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Non-Binary Methodology:

Book Review of *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, ed. Wernmei Yong Ade and Lim Lee Ching (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

WONG BING HAO

In response to the recent global fascisms that threaten to asphyxiate socio-personal ethics, such as right-wing governments in America and Europe and the targeted brutalisation of black, brown and transgender people around the world, art has become increasingly politicised as a site of ‘resistance’ against tyrannical power. Exhibitions and research foregrounding art by or about disenfranchised communities have proliferated in the past half a decade.¹ So too have discussions about the ethics of institutional representations of gender, race and indigeneity. However, I use terms like ‘political’ and ‘resistance’ cautiously, as well-intentioned or politically correct efforts by arts practitioners to galvanise art often end up being conceived in binary, myopic ways that lack tactical nuance, thus ironically perpetuating demagogical moral policing and reinforcing the same hierarchical asymmetries that they claim to dismantle.

Attempts to generate categories and discourses of difference can paradoxically flatten the potentialities of their networked realities, (re)producing reductive, categorical modes of representation. For example, while exhibitions

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dealing with ‘marginal’ identities certainly raise important questions about canonical (in)visibility and representational accountability, it could also be argued that they capitalise on the cultural currency of disenfranchisement through tokenistic inclusions, without addressing the root causes of exclusion. Furthermore, such projects risk aggrandising a particular political cause while implicitly denigrating others.² These curatorial gestures and artistic representations fail to conceive of basic social entanglements, and blithely perpetuate binary falsehoods that fuel their theatrical performances of political correctness. In a contemporary climate in which being socially progressive is fashionable and marketable, superficial projections of liberal ‘resistance’ must be carefully interrogated. This review offers a non-binary methodology: one that acknowledges as critical tools the complicities, lived realities, imbrications and visceral desires of gendered life.

A recent anthology, *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, edited by Wernmei Yong Ade and Lim Lee Ching, wades into the contentious territory of identifying art as a tool for socio-political change. The editors’ introduction presents a series of methodological contradictions. Although they productively aim to explore a “mutually informative relationship” between art and politics in Singapore, they also pre-emptively moralise and polarise the two entities, claiming that politics often “limits the flourishing of the arts” in this context, which lacks the “democratic space” needed to nurture art.³ In other words, the editors paradoxically acknowledge the necessary confluence between art and politics, while simultaneously cleaving apart the two entities. The inconsistency of their investigative framework is reflected in the contributions, which vary in their handling of a sensitive and topical issue. Some of the contributors’ essays resort to the easy, throwaway binary of ‘right versus wrong’ approaches to political art, while others view the topic at hand holistically, addressing the nuances and complexities of lived realities that often blur such reductive bifurcations. As Jacques Rancière, a key theoretical reference for the editors, cogently writes in *Hatred of Democracy*, “there is only one good democracy, the one that represses the catastrophe of democratic civilization.”⁴ For Rancière, “freedom also means the freedom to do wrong”; therefore, the acceptance of disorder and anarchy as potentially destructive outcomes encapsulates the true “intensity of democratic life.”⁵ The anthology could have benefited from a more trenchant, well-rounded inquiry by embracing a similarly nihilistic uncertainty to lacerate the tenuous, hygienic dichotomy between art and politics.

Some contributions in Ade and Lim’s anthology appear to uphold this binary by associating performative radicality with a ‘political art’ practice. In curator Louis Ho’s essay on artist Loo Zihan’s practice, Ho identifies

“corporeal confessionality” and “disclosure” as key tropes in Loo’s oeuvre, where “uncovered flesh stands in for divulged confidence”.⁶ For Ho, nudity—of the artist or of bodies in general—is “disruptive, deviant”, literally and metaphorically “ungovernable”.⁷ Writing about Loo’s *Cane* (2012), the artist’s re-enactment of Josef Ng’s canonical performance *Brother Cane* (1994), Ho recounts the opposition the artist faced from government authorities such as the Media Development Authority in the lead-up to the performance. In particular, the point of contention in Ng’s original performance was the act of snipping his pubic hair with his genitals away from public view. In response to these reservations, Loo replaced this act in his performance with an intentional and prolonged full-frontal exposure of his shaved genitals, alluding to the obscured end result of Ng’s original act. Here, the suggested radicality of Loo’s “climactic revelation” lies in its circumnavigation, “resistance” and mockery of systems of control.⁸ Who does Loo’s ‘resistance’ serve? What socio-political norms are he pushing back against? How and why is his exposure ‘deviant’? Ho’s essay certainly answers these questions within a delineated theoretical and political framework.

