



La Biennale di Venezia

58. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

MUSIC FOR EVERYONE
Variations on a Theme

Song-Ming Ang



Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme
Song-Ming Ang

Published on the occasion of the 58th Venice Biennale –
Singapore Pavilion: Song-Ming Ang, *Music for Everyone:
Variations on a Theme*, 2019

11 May – 24 November 2019



Project Advisor
Michelle Ho

Editor
Adeline Chia

Design
Factory 1611

Photography
Mizuki Kin

Printer
Allegro Print

Cover images
Song-Ming Ang
Recorder Sculptures, 2019

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Published in April 2019 by National Arts Council, Singapore

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Commissioned by National Arts Council, Singapore



Supported by Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth



ISBN: 978-981-14-1736-8

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Foreword from the Commissioner

Singapore's participation at the 58th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia* comes at a significant milestone. The year 2019 marks the 200th anniversary of the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. The Singapore Bicentennial offers us a unique opportunity to reflect on the island's development through the centuries.

Since our independence in 1965, Singapore's thriving arts scene has witnessed numerous successes worth celebrating and has contributed to building a confident Singapore. Through the arts, Singapore has expressed our multi-cultural heritage and evolution as a nation-state in Southeast Asia. Our artists and artworks have reflected our historical ties in the region and our modern international links with the rest of the world.

Our participation in this edition of the Venice Biennale is an opportunity to engage with international audiences through artistic expressions related to contemporary issues which confront many societies today. As visual arts trends and practices continue to evolve, the Singapore Pavilion allows Singapore to present our experiences through the decades as a country and society. It also provides a platform to showcase our artists' capacity to be engaged in artistic discourse through their works.

The National Arts Council (NAC) is delighted to commission Song-Ming Ang as Singapore's 2019 representative for the Venice Biennale. A Young Artist Award recipient in 2011, a national award presented by the Singapore government to recognise young artistic talents, Song-Ming has presented at numerous local and international platforms. We are happy to have witnessed and supported his growth as an artist.

Song-Ming Ang's show titled *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* seeks to demonstrate a closer examination of our country's history through music and visual art. His deep interest in music can be read as his means to gain a deeper understanding about the relationships between

the individual, society and art. A recurring theme throughout his *oeuvre* is his penchant for exploring ideas of improvisation and spontaneity. Most acutely articulated in one of the exhibited works, *Recorder Rewrite*, Song-Ming's privileging of the accidental expresses his desire to make art more accessible and to make music for everyone.

Curating the Singapore Pavilion is Michelle Ho, Gallery Director of Nanyang Technological University's Art, Design and Media (ADM) Gallery. She has more than a decade of experience in curating Singapore, Southeast Asian and international contemporary art exhibitions. Michelle and Song-Ming have worked together on multiple occasions in the past and we are excited for them to collaborate again at the Singapore Pavilion.

This year also sees the return of the Singapore Biennale for its 6th edition which will be held from 22 November 2019 to 22 March 2020. The Singapore Biennale reiterates our commitment to the visual arts. It aims to anchor Singapore as a place where international arts lovers meet and discover new ideas and experiences. Organised by the Singapore Art Museum, the Singapore Biennale will feature local, regional and international artists, and promises thought-provoking contemporary art discourse and insights to art in Singapore and Southeast Asia. We welcome you to visit the Singapore Biennale and join in the international dialogue on contemporary art.

Together with our arts community, the NAC will continue to position Singapore as a vibrant arts hub and raise Singapore's standing in the arts globally. The journey towards the Singapore Pavilion would not have been possible without the support and hard work of many people. The Council would like to extend our appreciation to the members of the Singapore Pavilion Commissioning Panel, contributors to this catalogue, all production and artistic collaborators involved, and all who have devoted their time and effort in making the Singapore Pavilion a platform we can be proud of.

Rosa Daniel
Chief Executive Officer
National Arts Council, Singapore

Song-Ming Ang: Purposeful Play in an Art of Rehabilitation

BY MICHELLE HO

“And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up the very life we are living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.”

John Cage in *Experimental Music*, 1958



No Man's Band (2007-10)

Between 2007 and 2010, Song-Ming Ang went to 15 schools in Singapore to record the sounds of student concert and military bands. Each visit took place in the 15 minutes before rehearsals formally commenced and the artist documented the clamour of bands in preparation, unfettered by formal practice or the presence of an instructor. A plethora of noise was collected: the chaos of students testing of a range of brass, woodwind and percussion instruments, the occasional drag of classroom furniture and impromptu drifts of stately anthems merging with casual chatter. Ang was trying to capture the performers, in a manner of performing, without being conscious of the act of performance.

This sound installation, titled *No Man's Band*, reveals an aspect of Ang's practice: making art that privileges spontaneity in process over staged performances which, in their rehearsed perfection, become a less innocent contrivance. A year later, Ang directed *The Robots*, a performance by a group of amateurs rendering an *a capella* version of a song with the same title by the German electronic duo Kraftwerk. They performed the song at their first group meeting without prior rehearsal together. In a 2018 workshop under the work series *A Song to Change the World*, participants with diverse musical preferences spent one week with the artist to compose, record and perform a pop tune. The restrictions Ang set up in his works often harness the abilities of amateurs rather than rely on the more predictable qualities of expertise and talent, thereby yielding a quality of honesty in art.

In constantly trying to connect art with the everyday, Ang has created a wide body of work that is born out of alternative methods of production, enactment and representation. His practice, which centres on music and how people relate to its different forms, engages with strategies in experimental music and conceptual art. The documentation and research of artists from Singapore and the Southeast Asia region that have been engaging with experimental music,

noise and sound can be traced back to the 1980s, taking place within the context of underground music scenes and performance art.¹ Ang's approach is unique as it operates within the visual arts field and takes not just the form of performance, but also drawing, installation, video and text. His interest in translating the conceptual and formal properties of music-related phenomena has resulted in works such as the composition of haikus from ABBA song lyrics (*ABBA Poetry*, 2010), or acts of labour to acquire a skill, be it spending three months practicing how to replicate pop singer Justin Bieber's autograph signature (*Justin*, 2012), or learning how to play J. S. Bach's C Major Prelude from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* backwards (*Backwards Bach*, 2014). Ang does not profess to be a fan of Bieber, nor does he set out to challenge a Western hegemony of music in the world of classical and pop. Rather, he is driven by a vision to articulate the less visible connections between art, music and social life, leading to forms of representing music that bridge concept and encounter with renewed form and structure.

Ang's presentation at the Singapore Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2019, titled *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme*, can be seen as an apt summation of one of the ideals in his practice where, by rethinking the criteria of art and music, creative agency may be given to non-art practitioners. The exhibition also embodies his proposition of how art can be liberated from institutionalised directives that seek to influence the appreciation and creation of art via cultural education.

The show presents two encounters with a publicly accessible "music for everyone". First, Ang examines state-run music appreciation programmes in Singapore and how nation-building goals are embedded into them. Then he presents new works that propose an alternative approach of art-making, one that is receptive to the surprises that may occur in the creation process, and which may set a new standard for an art for the collective good.

1 See Fermont, Cedrick, 'History of Noise Music in Asia' in Cedric Fermont and Dimitri della Faille (eds), *Not Your World Music: Noise in Southeast Asia* (Berlin: Syrphe, 2016)

Music for Everyone: A History



Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The exhibition revisits a chapter of early arts policy in Singapore through referencing a series of concerts, also titled *Music for Everyone*, organised by the country's then Ministry of Culture (today known as the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth). From 1971 – 1985, more than 360 concerts took place under this titular series, featuring local choral societies, early symphony bands and other cultural groups of ethnic music. More than 150,000 people attended the concerts during the run of the series, together with Western classical music contributed by foreign bands through diplomatic collaborations.²

Aimed at cultivating in Singaporeans "a taste for good music and building a core of regular concert goers", the objectives of the series were to provide local artistes a platform to perform and allow affordable access to the general public with a nominal admission price to the concerts.³ Critical reception of the Ministry of Culture's *Music for Everyone* concerts was varied. Less forgiving assessments called the standard of its music "by no means very good" but "satisfactory" and rebuked the series for presenting "unseasoned amateurs to the unlearned masses in an attempt to economise on cultural promotion."⁴ The series was lauded for its success in introducing baroque music to the masses, promoting bands comprising of students and teacher associations and introducing a dynamism to Singapore's

2 Interview with former Ministry of Culture staff, Lim Mee Lian (4 Mar, 2019)

3 Quote from Haji Sha'ari Tadin, Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture in 'Encourage Children To Attend Concert's Call by Shar'ari', Singapore: *New Nation*, 20 December 1976

4 Unattributed, 'Satisfying Evening of Music by PA Band', Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 27 Oct, 1975 and 'Let's Have Top Calibre Shows To Draw The Crowds', Forum letter, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 31 Mar, 1973

music scene.⁵ Perhaps what was particularly noteworthy of the concert series was its inclusivity and unpretentiousness. As a reviewer had pointed out, “the *Music for Everyone* concerts can truly claim to have an unbiased approach to both artistes and audiences. Few local performers are rejected, and tickets are within reach. It also sponsors all art forms from Chinese opera to progressive jazz.”⁶ A decade after its launch, a newspaper article observed an increase in the enrolment of classical music examinations as possibly a result of the programme’s influence.⁷



Goh Soon Tioe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The Ministry of Culture’s *Music for Everyone* concert series was also significant for one fact: Running for 14 years, it was the longest campaign to inculcate music appreciation at a national level since Singapore’s transition into independence following its departure from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. From the late 1960s to 1970s, much of the state’s cultural policy started to be directed at how participation in arts and cultural activities could be used for nation-building purposes.

“Literature, music and the fine arts have a significant role to play from within the framework of nation building. A truly Singaporean art must reflect values that will serve Singapore in the long run.”

Minister of Culture Jek Yeun Thong⁸ (1968-1979)

In her studies of music and national propaganda, sociologist Lily Kong maintained that the types of musical activities that were promoted by the state during this period were not arbitrary, but deployed to project a sanctioned

5 Unattributed, ‘Music for Everyone Scores New Success’, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 12 Jun, 1972, Violet Oon, ‘Big Turn Out at Repeat Show’, Singapore: *New Nation*, 4 September 1972, Violet Oon, ‘Real Baroque Music can be so Beautiful’, Singapore: *New Nation*, 23 Nov, 1976 and Sheila Cheong, ‘Ministry Brings New Beat to Culture Scene’, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 21 Nov, 1977
6 Patricia Goh, ‘Audiences Hail Music Series’, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 30 Jul, 1979
7 Unattributed, ‘Sharp Rise in Music Exam Candidates’, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 8 Mar, 1981
8 Press Release, 28 Jun, 1974 taken from Lily Kong, ‘Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas’ in *Geoforum*, 31(4), 2000, 409 – 424

version of Singapore identity. Formulated with the view that the arts “can play a vital role through the inculcation of correct values”,⁹ the cultural policy of this era was also aimed at opposing what the state deemed as “decadent” influences of Western culture, with classical music promoted instead because of the perceived values of high culture.¹⁰ Such a view also dovetailed with a 1972 Addendum to the President’s Address on cultural affairs which highlighted the necessity of both the mass media and the state to disseminating the merits of patriotism and pride in national accomplishments.

*“The Music for Everyone (series of concerts)... will be continued. The stress will continue to be put on mass participation in the fields of aesthetic creation and appreciation. The Ministry of Culture helps to mould the social and cultural development of the people, particularly the young.”*¹¹

With this historical context and analysis of the politics of early cultural policy in view, Ang provides a microcosm of the 14-year music appreciation campaign in his exhibition. A selection of the original Ministry of Culture’s *Music for Everyone* concert posters has been reproduced as documentation and banners. By retaining their content and design, the artist refrains from putting forth a visible form of judgement, allowing for factuality of the material to be presented to audiences. In representing this chapter of history, no information has been changed nor a shade of colour altered to suggest an artistic intervention or point of subversion.

A group of watercolour paintings highlight a series of songwriting competitions organised during the same period to galvanise Singaporeans into composing original songs that helped to develop a sense of national identity. This initiative, known as the “Our Songs” songwriting competitions, was co-organised by the now defunct National Theatre Trust and Radio Television Singapore between 1975 and 1979. The national drive to encourage citizens to write songs that strengthened national identity had also resulted in an output of mediocre music, as commentators critiqued how the competitions have been organised. The problem of compromised creativity being subjected to state agendas became so apparent that a judge surmised that the entire enterprise made visible how “patriotism is so insistent as to be a parody of patriotism”.¹² Another reviewer questioned “if creative impulse can flourish... when so much premium has been put on political conformity”.¹³

In the quintessential conceptual gesture of pointing something out—through documents showing the history of music programming—Ang draws attention to the subtle cultural propaganda taking place even at the seemingly harmless occasion of enjoying music. In replicating these yesteryear posters, Ang shows the forms of permissible music of the era defined by the state to be wholesome and worthy. The colourful designs of the original posters took the form of a

9 Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, Inche Sha’ari Tadin in Press Release, 30 Nov 1974, taken from Lily Kong, ‘Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas’ in *Geoforum*, 31(4), 2000, 409 – 424
10 Kong, Lily, “Music and the Wellbeing of a Nation: Developing Identity, Constructing Community in Singapore” in Gavin J. Brown, Pau Kingsbury and Robin Kearns (eds), *Soundscape of Wellbeing in Popular Music*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016)
11 Unattributed, ‘Patriotism and the Role of Mass Media’, Singapore: *The Straits Times*, 24 Oct, 1972
12 Judith Holmberg, ‘Will Song Quest be One More Flop’, Singapore: *New Nation*, 22 Jul, 1978
13 Tan Wang Joo, ‘Sing Something Simple’, Singapore: *New Nation*, 10 Apr, 1977

templated 1970s graphic aesthetic that was exuberant, but when reproduced in the Singapore Pavilion, become a metaphor for a sanitised music that is exemplary and expected. In their cheerful uniformity, this history of what an state-endorsed style of music for everyone begins to take on a more unsettling meaning.



Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Recorder Rewrite: An Art of Rehabilitation

Ang’s position on institutional directives that shape the learning and reception of music becomes more apparent in his film *Recorder Rewrite*, a recorder performance by primary school students at the Singapore Conference Hall, the same venue where many of the *Music for Everyone* concerts took place. The recorder is a common instrument taught in music lessons in Singapore schools, the result of adopting a music curriculum that had been established based on a British model of teaching music in the 1950s. By 1972, the education system had evolved into a framework that introduced the ideal enfoldng the collective well-being of the wider society. Not unlike the inclinations of the cultural policy of its time, music as it was taught in schools played a role in the indoctrination of civic-mindedness, social consciousness and national pride.¹⁴ This aim of forging a national identity through music education continues to be evident in recent times, as music educator Chee-Hoo Lum notes of the state’s continuous emphasis on advocating a national sense of shared affiliation through the public education system.¹⁵

In *Recorder Rewrite*, Ang avoids the historical baggage of a top-down approach by elevating the modest instrument that is often used as a teaching tool in music lessons. He presents a musical piece, not through the methods of playing learnt in school, but with an alternative pedagogical approach of improvised composition and extended recorder techniques. His vision comprised the following three criteria: that the work will be performed by children who may not necessarily be musically proficient; that they will, with the help of a facilitator, create their own composition; and that the work will include imperfections in the process of learning, as well as mistakes made in the course of performing, as legitimate elements of a musical composition. The production was executed over five days, beginning with a two-day workshop on extended recorder techniques

14 Staed, Eric Peter, Lum, Chee-Hoo, ‘The Development of the General Music Programme in Primary and Secondary School’ J. Zubillaga-Pow and C.K Ho (eds) in *Singapore Soundscape: Musical Renaissance of a Global City* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2014), 236-237
15 Lum, Chee-Hoo, ‘My Country, My Music: Imagined Nostalgia and the Crisis of Identity in a Time of Globalisation’ in *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 35(1), 2017, 47, 53

for the performers, leading them to make their own decisions about the combination of sound sequences that they will create with soprano, alto, tenor and bass recorders, and concluding with a three-day rehearsal and shoot. Musically, the work is characterised by four key movements to present a build-up of uncommon sounds and regular tones from minimal to melodious, from tonal to discordant, and segments of sectional harmonising as well as a climax of multiphonics. The work does not culminate with a performance in the concert hall, possibly a sign of Ang’s rejection of what is conventionally the end game for an aspiring musician. In fact, *Recorder Rewrite* almost begins with an exit from the concert hall to the foyer, departing the entrance, and then to the concert hall’s exterior, with performances that are often interspersed with play and flights of imagination. Performers assemble their recorders in a mock assembly line, letting their recorders roll down a banister, and later echoing this action by themselves rolling their bodies on the floor. With a brief injection of magical realism into the mundane, they are led into a game of musical statues to the sound of an invisible conductor. In a follow-up fantasy sequence, a performer is lured involuntarily by a “possessed recorder”, much to the wonderment of his troupe, leading them to take off away from the concert venue to perform their finale outside the building.

Viewed in such light, *Recorder Rewrite* appears to be an attempt to make a serious piece of music, while denying the fruition of a performance in conventional terms.

The ingenuity in *Recorder Rewrite* lies in how Ang draws upon the principles of *avant-garde* art forms without being too precious or precise with its execution. Citing the influences of avant-garde composers Glenn Branca and John Cage, ambient music pioneer Brian Eno and *musique concrète* composers like Luc Ferrari in his directing and editing of the film, Ang also makes choreographic references to the Judson Dance Theater of 1960s New York in the manner of his performers’ movement. The work is also a parody of avant-gardism, as evidenced in the amateurism and limited training of the performers. In *Recorder Rewrite*, the performers’ clumsy movements, awkward instrument-handling and glances of uncertainty segue into vignettes of earnest perseverance and pure concentration. Its intended conclusion was never about the display of mastery, but of an achievement attained with dedication and within one’s circumscribed abilities. “It’s also about dismantling a regimented way of learning. How do you teach without teaching?” Ang says, “and how do you allow things to happen naturally and spontaneously, and still produce interesting results? A big motivating factor in making *Recorder Rewrite* is to create a kind of art that is rehabilitative. It is also a restorative: to redress, and speak on behalf of the recorder, of how else music can be made in a more interesting way when it is not learnt through formulaic teaching.”¹⁶

16 Interview with Song-Ming Ang, 15 Mar, 2019

Silliness and the Importance of Purposeful Play

In *Recorder Sculptures*, a dozen recorders have been disassembled into their three sections of mouthpiece, barrel and foot joint, and rearranged into distinct forms. Some utilise the foot joint as pivot; others apply the barrel as a body for balance, and yet some play with the curve of the mouthpiece as focal point. A sense of mischief exudes from these reassembled forms that reorganise the spatial dynamics of the instrument, such that with a little leap in imagination, one could almost fathom the silhouettes of a lighthouse, a raised cannon, an airplane. They have been composed without overly being invested with meaning. “It’s a work that you can imagine school kids would have made,” says Ang, “taking apart the instrument at their desks and stacking them for fun. They wouldn’t even realise they are making art. And what are the limits of art anyway? *Recorder Sculptures* are also about the courage to perform silliness. I have an ambivalence towards art that tries to be too clever.”¹⁷

Ang’s intervention is subtle and measured, resisting the cliché of established conceptual art tropes that favour a type of urbane artist’s joke which revels in amusement with a touch of absurdity. If the objective of *Recorder Rewrite* was to present art as a form of rehabilitation from its rigid precedents, these *Recorder Sculptures*, together with his *Music Manuscripts* works are, to borrow John Cage’s musings, to generate “purposeless purposelessness”, or what can be described as “purposeful play”. *Music Manuscripts*, a series which began in 2014, were born out of a desire to engage with the format of music manuscript staves, not as a grand conceptual gesture of subverting the tradition of musical notation, but simply the practice of drawing lines on top of the staves without making mistakes. In their latest iterations at the Singapore Pavilion, techniques of folding and collaging have been introduced, extending what began as a mark-making exercise in discipline and restraint, into a bolder and more whimsical territory where folds, patterns and shapes interrupt the horizontal lines of the paper. Ang’s disruption of this systemic configuration shifts the act of composing from the musical to the visual. His *Music Manuscripts* can be seen as exercises of light-hearted manoeuvres on rules and foundation, using structure to joust with itself. But rather than negating the function of the manuscript paper, he teases with its format, dismantling, and then devising a new utility for it.

Elsewhere in the Singapore Pavilion, works like *Recorder Instruction Manual* provide a step-by-step pictorial guide for visitors to use the recorder in more stimulating ways, such as to make percussive or beatboxing sounds.

17 Ibid.

Collectively, the works in the exhibition propose an alternative way to engage with art-making that creates an experience of a more empathetic music for everyone.

“Part of my practice is about thinking and doing things I can do as an untrained person in conventional art-making,” says the artist, who did not formally study fine art and or classical music. “My practice stems from the two main entry points of conceptualism and experimental music, and how engaging with both of them in unexpected ways can change the game in terms of how we understand art and music.”¹⁸ By revising the categorical thinking of the ways art-making conventionally takes place, and remodeling the relationship between “proper” methodology and benchmarks of excellence, Ang is creating of his own syllabus,¹⁹ and by extension, an invitation for all to do the same.

Ang elevates amateurism as a critical force in art-making and uses it as a strategy of resistance to established aesthetics, as well as the instrumentalisations by the state. In light of curator Ralph Rugoff’s espousal for the 58th Venice Biennale of “a view of art’s social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking”, Ang’s works are a reminder of how, in Rugoff’s words, “art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in ‘interesting times’”.²⁰ And what of the “interesting times” in which Ang’s works reside, and what does the latter offer? The historical context of how the will to be creative should be of service to the powers that be is not so incongruent in the contemporary world, and one is cautioned by the aphorism that the more things change, the more they remain the same. In an age where culture is often instrumentalised, an art of rehabilitation is also a form of a remedy. Ang’s art calls for a return to the fundamental impulse behind art-making: as a conduit for joy, not cleverness, and as purposeful play.

Michelle Ho is Gallery Director of the ADM Gallery at the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University. She has curated numerous Singapore, Southeast Asian and international contemporary art exhibitions which include *The Art of Conflict: Video Works from the Asia Society Museum Collecton* (2017), *Time of Others* (2015 – 2016), a curatorial collaboration with Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT) and National Museum of Art, Osaka (NMAO), *Amanda Heng: Speak To Me, Walk With Me* (2011) and *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (2008). Formerly a curator at the Singapore Art Museum, she has led the acquisition strategies of its contemporary art collection from 2013 – 2015, and was co-curator in the Singapore Biennale 2013.

18 Interview with Song-Ming Ang, 15 Mar. 2019

19 Woo, Ian, ‘In Conversation with Ian Woo’, *Presidents Young Talents*, (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2015), 22

20 Rugoff, Ralph, Curatorial Statement for the 58th Venice Biennale 2019

Paper Speaks: On Song-Ming Ang's *Music Manuscripts*

BY PATRICK J. REED

The acoustic charms of paper are many. Turn a page; it releases a whisper. Burn an offering; it gives up a sigh. Paper speaks, but we have burdened it with a great responsibility: to carry our voices, which drown out its own. Perhaps this is the reason experts on the subject believe paper constitutes the bedrock of civilisation; it is a sounding board for everyone, and it is everywhere, sounding off.¹

Polyvocality and utility make paper an ideal medium for artist Song-Ming Ang, yet if one were to examine his work to date, it would be difficult to peg him for a paper devotee. His practice is too varied to permit any technique or medium-specific label to stick, but there are moments in his oeuvre when the pendulum swings to the end far opposite intermedia, striking hard-edged disciplinarity with a sustained peal.

His drawing series, *Music Manuscripts* (2013–), an “ongoing, systematic exploration of music staves as a structure for making visual compositions”, is one of these moments. The earliest incarnations are hand-drawn lines intersecting the pre-printed staves on music manuscript sheets according to “an internal logic, which in turn determines the end result”.² Complex patterns emerge from repetition. In *Music Manuscripts* #1 through #5, slanted lines connect the fore of one staff to the aft of the next in a top-to-bottom sequence. The first drawing is assigned one line per pair; the fifth is assigned a dizzying five. Ang turns convention on its side in #6 to #9 and treats the staves as vertical parallels, filling the margins with matching strokes that accumulate to resemble bar graphs. Variations intensify at the higher registers: #30 initiates a progression of choppy diagonals. Fifteen iterations later, the diagonals of #45 turn into vicious peaks appearing ready to shred their own page.

Ang's technical execution recalls the minimalist aesthetics of postwar conceptualism in the West. Sol LeWitt and John Cage are among his influences, as is the related, more globally propagated Fluxus “philosophy of experience”.³ Of special interest to Ang are the experimental music developments during this era for which Cage and his milieu are well known. One could easily trace a line and follow it from Le Monte Young's *Compositions 1960* to the many performance-driven, relational/procedural artworks produced by Ang since the early 2000s, artworks exemplifying moments when the pendulum swings in the direction of a less differentiated zone.

Regarding the larger scheme that is art history, Ang is deferential to his forebears (“I gravitate towards artists and musicians who really question what

1 Levine, Mark, “Can a Papermaker Help to Save Civilization?” The New York Times Magazine, 17 Feb, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/timothy-barrett-papermaker.html>

2 Ang, Song-Ming, “Music Manuscripts,” <https://www.circadiansongs.com/music-manuscripts/#7>

3 Friedman, Ken, Introduction, in Ken Friedman (ed), *The Fluxus Reader* (West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), ix

an art form is. What are the limitations? What are the boundaries? What defines music? What defines art?”), but he mostly credits his taste for the avant-garde to his personal experiences as an experimental musician himself: “I got into art from experimental music. I was doing free improv in my 20s, performing on the laptop, sometimes alone, sometimes [in] collaborations. [This experience] still informs the way that I work because I still make artwork through collaborations and improvisation”.⁴

Collaboration and improvisation rely on innate tension to generate an outcome. Collaborative tension is easy to identify; the very impetus for working with another (or several others) is to profit from a dialectical partnership. The tensions inherent to improvisation are distinct, though not altogether different. Improvisation, despite how “free” it has been styled, contends with an apparatus or a limit. The jazz trumpeter’s apparatus is the instrument; the improv comedian’s is the scenario directive. It would follow that any way you slice it you will find productive tension in Ang’s work.

Had he chosen a less specific frame for *Music Manuscripts*, the tensions surrounding the series would be less energetic, but the stave vibrates with historical precedents. The first 70 drawings strictly and superficially explore the stave design printed on the page, and they relate to avant-garde graphic notation techniques used by Hanne Darboven and Iannis Xenakis. Nonetheless, Ang maintains *Music Manuscripts* are drawings foremost, and that he is using manuscript paper as a “platform or entry point” for making art. But he does not rule out the possibility that the drawings could function like a score. In his estimation, “where music is concerned, where scores are concerned, everything is playable”.⁵

Ang’s position is both generous and mischievous, and it evokes the ambivalence that made Fluxus a mutinous cultural phenomenon more than an art movement, per se—a characteristic Stephen C. Foster described in “Historical Design and Social Purpose: A Note on the Relationship of Fluxus to Modernism” as “highly self conscious historically, and sophisticated in its manipulations of history’s use...” Foster also suggests “it is tempting to conclude that Fluxus is better defined through its ‘use’ of modernism and the avant-garde than it is through any rejection of them”.⁶ In a similar manner, Ang frustrates music tradition by drawing what are essentially graphic scores and, simultaneously, deflates the *avant-garde* ethic by denying that he made the drawings with sonic intentions. He extracts a condition based on canonical standards allowing *Music Manuscripts* to participate in art and music history while he petitions their exemption from it.

During an interview I conducted with Ang in early 2019, he admitted to thinking a lot about complex balanced compositions and the important modifier that is tone. He explained:

4 Interview with Song-Ming Ang, 5 Jan, 2019

5 Ibid.

6 Foster, Stephen C., “Historical Design and Social Purpose: A Note on the Relationship of Fluxus to Modernism,” in Ken Friedman (ed), *The Fluxus Reader* (West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 168

This is something that is interesting for me on several levels because the idea of tone translates across visual art, music, literature, and film in very different ways. In literature, tone can change something from being sincere to ironic In film, you talk about color grading. Grade [the film] a certain way, it can look like a horror film. Grade it [another] way, it becomes comedy. You’re not really changing the meaning; you’re changing the ambience. You’re changing the mood.

Attempt to pinpoint the tone of *Music Manuscripts* #1 through #70, and you will discover an aloof quality meant to preserve the drawings’ conceptual integrity.

Aloofness, however, does not mean neutrality, nor does preservation mean stasis. Rather, they are fertile states that sustain the work and cultivate its reinvention in the narrow margin between the visual and the musical.

The *Music Manuscripts* created by Ang on the occasion of his exhibition *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* demonstrate the series’s adaptability. Numbered in the seventies and beyond, these additions mutate in response to a fundamental shift in the series’ evolution. “It seems,” said Ang, “that the question has changed slightly.” The investigation shifts to a material issue. He asks, “How do you work with paper?” and answers by physically altering the music manuscripts sheets with a vigour that is outré compared to earlier efforts.⁷ He tests the paper’s resilience in an effort to learn its language and to amplify its voice via material presence.

Paper speaks loudest when its smoothness is disturbed. Crumpled newspaper, for example, rushes, screaming, into the foreground of our perception because it is no longer an indistinct substrate for reportage but a resolute object proclaiming its objecthood. Text and image become secondary attributes to the newspaper’s more dynamic scrunched up form, and the assumed hierarchy that privileges the message over messenger is inverted.

Ang takes advantage of this phenomenological postulate in the “*Music for Everyone*” *Music Manuscripts*, wherein his “systematic exploration of music staves as a structure” acquires bold properties in low relief.⁸ His favoured diagonals manifest as chevron-patterned folds, circles are cut from one drawing and glued to another (the remaining holes represent Ang’s investigations at their most invasive), and whole pages are sliced along their stave lines. These methods are applied to several drawings on photographic reproductions of wrinkled manuscript paper. They are rigorous collages that attempt to expand the visual/musical duality already present in the project.

7 Interview with Song-Ming Ang, 5 Jan, 2019

8 The *Music Manuscripts* produced for *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* are here referred to as the “Music for Everyone” *Music Manuscripts* in order to differentiate them from the previous works in the series. Please note that this is the author’s designation made for purposes of differentiation, despite the in-title repetition, within the text.



Artist's studio, Berlin

By wrinkling manuscript paper, Ang defies its inherited gravitas, and by extension, thwarts the extreme purist conclusion that any marks on staves are necessarily musical notation. At the same time, he strategically redresses the imbalance supporting the other extreme conclusion, that any marks on staves are necessarily drawings by transforming the wrinkled manuscript paper into a photograph. The process of cutting the printed photographs and rearranging their parts are just further steps for Ang along the postmodern route.

Coincidentally, the “*Music For Everyone*” *Music Manuscripts* resemble topographical maps. We could consider them the metaphorical terrain of Ang’s journey into paper—an excursion through layers, textures, and techniques emblematic of the experiences he orchestrates in his more performance-driven works involving rambles and journeys. For example: *Silent Walk* (2014), an experiment in which a group meanders about Singapore’s urban environment while silently listening to its sounds, is an explicit Debordian *dérive*. Less illustrative, but still related to this idea, is *Album* (2015), a video project that required the artist’s parents to transport a guitar from Singapore to Berlin. Carrying the unwieldy luggage highlighted challenges his parents would have otherwise avoided were it not for their prop-spawned *dérive* through international travel infrastructures.

On paper, so to speak, it may seem that Ang simply has a taste for wandering, but he would counter such an appraisal with a nuanced theory. He would say that he wants to stay hungry and never lose the desire “to continuously check out new forms of art, new forms of music, things that are still out there”. And there are so many things, all of them playable.

Patrick J. Reed is a writer and artist living in Los Angeles. His essays and criticism have been featured in *art agenda*, *Canvas: Art and Culture from the Middle East and Arab World*, *Temporary Art Review*, *Serpentine: A Magazine of Critique and Amodern*.

