

Forum: **“Is Performance Art today in a state of ‘menopause’?”**

2 to 5 PM Friday, 14 April, 2006 Venue: Singapore Art Museum

Speakers:

Sergio Edelsztein (Israel); Nani Kahar (Malaysia); Ko Siu Lan (Hong Kong); Thomas Berghuis (Netherlands/ Australia)

Moderator: Ray Langenbach (US/ Malaysia)

Transcribed from tape recordings by Noora Zul

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Just a reminder, as we go on, this is meant to be a conversational session. Some of you might want to move up a bit closer, and then we have more of a sense of dialogue and conversation during the afternoon. It's quite different from the morning session, which is really more of an information-based, lecture-based affair. So it's a roundtable, you know, even though the tables are not round.

So we're going to start with short position statements by each of the participants appearing today: Ko Siu Lan from Hong Kong, Sergio Edelsztein from Tel Aviv, Nani Kahar from Kuala Lumpur, and Thomas Berghuis from Sydney. And they will make opening arguments, opening provocations, opening statements about the topic: 'Is Performance Art in a State of Menopause?' which has become itself a kind of interesting: How did this topic arise? Everybody's disclaiming it. No one is admitting that they came up with the term 'menopause'. So we're not sure where it came from. But the topic arose out of an earlier statement, which came from a member of the audience at an event last year in Kuala Lumpur, which was the Stopover event, during which a number of artists from Japan and Singapore came up to Kuala Lumpur. After watching a few performances, this member of the audience said, "Performance art is the buggy whip of our time". The implication was that it was obsolete, that it was an artifact from the previous era, that it had retained elements of, or it was a remnant in a sense of a particular era in which it was extremely relevant for the socio-political aesthetic conditions of that time. What that time was is unclear, perhaps mid-century, perhaps two-thirds of the way through the last century, perhaps the beginning of the last century. Not clear. And he wasn't willing to actually define when the buggy became obsolete. Or the buggy whip. But that's the question: what is the relevance of this particular form to us now, now that FOI is in its third incarnation. How many incarnations will it have? Or will it then proliferate into other incarnations of other forms? So that's in general what we're looking: the issue of obsolescence. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Ray Langenbach and I'm presently from Kuala Lumpur.

OK, I'm going to start with throwing out a few provocations of my own, which I sent to the panelists. And they will go through theirs and we'll start...then we'll start with Siu Lan, and then go to Sergio, Nani, and Thomas Berghuis,, and then open it to the audience. And my job is to keep this on the beam, on topic. And I will, try to keep my dictatorial tendencies to a minimum. But the effort really is to stay on topic today. We're looking at this event; we're not really looking at the Satu Kali event in Kuala Lumpur, this afternoon.

Ok, so my provocations. Is the art form obsolete, or unnecessary or washed up, cleansed up or sanitized at this point? Was performance art a politically alive form that has now become institutionalized and conventionalized? Has it been mainstreamed to the extent where it is no longer necessary and no longer of relevance as a marginal form? Has it been appropriated in the sense of the Frankfurt School's notion of appropriation where the capitalist system appropriates all of its margins and the new commodity is formed through that process of appropriation? Or was it ever really so political, as we like to believe, is that part of its mythos, that it was really a political form or a marginal form or is it the conventional bourgeois civilizing of a much more radical tradition of agit-prop from the last century and of street theatre? Was performance art, for example, in Singapore, as radical as Boal's forum theatre to which the government attached it, theoretically and practically, and then carried out a de facto ban against the two – no performing without the license and no sponsorship allowable from the State? So has it in a sense become radicalized through its association, rather than through its own characteristics? And that is a particular question, perhaps, for Singapore.

Is performance art an art form in which a small club of alienated bourgeois intellectuals incestuously amplify their collective view of the world? Or is there... sorry what? (*Audience member*: Yes) of which I am actually a member of good standing in the club... is there some real form of research that

performance artists engage in? In other words, is there an area of real research into new forms and new ideas in performance, or is it simply a cheap way to travel to other countries and stay at, in, you know, twin share rooms with people you don't know and...

Should this question be answered differently by people of different identities – gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national, religious orientations? Is performance art still viable in some countries and environments, but no longer viable in others? What are the social conditions that make the form take hold and become viable in certain situations or in certain periods of time, and in other periods of time, in other cultural milieu to not be viable, or not be necessary perhaps? Are these conditions economic or are they political? Does this have to do with the growth of urban middle class, presence of art schools, pedagogy etc? Or is the problem more with the form with such performance art symposia as Future of Imagination, for example, and other international performance art meetings, rather than a problem with the form itself? Does the commodification really have more to do with the kinds of symposia that we engage in?

Finally, we recently had a discussion in KL about the *warisan badan*, the 'heritage of the body', and looking at Malaysian performance, all kinds of performance and performance art. The heritage of the body, the body politic, for example. But one of the artists up there actually didn't want to engage in this because he said that as soon as you mention the body, that the end of the conversation is already inherent in the conversation. In other words, the body is so obsessive for us, such a hot point of concentration due to the fact that we all have a body that it has somehow become the centre of discussion and it eliminates all possibilities of systematic discussions, a systematic view of performance, a view of performance in social systems and much more broad topics. And so that brings up my final question of whether it is really the body in performance art that has become obsolete, rather than performance art as a form itself? And along the lines of perhaps, the Australian artist, Stelarc, who, for the last twenty years, has been proclaiming the body obsolete in his work, not necessarily in the form of performance, but in an advanced cybernetic society that the body itself is a form of obsolescence. So we will let it go with that and we will start with Ko Siu Lan from Hong Kong. And you'll get a little introduction.

Siu Lan is an artist and a curator. She has a Bachelor in Sociology from the University of Hong Kong. Sorry, and a Masters in Sociology. Her research is on the migrant sex workers in Hong Kong. She works a lot with NGOs in the area of community development and cultural action projects. And she is one of the organizers and curators of a number of Hong Kong performance art events such as 'Hong Kong on the Move' in 2005 and 2006. Siu Lan.

## **KO SIU LAN**

Thank you. I think I will start with a few of the comments that I overheard in these few days, during this event. Last night, I overheard a telephone conversation of someone describing the event to the person he or she was speaking on the phone: "Um, what is this festival all about? Oh it's about a bunch of people trying to take photographs and videos in front of an artist, the people behind trying to see through the cameras and video what is happening. And then another bunch of people at the very back, discussing about why, how performance art has become a bunch of people taking photographs and videos. You know what? The great thing about performance art is a rubbish bin."

And then at the toilet of Substation, you know, I went to toilet and I overheard two ladies talking, describing some parts of the performance, the last part of their comment goes: "What is happening to The Substation?" The answer...

Maybe I'm not going to first answer the question, "Is Performance Art in 'Menopause'?" because I would talk about what do I think about this question at the end. I will just talk very frankly from the perspective as a young artist, well, who has been practicing performance art for four years, as a, well I would say, as quite a newcomer to the scene. And I would just talk about the feelings from a very frank perspective.

I remember the first time why I was asked to do a performance without even performing. I was asked to perform in a festival in Korea. And actually that was about the first or second time I actually publicly show my artwork. And I was very surprised when I was asked to do so, because no one asked for my CV. The curator in Korea has never even met me so that's why he failed to recognize, he failed to even fetch me up at the airport in Korea, of course.

I was thinking, what are these people doing? Inviting me without knowing anything about me? And what is the most amazing for me afterwards is, actually afterwards, after I performed in Korea, a lot of people continue to do that - without even seeing my artwork and that includes Chumpon who invited me to Asiatopia well after we met in Korea. But you never saw me performing. So after you invite me, of course I also accepted your invitation, of course I want to go to Bangkok as long as someone is paying for me. And then I remember I feel very confused, and at the same time, I feel, oh it's kind of very funny, this medium, I get to meet all sorts of people from all over the world and they are doing something, sometimes, seems to be interesting, sometimes seems to be very boring, sometimes like as if it's very radical. And I remember the excitement when I see some very good artwork or some artwork that I don't know why it excites me, but it just excites me and continues to make an impression on me with a lot of reflections. And of course I remember those times when I was somewhere else and not in the middle of the performance where people are jerking off or mutilating themselves or inflicting pain on themselves, in front of me, getting on my nerves and failed to do so. So I was very excited about all these in the beginning.

Then this, well, after three or four years, I start to, well I would say, in the beginning, I'm not really that concerned about oh I want to be an artist or I want to do performance art. It's actually a little bit playful. Oh I'm doing something and someone actually likes it and they continue to invite me, so okay, I'll continue to do it. And then, after two years, I start to think: 'Oh my God, what is performance art?' I have been doing that for two years. And then I start to reflect more deeply about these issues, and then I start to look at books and things like that and then one of the very constant dilemma I have is I feel like, I'm like a cat chasing after my own tail all the time. Every time I ask myself what is performance art, and I just couldn't get the answer or I just couldn't seem to be asking the right question. But every time when I am in a festival, when I am doing my own artwork, I am confronted with this question that I think maybe it is the wrong question, but then I also feel that it is very rightful to ask this question if you are doing this kind of art. So maybe some of you can help me with this question that I'm still struggling with.

Of course, I have come up with all the people who said that the thing about performance art is actually not trying to define what is performance art, because it is an art form that defies definition, that asks for no definition and no... freeing of other kinds of ideology. Or there are other people who say well performance art is actually a rubbish bin, or actually, they put in all their artworks that they don't know how to categorize in the established mainstream art forms to put it into this category, so it's a rubbish bin. I still don't know and that is still a constant question that I always try to ask.

And then I also think what is so avant-garde about performance art because when people who say they're doing performance art why should they continue to do this because it's a kind of avant-garde art form. But then I start to feel that what is so avant-garde about all these things? Is it about testing limits of your body, of morals of the society? But sometimes I just, after the first two years, or after my nerves being stepped on for so many times, they just failed to do so or you need to have something much more stronger or sometimes when I think, when you look at the reality it's much more ridiculous and much more absurd than what a lot of these artwork are trying to get at. Even when we say that the people are very horrified about Chinese performance artists eating babies but, well, it's happening in the real world. It's much more horrifying in the real world than what is happening here. So what is more avant-garde, more special about these performance artists?

Socially engaging, engaging with the public. Of course I would say: "Oh, why I engage in this because I think it's a very liberal form it's an art form that everyone can participate in, and everyone, if you have an idea, can participate." But the truth is, it's not so. You know, you need to have certain kind of connection, background in order to start doing an artwork, or you need a certain kind of platform to start doing a performance artwork. And I, it sometimes just makes me feel uncomfortable for some artists who try to engage or who try to put in social issues in their artwork but then, for example, there is some artists in China who try to work on issues regarding the migrants. And they invited migrants to collaborate with them in the artwork. But then it makes me feel very uncomfortable because they are not really participating, asking for the subjectivity of these migrants to curate something, to participate in the creative process but rather they are using these migrants as an object, or as a fetish object even in their artwork. When people go to see this exhibition, the migrants are actually, for example, there is an artwork at the opening of the UNESCO project for migrants, this artist invited migrants to get into the escalator

and people who went to see the exhibition will come into the escalator with migrants half-naked in the escalator, wearing their hat, looking at them. So these migrants will just go up and down the escalator with all these people who went to see the exhibition. But for God's sake, these people know nothing about those artwork, and know nothing about the exhibition but they were just asked to act as the idiot in front of all these artists and art goers and it's supposed to be an exhibition that speaks for them. So this kind of situation makes me annoyed and puzzled and angry.

And the problem about going to festivals, of course the first two years it was great you get to travel to new countries and meeting new people. But slowly, and sometimes I also feel very frustrated because isn't it more about a bunch of artists, a small group of artists, you know, meeting each other, showing artwork, and then getting drunk? And then sometimes I feel that it's so very distanced from the reality and the culture that they supposedly sometimes they told me, "Oh you're going to do cultural exchange with the local community." We went there for three days or four days without even going to see other parts of the country except for the venue of the performance, and then the restaurant of the performance and then... it goes on like that, so what is so socially engaging about performance art and performance artists?