All re-enactments are not, by nature, staid repetitions, but rather personalised modifications of their obsolescent original. A re-enactment thereby makes a paradoxical claim to be a new original. Therefore, by being “simultaneously representational and live”, to use Amelia Jones’ terms, re-enactments self-reflexively shore up the impossibility of presence and authenticity.⁹ Likewise, although Ho concentrates on the “maximum exposure” of Loo’s body, he also productively observes the “ontological ghostliness” of Ng’s original performance recording, which lives on in a “phenomenon of obscurity” and “occlusion”.¹⁰ Instead of attempting to recuperate the compromised visibility of the original event, Ng’s shadowy presence may reveal other intentions for the performance, reception and dissemination of the work.

In this regard, cultural critic Lee Weng Choy’s comprehensive and clinical timeline of Ng’s original performance, as well as the events preceding and following it, proves incredibly insightful. In particular, Lee records that Ng’s performance focused on “the arrest of 12 men for allegedly committing homosexual solicitations and the press’ exposure of the incident”.¹¹ In Ng’s performance, the artist’s revelation (of sexed body and creative impulse) therefore takes a backseat to collective urgencies and broader registers of perception. With these factual chronologies and theoretical trenchancies in mind, how then might an informed viewer contextualise Loo’s extended, ticketed and spotlighted exposure? It remains to be seen if the idealistic cultural transformation of wider perceptions and attitudes towards bodies of difference are best achieved through such artistic choices.

Within the framework of Western liberal rhetorics of visibility, ‘coming out’ and its connotations of explicit disclosure are often perceived as requisite, universal experience. However, such claims of unbridled exhibitionism do not necessarily apply in the transnational contexts of Southeast Asia, where gender and sexuality are negotiated with social realities such as familial and religious environments. Two brief excursions into the latter are in order. In delineating the subjectivity of the *bakla* and its alternative queer modernity in the context of the Philippines, Martin F. Manalansan describes how his interlocutors prefer to adopt implicit modes of communication, or even complete silence, between family and friends with regards to their gender or sexual identity. For them, Western norms of ‘coming out’ are “superfluous” declarations to which they do not subscribe.¹² Likewise, Azza Basarudin observes how Muslim women in Malaysia often disregard the colonial baggage of the label ‘feminist’ in their attempts to “infuse Islam with lived experience[s]” of gender, family and society.¹³ For these women, “liberal feminist frameworks of religious agency remain limited within the binaries of modern/traditional, subordination/resistance, freedom/unfreedom”, which fail to take into account their daily negotiations of gender.¹⁴ In both Manalansan and Basarudin’s accounts, social realities—such as filial piety, societal expectations and desires for socio-economic mobility—are inextricably entrenched in their interlocutors’ unspectacular and nuanced manifestations of gender and sexuality.

In the era of 1960s identity politics, weaponising visibility and accruing representation could have sufficed for an upheaval of the status quo. However, since then, the contestations of being visible have been well documented, especially by dark-skinned and gender non-conforming people around the world, who are all too familiar with the unwanted surveillance and punishment their bodies are subject to just for being visible. It is no longer enough to just be “insistently visible”, because not all bodies are treated equally when exposed.¹⁵ Echoing these concerns, Jasbir Puar asks a perennially pertinent question: “Who gets to be visible?”, undercutting privileged, moralistic impositions of explicit sexual outness without considering other socio-cultural positionings.¹⁶ In his contribution to the anthology, theorist Jeremy Fernando similarly writes that not “everyone has the same response [or] is affected in the same way” under laws and surveillance.¹⁷ Fernando astutely alludes to the insurmountable contingencies of optics and lived experiences that cannot be counterbalanced with a singular, headstrong solution.

Other contributors also deftly sidestep sensationalism in favour of more balanced commentary on the intersections between art and politics. Writing

about his experiences directing *Mosaic*, a trailblazing play by Geraldine Song that featured a cast actor with Down syndrome, Stephen Fernandez discusses his calculated decision to articulate the “tension between ‘seeing’ and ‘not seeing’” disability.¹⁸ *Mosaic* features two characters with Down syndrome, but only one phenotypically manifests its physical symptoms while the other passes as able-bodied. Fernandez’s essay on disability in Singaporean theatre provides a timely theoretical and topical contribution to the anthology’s discussions around politicising art and identity. Importantly, instead of hastily prescribing heightened visibility as a blanket solution to counter a lack of representation and discourse around disabled bodies, Fernandez underscores the “risk” and ethical struggle of rendering a marginalised body visible.¹⁹ He accurately notes that “performers with disabilities are caught in a bind”, as they are “at once an invisible [and ignored] member of the public domain and a highly visible object of deviance that invites the scrutiny of able-bodied individuals”.²⁰ By highlighting the tension between the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of bodies of difference, Fernandez presents an accountable, layered treatment of disability that carefully considers its subjects’ sensitivities and social contingencies.

