

21 February 2021

S.E.A. Focus

"Discussing Theatricality in National Histories with Ho Tzu Nyen"

Link: <https://seafocus.sg/discussing-theatricality-in-national-histories-with-ho-tzu-nyen/>



22 – 31 January 2021
Tanjong Pagar Distripark

VIP Login

About ▾

S.E.A. Focus Curated ▾

Artists

Galleries

Programmes

Editorial ▾

Educational Resources



Ho Tzu Nyen, 'One or Several Tigers', 2017. Synchronized double-channel HD projection, automated screen, shadow puppets, 10 channel sound, show control system. Courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

Discussing Theatricality in National Histories with Ho Tzu Nyen

Ho Tzu Nyen (b. 1976, Singapore) has been widely exhibited with one person exhibitions at the Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art, Oldenburg (2019), Kunstverein, Hamburg (2018), Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai (2018), TPAM, Yokohama (2018), Asia Art Archive (2017), Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (2015), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012) and Artspace, Sydney (2011), amongst others. He also represented Singapore at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011). Recent group exhibitions include MOCA, Busan (2019), Aichi Triennial 2019, Toyota City and Nagoya City (2019), Sharjah Biennial 14, Sharjah (2019), Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2018), amongst others. He has participated in numerous international film festivals including Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah (2012) and the 41st Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes International Film Festival in France (2009). He was an Artist-in-Residency at the DAAD (Berlin) from 2015 to 2016, and the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2012 to 2015).

You described your works *One or Several Tigers* (2018) and *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014) as attempts at 'dreaming' of other histories apart from those sanctioned by the state. Is this state of 'dreaming' significant to your practice? How would you describe the 'reality' or 'realness' of your artistic narratives?

To cite an old Chinese classic, Chuang Tzu was said to have dreamt of being a butterfly, happily flitting and fluttering about. He didn't know if he was Chuang Tzu who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu.



Ho Tzu Nyen, 'One or Several Tigers', 2017. Synchronized double-channel HD projection, automated screen, shadow puppets, 10 channel sound, show control system. Courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

There seems to be an especially inherent theatricality to your works. With regards to the sociocultural or national histories that you remain interested in, how would you say this 'performativity' of Narrative plays out within your practice?

Theatricality, at the most basic, fundamental level, is the awareness of being seen, or encountered. As such, we might say that all works of art are inherently theatrical, since they exist to be engaged with, even if the audience is no one else but the maker himself or herself. It is also conceivable that one's audience is non-human, for example in the case of rituals performed for the spirits and the gods, or perhaps aliens, such as the sounds projected into outer space by my Indonesian artist friend Venzha Christ.

I suppose one can think of national histories as innately theatrical, since they are designed as stories to be addressed to another, whom they interpolate into the narrative. All national histories insist on the inevitability of the State. Perhaps the work of art is defined by a process of continuous othering, while national histories function through the elimination of otherness...

You have spoken before about the less than satisfactory state of artistic discourse in Singapore. Would you say that your practice is somewhat predicated on this apparent lack within the cultural ecology of Singapore? How would you describe the attempts in recent years (by artists, collectives, independent spaces, etc.) to ameliorate or challenge this vacancy?

The cultural ecology of Singapore has remained stunted for many reasons. Unfortunately, this continues to be true. But at the same time, there have always been exceptional individuals and groups who have not only soldiered on, but made things better for others. As for my own practice, I am sure that the scene made a direct impact on who I am, and why I do what I do. I believe that an artist is, in some ways, an expression of his or her milieu. But I do not believe that my relationship to the cultural ecology is one solely of "lack". Rather there have always been people and things that have also inspired me.

Speaking with Interview Magazine back in 2012, you described a "spiritual castration" that seemed to characterise the demythologised secularism of modern experience in Singapore. Do you maintain this view? How would you position the importance of the 'mythic' in social and cultural organisation and identity, especially in contemporary Singapore?

At that time, I was probably thinking of Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral*, which is of course a cultural milestone for us in Singapore. But these days, I think it might be important to shift from this unifocal phallo-centrism – a single-mindedness on the male organ and the almost paranoiac fear of its lack, in order to try to relate to the world in a much more distributed way. Not the third eye of the heroic saint, but a thousand small eyes, like those of the potato.

About the mythic and the secular, I think that question is not so much one or the other, but rather how one can, and is very often the other. After all, the secular can itself be understood as a kind of myth. I think Bataille once described the myth of modernity as the absence of myth.

Could you tell us more about some upcoming projects or ideas you are currently exploring, that audiences can look forward to?

I am now working on a project called *Voice of Void*. It is an installation with projection, sound and a VR component, and is centred around a group of Japanese philosophers known as the Kyoto School and their experiences during the Second World War. The Kyoto School were regarded as the most significant Japanese philosophers of their time, but their reputation was severely compromised after WW2. After that, I will have another project in Japan dealing with their secret agencies, spies and soldiers in Southeast Asia. But I still have much to do to get there!

