

# DOGS IN SPACE, WITCHES OF DUMAGUETE

SG

Oceanic feeling

This essay began on a plane, while floating in an extended temporal displacement so many miles above, somewhere between a here and there, that I don't quite remember. It is from the air that I now most often look at the ocean, and it is from this view that I most often think about death, about the plane plummeting and crashing into the rippling, iridescent surface below in an abrupt re-introduction of scale. My first experiences of the ocean were of the Pacific, of letting my gluttonous body be saturated by its deep blue and salt, and wash and tumble to the shore. On land, from a fixed vantage point that was then Australia, a fascination with the global was late coming beyond an intellectual pursuit, until work, that being art, led me further afield. And while at first I followed a concerted trajectory across the Pacific to Australia's nearest neighbours, this travelling has since opened out to become a frequent international crisscrossing from my current base in Amsterdam.

At this new velocity of living, and at a remove from the language and accumulated cultural references that together had served as my compass, I noticed a change in how I wanted to write

about art. I began to write like a camera, taking ‘snapshots’ that recorded the details of the people, places and times that I was living, and to somehow map the meaning of it all. At the same time I noticed that I stopped taking photographs, frustrated at my inability to capture a certain something within the image’s flatness and frame and distrusting of my intentions in attempting to do so. In words I could achieve the three-dimensionality that I missed, and so I pursued writing as a daily practice and as a mode of correspondence with friends and family.

It was also during this period that I became enamoured of the modernist sculptor Constantin Brâncuși’s photographs of his studio after encountering them in an exhibition at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam.<sup>1</sup> In these photographs, several pieces of his sculptures, their bases and pedestals, have been assembled and reassembled into what Brâncuși called *groupes mobiles* (mobile groups), for the camera. The resulting images are a sophisticated diary of his sculptural permutations and appear to be alive with thought. The photographs are also characterised by flashes of light that radiate from the sculptures’ surfaces, dematerialising their inert and monolithic objecthood so that they appear atomised and transfigured.

In one photograph the roughly hewn plaster mold for Brâncuși’s *Head of a sleeping child* (1906–07) is directly aligned with the smoothed marble surface of the later *Newborn II* (1925), an enigmatic and highly polished egg, which appears at once to be a head and a pure geometric form. Between the two works is a palpable tension that could be described—to borrow a term from the artist Sriwhana Spong—as a ‘shimmering space’, an ‘invisible body created by difference that inhales and exhales between matter’<sup>2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was *Brancusi, Rosso, Man Ray. Framing sculpture* (8 February – 11 May 2014). It presented works by Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957), Medardo Rosso (1858–1928) and Man Ray (1890–1976), profiling their iconic sculptures alongside each artist’s innovative use of photography. I visited the exhibition with Sriwhana Spong.

<sup>2</sup> Sriwhana Spong, email, 12 January 2016.

and within which seems to be a ghost of the past, a spectre of the future, and an encapsulation of all of the radiant possibilities of the present.

These lingering impressions have anchored my thoughts throughout the development of the exhibition, *Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic feeling*, and around each of the artists and their oeuvres. Having known Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi over the past five years, I have encountered them and their work in studios and exhibitions in Auckland, Sydney, Manila, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, London, and now Singapore—marking only a fraction of their own travel itineraries. In this way *Oceanic feeling* can be considered a tracing of travelled and affective lines, lived intensities, and formed relations within a particular space and time, and at many alternating speeds.<sup>3</sup>

## MT

### The witching

Maria Taniguchi was born in 1981 in Dumaguete City, a major port within the swathe of islands known as the Visayas, which runs through the middle of the archipelago that is the Philippines. Facing Dumaguete is Siquijor, an island known for its shamans, sorcerers and witches, of whom Taniguchi recounted stories in the first days of our acquaintance. These stories sat in counterpoint to the iconographic traditions of Catholicism and Islam, and American and Spanish colonisation, which account for aspects of the

<sup>3</sup> ‘Oceanic feeling’ has been appropriated as the title of the exhibition from the psychological term coined by the French dramatist, novelist, essayist, art historian and mystic Romain Rolland (1866–1944) in regards to his study of Eastern mysticism. According to Rolland’s definition of the term, this feeling is the source of all religious energy, which permeates in various religious systems and is characterised by a sensation of an indissoluble bond, as of being connected with the external world in its integral form. The term was later popularised in the writings of Rolland’s friend and correspondent, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who used it to criticise this psychological feeling of religion.

Philippines' unique aesthetic bastardisation. Taniguchi grew up in an artist's home, with her mother working as a sculptor and painter, crafting scenes rich in a personal symbology of animals, plants, and winged women overlaid on fantastical scenes of cities, interiors and nature. Listening to Taniguchi's recollections of her childhood, and without direct experience of what she described, I had the unshakeable sense that there was alchemy at play in her work, an impression that was intensified by witnessing her focus on material and its many modes of transformation.