Music for Every *Who*? Song-Ming Ang's Gently Naïf Musical Interrogations

BY TAN SHZR EE

If a primary *raison d'être* of modernist (and to an extent, post modern) art-making today is to provoke and challenge while in pursuit of that elusive holy grail of the truly original, then Song-Ming Ang's latest installation at the Venice Biennale's Singapore Pavilion questions the very nature of originality, through gentle acts of jesting and an effortless, casual recalibration of aesthetic and cultural playing fields. It asks, without interrogating; it opens a door, but you'll have to step out yourself; it wipes a few slates clean, but as a naïf rather than as a revolutionary.

An artist who identifies himself as working primarily in music while not necessarily calling himself a musician *per se*, Ang has for the last two decades spent time “exploring the various ways we relate to music, both on a personal and societal level”. As he relates, “music often functions as a platform to investigate other issues, such as how audience participation leads to productive modes of self-organisation, and how the spirit of amateurism can be harnessed to generate unusual forms of knowledge”.

As such, his starting point is a quiet questioning of the idea of being and of vocation. As a musician's non-musician, he plays with the definitions of amateurism versus professionalism. But he prods at this binary conceptualisation in ways that suggest and reveal, rather than contest or criticise. He explains in an email: “In our current times, we see ‘amateur’ as the opposite of ‘professional’. But technically, an amateur is someone who does something out of passion, and I relate to that a lot. If I remember correctly, the etymology of ‘amateur’ is ‘lover of (something)’. The dedication and resourcefulness that amateurs or hobbyists display often fascinate me, and I think there's a lot to uncover there. A lot of my work is about this undefined area of non-professional expertise.”

It is in this grey area that Ang's deceptively simple show, *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme*, operates: at the broader philosophical, personal, pragmatic, logistic, haptic and experiential level.

The installation begins by asking the broader question of what “everyone” here might mean. Who has access to culture?

“Everyone” as the wo/man in the street, the average Joe or *ah beng* in Singapore? “Everyone” who might have the cultural and financial mobility and capital to obtain a ticket to and appreciate a prestigious art show in Europe? Or: “Everyone” as imagined in the breaking of the musician versus non-musician bifurcation, where the latent human manipulator of sound—whether amateur, trained or professional—can now claim a voice, literally, and play *with* music on their own terms in the sonic spaces and re-levelled playing fields cleared out by Ang in his interactive suggestions?

Could “everyone” really exist in today’s overwhelming plethora of ever-changing stimuli and offerings, and their implications on taste-acquisition, knowledge-building and the ability to listen and think in new ways?

Re-taking History in an Ideal, Cosmopolitan World

Putative answers to such unvoiced questions are rolled out in the *Music for Everyone* part of Ang’s exhibition in Venice. *Music for Everyone* is inspired by the similarly-named series of posters for free concerts for an arts education campaign issued by the then Ministry of Culture from the early 1970s. The exhibition provides a glimpse of this historical context with the reproduction of a selection of the original *Music for Everyone* posters, along with watercolour paintings and banners, also inspired by this era of Ministry-led initiatives. These posters reveal that the concerts were organised along the lines of the state-defined CMIO model (Chinese, Indian, Malay and Other) of ethnic classification, which simplifies the more diverse, complex and/or hybrid reality of Singaporean communities into bald categories. Because every ethnic category is represented by their traditional “folk” music, these concerts paint a picture of a harmonious, multicultural society.

In the Singapore part of Ang’s presentation, the section is expanded with the inclusion of another series of posters titled *Meaningful Music*, yet another series of concerts produced by the Ministry of Culture, and are categorised into Strings, Woodwind, Brass, Percussion and Human Voice—uncritically taking the organisational principles of Western art music.

The class marking of Western art music is highlighted here in the context of postcolonial nation-building directives, positioning European orchestral music as a universal and a musical lowest common denominator.

These perspectives chime in with the Singapore’s cosmopolitan aspirations today, where the state marks itself with soft power in arriving as a fully-fledged participant of the global playing field in the high (and necessarily elite) arts, no better demonstrated than through its fanfared participation in an international event of the Venice Biennale.



Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The rest of the Ang’s presentation nudges the audience to examine their own personal prejudices and histories. In *Recorder Rewrite*, a cheap plastic instrument made popular (or unpopular) in schools across the Commonwealth—not least Singapore—as part of mass music education drives, is given new life. To many Singaporeans who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, the half-whistled airy toot of not-quite-in-tune flutes were the mainstay of music classes in schools across the island and, potentially, at home, the oral equivalent of stepping on a Lego block for frustrated parents. But in Ang’s film, wrong notes and techniques are deliberately conjured up and turned into sonic raw material, with their ambiguous harmonics cumulatively combined to form new aural textures. The beauty of all this lies in the project’s very unpretentiousness: Here, the manipulating artists are students who, in jolly calculated acts of artistic and community jesting, have fun with the old tropes of a once-derided instrument, playing *with* it as well as playing it.

Both *Music for Everyone* and *Recorder Rewrite* narrate a theme of Singapore’s postcolonial history via music. They pose further questions about Singapore’s changing identities: a post-independence cultural orphanage that has, thanks to efforts from the state, morphed into a nebulous “multicultural society”, a rose-tinted construct which in turn camouflages a Chinese-dominant majority population. But as Ang exposes, the choices made by the state on what is considered “music” and, separately, “everyone”, are arbitrary. Why the recorder and not the *dizi*? Why a symphony and not the Beatles? Questions of cultural baggage and history, however, are not new to Ang, and have been tackled in his past works with the same cheerful, childlike approach. In *Backwards Bach* (2013), the artist, who confesses to having never learnt to play the piano nor harpsichord, gently subverts the canonical C Major Prelude from Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* from J. S. Bach by playing it in reverse in the hallowed surrounds of a Baroque-era mansion. To be sure, the idea of remaking a score through retrograde reading is not exactly new, as precursors from Alban Berg and Luigi Nono in the *avant-garde* worlds (and, even earlier, medieval Flemish composers deploying this effect as contrapuntal technique) have similarly experimented decades if not centuries ago. But it is the broader gesture and visual image of an unassuming, non-white person dressed in an unprepossessing



Backwards Bach (2013)

checked shirt and nondescript trousers who rocks up to a harpsichord ever so nonchalantly and performs this whimsy as if it was the most natural thing in the world, that casts aside centuries of cultural weight with the feathery lightness of a casual, horizon-tipping touch. Here, Ang plays the true cosmopolite in his deliberate recalibration of cultural turning points: In the ideal, everything-is-equal world created by his naïf engagements with music, *everything* is fun, fair game. There is no need for throat-clearing prologues about history and baggage, nor angry activist takedowns of so-called “colonial legacies”. He simply assumes his place as an equal on this playing field, and sets out to play.

Default “Singaporean” Art?

Ang’s re-angling of questions about history, culture, post-colonialism and identity in his particular setting of a *tabula rasa* connects to the larger paradox of how his show is positioned in the thoroughly Singapore-branded Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In addition to the issue of accepting state funding for his work, there are bigger questions of how the artist has allowed himself to be instrumentalised by the state’s soft power arm in “representing Singapore”... or perhaps not?

The use of the word “everyone”—seen through the lens of a music education campaign pitched at a public Singaporean audience—invites the Biennale’s international audiences to ponder what Singapore is. Showcased in domestic Singaporean contexts, however, the connotations of the word “everyone” operate in the realm of class hierarchies and invite questions on the accessibility of the arts across population demographics, as well as notions of taste-building and signalling through association with “high culture”.

As with many of his compatriots and fellow artists, Ang is adamant that he never sets out to make “Singaporean art”, saying: “I want to avoid being the Mad Chinaman¹ or Yellow Man², as much as I respect their contributions to the arts scene, and I think Orchard Road and Marina Bay Sands represent Singapore as well as Little India and Chinatown. I also think it’s problematic how we try to glamourise, exoticise and exaggerate certain traits to try to pass it off as culture that’s ‘authentic’, when it’s actually really done for artistic effect or to serve marketing, branding, or political ends.”

Instead, he prefers to see himself as ultimately producing Singaporean art however one might define it—as a matter of course rather than intention. “Part of the reason why I don’t have to deliberately make “Singaporean art” is because I believe that whatever I make, it would be “Singaporean” in some way,’ he says, “even though it doesn’t look or sound like it.”

A common observation that a few of Ang’s collaborators and viewers have made in the past is that his work often employs—in the artist’s own words—“self-imposed rules, restrictions, instructions, and the completion of tasks, which can be really anal-retentive and arguably Singaporean. I think I’m borrowing the methodologies from Western *avant-garde* movements (Fluxus, Conceptualism,

1 Singaporean singer-songwriter Dick Lee put out a successful pop album in 1989 called *The Mad Chinaman*, in which he adopted the eponymous alter ego. His songs pulled influences from Singapore’s multi-ethnic make-up.

2 A persona used by Singaporean artist Lee Wen since the 1990s in his performances, in which he covers his body in yellow paint to exaggerate his ethnic Chinese identity.

Minimalism) but fundamentally the spirit of my work is through what I know of growing up in Singapore. I often think about efficiency, which is a very ‘Singaporean’ value, and how it could be beautiful.”

Recognising the construct of nation-states as “something we can’t avoid”, Ang also believes in freedom of movement across borders. He tries to reconcile the existence of national pavilions with his own deliberations on authenticity, transnationality and cultural exchange. One way of resolving the paradox over national pavilions (Singaporean or otherwise), he points out, is the recent commissioning of non-German artists at the German Pavilion. The same pavilion had also once swapped spaces with France in 2013. What Ang extrapolates from the example is an ethos of celebrating cultural differences in their very fundamental equalities: “If the national pavilions can work with artists and curators from other nation-states, it is already a gesture of openness and cooperation.”

Thus, in aspirationally cosmopolitan terms, the cultural marking of Ang’s work, while inherently present rather than intentionally and outwardly signalled, becomes ultimately irrelevant to the broader conceptual points he chooses to make. These conceptual points in turn play with the notion of *tabula rasa* not only from an equal-globalities perspective, but also in terms of form and genre, and as we shall see, by creating multi-disciplinary and multi-sensorial experiences.

But what, then, is Music?

In the same gentle way that Ang raises the question of “everyone” while sidestepping heavyweight issues of postcolonial baggage and historical cultural narratives, the problem of what constitutes music in the first place receives a look-in. For many of his audiences, this is as much a subjective taste as it is an issue of *what* is being listened to: pitches, rhythms, phrasing, timbre, volume differentials, intentionality. For different aesthetic tribes and fans of subcultures, it could be an issue of genre: death metal might well be noise for a Chinese opera fan, where Noise (as a genre) could be balm for the ears of a uber-urbanite with a taste for the experimental. For this writer, an ethnomusicologist moving beyond John Blacking’s 1973 classic definition of “humanly-organised sounds”, music is, simply put, a “way of listening”, thereby putting the decision of definition in the beholder’s ears.³

For Ang, however, an answer to such a question can be found by way of crossing yet one more boundary, entering the realm of multi-sensorial experiences. Music, perhaps, does not even require the act of listening. In *Music Manuscripts*, the five-line staves of Western notation are left blank and unmarked, and are re-layered, cut up and put together again in patchworks of DIY collages that could almost have been produced in a kindergarten craft session at first glance, but turn out to have been precisely drafted upon closer inspection. While the final result here might strike one as equivalent to the previously (and thus no longer) groundbreaking work of graphic score composers such as Cornelius Cardew and

3 Blacking, John, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973), 3

György Ligeti, Ang's process comes from a completely different starting point. "My primary impulse is actually not to create graphic scores; more a way to work systematically with music manuscript paper as a medium and responding to the printed staves." In other words, the haptic exercise of touching, feeling, destroying, creating and working across methods is the *modus operandi*.

In his earlier days, Ang admits to making music on computers and revelling in free-improvisation concerts, but had grown dissatisfied with what he was producing, "because I felt that I was just reproducing established sub-genres of experimental music". Now, he is more interested in "experimental music as a spirit of enquiry" rather than a commitment to genre. In *Music Manuscripts*, he contends that he is "basically making very simple additions, subtractions and changes e.g. superimposing hand-drawn lines on the staves and cutting, folding, pasting, photocopying, layering to create compositions that make sense both visually and musically. The aim is actually to constantly find new ways to mess with the existing structure and compose something aesthetic in the process". As with the visual artworks in the *Music for Everyone* series, this gently radical rethinking of music as being more than a sonic form opens up new access points to different audiences.

For him, it is more important to think of experiments in music as projects of wonder and curiosity, and his conviction in this comes from the belief that *anyone*—in addition to *everyone*—using not just their ears and voices, but also hands and feet, could have made these scores, and could have composed something as a non-composer and produced music as a non-musician.

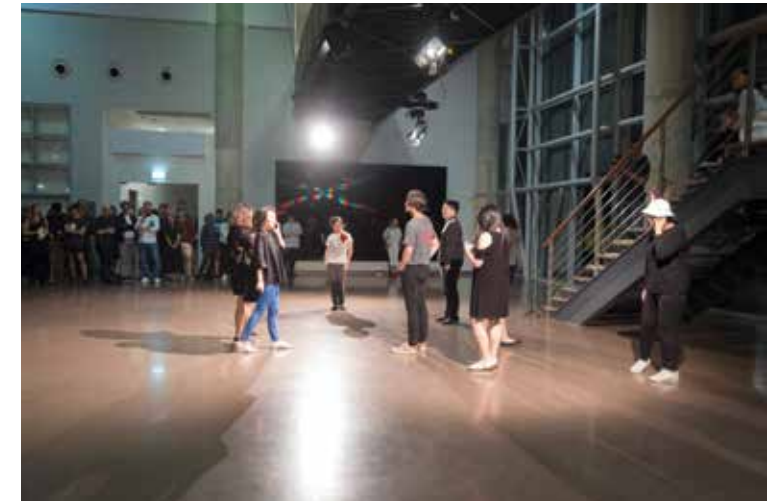
Human Connections, Sonic Empathy

This idea of the amateur artist playing with as well as playing music constitutes a running thread in Ang's work to date, and can be found in his site-specific projects of *Guilty Pleasures* (2007-), *Silent Walk* (2014), *Yesterday Mobile Karaoke* (2011), among other pieces. In different ways, these works morph ideas of the conscious author and aesthetic agency; they assign actual musical production to randomly collected performer-audiences around the world. These include a listening party constructed from the audience's embarrassing musical loves; a sound-walk led (each taking their turn) by every member of an assembled group who also constitute the audience; a karaoke truck making pit stops across the city for anyone to sing their favourite song.

But the site-specific angle here is again secondary to Ang's humanist approach of inviting musical intervention by *everyone* and *anyone*. The key is to first inscribe himself, the artist as *everyman* into the scene in a necessarily re-levelled playing field. He himself becomes an equal member of the art-making party, with his amateur and dilettante hands-on/hands-off experience. In each of his works, he is more interested in playing with the idea of composition itself: "How I can compose as a non-composer by only knowing what I know, e.g. through instructions, exchanges, group dynamics, emergence. On one hand, I know they

appear like postmodern works in which everything is permissible and celebrated, but on the other, there's a humanist impulse in how I hope they can embody the spirit of openness and inquiry."

Two other recent works allow Ang to play the naïf: *You and I* (2010) and *Dusk to Dawn Choruses* (2018). In the first, the artist pledges to create a CD mixtape for everyone and anyone—stranger or friend—who deigned to send him a letter. The resultant intimate spaces opened up through music inspired by words and re-made into words again in the form of a playlist (as per the exhibition), shed light on communicatory and bond-making powers of imagined as well as real



Dusk to Dawn Choruses (2018)



You And I (2010)

musical exchange. In *Dusk to Dawn Choruses*, a collaboration with Julien Grossmann, a group of non-professional singers are invited to work with the artists and perform a series of short, instructional scores using just their voices. Taken within the broader and longer histories and contexts of contemporary vocal improvisation workshops, where found sound is as much taken for granted as an aesthetic ethos as natural voice choirs have become part of the fabric of community arts groups, Ang's presentations might at first glance appear to be cheeky exercises in re-inventing the wheel. But the point is that they deliberately hark from a place of different, if perhaps *non*-origin: they surreptitiously work their naivete, their gentle curiosity; their accessibility to all persons (including those yet unclued into the histories and snobbery of experimental music), and their conceptual casting aside of commitment to newness or originality as ends in themselves.

There is a kindness and compassion for the listener
and to the audience, which makes the show on
multiple levels truly a project of music for everyone.

Back to the music posters of Ang's exhibition in Venice. In them, there are official references to neighbouring Asia-Pacific territories and community organisations such as the People's Association. A slogan, *Our Songs*, proclaims the title of a state-wide lyric-writing competition. All of this hint at a nation-building trope or a campaign of soft power. In the smaller print lie names of distinct, semi-historic individuals—Alex Abisheganaden, Choo Hoey, David Lim, among others—each figure a real person as much as he or she may have since been metamorphosed into an icon of nostalgia, vaguely recognisable to a specific group of Singaporeans clued into the early development and legacy of Singapore's strategically developed national music scenes.

How do the personalities named in the posters ventriloquise for “everyone”, here? And can the potential insider, knowing viewers of these artefacts constitute a segment of the same egalitarian audience which Ang hopes to reach, too?

Answers may be found in another set of fine print on these posters. Alongside letters headlining Schubert's *Rosamunde Overture* or Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, we spy the sponsor organisations that have paid for these historic concerts: a branded music school franchise (Yamaha); a supermarket providing all manner of everyday groceries (Cold Storage); a departmental store built into the heart of Singapore's emblematic Orchard Road (CK Tang), a bookstore calling itself something no less than “Popular”. For the putative “everyone” of Singapore at least, these are household names for the simple reason that they continue to exist today even as they sell to and serve the state's consumerist aspirational masses. They are institutions that have contributed to the neoliberal development of Singapore's cultural scenes even as the musicians depicted on the faded posters have passed. Uncannily symbolic of Singapore's much-trope economic rise as a capitalist state over the past five decades, these organisations persist, some continuing to support the country's shifting arts agendas of today, which still appear to extrapolate from the neo-colonial and culturally-engineered drives of the past—but that is another story.

Tan Shzr Ee is an ethnomusicologist and Senior Lecturer with the Music Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is interested in issues of music and sounded practices in relation to gender, politics, migration and representation. Her specific research projects have focused on a range of topics from the sounds of London's street protests, to gendering Latin dance in East Asia, the soundscapes of transient workers in Southeast Asia and politico-musical activism on the internet.

Music for Everyone

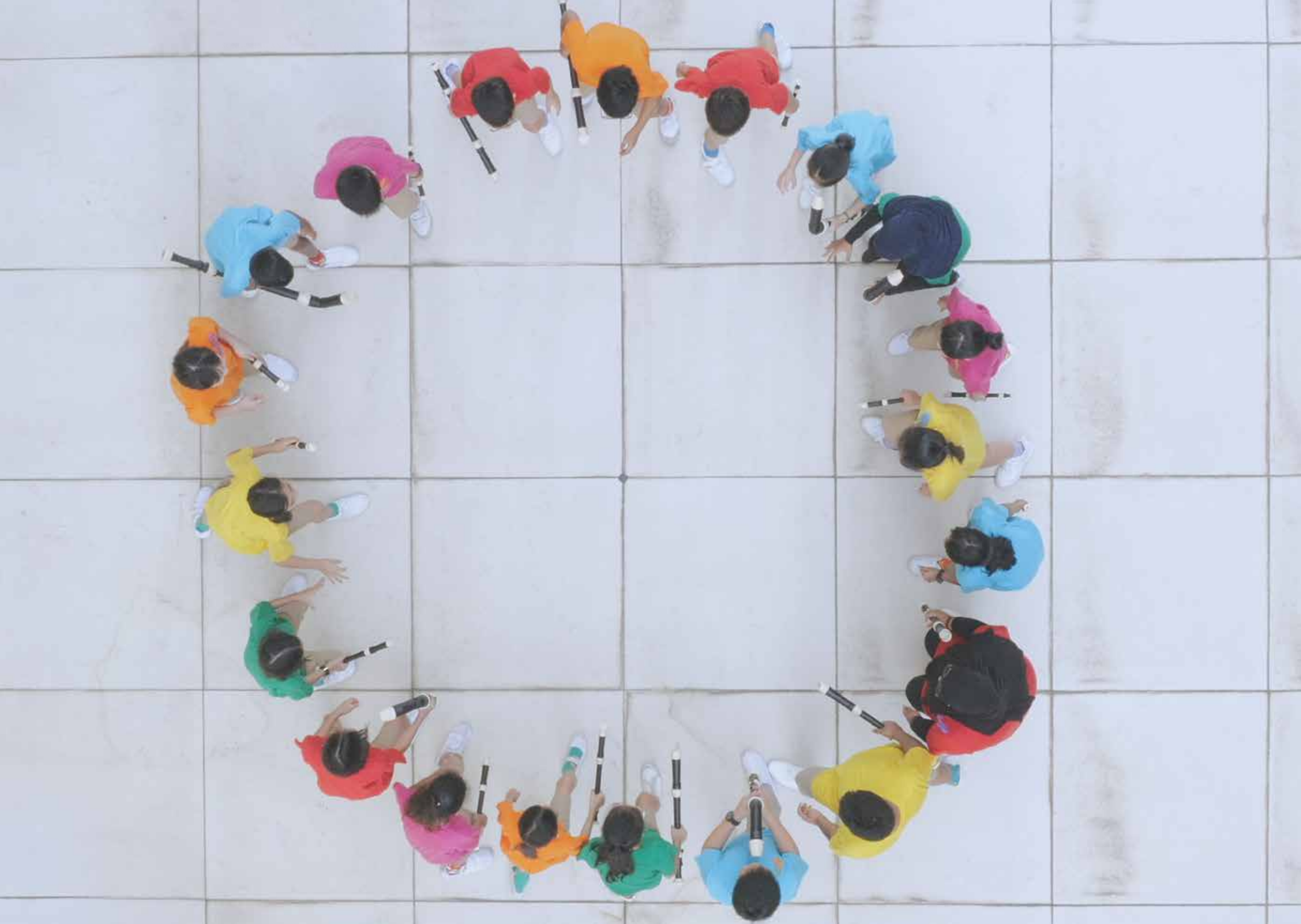
VARIATIONS ON A THEME

2019

Three-channel HD Video installation

15:00 min

Twenty children from diverse backgrounds created a recorder composition of their own through a music workshop before performing it at the Singapore Conference Hall, one of the original venues of the Ministry of Culture's Music for Everyone concert series.























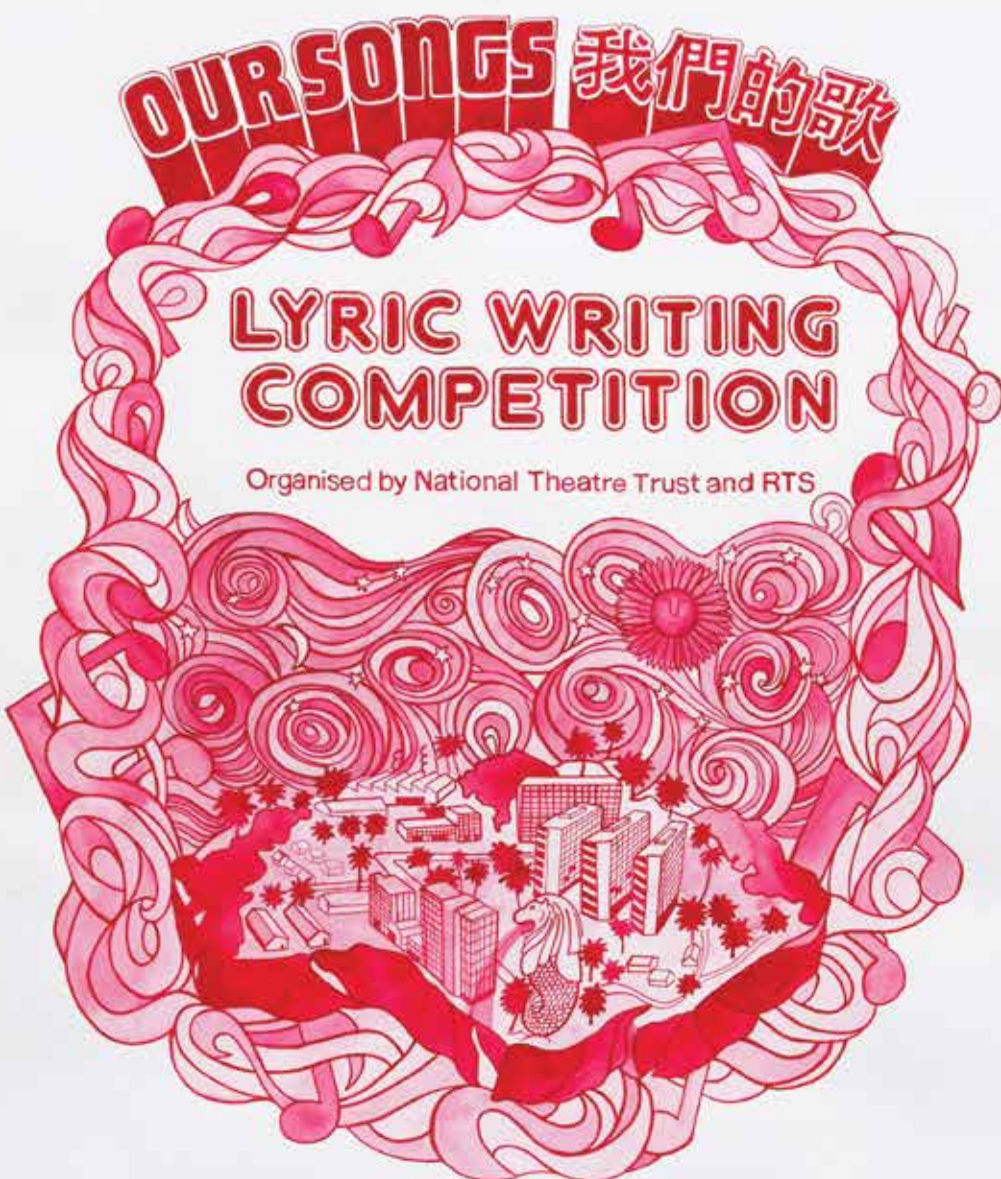


2019

Watercolour on paper (series of 4)

74 x 104 cm each

*Reproductions of posters from music
competitions encouraging Singaporeans
to write songs and lyrics.*



歌詞創作比賽

PRIZES:

1st Prize — \$400 for the best entry in each of the 4 languages

Consolation — 2 prizes of \$50.00 for each of the 4 languages

Entry forms available at National Theatre and RTS. Closing date for entries — 30th June, 1976



歌曲創作比賽

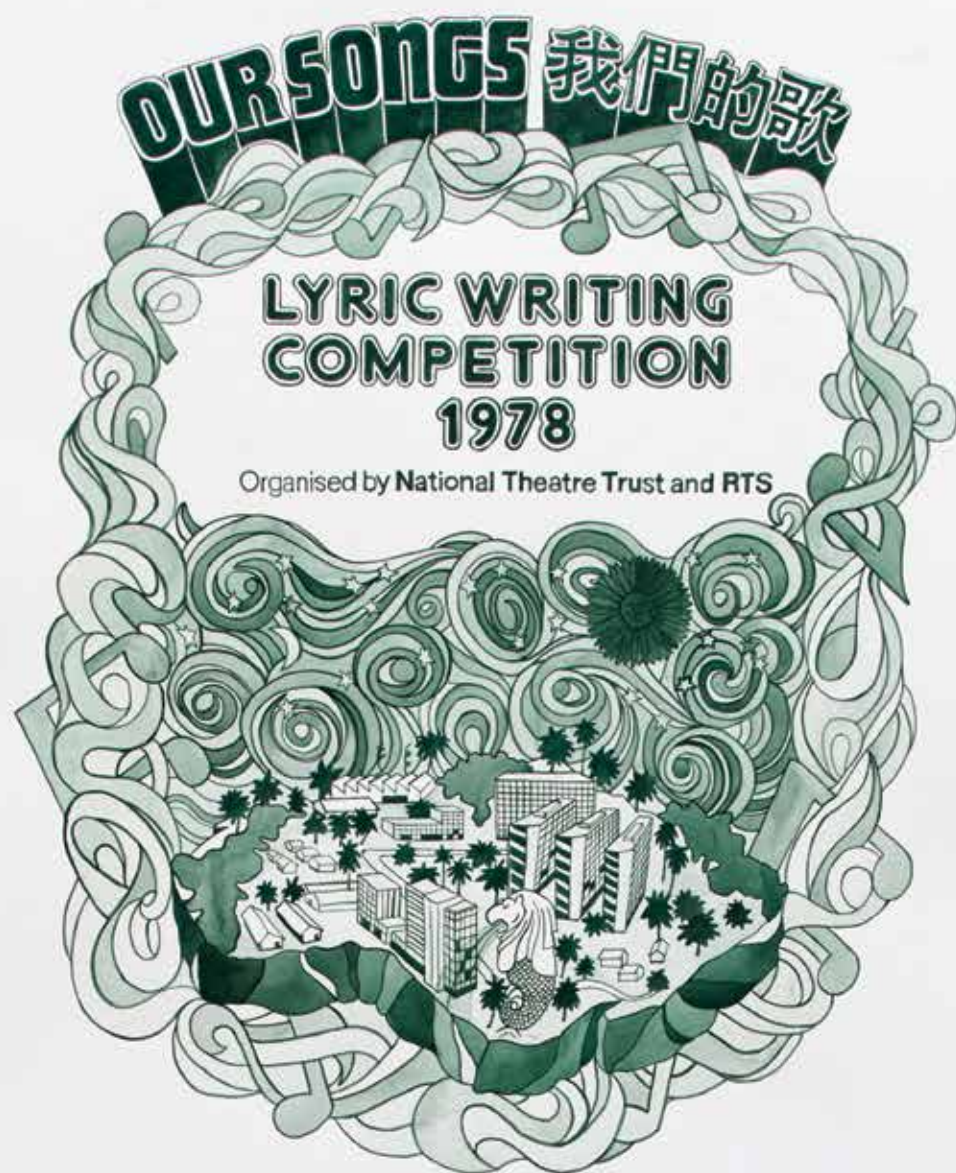
PRIZES:

First Prize — One Yamaha Console Piano Model M5E worth \$2,350.00 nett

Distinguished Prizes (5) — One Set Yamaha Component Stereo System Model IS-44 worth \$675.00 nett each

One Best Performer Award — One Set Yamaha Component Stereo System Model IS-44 worth \$675.00 nett

Entry forms available at National Theatre and RTS. Closing date for entries — 16th Feb, 1977



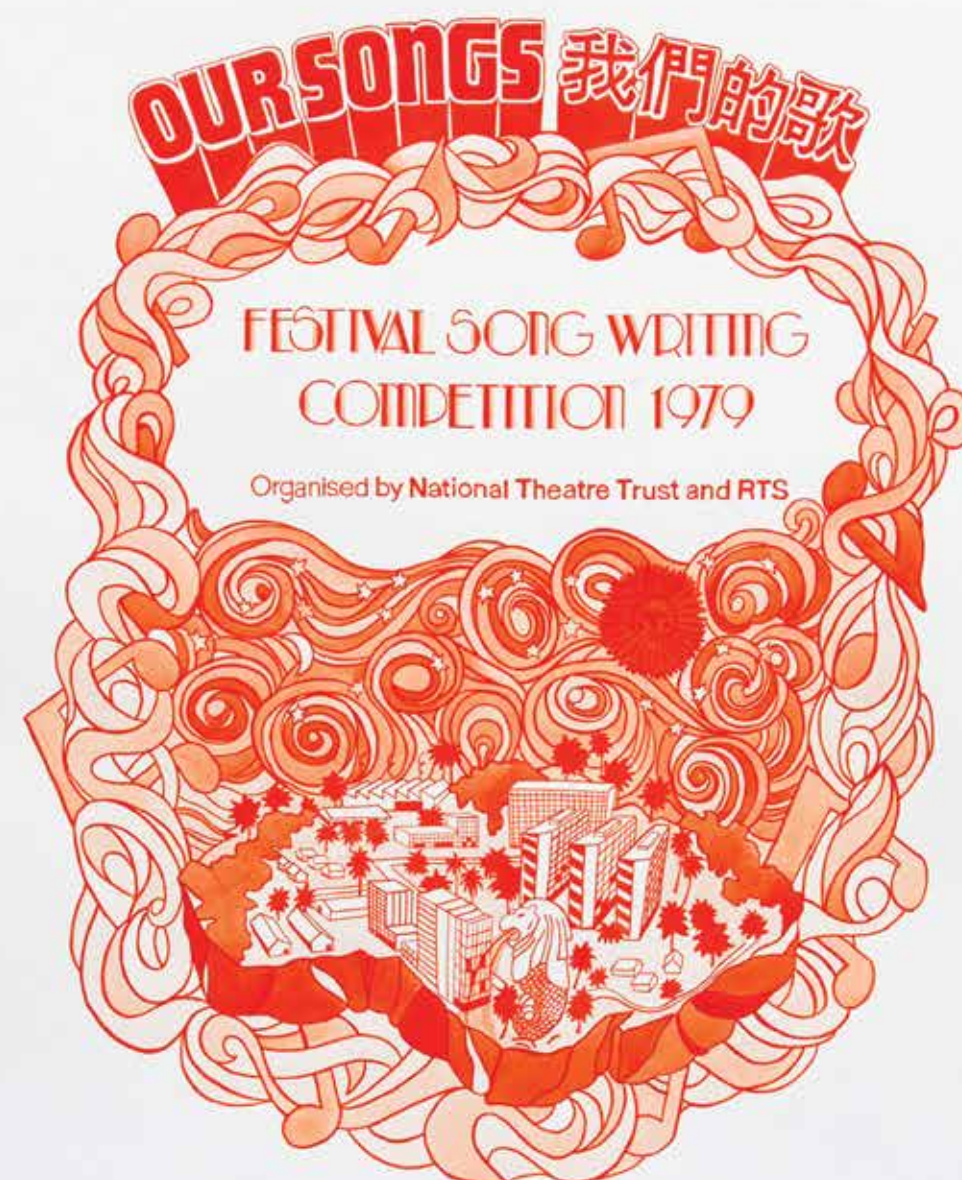
一九七八年歌詞創作比賽

PRIZES:

1st Prize — \$400 for the best entry in each of the 4 languages

Consolation — 2 prizes of \$100.00 for each of the 4 languages

Entry forms available at National Theatre and RTS. Closing date for entries — 31st August 1978



節日歌曲創作比賽

PRIZES: Distinguished Prizes (4) — Yamaha Purchase Vouchers worth \$2,000 each for the best entry in each of the 4 languages.

