

5 Singaporean artists working with the theme of Bureaucracy | COBO Social

cobosocial.com Updated Oct 10th, 2017

5 Singaporean artists working with the theme of Bureaucracy



Another view of Cane, 2012, photograph by Samantha Tio FOR REFERENCE / EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY





Jack Tan, KaraokeCourt, 2015.



Portrait of Jack Tan



Terry Wee, Micro Landscape, 2014



Portrait of Terry Wee



Zihan Loo, Another view of Cane, 2012, photograph by Samantha Tio. FOR REFERENCE / EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.





Portrait of Zihan Loo





Lim Tzay Chuen, MIKE, 2005. Digital print, Dimensions variable.



Portrait of Lim Tzay Chuen





Lai Yu Tong, And Now, I Am Cloud, 2014.



Portrait of Lai Yu Tong

9

Oct

[Naima Morelli](#)

[35](#)

87152

1800

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

[View Profile](#)

ART IN THE BAR DATE 14/09/2017 (THUR) Presented by
TIME 6pm Onwards 

What is the opposite of an artwork? It is paperwork. Whereas the artwork is open to interpretations, possibilities and imagination, a spreadsheet is meant to be as straightforward and self-contained as possible.

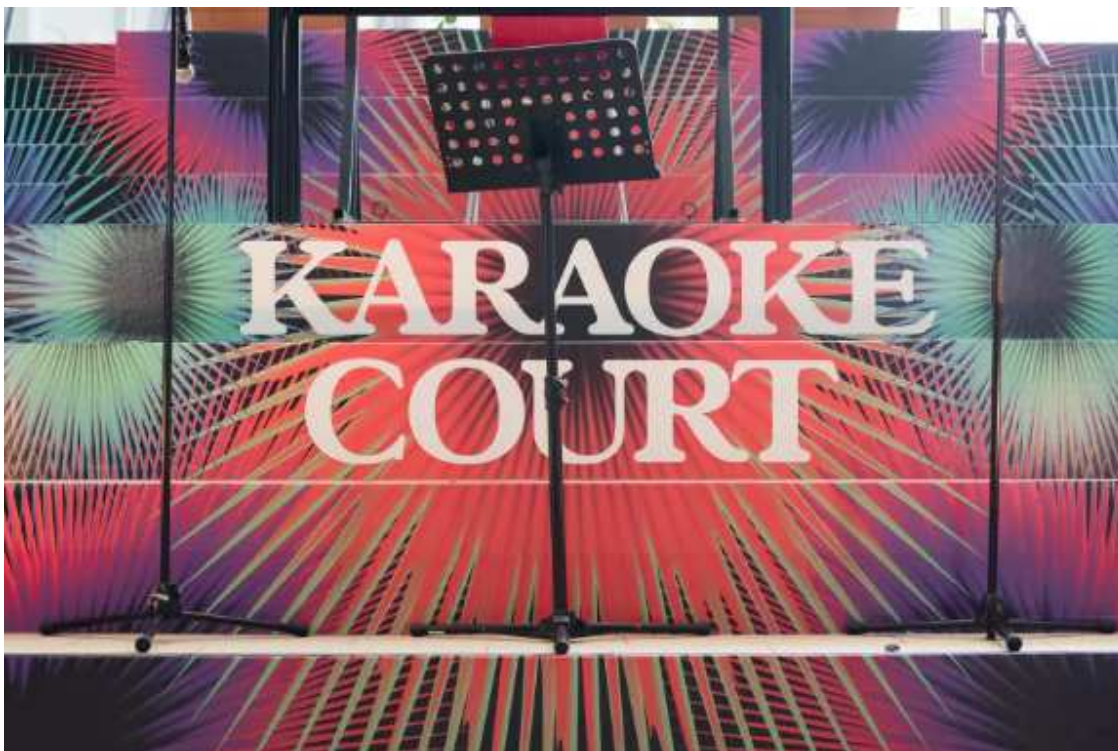
TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of artists

In Singapore bureaucracy pervades every aspect of society, including the art system. Singaporean artists have to continuously fill applications in order to get their art practices off the ground. Not surprisingly bureaucracy – in its many declinations – often becomes the subject of the art itself.

In this sense Singaporean artists seem to have embraced writer David Foster Wallace's idea that the key for survival in modern societies is the ability to deal with boredom. For artists, this doesn't necessarily mean giving it all up and surrender to apathy, but conversely finding a way to let imagination creep in.

Here are five Singaporean artists who in their art look at the different incarnations of bureaucracy, continuously transforming the self-contained into the open-ended.



Jack Tan, KaraokeCourt, 2015.

Jack Tan's legal aesthetics

Jack Tan brings art and law together by exploring what he calls 'legal aesthetics'. A former lawyer, Jack uses social relations and cultural norms as material to create performances, sculptures, videos and participatory projects.

His 2016 work "Hearings" was shown at the SAM8Q building as part of the last Singapore Biennale. This consisted in an installation of manuscripts and music

stands to be experienced together with eight audio recordings of hearings from court proceedings. Instead of simply being read, these were actually sung by the Anglo-Chinese Junior College Alumni Choir. The work was born out of a collaborative project with the Community Justice Centre where Tan was artist-in-residence.

In his 2015 exhibition “How to do things with Rules” at Institute of Contemporary Art Singapore, Tan examined how rules are socially, emotionally and legally constructed. Using the gallery not only as an exhibition space, but also as a social space, Tan presented a series of performances, sculptures, video and participatory works which reimagined customs and rituals.