Dumaguete City and Taniguchi's family appear, abstracted, in her work *Figure study* (2013), whose title astutely refers to creating something modelled from life. The piece comprises a simple set up: a black and white video documenting two men digging for clay for more than forty minutes surrounded by the dense foliage of Dumaguete's jungle, and a ceramic slab produced from the excavated clay that has been shaped to the proportions of the video's LCD screen display, and expertly fired by Taniguchi's family. Taniguchi's turn to the medium of ceramics within this work created a purposeful suture between her contemporary practice and art history, a connection that was at once personal through a reference to her family's skill with clay, and linked to the larger place of the medium within the rich traditions of the Philippines and indigenous cultures worldwide.<sup>4</sup> The work also proffered for consideration the simple elemental properties of earth upon its exposure to heat.

It was Maria Taniguchi who introduced me to the Manunggul jar (c. 890–710 BCE), a ceramic burial container that holds pride of place as one of the treasures of the National Museum of the Philippines, the other being Juan Luna's large history painting *Spoliarium* of 1884, famous for winning gold at the Madrid Art Exhibition the same year, and thus asserting the Philippines' cultural equality

with Europe. The main decorative feature of the more modest Manunggul jar is its handle, which is shaped into two figures seated in a boat in reference to the seaborne character of the Philippines' early migratory populations, and the journey of the soul to the afterlife.<sup>5</sup> It is an example of material invested with belief. When Taniguchi's *Figure study* was exhibited in the group exhibition, *The vexed contemporary*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) in Manila, a misstep by a student—who perhaps mistook the oxidised appearance of her ceramic slab for one of Carl Andre's square copper plates—saw it instantly destroyed and rematerialised as dust.<sup>6</sup> Taniguchi's carefully cast spell was broken.<sup>7</sup>

That Maria Taniguchi would follow in her family's footsteps and pursue a profession as an artist was assured by her selection to attend the Philippine High School for the Arts during her teenage years. Situated in Mount Makiling on the provincial outreaches of Manila's urban sprawl, the school was founded by Imelda Marcos in 1977 as part of a broad-reaching Marcos regime arts policy during martial law that promoted modernist aesthetics as its public image in an attempt to channel an aura of internationalism to the Philippines. Remaining in operation after President Marcos's impeachment in 1986, and despite its conflicted history, each year new students are scouted from across the Philippines to study along disciplinary lines—including visual art, dance and music. The school has fostered some of the country's most recognisable talents, including artists such as Kawayan de Guia and Nona Garcia, who studied alongside Taniguchi, and tutors Alfredo Aquilizan and Isabel Aquilizan, to name a few.

5 The Manunggul jar was excavated from a Neolithic burial site in Manunggul cave of Tabon Caves at Lipuun Point, Palawan, the Philippines, in 1964.

6 *The vexed contemporary* (26 August – 21 November 2015) was a group exhibition of sixteen Filipino artists, who through their work sought to consider the challenges of contemporaneity, and how artists position themselves within the precariousness of a global practice without resting on modes of essentialism.

7 Before the ceramic slab was damaged, both components of *Figure study* (2013) were selected for inclusion in the exhibition, *Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic feeling*. Only the video will now be presented.

Following this early formal training, Taniguchi completed a BFA (Sculpture) at the University of the Philippines (UP), Manila<sup>8</sup>, before pursuing her own international ambitions, departing the Philippines to complete an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, London, in 2009. In London she participated in the city's then thriving independent arts scene, exhibiting at spaces such as FormContent and participating in the LUX Associate Artists Programme for artists working with the moving image. However, with the faltering markets produced by the Global Financial Crisis putting the squeeze on life in the city, and the exchange rate hitting 1 British pound: 96 Philippine pesos, Taniguchi decided to again make Manila her work base.

#### Echo studies

Maria Taniguchi and I met on my first trip to the Philippines in 2011, the same year she returned from London. My travel coincided with her major solo exhibition, *Echo studies*, at the Jorge B Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center at the University of the Philippines, for which Taniguchi was later to be awarded the first of two Ateneo Art Awards, the most prestigious prize for young artists in the Philippines. Set against the Vargas Museum's impressive entrance foyer of granite and glass was a series of large-scale paintings propped against rather than hung on the walls. From their positions of cool repose, the paintings formed new architectural elements in the space. Each canvas was primed with a warm grey and patterned with a design of 2 × 6 centimetre 'bricks', which Taniguchi had blackened one by one with varying intensities of acrylic wash.