Merit Prizes (10) — worth \$100 each

There will also be Consolation Prizes

Entry forms available at National Theatre and RTS. Closing date for entries — 14th Feb 1979

MINISTRY OF CULTURE
MUSIC FOR EVERYONE

4 voices

Soprano : Yeoh Siew Lian
Mezzo-Soprano : Shirley Fleury
Tenor : David Lim
Baritone : Geoffrey Abisheganaden
Piano : Helen Foo
Guitar : Alex Abisheganaden

Sunday 20 August 78 8 p.m. DBS Auditorium

PROGRAMME

H. PURCELL (1659-1695)
Sound the trumpet, Let us wander, How blest are shepherds
W. A. MOZART (1756-1791)
Excerpts from "Don Giovanni" and "The Magic Flute"
F. MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
On wings of song, Herbstlied, Gruss, The lark
A. DVORAK (1841-1904)
Rusalka's Song to the moon, All alone, Never say die
A. SULLIVAN (1842-1900)
Excerpts from "The Mikado" and "The Pirates of Penzance"
FOLKSONGS
Sing a song of sixpence, Carmela, Ching-a-ring chaw

Admission \$1.00
The World Book Co.
Popular Book Co. (Cashin St.)
Popular Book Co. (Chin Swee Rd.)
Yamaha Music School (Plaza Singapura)
Cold Storage
C. K. Tang

2019

Fabric banners (cotton, polyester, wool)
134 x 180 cm each

*Reproductions of posters from the Music for
Everyone concert series.*



**Ministry of Culture
Music for Everyone**

艺苑新声

MUSICAL SOIREE

The Singapore Music Teachers Association

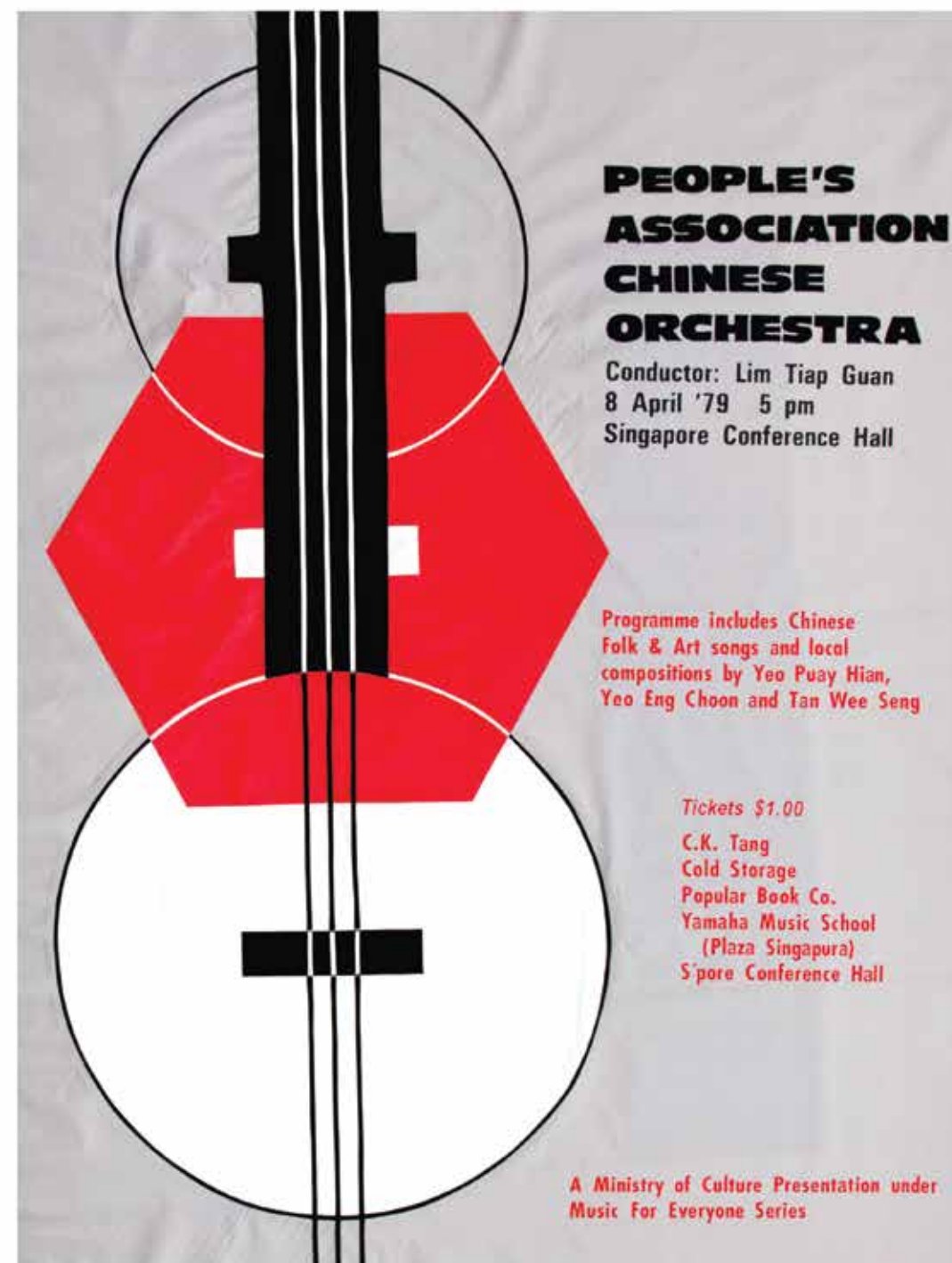
Sunday 11 June 78 5 pm

Victoria Theatre

PROGRAMME

(1) Prelude No. 2 in F minor ——— Satm	Admission — \$1.00
(2) Sonata in E, Op. 14 No. 1 ——— Beethoven	The Music Book Co.
(3) In the Night, from Fantasia on Op. 32 ——— Schumann	Popular Book Co. (Larkin St.)
(4) Ballade in A flat, Op. 47 ——— Chopin	Popular Book Co. (Chin Swee Rd.)
(5) Sonata in C ——— Haydn	Yamaha Music School (Plaza Singapura)
(6) Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3 ——— Brahms	Cold Storage
(7) La Bal (The Ball) from Jeux d'Enfants ——— Ravel	C. K. Tang
(8) Sonata in C minor, Op. 10 No. 3 ——— Chopin	Singapore Conference Hall
(9) Cadiz from Suite Española ——— Albeniz	
(10) The Sail and the Music ——— Copland	

The following is our programme as presented by Mr. Yang Eui Chung, Hon. Sec. Gen.
Chin, Mr. Wang Seng (Chair), Mrs. Lim Hoon Ang and Mrs. Lim Hoon Wang.



**PEOPLE'S
ASSOCIATION
CHINESE
ORCHESTRA**

Conductor: Lim Tiap Guan
8 April '79 5 pm
Singapore Conference Hall

**Programme includes Chinese
Folk & Art songs and local
compositions by Yeo Puay Hian,
Yeo Eng Choon and Tan Wee Seng**

Tickets \$1.00

**C.K. Tang
Cold Storage
Popular Book Co.
Yamaha Music School
(Plaza Singapura)
Singapore Conference Hall**

**A Ministry of Culture Presentation under
Music for Everyone Series**



MINISTRY OF CULTURE **MUSIC FOR EVERYONE**

Admission: \$1.00
 The World Book Co.
 Singapore Conference Hall
 Popular Book Co. (Cashin St.)
 Popular Book Co. (Chin Swee Rd.)
 Yamaha Music School (8 Floor Plaza Singapura)
 Yew Hong-Chow Music Centre
 Cold Storage
 C. K. Tang

Programme
 The Robert Luse Guitar Ensemble will feature 4 Modern and 2 Baroque works. The Baroque works include 4 Pieces by Bach and Concerto for 4 Violins by Telemann, while works from the Modern Period will be Vier Miniaturen by Eberhard Weidm, Going Dutch by John Duarte, Suite in G by Hermann Ambrosius and the Premier of Robert Luse's own Guitar Trio, Three Pieces after Carulli. Guitar soloists will be Winnie Fob and Leonard Tan.

Thursday 20-4-78 8p.m.
SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL

ROBERT LUSE GUITAR ENSEMBLE

Ministry of Culture Music for Everyone

ASIAN YOUTH ORCHESTRA

CONDUCTOR: CHOO HOEY
WEDNESDAY 13 DECEMBER 78 8PM
SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL

Programme
 Overture Rosamunde (Schubert)
 Mass in G (Schubert)
 Symphony No. 7 (Beethoven)
 Chorus: Singapore Teachers Choir and Youth Choir
 Soloists: Lee Soo Bee (Soprano)
 Choo Lin Mui (Alto)
 David Lim (Tenor)
 Goh Say Hong (Bass)

Admission: \$1.00
 S'pore Conference Hall
 Cold Storage
 C.K. Tang
 The World Book Co.
 Popular Book Co.
 Yamaha Music School
 (Plaza Singapura)



2019
ABS plastic
Dimensions variable

*Soprano, alto, tenor and bass recorders taken apart
and rearranged into sculptures.*











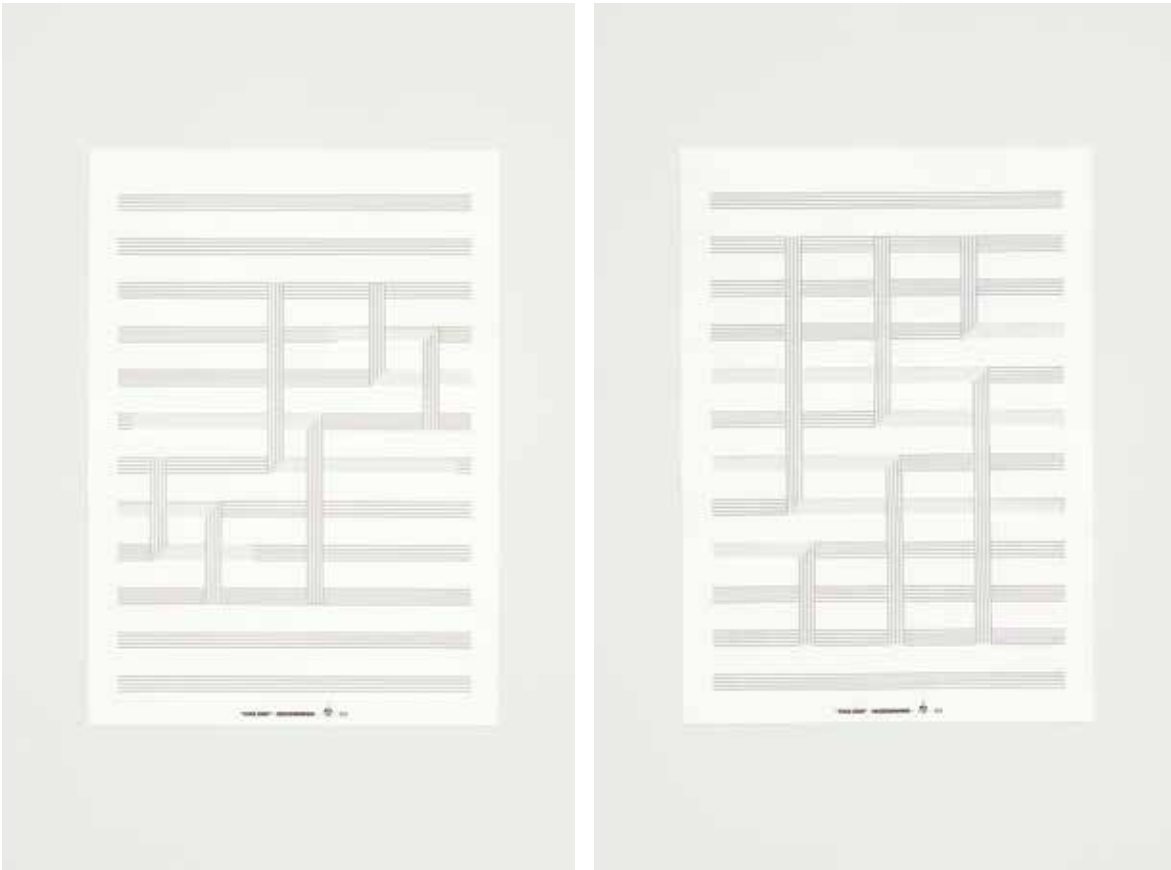
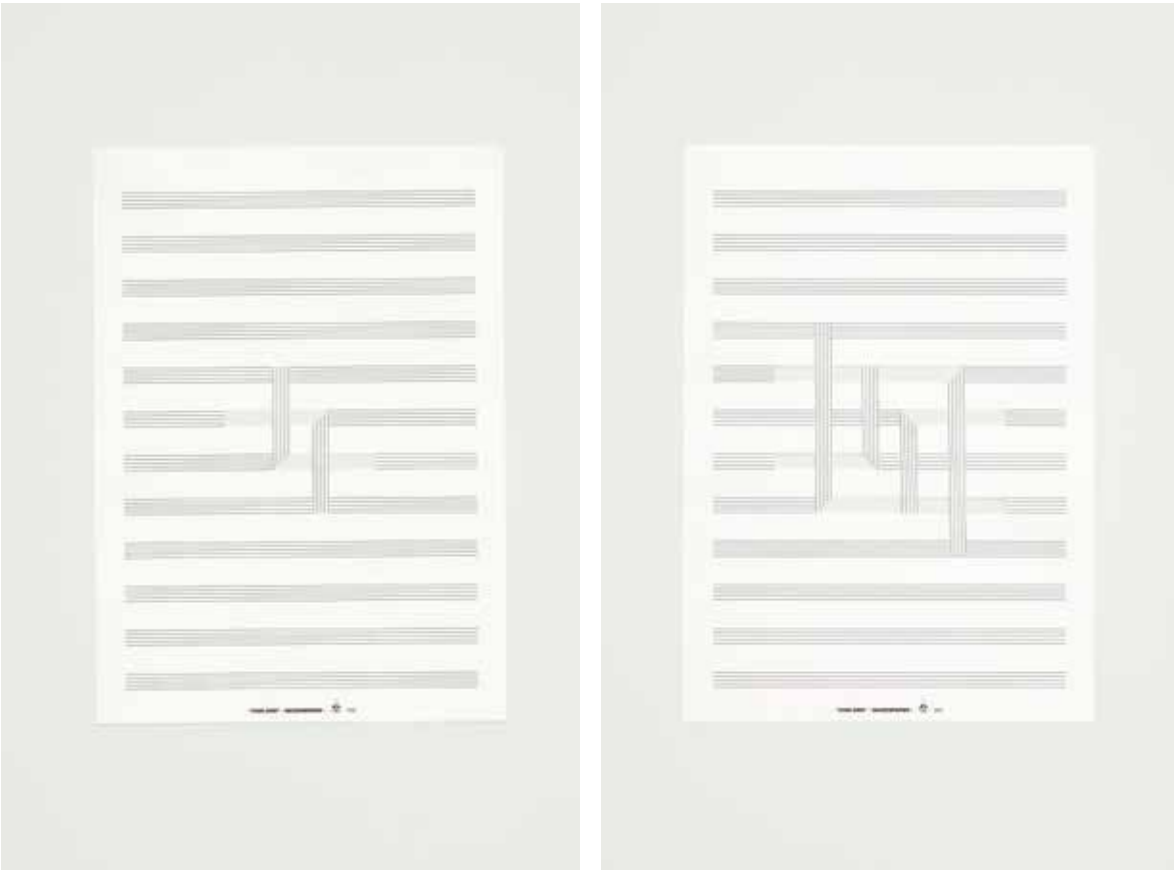


2018 – 2019

Mixed techniques on paper

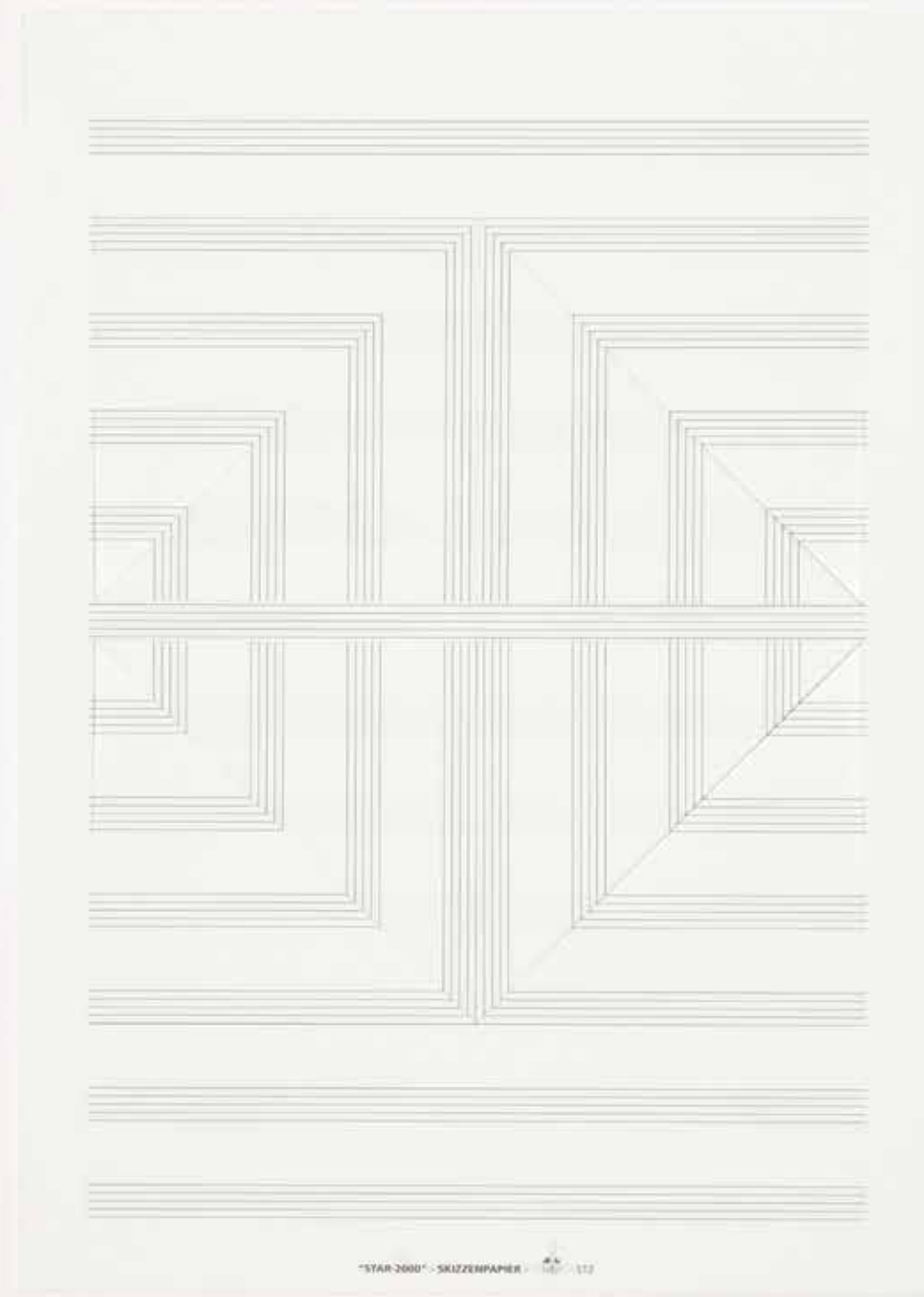
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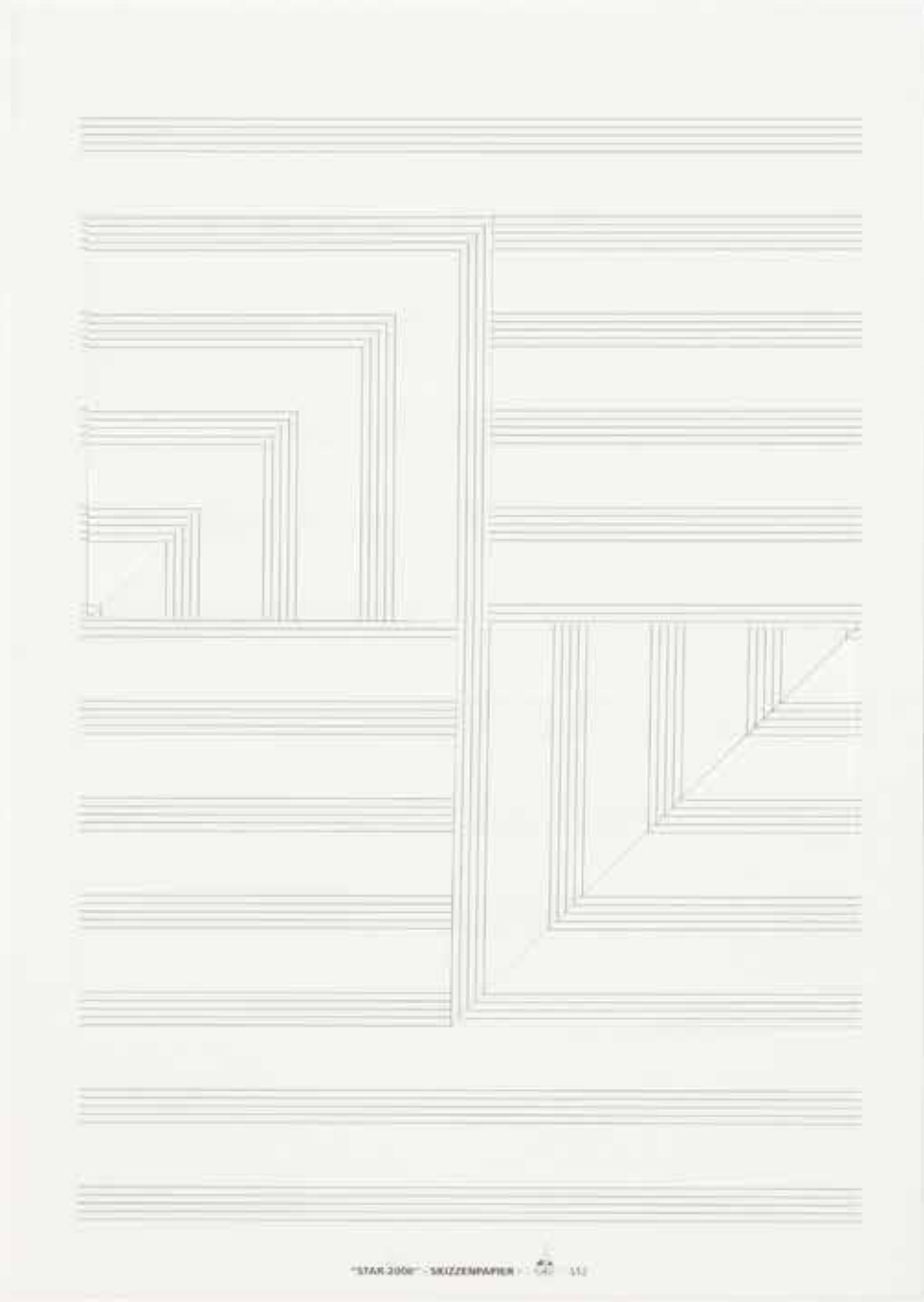
Ongoing, systematic exploration of music manuscript paper as a medium for creating visual compositions.

