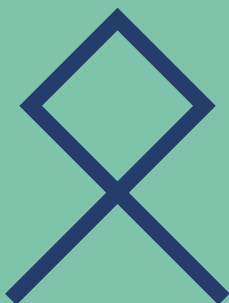


we
who
saw
signs



Contents

02

Preface

Dr Charles Merewether

06

We are going to tell lies

Guo-Liang Tan

16

Plates

33

Arcadian Tomb, Silently Speaking

Kevin Chua

38

Biographies

40

Acknowledgements/ Credits



Preface

I am delighted to be able to introduce *We Who Saw Signs* to the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS). There is considerable pleasure in presenting an exhibition that is devoted to not simply contemporary art practices but, more specifically, to those practices that consider the importance of the sign embedded within the body of the work or that the work of art is itself a sign. The exhibition is guest curated by the artist and writer Guo-Liang Tan, who is presenting a group of eight artists whose works may be viewed in this light.

The sign is traditionally understood as a momentary, epiphenomenal and transitory occurrence. And yet, it became inscribed as an image to be remembered and more than that, served as both a form of *aide-memoire* and a point around which the originating event could be re-enacted. This is, one could argue, a seminal point to the concept of a building that provides a defined space for or houses the devoted whether they be shrines, churches or sanctuaries.

This tradition is deeply informed if not shaped by religious beliefs as much as the stuff of mythology. In this context, the artist becomes a medium of such visions, and who makes manifest and transmits this by virtue of his or her skills. And yet from the late eighteenth century and the period of the Enlightenment, the value given to art practice progressively expanded and changed. It became more secular, more grounded in the life and reflection of the 'humanness' and the mundane of everyday life without a religious or mythological underpinning. The possibility of a broader interpretation became more democratic, more open to a differentiated public sphere and the differences between genders and across class and race became more ambiguous as regards a reading of signs.

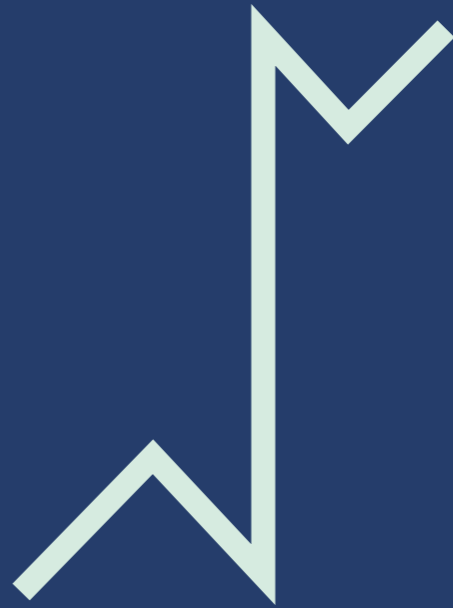
Amongst other forms, we may mention also that the notion of the fable has been a key literary device of storytelling that, while not necessarily true, offered a form of moral tale about life, a space for reflection on oneself and life around us. Writers such as Jonathan Swift, amongst others, were marvellous inventors of such tales. The fable and the fabulous were secular versions of mythology. The concept of the fable was also

explored by a group of major writers in Latin America, notably Jorges Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Augusto Roa Bastos, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Juan Rulfo. In their own distinct manners, they each used the fable as a means to reflect on our conception and understanding of the real. Theatre and the visual arts too, explored this terrain as in the case of some of the Surrealists and its inheritors amongst others. There was an artifice to their practice, opening its audiences up to new perspectives, to differing points of view and the unimaginable or inconceivable in order to shift conventional habits of mind and the familiar or commonplace.

A counterpoint to this line of thought is to be found in the companion essay by Kevin Chua. Chua opens up another dimension to the sign that is driven more by a reading of what he associates with on the one hand, the formation of the natural sciences and on the other, of the inscriptional as itself a trace of something that has occurred and is now past. As with the essay of Tan, both writers discuss concrete instances of how art engaged with the speculative, opening up a line of reflection and meditation about life and about events. These things had passed into history and yet their occurrence signalled a moment of change, an occurrence that had had bearing on the future and therefore on our lives.

As a companion to the exhibition *We Who Saw Signs*, this catalogue and its two essays provide a critical and thought-provoking terrain across which the works by the artists may be explored and understood better. We can only hope that this catalogue provides the space for the viewer of the exhibition to pause and reflect on the works exhibited and value to contemporary life today.

Dr Charles Merewether
Director
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



We are going to tell lies

Guo-Liang Tan

Rembrandt van Rijn
Belshazzar's Feast 1636 — 38
Oil on canvas
The National Gallery, London, UK
Photo: National Gallery
Picture Library



*For on the wall there appeared a hand
Nothing else, there was no man
And but, the hand began to write
And Belshazzar couldn't hide his fright*

*Well no one around could understand
What was written by the mystic hand
Belshazzar tried but couldn't find
A man who could give him piece of mind*

Belshazzar
lyrics by Johnny Cash

Heavenly mysteries are often enshrouded in apocalyptic visions. In Rembrandt's depiction of the story of Belshazzar, we bear witness the moment in which the Babylonian King encounters a cryptic message written seemingly out of darkness by a disembodied hand. Alas, this supernatural revelation is indecipherable to the king and the text remains as sign. The gap between what is seen and what could be read is acknowledged by Rembrandt's pictorial discolation of the hand and text from the rest of the painting. The secret code occupies an ambiguous space—not close enough to be *here* nor is it far enough to be *elsewhere*. It is here and nowhere.

Visions, like magic, seek to suspend our sense of disbelief. This is perhaps why we often associate a sense of wonderment when a vision is recounted and why we feel that some illusions may possibly entail hidden truths. Magic works on the premise of acknowledging without making visible its own artifice. It does not speak. Vision works on the promise of revelation. It speaks and is spoken to. A vision without interpretation fails to be a prophecy. It remains as sight, not foresight.

- Tell me a secret.
- *If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret.*
- If you don't, there will be none.
- Show me the future.
- *The future is where we meet. It is its secret.*
- *Now, look away.*



Caravaggio
The Incredulity of Saint Thomas
 c. 1601—02
 Oil on canvas
 Sanssouci, Potsdam, Brandenburg
 Photo: bpk/Stiftung Preussische
 Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-
 Brandenburg/Gerhard Murza

Like the foretelling of Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, the real lies somewhere between seeing and blindness, knowing and ignorance. In his *Memoirs of the Blind*, Jacques Derrida writes on the relationship between sight and doubt, *'the difference between believing and seeing, between believing one sees [croire voir] and seeing between, catching a glimpse [entrevoir]—or not ... Skepsis has to do with the eyes.'*¹ With Saint Thomas's intense gaze in the direction of Christ's open wound, Caravaggio's version of Doubting Thomas brings us to this precise threshold of seeing. The wound opens the internal to the eye, providing a glimpse beyond the corporeal and into the abyss. Here, the mysterious and the divine presents itself as a rapture in the visible, a black hole which cannot be fully acknowledged by sight but must instead, be experienced first hand. The gaze transverses from the optical to the haptic, turning sign into a space for transfiguration.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 1.