And the problem with festivals, I find myself, okay, doing artwork just because I was invited to perform in a festival some times. And I find that also... I discuss that with other artists and sometimes I find it's the same thing: 'We are doing artwork not because we... not spontaneously but just because, oh, you are invited to this festival so I try to, oh, dig inside of me. Ah! There is this thing that maybe is good to talk about and then I show it.' It's not about something that you initiate yourself but of course this is also linked to the fact that performance needs an audience in order to establish that as a performance artwork. It's not like a painting where you can do in the backyard or something like that. But sometimes, I feel it's so much commissioned by festivals and the problem with festivals, the form of it is so much fixed already there, you know you're going to a festival where there is a program, and then there will be a group of audience. It's so much performative and it limits the possibilities of performance artwork of having more, maybe it should be more time basis. It should go on for two or three years, or maybe it can be more socially engaging rather than in a museum setting. It can be with the landscape, and with the environment, with the architecture. The fact that a festival can only be three or four days and then it should be set into a time schedule really limits, I think, the possibility of curating an artwork of a different form. But why do I still want to do performance art? And why am I still so much excited by it? And I still want to do it and I'm still very much excited about performance art. When I think of it is because, I think, in this art form, it represents for me a land, it's almost a land of absolute freedom, a land where almost everything is possible, everything will be accepted. You can do whatever you want, well, not necessarily mean everything is good. But there is this basic spirit that I really find it amazing – this absolute acceptance that is so rare, that is so hard to find in this society no matter where you go. You couldn't find this almost like a utopia, no, I don't know how to describe this. But this really excites me, and this expectation every time you go to see a performance artwork, you don't know what is going to happen, you don't know what to expect. And this uncertainty really excites me and I think it's something really great. Still is, nowadays. But then of course there's a, I think, because of this spirit of absolute freedom, this is the trait of the art form itself, 'cause it is, for them. There is no regulation so you can expect, you know, anything that includes the best thing and the worst thing. And that is actually what I experience as some of the best moments of life that I experience is in seeing a performance artwork and some of the worst moment of my life too.

Ok, and then, this freedom, and also, well recently, I talked with an artist from China. He did an artwork that he actually talks with a lot of different old men and he tried to convince them to fuck himself for the sake of art. So, at the end, he managed to convince one old man, 70-year old man to perform this piece with him, which is videotaped. And, you know, it's called 'For the Sake of Art', why I say that is because in the video it's very deliberate say that because he was talking to the old man, say "Oh we are", so the old man ask "Why do you want me to do this with you?" He said, "Because I am not a homosexual, you don't love me, but you don't hate me either, so the reason, the only reason that why we are doing this is just because it's for the sake of art." Ok, and then I went to this exhibition and afterwards I talk to him, and I say, "Hey, why do you do this artwork?" And then he tells me, "Oh it's something about sexuality, and subjectivity, passivity." And then he said, "Because also I wanted to do something that no one else

have ever done before.” And then after he said that, and then I look at him and say “Mmmm. But how about yourself? When you do an artwork, is it only about doing something that no one else has ever done before but not about yourself? If you’re doing some artwork just for the sake of no one else have done it before then you are controlled by other people-... you are totally dependent on other people’s view when you are doing this artwork, but not from the, inside of you.” And then he looked at me and said, “Oh yes you’ve got a point. You’ve hit a point here.” And to be frank, I didn’t expect such an answer from him. And that makes me reflect a lot.

And I think, the other thing that I am puzzled about: what is being original, what is being creative? Is it really about doing something that no one else has ever done before? Isn’t that possible? There is, I’m always convinced there is no new thing under the sun, what is new, what is something that no one else have ever done before? But if you look at it from another perspective, everything is, everything you do is no one else have ever done before because you can be the only one who do it and no one else could have done it, so everything you do is no one else have ever done before. So sometimes I think being original maybe is in this sense is not about doing something someone else have ever done before. It’s rather that being connected to your origin, being connected to yourself, and very honestly and frankly expressing this, your individuality and originality with your work, artwork or with your work. And that actually expresses everybody’s uniqueness in this sense, if you understand originality in this sense. And if everyone is there and true and encouraged to express this, their originality, their own uniqueness, then I believe that this is a world with a lot of diversities. And sometimes I think this maybe this is what performance art is all about. It’s about everybody connecting to their true origin and their true personality and true self, expressing it in a very daring way without really considering what other people will think about it or whether by this daring, and if we can really achieve, if artists can achieve this, then it will be a great celebration of diversity. Maybe it’s a rubbish bin; maybe it’s a utopia. But I think it doesn’t matter.

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Sergio Edelzstein was born in Buenos Aires, studied at Tel Aviv University, founded an artifact gallery in Tel Aviv in 1987. He has been curating performance art events for fifteen years. He established and directs the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv where he has curated five performance art biennials and a video art biennial in the year 2000. Sergio?

## **SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

This is going to be a kind of a puzzle because I think everyone of us is going to talk about something different. And then you will have to figure out how things connect, or maybe that’s Ray. Anyway, as Ray pointed out, my practice is not centered in performance but it’s curatorial and it goes to other areas, other areas in terms of themes, artistic practices, and geographical area as well. Also the art world as we know it – the big shows, the big galleries, this is something I’ve been working with for a long time.

So, something that has been worrying me always, much more in the last few years, it’s the relationship of performance, as we know it, in this kind of events and the art world, and the market, let’s call it that way. So when I was told that the subject of this panel would be the menopause, I thought, for me, menopause, basically I looked it up in Wikipedia and somehow I got this idea of to get a point when you lose your power, the procreative power. I think maybe this was the, maybe the idea of Ray or whoever decided that this would be subject. Is performance getting to a point where we are repeating ourselves and there is nowhere else and something is getting stuck?

I decided I would talk about incest. I’m glad that Ray mentioned this funny but very true term for me anyway and, how do you, how was it (*Langenbach*: “Incestuous amplification”) Incestuous amplification. I think things relate because incest is, incest is first of all is something you choose, it’s not something you get to by your biological state. And it’s something that is more, and it involves the connection, the not rightful connection between two things that shouldn’t connect, and they shouldn’t go together and in the end, they bring to this kind of menopause. They bring to this halt in creativity. That’s the way I saw these two things. And this instance, I see it in performance and the market. Let me make very clear that I think that every artist in every field, definitely in performance, has the right and the obligation to live out of his or her work, and to make a more or less decent living out of it. And by no

means I'm saying that an artist shouldn't be in any way related to the market but when I mean market, I mean The Market, and not like just making a living, it's like big-time money. So this is something I want you to keep into consideration when I'm going to be talking in the next few minutes. The other thing I'm going to be doing is something totally politically incorrect and you shouldn't do this at home. These are the kind of things that you can do probably in Singapore, but I wouldn't definitely do it in New York or in London or in Paris. And take as an example the worst performance I'd seen in the last year, and show it to you and kind of elaborate on that. This last performance is by no means a unique instance, it's a trend, it's an important trend, it's a trend that is very accepted as the performance trend in certain circles of the art world, and definitely the art market. So that's something that we have to take into consideration. I have been very worried in the last year about being expropriated of the term performance by a few commercial artists that are...their work and performance, as we understand it has no relation whatsoever. But still they are taking away even this term, which I've always found very successful I must say for this kind of artistic practice.

So the work in question was done by an artist who is a very important performance artist. She's been working for about 25, 30 years in mostly New York. Her name is Coco Fusco I imagine that some of you know her well, or her work. I think it is important to point out that her work on gender, on immigration and on oppression of minorities as she's been doing in the late 70s and early 80s was groundbreaking and very important. So that's why we need to be critical on her new work, I think. The work I'm talking about I saw in a festival called "Video Brasil". It's a video festival but with a few performances that takes place in Sao Paulo every two years. This one was in September 2005 and the work was called 'Bare Life Study #1'. What I'll show a few pictures of the official website of the festival. I always tend to indicate what the source of the images because you need to know that when you see what you look also so you can read the text. The action was essentially very simple. There were about 30 volunteers dressed in these orange overalls that we all know from Guantanamo Bay prisoners. They march towards a position opposite, on the street opposite the United States consulate in Sao Paulo and they got on their knees for about twenty minutes or half an hour and with a toothbrush they were brushing the street. While the artist Coco Fusco here dressed in as a soldier in Iraq or this new camouflage she was yelling orders in Portuguese through this megaphone to them, to the volunteers. Here she is in action. So that was the action.

I mean I could talk about it much more I'm sure all the pictures we have here but I don't really want to get into, it would be too easy to attack, trash and disrupt and make really garbage of this performance in terms of what it means or what the sources are or what its position, her position is towards war, towards oppression et cetera. But what I want to tell is my experience as spectator. We were taken to this place which is you know Sao Paulo is like 24 million people it took like three hours to get there and another three hours back. The whole day went. We were taken in buses. We were told not to speak. Not to step down the sidewalk. We had to be silent on the other hand. We shouldn't take photographs. And we were totally I mean the public was definitely not to be there. The whole event was staged for two crews of cameramen. Totally professional, not little Sonys, but huge HD equipment and a few photographers that were paid by the gallery. Coco's working with New York in order to make photographs videos for her upcoming show to be printed sold and commercialized. So that's what I wanted to tell about this and we can't elaborate on the performance in itself.

Anyway, this is what I find and I mean, I was going to bring more examples, of Vanessa Beecroft and some more artists that are using the word performance in order to stage events that are whose sole purpose is to commercialize and to produce commodities and they are not interested anymore. In the case of Coco and some others, to produce work that creates an immediate relationship with the viewer. And that gives to that much more importance to all the things were said here actually I think they talk about performance in a much better way. But I think this is a trend that is going and growing we have to take care of. And another thing that we have to take care of is not to do performances that are very easily and very promptly degraded by reality. Because when we were walking down the street, we saw in the garden of the consulate; this was taken by my cellphone camera so you don't see it; but what you saw here was there were three black Brazilians sweeping the garden and four black Brazilians standing like this guy here, standing between the fence and these guys working there in a very defiant position. Those were the guards and you know, the moment you see this is a much stronger, it was anyway a much

stronger performance, much stronger image of oppression and of abuse than all of the orange overalls, volunteers sweeping the street. So this is also something that, when you stage something very complicated, just look around and see if there is not something, much better show in the area. Time out. (*Langenbach*: You have three more minutes if you want.) Ah no, it's okay. I'm done. (*Langenbach*: Thank you)

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Next is Nani Kahar from Kuala Lumpur. Born in Malaysia studied at Nottingham University and the Architectural Association in London. And PLC Westminster University in London as well. She's worked on city planning, building and interiors created and produced theatre. She's written a play, 'To Catch a Cloud' which was presented in the National Planetarium and it was a live performance, 16 slide projectors projection using the dome as the screen and producing an art context with children, about Malaysia's quest for modernity, with some irony as I understand. It was built in a childhood political allegory of the Government's *Wawasan Dua Puluh Dua Puluh*, Vision 2020, which was Mahathir's vision of the progress of Malaysia into a completed state of modernity. She works with the transformation of space. Actually at the end of the play the child has nothing in his pocket. He is searching for a cloud so the actual moment of capturing is a moment of emptiness.

She works with the transformation of space using the top of commercial buildings of office buildings for example in producing art events and installations she's worked in the production of icons and exhibition for community solidarity during and after the Anwar affair. And she has an Internet site, which has become quite well known called *Baca-Baca* at LabDNA.com, which is a resource site for a variety of texts and information. LabDNA is a project that she runs with her partner, Peter Kiernan, and it's engaged in the designing of space for social transformation of social interactions through the designing of space.

## **NANI KAHAR**

I think I'm going to talk a little about the title of this symposium which deals with the idea that performance art is actually going through a state of menopause. So the thing that I'm curious about is that the description of a state of degeneration which is actually referred to as a feminine condition. In a way I expected that, with the presence of people who I think to have acute sense and sensibility as not to, you know, concentrate on this macho mucho macho-centric, which I thought something that would be absent in this kind of field.

And then maybe because the idea of menopause is very visible; a woman that is going through a state of menopause, which I should approach in about five years, at the age of 50, where it's actually visible where you can see the process of aging deterioration et cetera; and that maybe the idea of a male menopause which I think is called andropause is probably something people would not like to talk about because it's not very visible. (*Laughter*) The other thing also I think Sergio mentioned about the idea of, I think, he talked about the idea of state of menopause where there's actually a lack of energy, a lack of reproductiveness et cetera but from my understanding as a female as one approach menopause you have actually, what you have is increased hormonal activity where well the female hormones is actually reduced but increased male, production of male hormone and it always equates for this increased state of desire, desire for sex, you know, desire for any kind of expression. And that I think that when you have this surge of energy, if that's not managed it becomes a bit more convoluted and people see as a problematic situation but actually if you can tap into, if it is in a state of menopause, it actually is a very creative period, as the normal sort of period women go through in their menstrual cycle.