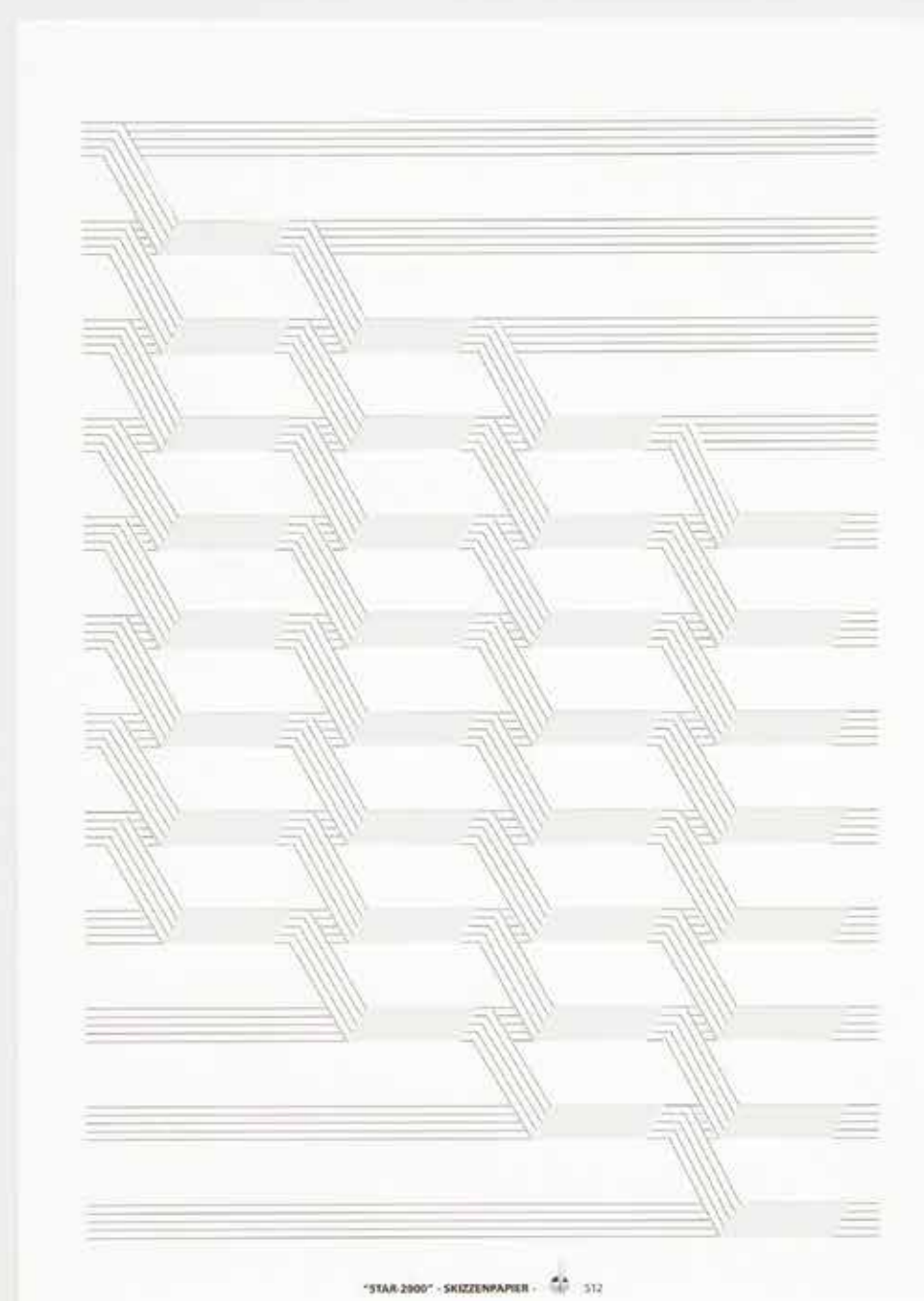




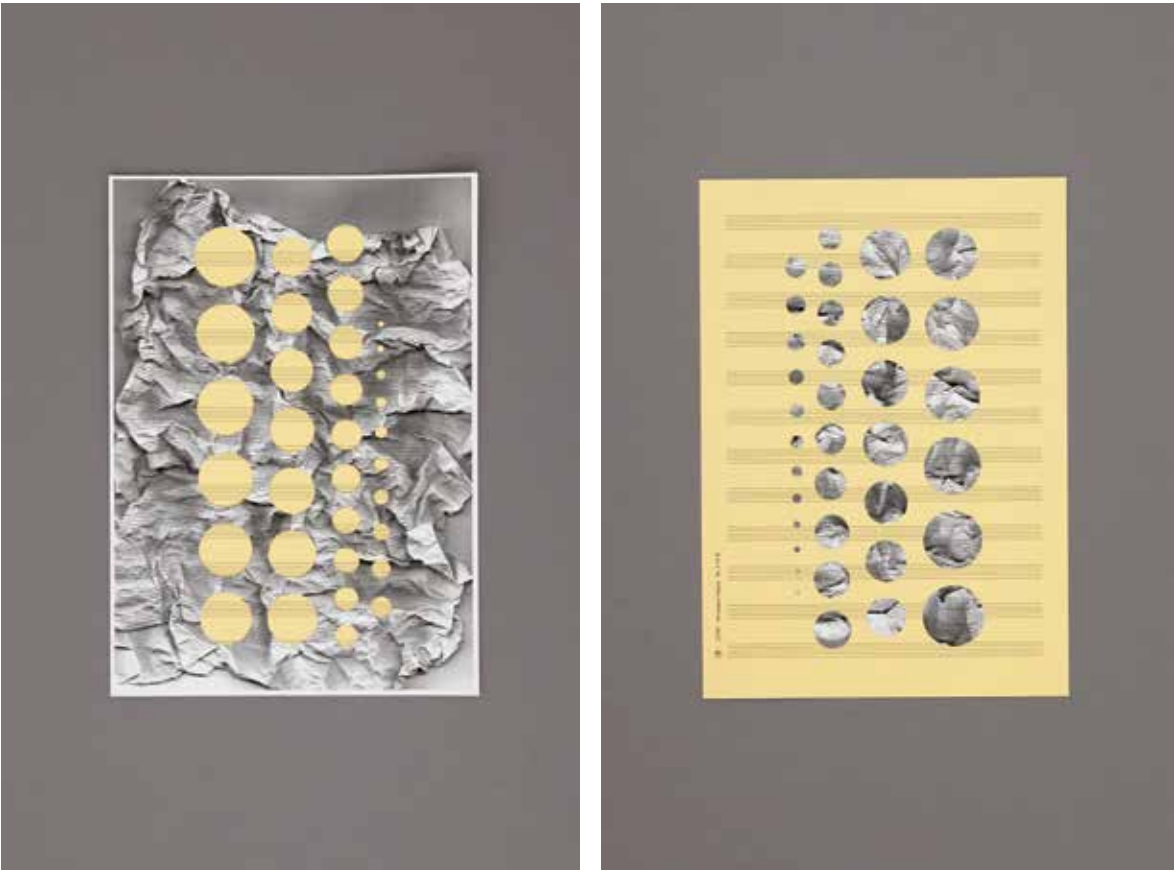


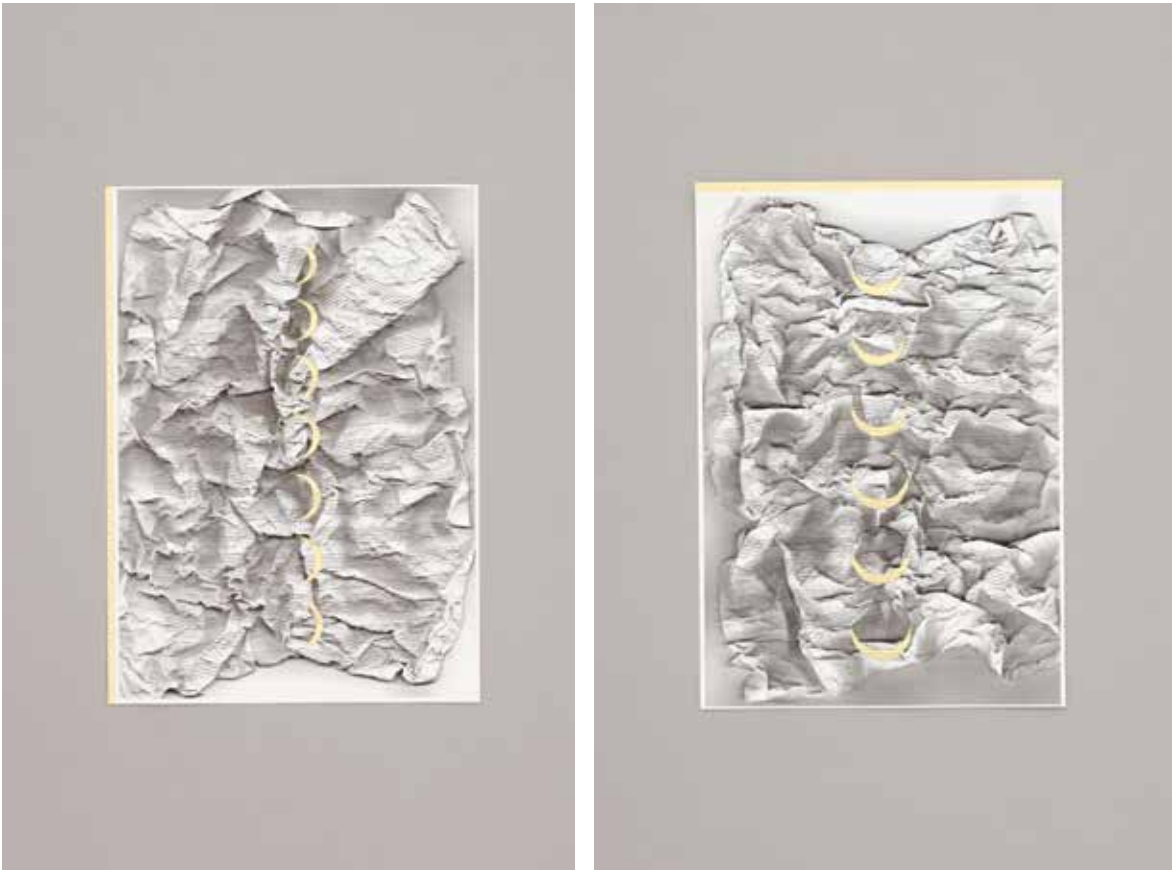


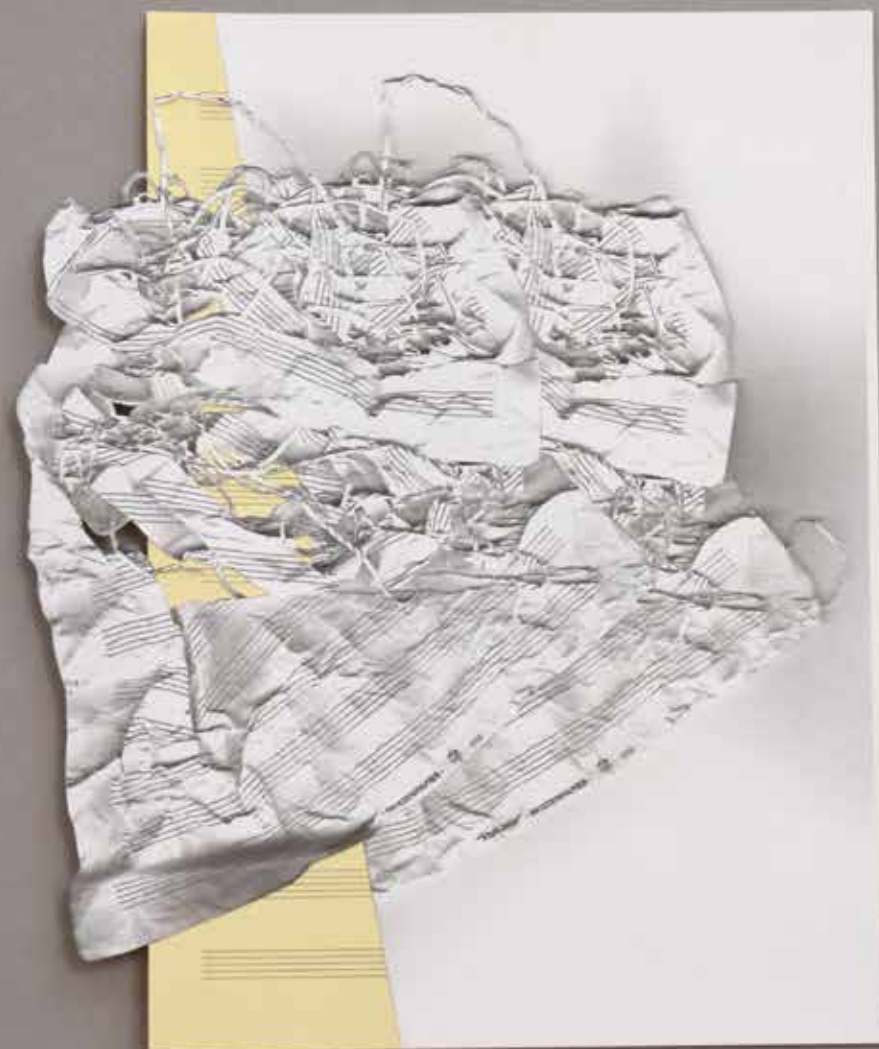
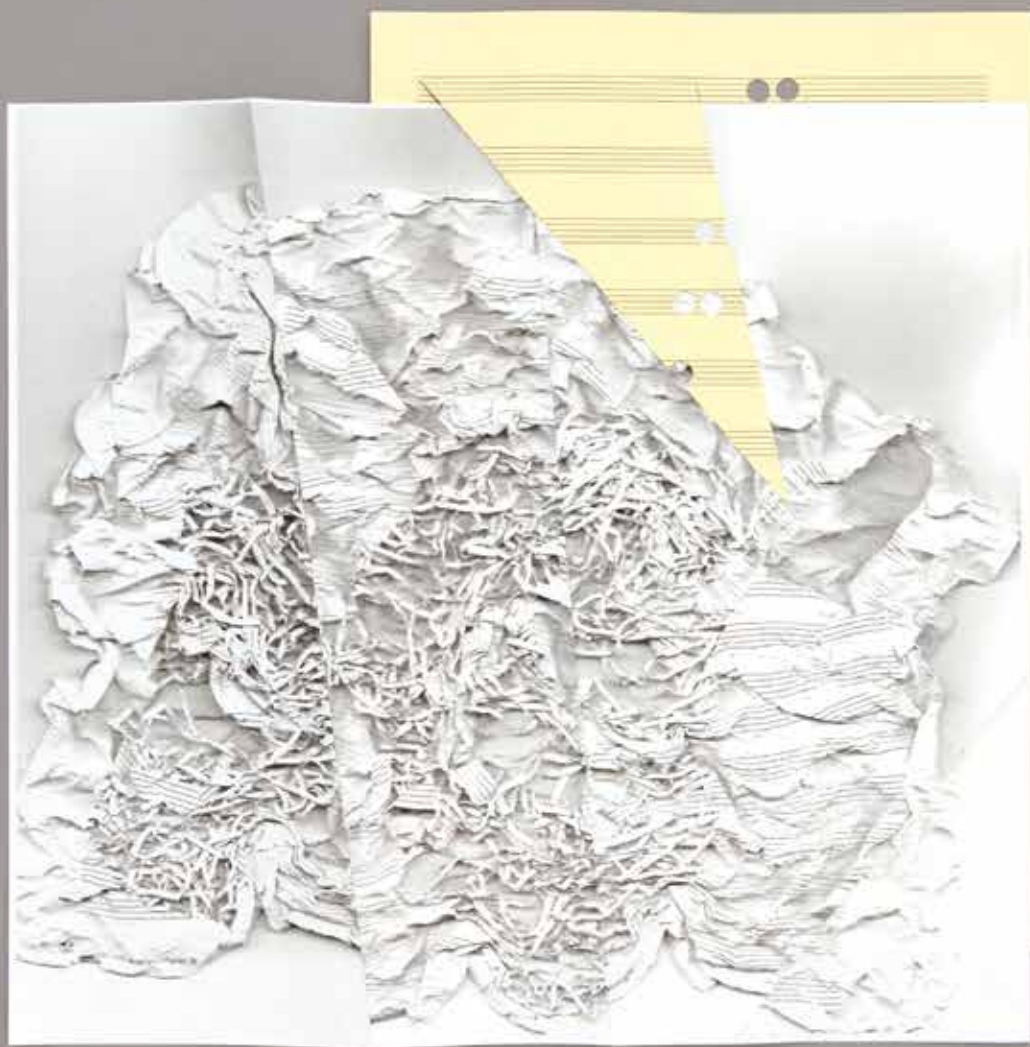


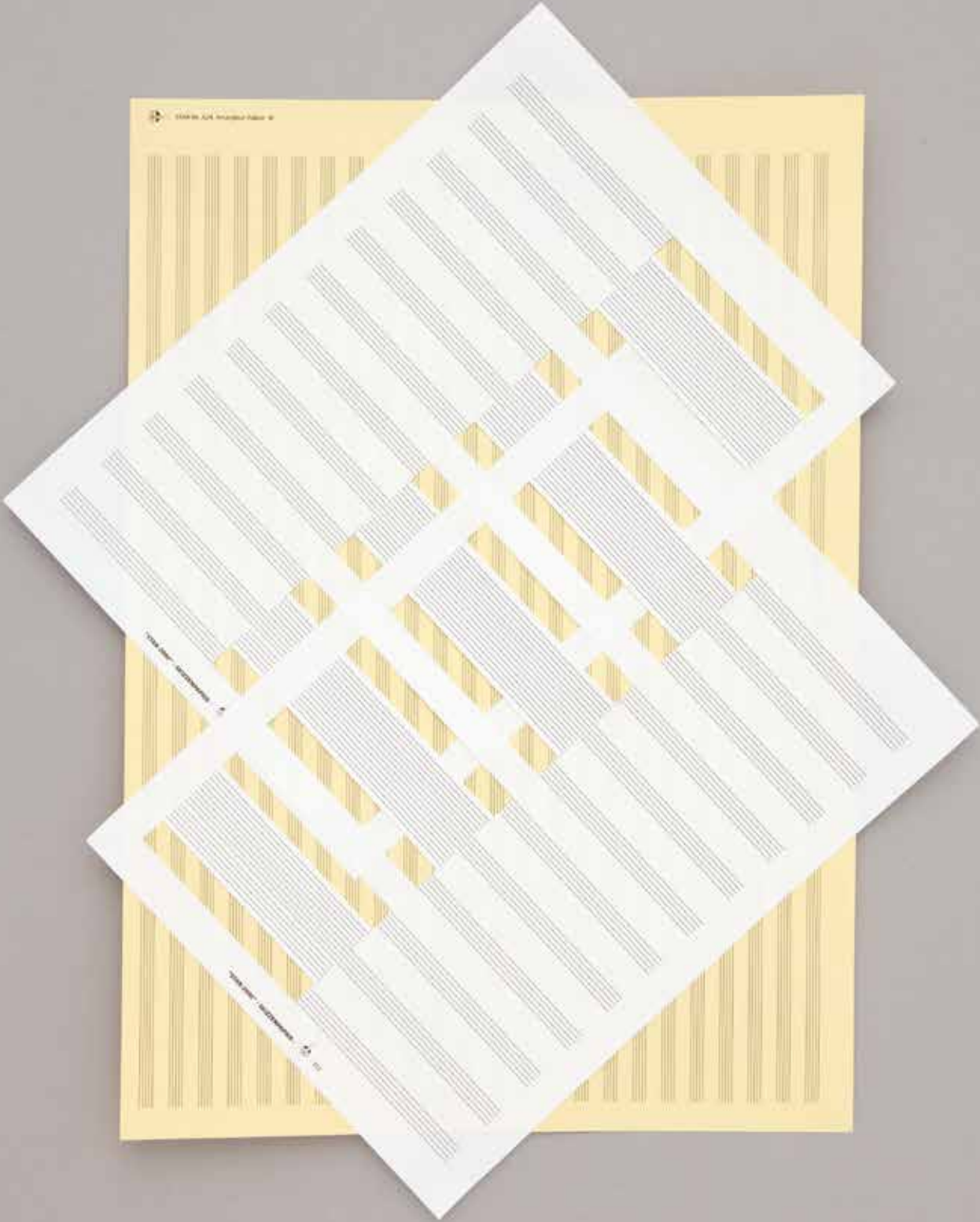


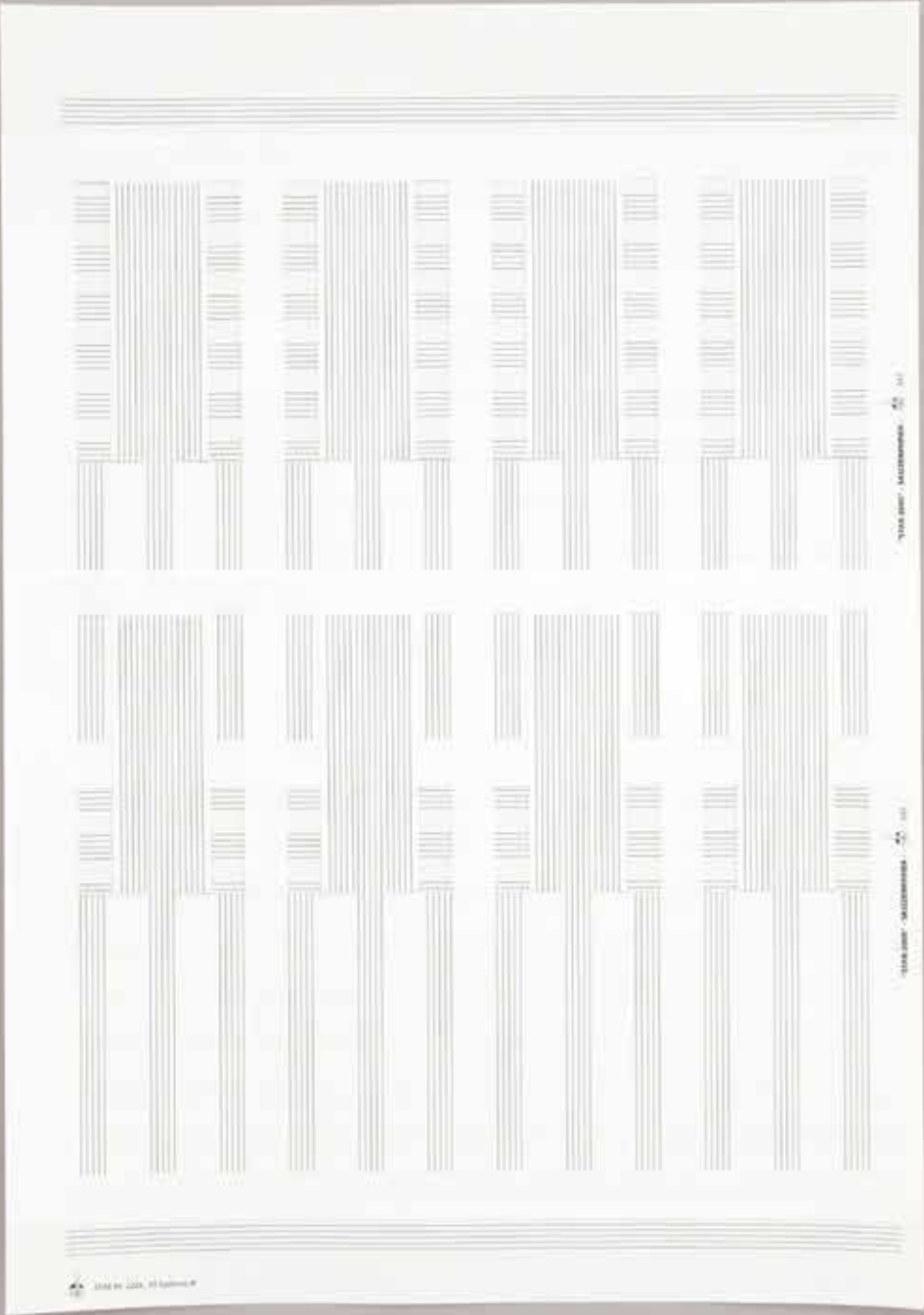
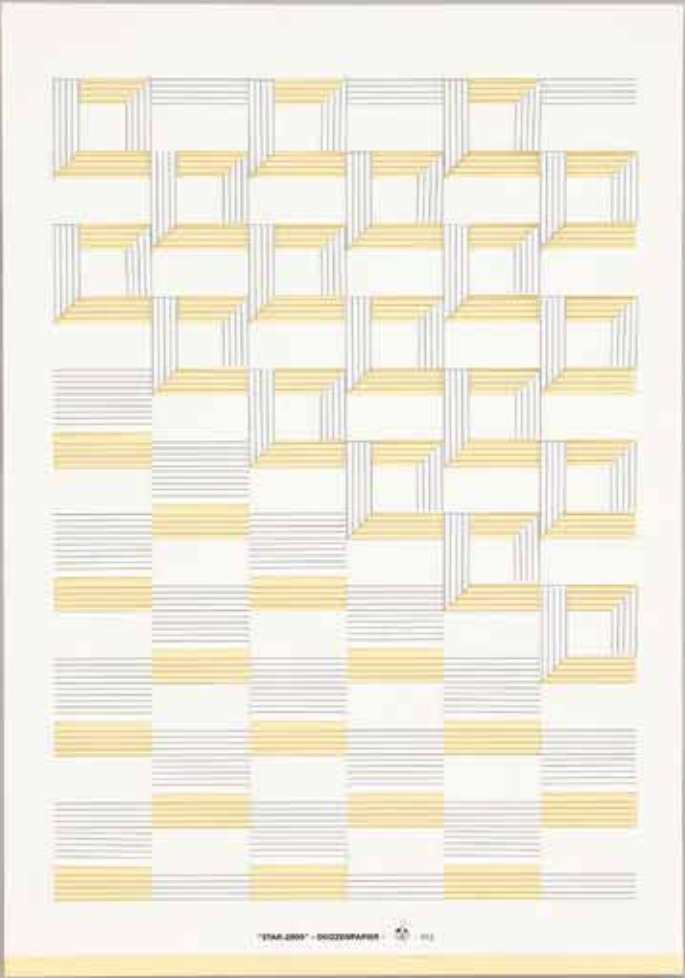


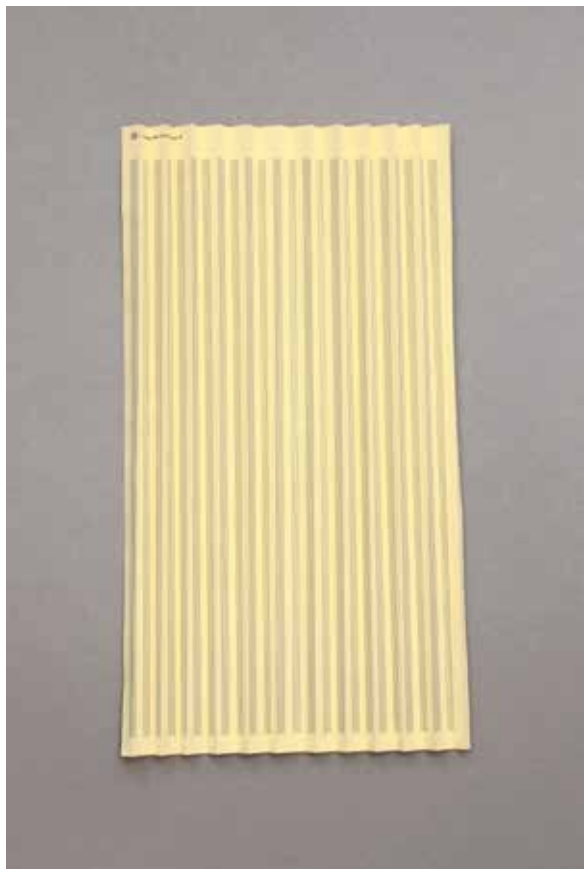
















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Cinegear Singapore Pte Ltd
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p.29 *Dusk to Dawn Choruses* (2018)
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The artist and curator would
like to thank:

The Ang Family
Rosa Daniel
Paul Tan
Low Eng Teong
Linda de Mello
Patrick Putra Piay
Candice Li
Bernice Ong
Chua Yong Kee
Ahmad Mashadi
Mae Anderson
Randy Chan
Emi Eu
Honor Harger
Jason Lim
Simon Speiser
Juliana Lim
Lim Mee Lian
Marina Zuccarelli
Annabelle Aw Hutchinson







Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme

Song-Ming Ang

Published on the occasion of the 58th Venice Biennale –
Singapore Pavilion: Song-Ming Ang, *Music for Everyone:
Variations on a Theme*, 2019

11 May – 24 November 2019



Project Advisor

Michelle Ho

Editor

Adeline Chia

Design

Factory 1611

Printer

Allegro Print

Cover images

Song-Ming Ang

Different Every Time, 2017

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Published in April 2019 by National Arts Council, Singapore

The publisher does not warrant or assume any legal
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necessarily reflect those of the National Arts Council.

Commissioned by National Arts Council, Singapore



Supported by Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

ISBN: 978-981-14-1736-8

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Coining Concepts: Conceptual Currencies in the Art of Song-Ming Ang

BY MELANIE POCOCK

While many texts—including the essays in these two volumes—discuss relationships between the art of Song-Ming Ang and music, few highlight the nature of his work as conceptual art, a lack which is surprising given its frequent references to the genre. The processes of Ang’s works—rigorous abstentions to an idea, creating correlations—are inherently conceptual: They employ signs and shift their meanings.

Perhaps the protracted processes of Ang’s works are what cause viewers to associate them less with modes of conceptual art. Though his works stem from ideas, their meticulous execution tends to overshadow their concepts, sometimes to the point of parody. Yet, and as many art historians would argue, such tensions between the idea and its execution have long been part of conceptual art’s ontology. One only needs to read artist Sol LeWitt’s instructions to follow irrational thoughts “absolutely and logically” to understand the fundamentally paradoxical dynamics of turning ideas into material forms.¹

In this text, I reflect on the ways in which Ang uses strategies of conceptual art in his works. These strategies include references to conceptual artworks and playing on their frameworks. In Ang’s works, conceptual art itself often becomes a trope which, when handled ironically, inscribes them into a global language of contemporary art. But while reflecting international art discourse, the conceptual quality of Ang’s works also has a particular resonance in Singapore, the country in which he was born. This resonance is not only due to the rubric-driven culture of Singapore, but local forms of conceptual art, which create similar, ironic forms of reference.

Stop Me if You Think You’ve Seen This One Before

The most literal reference by Ang to a work of conceptual art can be seen in his installation *Stop Me if You Think You’ve Seen This One Before* (2011). The title and components of the installation are adaptations of a work by British artist Jonathan Monk called *Stop Me if You Think That You’ve Heard This One Before* (2003). In Ang’s version, as in Monk’s work, a set of framed watercolour paintings of circles are hung above album covers with vinyl records inside them. In Monk’s work, the albums are all records by British rock band The Smiths; in Ang’s installation, they are records by Scottish pop band Belle and Sebastian. The colours of the painted circles in both works each match a colour of the albums placed beneath them. In both pieces, the hand-painted circles are approximately the same size as the vinyl records and create a string of associations: between the circular forms of the paintings and vinyls, as well as ideas of uniqueness and reproducibility.

In Monk’s work, emphasis on the idea (of matching the colours of the circles to the album covers) and its straightforward execution reflect the techniques of conceptual artists—John Baldessari’s use of coloured circles in his screen-prints or Donald Judd’s employment of serial objects, for instance. Yet, at the

¹ See, for example, Sol LeWitt’s *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, published in *Artforum* (June, 1987). While LeWitt highlights how the work of art lies in its idea, he also acknowledges the decisions involved in its execution. Such decisions imply a degree of labour—even if this labour is not acknowledged as the artwork itself.

same time, in his work Monk also parodies these techniques. Quoting a song by The Smiths, its title—*Stop Me if You Think That You’ve Heard This One Before*—hints at these artists’ techniques and their previous use in other artworks. There is also the irony of its instruction—to quote the work’s catalogue entry on the Museum of Modern Art in New York’s website, “not only is [Jonathan Monk] not present in the work itself and therefore impossible to stop, but there is nothing to hear, only something to look at.”² This “something to look at”, moreover, is far from the immaculately finished and precisely rendered works of conceptual artists like Donald Judd and LeWitt. For instance, while the circles in Monk’s works have been simply painted, they are also *badly* painted: the edges of the washes of paint have not been blended in and the distribution of the paint is uneven.

In replicating these techniques, Ang’s work absorbs these ironic references by Monk to North American conceptualism. Ang’s version also extends them, creating double ironies. Its title—*Stop Me if You Think You’ve Seen This One Before*—reads like a deliberate jibe to Monk, whose work he has closely, if not explicitly, “copied”. Ang’s mimetic work could also be interpreted as a rejoinder to Monk’s own “copying” of conceptual precedents. And by replacing The Smiths’ albums with records by Belle and Sebastian, Ang creates an ironic parallel between them (Morrissey’s designs for The Smiths’ albums directly inspired the covers of Belle and Sebastian’s albums). Thus, Ang’s work not only visually mirrors Monk’s installation, but inserts itself drolly into its parody.

Full Circles: Originals and Copies

On his website, Ang describes *Stop Me if You Think You’ve Seen This One Before* as an “appropriation” of Monk’s work.³ Ang’s description is certainly true in conceptual terms—he does, quite simply, replicate its idea—but is arguably less so in terms of content. Many elements of the work actually complement, or in a conceptual sense “complete”, Monk’s installation. While Ang’s use of albums by Belle and Sebastian is ironic, for instance, it also reflects Monk’s original selection of records—the former are contemporary equivalents of the latter, and directly reference The Smiths’ album designs. The title of Ang’s work also highlights the original principle of *Stop Me if You Think That You’ve Heard This One Before*—that there really is only something to look at—making it an homage to, and a parody of Monk’s work. Even Ang’s mimetic method aligns with Monk’s practice. In his works, Monk regularly references existing artworks and art movements, creating hyperbolic or analogous versions of them.⁴

2 Gallery label for *Stop Me If You Think That You’ve Heard This One Before* by Jonathan Monk from *Compass in Hand: Selections from The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection*, April 22, 2009–January 4, 2010. Accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/96720>.

3 Song-Ming Ang, *Stop Me If You Think You’ve Seen This One Before* (2011), <https://www.circadiansongs.com/stop-me>.

4 “Jonathan Monk’s work seems predicated on testing out possible exceptions to the rule that remakes and sequels are never quite as good as the originals. For the last 15 years or so his work has consisted of reflections on seminal works, methods and ideas principally from Conceptual and Minimal artists of the 1960s and 1970s. His updates, imitations with alterations, reinterpretations and cover versions turn on twists that are variously droll, whimsical, personalised or autobiographical.” Eichler, Dominic, ‘Review: Jonathan Monk, Kunstverein Hanover, Germany’, *Frieze* (7 Jun, 2006), <https://frieze.com/article/jonathan-monk>.

This absence of preciousness—about originals and their copies, and the act of replication itself—is intrinsic to Ang’s works and an integral attitude of conceptual art.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many North American conceptual artists forwent attachments to the art object, instead favouring infinitely reproducible ideas. In an exchange with Andrea Miller-Keller on the subject of his wall drawings, LeWitt commented that it did not matter if versions of his drawings were executed in different locations at the same time because their intrinsic value was their idea—there was no hierarchy between “original” and “copied” drawings.⁵ Vital to practices like LeWitt’s was also the idea of decentralising the artwork and its labour. The instructions for LeWitt’s drawings, for instance, could be executed by anyone, anywhere, and with any level of skill.⁶

For an artist like Ang, who comes from a background in literature and sound, the democratic principles and open terms of conceptual art have always been attractive. Drawing on these principles, Ang has been able to use his own skills and concepts: his experience in music production, for example, and ideas of blurring distinctions between “high” and “low” art.⁷ This broad approach of conceptual art also aligns with his later, critically-oriented art training at Goldsmiths at The University of London, in which distinctions between visual art and other disciplines were consistently eroded.⁸ In a contemporary climate, such approaches feel more relevant than ever, not only because of the continued prevalence of postmodernism, but also of the increasing conceptualisation of art practice itself. Removed from an association with particular techniques, artistic practices are now more interdisciplinary and concept-driven (Ang’s MA in Aural & Visual Cultures that he obtained from Goldsmiths, as well as the idea of “desktop” studios, being cases in point).

In *Justin* (2012), Ang blurs distinctions of creativity through a work honed on a single concept: to reproduce, as faithfully as possible, the autograph of pop star Justin Bieber. The process of mastering Bieber’s autograph took Ang four months, but in the final work viewers only see selected elements: Ang’s last, “perfect” signature written on a promotional poster of Bieber and a slideshow projection of Ang’s earlier versions and scripts. The scale of the slideshow and the poster are modest (the latter is bedroom, not billboard-sized, and the slideshow matches the size of the poster). Viewing the slides, we see how Ang has broken down the complicated squiggles of Bieber’s signature into component parts—the cusp of a J, an overlapping curve—and assembled them into a legible whole.

5 Weber, John S, ‘The Idea, The Wall Drawing, and Public Space’, in *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 91–92

6 Ibid.

7 The distinction between art and craft, for example, is often a question raised in Ang’s works. See *Something Old, Something New* (2015), an installation that comprises, among other elements, a glass replica of a 19th century music stand fabricated by glass artisans in Italy. In Ang’s glass version of the stand, the function of the original stand (as a manoeuvrable support) becomes redundant. Its status as an art object, however, is also questioned, because of its physical realisation by craftsmen.