'All Cretans are liars.'

— Epimenides

'A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else... Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all.'

— Umberto Eco²



In the first line of the *Odyssey*, we are told that Odysseus is a polytropic man (the term meaning 'much-travelled', or used metaphorically as 'turning many ways'). Throughout the Homeric hymn, we witness the master shape-shifter slipping past his opponents and being freed from tricky predicament. Quite literally, he thinks on his feet and his mind is constantly on the move, creating duplicity and ambiguity by displacing meaning through the use of language and symbols. In his attempt to trick Polyphemus, Odysseus deceives the one-eyed Cyclops by telling him that his name is Ουτις (translated as 'nobody' or 'no man'). In a turn of event, Odysseus escapes death by blinding his opponent with a flaming stick into his only eye. When Polyphemus yells that he is hurt by 'nobody', his fellow Cyclopes ignore his cry for help. It is perhaps not by chance that Odysseus was able to escape from the Cyclops, whose name means 'very famous', by momentarily giving up his own. A name is what separates a 'somebody' from a 'nobody'.

To be famous is to be known by everyone.

To be 'no one' is to be invisible.

² Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 7.

The act of calling upon one's name is an attempt to take hold of whom is not yet within grasp, to give shape and weight to the fleeting presence of the other. HEY YOU! YES, YOU! Across many primitive cultures and often in mythologies, names are not arbitrary symbols but an important aspect of what they help define. Jacques Vandier writes, *'It is enough to know the name of a god or of a divine creature in order to have it in one's power.'*³ To refuse naming is to deny identification and to remain anonymous. WHO? ME? Without a name, one is free to be anyone and no one. Odysseus did not fool the giant by simple falsehood but through a radical negation. I AM NOT! In so doing, he foreshadows the fall of his opponent by creating a fatal 'blind spot'.

3

Jacques Vandier, *La Religion Égyptienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949). Referenced by Jorge Luis Borges in his essay 'A History of the Echoes of a Name'.



If visions are meant to be prophetic of what is to come, then tombs are reminders of what once was. Engraved on the tomb of Poussin's neoclassical painting is Virgil's Latin phrase 'Et in Arcadia ego' which may be interpreted as 'even in Arcadia I exist' or 'I too once lived in Arcadia'. In the former, 'I' refers to the personified Death who waits in the mythological garden paradise while the subject in the latter refers to the buried who has once walked upon the idyllic pastures. The shift in the subject turns Death into the dead, Eden into earth. Poussin's tomb can be read as a contemplation of mortality, a *memento mori* in which the mythological now becomes historical. The historical subject bears weight for his name is written in stone.



Nicolas Poussin
Et in Arcadia Ego
c.1638—40
Oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre,
Paris, France
Photo: Erich Lessing/
Art Resource

- Tell me a story.
- *It is being written as we speak.*
- How does it begin?
- *It already has. You were there.*
- How does it end?
- *It all depends on how you read the signs.*

Like tombs, museums exist for many as a kind of resting place for the dead. Images, objects and words come together to give a sense of objectivity to the past and offer certainty to the present. This objectivity seeks to reposition the eye and seemingly reconstructs our perspective from a critical distance. Yet, there is nothing 'objective' about museums, or 'natural' in the way their collections are presented. For museums are always fictional in that they are always mediated under a particular set of social and historical circumstances. Beyond simply gatekeeping, they negotiate and narrate realities.

Often considered as a predecessor of the natural history museum, *Wunderkammer* (German for ‘wonder-chamber’, also known as the ‘cabinet of curiosities’) refers to an encyclopaedic collection in Renaissance Europe consisting of various unclassified and uncategorised objects. These unidentified objects, often a mixture of genuine and fake articles, are strangely familiar but not always fully recognisable. By bringing these seemingly disparate fragments together, the mysterious and the unknown are somehow contained and possessed. The ‘cabinet of curiosities’ becomes a theatrical space in which objectivity is channelled inwards, where the fictitious and the real play off each other in the private world. These nameless artefacts and alien specimens offer not knowledge but tales of exotic origins and encounters with the occult. Their opacity fascinates us because they offer more science fiction than science.



⁴ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), plate 14. Cited by Aldous Huxley in the epigraph to his 1949 book *The Doors of Perception*.

⁵ Elif Shafak, *The Gaze* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2006), p. 76.

‘If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.’
– William Blake ⁴

Zahir: One of the ninety-nine names of God, means ‘He who doesn’t hide from sight’.
– Dictionary of Gaze ⁵

Jorge Luis Borges presents us with two hypothetical encounters in his short stories *The Zahir* and *The Aleph*. The first with ‘Zahir’, an object that is seen by the beholder from all angles and at all times: in this case, a coin that can be viewed simultaneously from both sides as if it resides in the core of one’s visuality. The second,



Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog
1818, Oil on canvas
Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany
Photo: bpk / Hamburger
Kunsthalle / Elke Walford

‘Aleph’, is a point in space through which one is able to observe the world in its entirety with a single glance. Here, vision occupies an ideal locus in which the world presents itself to the viewer as in an infinite painting. The ‘Zahir’, while seemingly impossible in reality, is nonetheless still conceivable in terms of the symbolic. If one reads the two-sided coin as the coming together of thesis and antithesis in traditional dialecticism, then the ‘Zahir’ embodies the illusion of absolute knowledge. It is the perfect sign. Representation, in the case of ‘Aleph’, proves to be far trickier as the narrator admits, *‘I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols...’*⁶

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Plume, 1979), p. 26.

Accessing totality requires one to be distanced from the world, to step outside time and occupy a godly view. Translating the sublime forces one to face the impossible task of containing the infinite within the frame of representation. In place of the ideal and the absolute, the gap between vision and signification presents a possibility for the poetic. Wherein direct substitution is no longer adequate, one conceives language anew, *'I invented colors for the vowels! – A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. – I made rules for the form and movement of every consonant, and I boasted of inventing, with rhythms from within me, a kind of poetry that all the senses, sooner or later, would recognize. And I alone would be its translator.'*⁷

Liking his role as the poet to that of Elisha the prophet, William Blake's drawing *A Vision: The Inspiration of the Poet* describes an ambiguous third space between wall and chamber, where it is simultaneously inward and outward looking. Akin to Christ's open wound in Caravaggio's painting, this in-between space is both window and room, a 'narrow chink' through which one can choose to catch a glimpse beyond, but also a 'cavern' from which to retreat. Blake's immensely private and strange vision of divine inspiration is one that is spatially incongruous and perhaps even paradoxical as the chamber slips precariously between the imagined and the real.

⁷ Arthur Rimbaud, 'Alchemy of the Word', in *Season in Hell*, trans. by Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), p. 232.