These works, which included the prototype *Masks 1* (2011), in the current exhibition, were some of Taniguchi's first exhibited

brick paintings; as an ongoing series it has become the most recognisable of her oeuvre. Taniguchi commenced the brick paintings in 2008, starting with canvases of 1.4 × 3 metres before steadily increasing them in size. The largest painting to date measures 3 × 6 metres. Through the repetitive processes of their production, the brick paintings have come to operate as a metronome for her practice and life; day by day she attends to the simple task of filling in the grid, marking time passing like the hands on a clock or the breathing of a body in meditation. Of this resolve, Taniguchi once said, 'People look at these works and see abstract pictures, but in reality they serve a very practical purpose. These paintings take time and help me regulate my own production, my thinking. They set the tone for the rest of my work'.<sup>9</sup>

The resistance of Taniguchi's brick paintings to standard pictorial conventions also places them at a peculiar juncture within a contemporary art scene in the Philippines that is dominated by painting. While the works take on the scale of history or social realist paintings, they do not follow the traditions of allegory and figurative expression. They also subvert the pictorial strategy of photorealism, using the grid that guides its pictorial illusionism to forefront the labour involved in the image's production, while refusing as well to be simply abstractions, with the bricks depicting the concrete architectural form of the wall, yet slyly slipping from these very surfaces. Left untitled, Taniguchi's brick paintings are neither wholly image nor object; instead, at each and every moment, they are both, perfectly balanced in-between.

Accompanying her brick paintings in *Echo studies*, and displayed in the adjoining and main room of the Vargas Museum exhibition space, was a new video, *Untitled (Dawn's arms)* (2011). The work's set up involved a pair of synchronised videos played on two LCD screens that had been perched like watchful eagles on top of a

<sup>8</sup> The University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts is well known for its conceptual approach, most notably under the influential tutelage of the late Roberto Chabet (1937–2013).

<sup>9</sup> Marlyne Sahakian, 'Where I work: Maria Taniguchi', *ArtAsiaPacific*, 25 June 2013, viewed 9 July 2016, <<http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/WhereIWorkMariaTaniguchi>>.

plywood plinth. Two more plinths were laid out in front in expectation of viewers. Playing across both screens was documentation of the arms of the sculpture, *Alba* (1929), being refashioned in marble. Translated from Spanish to English as 'Dawn', *Alba* is a bronze sculpture by the German artist Georg Kolbe, which depicts a naked woman whose arms rise softly in front of her serpentine body like the breaking of the morning sun, and which was made specifically for the water basin of Mies van der Rohe's landmark modernist building, the Barcelona Pavilion.

For *Untitled (Dawn's arms)* Taniguchi travelled to the marble quarries on the Philippine island of Romblon, well known for its high-quality stone. In the video a white marble slab is depicted in close up being steadily cut away by a stonemason with an angle grinder, his every gesture setting off a shrill metallic ring as the metal meets the stone. During the work's twenty or so minutes, arms begin to emerge from the marble as recognisable forms. These scenes of the arms' production are intercut by bursts of green, captured both through the camera's steady gaze on the abundance of Romblon's vegetation, and the flat digital colour of a green screen. Without a clear narrative momentum, the video establishes a mode of contemplation across the separate elements, drawing the viewer into the temporality of the jungle, the instantaneousness of the digital, and the movement of the arms from the original body of *Alba*, from the material of bronze to marble, and across almost a century and 6,000 nautical miles.

Concluding the Vargas Museum exhibition was a large framed photograph hung on a freestanding wall. The image captured in finished form the replicas that together form *Dawn's arms*. Disembodied and methodically laid out side by side on a black background, they seemed to hover frozen and timeless in two-dimensional perfection.







## Recollections

Taniguchi's appropriation of *Alba's* arms, and her concentration on marble as a material, was an echo of an earlier work, *Mies 421* (2010). Made during her time studying in London, in this work the entirety of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion forms the object of her study.<sup>10</sup> Over approximately four minutes, the elegant simplicity and extravagant materiality of the building's design—its glass windows, open plan, walls of marble, red onyx and travertine, and the various views of *Alba* that it offers—are documented almost forensically, a single still black and white image at a time. These are played back in a slideshow format, which increases in speed by half of the time before at each and every repetition until the image is extinguished. As Taniguchi has said, '*Mies 421* is a horror movie, accidentally'.<sup>11</sup>

This deconstructive approach to the image through the camera is also seen in *Untitled (Marble lions)* (2010), a video work displayed on a portable DVD player in which two carved marble lions—one black and one white—are repeatedly arranged and rearranged in front of a blue background and the camera's lens. The action is slightly clumsy and perfunctory, which is extenuated by the obviousness of the camera at play; we can see the zooming in and out, the opening and closing of the aperture, and the rhythmic punctuation of its shutter's click. Chantal Wong has astutely observed that the image of the lion becomes somewhat arbitrary under these conditions:

When the focus would seem to be on the lion, it actually frames a *mise-en-scène* enabling us to analyze the process of the video being made. In its dry formalism, the video shifts the lens from representation to an awareness of the acts of

<sup>10</sup> The Barcelona Pavilion was originally built as a temporary structure for the purpose of representing Germany at the 1929 International Exhibition in Spain. It was demolished the following year. Between 1983 and 1986, a group of Catalan architects used black and white photographs and plans of the original structure to reconstruct the building, which appears in Taniguchi's film.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Taniguchi, email, 17 July 2016.

composing, constructing, and framing, as well as the particular historical and artistic pedagogy—of gazing, objectifying, and constructing meaning—to which Taniguchi has been subject.<sup>12</sup>