8 Ang studied at Goldsmiths between 2008 and 2009. Conversation with the author, 22 Jan, 2019.



Justin (2012)

The point made by Ang in *Justin* is that anyone can reproduce a “unique” signature if broken down and practised in this way. Yet the message is not just one of accessibility; it is also the fallacy of the uniqueness of Bieber’s autograph and its concomitant aura. Would a poster with Ang’s version of Bieber’s autograph on it be any less meaningful to a Bieber fan, so long as they thought it was real? Considered this way, one realises the extent to which identities—and particularly celebrity identities—are concepts, performed (or in this case, inscribed) by visual markers. That Bieber himself wears oversized hoodies, swaggers like a pre-pubescent Jay-Z, and at the same time embodies the golden boy, are themselves tropes cultivated by a marketing machine. The fact that his signature probably exists on thousands of posters and flyers also makes the idea of his autograph less unique—a reality of which we are reminded in Ang’s revolving slides. Ironically, Ang’s signature also seems to have more value than Bieber’s, because it is not a mark that has been made absent-mindedly (like Bieber’s autograph would have been), but one which has been refined over time.

Working Concepts

In *Justin*, the contrast between the process of replicating Justin Bieber’s autograph and its modest outcome creates a sense of disproportion; a discrepancy of scale which often occurs in conceptual artworks. As viewers, we cannot help but

marvel at the labour behind Ang’s version of Bieber’s signature, a labour which, though we have knowledge of, remains largely hidden.⁹ For Ang, the deceptive simplicity of conceptual art forms one of its most interesting contradictions. It was while viewing *Stop Me if You Think That You’ve Heard This One Before* at the Museum of Modern Art, for example, that Ang started to appreciate such dualities—the instantaneous idea versus the duration of its execution, as well as the difference between virtuosity and pure labour. To quote Ang: “What struck me is how [Monk] juxtaposes his own circles, painted by hand and thus signifying ‘authenticity’, with the vinyl records, which are factory-pressed and mass-produced. In fact, and to an extent, the ease of watercolour (as a medium) makes the value of the paintings seem less, while the limited run of the vinyls ensure their status as out-of-print collectibles.”¹⁰

For Ang, the hand-made quality of certain conceptual artworks makes their ideas more affecting, because it ties them to the capacities of the human mind and body.¹¹ In *Parts and Labour* (2012), Ang transposes this idea onto the process of restoring a piano, a task which is both physically painstaking and cerebral. Working closely with a piano restorer near his studio in Berlin, Ang learnt how to take a piano apart and replace its old strings. The final outcome is an edited video, in which viewers see the artist mostly alone, or occasionally in the company of the restorers, carefully disassembling and reassembling the piano, detailing his evolution from fumbling amateur to semi-skilled craftsman. For Ang, this personal evolution was a key part of the project, because it enabled him to gain an anatomical understanding of an instrument whose sounds he had mostly only previously manipulated in sound editing suites.¹²



Parts and Labour (2012)

⁹ For the first presentation of *Justin* during his residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2012, Ang included the leaves of paper with his practiced versions of Bieber’s autograph. It was only in later versions that he decided to present these pages as a slideshow projection. For Ang, the revolving slides convey a sense of time (and thus also labour). But the self-effacing nature of the projection (in which one slide replaces the next) also limits viewers’ access to the depth of time and labour in the work. At any one time, viewers see one, or several of the pages projected—it is only upon viewing the entire sequence that they apprehend Ang’s efforts to recreate the signature. Even then, viewers’ visual memory of Ang’s labour is somewhat blurred through the constant replacement of one slide by the next.

¹⁰ Ang, conversation with the author, 22 Jan. 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

In *Backwards Bach* (2013)—an extension of *Parts And Labour*—Ang juxtaposes two edited videos in which we see him playing Johann Sebastian Bach’s Prelude in C Major from book one of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722) on a harpsichord, forwards and backwards respectively. Watching the videos, it is impossible to discern which is which, the sound accompanying them only ever playing one version (forwards or backwards) at a time. The movement of the cameras increases the looping effect, their lenses circling around the pianist. Ang’s selection of Bach’s Prelude in C Major is apt: because of its simple and numerous arpeggios, it is often used as a warm-up piece for pianists, making it a relatively easy score for an unskilled player like Ang to learn.

Rather than encouraging viewers to immerse themselves in the laborious process of *Backwards Bach*, Ang instead pushes them outwards, towards its conceptual frame. Because of the mimetic and looping nature of the work, time and the precise details of Ang’s labour become abstracted, and are only signified by the two videos.

In both *Backwards Bach* and *Parts and Labour*, Ang addresses the pedagogy in classical music and its relationship to wider social pressures in Singapore. *Parts and Labour*, for example, is about learning these pedagogical “rules” and then unlearning them. In this way, these works follow in the footsteps of conceptual artworks in Singapore that test and subvert institutional parameters and cultural expectations.

Poignancy in Parameters

In Singapore, conceptual frameworks for artistic practice have a critical legacy, established through the performative works of artists like Cheo Chai-Hiang and Tang Da Wu in the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the most famous instances of conceptual art in Singapore occurred in 1972, with the Modern Art Society’s rejection of Cheo’s 5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*) from its annual exhibition. The work, according to the exhibition’s committee, did not qualify as “art” due to its conceptual representation of the Singapore River as a square, void of pictorial (and thus identifiable) references.¹³ Works like Cheo’s are etched onto Singapore’s art history, not only because of their innovative nature at the time, but because of the issues that they raised—stringent policies within arts associations, as well as a cultural lack of openness towards non-figurative and process-based approaches to art.

13 Ching, Isabel, “Tracing (Un)certain Legacies: Conceptualism in Singapore and The Philippines”, Asia Art Archive (1 Jul, 2011), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/tracing-uncertain-legacies-conceptualism-in-singapore-and-the-philippines>.

For many contemporary artists in Singapore, such issues remain and inform the works of several artists including Lim Tzay Chuen, Heman Chong and Chun Kai Feng. In Chong’s and Chun’s works, texts and forms re-deploying materials and cultural signifiers of modern Singapore question the impact of the country’s rubric-driven culture on the ways in which people move and think. For his project for the Singapore Pavilion for the 50th Venice Biennale, *Alter #11* (2002), Lim proposed to move one of Singapore’s national monuments—the Merlion fountain currently at Marina Bay—to the Singaporean pavilion in Venice. In many ways, Lim’s proposal was designed to fail, its logistical constraints simply forming a metaphor of the silted approach that often governs decision-making and arts policy in Singapore.¹⁴ In *Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules* (2003/2013), Ang similarly tests parameters for art, through an interactive installation in which people are invited to throw ping-pong balls at electric guitars and drums. Ang first presented the installation during International Computer Music Conference in Singapore in 2003, and most recently at The Substation, one of the country’s longest-running independent art spaces. Both these contexts make ripe frameworks in which to test art’s parameters: the former with its academic framework, and the latter with its consistently alternative (yet consciously community-minded) position. In these contexts, the open invitation and cacophony of *Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules* formed a playful critique of cultures and restraints surrounding performance art in Singapore, with its lack of a prescribed script (a frequent criterion for performances approved by the Media Development Authority) and its “excessive” noise.

Watching the video documentation of *Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules*, viewers sense Ang’s desire to liberate culture in Singapore more broadly, not just in art spaces, but in social and cultural attitudes. In the videos that document the installation, we see the various ways in which people “play” with the instruments, a freedom that often feels absent in mainstream musical training. In Asian cultures like Singapore, learning a classical instrument is a frequent rite of passage for middle-class youths: It signifies a high level of intellectual precocity and socio-economic standing. For many young people, however, such a practice may be felt as a burden and an imposition by their parents. Indeed, the emphasis of this kind of classical training is not so much to cultivate skills in free expression but rigour and discipline. These experiences can result in mixed feelings for the young people subject to them: a sense of appreciation for the discipline which such training instills, as well as feelings of being constrained by it.

Ang’s series of drawings, *Music Manuscripts* (2013–2014), which show patterns and designs made by Ang on top of empty music manuscripts, also playfully subvert the rule-following culture of classical music training. The marks in his drawings bend the rules, and yet are meticulous enough to look like an alternative set of logics. While some of Ang’s lines in his drawings adhere to

14 See Ching’s article, “Tracing (Un)certain Legacies: Conceptualism in Singapore and The Philippines”, where she describes artists like Lim Tzay Chuen, whose concept-driven propositions subvert Singapore’s status quo: “The problem is in fact a circular one: To negotiate and subvert the interlocking barriers and pressures, art practices fall back on ephemeral strategies and ambitious statement-making proposals that are doomed to failure. In turn, these non-existent works form the very sort of history that Singapore artists find necessary to re-visit for their potential critical power and reflexive strategies.” Ibid.

the printed stanzas on the templates, in others they diverge from them, creating their own motifs. Ang's medium of choice (technical pen) ties in with the look and feel of the printed stanzas: often his lines look like extensions of them. In some drawings, the criss-crossing of lines in turn creates their own patterns: accumulations of "punctuation" or visual impressions of reverberation. The thin marks of the pen give Ang's lines a semi-present and slightly precarious quality, as if they could at any moment be crossed out by a cantankerous music teacher interpreting them as "doodles". These tensions—between the formal and symbolic, and between the precision and playfulness of Ang's additions—give the drawings an intrinsically conceptual quality. For many conceptual artists, Ang's *Music Manuscripts* could be read as scores, their formations of lines signifying alternative ways of interpreting oscillating sounds and movements.¹⁵

Another work celebrating individual expression and improvisation is *No Man's Band* (2007), where Ang playfully reworks the parameters of *avant-garde* composer John Cage's sound work *4'33"* (1952) and records the sounds generated by music bands in secondary schools in Singapore before their rehearsals. In Cage's work, a four-minute, 33-second time frame is used to reveal the "hidden" sounds of an orchestra during a silent performance. In *No Man's Band*, a wider framework—of only recording moments before rehearsals, and for various durations—reveals the warm-ups and improvisations of young musicians-in-training. For Ang, these wide parameters result in the most interesting find of the work—that many young people often use such time to express themselves freely.¹⁶ Listening to the playful improvisations of the students, viewers sense the privileged nature of this "unaccounted for" time.



No Man's Band (2007)

15 See, for example, scores by conceptual choreographers Anna and Lawrence Halprin (1920–, 1916–2009) or the manuscripts of American avant-garde composer John Cage (1912–1992).

16 Ang, conversation with the author, 22 Jan, 2019.

Using concepts to unpick frameworks will form an integral part of Ang's project for the Singapore Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* (2019). By reproducing the posters that were used to promote multicultural concerts encouraged by the Singapore government during the 1970s and 1980s, Ang will make of their didactic campaigns, concepts, concepts which will in turn highlight the ideological underpinnings of the posters. At the time the posters for these campaigns were created, their abstractions of identity and cultural tropes invariably contributed to their conceptual power, with their rose-tinted images of Singapore as a fully-integrated multicultural society. These kinds of rose-tinted images form the subtext of many of Ang's works, from the social protocols of music education to the instrumentalised concepts of art which shape cultural attitudes and policy in Singapore. In all of Ang's works, irony permeates these subjects, through their meticulous (and sometimes "endless") processes of construction and deconstruction. Indeed, in Ang's works, such dual gestures seem to go hand-in-hand—they form the conniving tools of their conceptual critiques.

Melanie Pocock is a curator and writer. Her research explores paradoxical concepts and aesthetics, and international frameworks of contemporary art. Her group exhibitions include *Dissolving Margins* (2018–19), *Native Revisions* (2017) and *Countershadows (tactics in evasion)* (2014). In 2014, she edited and co-wrote the first monograph on the work of Malaysian artist Shooshie Sulaiman (Kerber Verlag: Berlin). She is currently a curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts.

Song-Ming Ang: A User's Manual

BY NATASHA HOARE

How do you write about an artist's work without mentioning its most salient feature?

That is the perplexing challenge laid out before me. I've been invited to write about Song-Ming Ang's work for this catalogue, which accompanies his pavilion for the Venice Biennale. His work represents Singapore, a country I've sadly only glimpsed in transit. The country thus lives in my imagination as an extension of the lush tropical display of plants and orchids at Changi Airport, an exotic living wallpaper for the jet-lagged.

The nature of my contribution to this catalogue takes a different course to a usual commission. In his work, Ang often gives people instructions. These instructions are generous. They intend to catalyse an experience, often shared, that might shift the parameters of social interaction and our potential for expression. In response I asked him to give me an instruction to follow. He responded in the spirit of the contusions of French writer Georges Perec's exercises in language and form, particularly those in which a denial or restriction is used to generate material that diverges from the usual use of language. Most famously, Perec wrote a novel, *A Void*, without using the letter "e" – the most common letter in the French language. He later wrote one only using words that contained the letter "e". I haven't been given such a brain-melting task. Ang invited me to write about his practice without mentioning music. There, I've done it once, and won't do it again.

The appeal of this approach is strong. So often when writing you tread a familiar path of research and response, trying to find some aspect of an artist's practice that can be yours to map, some reading that is at a remove from previous interpretations or pat descriptions. Here though, I've been sent into unknown and uncharted territory. I'm having to take a lateral journey through his work without discussing its main material; a material whose own immateriality makes this approach entirely fitting.

I impose another restriction. I won't talk to Ang about his work before writing this piece.

In this I'm thinking in part of his work *Silent Walk* (2014), in which a group of participants walk through a city in total silence. In silence, the sounds you might have previously missed become deafening. I'm hazarding that the silence that will exist between Ang and myself might work in a similar way.

My invitation has come on the back of a recommendation by a mutual friend. It's a shot in the dark for Ang, a leap of faith based on the trust he has for the person we hold in common. Such are the fragile threads of association that bind



Silent Walk (2014)

the ecology of the globalised art world. Those threads are as vulnerable as the ones he spins between himself and the participants in his work. There must be something in his nature and practice that engenders this trust. Some sociality and, at its heart, some need in people to take part in the scenarios that he engenders; a belief in the power of poetics. In an alienated world, we need artists like Ang who offer a narrative of empathy, possibility of collaboration. This feels optimistic, something in short supply at the moment.

What this Perecian task brings me to is the necessity to sketch the negative space that exists around Ang's work. That which is whittled away, discarded. The marble that constituted the block, but which was cast off during the sculpting. The canvas left nude. The rushes left on the cutting room floor. It makes me think of the time and space of the afterwards of his projects. The moment the camera stops documenting, when the audience have gone home and the project has ended. What after-effects ripple out from the project to occupy space in the lives of the participants and the minds of the viewer? The brief melding of community through a project, how lasting that is. Speaking with Serbian artist Maja Bekan, I know that the communities around her projects last long after the commissioning institution has closed the show, that her responsibility to those people continues, and that their connection often endures, as people who have shared a specific experience that stands outside the usual parameters of lived experience. What they have in common now is a special slice of connectivity, a little touch of glamour that hasn't faded, and the ability to relive it with those who shared it with you. Participants I've spoken to who have taken part in Tino Segal's work at the

Tate have a similarly lasting community, with or without him, they can't shake the experience, and wouldn't want to, reliving it together, re-reading it. Such are the hidden communities that reside after participatory practices go home. Perhaps they are the intended audiences, we are just an interchangeable public.

Constructing a text in the mode of Perec opens it up to failure. We often try to inure ourselves against failure in the art world. We seek opinions, research, follow trends, commission artists with a track record, and finally, seek consensus, a practice that is nowhere more marked than at Biennales where circular conversations seek to find common ground on who is good and who bad. Now, I'm setting out with clouds on the horizon, with failure a constant companion, and this being permissible — this process feels vulnerable. When I think of this failure I consider its implicated parties. Who would I be failing? Myself: damage to the cultural capital accrued over years? Failing Ang: a waste of written space in a catalogue for his project? Failing the reader: who is taking time out of her busy day to sit down and read this text with the hope of learning something new about Ang's work, or Singapore, or art in general? Three-fold potentials for failure, a holy trinity.

What did Perec think about failure? He was himself a failed painter, a fact that is vital in our reading of his work, no less of his great novel *Life: A User's Manual*, which eventually resolves as a painting. Some read it as a literary exorcism of frustrated artistry. Perec, in his high-wire acts of precarious meaning-making, was creating vulnerable artworks, ones that were so constrained by rules of engagement that they could fail to take form and fail to communicate.

I wonder how Ang negotiates failure. Does he leave space for it? I think he must, as he works with live material and with people.

You can't guarantee success, you have to lay out the conditions of the experiment, the form and let others make the content. They might miss the mark, they might turn right rather than left. Further, what if the tasks he sometimes sets himself in his work, usually learning or replicating something, aren't possible to achieve? (My trinity of failures is rapidly multiplying for Ang). A productive space opens up when you allow the potential of failure, which I think Ang does. It makes for bolder work and bolsters the creative act against the logic of consumption. There are no test audiences, no product recalls or hastily rush out replacement models. Failure as an ideological standpoint is key to creation; we start with questions, not answers. We curators are busy with trying to mitigate against the lurking

failure of miscommunication, usually with our texts and public programming, but is there an argument that we shouldn't? Should work be allowed to fail? I have to go carefully now, or else I'll talk myself out of a job. Perec wouldn't have liked exhibition texts. Or rather, he would have done them backwards and inside out.

In being instructed not to mention something, you very much wish to mention it. In suppressing it it becomes louder—a slip of the tongue will give you away. Spies training for World War II would be monitored as they slept. Any propensity to sleep talking, a return of the irrepressible, would mean a premature end to their career. This effort to suppress reminds me of particular episode of the cult British comedy *Fawlty Towers*, one titled *The Germans*, made in 1975. In it the hapless hotel manager, played by Monty Python John Cleese, tries desperately to avoid “mentioning the war” in front of his German guests. The harder he tries, the more taboo the act; the more inescapable it is that he does mention the war. The episode ends in complete farce with his goose stepping through the reception area, appalling all his guests. A canned British audience laugh uproariously, releasing the unbearable tension of post-war trauma, and providing a key to how we Brits deal with emotion—we try not to talk about it. This episode of *Fawlty Towers* thus becomes symptomatic of a national pathology. The show is played again and again on BBC TV to this day, and countless more times on YouTube; one posting has over 3 million hits. This repetition replays the trauma, inscribing it to popular memory, exorcising the suppressed emotion.

Ang plays with two elements present in my harping (a Freudian slip!) on *Fawlty Towers*. Firstly, his use of elements of popular culture, and secondly, his moving through various forms of repetition. The use of popular culture, I think, comes from a genuine wish to connect with an audience. To use a frame of reference that is held in common—at least in the way that we appropriate it as



Stop Me if You Think You've Seen This One Before (2011)

a shared language—and that has no embedded hierarchised sense of taste. The way in which this material becomes part of a shared language is itself through instances repetition: listening, performing, sharing, reproducing, translating. Through these modes the material becomes part of us; each time it is repeated we alter it minutely, and each time we recall it our memory transfigures it to fit with the narrative our mind wishes to construct. Similarly, Ang labours to master a skill through repeating it. A group perform a task, repeatedly in the gallery space, and they then recall and share it after the event. Sometimes he will even restage an existing artwork, such as Jonathan Monk's *Stop Me if You Think That You've Heard This One Before* (2003) which he moves one conceptual step further in his work *Stop Me if You Think You've Seen This One Before* (2011). The work is constructed as a series of concentric circles echoing out from a point of origin, through abstraction, then appropriation and into abstraction again. An elegant rippling out of intertexts, creating form through referentiality, but always with the thread of popular culture and decipherability running through it.

There is of course, a deep and dark absurdism at play in *Fawlty Towers*, and British comedy in general. Ang's practice also bears a streak of absurdity—it unavoidably rears its head wherever repetition is at play. I'm thinking here of the myth of Sisyphus, brought definitively into the modern era through the writing of Albert Camus. Sisyphus is a king, cursed by the gods for the ill treatment of his subjects. His sentence is to push a rock uphill for eternity, only for it to tumble back down over him. Over and over he leans in to the rock to push it up to the summit. It's a powerful image of the absurd—putting yourself repeatedly to a task that you know you cannot achieve—although crucially in Camus, Sisyphus is liberated through his awareness of this absurdity.

Ang's quietly absurd repetitiveness performs a similar pivot of meaning, breaking from nihilism through the figure of hope.

Similarly in the case of Perec, what might seem like absurd tasks deformed by impossible restraints become works of literary art. Perec and Ang are both hopeful absurdists.

Repetition is also a key methodology for learning; a process that both Ang and the participants in his work undertake. We all have experienced learning through rote, whether in acquiring a language, poem or mental arithmetic. Ang and his participants are learning because they are amateurs; not inept, but non-professional and untaught. This, along with the use of popular culture, lends his works their sense of openness and generosity toward the viewer. In a gentle and unassuming way, he pitches amateurism to unpick the bastions of taste and skill, often reinforced in the field of art, as facets of culture that exclude, that draw dividing lines between you and I, trained and untrained, artist and viewer. That he presents elements of popular culture and amateurism within the space of the white cube sharply focuses his critique of skill and taste and opens up a new arena for participation and co-authorship.

My life got interrupted recently. It was a shock. I have become interested in hope as a result. Traced its lines, considered its merits, put it aside and then picked it up again. A consideration of hope is not unconnected to my understanding of Ang’s practice. There is a great deal of hope in his work; one title openly declaims its intentions to “change the world”. It’s utopian, or it makes a study of collective utopianism, although it’s far too implicated to have the cool detachment of criticality. It seems hope-full, for the possibility of communion, collaboration, change and transmission of ideas—or indeed fundamentally the role of art in society.

Hope has had a difficult conceptual path through philosophy and theology. It was the final item left in Pandora’s box after all the evils had escaped into the world to wreak their havoc. Since then, the Greek myth has been debated. Was it left in the jar as a final curse on mankind, the only thing left to us as a delusional distraction from taking matters into our own hands? Or was it left as a blessing, something that would enable us to weather all the evils? In secular culture, in which believing in an afterlife has become redundant, what do we remain hopeful for? Transformation? Community? Connection? Self-realisation? Love? In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche saw hope as a fool’s pursuit, but later adjusted his criticism, “Let your love to life be love to your highest hope; and let your highest hope be the highest thought of life!”. The young philosopher didn’t have much time for hope, but as he aged he saw in it the potential to change the way you relate to the world. It made you live in the present tense, not the future. Does Ang’s hopeful art make us live more presently? More mindfully? Through the prism of hope, we can read his work as engaged in creating the conditions for a transformation in our way of relating to the present moment, and thus to each other.

Natasha Hoare is curator at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art. She was previously curator at Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2014-18). As a writer she has contributed to *Frieze*, *ArtReview*, *Ibraaz*, amongst others, and is contributing editor of *ExtraExtra*.

Conversation: Anne Hilde Neset with Song-Ming Ang

Song-Ming Ang: You're the Director of Kunstnernes Hus, a contemporary art institution, and contributing editor to *The Wire* magazine, which is dedicated to experimental music. You're also a host on *Late Junction*, a genre-free programme on BBC Radio 3, which is wonderful.

As someone with an interest in both contemporary art and experimental music, I've found it quite rare to find kindred spirits who move between these two disciplines, which is why I've approached you for this conversation despite us having never met in person. I'm interested to know—what were your thoughts upon learning of my artworks for the first time?

Anne Hilde Neset: From what I understand you are dealing with the meaning of music, how music can function socially, historically, politically and emotionally. I think that is interesting because it has little to do with what is commonly understood as “sound art” experimentations, treatments and reframings of sonic material but more an open-minded, almost anthropological approach to music as a material in itself, even if that material is vast and can cover so much ground.

I see a lot of ideas from the history of contemporary music in some of your work, the aleatoric experimentations of John Cage, the Fluxus deconstructions/destructions of George Maciunas, as well as the interest in having non-professional musicians perform music (which Cornelius Cardew did with his piece *Treatise*, and many other composers since).

But instead of referring to the relationship between composer and player or deliberating instruments and their historical meaning (like the aforementioned composers), your work seems to want to show new ways of understanding music and how it affects us in a much wider sense.

It is quite rare to find artists who operate in both spheres, contemporary music and contemporary art. I don't think institutions around either field are very good at seeing the connection between the two artforms. A music festival or a music venue has a very specific set of expectations built around it. So does a gallery or a museum. Institutions may resist playing with audience expectations of what kind of expression is allowed to happen in what kind of room. I wonder if you have ever come up against that with your work?

SMA: Sometimes I do feel that galleries and museums don't quite know what to do with me, which I'll take as a compliment, because I don't think my art practice is something they can easily put a finger on. I've been variously described as sound artist, conceptual artist, video artist and performance artist, none of which I truly identify with.

However, I've been lucky enough to have found an audience in contemporary art, and that my works circulate to some extent across Europe, Asia and Australia. I've even managed to sell some artworks along the way. But I've also always felt like an outsider in contemporary art, since my practice is too focused on music as a subject.

AHN: Music and visual art are parts of very different economies, both in terms of funding and how they are bought or sold. This might seem peripheral but it is definitely a factor when it comes to the presentation of work.

SMA: Yes, I totally agree. The different economies of art and music are actually my preoccupations, and I'm constantly wondering how artists and musicians can change the system or create new alternatives to let it work for them, rather than the other way around. For example, how artists may bypass the gallery system and sell works on their own, or how musicians can make a living not from performing but from recording. It would be very empowering to achieve that.

AHN: I can mention a concrete example of the two economies: I went to a concert-lecture by the *avant-garde* composer and artist Goodiepal years ago in Bristol. After his performance, the artist sold copies of his beautifully produced, highly collectible handmade vinyl "for as much as you'd like to pay", resulting in people paying a fiver. I also remember seeing them in record shops priced the same as a regular record even though his were in all different shapes, colours and clearly more sculptural than anything you might put on your record player. A few months later, that same year, while wandering through *Frieze* art fair, I saw the very same pieces of vinyl for sale through a gallery and going for a few thousand. So there is the economy of the art world and the music world juxtaposed: same objects, different contexts, different pricing.

SMA: Wow, this is sadly one of the instances in which the disparities of the music and art world come into focus, in terms of how we value objects and labour. One of the fundamental differences in the two economies is that the art world values objects more while the music world privileges labour, or to be exact, performance. Musicians essentially have to tour to make ends meet,

while artists can just manufacture objects and attend their openings, or not. At least we have a choice. On the other hand, the good thing about the music economy is that your audience base feels so much wider, and not just restricted to museums and the wealthy.

AHN: Musical expression in museums and galleries is often restricted to entertainment value take a DJ performing during an opening night rather than being perceived as work which deserves contemplation and deliberation. Thankfully, lots of artists are exploring music in their work, which gives music a place in the gallery via the artist, like your work. One of the things that interested me about your work is that it doesn't always seem to be about a genre of music or the sound itself, but the value, economy and meaning of music in society as a whole. Would you say that is true?

SMA: Yes, there's definitely that impulse to expand our appreciation of music, not in the formal sense, but in how it has value and meaning to us. But sometimes I also use music merely as a platform for getting into other subjects, as a Trojan horse of sorts. And yes, I've been told that what I do is partly anthropological, and I do agree with that.

AHN: I like the idea of music being springboards to other subjects. What other subjects do you want to tackle through music, can you talk about any specific works?

SMA: I look at music, musical phenomena and musical paraphernalia to see what lies behind these things, and what I can make out of the various contexts in which music is produced, disseminated and consumed. My interest is in thinking about what music means to us and the different ways we relate to it, but not necessarily to instrumentalise music.

For example, I don't start with the idea of making a political work and then doing research on how music relates to politics and its subsequent manifestations. It's more organic and I start more from music and musicians themselves – seeing them more from the perspective of a music fan rather than as an artist looking to "sample" them.

I guess we could talk about *The Coffee Cola Song* by the Cameroonian musician Francis Bebey, which I integrated it into *Can't Help Falling in Love*, a performance lecture which deals with the different ways in which art, music and film seduce us. I'm speaking about very disparate subjects like Kenny G, *The Wizard of Oz* and Martin Arnold before I end up talking about how Bebey's song functions as a criticism of colonialism with its sweet and deadly mix of an '80s video game tune and slightly awkward English. The point is, I didn't set out to make a work about colonialism. It's more a case of the song finding its way into the work and me making adjustments to my own work to accommodate it.

AHN: You told me you adore Jim O'Rourke, something we have in common. Can you tell me what it is about him that you are interested in?

SMA: Haha, this is going to get really long and geeky, but hey it's my catalogue so I'm going indulge a little.

To begin with, some of my musical idols tend to be the ones that wear several hats, both within the field of music and beyond it—Brian Eno, David Byrne, Laurie Anderson, Yoko Ono, Christian Marclay, Brian Wilson, Van Dyke Parks, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Eiichi Ohtaki.

These are people who either have a hand in the complete process of composing, arranging, performing and recording music, or have some affinity to what is beyond music, whether it's film, art, dance, capitalism, city-planning or emerging technology. These artists achieve a difficult balance. They go deep into what they do and are devoted to their craft. At the same time, they spread themselves out and possess a restlessness to pursue other interests.

AHN: Then again, if you go deep into an artist's work you will usually find a huge range of influences and interests beyond music. Some of the music I listened to when I was younger acted as a kind of university in itself. I think in general, by exploring an artwork, a work of literature or musical piece very closely, you will find references to other artists and other knowledge. During the teenage years, music is generally the form you might access most as you are starting to define your tastes and personality. David Bowie was one of my universities: I learnt about literature, art, film and style through his music and lyrics. Before that though, I listened to Run DMC non-stop at 13 years old, and experienced

another type of socio-political understanding and consciousness through their music. I'm fascinated by the routes and choices people make along the road and where they can lead you and just how much influence artists can have on your life. I studied theory in university and that could have been because Scritti Politti got me reading Derrida! In the early to mid-90s I ended up writing about aesthetics of noise music, possibly because I encountered John Cage through an interview I read with Brian Eno. I can imagine, and I hope, some enthusiastic kids having checked George Maciunas after seeing Sonic Youth performing *Piano Piece #13* on YouTube. Jim O'Rourke's work got me into film—mainly Jacques Tati and Nicolas Roeg but also Japanese experimental film. Which brings us back to Jim...

SMA: The main thing I like about Jim O'Rourke is how he seems to be always trying to mess with his audience. Nah, scratch that... I think he's not even really thinking about subverting audience expectations; he's probably keener on just keeping things interesting and challenging for himself. One minute he's producing a tribute album to Burt Bacharach, and the next minute he's performing a noise concert with Keiji Haino and Oren Ambarchi. In between he's touring as an additional member for Sonic Youth and working as an engineer for Bill Callahan and Wilco. Recently he's released an ambient album that's *not* ambient but *about* ambient music. (I tend to gravitate towards artists who think about why they're making what they make, rather than simply doing it.)

Fundamentally he's found ways to go both very deep into what he does being an experimental musician in the truest sense of the word and at the same time moving laterally. Didn't he move to Japan to make films or something? Anyway, I found out about the filmmaker Roeg only because O'Rourke named several of his albums after him. And yes, his output both as a solo artist and a collaborator is just astounding both in terms of quantity and quality. And he was musical director or consultant for *School of Rock*, the one starring Jack Black and a bunch of kids. How cool is that?!

And this is just the tip of the iceberg... He made some great records as one-half of Gastr Del Sol and helped pioneer the genre of post-rock, and his solo albums run the gamut from pop/rock (*Eureka*) to American primitivism (*Happy Days*) and electronic music (*I'm Happy, I'm Singing, and a 1 2 3 4*). And some of it is so “classically” composed and arranged, while some are so loose and improvised. He might seem like he's all over the place, but when you put everything together, it makes total sense to me. And apparently on *The Visitor*, he played all the instruments himself.