In her essay on Eleanor Wong’s trilogy of plays, *Invitation to Treat*, Ade similarly articulates the dual effects of visibility, cautioning that “granting marginalised groups access to modes of representation” should be “viewed with suspicion”.²¹ Like Fernandez, Ade is sceptical about the efficacy of visibility as the sole method of remediation. In other words, simply granting exposure to or including marginalised groups is insufficient. These short-sighted countermeasures neither rectify exclusionary systems nor address the lived realities of the demographics in question.

A selection of critical case studies on women’s art exhibitions in Asia are useful in articulating the limitations of a statistical approach to remunerating representation. Jeannine Tang flags up “the problem of measuring equality [and] the rhetorical equation of numerical representation with equality” in all-women exhibitions, arguing instead that “the leap from a politics of equality to a transformative feminist politics constitute contradictions and/or gaps that remain unbridged”.²² In essence, Tang interrogates the remunerative efficacy of the empirical method in women’s art exhibitions. Her anti-assimilationist critique acutely questions if the superficial inclusion of women in exhibitions actually serves to correct structural misogyny. Furthermore, a positivist approach risks exacerbating already narrow and deterministic categories of gender. In the context of Hong Kong art history, Christina Yuen Zi Chung observes that women’s art exhibitions, although potentially or symbolically able to recoup a certain lack in patriarchal art

historical canons, can also be “doubly marginalising—as the categories ‘woman artist’ or ‘women art’ produce stereotypical confines that stifle recognition of individuality and innovation beyond established gender norms.”²³ Ruminating on the category of women artists in Singapore, Adele Tan underscores this observation, noting that it is a “fraught” and tricky task to exhibit under the label of ‘woman artist’ as it can potentially be both a politicised and burdensome term.²⁴ Viewing its inherent ambivalence productively, she argues instead for the productive “capaciousness” of the term, stressing its mercurial “stages of becoming and un-becoming”.²⁵ These disparate critiques, compiled from a variety of sources including exhibition catalogues and art historical journals, offer a brief foray into the richness of a *transformative*, rather than a positivist approach to representing marginalised groups in art, one that demands a revision of the very hierarchies and canons of power.

Instead of resorting to superficial strategies of inclusion, Ade highlights how the characters in Wong’s plays adroitly appropriate and subvert the stultifying structures of legality to their benefit. Cases in point: in the pursuit of her “strategic goals”, protagonist Ellen Toh enters into a marriage of convenience with a man so she can “have it all”: sexual gratification with other women, a child of her own, a burgeoning career, and a performance of heteronormativity that appeases society and family.²⁶ Later, separated from her husband, Ellen’s new lesbian partner Lesley writes her into her will before she passes on, granting her jurisprudence over her funereal proceedings.²⁷ Through these examples and her titular puns on legality, Wong demonstrates how the women in her plays strategically manoeuvre within systems of control that diminish their socio-political claims in order to pragmatically attain life benefits. Therefore, by taking back hostile territory that was never made for them, these women do not simply identify as queer, but also actively *do queerness*.²⁸

Legal scholar Dean Spade articulates a similar stratagem in his formulation of “critical trans politics”, which “demands more than legal recognition and inclusion” but rather seeks to totally “transform current logics of state [...] and social equality”.²⁹ Spade, like Fernandez and Ade, does not believe that recognition is enough to change and uproot the status quo. In fact, inclusion, visibility and representation often achieve the exact opposite effect. Decrying the criminal justice system, Spade exposes how hate crime laws actually “target the very people” [they are] supposedly passed to protect.³⁰ In contrast, by working within the constraints of existing laws, Ellen Toh and her partners do not desire skin-deep or symbolic acknowledgement, but rather pragmatic and transformative outcomes. Their actions echo Rancière’s

claim that in a “‘real’ democracy [...] liberty and equality would no longer be represented in the institutions of law and State but *embodied* in the very forms of concrete life and sensible experience” (emphasis my own).³¹ For, as Ade succinctly concludes, Wong conveys not an appearance of queer love, but rather its “practicalities”, which encompass the veritable complexities and incongruences of lived experiences.³²

Ade and Lim’s anthology features some essays that productively interpolate the subject of art and democratic space. For more insightful future forays into the issue at hand, it might be useful to jettison the idea that a ‘political art’ can only exist in tandem with idealised or universal notions of freedom and democracy. This brand of unbridled liberalism is often a luxury, especially for the people and communities featured in the anthology. Instead, certain contributions could have benefited from a non-binary method’s critical understanding that the boundaries between resistance and capitulation, and martyrdom and helplessness are often nebulous. As artist-researcher Debbie Ding insightfully points out in her concluding essay on The Substation, Singapore’s pioneering independent art space, “what is considered within institutional space and what is outside [are increasingly] difficult to define.”³³ It should become apparent by now that performative politicisation is not necessarily an effective or productive method of navigating within the structures of an art ecology. More importantly, it is illuminating to note who can afford to subscribe to these elevated registers of recognition, and who choose (or are forced to choose) more subtle, underestimated strategies of rebuttal.

