

Curatorial Essay

trajectories of movement, entangled intensities

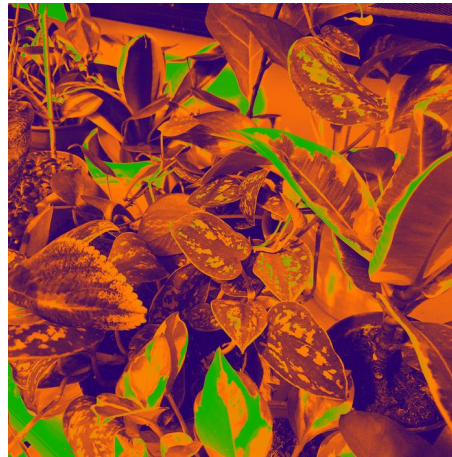
by Seet Yun Teng

This is a conversation between you and I – between us.

With this sentence, this already puts into your mind that there is you, our subject, the reader of my imagination, and I, the person who is writing this. And more crucially, the sentence is a proposition for you to enter a conversation. Of course, we can't physically do that, as though I was standing next to you, or sitting across you in a cafe, or even that these words take aural form through my spoken voice. No, it's rather a conversation that takes place through writing and reading, and thus also taking place in your mind. Conversations play a crucial role in the way I work alongside artists, and also my interests in the encounters, flows, slippages, associations, and circulations that take place in our interactions with art, or when we speak to each other.

Whether it's a look, a texture, a memory, a tension, something comes out in the interplay of ideas and things in this world, one that perhaps irreverently appears, disappears, be messy and unpredictable, passing between bodies and objects, and reveals aspects of the world that sit just underneath these words.

I'm writing this sitting in my flat, working remotely – outside, a scorching afternoon sun shines. The leaves on many house plants (in various states of health) flutter in a sudden breeze, always gently moving to the unseen currents that flow through my living space.



Whilst I'm writing this, I cannot ignore the fact that it is within a global crisis which *immaterial bodies* finds itself taking form. Whilst it was conceptualized before the pandemic happened, it has taken on a particular resonance and shifted in ways when we can't help but respond to these contexts in which we live and work in. This is a show about affect, (im)materiality, objects, bodies, and encounters, and whilst I've spent much of my time researching on concepts and theories, it is undoubtedly at the same time rooted in my personal practice and my previous work engaged with the interweaving of the body and textiles.

In a time when many of our movements are confined and limited; when interaction, gathering and touch have very quickly become strange concepts; when the intersections we have with others has transformed into sites of fear and danger, when previous conceptions of the way the world operated have been overturned. In a time like this, then, I do question what the value of art is in the face of much larger, looming issues – but at the same time, how can art form part of this process of re-adjusting our relationship to the world, and to other bodies?

I'd also like to apologise if this piece is slightly scattered – in my research, conversations and thoughts that helped this show emerge, it's unearthed such rich and sprawling material that it's become, perhaps, much bigger than I expected it to be. But I don't want to claim that this is fixed or completed in any way – it's a matter of having followed the flow of materials, and allowing space for unfoldings, infoldings and multiplicities of experience to take place.

the skin is faster than the word

⑥ The concept of affect resonates greatly with me. Here, I find Brian Massumi's writings on affect particularly resonant – he asserts that it always concerns “to affect and be affected”. He understands “affect” as “intensity”, where they are experiences of the body's reaction to stimuli *before* they are cognitively processed and consciously registered. It's because cognitive processing indisputably takes time – the body feels and senses more quickly than it can perceive, and Massumi refers to this lapse between the event and its conscious registering as “the missing half second”.^[1]

What I feel strongly from this concept is the question of what happens in this half second. Instead of the half second being empty or void, it's missed because it is “overfull”, in *excess* of potential and sensation, and this isn't located in the mind but rather in the body. The mind and consciousness “reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed”. It is here in the half second that, at the threshold of consciousness, this gap allows an infolding of contexts to happen – it allows the emergence of connections between unrelated past experiences, thoughts, volitions, and actions.

“They are tendencies – in other words, pastnesses opening directly onto a future, but with no present to speak of. For the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened.”^[2]

And it is in this space of potential, that exists in an immaterial realm (as in, non-physical), that I seek to explore and navigate in this exhibition. My hope is that through these artworks, a range of intensities and connections can arise, which remind us of the various encounters and entanglements we can have with people, places and objects.

“Affect is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness.”^[3]

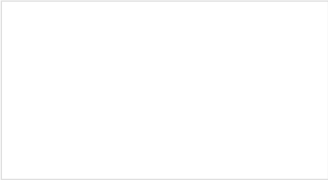
On one hand, it's an abstract concept, but at the same time it's immediately and inextricably connected with the real, the bodily, the physical – as it operates in the gap between the embodied, subjective, sensuous registers which we are affected by.

