2012

Performance Paradigm

"Stage fright and various failures: A conversation with No Tzu Nyen"

Stage Fright and Various Failures: A Conversation with Ho Tzu Nyen

Ho Tzu Nyen

He Zhiyuan (HZY): For most Singaporeans, the history of the island-state begins in 1819 with the arrival of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who established it as a trading port for the East India Company. But you chose to begin your artistic career in 2003 with *Utama* – *Every Name in History is I*, an installation of paintings and a film about Sang Nila Utama – the neglected and forgotten pre-colonial founder of Singapore. Was this beginning at the pre-colonial beginnings of your country a deliberate choice?

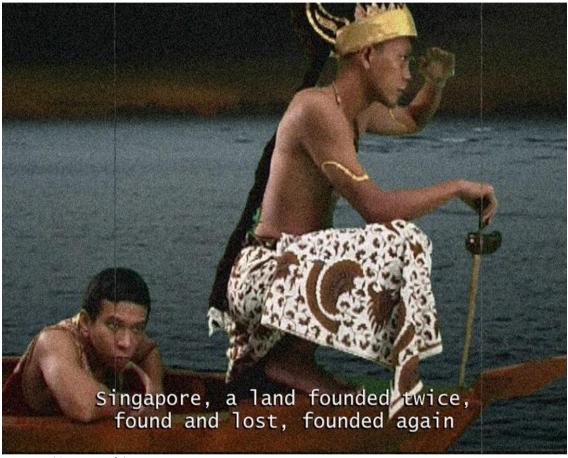
Ho Tzu Nyen (HTN): There is a story about Raffles that I really like. In 1823, while living in his newly constructed bungalow on Bukit Larangan in Singapore, Raffles suffered from a bout of tropical fever. In the throes of his delirium, he received a vision or perhaps a visitation by the Malay kings who had come to this island some 500-600 years before him. It should be said that Bukit Larangan, in Malay, means the Forbidden Hill – so named because it was the sacred burial grounds of the ancient Malay ruling dynasty. Upon waking up, and still depressed, Raffles wrote to his friend William Mardsen, saying that the tombs of the Malay Kings are close at hand; and that if it is his fate to die here in Singapore, he shall take his place amongst these. Just as he has walked in their footsteps in the 'founding' of Singapore, he now dreams of following them to their graves.



Raffles on his voyage of discovery.

Still from video component of Utama – Every Name in History is I (2003), DV, 23 min.

Raffles was a child of the Romantic Age, which was the great age of dreams of origins and originality . And perhaps this romantic predisposition made him particularly sensitive to a form of haunting – a haunting by one's predecessor, a feeling that one owes a debt to a precursor that can never be discharged, because the debtor is a phantom, a ghost-father. Ghost-fathers come in a multiplicity of guises and names. But to tell a story, one has to begin somewhere, and I chose to begin with Sang Nila Utama, the first king of the Malays, the one who was said to have given Singapore its name.



Utama on his voyage of discovery.

Still from video component of *Utama – Every Name in History is I* (2003), DV, 23 min.

Utama was believed to have arrived on the island between the 13th and 14th centuries, when he spotted a lion along the shores of the island, and thus gave Singapore its name. In Sanskrit, 'Singa' means lion, while 'pore' is derived from the word 'pura', or city. This founding was described in a most spectacular fashion in the *Malay Annals*: 'And they all beheld a strange animal. It seemed to move with great speed; it had a red body and a black head; its breast was white; it was strong and active in build, and in size was rather bigger than a he-goat. When it saw the party, it moved away and then disappeared. And Sri Tri Buana (another name for Utama) inquired of all those who were with him, "What beast is that?" But no one knew. Then said Demang Lebar Daun, "Your Highness, I have heard it said

¹ [Editor's note:] The first edited text of the *Sejarah Melayu*, or the Malay Annals, was edited by Abdullah bin Abdulkadir Munshi (1796-1854; usually referred to as Munshi Abdullah) and published in Singapore in about 1831, though there have been disagreements over the actual publication date.

that in ancient times it was a lion that had that appearance. I think that what we saw must have been a lion".'

