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Tokyo Art Beat

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Interviews

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Interview With Ho Tzu Nyen: Accessing History of Others and Infinite Multiplicities of Time (Interviewed by Chiaki Soma)

Interview with Ho Tzu Nyen on the occasion of his solo exhibition "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. The exhibition runs until July 7, 2024.



Ho Tzu Nyen at the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo) Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo holds the **Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents** exhibition from April 6 through July 7, 2024.

Ho Tzu Nyen was born in 1976 in Singapore, where he lives and works. Drawing on existing footage, archival material, and documentation, Ho creates films, video installations, and performances that traverse Southeast Asia's historical events, political ideologies, subjectivities, and cultural identities. He represented Singapore at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, and his work has been presented in numerous international theaters and film festivals. In addition to a group exhibition, *Time of Others*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in 2015, he has presented a series of new works in Japan, such as *Hotel Aporia* (Aichi Triennale 2019), *Voice of Void* (Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, YCAM, 2021), and his solo show *Night March of 100 Monsters* (Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, 2021).

Welcoming NPO Arts Commons Tokyo Representative Director and Art Producer **Chiaki Soma** as an interviewer, Tokyo Art Beat sat down with Ho Tzu Nyen to discuss his latest project, interests in the Kyoto School and Japanese wartime history, difficulties in accessing the history of others, and multiple forms of time. 【Tokyo Art Beat】

Secret agents and comprehensive perspective

—This is your second exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, following the group show *Time of Others* in 2015. *A for Agents* is an enigmatic and, in a way, provocative title. Can you explain its meaning?

For me, words always have multiple meanings. The first possible possible reading for "agents" is that of "secret agents." For example, *The Nameless* (2015) features Lai Teck, a Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party and a triple agent serving the French, British, and Japanese secret forces during World War II. He is a problematic character but, on the other hand, also a "medium" of historical forces. As the three foreign powers he served were colonial and imperial forces that sought to dominate Southeast Asia, I think of him as a medium with multiple agencies passing through him. Therefore, I see him as the embodiment of Southeast Asian history. This idea also connects to the notion of shapeshifting, a recurrent theme in my works. For example, the Malayan tiger is often considered a shapeshifting figure and a conduit for ancestral spirits.

Another meaning of "agents" is "agency," in the sense of volition or acting on one's will. We tend to assume that every figure has a singular agency, but Lai Teck, for example, was a subject of multiple agencies. I prefer thinking of agencies in the plural because I believe that we are always subject to multiple and often contradictory agencies and forces.



Ho Tzu Nyen Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

—This exhibition begins with *CDOSEA* (2017-), an online platform for the project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, which you initiated in 2012, and the first letter in the alphabet, "A." I sense your commitment and ethics as an artist in this dictionary-like style and repetitive expression. How does this desire to be exhaustive and repetitive connect to *T for Time* (2023)?

The desire to be comprehensive has always been my starting point and goal. But almost always, as I work on my projects, I realize my limitations in time and ability. For example, when I started the research for *T for Time*, I wanted to look into different disciplines and fields related to the concepts and politics of time. But very quickly, I realized that every single existing discipline- from history to mythology to religion- is deeply connected to the question of time and that it is impossible to be truly comprehensive. The limitation is linked to our mortality and our subjective and always contingent positions. Therefore, what I gradually felt during this process was instead a sense of fragility and vulnerability, which became very important to me in *T for Time*, and it also made me aware of how many of my earlier projects were marked by these qualities, even if it is not apparent at first glance.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) Photo by Kenji Morita

For example, *CDOSEA* structure suggests a certain kind of encyclopedic ambition- a drive to be comprehensive from "A" to "Z." And yet, after "Z," we always return to a different "A" due to the variation created by the algorithmic editing system. It is not a linear timeline- repetition creates a difference. Therefore, whatever propositions or speculations I made can only be one render or one version of multiple possibilities.

There are 42 chapters in *T for Time* because that was as far as I got with the time I had. However, arriving at the point of my limitation and accepting it became a vital component of this project.