“The body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete...”^[4] The structures of feeling within which the works operate cannot be named, only felt. In the missing half second, where the skin is faster than the word (language), an intensity that folds past and future takes place.



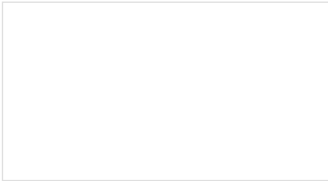
For me, ila's *hancur badan dikandung tanah* is one that expands in this gap. In her moving, emotional piece, she thinks about the relationship of the body to the land – to the places we inhabit, to a city which is characterized by disappearing sites of memory, and in which constant erasure of physical spaces is normalized. In anthropological studies of the links between person, embodiment and place, place is contended to be the most fundamental form of embodied experience – to be in a place is to *be aware of one's sensuous presence in the world*.

Critically, this physical embodiment is one that ila takes at the fore of her work – *hancur badan dikandung tanah* translates to the body which is contained by the land, disintegrates to the ground. *The skin is faster than the word*. How do our bodies react physically to the places that cease to exist, what layers of ourselves are removed when we no longer can return to the place we grew up in, the schools that we went to, the houses in which we lived?



In *hancur badan dikandung tanah*, unseen bodies push, resist, and struggle under blue tarpaulin, a material which permeates sites of demolition and construction through the city. The undulating surface of the tarpaulin sways and oscillates between almost topographical forms and recognizable bodily contours. At moments, it appears to blow in the wind, resting on scaffolding structures. And at an uncanny, striking moment, a split-second glimpse of a hand interrupts any ambiguity – but immediately disappears and is re-enveloped by the rippling surface. This break is one of my favourite moments in the work. It's something so spontaneous, but at the same time particularly critical in a moment of materialization and rupture.

For this work, ila reached out to the general public to collect their personal responses on disappeared places. More often than not, they recounted mundane and everyday spaces, but which hold incredibly emotional feelings. It serves as an affective grounding of the work in their embodied experiences, whose narratives and memories overlay the heightened performance. Thinking again about the non-conscious half-second, *hancur badan dikandung tanah* draws out a sensuous intensity that sits on this threshold, that is perhaps felt by the body before it can be expressed or named.



“Entanglement is two things. To clarify: Most precisely it is a shared quantum state. The experience of two (or more) entangled objects is inextricable and fully determining. The laws of relativity—Einstein’s own laws—say it is impossible to communicate faster than the speed of light, and yet somehow these objects do. Far apart, not locally connected, the particles speak without speaking; each reacts to the other, instantaneously. ... Less precisely, entanglement is a relation, an affectivity, a feeling between us: my life may affect yours, but what happens to me does not fully determine what happens to you; nevertheless, we are entangled.”[5]

This quote is from a marvelous text *From Inside a Black Box* that ties together entanglement, quantum realism and black revolutionary aesthetics (I’m ever grateful to Kin Chui for sharing this with me, without whom I would never have encountered this text). In the context of my research for this exhibition, this idea of entanglement with other beings or other objects is one that opens up countless new affective possibilities.

It’s the idea that we are all within a mesh of interconnected relations, where a ‘mesh’ can mean “the holes in a network and threading between them... it suggests both hardness and delicacy... both density and deception...a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled.”[6]

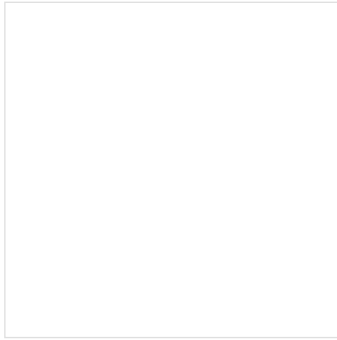
“Really thinking the mesh means letting go of an idea that it has a center”.[7]

Within such an understanding of the world, it sees the intersection or even, the interfacing of the self with the other as a meeting of “strange strangers” – simultaneously deeply intimate yet intrinsically strange and separate[8]. Here, this is where *Miss Q* comes squarely into the frame of *immaterial bodies*. *Miss Q* is part of a long-term speculative fiction piece that Denise Yap is writing, titled *New Growth*. In *New Growth*, a future world in which alternative kinships, non-nuclear families and gender fluidity is accepted and normalized, relationships defy linearity or structure – Denise imagines alternative, intimate entanglements in a future Singapore.