William Blake *A Vision: The Inspiration of the Poet (Elisha in the Chamber on the Wall)* c.1819–20
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Tate Gallery, London, UK
Photo: Tate Images

- Speak to me tales of distant stars.
- *To that which is unknowable is deceitful.*
- Sing to me songs of distant pasts.
- *To that which has been half forgotten can only be half true.*

By manipulating signs into visions, words into thoughts, the artist, the poet, the prophet find themselves wandering along the threshold of representation and curiously thread the boundary between meaning and signification. Intermittently, they make visible its artifice and in these brief moments, our gaze shifts towards the liminal, seized by what is possibly hidden hitherto. Somewhere between half-truths and missed encounters, between the gapped and the oblique lie the promise and the doubt.

Adad Hannah
Grieve Perspective
Ho Tzu Nyen
Institute of Critical Zoologists
Nipan Oranniwesna
Ola Vasiljeva
Tan Wee Lit
Yoca Muta

p. 17, 22

Grieve Perspective
**The Heavens Belong To
 Everyone But The View
 Above Is Ours Alone**
 2010
 Video installation
 Dimensions variable

p. 18, 25

Adad Hannah
**Video stills from
 All Is Vanity
 (Mirrorless Version)**
 2009
 HD video, 11 mins 46 secs

p. 19, 20 – 21

Ho Tzu Nyen
Video stills from Earth
 2009
 Single channel video,
 42 mins

p. 23

Tan Wee Lit
**The 'Missed' Series
 (Chicago)**
 2008
 White porcelain,
 engraved white marble,
 wood
 Dimensions variable

p. 24, 26 – 27

Ola Vasiljeva
Alchimie du Verbe
 2009
 Analogue slides

p. 28

The Institute of Critical
 Zoologists (ICZ)
**Winner from the series,
 The Great Pretenders**
 2011
 Archival Piezographic
 print
 121 x 84 cm

p. 29

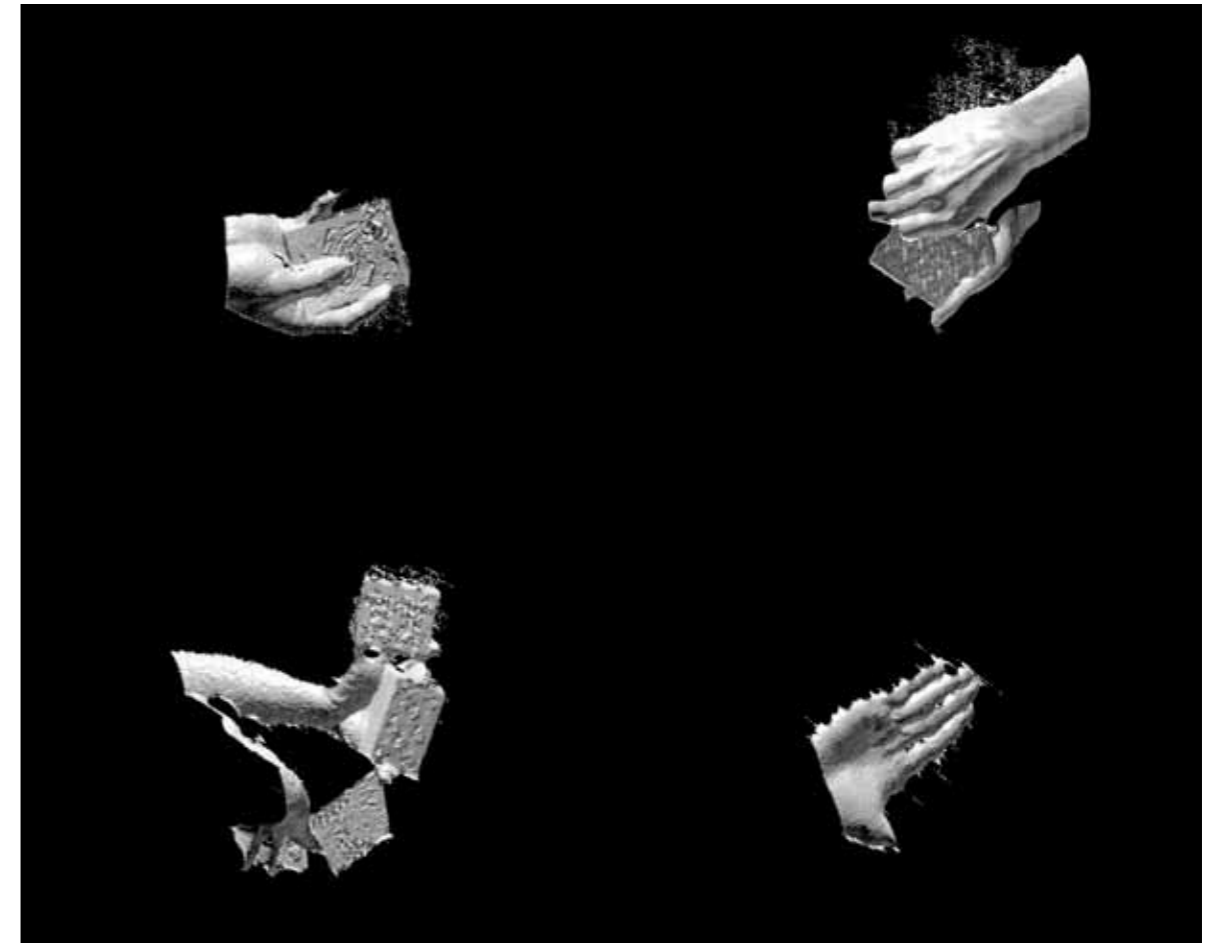
Yoca Muta
**Video stills from
 Mountain**
 2008
 5 mins

p. 30 – 31

Nipan Oranniwesna
Silence Voice
 2010
 Paper, wood construction
 480 x 320 x 40 cm

p. 32

The Institute of Critical
 Zoologists (ICZ)
**Nymph from the series,
 The Great Pretenders**
 2011
 Archival Piezographic
 print
 84 x 121 cm





All Is Vanity (Mirrorless Version)