I think that if, with this increased state of desire, I think that it will be interesting that, maybe seems, well I think the only certainty in life is death, that maybe if it is in a state of menopause, then maybe we should organize an orgy for performance art, you know, before it's all over, you know. (*Langenbach*: FOI 4) Yeah, yeah, FOI 4. An orgy, and then we have to think about, okay what kind of orgy should it be? So we have to create a place where this orgy happens. Maybe in a much more fine-tuned version, we could say let's look for a place to party, you know. So maybe we all, you know, get into a party mode. So where does one party? Do you party with, like, family, create an incestuous

environment? Or do you party with friends and it's kinda better sometimes when you party and you have strangers so you can have interesting encounters and things like that.

So, and then, I was also thinking about you know maybe okay like in an urban context people talk about the city as being a place where, as a meeting place of friends and strangers, it's also a place where you actually exchange ideas and so comes back to a place where maybe that interaction can actually happen in a public space. So where is this public space, you know. So, talking from the context of where I live in Malaysia a lot of the public spaces are, it's kinda like dodgy spaces where, it's actually a place where it keeps away private ownership. Whether it's actually public ownership is another thing but private ownership doesn't exist. So you have this kind of, like, curious space where you know where you get empty plaza, monuments that have, you know, little or few meanings. Then you think about, wah, that's not kind of public spaces we would like to interact. So maybe how about creating, but there are alternative spaces in the city. You have places like where people would interact like bars, cafe, clubs, sports stadium et cetera which I think there is a lot of activity that is going but interesting enough, a lot of these spaces actually owned by private enterprises, They are private property. So how do you interface with like you can have this activity in a private property but they're all actually done within rules and restrictions and things like that. So I think that because there is no real public space in places like, where I come from like Malaysia or rather a lack of democratic space where people can actually enter and actually express themselves because even in a public space, the concept of public space in Malaysia is really not a public space because it's not owned by the public nor is it managed by the public and there are rules and guideline and it's not free. You know, if you want to put a sign up in a public space you have to like, or do a performance or do anything, you have to have permit license, you need to pay for, if you want to put up a message a billboard or whatever. So this kind of spaces are problematic, I think so, and because of this lack of democratic space in Malaysia that the place of resistance has to well maybe most people perceive it should be the underground. But in Malaysia we don't really have a strong tradition of underground nor we have a tradition of avant-garde. So but you can create let's say a place of resistance maybe a private personal world of underground but you can never create this sort of collective symbolic, what I suppose what we call this collective symbolic order in that kind of things that, so, like in such a situation, prior to FOI, we had an event in Malaysia called 'Satu Kali', but even then everything has to operate above ground because I just said there is no underground so we have to negotiate it and operate it below the radar but you always have to negotiate with the power structure.

So then but I think that people can actually enter this kind of like public space to actually if you package yourself and hang on a minute. Well I was just thinking about the idea of "The Art of War", Sun Tzu's idea of the art of war where deception plays a role that people can actually enter into the public space by actually pretending. So you get yourself identified in a space and then actually play a role. And that's something what I do that I actually occupy like a very commercial mainstream space and actually have a hidden agenda and where there are certain area where there are like cracks or voids or certain spaces you can actually fill them up with probably I think very much in the idea of Hakim Bey's idea of temporary autonomous zone which is also I think a very interesting idea that actually could work in Malaysia. And the other thing about me being architect is that of course architect is always seen to perceive to actually manipulate form to create space. But I think what would be interesting is actually architecture or urban planning or if you do any sort of built environment is actually to actually create space to allow for layers and multitude of forms and images to co-exist so you can create more a site of possibility and how would you say, confrontation but within a limited sphere.

An example of this space is what I would call hybrid space and hybrid space you can find, for example, the idea of actually creating a garden on a rooftop, or the idea of actually creating a meeting place, a party in a parking garage or the idea of actually creating like a command centre where like in a café, so it's actually create spaces of multitude use and these things. And I think this space, hybrid spaces is where I think that maybe true performances outside of it can interface with the public which I think is key as I see as art should really be about communication it's no point talking to yourself and it's really important I feel it really communicates with the public. To me, at the end of the day, art is really about an act, an action, it's about activity and I think that maybe performance art in a way have to get out within this very constrained environment and actually move into hybrid space which can be created not

only by people like me and the profession like architects but just generally by the public. I think that's about it.

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay last but not least, Thomas Berghuis of, from Netherlands. Thomas has recently completed his doctorate dissertation on performance art in China at the University of Sydney in Australia following an MA in Sinology at Leiden University in the Netherlands. During the past ten years, he has carried out a large body of research in China, and in 2000 and 2004, he was a visiting scholar of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He has been involved in a number of curatorial projects including Associate Curator for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sharjah International Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. In 2003, curator of the 1<sup>st</sup> Da Shan Xi international arts festival at the 798 Factory in Beijing, in 2004 co-organizer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Da Dao Live Art Festival in Beijing, 2004 the 5<sup>th</sup> Open Art Platform International Performance Art Festival, Beijing 2004. His writings have been published in various magazines and art publications including *Artlink*, *Mesh* and *Positions*. Thomas.

*(Thomas Berghuis gets up and performs a set of actions to the audience.)*

## **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

My introduction on this topic will include some information about China. We see how it goes. I think it links as well to the art system, the art market which it's not only market, but it seems often to operate on Miss World contest meets stock market meets high entertainment values. The title of this forum kept on going through my head when I prepared this little presentation. I kept getting stuck on the word menopause. And especially those quotes, you know, if you want to say something then say it. You all know that, I know. Okay sorry guys. So is performance art in a state of menopause? The emphasis is on the question mark. I like that question mark actually as well. I wanted to end up with the question mark. Well, for me, yeah, I started looking through my images and through the artists that I've worked with including Chen Lingyang whom I've worked with in Sharjah. I actually tried to bring these images that you see.

Well, let's just say that if it comes down to a young female artists living in Beijing, who graduated in 1999, we can say: "No performance art is not in a state of menopause". During a whole year she recorded her menstruation [Thomas shows images the work *Twelve Month Flowers* by Chen Lingyang, 1999-2000]. She is a very young artist. The only thing is (and I'll get to that as well) she doesn't call her work performance art. She uses the term that is officially accepted in China to discuss this type of works including if you work with the body and quite explicit type of material. The term used is 'conceptual photography'. As long as you keep that sort of idea in mind, that it's not real, it can be interpreted, as you know, some type of stylish photography. You can always interpret if it's shown in an exhibition that this is not real blood; something like: "No I was playing with paint." But the interesting thing is the way Chen Lingyang choose to document her performance, and actually it becomes a very elaborate work. It very interesting to look at this and to realize how the whole process of the work was done in her own studio. It confronts the personal context of the work as well of the artist, who had just graduated from the Central Academy; hence she choose to deal with her own self, her own work, and her own position as an artist.

Maybe the andropause then could be described by looking at the work of Yang Zhichao, to an extent; or rather the lack of an andropause. [Thomas shows images of the work *Jiayu Fort* by Yang Zhichao, 1999-2000] It also deals with the topic of durational performance, which fortunately was also a topic brought up by Shu Yang here in Singapore twice now. This morning I would like to stress the role of durational performance with the work of Yang Zhichao. Because Yang Zhichao is one of those artists that wouldn't fit an FOI or a Satu Kali, NIPAF, PIPAF or any of the IPAF's. I am pointing at that kind of live art event that you can say: "Hey let's do a 20-minute gig." Yang Zhichao is not that type of artist. He's been invited to some festivals and I haven't seen images of his work, but I know it doesn't suit him. But he hasn't got a choice, because he wants to go overseas, he wants you to see his work, he wants to engage with other performance artists, he wants to engage with other artists. So how would he do that? Again,

the elaborate way of documenting and re-mediating his performance including in a diary, in photographs and in video, is very extensive and the performance itself engages with China, in a way that some artists don't.

These are reminiscent of the time when performance art was really strong in China, during the East Village, which is now sort of raises the discussion of whether the East Village is where Chinese performance art has become marketed; the supreme example of how artists can be used and abused for the market. Moving within the system of art history and the way art historians become facilitators, one basically can look at the very expensive catalogue of *Rong Rong's East Village*, which was supposed to be a book of the East Village by Wu Hong who is based in Chicago a very important writer and curator of Chinese contemporary art. I was told by artists how, initially, he asked documentation them for documentation to produce a really dense art historical book about the East Village. So a good friend of mine, Zhu Ming, gave him pretty much all of his documentation, started photocopying and send it over for free, and then it got turned into this flashy catalogue which was supported by Chambers Art Gallery in New York and it cost, I think, five hundred US dollars. I haven't got a copy, so I read it with the artist. There were also ten editions made with original prints of Rong Rong (making the publication even more a marketable). This is a very big discussion because Rong Rong has documented some of the performances, which has led to a very big discussion about who owns the work (the photographer or the performance artist). Using the East Village as a model, and how it's being used and abused on the market now, is a dangerous thing. Here, I'd like to show one of Ma Liuming's performance. [Thomas shows an image of Ma Liuming's *Dialogue with Gilbert and George*, 1993] This photograph is, I think, interesting to show sort of what that the understanding and misunderstanding is between people outside China and Chinese performance artists themselves. As you can see, Gilbert and George meet Ma Liuming in 1993 when they had an exhibition there. They were brought to the East Village to visit the artist studios and apparently they get some comments that they didn't really thought much of the paintings that the artists had done. Ma Liuming had experiences in performance in the 1980s, and decided to give them a performance. And as you can see, Gilbert and George they remain composed in their classical position, but completely in character as if they try to continue their own work. So for me this explains it all.

What now happens with the art market and what happens with performance art is that the actual performance becomes like an object, like a brand. Unlike what we saw of Yang Zhichao just now, certain works have become completely overwhelmed by the market, and turned into sort of the popular image of China. It went from the images of artists who used Mao Zedong and advertisement in Political Pop to Cynical Realism. We can bring to mind paintings by Fang Lijun, and so on. And then recently it has moved into the topic of urbanization and 'the new China', which creates this very popular type of images, which is basically performance turning into photography. There is a body, and that's where the only link to performance is. It's very clean-cut designed photographs, which do very well on the market. Some performance artists, including Cang Xin who is a former artist of the East Village, feel the pressure to produce for the market very well, and they also feel the pressure to immediately sell their works by putting it into different context. When I visited Cang Xin's studio in 2004 and I saw this huge photograph, I think it was 270x185 cm.. It was sort of sloping out of the frame because there aren't any good frame makers in China. Still huge photograph get printed and they make quite an impression. [Thomas shows an image of Cang Xin's work *Between Man and Nature – Mountain*, 2003] When I first saw the photograph, I couldn't help but being amazed, and I was like: "Oh!, you know, fantastic work!" And then I started to consider what actually made me feel that it was fantastic work. Well, it was partly because it was performance, which could be seen because, again, the body is there; and a naked body of a Chinese man, so it is most likely Chinese performance [laughs]. But then again the landscape—even without that body—it would be doing really well as a poster too, and everybody would still love to see it. And then with the 'strange' text in front of it... This is actually ancient Tibetan script, and the photograph is made in Sichuan on the border of Tibet. So it has all the contexts to become a hot item...

Artists in China and when they work in China, they know very well how to comment upon this [making art attractive for the overseas market]. But they do so in China. Song Dong for example, is such an artist, who when he works in China, his work is really engaging with society, with the rising economy. His works are much unlike Weng Fen's types of photographs, that are so popular on the Western art market. [Thomas shows an image of Weng Fen's work *At the Wall in Shenzhen No. 1*, 2002] In 1999,

Song Dong was involved in an exhibition titled *Art for Sale*, during which they opened up a supermarket where people could go to the back of the space, in the storeroom, where there was an actual exhibition. However, at the front, they ask artists to produce these objects that people could buy, and, you know everybody was mesmerized by the chance to buy a small item of the artists. There is a video of this and you see everyone (including international curators), you see them rally...you know, fighting for certain items. Song Dong was the art tour guide for this exhibition. So the actual space for commenting upon this type of event lies in China. If it is done well, it places comments on the context of art and the context of showcasing art. Especially during satellite events of biennales and triennials when a whole horde of curators and art critics and everybody sort of follows the pack and then looks at these temporal events, which only last a couple of hours.