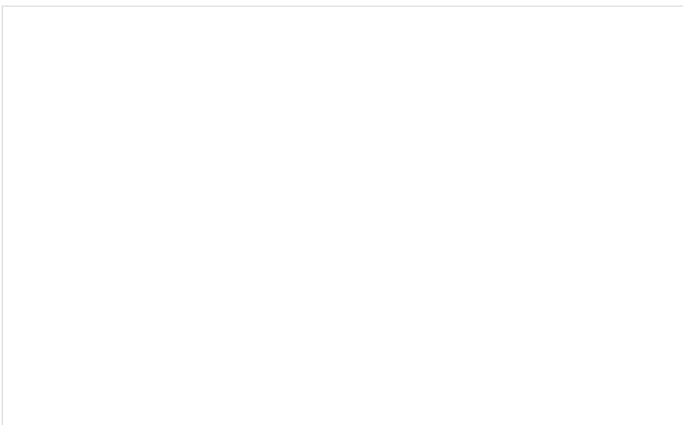
⑥ *Miss Q* emerges as a manifestation of their writing – their artworks materialize ideas and experiences that sometimes is beyond the reach of language. The limitations of language and expression is also an ongoing thread through their practice – in what forms and to what ends can we speak to each other? Most recently, in a work titled *Second Hand Smoke*, Denise plays with the calls and signals we make to express our love and affection to others. Thinking about involuntary physical reactions in humans while flirting, and bird mating calls that extend sonic and vibratory communications to their future lovers, in *Second Hand Smoke*, two queer adolescent characters, Zion and Cae, send their delicate and reticent love letters to each other through tweets and GIFs, a courtship unfolding through affectionate, gentle signals that travel through virtual space.

In the course of this exhibition, I've also been entering into a similar communication with *Miss Q*, in my bid to understand them better. The virtuality of these communications remind me that *Miss Q* exists in a world where individuals exist beyond their bodies, where relationships can take on rhizomatic and web-like forms.

I send my messages to *Miss Q*, and wait for an answer.



“Yes, experiencing it is definitely a big point. Sometimes I don't like to describe the work I made... because I can't describe it. This issue with language [is that it] creates an unknown that allows me to speculate. So this artwork only makes sense with this other artwork and not just solely language. Language can only bring you so far. A technical thing: whenever I want to make a work I always think in terms of sound first. For me, thoughts are abstract, artworks are too physical and sometimes it's too fast to [go from] abstract to artwork. Sound for me, comprises this nice meta-realm where it's abstract and also physical. It's like a mediating point, and also informs the visual.” – Denise Yap





Miss Q appropriates the orchid flower, laden with symbolic and national narratives, but also emerging from a history of cross-species breeding and hybridization. The origins of the Vanda Miss Joaquim (selected as Singapore's national flower) are debatable, whether it was a naturally occurring hybrid, or artificially engineered to be so. As a technological embodiment of the orchid, its synthetic biology bypasses bodily surfaces to generate a membrane that pulsates on *Miss Q*'s five-petalled screens. In this world, *Miss Q* has solar panels for renewable energy, taking on another layer of transformation. A form of energy production that is tied to earth systems is inherent in a future imagination of a world in which exploitative environmental extractivism that results from a capitalist and production-driven society is overturned, and one that places beings in this world in a responsive choreography with the world in order to stay in balance with it.

For me, thinking about the proposition that *Miss Q* sets forward as one that is fluid, expanded, and not bound by a certain materiality, also makes me think about orientations. In "Orientations: Toward A Queer Phenomenology"^[9], Sara Ahmed enters an in-depth discussion on what it means to orient, deviate and take on queer orientations. It's also an important reflection on how kinship can be constructed in a way that does not follow certain lines, allowing for disorientations and the pleasures of deviation. I think about Denise's musings on body-modification and ideas of the biological body, where alterations transcend their physical prescriptions to take on social, emotional, post-human ramifications, as an empowering and hopeful vision of what the future can be.

hybridity, transformations and mutations

In the Institute of Queer Ecology's recent video works, *Metamorphosis – Emergence*, they propose that in order to resist capitalistic and unsustainable modes of production and reproduction, there is a need to imagine other ways of being and an insistence on the potentiality of another world, and draw on the transformative process of butterflies and moths in their final life-stage what could emerge from revolutionary transformation.

"as excess, as autonomous, as impersonal, as the ineffable, as the ongoingness of process ... as virtual, as shareable (mimetic), as sticky, as collective, as contingency, as threshold or conversion point, as immanence of potential (futura), as the open" [10]

In *larval limbic*, Weixin Chong also thinks about morphing, transformation and mutation. Her work draws on a few references, notably in this context, the orchid mantis, or *Hymenopus coronatus*, a pink and white mantis with lobes on its legs that look like flower petals. In an adaptive strategy known as "aggressive mimicry", it has adapted to resemble orchids both to hide from predators and to target prey. Another reference that she draws from is science fiction author Octavia E. Butler's trilogy, *Lilith's Brood*, which imagines an apocalyptic future in which humans struggle to adapt themselves to new environments by merging with alien species and taking on new forms.