I presume you know about his Steamroom Bandcamp page—42 albums and counting. It's mind-blowing. Oh, and I like the fact that he's a sort of awkward hermit who lives in the countryside despite half his work being so collaborative.

He was talking about how he would freeze in front of an audience when they're paying to see Jim O'Rourke, but he'd be comfortable on stage playing bass for Sonic Youth. How charming. Some of my works are live performances but I've never felt comfortable being the centre of attention.

AHN: He does perform, but will not go outside Japan I am told (I tried to get him to Europe for various things in the past). And yes, he composes for orchestras and makes film music and straddles the mainstream and the underground like few others are able to. If you can even talk about entities like mainstream and underground anymore, I guess the Internet has blurred that distinction.

I interviewed Jim a few times, once as part of *The Wire* during an "Invisible Jukebox" feature, where an artist guesses mystery tracks that the journalist brings. It's not a test per se, but a chance to discuss an artist's work through other music. But of course there is a certain prestige in being able to guess all the tracks in that geeky music nerd way (and I use that term full of affection and recognition).

In the 16 years I worked at *The Wire's* offices, Jim's "Jukebox" interview was off the scale in terms of precision and the fact that he identified the tracks within seconds. This was the late 90s and we played music on a rubbish boombox CD player which had a lot of inbuilt hiss. One of the artists we picked for him to try and identify was the German composer/sound artist Günther Müller who made compositions that are extremely reductionist and "nearly there". Jim identified Müller straight away, which was mind-blowing given the circumstances: bad sound quality plus the music itself was barely a hiss. And he played up to it, punching the air, "fuck yeah" when he got it right, and the whole thing was so absurd, the sportsperson approach to this incredible rarefied, complex and obscure music.

Jim's listening skills were humbling. I respect people with such trained ears and who can identify with such precision what is happening sonically. Later, we asked Jim to DJ with us at *The Wire* Christmas party, and you know what he played all night? Cher. He loved Cher.

So that just shows you his range and interests, and how the whole Jack Black and underground drone connection just makes sense. In my experience this kind of span is becoming more common, where a love of "difficult" and rare work sits side by side with a love of pop music.

I am fascinated by listening skills. Have you ever been to an orchestra rehearsal? I worked with the Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov a couple of years back, we made a festival together in Oslo. He is someone who straddles the mainstream classical world—the maestro travelling around conducting Mahler with international philharmonic orchestras, and then turning up playing improv violin with a bunch of noise musicians in a basement in Glasgow on any given Saturday night. While it might be common to straddle worlds in your listening habits, it's very rare to have such ease of movement working between cultural worlds. And when I saw Ilan in action during a rehearsal in Oslo for our festival, I was blown away by the listening skills. "You, second violin in the third row, you are slightly off tune in the third part of... etc". Incredible. To me, it was just an orchestra playing, to him, there were 65 individual instruments that needed to be exactly right.

Back to Jim for one more story. I did a project called Her Noise, which was a show and also an archive of women working with experimental music, composition and sound art. The project, curated with my colleague Lina Dzuverovic, attempted to rebalance the history of experimental music by presenting forgotten female practitioners in an exhibition archive and interviews. The idea for this project was planted in an interview I did with Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, where we discussed the lack of documentation of amazing and little-known women composers like Maryanne Amacher, Pauline Oliveros and Éliane Radigue. Kim had a plan to make such a documentary. So we started collaborating.

I had worked in a male environment for a very long time. Now there is more awareness of gender, racial and geographical bias, but at the time we were breaking new ground with this project which became an exhibition at the South London Gallery in 2004 and an archive now run by London University of the Arts. Kim, Lina and I did interviews with women musicians and composers, and thought it would make a really funny short film to interview "men in experimental music" and to turn the tables—ask the same types of questions to a man. Questions like "what does it feel like to be the only guy in the band", "what does it feel like to go into a record shop and then not getting any service because all the girls behind the counter think you are just the boyfriend tagging along" etc. Jim was the first one out, he proved himself to be a total comedian and actor during this interview which was held backstage at the South Bank Centre in London before a concert. He played along fully, a real comedian, giving us hilarious stories of being one of very few men in experimental music.

But we are digressing from your work in this conversation. Jim has embraced the Japanese lifestyle and professed never to leave the country. I am very curious about how you approach Singaporean national identity at the Venice pavilion. You have been based in Berlin for a long time now which might give you a slight distance and ability to see connections in Singapore?

SMA: Good musicians first and foremost have to be good listeners, so it doesn't surprise me at all how Jim was aceing "Invisible Jukebox". (I'm a fan of that feature, by the way.) It's great what you shared about Her Noise and underrepresented musicians. In 2015, I made a video called *Album*. In the video, I composed and performed a guitar soundtrack and realised that many of my influences for that work were women musicians.



Album (2015)

I think there's definitely some Joni Mitchell and Jessica Pratt in there. For another work, *Dusk to Dawn Choruses*, I was listening to Meredith Monk constantly for inspiration. Even *Recorder Rewrite*, which I'm showing in Venice, contains ideas from women choreographers Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer. And oh yeah, Cher rules!



Dawn to Dusk Choruses (2017-)

sense of distance, not just in a physical way, but more of a feeling, maybe of alienation. The irony is, I actually feel very connected to my generation of artists currently working in Singapore. There's a very good bunch of artists actually, many combining research and critical thinking with a dexterity at synthesising what they've seen and creating something unique out of it. Coming from a small and young country, perhaps we have this understanding that what we're creating now might possibly become part of art history in the future.

Anyway, the weird thing is, growing up in Singapore, I never felt that I was particularly arty or musical, and never once imagined I'd become a full-time artist. I did fairly well in school and thought I'd either become a music journalist or an academic. Sure, I was listening to noise music and watching experimental films in my early twenties, but it just felt to me that I had progressive tastes.

One of the things I wanted to touch on was Mark Fisher's writings. I have this feeling that you'd be into it, or at least familiar with it. After his passing in 2017, Hua Hsu penned a review in *The New Yorker* about the collected writings of his *K-punk* blog, now published as a veritable tome. And Hua Hsu wrote about how one of Fisher's most important ideas was that the true revolutionary potential in pop culture lies in its capability to be *nihilative*, to negate what came before it, and in so doing, conjure new visions and possibilities for the future. Capitalist realism, of course, tells us that "there is no alternative", so we should just sit down, pop the blue pill, down some Coke or Pepsi and veg out to Netflix rather than to engage with the problems of world generated by the downside of capitalism.

What are your own perspectives on Fisher's writing? As a director of an art institution, do you find yourself obliged to champion forms of *nihilative* art, or let's say more generally, art that expressly attempts to be new or revolutionary? To be honest, I don't necessarily see art and music always as the best solutions to the problems of our world. And we should never expect artists and musicians to solve the problems that we ourselves, as citizens of the world, should solve. Yet, I still find myself entranced by such lofty aspirations, and sometimes wonder if my own work could have more value or "usefulness" if they could purportedly be revolutionary or political in some way...

AHN: There's a good book about revolutionary music by Matthew Collin called *Pop Grenade*, which describes, by using four or five concrete international examples, music's power as a force for change. Music is better placed than contemporary art to act as triggers for masses of people. Matthew is a foreign correspondent for the BBC and Al Jazeera so he has a political angle. It was published by Zero Books, a small but important publisher where Mark Fisher acted as commissioning editor, and where he published his most-read book *Capitalist Realism*.

I love Mark Fisher’s writing, of course. We worked together, he wrote for *The Wire*, and he even took my job as deputy editor for the magazine the year I was off on maternity leave in 2008. His *K-punk* blog was one of a handful of blogs we all read on a daily basis. I am so happy it has come out on paper and the experience of reading the texts as a book is so different from the transitory nature of a blog, even I have to say the blog format suited his prose, as a techno revolutionary writing from his base in Felixstowe (a Ballardian harbour town in Suffolk, mainly known as a massive industrial port with vast container stacks). His caustic critique and despair of capitalist society was evangelical at times, but his thinking could also be euphoric and, back to the idea of musical artists acting like universities: Mark would write about an album or an artist, and the text would transform itself along the way, going outside the remit of subject in question to become a work of sharp social critique. We spoke about music as a jumping-off point earlier, Mark jumped off all the time, going way beyond his word counts in *The Wire*, wrote reviews also where he changed his mind about the music half way through the text. Great writing about music can supercede the music itself, where the music is more a thought-fuel than a destination in itself. Mark seemed to spring into another writing gear when he found connections between moments where radical ideas broke through into mass consciousness via pop culture. He was a big fan of the book and films *The Hunger Games*, for example, and of comedian Russell Brand, he didn’t necessarily find revolutionary potential in the underground at all.

I suppose Fisher’s faith was that interruptions of the culturally alien and new production could instil a confidence that change was possible in other areas of life, and that those disturbances of the status quo proved that change was not impossible. As for my own position as a director of an art centre: We present exhibitions, films, talks and concerts, and I am a firm believer that the different modes of cultural production will engage and enrich one another and accelerate cultural conversation. It is a place which can make deep enquiries into contemporary culture as well as contextualise it, but feel no obligation as such to present *nihilative* art. It is a combination of thinking about the bigger societal questions, about what feels urgent to deliberate on, but also of course, constantly weighing up historical/local/national impulses and, most importantly keep exploring.

SMA: Ah, that’s an interesting thought. I feel that the idea of urgency—or what needs to be addressed right now—could really be taking the idea of “contemporary art” to its extreme, since contemporary art is defined as art of the “right now”, or art of the present time.

Apart from that, if we trace the Latin roots of the word, “contemporary” also means “together with time”. But I’ve realised that some of my favourite artists and musicians are the ones who create works that feel out of time, or works that feel deliberate un-urgent—Agnes Martin’s paintings, for example, or Luigi Ghirri’s photographs, Tetsuya Umeda’s performances and Jim O’Rourke!

I guess I’m just a bit of a Romantic at heart, and a sucker for introverted or reclusive folks who do their own thing. My favourite art-viewing experience in my life so far was actually at the Teshima Art Museum, with a site-specific collaboration between the artist Rei Naito and architect Ryue Nishizawa. Words can’t do the artwork justice, but suffice to say, it’s a most unhurried work borne out of a perfect synthesis of art, sound, architecture and nature.

I was just re-listening to Stars of the Lid recently, and fell in love all over again with how their music manages to completely change my experience of time. Unlike many drone or ambient musicians, their music never feels slow, or dare I say it, boring. They make such beautiful music; incredibly simple yet complex. Perhaps a way of ending our “geeky music nerds” conversation (and I use that term full of affection), is to rave one last time, about a duo who makes music that feels truly out of time—Asa-Chang & Jun Ray. I can’t think of anyone else who’s made music that feels so considered but free, electronic yet organic, so old yet so new. Their album *Mahou* from 2016 means “magic” in Japanese, and that’s the absolute truth. It makes me feel happy and wistful at the same time when I listen to it. How strange and awesome.

Anne Hilde Neset is Director of Kunstneres Hus (House of Artists) in Oslo, one of the largest contemporary art centres in Norway. Before that, she served as artistic director at the Norwegian new music organisation nyMusikk, where she established the international festivals Only Connect and the Off The Page Oslo. She has a background from London where she worked as Deputy Editor of the international music title *The Wire* for many years.

With a Little Help from My Friends

A SELECTION OF EXISTING ARTWORKS,
EACH PAIRED WITH A SHORT PERSONAL,
CRITICAL OR CREATIVE RESPONSE FROM
COMRADES AND COLLABORATORS



Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules

2003/2013

Interactive installation: 350 ping-pong/plastic balls, rackets, guitars, guitar effects, amplifiers, drums, cymbals

Audiences create music by throwing an assortment of balls at guitars and drum sets, creating spontaneous compositions along the way.

Those of us who professionally rely on language are at a disadvantage in the world of sights, sounds and tastes. Words are redundant compared to a smile or a melody. Song-Ming mixes many senses, enabling his audience to move freely between languages and contexts. In fact, his work is in its own context. We, the audience, are often invited to be participants. And yes, even children can enjoy themselves amid the complexity of his projects.

Song-Ming's body of work reinvents a light touch as an aesthetic. His style, starting with one of his earliest work that I experienced, *Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules*, feels significantly lighter than the existential and critical messages it might convey. Unlike projects that seek to be top-down and educational about serious problems in the world and our responsibility and/or complicity with not solving them at this very moment, his light touch is far from such a heavy-handed style. I feel listened to even when I am asked to listen.

The work and the artist have remained deep listeners and observers, at times treading between silence and whispering, but always attentive to the world. The absence of words throughout the years does not mean there is no story to tell. The collective storytelling part has just started.

Irina Aristarkhova
Academic



2007-2010
Sound installation

Audio recordings of school band rehearsals before they formally begin, capturing moments of instrument practice and student chatter. In some recordings, the individual warm-ups merge into collective improvisations, while others verge on noise. About four hours of audio was recorded from 15 Singaporean school bands.

As part of our educational legacy from our former British colonial masters, symphonic bands have always been instruments of pedagogical instruction. Comprising recordings of the warm-up sessions of various school bands, this work examines the rupture from the formalised unit of band practice, and celebrates moments of levity we all longed for as teenagers. It recognises our own individuality and musical taste which veer far from the usual repertoire of a school band and its endless repeat practice of *Hawaii Five-O* by The Ventures. After all, who could really imagine and create a vision the sun and surf when trapped under one's scratchy uniform and the weight of an instrument?

Oh, the liberation to play one's tune to one's own rhythm! The awkwardness and insecurity of puberty melt away to form a joyous cacophony made up individual melodies, unrecognisable as a whole and recognisable only to the musician himself.

Lim Qinyi
Curator, National Gallery Singapore



2007

Listening party

A listening party in which audience members participate by talking about a song that they consider a guilty pleasure, before playing the song for everyone else to listen to.

I'll admit it: I was a Little Monster.

Others have identified me as a Little Monster even before they knew I was gay (I have always been a flaming fag though). In secondary school, my English teacher read out an essay I wrote before my classmates about the parallels between my grandmother and Lady Gaga. Unable to find friends, I brought my mom to my first Lady Gaga concert at Fort Canning Park. Every time Gaga shocked, like in her sacrilegious *Alejandro* music video, I was nominated by my peers to defend the indefensible.

As a gay boy growing up in an island-nation of militarised forms of masculinity (there is mandatory conscription for all male citizens and permanent residents at the age of 18), she gave me the vocabulary to speak for absurdist, high-camp theatrics.

Being identified as a Little Monster was a hairline away from being teased as a fairy, or *ah gua*, although nothing stopped the cruelty of children anyway. But the more society rejected you, the more defiant you became—such is the logic of deviancy.

During her *Cheek to Cheek* era, my obsession with Gaga waned. I began to realise the American-styled individuality behind her sermonising: an American dream sprinkled with neoliberal homonormative politics. While Gaga didn't age well as a political role model, in the deepest of adolescent nights, when the guilt of being born turned unbearable, Gaga, with fireworks streaming from her bra, riding on a unicorn, sang to me:

*Don't hide yourself in regret
Just love yourself and you're set
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way*

Marcus Yee
Writer





Rhyme and Reason

2009

Digital prints

84 x 119 cm each

A work exploring the musicality that may exist in texts. The seemingly senseless words function as alliterations and rhymes, following a certain logic.

An ocean. A sunrise. A desert. These are the evocative colours that fan out in slow gradients in the three frames of Song-Ming's work. The word-strings they contain creates a playful musicality in the viewer's head.

Rhyme and Reason can be interpreted as a musical utterance, but also as a visual piece or a conceptual work. Besides drawing upon multiple influences—from the language exercises of Barbara Kruger, Annette Lemieux or the Oulipo writers, to the gradient paintings of Barnett Newman or Anselm Reyle—the work also creates a meta-language.

The transitions of the colours and of the words in the word-string are comparable to the way we process and decode information, that is, we attempt to make sense of a whole set of data from the single parts of the set. Playing with this paradigm, Song-Ming forces us to go back and forth between the rhythm of the word-string and the meaning of the single words that comprise it (a series of pop bands).

In this sense, the piece is a meta-work, asking the viewer to reflect on what encoding and decoding information means, and therefore on what creating an artistic sign means.

Lucia Longhi
Independent curator



2009

Handwritten letters and playlists

Following an invitation to the public, I made a CD-R mixtape as a reply to anyone who sent me a handwritten letter. Each mixtape is customised with its music chosen based on the contents of the letter. More than 60 letters were received from friends, acquaintances and strangers. During exhibitions, each letter is shown with a replica of its corresponding CD-R.

A handwritten letter—that was your only request. A folded letter in an envelope, carried and dropped into the postbox. Days later, after crossing half of the globe, it landed in your hands as a physical object. While the origins of the postal service go back hundreds of years, it still now functions on the same basic structure. Once the only way to stay in touch with a beloved person, the letters of today have turned into historical documents.

The carefully closed envelope protected by the fundamental privacy rights of postal secrecy tempts us to talk frankly, to share our thoughts, memories and secrets. It exposes.

Handwriting exposes. You can see the fluidity of words and sentences moving across the page; if the writing is contrived or spontaneous, the rhythm sincere or at odds. Illegible words and letters, erratic spacing between letters, words and lines; so many traces are left behind, so many unintentional or willful details are preserved. An email would always flatten this information. It limits communication in one way while opening it in other ways.

You said your response was a customised playlist based on the content of the letter. I wonder in what ways the form determined your choice of songs? We send and share music constantly in any online chat, but you answered with a CD-R, a physical object as well. Today I would not even know where to play it. I realised I never asked you how you announced your invitation to the public.

Sarah and Kathrin Oberrauch
Independent curators





2010
 7 inkjet prints on photo paper
 28 x 21 cm each
 1 spray-painted glockenspiel
 28 x 10 cm

During my residency with ARCUS Project in Moriya (Ibaraki, Japan), I photographed a series of houses roughly corresponding to the colours of the rainbow. I then spraypainted a glockenspiel to match the colours of the houses and donated it to the city's children community centre.

When I was young, I wondered why the lettering on a friend's garage starts from C to G and then ends with B.

I realised the answer after I learned about the musical scale.

Song-Ming expresses the town's landscape in the form of musical scale by colouring a children's glockenspiel, allowing people to hear the sound played by the landscape.

Yagi Lyota
Artist

Nokia Head Office
Keililahdentie 2-4
P.O. Box 226
FIN-00045, Finland

Song-Ming Ang
543 Jelang Road #13-64
Singapore 679543
Singapore

Dear Nokia,

List of Musicians for Inclusion in Predictive Text

I would like to offer a suggestion for your company, which is to include the names of commonly mentioned musicians into the word list of the Predictive Text function.

As an avid fan of music, the names of musicians come up regularly in my text messages to others. However, many names of musicians, even canonical ones like The Beatles and Elvis Presley, are not pre-included in the Predictive Text word list. Naturally, I am disappointed. Many of such bestselling artists of all time have sold more than 100 million records. (The Beatles and Elvis have both exceeded 1 billion.) These musicians are a part of many people's lives, and I feel that mobile phones, a representative technology of our times, should reflect the importance of these artists.

Anyhow, more often than not, my typing of a musician's name ends up in a half-spelt word and a beep; I then have to backtrack, spell out the name syllable by syllable, and then save the word into the word list. I am sure many other users around the world have encountered the same experience.

I have thus taken the liberty to compile a list of popular musicians whom I think you should pre-include in the Predictive Text word list. This list is based on two criteria:

- Bestselling artists of all time
- Artists of most downloaded albums and songs of the past ten years

Whereas the bestselling artists of all time (The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, etc.) would naturally be popular to the general public, I have also included the most downloaded albums and songs of the past ten years. This is to reflect the greater probability of how currently popular artists would very likely be included in text messages.

In addition, I would like to offer a few more reasons why such names should be included:

1. Proper nouns and names already feature in Predictive Text, and it makes sense to include common names like 'Celine', 'Lionel', and 'Stevie', which are currently excluded.
 2. 'Dolly Parton' shows up as 'Folly Parton'; 'Lionel Richie' as 'Limod Shagge'; 'Tupac Shakur' as 'Turba Pickup'. Although there is some entertainment value here, I think it would be prudent to let these musicians have their dignity.
 3. Foreign words such as 'Iglesias' are understandably lacking in Predictive Text, but 'Iglesias' is such a common Spanish word (Churches) that the inclusion of it may foster a better understanding of non-English cultures.
 4. Similarly, even though 'Zeppelin' is a German word, it has been absorbed into the English vocabulary as a common word for 'airship'. Since such words are already in the English mainstream, Predictive Text should reflect them.
- I hope that you can consider implementing my suggestion as it could result in massive time (and frustration) savings for your users around the world. I look forward to hear from you what you think, and if you would implement my suggestion. Thank you.
- Best Wishes,
- 
- Song-Ming Ang
25 Apr 2010
- Top Selling Musicians of All Time Not Included in Predictive Text**
- The Beatles (stops at The Best?)
Led Zeppelin (stops at Led Yes?)
Jimi Hendrix (stops at Jim? Generix)
Bob Marley (stops at Bob Maple?)
Fleetwood Mac (stops at Fleetymac)
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young (stops at Armarw)
The Allman Brothers (stops at The Allor?)
Bruce Springsteen (stops at Bruce Prinzsheds)
Punkadelle (stops at Punk?)
Dixie Chicks (Foxie turns up)
David Bowie (stops at David Amode)
Jethro Tull (stops at Levi? Vull?)
Beastie Boys (stops at Adapet?)
Creedence Clearwater Revival (stops at Breede?)
Frank Zappa (stops at Frank Warra)
Blondie (Blondie turns up)

Lynyrd Skynyrd (Lynxpf Phyma? turns up)
Janis Joplin (stops at Janis Los?)
Elvis Presley (stops at Elvis Prep?)
Eric Clapton (stops at Eric Blast?)
John Coltrane (stops at John Beltsune)
Frank Sinatra (stops at Frank Shoets?)
Tupac Shakur (Turba Pickup shows up)
Aretha Franklin (Crevic Franklin)
Marvin Gaye (Marvin Gaze)
Stevie Ray Vaughan (Queule Ray Taughboo)
Duke Ellington (Duke (Ellign?)
Simon and Garfunkel (Simon and Hard?)
The Ramones (The Scoones)
Abba (Cabb)
Celine Dion (Beliod Finn)
Julio Iglesias (Häarsdbs)
Barbra Streisand (Abrasa Surfia?)
Boney M (Annex M)
Depeche Mode (Desoche Mode)
Dolly Parton (Folly Parton)
Lionel Richie (Limod Shagge)
Luciano Pavarotti (Lucia? Qstar?)

Artists of Most Downloaded Songs and Albums Within the Last 10 Years Not Included in Predictive Text

Lady GaGa (Lady Gag?)
Jason Mraz (Jason Orb?)
Fergie (Desige)
Akron (Alien)
Avril Lavigne (Burgi Laugh?)
Daughtry (Daughts?)
Rihanna (Pig?)
Nelly Furtado (Melly Dustaio)
Mika (Mila)
Timbaland (Vincelad?)
Michael Buble (Michael Bucke)
Eminem (Eminet)
Kanye West (Jan? West)
Erya (Fox?)
John Mayer (John Mazen)
Christina Aguilera (Christina Civiles?)
Eliot John (Flann John)
Miley Cyrus (Mile? Cyrus)
Kesha (Lesic)
Flo Rida (Flo Fiec)

2010
Mail art

Five letters were sent respectively to Nokia, Motorola, Sony Ericsson, Samsung and LG, asking them to include a list of musicians most likely to occur in text messages, but had not yet been included in the Predictive Text (T9) word list.

The list consisted of the best-selling musicians of all time and the most downloaded musicians within the last ten years. The names in the brackets are the predictions made by the Predictive Text function.

A Suggestion shakes its fist at the irritating parameters of predictive text and expresses the exasperation of trying to type out “Tupac” and only getting “Turba”. It embodies the annoyance found at the limits of computational knowing and at the edges of what a corporation considers popular knowledge and “English”. *A Suggestion* argues: The Beatles sold millions of records and are part of the global heritage of pop music, so why shouldn’t they be included in a computer’s vocabulary, a representation of our common knowledge?

A major limitation of predictive texting is that for the most part it runs on a system based on alphabets—but the world communicates in a multitude of languages and images. Almost a decade later, with the rise of global Chinese information technology giants like Huawei building the information highways of tomorrow, *A Suggestion* continues to resonate. This is not just in the sense of the bureaucratic formality of the complaint letter that is becoming a ubiquitous form of everyday communication, because we are beginning to communicate more with organisations, systems and mechanisms than with one another. It also continues to resonate in our continued frustration with a technological world divided by computer systems that don’t address the plural lived realities of a world written in both character and alphabet-based vocabularies.

Kathleen Ditzig
Curator, writer



2010 Installation

Fallen autumn leaves were collected and placed along my studio corridor. As visitors walked through the leaves, rustling sounds were made.

In 2010, Song-Ming collected piles of fallen dead leaves from the grounds surrounding the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. He was among the first round of artists to arrive at the newly renovated residency, housed inside a former manufacturing building with an interior of freshly painted white walls and grey linoleum floors. Countering this starkness, Song-Ming poured what must have been bags and bags of leaves into the hallway outside his studio. This ‘autumnal carpet’ brought not only texture, warm tones and (former) life inside the sterile building, but also a rich, peaty aroma. Perhaps most importantly for Song-Ming, the leaves brought in sound—crunching, crackling, rustling—under the footsteps of the people who walked down the hall towards his studio.

Transposition follows in the spirit of many of Song-Ming’s works in that it created a joyful encounter that taps into familiar nostalgia. The leaves invited visitors to revel in the childish glee of kicking them up. But maybe even better than this feeling, with the knowledge that the leaves were also an artwork, was the dual exhilaration of destroying an artwork by stamping, kicking and jumping on it. Through this seemingly simple “transposition” of autumn leaves into an art space, Song-Ming shifted typical ways of viewing art into an experience that is exuberant, sensory and open to all.

Lauren Reid
Curator, insitu collective



2010
Postcards
15 x 10 cm each

Speech balloons and comic signs superimposed onto found photographs.

In 2018, the Osaka Earthquake collapsed a wall in an elementary school and killed a student. Since then, for safety reasons, all old walls in schools were removed, together with old monuments. These include statues of the 19th century intellectual Ninomiya Kinjiro, a popular symbol of studiousness, as well as statues in the shape of birds to commemorate graduation—one cute one can be seen in these old photos. In fact, I realise that this bird monument in the picture was erected more than 30 years ago and can no longer be found.

Other than old students from those days, people who might have affection towards these bird statues are people like us, the social media generation familiar with Twitter, which has a blue bird symbol. If a natural disaster happens, we will most likely hear about it on Twitter first.

By adding manga-inspired speech balloons to these old images, Song-Ming draws attention to the different emotional expressions in the photos. Even without dialogue, the speech bubbles complements the pictures' atmosphere in a way that is hard to put in words. Perhaps I can hear a faint twittering, a different kind to the online version, comprising some of the voices of the children that no longer echo in the halls of the abandoned school; or maybe if these are postcards that are addressed to the past, to these kids—I wonder what they would say?

Mizuho Ishii

Project Manager, ARCUS Project



2010
5-channel video
2 to 3 mins each

Adults trying to sing their primary school song on camera, with the song often breaking down as the singers struggle to remember the lyrics. All recordings were performed in one take without rehearsals.

Wind, sky, hill, river, ambition, study, highly, heart, youth, hometown...
These are some recurring words in the lyrics of a school song.

When I was an elementary school student, students had to gather to sing the school anthem at the gymnasium every morning. I hated it. I disliked the lyrics, which included old-fashioned phrases, the pitch, which I could never achieve, and especially the energetic tone of the piano that echoed powerfully in the air.

Performers in *Be True to Your School* were asked to recall the anthem of the school they attended more than 30 years ago. Despite singing these songs repeatedly in their youth, many of them couldn't remember the lyrics at all. In front of the camera, humming the tune, we should have the same facial expression as they do. We are not only remembering the lyrics but the fragments of the memories we had in the gymnasium or school in general.

In the scene where the performers, after confirming the lyrics, gather to sing the anthem together, Song-Ming plays a small metallophone that he had kept from another art project, providing the singers with a gentle accompaniment that he had practiced over and over during his stay in Japan. It's a charming and beautiful scene.

In the end, after the performance is over, the participants thanked Song-Ming. After recalling the school anthem and memories of school through this group exercise initiated by, ironically, someone not from the school, I wonder what these performers took away from these experience?

Gosuke Sugiyama
Photographer, artist





2010

Modified open-source software

I edited and customised the video game Frets on Fire—an open-source version of Guitar Hero—for visitors to play one of Singapore's national songs, Stand up for Singapore, via a computer keyboard. Visitors may choose to play the song at basic, intermediate and advanced levels, while the best players enter a Hall of Fame.

*Stand up for Singapore, do it with a smile
If you stand up for Singapore
You'll find it all worthwhile*

How can something so didactic, so transparently propagandistic also be so... popular? Yet, these are the lyrics to *Stand up for Singapore*, one of the most beloved tracks in the ever-expanding repertoire of patriotic songs about Singapore. Unlike other such numbers that began as folk songs, *Stand up for Singapore* is the product of an advertising agency commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to compose a theme to accompany the annual National Day celebrations. Written in 1984 by the Canadian Hugh Harrison, it started what has become a tradition of commissioning a new song for each anniversary of the nation's independence.

What better fix then is there to the flagging enthusiasm towards this yearly pageantry than a revival of this classic manufactured gem, not least by repackaging it as a popular music video game? Built using an open-source version of *Guitar Hero* at the height of game's popularity, Song-Ming's spin on this most familiar of Singaporean patriotic songs reprogrammes propaganda for the age of the player. Out-kitsching the kitsch and almost reverential in its irreverence, the interactive installation turns what was once a literal synchronisation of the vox populi into a contest to out-jam the last player by hitting all the notes missed by your less dexterous countrymen. But of course, we are all still playing the same tune, and doing so with not just a smile but a giggle—directed to our competition as much as to that part of ourselves that secretly really wants to hit that high score of note-perfect nationalism.

Ho Rui An
Artist, writer



2010
Found poetry/Twitter account

*Poetry composed from ABBA
song titles, shared via Twitter.*

It's impossible to climb to the top of a mountain like Everest in one go. Instead you set up a chain of camps along the way, scaling the mountain in steps. After you've created Camp 1, you go back down to get the things you need to set up Camp 2, Camp 3, and so on. This process can take weeks.

In 1982, the Dutch mountaineer Bart Vos made his first attempt to climb the world's tallest mountain with a team of experienced Dutch climbers. The expedition was, however, fraught with internal competition and constant quarreling among its members, and was subsequently never completed.

Vos tried again two years later, with a new team of climbers. Among them was Edward Bekker, a 23-year-old from the south of the Netherlands. Edward was relatively new to climbing, but optimistic about the expedition. When asked how he thought they should approach the climb, he replied they should of course "just go up".

Vos made it up as far as he did in part thanks to Bekker, who had been tirelessly and without complaint carrying everyone's things from base camp up to the other four camps. Playing on repeat on his Sony Walkman was ABBA's 1980 album *Super Trouper*.