Infinite multiplicities of time

—I noticed that the duration of each *Timepiece* in *T for Time* is quite different- some last only seconds, while others are infinite and continuously loop. Did you intend to connect this infinity concept to the Kyoto School's founder, Kitaro Nishida's concept of void, as void is also a kind of infinity?

Varying durations were my point of interest. Some of these *Timepieces* are short, closed loops, while others are not videos but applications that unfold over 24 hours. They may be described as open loops because they don't truly repeat. Of course, the museum closes at 18:00, but I wanted these applications to continue functioning and changing even if no one was there to see them.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "T for Time: Timepieces" (Part, 2023-ongoing)

T for Time was an attempt to look into the multiplicities of time. In the end, it was also an affirmation that my subjective contingent position is also a form of time, as real and concrete as any religious or scientific model. Sometimes, with certain artworks, we remove the subjective position so that it takes on an objective tone. I started *T for Time* in that vein but ended up grappling with my own time, my existence in this world, my limitations, and my encounters and experiences of the other people around me, who affect who I am and how I think. I wanted to find a way to fold that subjectivity into the work, to make these experiences equal to the grand cosmological theories of time.

Interestingly, words and concepts such as "emptiness" or "void" recur with more frequency in my mind than does "infinity." Maybe this has to do with my upbringing in a Taoist and Buddhist environment. Western thinking sees emptiness as a lack, but in Eastern philosophy, it is seen as potential, and here, I agree with you that this connects to the notion of infinity. After all, any number divided by zero yields infinity. But maybe infinity feels and sounds too grand for me, such that I still prefer the relative modesty of the zero, of emptiness.



Chiaki Soma Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

—Noticing that you also included the date and time you wrote the notes for *Timepieces*, I felt your intention to create different timelines in one exhibition. It is even a little provocative that *Timepieces* are presented repeatedly on rectangular screens on the museum's white wall, isn't it?

When we see texts placed next to an artwork in a museum, we immediately assume that the museum authored such texts. I thought including the date and time I wrote these texts was a highly efficient way to clarify my authorship. But the pinpointing of the exact moment in which they were written also evokes a kind of fragility that I thought works very well with the tone of the texts, which emphasize the multiplicity of the temporalities, in which the personal, the historical, the mythical, and the theoretical can exist side by side.



Indeed, theatricality has always been an essential factor in my work. For me, theatricality is a recognition of the audience's presence, and it is deeply connected to my predilection for loud volume and especially low frequencies, which can physically affect the bodies of audiences. However, I was intrigued by the possibility of almost silence for the *Timepieces*.