BIOGRAPHY

Wong Bing Hao is a writer and curator based in Singapore. Their research looks at gender and sexuality in theory, art and everyday realities. Recent projects include *Indifferent Idols*, the first in a new series of online research publications. They write for *Frieze* and *Leap*, among others, and received a BA in Art History from University College London, where they wrote a dissertation on transgender in contemporary art. Currently, they are Research Assistant at the National Gallery Singapore, and an MA candidate in Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, where they research contemporary art of queer diasporas.

NOTES

- ¹ Recent examples include *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* (2017–18) at the New Museum, New York; *Queer British Art 1861–1967* (2017) at Tate Britain, London; *Spectrosynthesis—Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* (2017) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei; *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2017), at the Tate Modern, London; and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* (2017) at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- ² For instance, reviews of the *Queer British Art* exhibition have noted its narrow and neutered portrayal of ‘LGBTQ’ issues through its focus on cisgender gay men and the overall absence of women and transgender people. Equally, Western-centric projects delineating ‘queer’ and ‘feminist’ art practices risk demonising ethnic, gendered and religious ways of life in transnational geopolitical contexts that do not subscribe to globalised lexica and activist mechanisms.
- ³ Wernmei Yong Ade and Lim Lee Ching, “Introduction”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), p. 2.
- ⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), p. 4.
- ⁵ Rancière, *Democracy*, pp. 6–7.
- ⁶ Louis Ho, “Loo Zihan and the Body Confessional”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, p. 30.
- ⁷ Ho, “Confessional”, pp. 36–8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ⁹ Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence”, *The Drama Review* 55, 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45.
- ¹⁰ Ho, “Confessional”, pp. 34–5.
- ¹¹ Lee Weng Choy, “Chronology of a Controversy”, in *Looking at Culture*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan et al. (Singapore: Artres Design and Communications, 1996), pp. 63–72.
- ¹² Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 43.
- ¹³ Azza Basarudin, “Negotiating Lives, Crafting Selves. Narratives of Belonging”, in *Humanizing the Sacred: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Gender Justice in Malaysia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 182.
- ¹⁴ Basarudin, “Negotiating Lives”, pp. 187–8.
- ¹⁵ Ho, “Confessional”, p. 42.
- ¹⁶ Jasbir Puar, “Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diasporas”, in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 414–5.
- ¹⁷ Jeremy Fernando, “Waxing on Wagers”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, p. 21.
- ¹⁸ Stephen Fernandez, “The Mosaic Body: Interpreting Disability in Performance”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, p. 64.

- ¹⁹ Fernandez, “Mosaic”, p. 80.
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp. 79–80.
- ²¹ Wernmei Yong Ade, “Becoming Ellen Toh: The Politics of Visibility in *Invitation to Treat: The Eleanor Wong Trilogy*”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, p. 107.
- ²² Jeannine Tang, “The Problem of Equality, or Translating ‘Woman’ in the Age of Global Exhibitions”, in *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 248.
- ²³ Christina Yuen Zi Chung, “Gendering Her Art: The Category of “Woman” in the Art History of Hong Kong”, *Asia Art Archive* (May 2018), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/gendering-her-art-the-category-of-woman-in-the-art-history-of-hong-kong> [accessed Jan. 2019].
- ²⁴ Adele Tan, “Shades of Becoming: Seeing “Women Artists” in Singapore,” in exh. cat. *Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984–2012* (Japan: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2012), p. 173.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 174.
- ²⁶ Ade, “Ellen Toh”, pp. 112, 114.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 118.
- ²⁸ Ibid., pp. 109–10.
- ²⁹ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (New York: South End Press, 2011), p. 19.
- ³⁰ Spade, *Normal Life*, pp. 87–8. For example, Spade notes how “criminal punishment cannot be the method we use to stop transphobia when the criminal punishment system is the most significant perpetrator of violence against trans people”.
- ³¹ Rancière, *Democracy*, p. 3.
- ³² Ade, “Ellen Toh”, p. 116.
- ³³ Debbie Ding, “The Substation at 25: On Institutional Memory and Forgetting”, in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore*, p. 147.

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