But lions have never been a part of Singapore's eco-system. To begin at the beginning is always to begin with fiction, and as fiction.



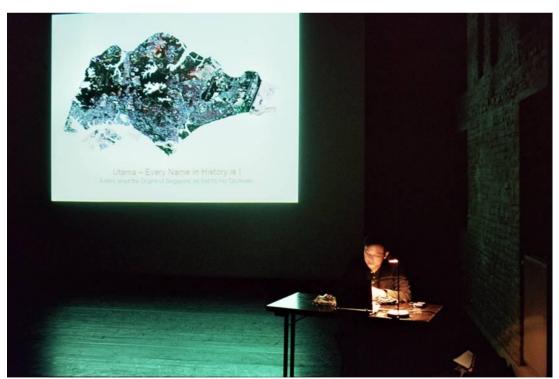
Utama at the Hunt for the Lion of Singapore
Painting from Utama – Every Name in History is I (2003), acrylic and ink on canvas

HZY: This passage from the *Malay Annals* reminds me of the primal scene as it has been staged in psychoanalytic discourses – the moment where a child encounters a reenactment of his or her own origin, which Freud dramatised as a traumatic witnessing of parental intercourse – an experience marked by sexual agitation and violence and which can only be recollected by the child in a disguised form.

HTN: Freud was one of the greatest poets of originary myths. And the agitation and violence that you mentioned saturates the scene of this encounter with the 'lion'. It is embodied by the great speed and monstrous appearance of the chimera. To contain this trauma, the chimera must be domesticated by being given a name. And in turn, this process of naming opens up to a process of wish fulfilment. We must understand the phantasmic projection of the lion as a manifestation of the desire to establish a new dynasty founded upon the legitimizing authority of the 'singasana' or the 'lion throne', a major symbol of Malay and Indonesian royalty. From the absence at the heart of origins, theatre emerges – theatre as simultaneously concealment and the projection of power.

HZY: Speaking about theatre, even though *Utama* began as an art installation, it subsequently also became a performance. How did this happen?

HTN: Due to the historical nature of this work, I was given the opportunity to present the project as a lecture in a number of pre-tertiary and tertiary educational institutions in Singapore. The lecture included discussions of the process of making the work, as well as the larger historical contexts in which this myth of origins is embedded. Repeated deliveries of this lecture led to an expansion of its scope and a formalisation of its mode of presentation. In other words, a script for performance has emerged, and jokes were repeated. Eventually, I was invited to present it at a number of theatrical events and performing arts festivals, first abroad, then in Singapore. That's how, for the first time in my life, I found myself on a stage, performing for a paying audience. Quite frankly, I have always been averse to being on stage. I have always found it difficult coming face to face with an audience — that hydra-like creature hidden in the dark. All I see is the whites of eyes and teeth. It's something like the virtual smile of the Cheshire Cat except that it is hard to make out if the creature is smiling or snarling.



Documentation of the performance lecture for *Utama – Every Name in History is I* (2003) KunstenFestivaldesArts, Brussels, Belgium, 2006, 60 min.

But still, this performance had to be done in the interest of dissemination. The installation was circulating at various art exhibitions while the film had its own separate existence in film festivals, before being mass released so that schools in Singapore could acquire the film for their libraries. The lecture was just another way to keep the work in circulation, and to engage with a different set of audiences.

HZY: This concern with dissemination seems to be at the heart of the next project that you did, 4×4 – Episodes of Singapore Art (2005). This is a television series about four Singaporean artworks that you wrote and directed as part of a visual arts exhibition. Tell us how this work came about.