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The last time I saw Taniguchi in person was in 2012 at her studio, a stone's throw from Manila Bay, and set against the fading light of a sunset whose beauty is indebted to the toxic intensity of the city's sky. In one room, laid out flat on trestles and almost filling the full dimension of the space, was the latest of her untitled brick paintings. In its position parallel to the ground, the painting's grid seemed to reflect the infinite perspective of a horizon line, including the unfathomable stretch of Manila's urban density. Laid to rest beside the last filled-in cell was a bowl of wash and a brush. Nearby on the floor beneath the window, gathering dust and stray hairs from Taniguchi's miniature schnauzer, Charlie, were the arms of *Dawn*. Seen within this new arrangement, the arms were surprisingly diffused of their potency and comfortably at home among fellow elements accumulated from studio life. As night fell, thumbing through some of Taniguchi's childhood photo albums while we talked, she occasionally pointed to a detail of one picture or another, proclaiming, 'That is when it happened'.

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Pussies and Muttiks

Sriwhana Spong was born in 1979 in Auckland, New Zealand, the first child of a father of Balinese heritage and a New Zealand

<sup>12</sup> Chantal Wong, 'It's difficult to talk about Maria's work', *LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China*, no. 35, viewed 12 July 2016, <<http://www.leapleapleap.com/2015/10/it-is-difficult-to-talk-about-marias-work/>>.

mother of British descent. Having met in Indonesia, Spong's father moved to New Zealand to be with her mother. However, when the relationship faltered, he returned to Bali to take up work as a landscape gardener.<sup>13</sup> Spong's mother subsequently married, settling with her family in a house in the suburbs of Auckland.

Using a family photograph taken at Christmas time, Spong once described to me the experience of growing up with mixed heritage in the New Zealand of the 1980s and '90s. In the photograph, her blonde-haired, fair-skinned siblings sit smiling in front of a Christmas tree, while Spong stands slightly further back behind the tree, her head shaved and face blank in a posture of perfected teenage angst. Viewable within the photo are both the connecting familial resemblances and the differences along racial lines, placing Spong both in and out of the frame, and encapsulating her sense of simultaneously having history and a life somewhere out of view.

In acting out these identity concerns, Spong used her mixed heritage as a point of productive tension to fuel her early creative expression. Most explicitly this included her joining a short-lived riot-grrrl inspired band, the Pussies, alongside high-school friends who were of mixed Fijian-Indian, Samoan and Māori descent. The Pussies referenced their cultural status full frontally, using monikers such as 'Symphony'—Spong's pet name within the group—and song titles like 'Half breed'. It was, however, during her study of sculpture at the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts from 1998 to 2001, and her engagement with materials and the multiple meanings and poetic possibilities that they could carry, that Spong found a more nuanced expression for such feelings outside of language.

Acting as one of the triggers for Spong to pursue art in such a way was her repeated encounter with a collection of paintings in

<sup>13</sup> Spong's father had struggled to find work within a New Zealand still grappling with its increasing multiculturalism and the traumatic impact of colonisation on its first people, the Māori.

the home of a family friend. Leaving a particular impression was a work from the series *Teaching aids* (1975) by the acclaimed New Zealand painter, Colin McCahon. From within the darkness of the work's vertical black canvases, McCahon had drawn a cross and numbers in white paint that functioned as mnemonics for the Stations of the Cross, and through their simplicity illustrated his pursuit of a direct and real contact between art and life, and of faith as an active coming to terms.

Upon finishing her studies, Spong quickly achieved recognition within New Zealand for her early film works. These documented temporary sculptures, reminiscent of Balinese ritual forms, which she had assembled and displayed in her family's garden in Auckland to summon a connection to the imagined cultural space of Indonesia. The sculptures were composed of apples, melons, oranges, marigolds, bamboo shoots, cigarettes, bananas, beds of rice and Coca-Cola bottles, all arranged into bloom- and totem-like shapes. Spong documented them using Super-8 film, distorting their context and location by tracing the sculptures' surfaces by hand, and in different lighting conditions. Of one of these early films, *Muttnik* (2005)<sup>14</sup>, the art writer A Cooper (an early nom de plume of Spong's) once riffed:

I was never there on the mountains of infinite bliss in Rishikesh. I was not there for George's birthday where the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi handed him an upside down plastic globe and declared, 'this is the world and it needs changing'. I wasn't present when Harrison let it slip that his one word mantra appears in 'I am the walrus', and I certainly wasn't there for that group photo: 'Now come on everybody. Cosmic smiles ... and all into the lens'. But I've seen the photos, and I imagine

<sup>14</sup> *Muttnik*'s title references the American name for the Soviet dog that pioneered space travel, being the first earthbound creature to travel into orbit. Spong's film is set to the Beatles' song 'Dear Prudence', which was written by John Lennon to lure Prudence Farrow, the actress Mia Farrow's sister, out of a deep meditation and back into an open connection with the world while they were in India with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

the rest. The sharp waft of marigolds mixed with dry earth, the screech of monkeys exalting high in the trees, and somewhere the strains of someone strumming 'Dear Prudence'. I read about these histories; I see the faded images, and my mind plays in the gaps. It is in these gaps where all the subjective memories, and mini narratives float. The powerful small stories that make messy those official documentations of past events. In the words of Mr L Cohen, 'There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'.<sup>15</sup>

Spong's attention to light and its potential to offer illumination pervade her sensitive uses of the chemical properties of film. In *24 hour garden* (2006), her ritual assemblages are documented on Super-8 in a single wide shot over the course of a day. The footage is sped up in the final edit, so that the twenty-four hours is compressed into a mere three minutes, emphasising the Earth's orbit around the sun through the shifting light and shade that animate the sculptural forms, until the darkness of the night fades, pulling the scene into black for the final half of the film.