Earth

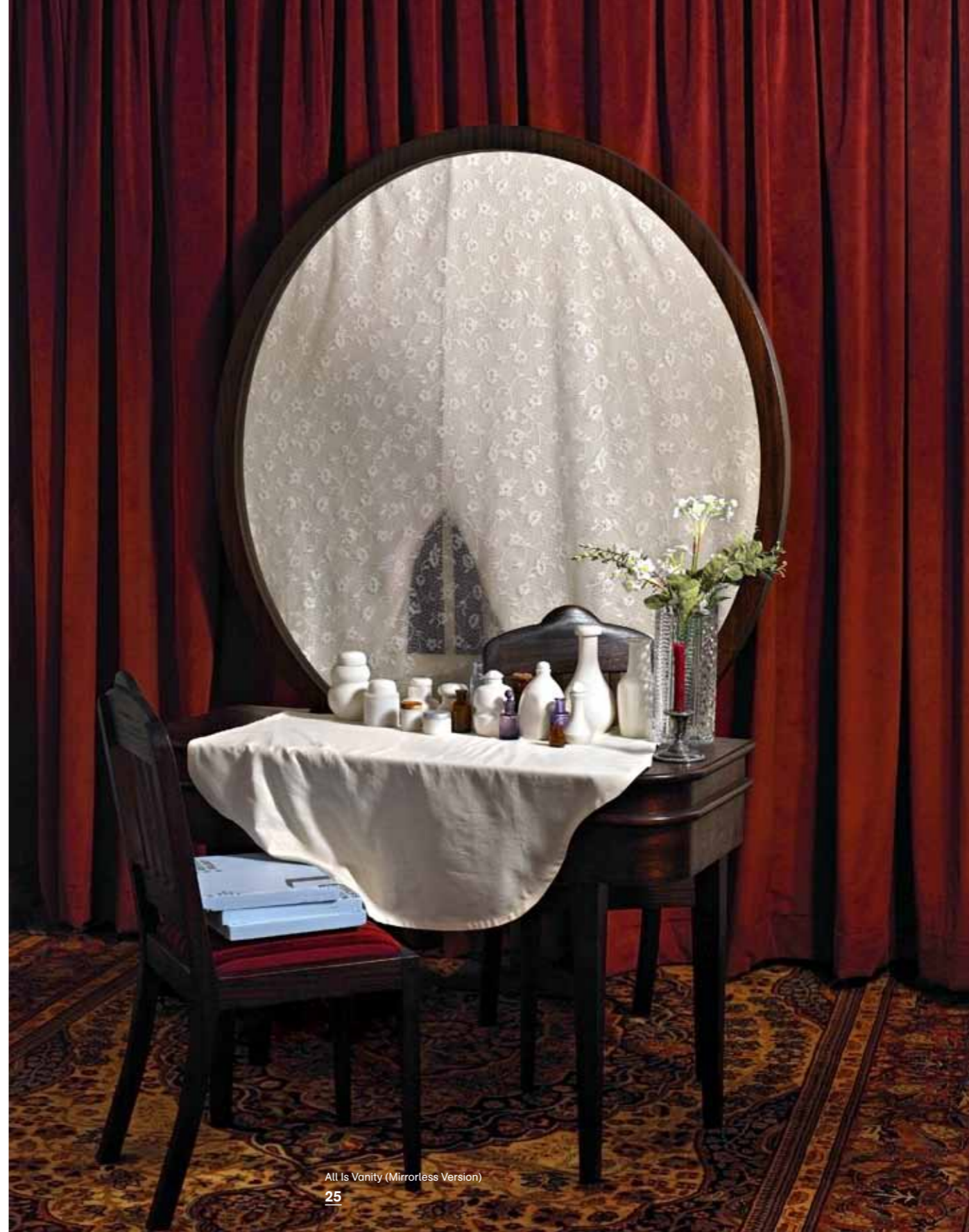




The Heavens Belong To Everyone But The View Above Is Ours Alone

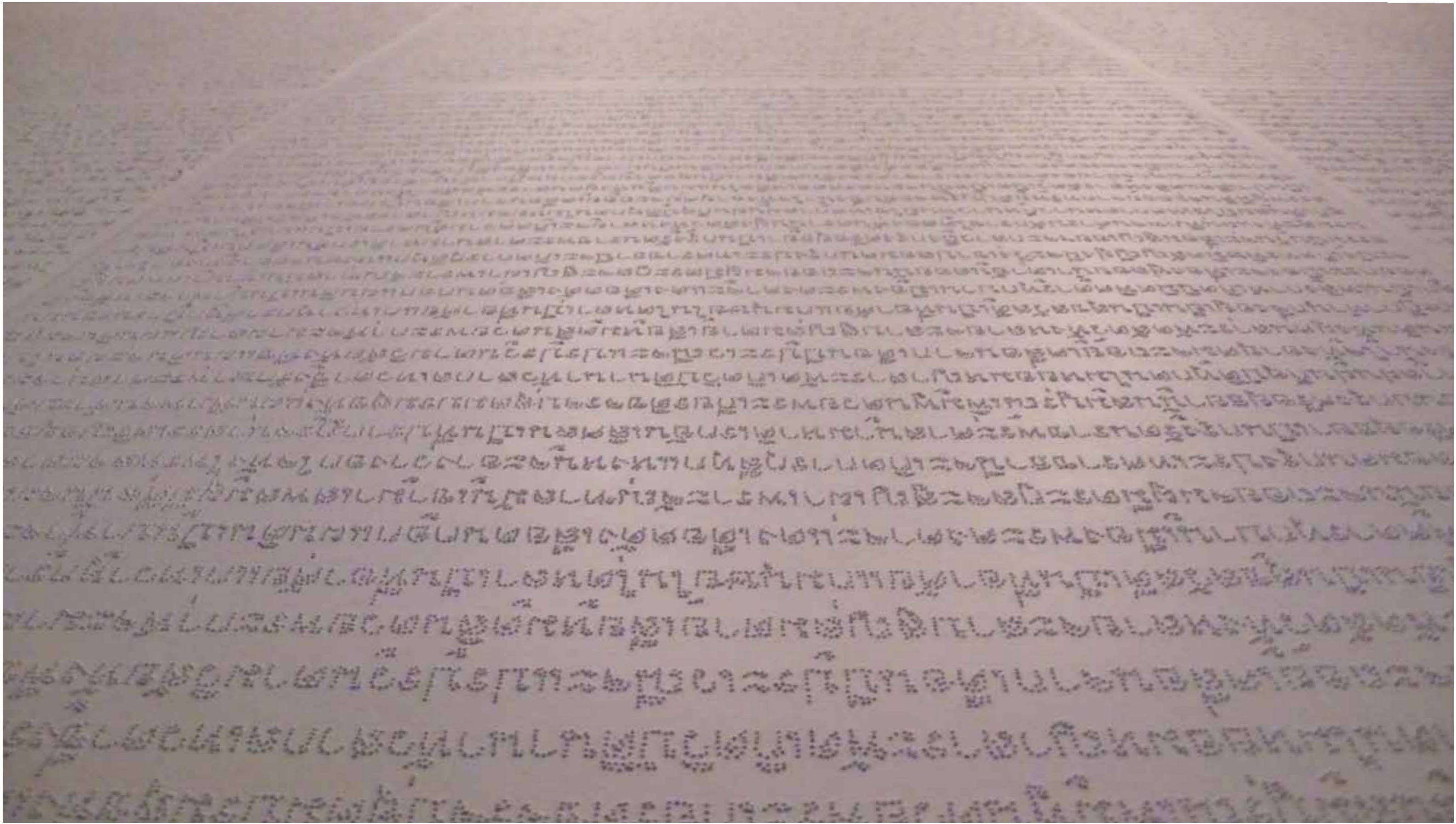


The 'Missed' Series (Chicago)