HTN: I was commissioned by the Singapore Art Show that year to produce a new work and I used the commission money to purchase four half-hour prime-time slots of airtime, on the 'Arts Central' channel from the national broadcaster. Subsequently, I got in touch with a production company that produces commercials to create a four-episode TV series. Each of these episodes is centered on a work of art produced by a Singaporean artist. The first of these works was a painting, *Tropical Life* (1959), by Cheong Soo Pieng; the second was a piece of conceptual artwork, *5ft. x 5ft.* (*Singapore River*) (1972), by Cheo Chai Hiang; then a performance art intervention *Don't Give Money to the Arts* (1995), by Tang Da Wu; and finally, Lim Tzay Chuen's unrealised project, *Alter #11* (2002).



Video still from 4 x 4 – Episodes of Singapore Art (2005), four episode TV series, 23 min. each Episode four: Lim Tzay Chuen: The Invisible Artwork

I wanted to produce something that could be disseminated to the largest possible number of people in Singapore, for free. Roberto Rossellini has already led the way with his turn from filmmaking to creating great pedagogic programmes for television. But I was also curious to experience the economy of audio-visual production in Singapore. I wanted first-hand experience of how television programmes are made, and to see if I might be able to do something different.

HZY: In all four episodes of 4 x 4, you had two actors who were simultaneously performing the function of a traditional television programme presenter and playing a dramatic role. And they were perpetually arguing about the work of art in question. Was this an attempt to dialectically open up interpretations of the artworks in question?

HTN: That's right. I wanted to experiment with the possible modes of address in the format of a television programme. Like 'lifestyle' programmes or the news, programmes about art always include a presenter who functions as a guide for the viewer and the presenter always addresses the viewer on the other side of the television screen directly. This direct address is the source of the presenter's authority – he or she commands the attention of the audience at home, in order to tell them something that they don't know about, but should know.



Video-still from 4 x 4 – Episodes of Singapore Art (2005), four episode TV series, 23 min. each Episode 1: Cheong Soo Pieng – A Dream of Tropical Life

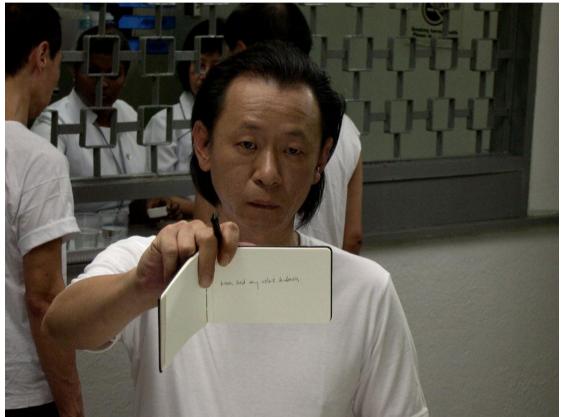
In reality, the presenter is merely addressing the mechanical eye of a camera – the public being addressed is nothing but an imaginary entity. Yet this very act of addressing an imaginary public has the strange power to generate a real public opinion. It has the power to materialise the very public it imagines. And this is the power of advertising and propaganda. At the same time, this practice of addressing of an imaginary public reminded me of the time I spent in my late teens working on a corporate video for a mental institution, when I encountered many patients addressing seemingly invisible audiences.

HZY: This sounds like something that came out in the feature film *HERE*, that you did in 2009, which was set in a mental institution. The film oscillates between a documentary format and more typical fictional scenes. In the documentary scenes, the patients in the hospital are constantly addressing a presence on the other side of the camera, a presence whom we never see.

HTN: That's right. HERE was an attempt to present the paradox of self-consciousness – or how one is able to generate what Antonio Damasio called the movie-in-the-brain, while simultaneously generating the observer of that movie. This is a long-standing obsession that

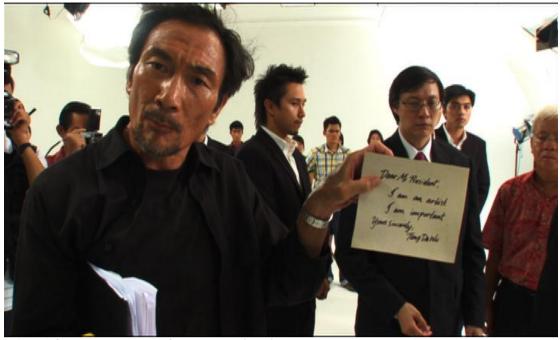
permeates almost all of my work.