Michiel Huijben
Artist



2010

Instructions (audio and text);
walk; 20 instant photographs

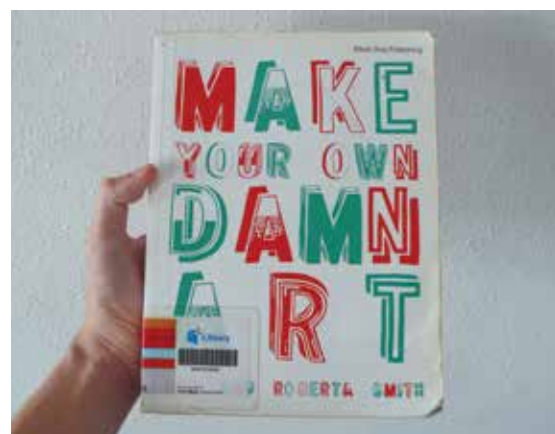
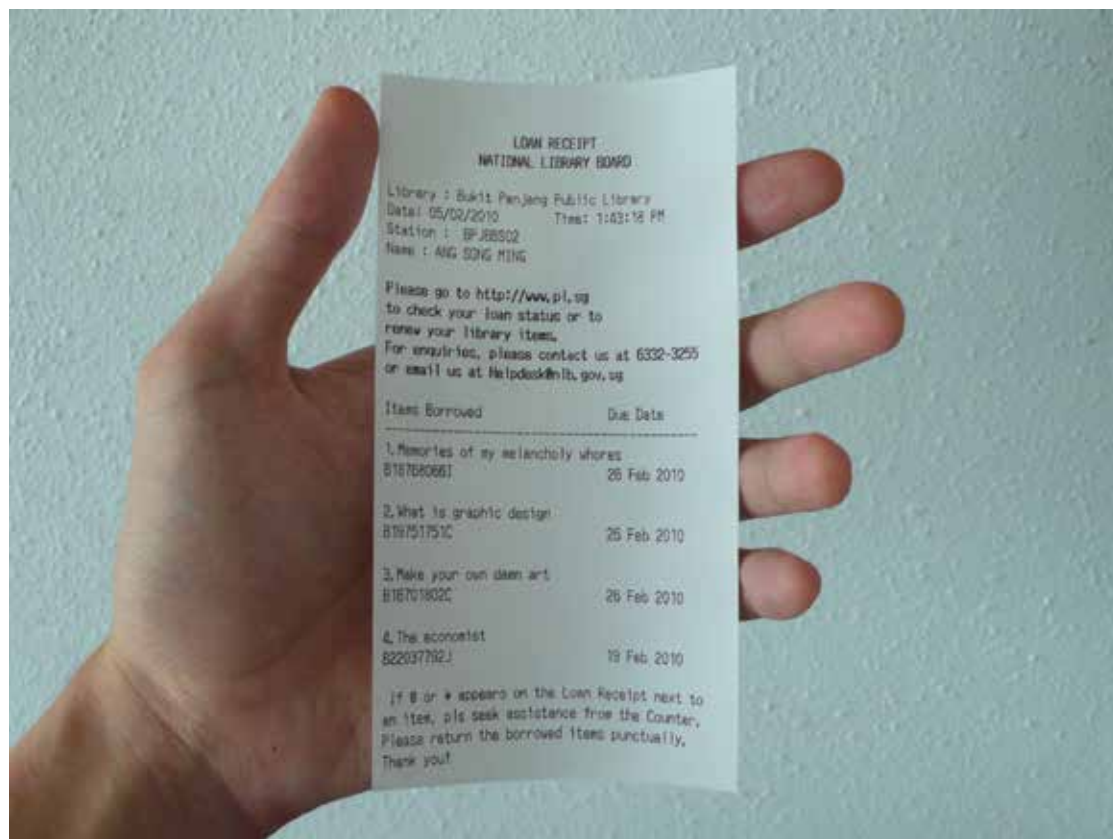
This work documents a 2.5-hour walk from Guernsey Airport to the city centre—navigated via recorded oral instructions by the curator—without reference to street names.

I commissioned Song-Ming's performance, *Nowhere Man*, as part of the first exhibition I ever organised. The idea was to invite artists to "respond" to the idea of a map of the island of Guernsey, where I'm from. Song-Ming didn't make a map at all, instead proposing spoken directions—the kind that someone might give you out of a car window—as an alternative navigational tool. He asked me to book him a flight to Guernsey on the day of the exhibition's private view, then to send him an audio recording giving instructions for how to get from the airport to the exhibition venue 6.5km away, without using maps, taxis or road names. I didn't record the instructions in real time, so it must have been quite annoying to have to keep pausing the recording as he got from one described landmark to the next.

Obeying John Lennon's plea to the *Nowhere Man* in The Beatles' 1965 album track to "take your time, don't hurry", his journey took two and a half hours, more than an hour later than Google Maps estimate, which was an hour and 17 minutes.

Lauren Barnes

Curator of Exhibitions, The Power Plant, Toronto



2010

Library book; report

I borrowed the book Make Your Own Damn Art by Bob & Roberta Smith from the National Library, Singapore and reported its loss, exhibiting the book afterwards as my own artwork.

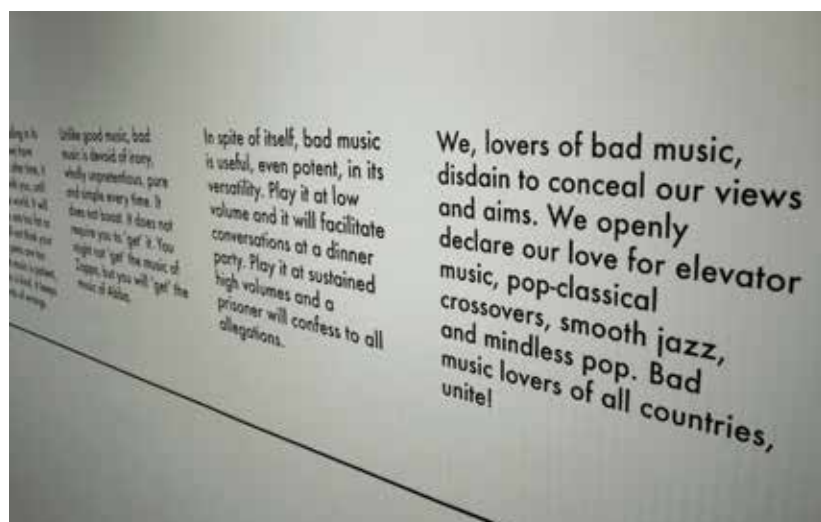
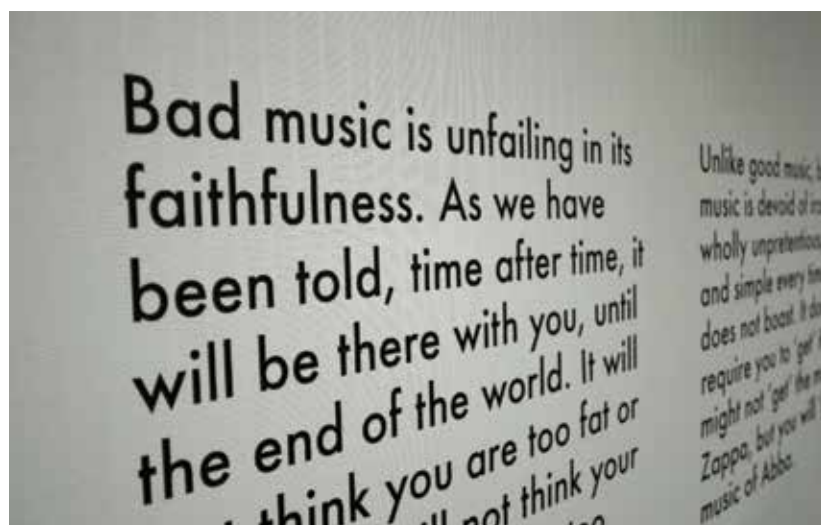
Song-Ming's introduction to this nine-year-old artwork brought to mind recent conversations I'd had with another artist. That artist had a plan, unrealised at the time of writing, to make an artwork in part by reporting to the police a series of "found" items ostensibly lost by others. I'd found myself uncomfortably preoccupied with the ethics of what I imagined to be a disregard for working people's time—as if some kind of make-work scheme were being proposed. A heist!

Song-Ming once reported as lost a book he'd borrowed from a heartland branch of Singapore's National Library, and paid for its replacement. In so doing, he also catalysed someone's administrative labour—notwithstanding that a librarian might describe the loss as a common occurrence, all in a day's work. The well-worn paperback that inspired these events was *Make Your Own Damn Art*, by Bob and Roberta Smith (aka Patrick Brill), whose central theme is that making and participating in art does us good. In 2010, Song-Ming followed the book's title instruction faithfully, and to obvious ironic effect, displaying the barcoded lending edition as his own art in an exhibition at The Substation.

I checked online and the solitary Bob and Roberta Smith book's current status is "reference only" at the National Library's central branch. I checked my feelings too. This time they're not the same as I experienced when considering those hypothetical exchanges of lost and found items. I wonder if the transactions integral to Song-Ming's work amount to a playful snapshot of the system's mechanics as well as a by-the-book break and enter.

Bala Starr

Director, LASALLE Institute of Contemporary Arts



Manifesto for Bad Music

2011
Wall installation

Drawing from diverse sources such as pop music lyrics, the Communist Manifesto and the Bible, I created a call for the appreciation of bad music.

You don't hear spontaneous, uncontrollable screaming at visual art exhibitions as you do in a rock concert. I will overgeneralise and suggest that this is because music is far more intuitively received and processed than visual art, which, like language-text, is more rationally apprehended and "read".

Neither strictly about music nor visual art but within the realm of contemporary art, Song-Ming's body of work shows a deep understanding of how (not so much why) people respond to music or sounds. He uses this knowledge to create open experiments from which observations and conclusions on cultural and musical eccentricities are made.

This is certainly true for *Manifesto for Bad Music*. The work can also be seen as a tool to unhinge kitsch, just enough so that we are knowingly implicated. An early work, *Manifesto* signalled the artist's propensity of setting traps in order to generate within us (the project's protagonists and viewers) a feeling of discomfort, as we fall prey to our "uncool" affiliations.

Although gentle and light in his approach, this “discomfort” produced is what makes *Manifesto* effective. Despite their minimal presentation, his best works conjure up sparks of recognition that cast light on our acknowledgement of who we are while connecting our individual experiences with that of others.

Matthew Ngui
Artist, curator



“Yesterday” Mobile Karaoke

2011

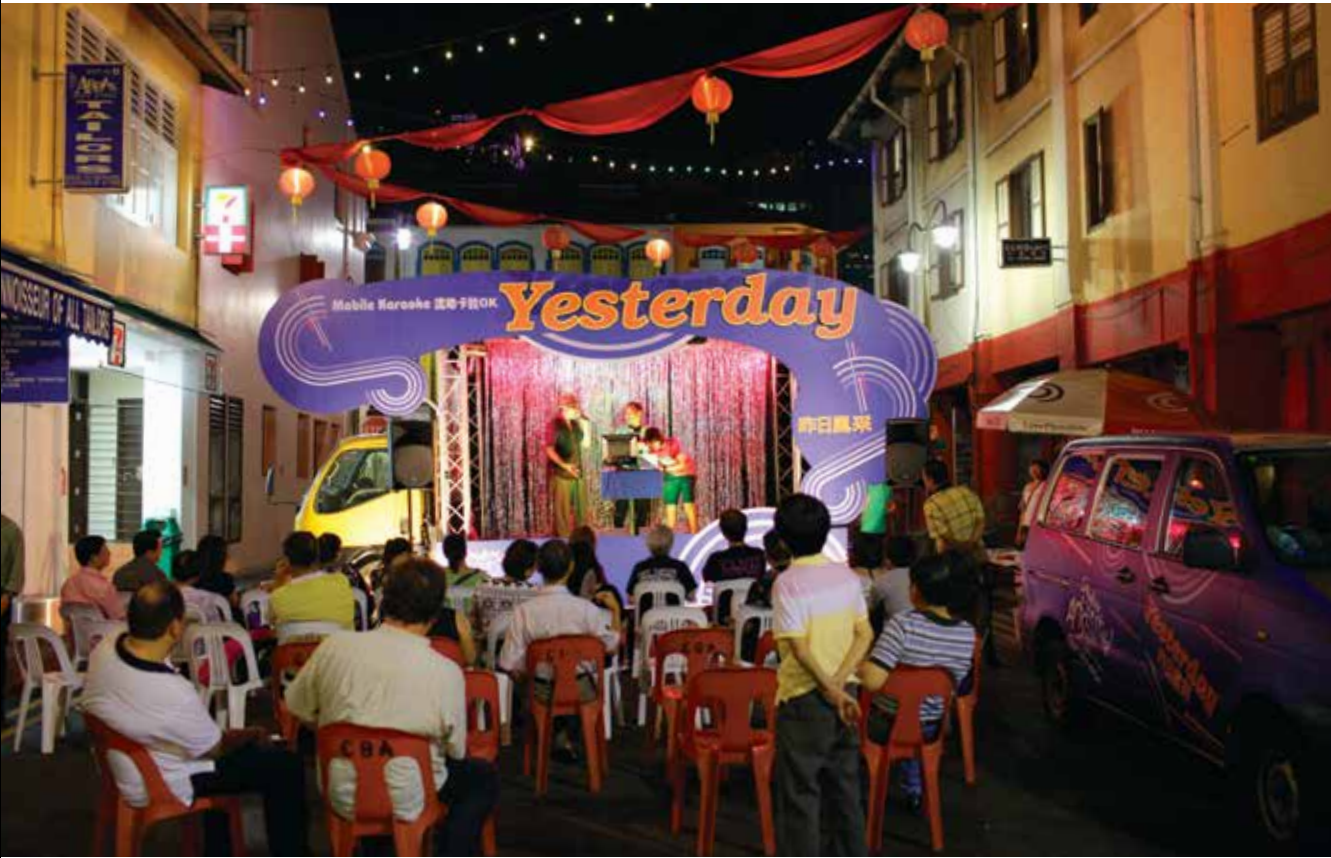
Interactive installation

A truck was fitted with a stage and karaoke system and travelled around Singapore for two weeks to seven different locations. At each stop, the stage was open for the public to sing their favourite songs from the past. Songs were available in various local and regional languages to cater to the diverse population of Singapore.

Squeezing past height restrictions on overhead bridges and followed by a random coterie of Elvis karaoke die-hards, this truck trundled around Singapore's heartlands, moving from the Esplanade to Woodlands, offering up to 10,000 classics and hits in different languages, including English, Tamil and Tagalog.

The kitsch of the stage-set is playful and offers a deliberate contrast with a more innocent past, aligning with other mobile enterprises of old: the roving *kacang putih* vendor, the mobile library, or the cinema-on-wheels which only disappeared in the '70s. Galvanising your uncles and aunties in Bedok to croon Teresa Teng or to shake a leg like Elvis brings back an alienated nostalgia for a rapidly urbanised metropolis with its attendant balkanisation of local areas. Forget *kampungs*, a communal get-together was once just like this: impromptu, open, convivial, local. Even that is disappearing.

Elaine Chiew
Writer





2011

Single-channel SD video

6 min 12 secs

An all-female a cappella cover of Kraftwerk's The Robots by a group of amateur singers who try their best to reproduce the electronic textures of Kraftwerk's music with only their voices. The group was given a month to listen to the original song, and asked to self-organise and perform their version as they were recorded on video.

There are plenty of *a capella* versions of pop songs, but you will hardly find a stranger and funnier interpretation of a classic than Song-Ming's take on *The Robots*. Inspired by the artist but executed by five women performers, the rendition is infused with a warmth and human authenticity that can only be generated by true fan behaviour.

The Robots was released in 1978 on the LP *The Man-Machine*, the seventh album by the West German band Kraftwerk. The music is quintessential Kraftwerk electro-pop, albeit with a softer touch than its cold mechanistic predecessors, which became the band's trademark and established its worldwide reputation. The themes addressed on this album revolve around space travel, robots and alienation in the big city. The artwork references the German silent film classic *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang from 1927, and the band's graphics, stage design and outfits are reminiscent of the work of the Soviet constructivist El Lissitzky.

Ang's concept is both subtle and emotionally gripping. Almost effortlessly, the artist upends our patterns of perception and modes of interpretation. Operating in DIY mode, he turns the distancing rite of the cyborg-style, art-modernist Kraftwerk show into a cuddly feel-good event.

Christoph Tannert

Artistic Director, Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin



2012

Reconstructed upright piano and HD video
26 mins

Over a period of four months, I learnt how to refurbish a disused piano in a piano workshop. The piano was taken apart, restrung, reassembled and tuned to playable condition. Mechanical and cosmetic improvements were also made. Each part of the process was recorded on camera and subsequently edited into a video.

In this 26-minute video, the artist gets to the heart of music—as well as to its bones and guts. In the privacy of a tiny studio, Ang methodically dissects, unties, dismembers an upright piano, right down to its bare unstrung frame, and then painstakingly reconstructs it, string by string, key by key. The documented process leaves the piano a silent frame without a picture, the bare bones of the art of music. The random sounds of a piano atelier, from the primordial, cathedralesque twang of bass strings being pulled into place, to the tuning of a bright “C” with an electronic tuner and professional tools, lead us not to music, but to an apotheosis of artist as craftsman, capable of destruction as well as recreation of material objects, as well as musical decomposition and recomposition, which exists on a higher plane.

Yearning for the artist to play the instrument, we are left with the homely image of an upright piano, fully restored, its keyboard cover closed, concealing the trauma and resurrection that has taken place before us. Perhaps it will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, capable only of random, dissonant, aleatoric music; on the other hand it may once again ring out with sonorous Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartok, Berio and The Beatles.

Don J. Cohn
Writer





Stop Me If You Think You've Seen This One Before

2012

Installation

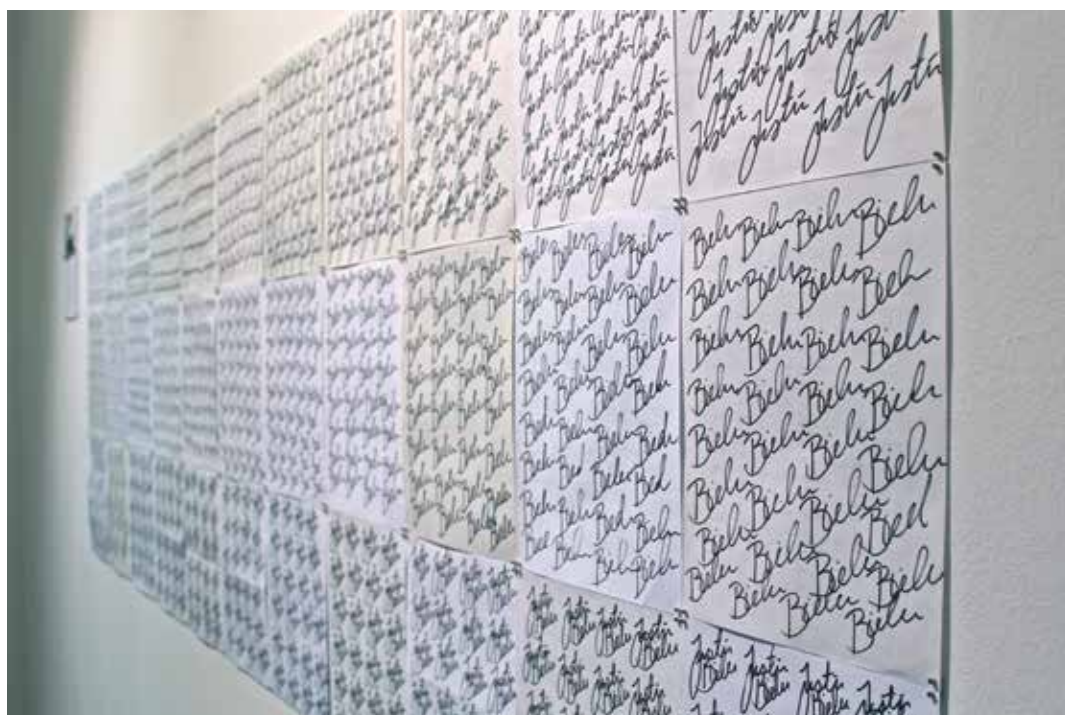
Seven watercolour paintings and seven 12" vinyl records
52 x 52 cm each (framed)

A collection of Belle and Sebastian 12" vinyl records paired with seven watercolour paintings. Each painting is a monochromatic circle, drawing from the main colour of the vinyl record it is paired with. The work references Jonathan Monk's installation Stop Me if You Think That You've Heard This One Before (2003), which uses twelve 12" vinyl singles from The Smiths.

Century | Fakers | Act |
Apostles | Another | Sunny | Plague |
Other | Politician | Silence | Asleep | Sunbeam |
Space | Wasting | Beautiful | Best | Friend |
Beyond | Sunrise |
Big | Shaft | Black | Unite | Blue | Eyes |
Millionaire | Born | Calculating | Bimbo | Chickfactor |
Time | Sister | Leaving | Cornflake | Version |
Crash | Dear | Catastrophe | Waitress | Desperation |
Fool | Dialogue | Dirty | Dream | Dog | Wheels |
Leave | Dress | Ease | Feet |

Adele Tan

Senior curator, National Gallery Singapore



2012

Autographed poster

Practice sheets

Over three months, I learnt to replicate Justin Bieber's autograph and eventually reproduced it on a poster of the pop star.

Available from Ebay (last updated Jan 01, 2019):

Justin Bieber Rare Authentic Hand Signed Autographed Tour Photo Book
Program COA

Condition: "good!"

Price: USD \$399.99

Shipping: \$36.39 International Priority Shipping

Seller: [raretracks](#) (20462 stars) 99.9% Positive feedback

For your consideration is the rare Justin Bieber Autographed VIP Tour Program that was Hand Signed by the Superstar Justin Bieber himself! Justin Bieber Signatures are far and few between considering he's surrounded by a fortress of security guards and no longer does meet and greets. Even in the early days of his career, Justin's Autograph was extremely difficult to obtain. Comes with COA from Raretracks. Collect something you can Display. We provided numerous photos shown in the description because we feel that it's important for you to examine this Collectable's Authenticity.

Charmaine Toh
Curator, National Gallery Singapore



2014

Group exercise based on artist instructions

A group exercise in which participants listen to the sounds of their immediate environment. Each participant leads the group for five minutes, walking in any direction and pausing as they wish. The rest of the group follows the leader, and the exercise ends when all members have taken turns to lead the group. All mobile devices are switched off and all participants remain silent during the walk.

It was perfect weather on that day in Hong Kong, and I turned up to the *Silent Walk* ready to tune out the day's activities and to tune into a state of attentive listening. But the memory that stays with me years later is less about the city that I heard, and more about an affecting sense of listening in silence to my fellow walkers.

Our group of strangers was set free into the city with few instructions, only that we had to stay together and take turns leading one another along unfamiliar streets toward unspecified destinations, all without speaking.

Thus framed, navigating each other, registering the dynamic and responding to the flow of our group became a shadow exercise in listening. I have not forgotten the sensation of our heightened attention in that hour, our sensitivity not just to the city sounds, but—unexpectedly—to each other.

Mimi Brown

Founder, Spring Workshop





2014

2-channel synchronised HD film

5 mins 13 secs

Having never received any harpsichord training, I learnt how to play the C Major Prelude from J. S. Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier (Book I). I then worked out a backwards version of the piece and performed the two versions on a harpsichord in a Baroque-era mansion in Berlin, Germany. Both forwards and backwards versions were filmed as single takes, with the camera moving in opposite directions for the two performances.

Why would you play Bach backwards? Forwards Bach seems complex enough.

The first answer would be architecture. Classical music has structure. It unfolds forward, and we really only know this when an artist shows us that it can exist backwards too.

The diptych format of this two-channel video also offers other symmetries. The left screen shows the forward version, the right screen the backwards. There are two ways that Song-Ming has programmed his installation. The first version has the left and right screens alternating being shown; the second had both screens playing concurrently. In both cases, there are visual counterpoints.

Coda: Remember in the last century, some Christian groups warned teens off rock 'n roll because of supposed backmasked messages from the Devil? Does *Backwards Bach* sound like the Devil's work? I don't know about Satanic, but there's definitely something anti-classical in the way that these chords build up to no resolution.

Sherman Sam
Artist, writer



PRAELUDIUM I

Musical score for Praeludium I, measures 1-16. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of five systems of two staves each. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The melody in the right hand starts with a quarter rest, followed by eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass line in the left hand starts with a whole rest, followed by eighth and sixteenth notes. The subsequent systems (measures 5-16) continue the melodic and harmonic development with various rhythmic patterns and chordal textures.

Musical score for Backwards Bach, measures 1-16. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of four systems of two staves each. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The melody in the right hand starts with a quarter rest, followed by eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass line in the left hand starts with a whole rest, followed by eighth and sixteenth notes. The subsequent systems (measures 5-16) continue the melodic and harmonic development with various rhythmic patterns and chordal textures.

2014

Various techniques on paper

An ongoing, systematic exploration of music staves as a structure for making visual compositions. Each set of artworks contains an internal logic, which in turn determines the end result. Most works so far have been made by hand-drawing additional lines onto the existing printed staves. The latest ones focus on the materiality of paper, revolving around cutting, copying, folding and pasting.

It's been a while since I've seen manuscript paper.

Music Manuscripts evokes mixed reactions in me because of my childhood experience of playing the piano and cello.

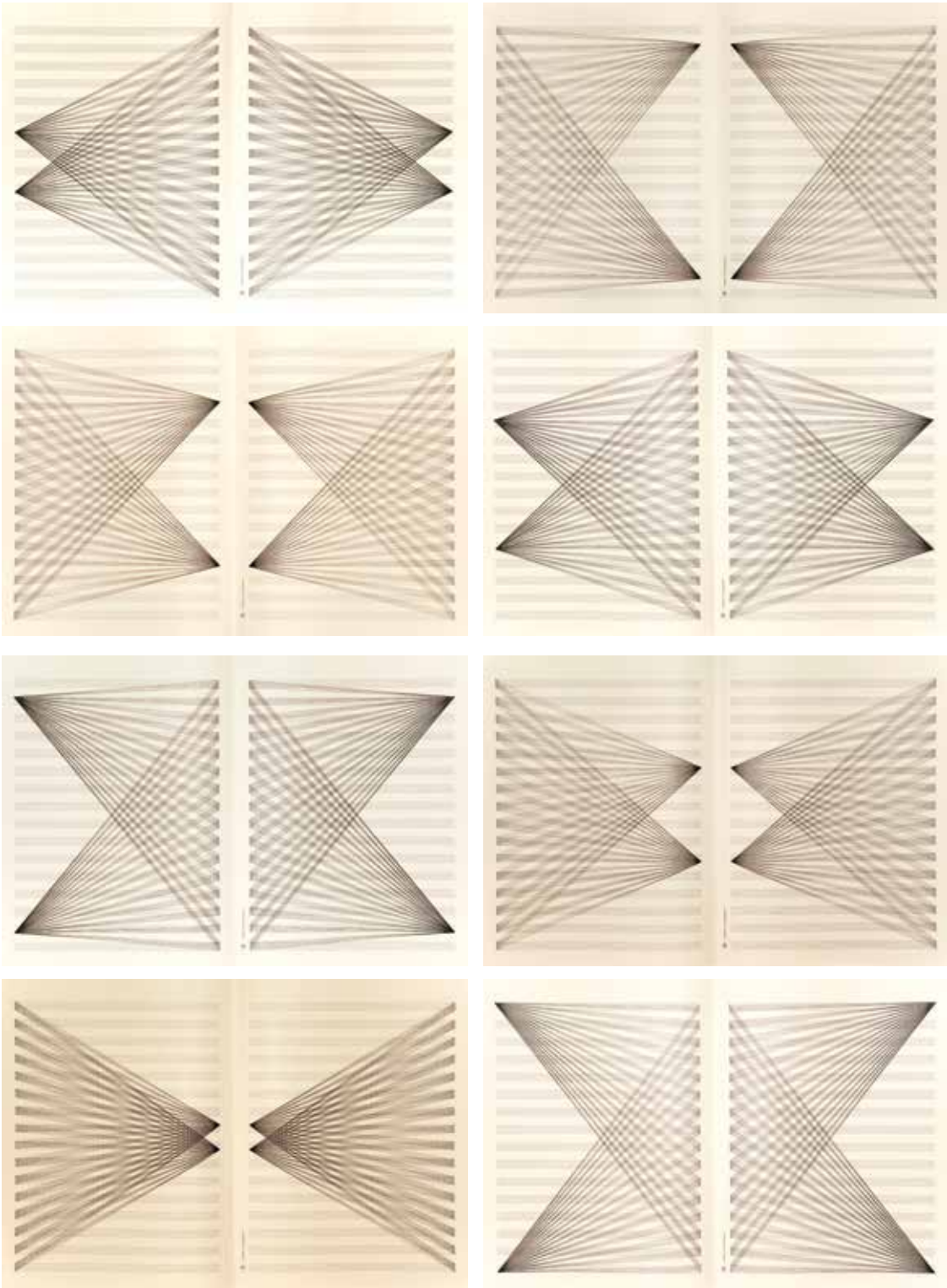
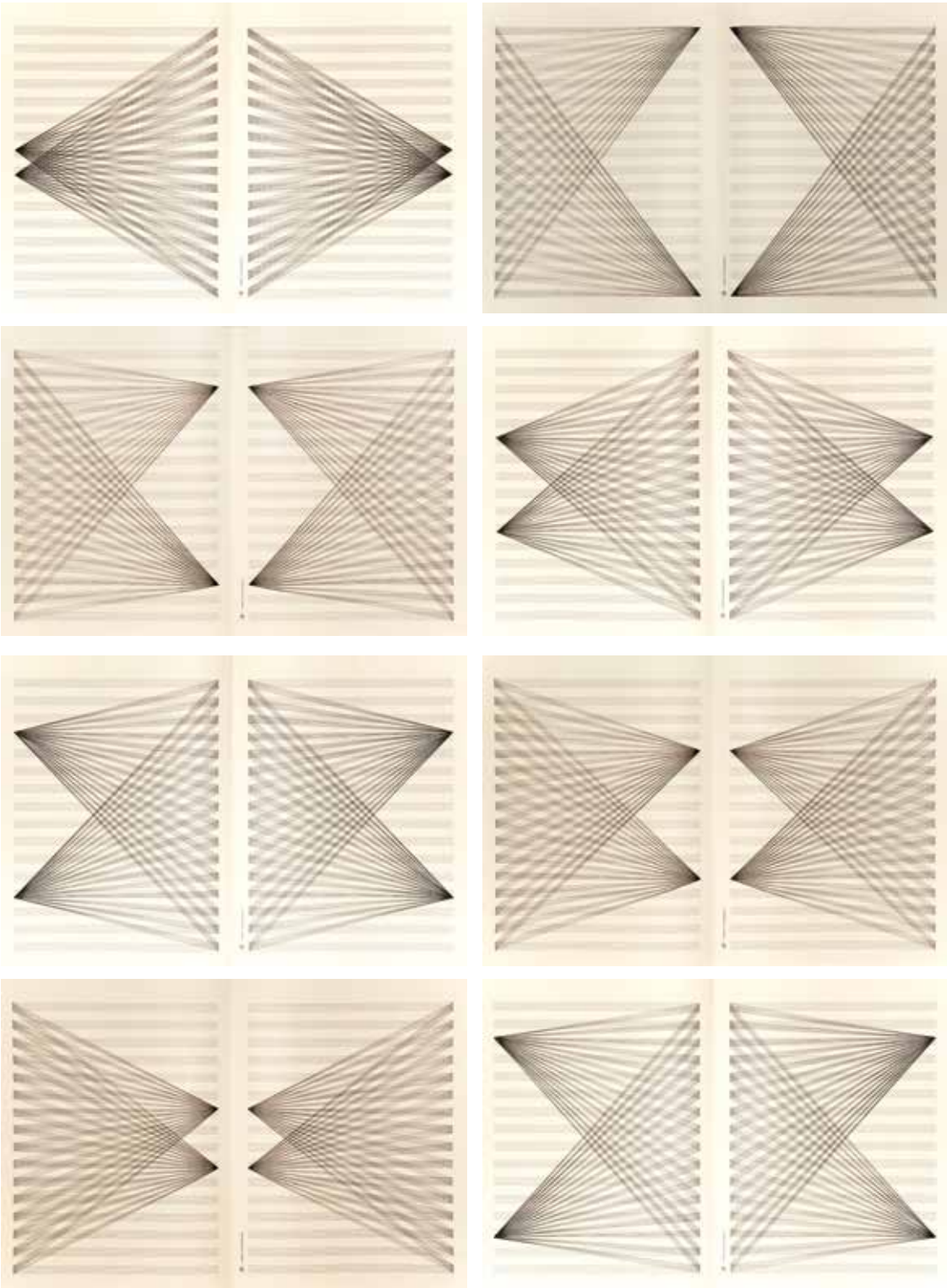
Song-Ming's systematic implementation of the lines reminds me of the rigidity and discipline of daily practice; yet simultaneously, the mesmerising patterns that emerge on the paper pulsate with a dynamism and confidence similar to presenting all that tedious work in a concert or recital.