This approach to light was extended in her film *Halberd head with naga and blades, Indonesia (Java), Eastern Javanese period, Singasari kingdom, ca. second half of the 13th century, copper alloy. Samuel Eilenberg Collection. Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1996. 1996.468 a, b* (2008), which she made while on a four-month residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York in 2008. Constructing a simple pinhole camera, Spong exposed a cartridge of Super-8 film to an Indonesian spearhead composed of two blades jutting from the head and tail of a dragon, and held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) collection. Produced while covertly bypassing the museum's 'no filming' policy in a reversed act of cultural theft, and without the mechanisms of the camera to pull focus, the resulting film does not record the form of the

<sup>15</sup> A Cooper, 'Sriwhana Spong', in *Turbulence: 3rd Auckland Triennial*, 2007, viewed 28 June 2016, <<http://aucklandtriennial.com/static/archive/2007/artists/spong.html>>.



artefact, registering only the light from the space surrounding it and the rhythm of the artist's hand winding on the film.

Over the pinhole, adding a layer of affect, Spong placed colour filters of magenta, green and blue that were created by the Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, and which reference the psychological effects of different colours; the way in which they influence the perception of different situations, and how shifting technologies of representation shape the way we frame the world.

#### Actions and remains

It was during Spong's four months in New York that she also started to distance herself from the focus on her Balinese heritage that had unwittingly come to define her practice, and to pigeonhole her work's engagement within a certain institutional discourse. She did this by delving into other aspects of her upbringing that complicated the relation between culture and the self that she had wished to express. Within this, her disciplined pursuit of ballet across her adolescent years, and its lasting imprint on the posture and movement of her body, became a point of interest over the ensuing years. Other points of historical reference for Spong's interest in dance at this time included another object from the Met, a twelfth-century sandstone sculpture from India titled *Dancing celestial deity (Devata)*, featuring a female figure whirling; the Ballets Russes, and its gender-defying faun, Vaslav Nijinsky; and Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Dance Theater collective of the early 1960s, who pioneered everyday movement within a choreographic vernacular. Ongoing in parallel to these sources was her collaboration with the contemporary New Zealand dancer, Benjamin Ord.

Of her works evoking dance, two, *Beach study* (2012) and *Learning duets* (2012), were filmed on adjoining beaches in New Zealand that she had frequented as a child and which were of renewed

interest due to the shifted conditions of their public access. For *Learning duets*, Spong invited Benjamin Ord to interpret a text she had composed from two books—*Tender is the night* by F Scott Fitzgerald and *Save me the waltz* by Zelda Fitzgerald. Both books are set in the same seaside location in the South of France where the Fitzgeralds spent a few summers. Spong's text weaves together a site written into being through the two subjectivities of these often warring lovers. Using this text, with the precision of his training, Ord traced an itinerary below the high-tide mark—an unstable boundary that in New Zealand demarcates the foreshore and seabed as sites where the public has right of access in contrast to the dry land above—by matching his steps to the flatness of the sand and to punctuating breaks of jagged rock. Improvising at the end, Ord allowed himself to fall, meeting the waiting rapture of the black volcanic sand and the lapping waves of an open sea. Spong once admitted in conversation to an initial unease about the movement from the conceptual clarity of her initial proposition, to the figurative expressionism of Ord's fall and his unabashed body in repose, with the wet black sand staining his clothes and skin.

It was as part of Spong's contribution to the 18th Biennale of Sydney, *All our relations* (2012), that I first saw *Learning duets* alongside *Beach study*. Both were projected in a vast industrial space on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. These works were complemented by *Villa America* (2012), a large 'backdrop' comprising two curtains made from differently weighted silk in diamond shapes, cut and stitched together to custom-fit the space. Most strikingly, the silk was stained a vibrant orange, with a pigment made from Fanta, the orange-flavoured relative of Coca-Cola, which had been absorbed by the porous, thirsty silk. *Villa America* followed in a line of silk works dyed using beverages, including Coca-Cola and tea. When queried about these works, Spong offered me a short essay by the American musician and writer, Ian F Svenonius, titled 'The bloody latte: Vampirism as mass movement', by way of

explanation. The essay unfolds a history of beverages and their movement as acts of colonial bloodsucking; 'A culture's adopted beverage represents the blood of their vanquished foe'.<sup>16</sup>

For the near three-month duration of the Biennale of Sydney, the silk slowly stretched, eventually pooling at its base in a triumph of gravity over the apparent lightness of the fabric's weight. The following year, in preparation for a group exhibition at the Guangdong Times Museum in China, it was unexpectedly punctured by nails, glued, cut and torn to fit the space for display when the artist was not present. Since its return to Spong, these tatters and stains have come to denote a new surface that is nevertheless indistinguishable from its original materiality and, like the theatre backdrops on which the work was based, shows the accumulated marks of its travel and migration.