I also noticed this type of shopping for art in 2002 when I was there during the satellite exhibition of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guangzhou Triennial. We were looking at the artworks and you had to do it sort of quickly, as there were a lot of people. It was also just after Documenta, so there were a lot of curators, I noticed, who went straight for artists they recognized as they saw their names on the list. Hence, they went straight for Yang Fudong to see his latest work and so forgot to look at the other works. At the time, each of us was followed by a migrant worker who was dressed up in a prison suit. So whilst you were looking at the artworks, the migrant worker was constantly looking at you. And it made me aware of that the way everyday society is sort of absent. To have a migrant worker follow you, suddenly just made me aware of what's really going on in China, by constantly being constantly looked at and constantly being followed. I felt that it was actually a very good critique.

The other level, following the work of Song Dong and others is this kind of real time event art. I'm currently working on an article with, titled "The Real [E]state of Chinese Contemporary Art". These days in China, curators have been picking up on these events, linking themselves with big construction companies to organize exhibitions. They ask artists, especially those who are good in doing spectacle, including artists such as Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. [Thomas shows images of the work *Contend for Hegemony*, done at the Left Bank exhibition in Beijing in December 2003] This was a competition between three boxers – a heavyweight, a lightweight and a middleweight. This is basically a spectacle. The spectacles that we usually don't get to see outside China, except in documentation, are the result of underground exhibitions including "Post and Sensibility and Spree" which is not an international performance art festival but it continues to offer this type of important context.

The audiences were asked to come to a theatre space at the Beijing Film and Television Academy and to arrive exactly at three o'clock in the afternoon, after which the doors were locked for the next couple of hours of the event. The audiences who were there, were basically locked into this studio space and were watching works of five artists who'd been asked to do anything; to do what they want but as long as they were working to confront the senses of the audience, including smell, taste, sound. I just want to show a brief section of the video. Is it okay? Can we...? Yes?

[Thomas shows excerpts of the video of *Post-Sense Sensibility: Spree*, Beijing, 2001]

So sometime other time I can show the whole video of the event, for those of you who are interested. Thank you. That's my talk.

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, your, just your beginning, reminded me, I think it's an Almodovar film (Panelist: Ray, Ray!) Sorry, it's an Almodovar film and the character is arriving in Miami, at Miami Airport, drives through a neighborhood and encounters a, you know the sort of classic American suburban house with a fellow on the lawn, mowing the lawn. He's wearing a Mickey Mouse face and, with a permanent smile, waves as the car's going by and then it turns into (middle finger)... another context.

## **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Yeah the other context for me as well to do my actions at the start of my presentation was of a Dutch documentary (again one of those contextual things— you can do it on a Dutch commentary but you would

never see it anywhere else). But, anyway, this documentary featured Ai Weiwei who was sitting in a forum talking about biennales and triennials and how to set up the Chinese art market, and then when he came off the stage and he did this hand signal of “Fuck!” to the camera (something which he’s been doing as a piece of work as well, so just another context...

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, let’s maybe open it up just for a few minutes between the panelists and if you have anything that, any intervention you’d like to make or comment, reaction to each other’s presentations and then we’ll open it up to the floor.

### **NANI KAHAR**

Not necessarily about the participants, but the idea of notion when we talk about how performance art is actually going to, and this notion that, particularly with the title “menopause”, that the fact that I felt the whole idea of singularity where it’s an anthropological reality where there’s always a beginning, and then an end, and then that time is linear. So I was thinking that maybe we can think in a different way that things doesn’t move necessarily in a linear way. Maybe we can apply the idea of cyclical time. That maybe after death there is rebirth or maybe look into the idea where things can actually exist at a multilayered level where there is no time. That everything can co-exist so, and that the fact performance art itself could actually evolve, maybe not so much evolve but this idea of changing and a state of becoming so, even though they’re both different thing – the idea of changing and the idea state of becoming and not becoming – it’s very opposite thing but I think it is interesting way to actually explore that things doesn’t necessarily move in a linear way and then if people perceive things as in a non-linear way then maybe things could be moved or engineered differently, I’m sure.

### **KO SIU LAN**

Ya, this is something that I wanted to comment but I have no time to do this. And also I think it, this question is performance art in a state of menopause very much based on a presumption that performance art should be so-and-so-and-so that’s why there is the question of menopause but perhaps I think it is built on a wrong presupposition, perception that there is, this is simply irrelevant. We simply should not pursue performance art should be so-and-so. If you ask this question, then it’s going to perhaps bring it into menopause, the fact that you ask this question. And also that, it’s interesting when you talk about the work, the description of this feminine state. Recently I read an article by Wang Chu Yu, a Chinese performance artist also curator, that he wrote about Chinese art scene, he used a very similar word, he say the situation of Chinese art, performance art, is like a old bitch, a old sex worker. I just find the correlation why this appropriation of all these feminine and a little bit also negative terms to describe this state of performance art. Perhaps this is something (*Laughter. Nani*: “Perverse. Yup, it feels perverse.” *Koh herself*: “Yeah”) But I’m going to talk to him about this which I’ve yet to done.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay well we’ll open it to the floor. Please when you make a comment, can you use the mike? Now can we move this mike around or does it sit there or...? Some people might not want to stand.

### **KO SIU LAN**

Do you want to move it around?

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

So when somebody has something to say, we’ll try to move the mike to you.

**RONNIE LAI**

Thank you very much. I've been here since morning 10am. Very stimulating and interesting session. My name is Ronnie Lai, I'm a Singaporean accountant. And in this coming September, Singapore is hosting an international event it's about relating to IMF and World Bank. Just wondering if anyone of you have any plan, whether individually or collectively, going to do something during these events to enhance the vibrantness of Singapore's performance art. Thank you.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

What we want to do is produce a sense of dialogue, so if you all have a response, then say so. If someone else has a response, say so. Let's give priority to response and otherwise if no one is responding, then we move on to another topic, alright? Thank you

**THOMAS BERGHUIS**

The event is the Singapore Biennale? Yes? It's a very interesting development. I think the whole idea of having, or rather I should say hosting a biennale in Singapore is a very interesting...However, it existed in some way already with *Seni*.

**RONNIE LAI**

Personally I find that performance art very... Thank you. I find that, as far as IMF and World Bank is concerned, they're talking about reducing world poverty and this is maybe one area that, you know, people, artists like you can look into that. And then as a matter of fact, IMF, as far as talking about currency, foreign exchange and things like that, IMF is very backwards in the sense that that is the currency exchanges that bring to a lot of problems to this globalized world. So this is one area I think artists being an ordinary Singaporean; I'm not an artist; ok, I love art. I love artists. I salute, respect artists but I think artists, with good inspiration and you know, very creative you may be able to think of something to stimulate you know, people, those high-level people from IMF, World Bank to think about poverty in the world. We're talking here but in this world, another part of the world, there are children dying every day, yes. And then Singapore – we're going to be very special this year, we're going to accept, we're going to sort of allow demonstrations, you know, peacefully or whatsoever by NGO. So being an ordinary Singaporean, I'm hoping and expecting positive, you know, out of it. Thank you.

**THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Let me just say this. I hope and I really stimulate not just performance artists but every artist here, including art students, to do something during the Singapore Biennale. Especially, because what Singaporeans will notice (as people who have been working here for a long time or are engaged with the art scene not only in Singapore, but in Southeast Asia know already), is that the Biennale itself may turn into this aestheticization of art processes which are, in fact, international processes of cultural exchange and cultural marketing; including with the selection of a curator who is not from Singapore but is one of the top curators of the scene. So, I've been visiting a lot of biennales and I must say, that the opening of a biennale is this kind of spectacle. I was there in Venice in 2003 and noticed how it is this kind of spectacle, where there are these multiple layers [and terms] of engagement. I was there on the basis of having gained a press card because I was going to write something. So I was on Level 2 actually. Level 1 is curators. They have parties as well in the palazzos in the evening. They travel in speedboats to the venue. I was there with the media so we're Level 2 because we actually write about the event and we'll publicize it and promote it. The artists were Level 3. They traveled on the ferry. And they had to travel from a hotel, which was two-and-a-half hours from the actual venue, whereas the other guests were in a

very luxurious hotel next to the venue. So the artists always came late and they always had to leave before the parties started, because there were no ferries anymore to bring them back. So that was very interesting, I found out as well, the audience they were No. 4. However at that event they were not there because it was already full and basically they weren't allowed to come to the opening. So that's what happens. But fortunately here, and I encourage all of these people I met, for example, during my time at Nanyang Academy, a lot of young students who engage in interesting work. One of them is engaged in a project in Jurong. You know, I would like to see people being invited to come to Jurong as well and learn about the area, what the project is about. I never knew about Jurong. The Sydney Biennale, I wasn't there last summer, I was in China. But in 2002, it was held exclusively in the CBD [Central Business District]. You could literally go around the Opera House and see all the venues for the Sydney Biennial. Sydney is a huge city but everyone who was there didn't see it. They didn't see the western suburbs. They only saw the Biennale side, it is sad to see, really.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, I notice that Noi had something that she wanted to say.

### **NOI**

I'm sorry that I want to get back to the description and the implication of 'menopause'. Well, I'm the artist-lover, not the art-lover. So, very sensitive about friends of mine, female artists, and this terminology is very, you know, kicking people that we are talking about sensitivity of something about, related to women on art. So in the Western 'menopause' can be mean, you know, stop reproductive rights. We didn't mean that. We stop reproduction of, you know, art, art piece, art lover, art, you know. But, in Thailand, maybe I can make you feel better, 'menopause' can be meant a golden age. So people believe that you are putting the seeds for a long time, and then it's a time that you can pick up the fruit. So it's fruitful in your life, in this period. So it doesn't mean it's stop of reproduction, but it's start about recreation. So maybe we could have the implication about 'menopause' in the Thai way.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Other comments? Go ahead.

### **Audience Member**

Hi, yes, this question is addressed to Siu Lan. Just now you mentioned that there was a Chinese performance artist who put migrant workers in an escalator half-naked, and you said that that was a question, I mean, you brought that up as an ethical problem. Can I ask you how would you involve your audience and what actually crosses the line between something ethical and unethical; to you, specifically to you? Yeah, how do you...what...how would you classify it as crossing the boundary of becoming something, from being ethical to being unethical?

### **KO SIU LAN**

I think I wouldn't interpret that, I don't think it's unethical, for that, it's not unethical for me. But it's just that the attitude that ok, they say this is an artwork that is together with migrants, that they created together with migrants but it is not true. It is not created together with migrants. It's their idea asking the migrants to execute it without any active participation of the migrants themselves which they hope is for empowering of the migrants, in the end. That, I find that problematic. But on the other hand, when Thomas says, oh you found it a strong critique having a migrant following you in an exhibition. I just also wonder, isn't that, so if we, I don't know, if we want to, for example, do an artwork for empowering for sex worker, do we need to display them in order to remind ourselves oh how different we are from them. How poor they are. Do we have the right to do that? To put them into that kind of position, even though our intention is oh for

the sake of empowering you. I find that very problematic. That's what I think, but it's not about ethical or unethical.

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Well, we don't need to display them there if we have audiences like Sergio who actually looks around when he sees the performance of Coco Fusco. And looks around what is actually happening in real time, in the real world outside the art context. If we had that type of audience, then no, it's not necessary. But I think the audience is saturated as well by the fact that they just (you know, including in personal life) are used to be looking at the TV screen, whilst something real is happening outside, but they only become aware of it once it's shown on TV that same night. And that's the same with this type of events, I think as well. Maybe this links it to what we're talking about in the context of this festival.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Let's keep it at that. Does anybody else have anything else to say on that issue before we move on?

### **Audience Member**

Actually, also a second question: during the performance where the people are on the escalator and they're being looked at; the people are being seen as objects. But I'm also thinking could the audience not be the performers as well – their responses to the migrant workers on the escalators? This also brings me back to Ray's performance, was it Ray's performance with the funeral band yesterday? I thought it was quite interesting because you had the funeral band playing the music and then there was, after a while there was the audience participating and clapping. I don't know whether for them it could be like the first time that people actually clap at their performances. I don't know. But it was interesting that the boundary between the performer and audience is actually blurred. And we, the audience functions even as the performer sometimes in that context. That's about it. Thank you.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Is there a question there or...?