We find the following description in Charles Burton Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*:

[The Hikyat Abdullah] tells us of the rock at the mouth of the river, about which much has been said by all the writers about Singapore. The following is Abdullah's account of the discovery of it. 'At the end of the point there was another rock found among the brushwood; it was smooth, of square form, covered with a chiselled inscription which no one could read, as it had been worn away by water for how many thousands of years who can tell. As soon as it was discovered people of all races crowded round it. The Hindoos said it was Hindoo writing, the Chinese that it was Chinese. I went among others with Mr. Raffles and the Rev. Mr. Thompson. I thought from the appearance of the raised parts of the letters that it was Arabic, but I could not read it, as the stone had been subject to the rising and falling tides for such a long time. [...] Ingenuity was exhausted in trying to decipher the inscription. [...] Mr. Raffles said the inscription was Hindoo, because the Hindoo race was the earliest that came to the Archipelago, first to Java and then to Bali and Siam, the inhabitants of which [...] are all descended from the Hindoos. But not a soul in Singapore could say what the inscription was.'¹

I couldn't help but think of the above episode passage the first time I saw Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (c. 1638 – 40). It was a late fall afternoon in Paris, and I unexpectedly came upon the painting after turning a corner in the Louvre. The gathering of a few shepherds around a tomb in the painting somehow seemed to speak to the discovery of another inscription, one that happened close to two centuries later, on the opposite side of the world.

Poussin had done a first version of the 'Et in Arcadia Ego' theme (around 1630, now in the Devonshire collection in Chatsworth), in which three shepherds are shown coming upon a solitary tomb. Erwin Panofsky famously argued that Poussin's second version of the theme—the painting in the Louvre—weakened the fearful *memento mori* theme of the first, wherein, against the enjoyment of worldly pleasures in the present, we are warned of our impending death.² The decline of this pictorial genre meant that we were blind to our mortality, took steps away from our finitude. If the earlier painting had surprise and urgency, the



¹ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, 1819–1867* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 89–90 (first published 1902).

² Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition', in *Meaning and the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 295–320 (first published 1955).

later painting was more placid and calm, and fit the changing tenor of the times – Counter-Reformation anxiety had eased into the mildness of seventeenth-century classical art theory. Panofsky’s magisterial reading turned on a careful explication of the Latin phrase ‘et in Arcadia ego’ central to Poussin’s two paintings: what had once meant ‘death is even in Arcadia’ was, over time, translated as ‘I too was born in Arcadia’. The former translation was more forceful because in it a present happiness was menaced by death. In the latter translation, it is the dead person in the tomb, not allegorical Death, who is speaking, and by turning impersonal Death into an individualised ‘I’, Poussin diminished the force and charge of his earlier painting. Ironically, personalisation meant a diminishment of the implication of death for the reading/viewing subject. ‘We are confronted with a change from thinly veiled moralism to undisguised elegiac sentiment’, Panofsky wrote. His interpretation was in tune with histories of death, which became more secularised—modernised—towards the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. Death was gradually separated from society; and as medicine gained its healing powers, we feared death not more but less.

Yet Panofsky’s conclusion retreats from the significance of Poussin’s second painting. Ironically, he avoids the picture’s warning of death. There is, for instance, a way in which the second painting confronts and implicates its viewer in a stronger manner than the first. In the second version, there is a more complicated, if not complex, luring-in of the beholder: the painting almost taunts us *not* to come forward. (Poussin might have wanted to trick the viewer, drawing him in via the picture’s serene calmness, in order to bring him to a stronger consciousness of death.) The later painting also seems more confident of its ability to understand and picture the world: it is an ambitious statement—a philosophy—of some sort. Reading and deciphering are deeply at issue.

This is where Louis Marin comes in.³ For Marin, the second painting functions as a ‘metapictorial sign’, making a larger statement about pictures in general.⁴ Poussin’s painting tells us something about the language of painting as such, representation tout court. Marin begins by positing a series of equivalences between verbal and visual language. He follows Roman Jakobson’s distinction between *histoire*—a kind of writing that takes place without a narrator, and consists of events that simply happen—and *discours*, that which is spoken, enunciatory enunciated. By revealing the process by which paintings, like verbal language, efface their own subject position (like the move from first to third person discourse, or the way we don’t notice the material support when we look at the content of a painting), Marin reveals Poussin’s painting as a form of address. Recovering the picture’s mode of address is like digging up a grave, rescuing speech from its death *in* language.

³
Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. by Mette Hjort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴
But by ‘metapictorial sign’, Marin implies that there is always a tension between the visual and the verbal. There is never full convertibility between the two.



Marin’s first move is to see the speaker’s confusion in the Latin phrase (dead person or Death, tomb or painting?) as a *real* ambiguity, rather than a mere mistake on the part of the artist. If the verb is what makes a story visible to a given subject, there is a notable absence of the verb in the phrase ‘et in Arcadia ego’. We are led to impute a verb (‘sum’ or ‘I am’) when we read—view—the painting. Marin calls this the painting’s ‘secret fissure’. It is not a coincidence that the kneeling shepherd—the figure who most approximates the viewer, by his active attempt to decipher the inscription—points precisely to the last word in the phrase: ‘ego’. It is as though he is stumbling over that very word. Bent over in thought, he cannot (yet) impute the verb. He cannot yet understand the word’s self-implication. (At this same moment, the rightmost shepherd looks to the woman, as though asking her—asking us—of the meaning of the cautionary phrase.)

A shift also takes place when we turn what we see into language, when we verbalise all the semi-conscious thoughts and fleeting sensations that occur when we look at the painting. A ‘cut’ happens, when we move from what Marin calls a ‘perceptual continuum’ into a ‘figurative discontinuum’, when seeing turns into reading. (Verbal language will, perhaps, always be a reduction of the visual.) Marin regards the painting, in effect, as giving us clues, telling us how to look. Our reading of the painting converts depth into breadth – the four figures are arrayed into a frieze. It is as though we need to rotate the picture plane ninety degrees ‘forward’ to understand the painting, or look at it ‘sideways’, from the right (notice how this recalls the work of anamorphosis in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533): only by moving to the right of the painting do we glimpse the striking death’s head). Lateralisation is also literalisation: we read the figures in a progression, moving from left (unconsciousness, lack of knowledge) to right (consciousness of death). The painting moves us from Ignorance to Wisdom, represented by the poised woman who looks down in quiet contemplation. Now she is closest to us – but the painting holds out the possibility that we might never understand that last word, occupy her position. Our inability to read and understand the painting is our possible misconstrual of death, its meaning for us.