A black and white photograph by Spong that shows the aging of another of her works was once used as part of a press kit for an exhibition in Sydney. The photograph features a set of concrete stairs modelled on a stage element from one of Yvonne Rainer's performances, and produced by Spong for an exhibition, *Actions and remains* (2012), at the Auckland Art Gallery. 'Stored' after the exhibition in her family's garden, the concrete had over time drunk up the surrounding wet, so that the sculpture became a host for a thickening cover of moss and fallen leaves.

### Taking form

While Spong and I had been orbiting each other for years, it was not until the eve of both of us leaving our respective homes in New Zealand and Australia for the Netherlands—with Spong moving to undertake an MFA at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam—that



<sup>16</sup> Ian F Svenonius, 'The bloody latte: Vampirism as mass movement', in *The psychic Soviet*, Drag City, 2006, p. 35.



we finally met. It was at the opening of a two-person exhibition, *Taking form*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2013, which brought together work by Spong and the Australian artist Agatha Gothe-Snape. Spong's contribution to the exhibition included the new works *The stranger's house*, a large theatrical canvas backdrop on which was painted, in black gestural strokes, Sidney Nolan's failed design for the original Ballets Russes production of *Icare*; a text score for a choreography to be performed in the gallery's neighbouring Botanic Gardens; and three marble 'brackets' titled *Hair, pastry, tobacco*. Resting within the gentle curves of the latter, and almost camouflaged against the white of the walls, were simple lines of clay. Air-dried in place, each had lifted up ever so slightly from their support, with the body of the clay contracting as the water slowly evaporated. Of these works, the exhibition's curator, Anneke Jasper, has commented, 'Spong calls these objects "utterances", thereby locating them in the realm of language, although they do not resemble Roman text'.<sup>17</sup> Within the context of *Taking form*, these shapes referred loosely to forms of dance notation. For *Oceanic feeling*, these shapes have been re-uttered in wood painted with the paraffin wax used in batik; together their serpentine forms now carry the title, *Mother's tongue* (2016).

### Mother's tongue

It was during her study in Rotterdam, when she invited me to write the text that would accompany her graduation work, that Spong and I commenced working together. The text was structured to move across two years of studio visits. It was interspersed with the artist's own writing from that time—which was invigorated by her growing interest in medieval female mystics—and a poem about

<sup>17</sup> Anneke Jaspers, 'Objects in the field of movement', in *Taking form*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013, p. 6.

a shipwreck by the writer and fellow student Michael FitzGerald. During these studio visits we spoke often of mother tongues and of pica, a desire to lick lovely surfaces—‘things like concrete, stone, architectural decorations dating from the nineteenth century, balustrades, the elbows of tree branches, new leaves, marble, the rind of an orange, the inside of a mussel shell, the patch of skin where your arm leaves its sleeve’—something which, to continue using Spong’s words, she described as ‘that period before language when the tongue draws the world to it, before words get in-between’.<sup>18</sup>

Following her studies in Rotterdam, Spong was invited to participate in the twelve-month DAAD Berlin Artists-in-Residence programme, during which she started a body of work centred on the technique of *ombak* used in the Balinese gamelan orchestra, through the production of a custom-made metallophone for which she invited the New Zealand composer, Antonia Barnett-McIntosh, to set its scale. *Ombak*, which translates as ‘wave’, refers to the interference beats produced when a pair of instruments tuned slightly apart are played together. This is done to reference the breath or the beating of the heart, where the instrument tuned slightly higher is thought of as the ‘inhale’, and the one slightly lower, the ‘exhale’, as a symbol of being alive.<sup>19</sup>

The set scale of the first metallophone, *Instrument A (Antonia)* (2016), was used by the musician Tim Coster to score the video *Was Saint Ignatius able to tell the difference between palms and Eucalyptus trees* (2016), which documents in a single shot at a time a large linden tree seen from every architectural vantage point at Spong’s Berlin studio. This is intercut with a choreography that alternates between the palm of the artist’s hand and an image of a palm frond, which both turn gently to reveal the multiple faces

of each. Overlaying the images are colour filters, which alternate through various shades of orange and blue in time with the shifting scale of the score, each colour corresponding to the frequency of one of the ten notes in the set scale of *Instrument A (Antonia)*.