### **TAN TARN HOW**

Can I ask a question? Do you want to follow up or can I ask a separate question?

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Go ahead.

### **TAN TARN HOW**

In a way, just to look at Singapore. Well, if people are unhappy with the word 'menopause', let's use is it relevant? Or is it, does it engage? Or does it still, is it still vital? In Singapore, I think the problem is, the issue is the struggle for the audience. The people that, whom are going beyond the practitioners you know for the minds of the people whom you want to speak to if you are engaged in some sort of, I suppose, socially or politically motivated kind of performance art and how do you wrest that from, in a way, the government trying to get the eyes of your potential audience away from what you are doing, and telling them that, well, indoctrinating them that, you know, this is not important, this is irrelevant, this...you should look to Disney or whatever it is. How do you engage in that process of wrestling your constituency, so to speak, you know, and how does it happen in a country like China where that kind of things also

happens, right. Where there is control, and then there is also indoctrination. Then there is also, you know, the market, which, you know, pulls everybody away from what the performance artists, or the artists in general, are interested in. And how, and the ability to get the eyes onto, focused on you is, I suppose, a measure of your relevance. Of whether you are being able to be relevant. Because I see that, for example, what happens now: we are totally cut off now from what's happening around, in Singapore. I mean, the press doesn't cover us. We create a little bit of noise but it seems very loud but you know it's irrelevant. Therefore, we are fighting again all these forces to...how do you do that, I would say? Sorry, I am less than coherent.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Does anybody have anything to say on that?

**SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I have something.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

What you were going to say before...?

**SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I just want to try to answer and connect to the issue of the biennale and of the social aspects of performance and say that we have a problem here. Maybe, or maybe it's an asset. As I see things here in Singapore, if you had lots of press, you probably wouldn't be doing this kind of work so you have to decide if you want press or you want to do what you want to do. Here, definitely. Probably the same in China and other places. Now, regarding the other two things, I think one of the main challenges of performance art is to try to get assimilated into the artworld and to those biennales that we were talking about. For some reason, performance art as we, believe it or not, what I showed before is totally marginalized although, increasingly, the subject matter that interests this kind of events, that interest the art world in general, are getting closer and closer. Social issues are very important; reality is very important, you know, with video and new media, photography – those are reality-based, reality I mean real-life, no, real life based media, just like performance, unlike painting for instance. But you hardly see in these biennials, no. So in a way it could be there but... I myself, for instance was, when I was in Sao Paolo at that time, I met the curator of the next Sao Paolo Biennial and we were talking, she was telling me what the subject matter is, which is something quite interesting about activating the city, aspects of urbanism et cetera, et cetera. And I thought, wah, I know quite a few very good performance artists that you could put in your program. Well, I send her a release and as far as I know, she didn't know them. I mean, of course, you go for names. You can't, you have to go for names. Here and there. You can't put one of the names you know and the rest, none. But of course, the names of Singapore artist dealing with urbanism are not interesting, they are not known and they are not definitely building up an interesting biennial in terms of public. And they need public. You have to understand if we talk about biennials, it's mainly a touristic event, it's not an artistic event. That it has to bring people here, buy food, pay for hotels, et cetera, et cetera. And consume whatever you show them as art – Ah! that's the idea of governments, municipalities et cetera paying for biennales. That's what they want, that's what they need – the Big Names – and they are less interested in names that are not adding to the sexy, sex appeal of the biennale. But again, but when I see what art is about, what art being re-introduced, I think that performance art, as we understand it, has a lot to offer there; and I'm pretty sure we're not going to see this in the biennale here. Unless, as Thomas proposed and I support him, you make some kind of intervention or negotiate with the biennale some kind of participation. So that's my connection of everything that's been told.

## **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Well, mainly just to follow up on this. It is very difficult, I guess, as well for artists here (as it is everywhere) then to do something during the biennale because as could be seen during the first DaDao Live Art Festival that Shu Yang organized in Beijing, it was coinciding with the Biennale of Beijing. And the Biennale of Beijing really needed an alternative because it had this wonderful poster hanging in front of the museum saying yes we do recognize that there is photography and video art in China, but the Biennale will this year concentrate on painting and sculpture. And I think the last time it concentrated on tradition, so there is still a long process to go. But then, yes, some people were commenting up on that as well, as Shu Yang organizing that event to sort of attract the attention of the international art market and sort of popularizing performance art. So it has to be done but it also has to try to find a structure which provides an alternative, I guess. I'm not sure if a festival like FOI is in fact...I'm really sorry to say this, but part of my thought is that it is a little bit a case of showcasing performance. It has this kind of showcase quality to it. I'm very interested actually to hear from the artists, to hear a little bit more about whether or not the structures that we now describe and, whether or not it happens with the exchange of the festivals as well, where the matter of fact is that "I choose you, you choose me", and you go by name-dropping.

## **KO SIU LAN**

Can I...I mean, when I was thinking about that, I think it's not about the art form, performance art form itself, but rather, I think, it's about the fact that festivals – a structure like this – it makes that, it is not a very, perhaps it's not a good way of engaging with public or so-called community, if we are to think of performance art in terms of this kind of festivals, showcase or festivals. It...in terms of this, like a 20-minutes, 30-minutes showcase kind of performance, it is very hard to have something really engaging with the public, or community, with...reflected, or true participation or initiation from the public, I think. So perhaps this is something we should question; not about the art form, but about this kind of festivals actually handicaps the artwork's capacity to engage with the public in a true sense. It always falls into this trap of oh having a public doing a little bit of things with you. But is that a community art project? Oh I don't, I doubt. And also, about the fact, report about the media. There is the saying, news value or the effect of a lot of people reporting and looking forward to something, like something 'deep shit' happening in performance art festival, is something that kills performance or not kills performance art in China, but like makes it so unbearable nowadays that some artists are quitting to do performance art because too many people are doing it and it's like a shithole now, performance art. And actually, some analysis goes to the fact that because performance art in China started off with so many media attention and also official attention of artists being arrested. And so every time an artist want to continue to do something, they always have to have this pressure of oh is the media going to report about your performance? If yes, or if the police is going to be at the door to arrest you, if yes, then this is a good performance. And this is actually very problematic. Maybe Shu Yang is in a better position to comment this. Is he here? Shu Yang, say something.

## **SHU YANG**

Sorry my English is not...it's bad. Maybe you can explain this.

*(Shu Yang gets Siu Lan to explain to him in Mandarin.)\**

Yes we had some problem from the public media like, the public media normally they just focus on some "worst news. Like some 'shock the public' or something like that.

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\*Mark: Disc 2, 47'29" till 48'28"

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Can you talk a bit louder?

**SHU YANG**

Oh sorry. Like our second performance festival we have, we invited international artists, we had 40 performances. But at the last, the newspaper just shows Zhu Yu's works because it really shocks the public. So the public focus on this one. Ya, we also discuss quite a lot about this piece but it's only one piece of the works. So it means that the public media have their own idea of how to show art to public but sometimes it's different, you know the view is very different from art or from, I don't know, also from public. In China, another problem is from the system, media system so they need critique performance art. That's the first thing so they just show some looks like bad things about performance art. That's their job so maybe, I don't know, but I don't think the public media is so strong for art. I mean, they can't control art. I always think art come from artists, from individual artists' idea. So maybe the media gives some view, maybe public knows something about art but the artist still has chance to develop themselves. Art's the first, maybe, for artists.

**Audience Member 2**

Perhaps we should change the title to "Is Performance Art in a State of Solitary Masturbation?"...

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Use the microphone.

**TAN TARN HOW**

Maybe we should change the title to Is Performance Art Today in a State of Masturbation? Maybe without the quotes, just to make Thomas happy. Perhaps not solitary masturbation but group masturbation. So I'm saying that between it being a media circus and between, you doing it alone in the toilet, right? Or wherever it is, in your room. Where do you find, sort of, interface with the public and through what kind of instruments do you make sure that that interface serves you? Of course some times it wants to appropriate you, yes, the media does, right? It wants a five-minute performance art, the most famous guy, whatever it is, the mutilation. But the other solution where you are alone wanking away, I don't think it works either. And in a society like Singapore, I think, maybe in the West, this is all passé, right? But then in a society...my point is that it continues to be relevant but in a society like Singapore, how do you make that relevant? Are you relevant? How do you look for your audience and use the instrument, which wants to use you to your advantage? And that is the question. I think we should engage in that. And your point about what do we do here which is relevant what happens in the rest of society.

**NANI KAHAR**

Well I think it's okay to wank in private. It's not an issue; it's whether you want the media present when you wank in private. So maybe we should look into the possibility of actually organizing performance art in the absence of media; that maybe it's just a direct interaction between the public and that it's not necessarily promoted. And without that pressure, maybe there is room for performance art to grow naturally.

**MICHAEL LEE**

Can I take on Tarn How's observation? 'Cause I have something, I have an observation similar to his as well. And it's related to the question that has been ringing in my mind these last few evenings – why am I not yet a performance artist? And I'm still making art objects. By the way, I have artworks along the corridor behind. But my preliminary answer to the question is that I'm afraid of not having an audience.

Now that is of course not true 'cause we saw many people around each performance. But the audience that I wish for, as a person, as an artist, is really the audience outside the obvious ones, the converts. I wish my relatives, I wish people who don't know me, I wish tourists would pass by and see my performance. Last few nights, we see mostly artists, writers and curators and couple of Indian construction workers, maybe. It's not a sexist comment but I found it problematic that the audience comprises only of people in the art circle so I'm wondering maybe the next time we could have it in a more public area, in the Esplanade or something.

### **CHEO CHAI-HIANG**

Yes, I'm interested in the idea of audience too. What kind of audience? For instance, this morning when Siu Lan showed that performance of that yellow taping on the road, which actually occurred during the July 1st, demonstration and how many people were there?

### **KO SIU LAN**

The second year they say there are around 70 000 Hong Kongers.

### **CHEO CHAI-HIANG**

70 000, and that's sort of a ready-made audience, if you like. The other thing talking about audience, I think it is up to the art community to strategize and find the audience and also target what kind of audience one wants. For instance, years ago when Da Wu did that performance in Chinatown, I think there's a lot of people there but I think what I am interested about performance art here is, there seems to be a reluctance in trying, and I think probably strategically, trying to avoid giving performance a fixed definition. And therefore, without a fixed definition, it would be a lot more difficult for people – whether it's audience or writer or artists themselves to be able to, to be critically engaged in what these performance artists are doing. And so, from that, I'd like to go back to Ray's sort of a question, or maybe statement rather than a question, about the institutionalization of performing art, and I think you refer to Singapore, is it? (*Langenbach: Everywhere*) And maybe we could open that up and talk about whether now that after an absence, not exactly an absence, after not being supported for ten years and started to get funding, is it going to be very good, good or bad? So maybe someone would like to talk about that because I'm not very familiar with Singapore performance art.

### **Audience Member 3**

I'm not sure how we define performance art because I think that theatre practitioners like Ong Keng Sen from Singapore; his works are quite, to me, performance art. I mean there are dance and theatre practitioners who do works that can be considered as performance art. But I think we are narrowing down a lot of things here. And I think there are performance artists who extended of not using their body in performance art, they've extended into cyberspace, creating the cyborg, the body which is a non-body. So do we still need to have body to do performance art? Do we need to see the body, the real body, to be considered that as performance art? So I think actually we have branched out a lot from performance art and as we talk about conventions, how some of us may accept those sub-genres as performance art or not, yes.