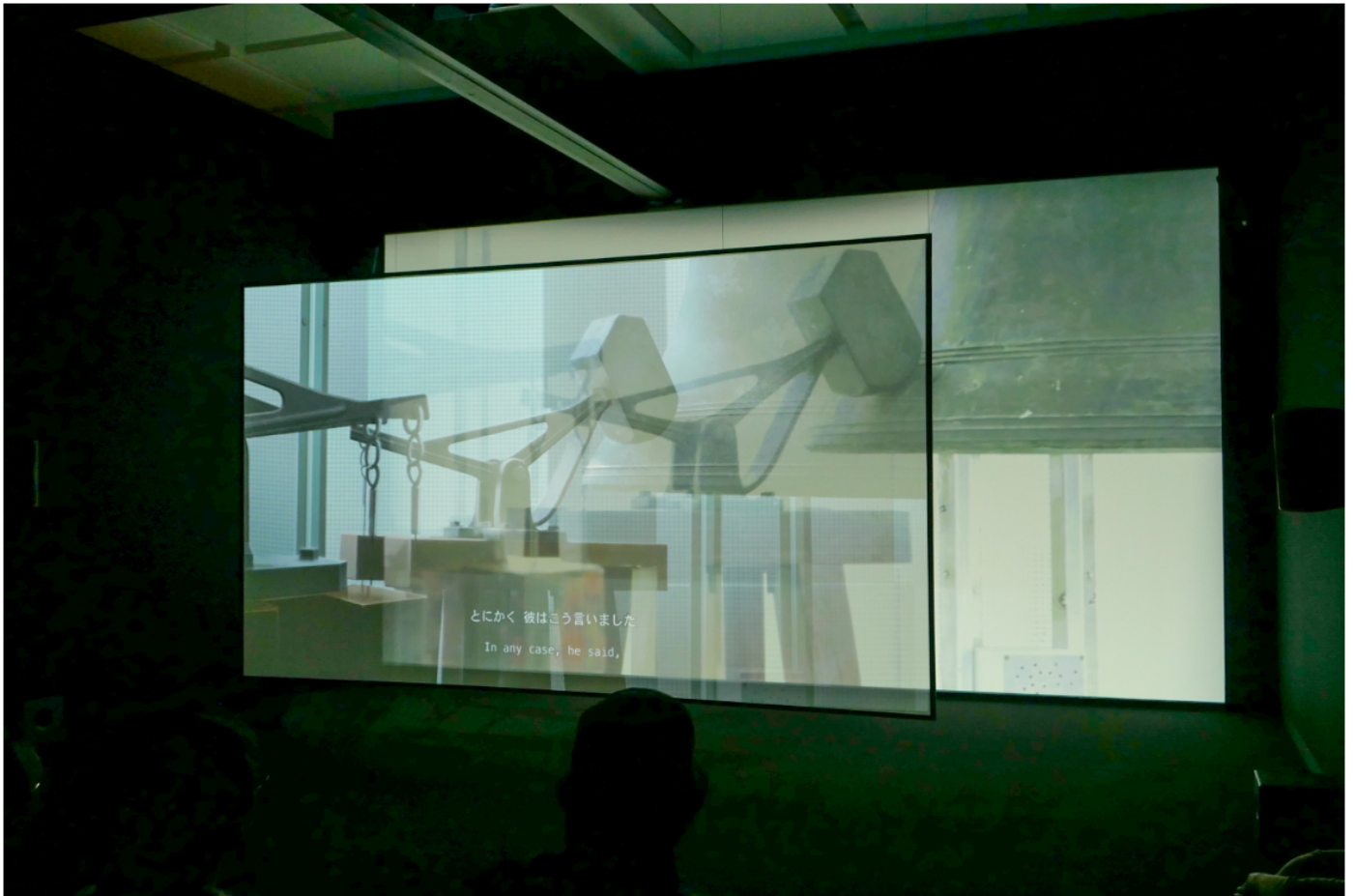
T for Time is a two-part work. The first part features forty-two almost silent *Timepieces* on monitors accompanied by my written texts. The second part is the double-channeled video projections, which use an algorithmic editing system to create multiple narratives about each *Timepiece*. At the Singapore Art Museum, the *Timepieces* were completely silent. But this time around, as we distributed them across the museum, I started to include very soft and discreet sounds in specific timepieces, usually concerning their specific placements in the exhibition space and their potential connection with other works.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "T for Time: Timepieces" (Part, 2023)
Photo: Kenji Morita

—This also creates a different relationship between the audience and the text, isn't it? The audience pays attention not only to the visual aspect of the monitors but also to the sound and the written words, trying to understand them.

Exactly. In a sense, the theatricality of loud and intense volumes pushes the audience out of the work and into their bodies in the actual space. Silence can have the opposite effect by giving the audience space to enter or be absorbed by the work. Sometimes, as a joke or criticism, we say that we go to a museum and spend more time reading the captions on the wall than looking at the artwork. In the case of *Timepieces*, I deliberately chose to include the notes so that the audience may spend more time reading than looking at the moving images. This time was significant to me within the dramaturgy of the entire exhibition. The texts, read individually and in silence, become a counterpoint to the works characterized by larger, louder, and more intense projected videos.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "T for Time" (2023) Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

Kyoto School and Japanese Trilogy

—*Hotel Aporia* (2019), *Voice of Void* (2021), and *Night March of Hundred Monsters* (2021) are a series of works that could also be described as the "Japanese Trilogy." You also conducted intense research with the Japanese team for several years. How do you find the possibility and limitations of accessing the history of others as an "outsider"?