Now that first consciousness of death also constitutes the beginning of human history. (It is similar to a child’s first acquaintance with death, as an existential phenomenon.) Poussin’s painting thus rests on that threshold, when humankind departed from myth, ‘*The Arcadian Shepherds* recounts, in what is at once a musical and plastic manner, the moment when the song of the origin is interrupted, the spent moment when history intrudes upon the scene.’⁵ Understanding death in and through the painting has us tunnelling back to the shadowy beginnings of our past. (Marin’s positing of a shift from the oral to the written also brings to mind Derrida’s reading of Lévi-Strauss and the Nambikwara.⁶

⁵
Marin, p. 69.

⁶
Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).



(Derrida brilliantly argued that the Brazilian tribe already had ‘writing’ before European discovery, thereby undermining European cultural superiority and Western modernity as such.)

What of the Singapore stone, then, that indecipherable fragment that seems to stand for the promise and loss of an entire civilisation? Buckley provided several possible explanations of the inscription: most convincing for him was one from the *Malay Annals* that explained the inscription as having been authored by the Rajah of Kling, around 1228 AD. The Rajah had staged a contest between the reigning Kling champion and an outsider named Badang. Both were given the challenge of lifting up a huge stone: the Kling champion wavered, while Badang was able to lift it over his head. Badang then threw the stone into the mouth of the river, which is the stone we see today.⁷ Yet I am more intrigued by another explanation that Buckley provides, one that involves a forbidden love. One Tun Jana Khateb was spying (or simply looking) at one of the Rajah of Singapura’s beautiful women, when a betel tree broke. Suspecting the man of causing this ecological mishap to attract the woman’s attention, the Rajah had him put to death. His dead body lay near a seller of sweetmeat, and his blood soon turned into stone.⁸ What is interesting about the story is that it says something more telling, I think, about a society’s origins. The thwarted love, the betel tree, the sweetmeat seller, all strangely have a part to play in the way the stone gets encoded, becomes a pregnant sign. (It recalls the second version of Poussin’s *Et In Arcadia Ego*, in the way that the painting made the consideration of origins our own deathly encounter.) Or one could say that all good myths involve transformation, both moral and material. In this foundational myth, Tun Jana Khateb *needed* to die, for Singapore society to begin. Sacrifice, under a betel tree.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg once described the evolution of signs.⁹ For thousands of years mankind lived by hunting. Hunters learned to construct the appearance and movements of an unseen quarry through prints in soft ground, snapped twigs, smells, and threads of saliva. They learnt to sniff and observe, and gave meaning and context to the slightest trace. This process of deciphering animal tracks led to the invention of writing. Footprints evolved into pictograms, and pictograms developed into phonetic script. If early civilisations saw knowledge as a process of divination and prophecy, it was the Greek city-states that pioneered dispassionate investigation as the true form of knowledge. Though Hippocratic medicine played an important part in this change—as a model that was based on symptoms and signs, and conjecturally built up knowledge from parts to wholes—it was soon eclipsed by Plato’s more idealised theory of knowledge. A similar shift away from ‘false’ methods of



7
“The third [...] I have reserved for the last because I am inclined to think that the evidence is fully presumptive in favour of its being the stone now visible in Singapore; it is to be met with at pages 62 and 63 of the Annals. The preceding pages inform us that in the reign of Sir Rajah Vicrama, there was a redoubtable champion of the name of Badang. Several remarkable feats of strength are recorded of him, but I will merely select the one in point. The fame of Badang having reached the land of Kling (Coromandel) the Rajah of that country dispatched a champion, named Nadi Vijaya Vicrama, to try his strength with him, staking seven ships on the issue of the contest. After a few trials of their relative powers, Badang pointed to a huge stone lying before the Rajah’s hall, and asked his opponent to lift it, and to allow their claims to be decided by the greatest strength displayed by this feat. The Kling champion assented, and, after several failures, succeeded in raising it as high as his knee, after which he immediately let it fall. The story then says that Badang, having taken up the stone, poised it easily several times, and

then threw it out into the mouth of the river, and this is the rock which is at this day visible at the point of Singhapura [...] After some other recitals, the Annals state that “after a long time, Badang also died, and was buried at the point of the straits of Singhapura; and, when the tidings of his death reached the land of Kling, the Rajah sent two stone pillars, to be raised over his grave as a monument, and these are the pillars which are still at the point of the Bay.” (Around 1228 AD, the Kling Rajah had the inscription written of Badang’s exploits, in something close to the Malabar language, an obsolete Tamil dialect.) ‘If the story of Mr Badang is true,’ Buckley concludes, ‘[this explains why] there were sports on the Esplanade about six hundred and fifty years ago, which is the time when Badang is said to have lived.’ Buckley, p. 94.

divination occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, as the natural sciences, under the influence of Galileo, moved away from particularistic, conjectural knowledge, towards a more general, yet comprehensive, understanding of the workings of nature. Art split off from science, as the human sciences broke away from disciplines like physics and biology.

Yet we see those early divinatory methods reappearing in the late-nineteenth century, in figures like Freud and the art historian Giovanni Morelli (who discerned the true identity of works of art through ‘unconsciously’ depicted identifying marks like fingernails or earlobes). Conjectural semiotics returned with a vengeance, but it was not necessarily false nor naïvely speculative. ‘In a social structure of ever-increasing complexity like that of advanced capitalism’, Ginzburg writes, ‘any claim to systematic knowledge appears as a flight of foolish fancy. [...] Reality is opaque; but there are certain points—clues, signs—which allow us to decipher it.’¹⁰ In many ways, contemporary art historians like Marin are the hunters of today, following tracks and pictorial signs, building conclusions from a welter of small inferences.¹¹ Artists too, of course; the works in this exhibition testify to an unabated interest in the relationship between history and myth, the errances of meaning, and the paradoxes of the sign.

8
‘Resorting to the Malay Annals, which, clouded as they undoubtedly are by fable and allegory, yet contain many a valuable piece of information, we find therein mention made of three remarkable stones at Singhapura. The first that I shall mention is that recorded at page 82 of Leyden’s Malay Annals, in which the translator, following its author, tells us “that there was a man of Pasei, named Tun Jana Khateb, who went to Singhapura with two companions, named Tuan de Bongoran, and Tuan de Salangor. One day Tun Jana Khateb was walking in the market place of Singhapura, and drew near to the palace of the Rajah, where one of the Rajah’s women observed him. He was looking at a betel tree, when it suddenly broke. This was observed by the Rajah, who was enraged at it, conceiving it to have been done solely for the purpose of attracting the lady’s attention. [...] He accordingly ordered him to be put to death. The executioners seized him, and carried him to the place of execution and stabbed him near the house of a seller of sweetmeats. His blood flowed on the ground, but his body vanished from their ken, and his blood was covered up by the sweetmeat seller, and was changed into stone and still remains at Singhapura.” Buckley, p. 90.

9
Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method’, *History Workshop Journal*, 9, Spring (1980), 5–36.