### **NANI KAHAR**

Just to make a request, I think, when I was in Kuala Lumpur, I think Boris made a very interesting remark about performance art, not so much as a closed system but as an open system. So I was wondering where he could elaborate a little bit later on after this guy on the idea of performance art as an open system

### **LY DARAVUTH**

Yeah, first the question "Is Performance Art in a State of Menopause?" it doesn't say where. I think the context is very important, because the question for here would be different in US or in, maybe where Sergio comes from. So this is a too-general question, and in a way it creates, because of that it creates all these different mesmerizing...so you're right maybe here the issue of having a naked person in, say, the naked body in public space can be very controversial in a way. But maybe not in Madrid anymore, it is in Cambodia so the issue of locality and global is relevant. So this is one observation. And I'm really interested...finding of interest the idea of incest, of menopause, of pro-creation, turns around the issue of pro-creation, to create and there is something about creativity that is in question and maybe what happens in this discussion shows that there are concerns about constituencies, about media, there are concerns about power. And these concerns are not specific to performance art and this morning, I came to a talk with Sergio, I think, yeah you were here, in Chinese I couldn't understand that. But I can feel, I can feel, right, the talk in Chinese, I couldn't understand the language of course, but I can feel that; it was Thomas and Siu Lan, yeah, gave us a description of how performance art have a, the history of performance art in China anyway, and I am still very interested in the issue of locality and global because this morning you take examples of people, talking about the first naked performance in China in the 80s, yeah? Or the 70s? These people, did they know about The Armory Show in New York in 1905, for example, or did they know about a work that has been done in the West or not? How this relationship between what happens before, in the West of course, but it happened; there is, I don't know how to say it, things is happening now here and in some place there are questions that are being raised that are not relevant. But they are not relevant for Sergio but they are relevant for you – the media, for example. So I think you ought to rephrase the question. Is it about China? Is it about Singapore? Or is it about performance art in the world in general? I think you cannot just have that. Because we would have a different discussion, you know, we would have a different discussion with a different constituency also. It's about the people, the audience with whom we discuss. So performance art is just a form of art, as you know. I mean it's a category of art.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Ya, your point is very well-taken, certainly we're talking about Singapore. But we're talking about Singapore, I think, in a global frame. Because performance art, as we say, is actually a globalized form at this point. And its mainstreaming in certain parts of the world have produced that globalization and are a product of globalization. But you know, just so you know, that question is very different just across the Causeway where, for example, performance art has never really taken hold for example in Malaysia the way that is has in the neighboring countries. So you know, the process of transmission of ideas is not necessarily through proximity, it's actually through quite oblique transmissions, the way information or meme, to use Richard Dawkin's term, finds itself proliferating in a particular context. It is a very odd and unique phenomenon when an idea takes hold in a certain place, and what are the conditions – the sociological, economic, political et cetera – that allows that to happen is, in a sense, one of the questions that you're asking. So yeah, I think that what we're doing is we're looking here, this is our model, in a sense of...for the posing of the question, this problematic question that has many problems in it, you know, we're discovering. Not just the problem of menopause, the problem of what actually is the boundary of this question ... is the issue you bring up now.

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Could I add to that? I think, for me, one of the things I want to say (also in terms of the cultural context and what we discussed before) the important dialogue is between the artist, the artwork and the audience. That's number one, and then if it works well, then there is a space involved as well where that dialogue happens. One of the things that I'd like to comment upon in terms of this festival and other festivals that I see here, is about the innovation of the event itself, the structure itself is kind of (at least in this part of the world), is kind of adapted into one singular concept. And now we're talking about, when we're discussing

some of the issues with the context of the festival, we've been talking about, well there's too many cameras recording, or it doesn't happen in an open space. I'm just trying to see a festival arise, which is different. One of the things is, earlier somebody ask Boris as well to comment on it, the Black Market was that kind of dialogue between the artist, the artwork and the audience, in a space. And it was occurring and I saw people holding video cameras as well and audiences walking around. I didn't see that sort of pack just constantly moving to the show.. So this type of structure, something different, something maybe which lasts three months if necessary, or one day, or involves one artist or...

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Well, the flash mob as you were mentioning. Yeah, Chumpon?

### **CHUMPON APISUK**

Yeah well I think there's a few things going around. One we worry about the popularizing of performance art, two institutionalizing performance art, three we are talking about declining of performance art, as I perceive the word, 'menopause, of how it happens. Or we're talking about the stagnancy of performance art. But actually, well I mean there's always a conflict when you're starting to do something very new and provocative considering the public or the media. Okay, in the case of Thailand, I think we are quite successful in the first year, the second year of our festival in terms of media coverage, and after that they think okay, it's the same old thing happening again so they're not covering anymore so now we end up writing up our own press release and they publish it. And that's how the media takes it. I'm not blaming them but on the other hand, I think we're a little bit more focused on what we are trying to do. What I think that is happening at the moment it's more relevant to say the movement has started in Southeast Asia. Okay, Singapore has always been sort of centralized, you know, of the modern contemporary arts that's happening because you have a big sum of money and, you know, also fantasies of all these museums and contemporary art scenes in the region. But then again, things happening in other countries around the region, it takes place in different location, it takes place in different situation, it takes place in the certain political circumstances, differences on where it happened. What happened in WTO conference in Hong Kong was that, okay, Siu Lan was situated, artists into the mass rally who were opposed to WTO. And that is our audience, and that is our agenda of how it takes place. It might be different in the Philippines when they do all these mockups, you know, things that happen in the rally, and also the public intervention, you know, of video festival happen in Manila and other places. And also things have been going on Jogja, in Bandung, in Jakarta is maybe dialogue because all the artists are moving throughout the cities. And then returning to the FOI, I think FOI is quite, you know, becoming one of the successful performance art festivals in the region and it's beginning, you know, to create the, what you call the platform; to adding up another platform in this region and, once again, I think this is, we should have looked at the performance art as a movement, rather than as a form. However, I think the context also varies, you know, like Daravuth has just mentioned. You know, when we look at the context of local and we look at the context of global. Because they're relevant, because the global terms, you're talking about something much bigger, but at the same time, the local subject, the local context also reflects what is happening in this world and how it affects the local. This is what I try to interpret 'menopause', of that term.

### **SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I have some thoughts I would like to share with you and ask your opinion of them. This is the first time I've been so close with so many Southeast Asia artists, and although I knew there were some troubles in this area politically, talking about performing and doing artwork and we see it all the time, it was, maybe from the whole situation here, this time very, very acute in this event. And this is something that keeps me wondering all the time and, I think you all have a...about Southeast Asia artists; a love-hate relationship with censorship, with media that for some reason you see it like, going together – media and censorship –

like: "Is the journalist in the audience? Oh my God, we're not normally very happy to have..." So it's not clear what's the media doing here. But I do think you really have a love-hate relationship with that. Censorship is a driving force behind a lot of work that you're doing here. What Chumpon was saying in terms of globally talking about the WTO is what it's getting back into the local. I don't think you have feel guilty about it; we're all living in semi-fascist countries. And with the WTO over all these semi-fascist countries being the higher power governing us. Are you really conscious of this love for censorship you have here? Anyone thought about it? As how lucky if you have breaks, you have power to, or you can work against something, not for something. We're talking about specifically the creative powers here in this side of the world against Europe or America. I think that's one of the drives – just break the law, not break the law, never mind, I don't think you have to break the law. The moment you have conscious of it, and you keep it, then you're working with it or against it exactly the same. So you're always all the time bitching about censorship but I think it's a very important part of your work here, and very local, although wide area, but local to this part of the world so I'll be happy to hear from you.

### **TAN TARN HOW**

Well, it is interesting that there were two kinds of negotiations with the government as far as censorship is concerned. If you look at theatre, what happened was there was an ongoing process which continued from the early 90s up till now. That there's a regime there, but there is a negotiation, and you know, it's a question of how much you want to give in or give away. But with performance art, what happened was that, I don't know if you know the history the Josef Ng and Jason Leow incident, and that, you know, is performance art in a state of castration after Josef Leow? Josef Ng, sorry, Vincent Leow, sorry. And what happened was the shot was given away in the sense that the artists have no voice, and in fact it became a media circus that it was about the pubic hair rather than what Josef Ng was trying to do. And there wasn't an attempt by the practitioners and everybody else to say, 'Hey, you know, we want to state our case'. There was no organization and there was no representation except through the media, and in the end, when the thing was proscribed, there was no voice. And it just sort of like went underground in a way, because some people were doing performance art and forum theatre in everything but name. But it sort of disappeared and only, I suppose, now, I'm not so sure about history, I'm more familiar with the history of theatre... (*Responds to comments in background*) Ya, diving period and it's only recovered. I don't know whether it's love-hate or not, certainly there isn't very much love but there's certainly a lot of hate. But what happened was performance art really was, in a way, had the thing pulled out from...and we can look into the reasons why, I don't know exactly what but theatre, because we have the institutionalization of theatre groups, right, it provided a platform, a kind of power centre for them to negotiate through whereas the performance artists – they had no association, they work as individuals – they didn't have that mechanism for, in a way, dialogue or engagement with the government.

### **SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I just want to intercept that to give a small example of what I'm talking about in the performance of Arai that most of you saw. I know that the pantyhose were a negotiation, an idea of Lee Wen, just, so he's not naked. But I think it changed radically the whole image of the performance. It gave the performance much more depth sexually of course, you know – transgender, brought up a lot of things that he didn't intend but it's a tiny example of how negotiating with reality can give a lot of significance and depth to your work, in this case. Imagine that same performance without the pantyhose. It would have been good but with that, it's something else, totally different.

### **KO SIU LAN**

But I rather think the pantyhose and the Pikachu actually makes it even better.

### **SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

Yeah, that's what I said. That's what I said.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

(To Jaimie McMurry) Are you on this topic?

**JAMIE MCMURRY**

Unless you want to talk about Pikachu some more, then I'll stay on topic.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

We'll come back to you

**KO SIU LAN**

I just wonder why couldn't...why we didn't say 'Is poetry solitary wanking'; 'Is painting solitary wanking'? Why do we point the fingers at performance art if performance art is just an art form? I can see where this is all coming from because performance art developed out of like this resistance from social conventions, and all these things and...It's like, I think why we are getting, this is like you see children who can fly, you know that there is great potential; that you, or he or she used to fly, but now it doesn't fly or sometimes it flies but it doesn't make enough impact. And we have so much hope it can fly again. But on the other hand, I think it is; yet it could, performance art could do so many things, we could have this expectation but we should not think 'they should'. It's a matter of 'could' or 'should'. If we change it into something 'should', it will become something like "oh performance artist should do this in order to sell". It's the same thing; it will end up in the same dead end. So I think it is important, yeah, we ask "Could performance art do that"; "Could you please fly again" but not 'should'.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Jamie, do you want to do yours or...?

**LEE WEN**

Can I just intervene? I think Ko Siu Lan has brought up a very good point and it's the main point here we are talking about because, the word 'menopause' is in inverted commas which means that there's a lot of different things we wanted to say but we chose this word because it kind of arouses a lot of meanings behind that: irrelevance, like what it's supposed to do but it's not doing it anymore. And of course, it's true that we're not just talking about performance art here. The whole question for me, I think, is the larger question of art as well, because when you think about what's happening in contemporary art, the artists are being subjected to in terms of selling out to the market, to the global capitalist system that we all live under. And yes, art must do something. It's not about 'should' or 'why' or 'what', but I feel that art must do something, which it's not doing anymore because the whole ubiquitous market is just sucking us up. And the question is to artists-at-large, but because we are performance artists, we are ahead of them. We feel it more than any other artist, and we are, as a performance artists, we are self-referential. (*Thomas Berghuis interjects: 'Avant-garde', is that the word?*) Because we're losing out to this all the time. Yeah, we use our bodies and we're self-referential and we are asking this question because, although we are doing something here which is really, I think doing something more than showcasing; it's just the model we are fit into because we are living in this kind of system where we have to hire a space or get somebody to sponsor us. We would like a larger space, but the space, the people who own the larger spaces wouldn't let us have it, yeah. The way that Substation is very understanding in letting us use it, you know, because there are very few people who own spaces like that who understand artists. (*Laughter*) There are very few. In fact, maybe there's only one in Singapore. (*Applause*) And the question

here is not about, like, okay, it's not something to arouse feminist concerns about being a woman, or creativity or productivity, but it's just the function of art and artists here. What are artists doing? Are we just submitting to the conspiracy of the marketplace, the conspiracy of the powers-that-be, in making people becoming, what you call, submitting to the system and what are artists doing about it? Okay, the interesting thing that came up here is also the kind of different conditions in different countries, which I think is really useful as well. Because we start to understand that there is this thing happening in Malaysia where the way they use the space is also very different; and that Communist China and artists there are submitting to capitalism the same way as anywhere else although they are having this Communist system, you know, and so I think this is what we are talking about is a very relevant question here, but what can we do about it? I have no answers but I think that is the main thing that we want to think about.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Can I have a comment? And then um, okay, I see your hand. Oh I heard someone. Someone over here? Okay, you are third, you are fourth?