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For *Oceanic feeling* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Spong has created a new instrument, *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016), for which the Singaporean musician Vivian Wang has been invited to set the scale and play an improvisation at different times during the exhibition. On two occasions this will occur alongside a performance by Spong titled *Bells for hooves* (2016), in which the artist appears in a painted costume, and plays two cowbells of different tones by raising them from the ground and knocking them together once while on perched toes, until her body’s strain coaxes her back down to rest. Radiating into the space during these moments will be the *ombak* of these instruments, which will wash over and beat between the intonations of Spong’s and Taniguchi’s respective works. And just as each of these waves of sound will settle and dissipate, so too will the tension which holds these works together in this particular constellation across the duration of the exhibition, to be packed up and shipped off to continue their movement through more official and not so official histories. To be soaked, to be stretched, to slide off.

Susan Gibb

<sup>18</sup> Susan Gibb, Michael FitzGerald, Sriwhana Spong, ‘A cruel repose’, in *High-rise*, Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam, 2015, pp. 19–20.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical traditions: Reimagining culture in Balinese contemporary music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 168.

# AFTERWORD

New and independent curatorial practices are critical instruments of programme development at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. We were very pleased to commission Susan Gibb, who curated an exhibition that she developed over two years to become *Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic feeling*. After leaving Sydney in 2013, Gibb had been living and working in Amsterdam. She was keen then, as now, to deepen her knowledge of what she has described as ‘the life and work of the artist and [art] object’. Gibb’s curatorial practice has been guided by detailed engagements with several individual artists. She is interested to exercise a curatorial methodology that can account for information generated through working with artists and making exhibitions. Questions to do with how to bring forward information about artists’ ideas and concerns, their life paths and often precarious professional circumstances, are important for curating but often precluded by production issues.

Susan Gibb had not previously worked on an exhibition with Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi; nevertheless they were two artists with whom she had enjoyed long continuing conversations. Each with ten years’ practice behind them, Spong and Taniguchi are influential in the art scenes of New Zealand and Southeast Asia respectively, and they have gained international reputations for their practice. I am especially delighted that Gibb has chosen to present the art of these two women. She does so in a materially complex, dual survey-scale exhibition, the first such major presentation for each of the artists.

Susan Gibb has raised absorbing curatorial questions in the process of developing *Oceanic feeling*. She has asked, for example, ‘What if I learnt an artist’s work as a language and then tried to speak [curatorially] within that language, that syntax?’ Gibb has also spoken about wanting to write in a way that better enables

spectatorship without being didactic, seeking to create room for the existence of what she calls ‘necessary gaps’, or fissures. More than offer interpretations or explanations of Spong’s and Taniguchi’s art, Gibb’s essay in the preceding pages is an account of her learning about the artists’ lives and work processes through encounters in galleries and studio spaces, through friendship, contemplation and exchange. For visitors, the environment and material of the exhibition itself will connect the two artists’ practices, albeit in ways that are fleeting and contingent.

*Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic feeling* is Susan Gibb’s first major project in Southeast Asia. I warmly thank her along with artists Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi for their individual practices and their commitment to this exhibition. There is an old code that asks artists, and for that matter curators, to bring with them the influence of ‘the street’, and to continue throughout their careers to mature languages learnt outside the academy. In the Asia Pacific, where we must first look further afield in order to properly come together, this principle seems especially appropriate.

It is my pleasure to thank the collectors in Singapore and Hong Kong who have lent to the exhibition major paintings by Maria Taniguchi. The generous support of both artists’ representatives, especially Silverlens Galleries, Manila, and Michael Lett, Auckland, has been crucial to our ability to present this exhibition. The arts funding bodies of the governments of Australia and New Zealand, along with the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, have funded Susan Gibb’s curatorial research, and the production of new work by Sriwhana Spong. Their support is greatly appreciated.

*Bala Starr*

Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore,  
LASALLE College of the Arts



## BIOGRAPHIES & FURTHER READING

### Sriwhana Spong

Sriwhana Spong was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1979. Recent exhibitions include *Im Wintergarten*, daadgalerie, Berlin (2015); *24 frames per second*, Carriageworks, Sydney (2015); *Sights and sounds*, the Jewish Museum, New York, (2015); Art Basel Hong Kong Film Sector (2014); *Taking form*, with Agatha Gothe-Snape, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2013); *Zizhiq (Autonomous regions)*, Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou (2013); and *All our relations*, 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012). She was awarded a DAAD Berlin Artist-in-Residence scholarship in 2015. Sriwhana Spong is represented by Michael Lett, Auckland.

#### Further reading:

- Fitzgerald, M 2013, 'Sriwhana Spong's choreography of the camera', *Art & Australia*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 446–53.
- Jaspers, A 2013, 'Objects in the field of movement', *Taking form*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Mossman, D 2010, 'Sriwhana Spong', *Flash Art International*, vol. 43, no. 271, p. 108.
- Riva, C 2013, '(Muscular) Memory: A conversation with Sriwhana Spong', *Art New Zealand*, no. 146, pp. 38–45.