Orchid Mantis Catching Prey



Like Denise, Weixin thinks about body modification and the evolution of appearance to open up possibilities of fluidity, post-humanness and the possibility of hybrid beings. On one hand, this breaks out of conventional notions of what bodies can be, especially in potential transformative imaginations of fluid forms. On the other, I refer again to Timothy Morton's writing on "strange strangers" and the poetics of coexistence^[11]. In his writing on ecological thought, the interconnectedness of all beings in a "mesh" simultaneously permits no distance with other beings (meaning that everything is brought into intimate relation), and at the same time they are intrinsically "strange" as there is a vastness to our coexistence. "When the environment becomes intimate—as it is in our age of ecological panic—it no longer remains an environment." That is to say, through this interconnected thought, a shift is made in how we see ourselves in relation to our environment – we become open to trajectories of becoming and as sites of emergence.

Weixin's work has always taken on a sensory and tactile approach, playing with interactions between materials and the bodily. They exist in spaces of ambiguity and in-betweenness, rejecting binary constructions and understandings. In *larval limbic*, the soft sculptures *mantid hybrids*, which are made of faux fur and synthetic webbing, form winged skins that blend associations of insects with mammals – they are part cocoon, part skin, part alien body, and at the same time have the potential of being worn as extensions of the human body. It's no surprise that fashion has an influence on her work – from the voluminous traditional robes of the Korean Joseon dynasty which overpower the shape of the human body with a plant-like excess, to avant-garde contemporary label Blindness' sculptural clothing constructions which challenge the performance of gender.

The primacy of material and tactility also come to the fore in her sculptural objects, which hang in the space alongside the *mantid hybrids*. A mix of hybrid object sculptures, they merge silicone glass, plant forms, plastic translucent bags and metal chains. Blending synthetic with natural, they are objects in the middle of transformation – each object, suspended in relation to each other, intertwine, unbind and release latent meanings. Undergirding the hanging objects, which themselves take on a vibrational resonance in the installation, is the low sound of larval-stage creatures transitioning/transforming, serving as an affective texture to the work. The audio is ambiguous, yet incredibly bodily, even guttural – sound creates a distinct affect that makes it difficult to be expressed in words.

figures of affective capture

It has to be acknowledged that affect theory is a much larger field of study across the humanities, and my work here is merely trying to draw connections and setting the conceptual ground on which this exhibition takes place – and perhaps, drawing out the more relevant ideas that resonate. One of the ambivalent dualities of affect is that, although it is widely considered to be able to produce “the change for something else, unexpected, new”, as subjectivities that can circulate and flow between bodies, it can also be harnessed by disciplinary structures to govern and control populations^[12].

Wayne Lim’s *The Hyperrestrained Order* (HRO) is both a theoretical exploration of these ideas as well as a sensory and experiential one. *HRO* stems from Wayne’s ongoing research into the concept of “the hyperrestrained order”, one that combines firstly Foucault’s concept of a disciplinary society (a society in which one becomes a docile body due to the presence of constant surveillance); Deleuze’s societies of control (in which movement is limited or allowed within certain boundaries of control); and that of the “hyperreal” image in a photogenic, spectacle-centred state (the inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality).



As a two-channel video installation, it collages and overlays footage in a jarring and fragmented way; combined with other effects – the release of smoke, which alludes to the recurring scenes of fireworks / demonstrations of explosions, the smoke screen both metaphorically and literally, speaks to a society in which the militarisation of the everyday take on spectacular forms. And further, the concept of mobilisation – in itself a military term (to put in a state of readiness for active service in war), and signified by the little green mobilisation man that flashes on screens island-wide, requiring mobilised men to report at a moment’s notice.

Wayne theorises mobilisation in parallel with the concept of mobility, or rather the control over the mobility of citizen-bodies in a highly pragmatic and capitalist society. The regulation of seamless movement through controlled spaces (of schools, military camps, corporate offices and mall complexes) is one facilitated by both mass production and mass consumption, the pragmatic allocation of useful-time, and the function of media as a socializing/ideological mechanism that performs “a continuous modulation, variation and intensification of affective response in real time”^[13].

The effect of control is perhaps the reduction of individual subjects to individual citizen-bodies and transforms the subject of discipline into “generic figures of affective capture”^[14], ultimately operating as a statistically produced population under biopolitical strategies of control.





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