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Can I relate to this quickly?

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Let's hold it, so we don't centralize this here.

### **C J WEE WAN LING**

Okay actually the first thing is a sort of historical note, I think to Sergio's point that censorship is a sort of weird love-hate relationship. I think that is a very good observation actually. That's actually, in a certain sense, he's right because, in terms of art, censorship has become both a theme as well as a thematic of a lot of contemporary art, whether visual or theatre. And you're right that theatre like, a big company like TheatreWorks can navigate it in a way different from Lee Wen, for instance. And I think the institutional presence of theatre plus its location in the global city for the arts plan gives it that clout that performance artists don't quite have so I think that's actually a quite good point and I'll come back to it in a minute. But secondly, I wanted to put in at least a sort of historical footnote to what Tarn How was saying, because he will remember because he was there, I saw him, there was a big meeting at the Guildhouse after the Josef Ng incident, where Pao Kun, Kuo Pao Kun, a whole bunch of people were there. You might remember that, you were there, I saw you. And Stella, Stella Kon, propose, you might recall, that we take out...were you there, Ray? You were, right. She had proposed we take out a two-page advertisement in The Straits Times staking a response to the Josef et cetera et cetera incidents. And the room in fact, you might recall, visibly responded very positively to that. And then Kuo Pao Kun stood up and said, 'Look if you do this, the young man will get hit harder, A; B: also what's the issue of responsibility of this sort of thing?' I mean, I couldn't quite, I can't quite remember what the second point was. And after he said that, because Kuo Pao Kun had the immense authority that he had, the room sort of, as I recall, sort of visibly deflated. Just went *pfssssh!* And instantly, the proposal for the advertisement died. And afterwards there was this sort of snide comments from people, you know – paternalism, authoritarianism of Kuo Pao Kun blah blah blah, all that sort of stuff. And to some extent that's true, but I also think it should also be recorded that no one in the room responded against what he said, what he put forth as, maybe, an authoritative comment was taken as, I don't know, proscription, prescription or something like that. So in the same way, all those people in that room, theatre people, visual artists were culpable in not using that moment when, you know, something could have been quite interesting. After that, I think various theatre and visual arts groups started dissipating in Singapore, that's my feeling, in terms of, I don't know, solidarity or community or something like that. So I think that Sergio's point marks a, indicates a very important historical moment in '94 that I don't think we've quite come to terms with. So I think that historical note is important, but moving on to the sort of issue of commodification, there's something that I think that, in terms of what we've seen here, and to do with the lifting on the ban on performance art, and

on...it's not fully a common result, sort of an observation is that soon after that it was lifted, after all those years and all, all the fuss involved from that, the Singapore Art Museum, right, just before the festival, organized a workshop on how to do performance art with Da Wu, Mideo Cruz and one other person. So I mean, that's amazing, I mean, what does that mean that, even with all the problems talking about that, the institutions can move in with a public workshop on something that a ban has just been lifted on, more or less literally? I wonder what that says. I don't think it's just about Chinese artists and Wu Han, of course a lot has been said about him and Hou Hanru and blah blah blah, about the commodification of Chinese art because the world wants to buy contemporary Chinese art, no one's interested in contemporary Southeast Asian art. Contemporary what? So that's part of it as well so there are these movements, certainly, political, not yet we need...I think it's not just about global, economic power of China, but its geopolitical position means everyone's interested in China while, before contemporary Southeast Asia could exist, if not, we're just hived off to another ethnographic note somewhere with one exhibition in New York to its credit and that's about it, yeah.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, comment there? Oh yeah, Jamie, sorry. Okay, you are next, and then you and then you and then you and then you.

### **Audience Member 5**

This is the first time I'm watching performance art and I'm a very young audience. I'm not an artist. I'm 25 years old but for the past five years, I've been very active in managing arts, with the artists as well. So the time, I came here and I want to understand what performance artists do, or actually for the past five years, what artists do. And I...the question with me was how spontaneous are the performance artists in Singapore? We have a lot of issues that have been going on like death penalty or even Temasek buying up a lot of things and we have an election coming up where PAP tries to be opposition, propose to be opposition. How do artists respond to that? Are they spontaneous? For the past, ya, five years, I...maybe it's my...I'm not informed, but I don't feel that performance art, or performance artists are very responsive to current issues, or is there a continuity; that I know a certain artist is interested in an issue and he keeps thinking about it. For example, last year I saw Andree Weschler. I only saw her last year, I know she's interested in something about herself as a woman, so I followed her up to this year, her performances and see what's her development. So, ya, my question is about how performance art can be more spontaneous in Singapore, and the continuity of issues? Something like that. And my simple understanding of 'menopause' is that it comes with age. You have to do something, it's something regular and then it kind of stagnant, you face something different but I'm not sure that performance art in Singapore is that regular to face 'menopause', yeah.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

So, the question of performance art, whether it's a spontaneous form is a very very big question. I think we should probably keep to the specific issues that we're trying to deal with; and maybe at another time or afterwards, we come to this larger theoretical question about the nature of performance art. If we can, okay? Alright. Jamie?

### **JAMIE MCMURRY**

I want to point out that it's very warm in The Substation every night, which is a nice little intimate gathering, you know. Now here we are in the museum and everybody's freezing their ass off (*Langenbach*: I know. I tried to get it...) and so spread around. Speaking about the festival format, I also have had some experiences in the last couple of years, being a little cynical about the setting and seeing the same people in the same context all the time. What I have come to conclude about that though is very different. Now, as an artist, I am offended by the idea of people assuming that what they see me do at a festival is my practice. It's the only part of my practice. It seems a little ignorant to just assume that. In the

same way that looking at one painting of an artist who may have one piece of work hanging in the museum is their entire practice. So, as a viewer and a writer and a theorist and a teacher, and all these things that sort of make you other than the artist at these performance art festivals, I find it to be a format to bring attention to the medium for people who have never been exposed to it in any other form before. I find it to be a vehicle in which I can learn about the incredibly diverse practice of different artists who choose to work in time-based fields. Many, many examples: Essi and Paul and Kai Lam and Chumpon and Boris. I know so much more the work that they do that does not fit within the performance art festival context because I go and meet them and make an effort as an audience member to learn more about what they're doing outside of the festival context. So the question for whomever is: Do you feel it's the artist's responsibility to show viewers, writers, critics, whomever, other parts of their practice just because it's not easily accessible? Just because it's not in a context like a gallery or a museum or a book. Does it then become the artist's responsibility to show you that stuff?

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, we'll keep rolling in our people and then if someone wants to engage with that... Sorry, does somebody want to engage with that? We're kinda jumping into another line.

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

I'll wait my turn.

### **BORIS NIESLONY**

I have the same things. For me, it's a big problem to make some watcher, some viewer, to make it to the audience. It's the same thing to switch from quality to quantity. For me, it's a big problem to make some people to audience. So, why as it is, what's going on to have a communication with somebody he's watching? It makes you, as it's for me. So it's very important to know this, why it makes all things we think about it in a completely, as a way for me, a way of clarity, we don't need too much people, we don't need releases. Things make some things in a representation way. So why is this more better to make a different point as often as possible in the deepest quality we can do it? That's really the feeling I have so I've got to say it.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, go ahead. Sorry, you had a comment? No?

### **JAMIE MCMURRY**

I will assume that if you have a criticism about the festival format, then you would have some kind of an answer to my question.

### **SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I think that this is a very good format. And I think that, even the fact that this work through this I-invite-you, you-invite-me, is also okay. And it's because most of the organizers of these festivals are artists, which is quite unique. Though I had an Internet conversation with a few curators for a project I'm working on, and one of the subject was the artist as curator, which is sounds like 'kind of a freak', 'should be suspicious' or 'what shall we do about it'; while in this area, it is, it's the norm. That's what happens. There are very few, very very few, as you know, organizers that are not artists. I'm one of them but, I don't know, maybe we know four or five more, I guess. And so that's part of the format, you cannot do without it. So an artist has the possibility of inviting some other artists, that's what we call a festival. And he has the possibility to show his work to the other artists because the moment you perform, you're performer but fifteen minutes

later, you're the audience, so I find it very healthy, I find it very healthy that it's low budget, that we don't have big sponsorship, that we don't have big restraints, that we don't have press problems, and I think that's what keeping performances as we understand it here as a lively, non-menopausal art form. And I think we have to maintain it. I'm not critical of it at all. I mean I, I've been working, I even, going to say more, I even invited to my festival, not a lot of times, but once or twice I must confess, artists that I wouldn't, I was not very keen on their artwork but I invited them because they had their own festivals and it was important for me that they come as organizers to see, I mean one of the things that I'm trying to, since the beginning in Israel, is to have Israeli performance art being disseminated. And it's important for me that some of those organizers that even if I don't really respect very much their work are there. So I invited them to perform and they invite Israeli artists, I'm very happy about it. I don't think we have to be that critical, I think it's unique. I mean if you really know how the art world works, you wouldn't call this corruption. Okay, corruption is somewhere else, and this is some kind of norm that is, you can criticize it, put it in the right place, but it's definitely nothing to do with real, big-time corruption.

### **KO SIU LAN**

Yeah, I also think that it is okay to have festivals, but I think it is a problem if we only have festivals for, as a platform of exchange. And I think it is also okay, about what, I agree with what Boris say about quality, not about quantity, that's why, you know, it's this land of all possibilities, and it don't give a fuck of all those mainstream standard about, you know, quantity, or you have to be productive and everything. Yes, this is okay but on the other hand, there should be also possibility of like what you say, why we don't only have festivals? Why we don't encourage other forms of exchanges among artists, and if this is not happening, can we do something to encourage this?

### **JAMIE MCMURRY**

We don't. We don't only have festivals of art.

### **BORIS NIESLONY**

I have to answer that directly, sorry. It exists, a lot of different things, but we don't speak about it. See, the world is full of other forms of how people coming together and to bring time together to develop some things, interesting things. (*Audience: Many, many.*) Many, many. So festival is one of the latest and I hate really festivals too, but okay, will go to meet people. So why I like to come to meet people, I like, met, I never met before. But mostly, it still exists as a possibility. You have to speak about this in the future.

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

The challenge will be, and I'm glad that Lee Wen actually stood up and said something about the festival and, but the challenge will be if this is indeed the last FOI because, if Lee Wen, like Chumpon was saying FOI is one of the most successful events in Asia but what if there's no more FOI? The challenge will be for young artists to organize something, to become innovative. Maybe organize another structure. Maybe host a structure in which Jamie can show his whole oeuvre to me and other audiences who are really interested in, or you know, think of new structures. And then in the case of the venue where it's held, you know, this structure has been based on friendship and history, on engaging with the venue, engaging...but I can, you know, I presume that maybe in the next case, somebody won't have that affiliation with the venue or, so you know, it can happen at another space as well. The challenge lies in the future, I guess.

### **NANI KAHAR**

I was also thinking about the idea of actually, you were talking about structure, whether it can take a form of a parasitic or saprophytic structure where it can have a host where it can feed off. For example, gentleman here is actually organizing an event which involved the IMF and the World Bank, but I think in that sense whether that special space can be created for, as a host, where you allow other people to be a saprophyte, i.e., feeding off a living organism as opposed to a dead organism.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Dana and Tran Luong.

**JAMIE MCMURRY**

While I'm walking over to Dana, I will just briefly add that I think what you're identifying as being something; I feel like a Donohue or something, maybe nobody knows who that is; I think what you're describing as something we need to seek, exists, and I don't think that it's my responsibility to show everybody that it exists. You know what I mean? As an organizer, as an artist, I think these things happen and we all just assume that they don't happen because we're not looking hard enough for them.