### Maria Taniguchi

Maria Taniguchi was born in Dumaguete City, the Philippines, in 1981. She won the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award in 2015 and was a LUX Associate Artist in 2009. Recent exhibitions include *History of a vanishing present: A prologue*, the Mistake Room, Los Angeles (2016); *Afterwork*, Para Site, Hong Kong (2016); *Globale: New sensorium*, ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany (2016); *The vexed contemporary*, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila (2015); and the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, QAGOMA, Brisbane (2015). Her work is held in a number of collections including the M+ Museum, Hong Kong; the Burger Collection, Hong Kong; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco; QAGOMA, Brisbane; and the K11 Art Foundation, Shanghai. Maria Taniguchi is represented by Silverlens Galleries, Manila; carlier | gebauer, Berlin; and Ibid, London and Los Angeles.

#### Further reading:

- Cruz, J 2013, 'The making of Asia', *Kaleidoscope*, no. 19, Asia special issue.
- Wong, C 2015, 'It is difficult to talk about Maria's work', *LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China*, no. 35.
- Phaidon Press editors 2016, *Vitamin P3: New perspectives in painting*, Phaidon Press, London & New York.
- 'Reviews', *Flash Art*, no. 295, 2014.

### Susan Gibb

Susan Gibb was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1983, and is curator at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, a curatorial production house for performance-related art and research in Amsterdam. In Sydney Gibb ran the independent curatorial initiative Society from 2011 to 2012, and has held curatorial positions at the interdisciplinary art centres Carriageworks (2011–12) and Campbelltown Arts Centre (2009–11). Recent projects include her development of live improvisational and email performances with the artist Brian Fuata for Performa 15, New York (2015); *A planet with two suns* with Agatha Gothe-Snape at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (2013) and Kunstvlaai: Festival of Independents, Amsterdam (2012); and *What I think about when I think about dancing*, at Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney (2009).

#### Further reading:

- Gibb, S 2012, '18th Biennale of Sydney: All our relations', *LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China*, no. 17.
- Gibb, S 2014, *Anna Kristensen: Render*, Gallery 9, Sydney, pp. 23–6.
- Gibb, S 2015, 'On If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution and "Appropriation and dedication"', *un Magazine*, no. 9.1.
- Weiss, H 2015, 'The curtain rises in cyberspace', *Interview Magazine*, 13 November.

## CATALOGUE OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given as height preceding width (followed, where applicable, by depth)

### Sriwhana Spong

- 1 *Bells for hooves*, 2016
  - performance with costume and cowbells
  - duration variable, performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore on 19 and 20 August 2016
- 2 *Instrument B (Vivian)*, 2016
  - made with the assistance of Wilken Schade, aluminium tone bars by Matt Nolan
  - wood, acrylic, rubber, aluminium
  - two parts, each 78 × 47.4 × 40.2 cm
- 3 *Mother's tongue*, 2016
  - wood, wax, clay
  - dimensions variable
- 4 *Untitled (Backdrop)*, 2016
  - silk dyed in Coca-Cola and grape Fanta
  - 320 × 320 cm
- 5 *Was Saint Ignatius able to tell the difference between palms and Eucalyptus trees*, 2016
  - sound by Tim Coster, image by Summer Agnew
  - single-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound
  - 12 minutes
- 6 *Learning duets*, 2012
  - single-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound
  - 6:33 minutes
- 7 *Villa America*, 2012
  - silk dyed in orange Fanta
  - 463 × 1600 cm
- 8 *Halberd head with naga and blades, Indonesia (Java), Eastern Javanese period, Singasari kingdom, ca. second half of the 13th century, copper alloy. Samuel Eilenberg Collection. Gift of Samuel Eilenberg 1996. 1996.468 a, b*, 2008
  - Super-8 transferred to digital video, 4:3 aspect ratio, colour, silent
  - 1:12 minutes

- 9 *24 hour garden*, 2006
  - Super-8 transferred to digital video, 4:3 aspect ratio, black and white, silent
  - 2:52 minutes

All works courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland

### Maria Taniguchi

- 10 *Untitled*, 2015
  - synthetic polymer paint on canvas
  - 304 × 137 cm
- 11 *Untitled*, 2014
  - synthetic polymer paint on canvas
  - 274 × 488 cm
  - Private collection, Hong Kong
- 12 *Figure study*, 2013
  - single-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, black and white, sound
  - 33:10 minutes
- 13 *Masks I*, 2011
  - synthetic polymer paint on canvas
  - 214 × 154 cm
  - Private collection, Singapore
- 14 *Untitled (Dawn's arms)*, 2011
  - two-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound; wooden plinth and two wooden benches
  - 22:07 minutes; (a) 63.5 × 300 × 63.5 cm, (b) 46 × 300 × 38 cm, (c) 46 × 300 × 38 cm
- 15 *Mies 421*, 2010
  - single-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, black and white, sound
  - 4:06 minutes
  - Courtesy the artist and carlier | gebauer, Berlin
- 16 *Untitled (Marble lions)*, 2010
  - single-channel high-definition digital video, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound
  - 12:08 minutes

All works courtesy the artist and Silverlens Galleries, Manila, unless otherwise stated

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Curator: Susan Gibb

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