My interest in Japanese wartime history started with an encounter with the Kyoto School around 2017. I began thinking about how the extremely complicated and convoluted histories could be given shape and what it means to do this as an "outsider." In 2018, curator David Teh invited me to do a project on these interests at Gwangju Biennale. The project became a live performance and group reading event across two days, known as "The Kyoto School Project"- the precursor of the so-called **"Japanese Trilogy."** It featured live, improvised music by the band FEN, whose name refers to Far East Network- the radio station serving American military bases in Okinawa in the post-war years. FEN is an improvised music project group comprised of Otomo Yoshide from Japan, Yan Jun from China, Yuen Chee Wai from Singapore, and Ryu Hankil from South Korea, who work with unrehearsed improvisations. I also invited Park Minhee, a classically trained singer and experimental musician from Seoul, to sing a text over their music about a series of roundtable discussions held by four members of the Kyoto School during the war years. The collaborators' "pan-Asian" backgrounds were part of the conceptual framework of "The Kyoto School Project" because, in a sense, none of us were truly "outsiders." All of us were from places connected or synchronized by Japanese Imperialism during World War II. In addition, a series of presentations by scholars and artists, such as Park Chan-Kyong, on the Kyoto School and ideas of Pan-Asianism also framed this event.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "Voice of Void" (Detail, VR, 2021)
Photo: Kenji Morita

The following year, the curator, Yoko Nose, invited me to do a project for the Aichi Triennale 2019. Initially, I wanted to create a project about the Kyoto School, but I felt I was still not ready. I needed to understand the wider social context of the time, so I expanded my focus by looking at a broader demographic of Japanese historical personages. This included a female ryokan caretaker, a squadron of "kamikaze" pilots, the film director Yasujiro Ozu, and the animator Ryuichi Yokoyama- who were both dispatched to Southeast Asia to make propaganda- and the Kyoto School. And this was how *Hotel Aporia* came about.

During its making, engaging with the history of "others" became one of the central ethical and aesthetic questions to the extent that I believed what I had to say was less important than how it was to be said. The subject's position was also critical- with whose voice could these utterances be made? I felt that the work could not be a "monologue" but should be a kind of "polylogue" constructed from my interactions with a circle of Japanese collaborators, including Yoko Nose, the dramaturg and translator Tomoyuki Arai, and the assistant translator Kazue Suzuki. This resulted in a structural circulation between myself as an outsider and Japanese insiders, who also, in a sense, became my informants or informers. I've also always been inspired by the notion of "free indirect discourse" elaborated by Pier Paolo Pasolini- when narratorial objectivity cannot be distinguished from characterological subjectivity, it leads to a polyvocal and polyphonic utterance.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "Voice of Void" (2021) Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

The next step was ***Voice of Void***, first presented at the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media [YCAM]. Like *Hotel Aporia*, it dealt with many historical characters, but they were all part of the Kyoto School circle this time. *Voice of Void* was my attempt to narrow my focus and deepen my engagement with the Kyoto School. However, once again, the contents of this work could only be generated through an intensive engagement with Japanese collaborators, such as Tomoyuki Arai and the translator Miho Tsuji. The form of "free indirect discourse" was also deeply embedded into the structure, featuring the voices of many prominent Japanese performers and voice actors.

Finally, this was followed by ***Night March of Hundred Monsters*** (Toyota Municipal Museum of Art), in which I decided to widen the focus by splicing complex wartime histories with the popular motif of the Yokai, which had its roots in folk tradition but is now widely commercialized and disseminated through manga and anime culture. I suppose this was my slightly strange and monstrous attempt at "pop art."

Focus on subjective time and power

—How do these years of research connect to this exhibition?

Those were intense, fruitful years of experimental research in which I was privileged to develop new collaborations and friendships. At the same time, my research process was about more than just gathering data or obtaining mastery over discourses. Instead, it is a way to create a world I can imaginatively inhabit. I needed to feel this world and dream in it without recourse to standardized options and readymade judgments. And I must say, immersing in those historical and heavy subject matters for so many years was not easy. Therefore, after *Night March of Hundred Monsters*, I felt it was time to move on and explore other dimensions of life. This led to my interest in the question of time, which resulted in my latest work, *T for Time*.