**DANA LAM**

Thank you. I think it will be something contrary to the nature of performance art if we were going to be, if we were to concern ourselves with getting a, attracting the media. As an alternative structure to the festival, I'm wondering if it's conceivable for FO14 to think about doing a festival that is completely guerrilla style. Because, as a Singaporean, the thing that excites me about performance art personally, I have a love-hate relationship with performance art but it's exciting to me because it seems to be the only art form existing now, which we can, as individuals, kind of grab some space for ourselves. We can have kind of parallel; have a parallel world running with whatever's going on in mainstream society. When the \$600-million dollar Esplanade had its fantastic fireworks opening, during, around that time; Weng I don't know if you remember; Rizman's group was doing a small show in The Substation Gallery, and I had the opportunity to see them practice and what they were doing was, they have cut open some garbage, black plastic garbage bag and they were crawling underneath it and trying to test out what they can do with this material. And at some point, it took the shape of that sort of echoed the shape of the Esplanade. And I spent, I think about a day trying to persuade them to do a performance in the shadows, you know, find a space near the, outside the Esplanade Theatre and have a parallel opening, because the opening was very selective, you have all the VIP guests and the rest of us can only watch it on TV. So I thought that it would be so cool for us to have a parallel opening at the side. Of course we were all too worried about licensing and all that and we didn't do that, but it really be great to see that happening in Singapore. My question to the foreign artists would be: if you were to be invited to a festival where everything is going to be guerrilla-style. First of all, there will be no proper licensing; secondly, you wouldn't know where the venues, there will be no official venues, you would come here and the whole idea would be to have spontaneous actions take place at different parts of Singapore whether... and of course, you then select your audience, I mean the whole idea of, you go to a place where you think you want that particular audience to get your message. Would you, what would your response be? Would you come? It would be organization nightmare for us, for Lee Wen; I will volunteer to help if you were going to do that. (*Laughter*) Yes. What was it? Forgot what else, but what would your response be? Oh! You know, I have the perfect argument for the police if they were to catch us doing that because to me then putting my side, putting myself in the shoes of an audience, in the shoes of a tourist even, I think there can be nothing more exciting than stumbling on an event or an action when I least expect it, much more...and if this builds up over time, thinking like the Tourist Board director now, if this builds up over time, Singapore gets a reputation for this kind of thing happening, I think it will be more interesting for tourists than coming here and buying an expensive ticket to the Esplanade so I think I can get away with it.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Okay, Tran Luong, Tran Luong.

## **TRAN LUONG**

For me, I think I agree that festival form is still benefit us very much, it's a lot. I not really felt that inconvenient with the you-invite-me-and-me-invite-you, and I don't care. But I care about the scheduling festival in concrete place and I still feel have inconvenience for the artist body. I think there's a lot of limited conditions for us, I have been organizer, I know. But I think maybe we should turn partly the form of festival for performance art as a, little bit as a residency form. And artist might have more chance to living together, not instead to perform together, eating or drinking or traveling or, and requiring artists should be making project with the local context. I know, I been, took part in residency program, different residency programs, sometimes I felt also stuck because artists are in the forest and all of them just hang around with each other, and talking and drink, or talk about art, but nothing linking with the local environment and country and people around them. So sometimes I thought, ah, they are really fancy community, they took some money from so-so and eating and do some kind of 'mystic-art', there's nothing, you know, benefit for local community. So I heard recently residency program is also changing. There's a Montalvo Centre program in California, they now require, the new one, they require artist-participant that should have a project to directly working with local district and have to spend time to research about life there. And of course, everyone still not, you know, get off from their own contact in visual body, but they should interact with local life, so I hope that my way, we have a change in the future to do that more, you know, how can I say it, flexible form of contract performer of festival.

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

If we go to this gentleman, he's been waiting a long time. And then we are going to be in the last five minutes so we need to sort of have our final comments.

## **RONNIE LAI**

Thank you. I'd like to follow up the issue that was raised by the lady regarding police, you know. I think we should have a way to protect, you know, performance artists not to be disturbed by the police when they are in the process of performing. Performance artists deserve respect, you know, how, we should think of a way, we should think of a way whether, like for instance, I came up with a stupid idea, if I'm wrong please correct me, maybe the association of performance artists, you know, when the artist went up to, go up to perform, they wear a kind of identification, or performing armband or what, you know, so when they are in that: 'Please don't disturb me. I'm not creating nuisance, creating trouble in public or whatsoever'. So that is one. We should protect the rights of the performing artist when they are from point to point, you know. So second is that, I really appreciate and very much enjoy this very lively interaction action, okay, session, okay, and so happy to see so many outstanding, you know, performing artists here who are all friends and sisters and brothers, who care about this form of art. So permit me to propose an idea that, because the coming IMF, as what the honorable speaker was saying, that's a very good platform for us. So the coming there is September, so okay, and personally I just do not agree with people who go on demonstration, then you confront the police, then after that violence, then after that, you know, snowball effect, you know, after that people forget about you. What they remember is police hammer you. So performing artists, we can unite together and request government to give us a piece of, maybe a certain room or, you know, a certain park or whatsoever. Then unite together, like what Thomas was saying, you know, invite other artists together, installation art or whatsoever, with a theme, you know, 'poverty reduction'; 'save the children' or 'help the needy'. Then that will be wonderful. Then all of us will think, think, you know, you can just, how creative you are, how, whatever kind, all in a park, you know, like Fort Canning or whatsoever. Then there are 16 000 you know, very, what you call, high-level ranking people visiting Singapore, and that's something for Singapore, for IMF and for all the artists and I hope brother and sister consider seriously.

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

Well, wrap up your comments.

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Well can I just say? I wasn't trying to offer alternative structures. I think that's up to the organizers. I'm not offering alternative structures. Basically, I...Really, I'm sorry, Jamie, but I didn't get your last comment because part of the structure that you've been involved during these festivals is doing workshops with young artists and people were invited for the workshops, so you have been actually engaged into an extension to the usual festival structure whereby you do your performance and ask people to, or you say it's open to people to look for my work. So you've actually already decided that you would engage on another level. And then, my next question would be then in terms of looking in this kind of open environment to the rest of your work, Yang Zhichao who, I just discussed as well his work. He doesn't speak English, he doesn't hang out with a lot of artists that are here at these festivals. I just mentioned that his work is not suitable for a festival connection because his work is not only durational; it is very much privately done. But he is very interested in meeting performance artists that are here, and actually being aware of the fact that the basic practice he is doing. What I was saying is that though focusing on the direct relationship between artist, artwork, audience, in a space, and in a social context; he would be very interested (and other artists in that context as well) to engage all of you in a dialogue. And that's why I'm saying I'm not offering a structure which, that should be decided by whoever wants to pick up if FOI stops; but would ask anyone to challenge the festival as such.

### **JAMIE MCMURRY**

Yeah, and I didn't mean for that to sound so...It just hit me the wrong way 'cause I do see a lot of structures out there. And, you know, in regards to the workshop, if you had attended the workshop, you probably would have a completely different opinion. But I think when you're talking about artists in this setting; you are offering an alternative structure. It is a really great way to show performance can exist in these different contexts and these formats that we've become tired of because they seem to be repeating themselves all the time are the situations in which we find out about those things. You talk about event art in China. Where am I going to find out about that other than here? You talk about these artists who are putting their work out as being conceptual photography because it's difficult for them to show it in other forms. As far as I'm concerned, that's an alternative structure.

### **RAY LANGENBACH**

One more comment.

### **Audience Member 6**

I wanted to...you were talking about the commercialization of the performance art and your disturbance with that as a trend. And what, are there any options? Do you see any, you know, a new shift or any options to that, or?

### **THOMAS BERGHUIS**

Yeah, I just hope that these festivals, which will be recognized and will be picked up and will be discussed, and performance art will be discussed. Because, at the moment, you know, organizing events that are not festivals and talking with museums, and talking to exhibition spaces about doing something with performance art, which is a long-term event, three months, and you say: "Oh I'm doing something about performance art". They will say, you know, "No way". If you say "I'm doing a new media art show", then they will say "Yes, let's do it". They still lack that kind of perception of performance art, which I find really positive about these festival structures. It is a very engaging process. So I am just...I am just hopeful.

**SERGIO EDELZSTEIN**

I saw plenty of alternatives in the last four days. And I'm hoping to see three or four more this evening. Everything we saw here are alternatives, yeah sure.

**KO SIU LAN**

And I also think what is great about festivals or formal things like that is you are actually using, I mean, applying for government or so-called money from the mainstream to do something that you hope maybe, one day, would have points of resistance to turn against this system. Maybe. But I think it is a problematic attitude to, well, I rather agree with Thomas is that festivals also represent this commodification and market, international market of exchange and all that about art, which is okay but on the other hand, I think it will be problem if the artist or writer or curator, they have this: "Well, apart from that, none of my business. What is going to happen, apart from that, is your responsibility to do with the artist, or the whatever, you know. It's none of my business". Then I think this is a big problem. We should do something to create other platforms and other structures. Rather than say, "Oh I do this and maybe the others are none of my responsibilities, your responsibilities", I don't know, I'd rather think...

**RAY LANGENBACH**

I guess we'll close. I guess the conclusion to the question that we started with is that we don't like the question, and we've pretty much eliminated it. But the other questions surrounding it seem to be quite open and there are many, many avenues at this point. I'd like to thank FOI for the discussion.

**DANA LAM**

You haven't answered my question.

**LEE WEN**

Do it. Do it yourself.

**RAY LANGENBACH**

Go ahead.

**DANA LAM**

I'm dying to do it with Lee Wen. No, I'm sure it would be very problematic to organize but my question to the foreign artists is would they come under such, under those conditions? The whole festival is going to be done guerilla style. No fixed venue. No license, you know.

**THOMAS BERGHUIS**

This can't be a question. Do it, as Lee Wen says. Really, do it.

**DANA LAM**

I'm asking you as visiting artist, would you come?

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

I don't think there are any guarantees in organizing. I think it sounds great, I mean, yeah I'd come. But really, it's a matter of...

## **DANA LAM**

Who will have to do it with me? You'll have to do it with me, okay?

## **RAY LANGENBACH**

*(Laughter)* Okay, okay, okay, thank you very much for coming.

### **The Forum speakers:**

**Nani Kahar** is an architect and through labDNA seeks to extend the possibilities of architectural design practice through engagement with fine art, popular culture and communication technology. Media projects produced/curated include urban art events and installations, theatre, videos, and publications. Currently divides her time between Malaysia and the USA. <http://www.labdna.com/>

**Sergio Edelsztein** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1956. He studied at the Tel Aviv University (1976-85). Founded and directed Artifact Gallery in Tel Aviv (1987-1995). In 1995 founded The Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv in this framework he curated five Performance Art Biennials (BLURRR 1-5, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005) and Video Zone, The first International Video Art Biennial (2002). Since 1995 he curated numerous video art screenings, retrospectives, performances events and biennials and also lectured, presented video programs and published writings in many countries. He was the curator for the Israeli Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale 2005. <http://www.cca.org.il/>

**Thomas J. Berghuis** has recently completed his PhD dissertation on Performance Art in China at the University of Sydney (Australia), following an MA in Sinology at Leiden University (The Netherlands). During the past 10 years he has frequently traveled to China for his research, and from 2003 to 2004 he was a visiting scholar at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Next to his studies he has also been involved in several curatorial projects, including Associate Curator for the 6th Sharjah International Biennale, U.A.E (2003), Curator for the 1st Dashanzi International Arts Festival at the 798 Factory in Beijing (2004), and Co-organizer for the 2nd Dadao Live Art Festival in Beijing (2004) and the 5<sup>th</sup> Open Art Platform – International Performance Art Festival in Beijing (2004). His writings have been published in various magazines and art publications, including in *Artlink*, *Mesh* and *positions*.

**Ko Siu Lan** is an artist/ cultural/development worker. She works on community development and cultural action projects. She has participated in performance art events both locally and overseas. She is one of the organizers and curators of various Hong Kong performance art events such as the recent Hong Kong On the Move project in 2005-2006. <http://www.hongkongperformanceart.com/>

### **Moderator:**

**Ray Langenbach** "performs theory," focusing on cognitive phenomena & propaganda. He also makes video works, installations and performances have been presented them in Singapore, and internationally including Whitney Museum of Art (New York), Museum of Neon Art (Los Angeles), LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), Nevada Museum of Art (Reno), National Centre for the Arts (Mumbai), Artspace (Sydney), 3rd Werkleitz Biennial-Germany, Asia Pacific Triennale, Gwangju Biennale and others. Langenbach curates and writes cultural theory. He has published in *Art Asia Pacific*, *Artlink*, *Asian Art News*, *Afterimage*. He served as Singapore Editorial Consultant for *World Art*, and appears in several collections, including *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity and the State in Southeast Asia*, Oxford Dictionary of Performance (2004).