The procedure of directly addressing the viewer is commonplace in television – which strives to compel attention by overcoming the distractions of the environment. But in a cinema, where attention is more easily assured, direct address is usually avoided so that the audience can remain hidden in the comfort of their anonymity. If a character from the film speaks directly to you, the effect is often unbearably comic and uncomfortable. Which is to say, directly addressing an audience in film fiction has an immense power, which can only be harnessed through the cloak of a documentary mode.



Film still from HERE (2009), feature film, HD, 89 min.

This is similar to the structure of addressing that I constructed with 4 x 4, where the presenter-function is always shared between an actor and an actress.



Video still from 4 x 4 – Episodes of Singapore Art (2005) Episode 3: Tang Da Wu – The Most Radical Gesture, four episode TV series, 23 min. each

At any one time, only one of them appears, while the other recedes into an implied, off-screen presence behind the camera. So when either one of the presenters addresses the camera directly, he or she is always addressing the other presenter instead of an imaginary audience. I wanted to find a way to build a shield between the presenter and the potential audience, to mediate the authority of whatever is being said about the artworks in question.



Video still from 4 x 4 – Episodes of Singapore Art (2005) Episode 3: Tang Da Wu – The Most Radical Gesture, four episode TV series, 23 min. each

HZY: This question of authority in relation to the image brings me to the next work that I would like to discuss – *The Bohemian Rhapsody Project* (2006). This was commissioned for the first Singapore Biennale, which, very significantly, was held at the City Hall, where the former Supreme Court of Singapore was housed. And your video is made up of footage of an audition held in one of these courts?

The location of the Biennale was a great opportunity to express one of my many disagreements with penal system in Singapore – the death penalty. Before the film-shoot, we sent out notices for an audition to find an actor for the lead role in a film called *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Auditioning actors were asked to memorise the lyrics of the song with the same name by the British band Queen.

Twenty young men arrived for the audition, and were immediately put into orange prison jumpsuits by policemen, handcuffed and led to the Defendant's box, where they were put on 'trial'. There, six beautiful angels cheered them on as they were tested on their spoken dramatization of the words of the song – which are really the final words of a man about to be put to death.



Video still from *The Bohemian Rhapsody Project* (2006), DV, 6 min. 20 sec.

The anxiety of the auditioning actors becomes conflated with the terror of criminals on trial – just as the judgment of the director fuses with the life-and-death judgment of the court. The actual film never materialised – nor was it meant to, but the resulting audition footage was edited to the original duration and rhythmic structure of the song. What came out of it

was a musical courtroom drama that was also a record of its own making. In this way, all the actors who auditioned got their parts – a happy ending, in which judgment is suspended.

HZY: This usage of the audition as a format, and the concern about judgment is something that continues in the first two parts of *The King Lear Project* (2007-08), a four-part theatrical series for the stage. For this work you chose to stage critical essays about *King Lear*, rather than Shakespeare's version of it. What were the reasons for this?

HTN: Frankly, *King Lear* has already been staged so many times, and I didn't think I could do any better, nor was I interested in trying to do so. Also, the play is so well known, I thought that we could use the opportunity to do something else with it, to go somewhere else with it. I was also struck by the fact that in the strongest writings about *King Lear* by Shakespearean critics, there is often a form of creative interpretation that comes close to poetry, and I wanted to find a way to bring this writing on theatre back onto the stage. Each of the four parts of *The King Lear Project* is named after an existing critical essay about *King Lear*. The first installment, *The Avoidance of Love*, was based on Stanley Cavell's essay, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear'. It took the form of a 'live' and unrehearsed audition for the roles of the three daughters of King Lear.



Documentation of *The King Lear Project, Part 1: The Avoidance of Love* (2007) Esplanade Theatre Studio, 60 min.