10
Ginzburg, 27.

11
To be sure, art history as it is currently practiced in North America and Europe shies away from straightforward semiotic analysis—if by ‘straightforward’ we refer to a kind of one-way deciphering of signs in works of art, that often presumes full translatability from visual to verbal. More critical analyses tend to multiply modes of investigation—using semiotics to augment a historicised analysis of medium and format, for example—and especially examines the *frame* of semiotic analysis. In other words, looking at the historical context and conditions that called for an extant semiotic analysis. See for example, Eve Meltzer’s excellent ‘*The Dream of the Information World*’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (March 2006), 115–35, which—to put it simply—unpacks the linguistic unconscious of a wide body of art practices of the 1960s and 70s. It would also be useful to remember that societies tend to alternately favour ‘synchronic’ (over space) and ‘diachronic’ (over time) investigations: the emergence of various relativising structuralisms of the 1910s and 20s, such as the theories of Saussure and Wittgenstein, was a result of the failure of evolutionary modes of explanation of socio-historical change in the 1870s–1900s. See Ronald Bush, ‘*The Presence of the Past: Ethnographic Thinking/Literary Politics*’, in *Prehistories of the Future: the Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. by Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 23–41.



Biographies

Adad Hannah / b. 1971
Lives and works in
Montreal, Canada

Adad Hannah is best known for his video-recorded tableaux vivants of models holding poses for extended periods in order to undermine the verity of the photographic image. By drawing our attention to the performance inherent within photography, he creates a space for reflection that transforms passive viewers into self-conscious historical agents. His recent projects include the *Prado Stills* series, shot in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain, and *All Is Vanity (Mirrorless Version)*, an uncanny reconstruction of a nineteenth century optical illusion by Charles Allan Gilbert using a pair of identical twins to render the appearance of a non-existent mirror.

Hannah earned a BFA from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver (1998), and an MFA from Concordia University in Montreal (2004). He has recently exhibited at The Aldrich Museum, Connecticut, USA (2010), The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney (2010), Zendai MoMA, Shanghai, China (2009), Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Canada (2008, 2009), Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, Germany (2008), Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2006), the 4th Seoul International Media Art Biennale, Korea (2006), and Casa Encendida, Madrid, Spain (2006). Hannah's works are in museums, private, and corporate collections around the world and he is represented by Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain in Montreal, Canada.

Grieve Perspective
Formed 2009
Based in Singapore

Grieve Perspective is an art collective based in Singapore. Working primarily with high-end motion compositing software, much of its works delve into the maintained perversities that are a root staple of Singapore life. More of a collective of ideas than of a collective of individuals, Grieve Perspective, as the name obliquely implies, navigates through loss to a point of critical distance, mixing the everyday with the absurd, the macabre with the sentimental. Their video installation, *The Heavens Belong To Everyone But The View Above Is Ours Alone*, makes use of a 'time of flight' camera to produce digital 3D sequences of card flourishing. With its allusive title coincidentally bearing the same number of characters as the number of cards in a pack, the work points to a perspective shift involving an emotional transcendence.

Grieve Perspective have shown their works in film festivals and art exhibitions at various locations in Asia and Europe, including *International Symposium on Computational Aesthetics in Graphics, Visualization, and Imaging*, London, UK (2010), the *Open Space / Singapore / Southeast Asia Exhibition*, Singapore (2010) and a solo show at Grey Projects Annex Space at Niven Road, Singapore (2010).

Ho Tzu Nyen / b.1976
Lives and works
in Singapore

Ho Tzu Nyen makes art projects that have been presented in cinemas, galleries and theatres, as well as on television. His past works have in common the investigation and incorporation of important cultural moments; these are ideas and expressions that have had significant impact beyond their individual cultural and geographical origin. His work is characterised by three themes: historiography — the production of new histories, from pre-colonial founding myths (*Utama – Every Name in History is I*, 2003) to art histories (*4 x 4: Episodes of Singapore Art*, 2004); re-interpretation — the reworking of historical objects, ranging from philosophical texts (*Zarathustra: A Film for Everyone and No One*, 2009), history painting (*EARTH*, 2009), and popular songs (*The Bohemian Rhapsody Project*, 2008); and the analysis of the production of visual aesthetic and acoustic deconstruction (*NEWTON*, 2009 and *EARTH*, 2009).

His first feature film *HERE* premiered at the 41st Director's Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival, France (2009) and his medium length film, *EARTH* at the 66th Venice International Film Festival, Italy (2009). His art projects have been presented at the Liverpool Biennial, UK (2010); the 6th Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia (2009); the 26th Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil (2004); the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Japan (2005); and the inaugural Singapore Biennale (2006). He recently represented Singapore at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011).

Nipan Oranniwesna / b.1962
Lives and works in
Bangkok, Thailand

Nipan Oranniwesna's work explores the fragile state of contemporary societies in the age of globalisation. This can be seen in the installation, *City of Ghost*, in which the artist uses talcum powder to create a sprawling cityscape using a combination of meticulously cut-out maps of ten different metropolitan cities. Its compelling visuality is contrasted at same time by consciousness of its fragility, highlighting the delicate and fragile nature of our societies and their interconnectedness with each other. Notion of cultural identity, both within the context of Thailand and abroad, is another aspect of the artist's work which can be observed in his series of works on paper based on the lyrics of national anthems and religious text. Reproduced with small holes to create Braille-like versions of the original, these works are compelling yet difficult to read, questioning their intent and effectiveness.

Nipan's work has been widely exhibited internationally, most notably at the Busan Biennale, Korea (2008), and at the Thai Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, Italy (2007). His works were also included in *Monologue / Dialogue II*, BISCHOFF/WIESS, London, UK (2008), *Coffee, Cigarettes and Pad Thai: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*, Eslite Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan (2008), *Paper Matters*, BACC, Bangkok, Thailand (2009), *Safe Place The Future*, VER Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand (2009) and *This Is Not A Fairy Tale*, g23, Bangkok, Thailand (2011).

Ola Vasiljeva / b.1981
Lives and works in
Netherlands

Working in a wide range of media and drawing her inspiration from classical literature, historical figures and events, pop- and sub-cultures, **Ola Vasiljeva** creates an ambiguous, absurd scenography, which she populates with objects, videos; artworks by herself and other artists. The work often evokes an odd, surreal situation; though being hardly narrative, it often focuses on the state of fundamental loneliness and distancing from the real world. Vasiljeva's aesthetic vocabulary draws from popular imagery which she choreographs with witty humour, poetry and a strong uncanny touch. Inspired by a famous passage – 'Alchemy of the Word' from Arthur Rimbaud's *Season In Hell*, Vasiljeva's own *Alchimie du Verbe* can be seen as a response to the poet's cry for the absurd, the theatrical and the mystical. Seemingly hallucinatory and dream-like, Vasiljeva's series of distorted black and white photographs hint at the performative and the imaginative powers of imagery and word.