Throughout my years of practice, I developed waves of interest and experienced bouts of anxiety toward my instruments, the latter of which was driven by the pressures from the annual Certificate of Merit and ABRSM tests. It was a time filled with internal resistance, sometimes dread, though often sprinkled with fulfilment and flow.

With college applications submitted, I reached a point where I could say "no".

Fifteen years later, I look forward to relearning my cello foundations (and building up those calluses!) with the goal of working through the last piece I had thought to perform in my senior year of high school—Lalo's Cello Concerto in D minor.

Sylvia Tsai
Writer





2015 Installation

*Semi-autobiographical “diary entries”
presented as printed texts and acrylic
sketches on music stands.*

It is hard to encounter the work without, at the same time, feeling as though the artist's biography is being revealed. In *Notes*, 11 acrylic sketches—each of them alternating between thick, heavy strokes, or thin, faint lines—accompany 11 written texts, presented as excerpts from a diary. Song-Ming's gestural drawings read as personally as his written observations; they are traces that make visible the progression of the artist's hand across the paper. Together, they capture the artist's meditation on the passing of days, of moments, housed in the material form of his sketches and texts.

Notes is a window into a practice that moves with time. It represents the convergence of different temporalities onto a single surface: moments of real time in the artist's life spent writing and sketching, recollected time in the artist's accounts, and the time we spend in viewing and reflecting on *Notes*. Perhaps it is no surprise that music, which underpins Song-Ming's practice, is itself a temporal form. It is transitory in experience, a structure of sounds that depend on a duration to unfold. A quiet iteration on the overlap between the artist's life and practice, *Notes* becomes an invitation to reflect on the process of art-making.

Junni Chen
Writer, curator



2015
Single-channel HD video
20 mins

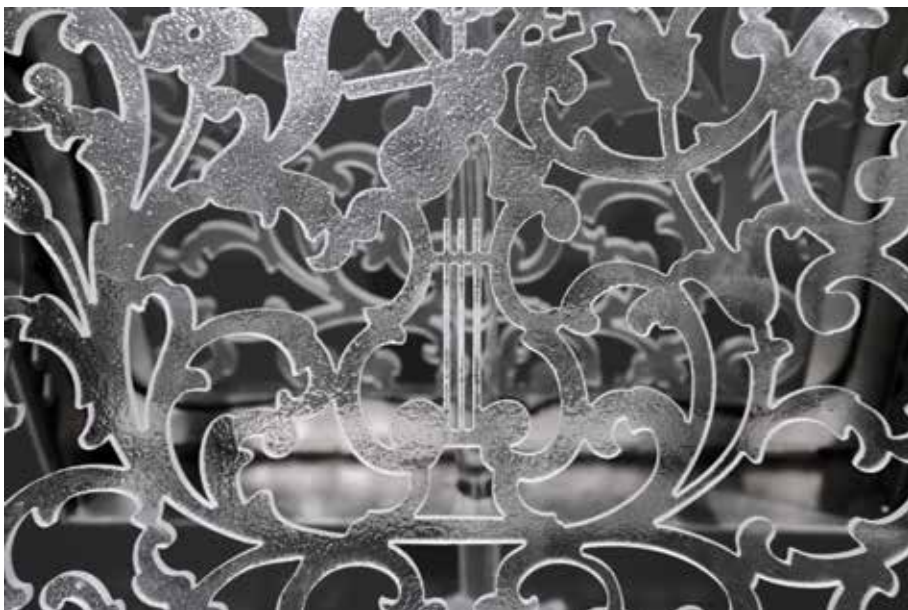
I asked my parents to take my guitar from their home in Singapore to Berlin and filmed the journey. After receiving the guitar, I used it to compose and record music as the video soundtrack.



While watching *Album*, I asked myself, why would anyone be interested in watching two elderly persons manoeuvring luggage? They could be going anywhere amongst the constant stream of travelers and their destinations. But yet I was transfixed by this oddly charming road movie. *Album* is a mix of stark, uncool reality and aesthetic motivations. A moment in the ordinary life of an artist and his parents, knowingly packaged into art. Perhaps this awkwardness is part of the weird experience of being Singaporean, or even a Singaporean artist: We want to maintain control as much as we want to let go, and there is the pervasive anxiety that everything “must work”. *Album*, which is accompanied by a DIY soundtrack played by a self-declared “anti Guitar Hero”, is filled with such contradictions.

Ian Woo
Artist





2015

Installation: photograph, drawing,
HD video, glass sculpture

Something Old, Something New traces my attempt to reproduce a 19th-century wooden music stand in glass. In using glass as material, the new sculpture acquires a sense of fragility and becomes an aesthetic object more than a functional one.

The music stand has a fragile modesty in comparison to so many objects around it.

The light streams through the curved glass windows of the vast room. A bright, cool, optimistic gold that has bounced off the surface of the North Sea and travelled through the canopy of trees that protects the house from the ferocious winds and corrosive salt spray.

The house is Hospitalfield, a 19th-century house designed and built by the artist Patrick Allan-Fraser, on the site of a medieval hospital. His vision was to create a legacy, a house to support artists of the future.

The stand has a clear function: to enable the playing of music together. It is designed, crafted, polished and preserved to support the creation of others.

Against the context of the industrial revolution, Allen-Fraser has designed a place in response to a great anxiety of the time; that the skills and processes of making things would be cut away from our lives.

The dark polished surface of the stand is carved to support the decorative filigree of the sloping surface, which in turn supports the sheet music for two players.

A well-founded 19th-century anxiety that we still experience, especially the limitation of education shaped only in relation to direct economic gain. Hospitalfield is a legacy, designed to educate, shelter and provide space for artists and makers to work. The most valuable resource for an artist is time away from the continuum of their everyday.

Here the object is made fetish, cast and drawn, traced and photographed. It takes on a new life whilst simultaneously remaining in its place beside the North Sea.

Lucy Byatt
Director, Hospitalfield





2016

Found SD videos (digitised from 8mm film)
and audio

23 mins 8 secs

Site-specific installation for Kenpoku Art Festival. Upon discovering a series of home videos shot by various residents of Daigo (Ibaraki, Japan) from the 1960s to the 1980s, I researched the local folk songs of the area, and created impressionistic piano arrangements of the folk songs to complement the Super 8 videos.

Song-Ming's original soundtrack, which draws on the musical scales of regional music from North Ibaraki, is an interpretation of the memories of Daigo's residents. Presented on old CRT televisions and accompanied by moving music, the installation provides a fresh yet nostalgic experience both for those familiar with Daigo, as well as first-time visitors. The title also opens up the space for us to contemplate what was "lost" and what was "found".

Yukiko Shikata
Curator, Tokyo



2017

Lecture performance

Lecture performance exploring the seductive qualities of music and film, drawing from diverse sources such as Kenny G, Joy Division, Martin Arnold and The Wizard of Oz.



I don't remember much of Song-Ming's lecture performance. But I am reminded of it constantly. The most recent trigger was the cover of *Can't Help Falling in Love* in *Crazy Rich Asians*, the ridiculous yet oddly watchable film version of Kevin Kwan's haute-naff chronicle of Singapore's elite. Is it a testament to the power of Song-Ming's lecture that the only thing I heard when seeing that part of the film was the clip he played of *Stand up for Singapore*? The unabashed cheesiness of some of his references that made his work more genuine than anything else I remember seeing in London that year.

Reading Song-Ming's script now, the point that comes up is the difference between audibility and intelligibility. Hearing doesn't necessarily mean understanding. And so it is with art: Real comprehension begins when you realise you don't actually know what you're hearing, seeing or reading. The kind of attention it demands is different from what's required to make sense of a scholarly essay, a magazine article or even a conceptual work of art. It's an unintentionally clever way of reinscribing the artist and his or her personality onto the artwork in a non-strident way that doesn't simply rehearse the significance of authorial intent or subjectivity. There is an identity without identitarianism. Which is why, to quote another bard of our age, I can't get you—the work—out of my head.

Joan Kee
Art historian

DIFFERENT EVERY TIME

2017

365 digital photographs/Instagram account

For each day of the year 2017, I uploaded a single image of a CD onto the Instagram account different.every.time without commentary or hashtags.

It's not unusual to see vinyl records and cassette tapes depicted as objects of obsession; it's rather less common for the coldly pristine compact disc to be fetishised. Yet in his Instagram project *different.every.time*, Song-Ming appears unnaturally fixated by the latter's glossy surface. On each day of 2017, Song-Ming uploaded a single ghostly image of a CD floating in a void. The account was more Finsta than Insta, finishing its run with fewer followers than posts. It displayed no discernible desire to be social and eschewed text as well as hashtags which might have made it more easily discoverable by the public (or click farms). Its only nod to its platform was to the frequently presumed "Instagram aesthetic": rebounded flecks of ever-shifting rainbow-coloured light adorn each picture in the work, and imply a year-long infatuation with iridescence.

Nguan
Artist





1 Whitman, Walt: "I sing the body electric." *Leaves of Grass*. The First (1855) Edition. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. Print. 2 Glass, Philip: "Liquid Days." *Songs From Liquid Days*. CBS. 1986. CD. 3 Silversun Pickups: "Circadian Rhythm (Last Dance)." *Better Nature*. New Machine. 2015. CD. 4 Musée Mécanique: "Our Changing Skins." *Hold This Ghost*. Fraog Stand records. 2008. CD. 5 Steven Wilson: "Nowhere now." *To the Bone*. Caroline International. 2017. CD. 6 Howe, Susan: "That This." *That This*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.

2017 –

Instructional and musical scores;
live performance

A collaboration with Julien Grossmann exploring the various forms and definitions of the chorus—including ancient Greek tragedies, modern telecommunications and bird calls at dawn.

Using our findings, we wrote instructional scores and music compositions in which the voice occupies a central place. The music was then realised through workshops and performances with an ensemble of amateur singers.

"I sing the body electric"¹

"Well here we are

Sleep

Sleep

Sleep

Sleep

Sleep

Sleep

Being in air

Turning to speak

Losing our way"²

"Standing arm and arm, still so out of reach

Well, there's nowhere left to go"³

"Spinning in our changing skins,

We'd walk through walls with dizzy heads"⁴

"At the speed of sound

We are nowhere now

Too much time to kill

Too much wasted air

Too much everything"⁵

"That thing not shadowed

The way music is formed of

cloud and fire once actually

concrete now accidental as

half truth or as whole truth"⁶

"And you may find yourself

In another part of the world

And you may find yourself

Behind the wheel of a large automobile

And you may find yourself in a beautiful house

With a beautiful wife

And you may ask yourself, well

How did I get here?"

Marc Glöede

Curator, critic, film scholar





Lil' List

2019
Digital print
70 x 100 cm

*On the music streaming portal Spotify,
I searched for the names of artistes beginning
with the word "Lil". I then compiled all the
names into a larger poster with a repetitive list
that, when read rhythmically, can be rapped.*

What else informs the rap genre more than this—a lil list of small places, big dreams, favourite foods, addictions, obsessions, compulsions, virtual realness, anxious bluster, self-effacement, nicknames your grandma gave you and other affectations.

Lim Pey Chuan
Curator, writer



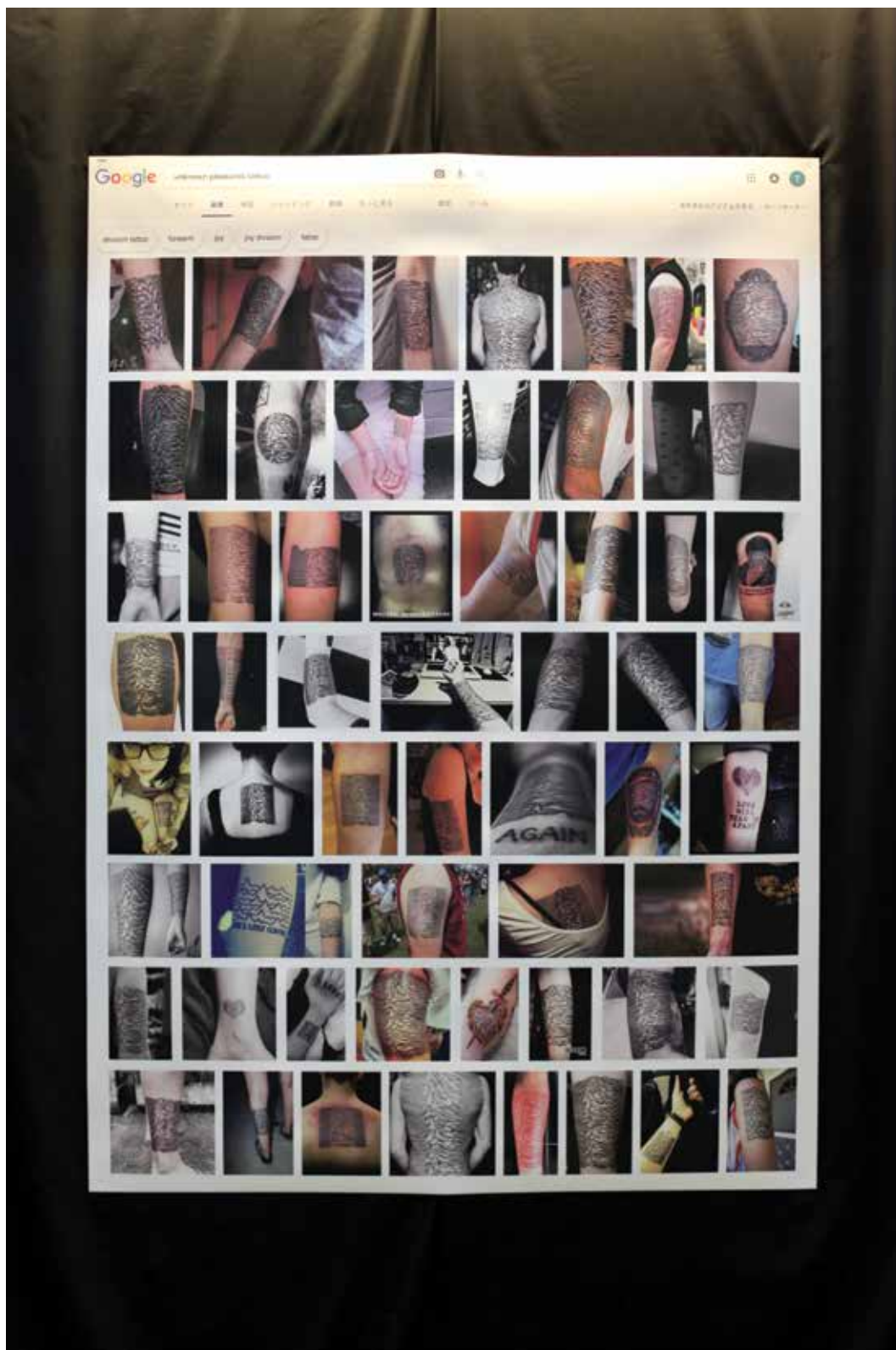
2018
Large format print
120 x 3000 cm (unrolled)

A compilation of email footers from organisations which I may or may not have subscribed to.

A large scroll of paper is flush against the gallery's wall and floor. Sentences of English words in various fonts, sizes and colours are printed on the sheet of paper. Glossing over the paper's seemingly diverse content, however, one gathers that it is a compilation of similarly worded, automated disclaimers for artist, art magazine, gallery, art fair and museum e-newsletters that Song-Ming has subscribed to.

Fittingly, he satirises this recurring inundation of niceties by titling his work after the generic overtures of subscription e-mails which are ironically meant to provide personalised updates for the busy or otherwise unwitting subscriber. Often not tailored or privatised, these e-mails are repetitive or inane digital sources of information that might be found elsewhere, thus prompting or rationalising their instinctive deletion. The size and placement of the work, which interrupts the spectator's leisurely amble through the gallery space, materialises the sheer volume of fleeting impressions which cultural workers and impresarios are met with on a regular basis. Song-Ming's work shores up the Catch-22 of well-intentioned art workers who might wish to develop more sincere, fortified connections while navigating their industry's attention economy. Cheekily, the work seems to ask if it is unnecessary or tautological to subscribe to another's life.

Wong Bing Hao
Writer



2018
Digital print
70 x 100 cm

I did a Google Search for tattoos inspired by the album cover art of Joy Division's Unknown Pleasures and compiled the images into a print.

In September 2018, I worked with Song-Ming on an exhibition at ISLANDS at Peninsula Plaza, a year-long project that staged exhibitions in advertising vitrines along a secluded walkway of a shopping mall. Titled *Perennial Concerns*, the show reflected on the history of Peninsula Plaza as a musician's haven, everyday banality and our interest in music whilst practicing as visual artists.

What do you think about repetition? Why do anything more than once? I asked Song-Ming these questions as we keyed in various pop culture fads into our Google search engines and looked at the wonderful series of images that were generated—Bowie face paint, Metallica T-shirts, Justin Bieber hairstyle, recreations of The Beatles crossing Abbey Road. I think it is rather strange when things repeat themselves—when two people share the same name, when strangers wear matching outfits, or when two identical cars drive past each other. Maybe it's because we do a lot of things thinking they might set us apart from others.

Song-Ming is one of those artists who readily accepts that we make versions of things. This might be why he isn't afraid of making works that are versions of other artworks like *Stop Me if You Think You've Seen This One Before*, often as a kind of tribute to artworks he likes. Perhaps his art can be likened to some form of fan art which is similar to a Joy Division fan getting an *Unknown Pleasures* tattoo, but also not quite. His is a kind of fan art about music itself.

Lai Yu Tong
Artist



2018

Workshop; performance; PowerPoint video; paraphernalia

A collaboration with Jason Maling, this project is a perpetual attempt to create a song that could possibly change the world.

To date, we have invented “truly-existing imaginary genres” of music and set them to PowerPoint animations; written and performed a pop song with members of the public; and produced related objects such as badges and postcards.

When I was seven, growing up in the suburbs of Melbourne in the 1980s, the schoolyard dictated that you were either a fan of Michael Jackson or local singer John Farnham. For us, no other music existed, and we were divided in friendship by our allegiances. This division led to conflict. In Grade Two I had a fight with another boy. My fighting style was heavily influenced by Jackson’s dance moves, spins mostly, that I’d seen on TV.

As we grew our gradual exposure to a greater range of influences, musical and otherwise, changed us, dissipating much of our angst. There were no great polarities that we had to choose between that could divide us so categorically.

While occasionally cataclysmic events in our public and private lives change our direction or the course of history, it is really the incidental changes that we barely notice, the small connections, that make the greatest difference to our societies and to our lives.

If you could write a song to change the world, what you say? And what would you want to change?

By asking us these questions, and providing us a communal space to think and work on them with humour despite the task’s admitted impossibility, Jason’s and Song-Ming’s territory is connection. They show us that it is more likely the outliers and overlooked movements, genres and actions that deserve our attention most when thinking about making positive changes in our world.

Trent Walter

Director, Negative Press, Melbourne





2018

PowerPoint presentation

2 mins 30 secs

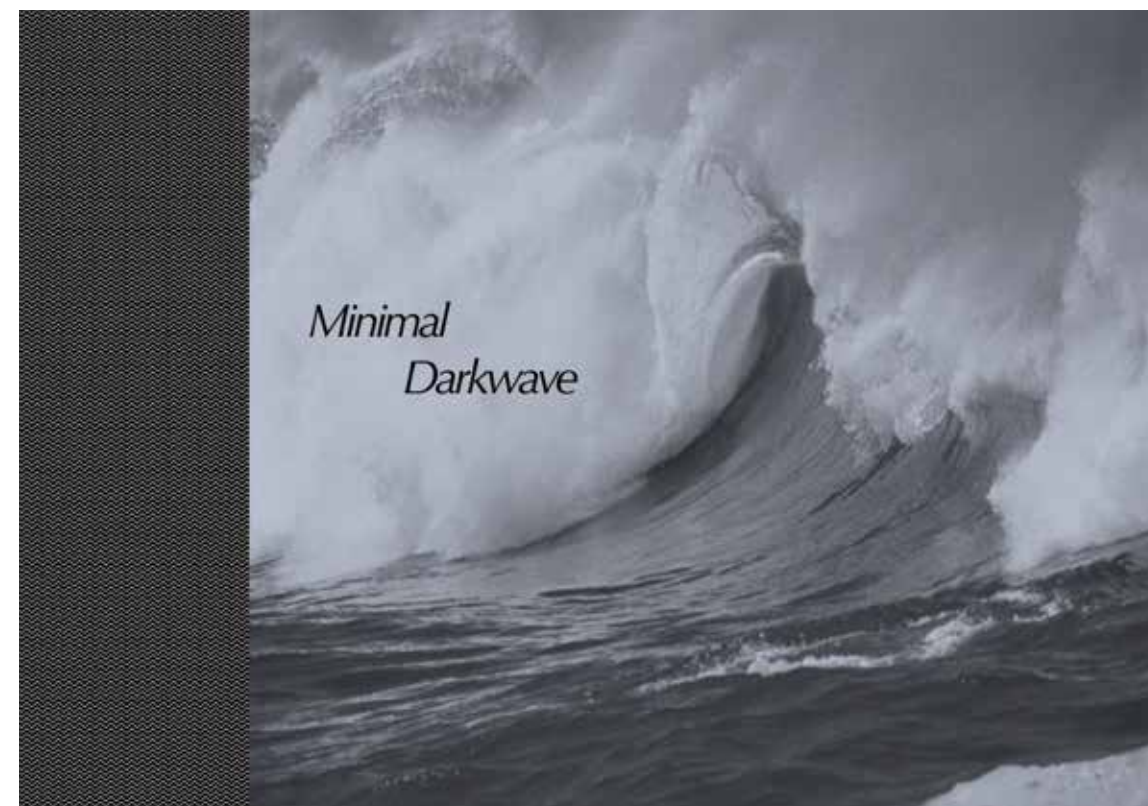
Part of A Song to Change the World, this work contains imaginary genres of music coined by Jason and me from mashing up movements in art history, music, philosophy and politics. We then created audio excerpts for the genres, setting them to PowerPoint slides and transitions.

At the core of this work is Song-Ming's effort to maximise and play around with PowerPoint's essential purpose and function as a simple and efficient means of conveying information. From an aesthetic perspective, the fonts, backgrounds and music are all in keeping with the fictional genre, but the design can also be seen as a bold attempt to strike a nostalgic or futuristic chord. At the same time, there is some remixing and collaging, creating a new aspect.

Because the work was made by Song-Ming, an artist who has explored experimental expressions in both a comprehensive and ambiguous manner as well as studying art and critical theory, it is much more than an amateur fantasy of a fictitious musical genre. Rather, it sheds light on amateurs and the power of amateurism. This unconventional amateur quality enables someone to deviate from the existing framework of performing music on an instrument exactly as they have practiced it. This approach unearths new values and potentials. The desire to liberate oneself from disciplined behaviours and customs, to strive for something more democratic and to resist the things one has been given, suggests aspects of the colonial history of Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries.

Shihoko Iida
Curator

KLEIN CORE





2018

Hot foil stamp on paper

15 unique pieces

30 x 42 cm each

*A compilation of legalistic language
often found in email footers.*

Re: Return to Sender
To Whom it May Concern

I seem to be the intended recipient of *Email Disclaimers*. By default, I sit at the office desk to write a personal response to this artwork made of 15 email disclaimers, each placed at the bottom of an otherwise blank A4 page.

Inevitably, my art-historical mind travels to the aesthetic of administration and the linguistic turns of Conceptual Art, via Mail Art, past Institutional Critique. My curatorial mind begins to browse projects about the emailsphere, such as Camille Henrot's *Office of Unanswered Emails* recently shown here.

I think of (self) censorship.

I wonder what "personal response" means.

Whenever I think of Song-Ming, music plays. I wear headphones and let my computer play a compilation of songs concocted by an algorithm specifically for me. The algorithm knows me very well since either I already like the songs or otherwise find myself intrigued by what I hear. I am deeply fascinated by the soul-searching reach of ubiquitous algorithms that predict desires in music, books, fashion, films, travel. Even love. My future being written by a data centre located in some remote desert.

Every few minutes, the music is interrupted by a ringtone that signals the landing of a new email in the mailbox. It's all work stuff.

I am a curator, and 80% of my time goes into reading and writing emails.

What if 80% of the messages were not meant for me?

I hereby declare myself the unintended recipient.

Yours truly,
Anna Lovecchio

Curator, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore

Auctoritas non veritas facit legem

Authority, not truth, makes law¹

In vino veritas

In wine there is truth²

Obscuris vera involvens

Truth is enveloped by obscurity³

Veritas odium paret

Truth begets hatred⁴

Veritas vos liberabit

The truth will set you free⁵

Veritatem dies aperit

Time discloses the truth⁶

Vincit omnia veritas

Truth conquers all⁷

Veritas curat

Truth cures⁸

Veritas numquam perit

Truth never expires⁹

Veritas vincit

Truth prevails¹⁰

Veritas vitae magistra

Truth is the teacher of life¹¹

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (II, 26); 2. Proverb; 3. Virgil, *Aeneid* (VI, 100); 4. Terence, *Andria* (68); 5. The Holy Bible, *Gospel of John* (8:32); 6. Proverb; 7. Proverb; 8. Motto of Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research; 9. Seneca the Younger, *De ira* (On Anger) (II, 22, 2); 10. Motto of the banner of the President of the Czech Republic ("Pravda vítězí"); 11. Unofficial motto of University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras inscribed in its tower

2018

Laser-cut stainless steel

*A recasting of proverbs and
mottos related to truth as text
sculptures.*

I was in a group exhibition called *Exceptions of Rule: Counterpoints to Truth* (2018) with Song-Ming when I first encountered this work. It was a show tackling the relativity of subscribed truths in contemporary society.



The words of "Truth" have a certain pattern. They are always partly comprehensible, and partly enigmatic. Their exterior glitters make people pensive. I am reminded of a new logogram created by myself with an author recently. It was an image that emerged in my subconscious under the guidance of his text. I invested it with meaning: it is fire, a falling angel, a dove. It symbolises trial, the struggle between flesh and spirit, as well as the spirit of holiness. We created a pronunciation for it, and made the reading of it a ritual. Then we developed the logogram into four signs, following the sequence "1 > 2 > 3 > Infinity". They represent the mystical precincts of four organisations, as well as four progressive stages in the spiritual development of their members. In the end, a religion takes shape. This religion is reassuring, precisely because it is based on an enigmatic logogram.

Pak Sheung Chuen
Artist

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Dusk to Dawn Choruses
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Lil’ List
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You are Receiving This Email Because
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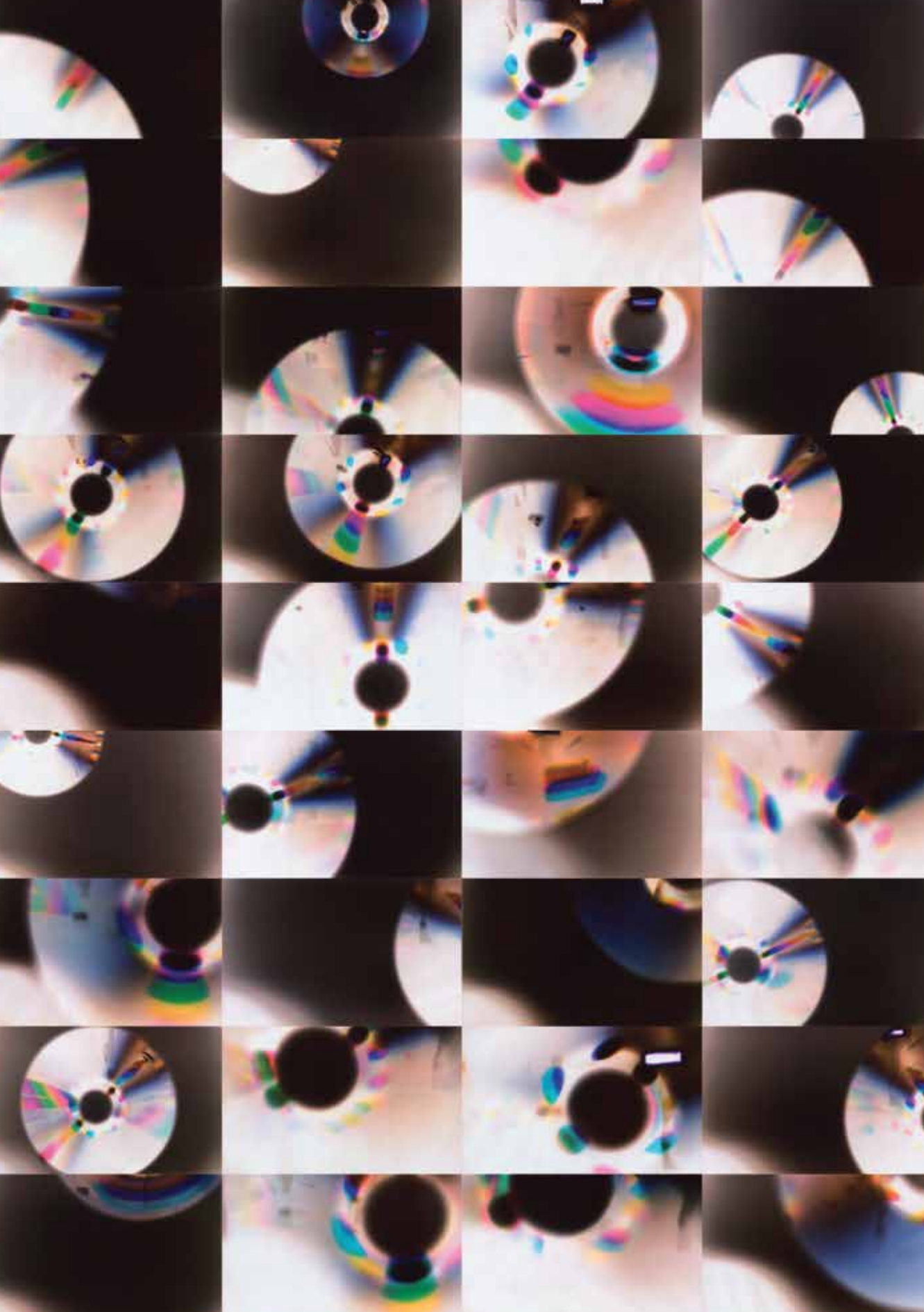
Unknown Pleasures Tattoo Google Search
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Email Disclaimers
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Veritas et cetera
Photo by Ang Song Nian

All other images courtesy the artist



Song-Ming Ang (b. 1980, Singapore) makes art exploring how people relate to music individually and as a society, often examining the contexts in which music is produced, disseminated and consumed. Drawing from popular culture and the everyday, Ang's interdisciplinary art practice revolves around "thinking about music" as he creates objects and encounters in various formats.

This fully illustrated double-volume box set features an exhibition catalogue and an overview of his career. Volume One includes three essays on his Venice presentation, *Music for Everyone: Variations on a Theme* (2019), as well as artwork plates of the exhibits. Volume Two provides a survey of his practice, with two essays, an interview and 38 artworks, each paired with a response by various writers, curators and artists.

Published on the occasion of his solo presentation for the Singapore Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, this publication is an informative resource for art scholars, critics, researchers as well as art and music lovers.