The next three parts of the series consisted of *Lear Enters*, based on Marvin Rosenberg's essay of the same name. And this took the form of an unrehearsed audition for the role of King Lear. This was followed by *Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation*, named after Jonathan Goldberg's essay of the same name, and it consisted of a series of 'live' rehearsals for scenes from *King Lear* which had traditionally proved most challenging for the

lighting, sound and stage design. The fourth and final installment, *The Lear Universe*, was based on G. Wilson Knight's essay of the same name. This took the form of a post-show discussion that was completely staged in a way to deny the 'real' audience any chance of interaction.



Documentation of *The King Lear Project, Part 3: Dover Cliff and the Limits of Representation* (2008) Kunstenfestivaldesarts, KVS-Bol, Brussels, Belgium, 120 min. (Photo: Manuel Versaen)

HZY: For *The Lear Universe*, you had staged the 'post-show discussion' in a way that every question and answer somehow leads to the entire play restarting. I remember that the audiences were laughing at the beginning, but by the time this repetition happened the fifth or sixth time, some of them were getting really furious, especially when the play stretched on for almost three hours.

HTN: *The Lear Universe* was a perversion of interactive theatre. Speech had to be denied to the audience, and their frustration exacerbated, so that we could collectively arrive at a state that was close to the purgatorial world that Knight had described as the Lear Universe. This stasis brought about a hallucinatory slowing down of time, which was close to how I had experienced performances of drone-based music. The duration of the work and the structure of repetition were crucial in achieving this intensity, which I believe opens up the sensorium to new and interesting experiences of time and space. A lot of the work that I do are attempts to induce these states of affectivity.

HZY: Were there any formal rules that underlined the production of the four episodes?

HTN: All four parts of *The King Lear Project* were carried out according to certain basic principles. Rehearsals were carried out only on a fragmentary basis with the actors, and full rehearsals with the ensemble cast were completely avoided. In this way, a sense of uncertainty permeated the entire performance. Most of the spoken lines were either

directly sampled from critical essays, or left to the actors' improvisation, so that the performance was constantly open to chance. I wanted to introduce a kind of stuttering and awkwardness into the theatrical machine.



Documentation of *The King Lear Project, Part 1: The Avoidance of Love* (2007) Esplanade Theatre Studio, 60 min.

Another key concern was to have the audience function built into the performances. The actors who participated in *The King Lear Project* can be divided into two groups. There were actors playing actors on stage, and there were actors who were playing the roles of the director, the assistant and the producer. Therefore, the first group of actors is always playing to and performing for the second group. This closed circuit ensures that the performances could take place in the absence of the 'real', paying audience. At the same time, the 'real' audience members are effectively transformed into second-order observers. They are observing the second group of actors observing the first group of actors.

HZY: So you were also building a kind of membrane between the audience and the performers – similar to what you were attempting to do with 4 x 4?

HTN: There are certainly similarities, but there are also differences in the modes of address between television and the stage. After all, actors on a stage perform in the presence of a 'real' audience and not a camera, and their presence results in a very different kind of power structure. On stage, the actors are vulnerable to the energies – real or imagined – that emanates from the 'live' audience. If the membrane in 4×4 was meant to shield the audience from the authority of the presenters, the membrane in *The King Lear Project* was meant to shield the performers and audience from each other.



An image of the actual audience projected on screen during performance. Documentation of *The King Lear Project, Part 1: The Avoidance of Love* (2007) Esplanade Theatre Studio

I think that a lot of this need for creating shields comes from my own experiences – not only of performing the lecture of *Utama* on stage, but also of sitting amongst the audience in plays. I've often been terrified by a kind of excessive theatricality that emerges when actors are playing to the audience, in the same way that I've always found it excruciating to be in the presence of people who try too hard to please.

HZY: Would you say that this this need for love is one of the dominant themes of Shakespeare's *King Lear*?