Time is at once the most abstract of notions and also the most concrete of experiences. My research led me to study horological histories, the geopolitics of time, and various branches of science, including biology and physics. But at the same time, I became very interested in subjective time, our experiences of aging, death, nostalgia, and memory. The contrast between the abstract and the intensely personal was interesting and liberated me from my previous focus on Japanese wartime histories. Interestingly, all engagements with histories presuppose an assumption about the nature and structure of time, which is often left unannounced and unexamined, and this is partially my reason for turning my attention to time. Moreover, as an artist who mostly works with moving images, I consider time the true substance or material with which I work.



Installation view of the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2024) "T for Time: Timepieces" (Part, 2023-ongoing) Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

——For the last question, let's return to the realities of our world. How do you see the current times of different histories and contexts, oppression and violence, and what would you like to do in the future as an artist?

In a way, all of the geopolitical problems we are facing now stem from the unresolved problems and traumas of the past, which return to haunt us like ghosts. Time does not simply move in a straight line but also loops back upon itself, like eddies in a river. According to Sigmund Freud, the unconscious does not experience time, and traumas we experience in the past continue to exist or rather persist in the present, perhaps in a different form.

Feeling powerless against this form of bad, eternal repetition is very much a feeling of our age. And we also seem to lack coherent visions or inspirations for where the future could go. Of late, I've started thinking that perhaps it is increasingly important for us to empower ourselves. But this requires a radical reconfiguration of how we intuitively understand power today- as a kind of force directed externally over other people. In such a configuration, power is always understood as something negative, and the function of democracy seems directed to restrict and reduce power. But I am interested in a different form of power, power directed inwards- power as capacity. Or, better yet, power as the capacity to be affected, which I like to understand as the intensification of our sensitivity and empathy. Interestingly, for the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who is the starting inspiration for some of these ideas, democracy can be understood as a form of arrangement in which power is amplified through the relation of bodies to each other- a positive form of power, which is of course completely antithetical to the vulgar forms of power we see everywhere today manifested in the dictators plaguing us at the moment. I would like to spend time researching the different concepts and lineages of power across different cultures.



Ho Tzu Nyen at the "Ho Tzu Nyen: A for Agents" (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo) Photo by Tokyo Art Beat

Ho Tzu Nyen

Ho Tzu Nyen was born in 1976 in Singapore, where he lives and works. His films, film-based installations, and performances draw from a vast range of cultural materials and discourse, repurposed into a visual machinery that animates the entanglement and complexity of history, subjectivity, and power. Ho's recent solo exhibitions were held at Singapore Art Museum (2023), Hammer Museum (Los Angeles, 2022), Toyota Municipal Museum of Art (Aichi, 2021–22), Crow Museum of Asian Art of the University of Texas at Dallas (2021), Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (2021), Kunstverein in Hamburg (2018), and Ming Contemporary Art Museum (Shanghai, 2018). He represented Singapore at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. Ho's recent group exhibitions include Thailand Biennale (2023), Aichi Triennale (2019), 12th Gwangju Biennale (2018), and 10th Shanghai Biennale (2014). His works have also been presented in numerous international theaters and film festivals, including Theater der Welt (2010, 2023), Holland Festival (2018, 2020), Berlin International Film Festival (2015), Sundance Film Festival (2012), and 41st Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival (2009). In 2019, Ho co-curated the 7th Asian Art Biennial with Taiwanese artist Hsu Chia-Wei at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts.

Chiaki Soma

NPO Arts Commons Tokyo Representative Director. Art Producer. Soma specializes in curating and producing cross-disciplinary, contemporary art practices, including theatre, contemporary art, socially engaged art, and media art employing VR/AR technology. Over the past twenty years, she has directed numerous projects in Japan, Asia, and Europe. She has served as the first Program Director of Festival/Tokyo (2009-2013), curator of the Performing Arts section of Aichi Triennale 2019 and Aichi Triennale 2022, Chairperson and Executive Director of Theater Commons (2017-present), Program Director of Theater der Welt 2023, etc. Recipient of the Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from France's Minister of Culture in 2015 and Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs' 71st Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology's Art Encouragement Prize in 2021. Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts (Global Art Practice) since 2021.



Alena Heiß

Editor at Tokyo Art Beat since 2021. Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Keio University. Specializes in arts-based research, performative sociology, and visual sociology.

Articles