Vasiljeva is one of the founders of the Ocean Academy of Arts (www.oaoasite.net) and the publisher of the OAOA magazine. Her work has recently been shown at the Witte de With in Rotterdam, Netherlands, Ellen de Bruijne Projects in Amsterdam, Netherlands, CAC in Vilnius, Lithuania, and Art Since the Summer of '69 in New York, USA. Vasiljeva is represented by Galerie van Gelder in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Tan Wee Lit / b.1978
Lives and works
in Singapore

The autobiographical snippets of his life, identity as an artist and the social issues that surfaces in everyday life are all skillfully woven into the works of **Tan Wee Lit**. Each social and personal aspect is implicitly layered into what are deceptively simple manifestations. Instigated from seemingly nondescript trivialities, Tan's objects intersect with larger events specific to a particular period of his life and aim to resonate with that of his audiences. His ongoing *The 'Missed' Series* are private monuments of persons on the 'missing and wanted' list. Sculpted out of fine white porcelain, the series of ghostly figures carry with them an air of poignancy and sterility while also being accorded with a sense of the dignity and respect akin to past noblemen and dignitaries.

Tan graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an MFA in Sculpture and had his first solo exhibition at the invitation of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA (2008). He was one of five artists to represent Singapore in the exhibition *Identities vs. Globalisation* in Berlin, Germany, Chiangmai and Bangkok, Thailand (2004). Recent exhibitions include the Fifth Outdoor Sculpture Biennial, Baltimore, USA (2008), *Urban Contemporary Art Trail*, UK (2008), and *Emerging Illinois Artists*, USA (2007). He was a recipient of the Graduate Fellowship Award from the School of the Art, Institute of Chicago and the Grand Prize Winner for the Singapore Sculpture Award (2007).

Yoca Muta / b.1981
Lives and works
in Japan

Using moving images and sculpture installations, **Yoca Muta's** works delve into the idea of the fetishistic relationship humans have with nature and the incumbent need to devour or become one with a wild and untamed world. In *A Tale of Two Suns*, Muta uses folklore to explore the human encounter with rural landscape and the idea of nature as a screen onto which we project our desires and longings. Though the use of artifice and theatrical devices, Muta constructs her apocalyptic dreamscape *Mountain*, in which we appear to be viewing a hilly landscape from a distance, not unlike the lone figure in Caspar David Fredrich's sublime landscape painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. Here, totality is suggested at the threshold of perception. As the camera zooms out, the artist herself appears to reveal the mountain as a miniature and began devouring the idyllic landscape, turning a scene of contemplation into absurd destruction.

Muta first received her formal training from Tokyo Zokei University (2003) and subsequently, graduated from Goldsmiths College, University of London (2008) where she received the Nicholas and Andrei Tooth Travelling Scholarship for her research field trip to Borneo. She was commissioned by Iniva to install a site-specific work at Rivington Place, London, UK (2008) and her work was also included in *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, London, UK (2008).

Zhao Renhui / b.1979
Lives and works in
Singapore and London, UK

Zhao Renhui's work is based on the concept of doubt and uncertainty and in his project, The Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), he tests to the limit the principles behind the dissemination of knowledge and acceptance of truths. A large part of his practice tries to resist the false naturalisation of beliefs and circumstances. In *The Great Pretenders*, ICZ looks at systems of resemblances and mimicry through the winners of the annual Phyllidae (Leaf Insects) Convention in Tokyo, Japan where scientists breed and compete their leaf insects against one another. Through meticulous photographic documentation and research journals, ICZ brings these highly camouflaged insects to intense scrutiny.

Zhao has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions including at the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; Michel Foley Gallery, New York, USA; Photo Levallois, Paris, France; Seoul Arts Center, Korea; PhotoIreland, Flash Forward Festival, Toronto, Canada; and Flowers East Gallery, London, UK. His work has also been awarded the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award, Singapore (2009), Conceptual & Constructed Winner of Sony World Photography Awards at Cannes, France (2010), honourable mentions in Photo Levallois, France (2008) and Prix Voies Off, France (2010). In 2010, he was awarded the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council, Singapore.

**Published on the occasion
of the exhibition
We Who Saw Signs
3 Aug – 4 Sept, 2011
Institute of Contemporary
Arts Singapore**

LASALLE College of the Arts
1 McNally Street
Singapore 187940
T: +65 6496 5070
F: +65 6496 5065
E: icas@lasalle.edu.sg
W: www.lasalle.edu.sg

ISBN 978-981-08-9435-1

© 2011 Institute of
Contemporary Arts
Singapore

© 2011 Individual
contributions:
the contributors

All rights reserved; no
part of this publication
may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or
transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying,
recording, or otherwise
without prior written
permission of the publisher.

The publisher does not
warrant or assume any
legal responsibility for the
publication's contents. All
opinions expressed in the
book are of the authors
and do not necessarily
reflect those of LASALLE
College of the Arts.

We Who Saw Signs is a
publication of the Institute of
Contemporary Arts Singapore
at LASALLE College of
the Arts. The Institute
of Contemporary Arts
Singapore imprint focuses
on exhibition catalogues,
artists' monographs, and
publications on art history
and critical theory. These
publications complement the
Institute of Contemporary
Arts Singapore's exhibition
programme and other
research initiatives,
which aim to promote the
discourses surrounding
contemporary art.

INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ARTS
S I N G A P O R E



Contributors:

Guo-Liang Tan is a visual
artist based in Singapore.
Alongside his studio practice,
he writes for and works with
other artists in curatorial
and publication projects, the
most recent being *Found &
Lost* and *Aversions* (2009),
an exhibition/publication
on contemporary artists'
drawings at Osage Gallery.

Kevin Chua teaches
eighteenth and nineteenth
century European Art at
Texas Tech University, in
Lubbock, Texas, USA. He also
writes on contemporary Asian
art, and has published in *Art
Journal*, *FOCAS: Forum on
Contemporary Art and Society*,
Broadsheet, and *Third Text*.

Dr Charles Merewether is
the Director of the Institute
of Contemporary Arts
Singapore, a historian,
writer and curator who
has published books
and articles and worked
professionally in Europe,
the Americas, Australia,
Asia and the Middle East.
He was Artistic Director
of the Biennale of
Sydney in 2006.

Acknowledgements:

The Institute of
Contemporary Arts Singapore
would like to thank the
participating artists for their
contributions, as well as
the generous support of the
a.r.t.s. Fund and the National
Arts Council, Singapore.

The curator would like to
extend a special thanks to:

Dr Charles Merewether
Kevin Chua
Kimberly Shen
Isrudy Shaik
Redzuan Zemmy
Rofan Teo
Khim Ong
Milenko Prvacki
Ian Woo

Design by MAKE
Printed in Singapore
First Edition (500 copies)

Supported by:

a.r.t.s.fund