HTN: Exactly. *King Lear* begins with the famous secession scene where he demands that his three daughters perform a declaration of love for him before he would give them their third of the kingdom. In other words, Lear wanted to direct a play where his three daughters were the actresses, and his subjects, the audience. The two older daughters deliver marvellous performances, but Cordelia, the youngest freezes. She can't perform because she is the only one who really loves the old King. It is easy to pretend to say something that you don't mean, but it is impossible to pretend when the words are heartfelt – this is why Cordelia freezes.



The actress who was Cordelia
Documentation of *The King Lear Project, Part 1: The Avoidance of Love* (2007)
Esplanade Theatre Studio

For me, the girl who was to be Cordelia can only be played by a non-actress. Her unease on stage must be physically palpable. For me, silence and the awkwardness are two of the most profound and intense forms of realism on stage.

HZY: For me, *The King Lear Project* is an allegory of theatre in Singapore, which exists in a kind of complex Oedipal relationship to the State, and where there is almost this desperate need for love, embodied in its tendency to play to the audience.

HTN: Yes, I do think that the culture of theatre in Singapore is thoroughly Oedipalised. The State is a censuring – and censoring – Father handing out the dole. But I think that it is also important to see that this Oedipus complex is something profoundly internalised by theatre practice here, for example in the relationship between actors and the director, or between the theatre company and the audience.

The conditions for making theatre here seem to make it more vulnerable to these forces than say the visual arts – which is much more autonomous, mobile and fluid. The resources needed for making theatre simply makes it much more of a hostage to the State – and the box-office. With the extremely small critical mass of audience here, it is perhaps inevitable that theatre companies face an exceptional pressure to play to the audience – the theatricalisation of theatre, in order to survive.

HZY: Would you say that you have an inherent fear of theatre?

HTN: I would say that I am terrified of theatricality – which is not quite the same thing as having a fear of theatre.

For me, the most vital theatrical practices of the last few decades had in one way or another sought to either confront theatricality or to defeat it, for example Brechtian alienation or Artaud's alchemical theatre. But Singaporean theatrical practice today has remained largely bound to the tenets of naturalism and a continued privileging of text, which is not all that different from the format of a televised soap opera. It does not help that public policymaking with regards to the arts has been undertaken under the highly destructive view that art is and should be produced for the masses, the people, or the grassroots, thus erasing the line between art and mass-entertainment, and stifling the will to experiment.

HZY: I think complete absorption in a task is also a way in which a performer can be kept from becoming conscious of the audience, like the musicians that you work with in the performances of *EARTH* (2009-12) and *The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012). Tell us more about these works.

HTN: *EARTH* consists of 'live' musicians and 50 filmed actors constantly oscillating between consciousness and unconsciousness. During filming, the actors are perpetually absorbed in a complex system of cues as the 42-minute film is done in three continuous long takes. This ensures that the actors reach a state of semi-automatism, which prevents them from playing to the camera, or any imagined audience.

The screen on which they are projected, also functions as a screen that separates them from the presence of the living audience. Perhaps they are like ghosts, living out cycles of waking and sleeping in an adjacent dimension.



Still from *EARTH* (2009-12), HD, 42 min.

At the same time, the musicians performing 'live' to the film are immersed in producing a continuous track of long duration that is synchronised to the flow of images. The complexity of the task renders them oblivious to the presence of the audience. In a strange way, the musicians standing right before the audience are not really there. They are elsewhere.



Documentation of performance, *The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012), Esplanade Theatre Studio, Singapore, 60 min.

I've always found images of people in extreme states of concentration to be highly moving. And what I find fascinating about musicians is that this other space in which they are immersed is aurally materialised for us to enter into, to lose ourselves in.



Documentation of performance, *The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012), Esplanade Theatre Studio, Singapore, 60 min.

The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger consists of four musicians, placed upon four separate pedestals, and a traditional Malay dancer, isolated in a tank-like structure that resembles a screen. Throughout the 60 minutes of the performance, the musicians are completely immersed in a single, continuous drone-metal track, which tells the story of the Malayan tigers that had once roamed Singapore, but which became extinct with the coming of the British. The separation of the musicians from each other breaks up the normal modes of communication and interaction that takes place amongst a band during performance, hence reinforcing a form of deep concentration in the music. The constant presence of theatrical smoke further reduces visibility between musicians and the audience, and creates an atmosphere in the audience's experience of time can be stretched out. At the same time, the dancer – in the vein of Malay shamans who were said to possess the ability to transform into tigers – enters into a state of trance.



Documentation of performance, *The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012), Esplanade Theatre Studio, Singapore, 60 min.

HZY: And the music produced the performance is also extremely repetitive and very loud.

HTN: The repetitive structure and the extreme volume are necessary as a way of immobilizing the audience; and stasis opens up the senses to a wholly different way of experiencing time. In a way, *The Song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* is the logical continuation and perhaps conclusion of what I began with *The Lear Universe* and *EARTH*.

HZY: But one can also include amongst this series *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011) for the Singapore Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, even though this is not a theatre or performance piece.

HTN: Right. But I've always thought of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as a way to present film in a way that can be as close as possible to an experience of theatre or a performance – as an event that unfolds in real-time and in real-space.



Documentation of installation, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Venice Biennale 2011
Single Channel HD film, 13-channel sound, smoke machines, floodlight, show control system

Therefore, instead of a screen that recedes into invisibility when images are projected upon it, we had a floating screen that had a sculptural presence, and the film repeatedly draws the attention of the viewer back onto the presence of the screen.



Still from the film component of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), 28 min.

And in place of the concealed sound system of typical cinema theatres, the 13-channel sound system of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was designed specifically to create an audio

experience of extreme physicality, while speakers positioned on the ceiling ensure that sounds are generated with a directionality that ruptures the typical, more horizontal fields of sound that characterise the surround systems of cinemas.



Still from the film component of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), 28 min.

In a way, I think that all of my work, regardless whether they are films, videos, installations or performances, tend towards theatre, but theatre understood as that which happens when I am in the presence of another.

Sometimes, this 'otherness' even erupts from within, as happens in those moments of self-reflection – when I am thinking about myself, writing about myself. Moments such as this, when I am seeing myself with the eye of my mind as though I am on a stage; moments such as this, when I am hearing my own thoughts resonating the space between my ears, in the echo chamber of my mind.



Still from the film component of The Cloud of Unknowing (2011), 28 min.

Born in 1976 in Singapore, Ho Tzu Nyen creates projects that take the form of films, musical concerts and theatrical performances. His works are characterised by the investigation and incorporation of important cultural moments as their material, and ongoing experimentations on the relationships between sound and image. Recurrent concerns include: historiography and the reworking of historical objects, ranging from philosophical texts, historical painting and popular songs; and the analysis of the production of visual aesthetic and acoustic deconstruction. Recent one-person exhibitions include: The Cloud of Unknowing at MAM Project 016, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012); Singapore Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011); and EARTH at Artspace, Sydney (2011). He has also exhibited at various biennales, including: the Asian Art Biennial (2011); the 6th Asia-Pacific Triennial (2009); the 1st Singapore Biennale (2006); the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (2005); and the 26th Sao Paulo Biennale (2004). Ho's films have been presented as various film festivals, including the Sundance in 2012 and Venice in 2009. His first feature film HERE premiered at the 41st Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival (2009). Theatrical performances by Ho have been presented at: the Theater der Welt (2010); the KunstenFestivaldesArts (2006, 2008); and the Singapore Arts Festival (2006, 2008). He has also collaborated with many musicians in his work, including: Yasuhiro Morinaga (Japan); Stefano Pilia (Italy); Black to Comm (Germany); Wolfram (Poland); Oren Ambarchi (Australia); Randolf Ariola (Singapore); Bani Haykal (Singapore); 3 Tigers (Singapore); and Aki Onda (US/Japan). In 2011, De Stijl Records released the soundtrack to EARTH by Black to Comm, featuring Vindicatrix on vocals.