In the central piece, “Karaoke Court” he reproduced a functioning Court office, library and meeting areas and developed a method of legal arbitration with the staff and the students at LASALLE College of the Arts – which the Institute of Contemporary Art is part of – and the local community.

Another piece, “Hard Copy” consisted in a set of 3 ceramic sculptures that formed the signed exhibition contract between the Institute of Contemporary Art and the artist. This was inspired by the ancient Mesopotamian practice of inscribing legal documents into stone or ceramic. Finally, in the performance “A Kiss is Just a Kiss” the artist makes empathy and human connection override the dry and cold rule-making by kissing the visitors.

About the artist



Portrait of Jack Tan

Jack Tan trained as a lawyer and worked in civil rights NGOs before becoming an artist. Recent projects include Karaoke Court (2014-ongoing) a singing dispute resolution process, his Singapore Biennale presentation Voices

From The Courts examining the vocality of the State Courts of Singapore (2016), Law's Imagination (2016) a curatorial residency at arebyte exploring legal aesthetics, his solo exhibition How to do things with rules (2015) at the ICA Singapore, and Closure (2012), a year-long residency and exhibition at the UK Department for Health looking at the liquidation of their social work quango.



Terry Wee, Micro Landscape, 2014

Terry Wee

Terry Wee's work reflects the realms of administration and its systems that transform Singaporeans into self-censorship individuals. His art reflects how in the utopia of perfection in administrative culture, the human element is almost an error and makes citizens perennially engaged in an impossible striving.

We mentioned that Singaporean artists experience bureaucracy firsthand. Indeed, it was out of frustration with application processes and red tape that in 2015 the artist created the "Administration series". The work was a response to a feeling of inadequacy as an artist which came to dealing with arcane policies and administrative requirements.

"If Administration is inspired by this other reality of art practice," says the artist, "it can also be explained as an attempt to appropriate the formal tools of administrative rationalisation to reflect the abstract and arbitrary systems within which art is made."

Part of the series is the work *shifteround vlex*, which consists in a suite of eight

Part of the series is the work *shiftground.xlsx*, which consists in a suite of eight diagrams made with the use of Microsoft Excel drawing tools. In subjecting the drawing process to the protocols of the programme, *shiftground.xlsx* follows after an earlier drawing series *Protocol with Lines* (2014) in which Wee sets up physical conditions that limit the free movement of his drawing hand, thereby instituting the structural rules within which mark making is predicated.

Some of his work from the Administration series were exhibited in the 2015, for a collective show at Utterly Art Exhibition Space called “Panoramic Mastermind” where the artist focused on the reduction of language, self-purification and self-censorship in Singapore.

About the artist



Portrait of Terry Wee

Terry Wee (b. in 1988, Singapore) graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts from NAFA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts). He is currently pursuing his BA(Hons) Fine Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts. He is a recipient of 35th Takifuji Scholarship Award in Japan. A two time award winner from the Nanyang Fine Arts Award in 2007- The Highly Commended Award and the First Prize in 2009. Whilst studying and working, he is also currently doing shows and exhibiting locally, as well as overseas in countries such as Indonesia and Philippines.



Zihan Loo, Another view of Cane, 2012, photograph by Samantha Tio. FOR REFERENCE / EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.

Zihan Loo

Zihan Loo describes his practice as a reconciliation between the ‘flesh’ of the performing body and the ‘bone’ of the archive. In his performance re-enactments and videos he represents how collective memory can change over time and be modified.

In his career the artist went through different phases during which he explored themes which stayed core to his artistic practice. He started from examining his queer identity, then moved onto reflections on censorship and archive with one of his most popular pieces, called “Cane”. This was a re-enactment of the famous Josef Ng’s performance of Brother Cane, who is tied to a period of ban on performance art in Singapore.

From 2015 Zihan Loo started looking at what he calls “Bodies of Knowledge”, dealing with bureaucracy in the form of the archive. In his installation “Of Public Interest” the artist moved 4,500 volumes from the Singapore Art Museum’s resource room – normally not available to public – into the space of a gallery. The public was invited to shape the collection for the duration of the exhibition from August 2015 to March 2016. The conditions were that each visitor was allowed to withdraw one book from the collection, restricting the public access to this book for the duration of the exhibition. Also, visitors were allowed to loan one book to the collection. At the end of the exhibition, there were a total of 84 public withdrawals and 14 public contributions.

About the artist





Portrait of Zihan Loo

Zihan Loo graduated with his Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 2011. He was awarded a merit scholarship and graduate fellowship during his time at SAIC. Before heading to Chicago, Zihan was part of the pioneer batch of students to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts in the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). His performances have been presented at various events, including the Singapore International Festival of Arts in 2016 and the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival 2015. His moving-image works have been screened at various international film festivals, such as the AFI Fest in Los Angeles and the Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea. Zihan was awarded the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council of Singapore in 2015.





Lim Tzay Chuen, MIKE, 2005. Digital print, Dimensions variable.

Lim Tzay-Chuen

When a concept is so ubiquitous in society, often artist tackles it not as a separate topic, but in its manifestations. As NY Asia Society Museum director Tan Boon Hui puts it: “The best work engaging with the concept of bureaucracy is elliptical in approach.”

This is the case with Lim Tzay-Chuen’s art which is concerned with offering artistic solutions to administration and organisation problems – aspects that are deeply embedded in the art world, but are usually left out from the official narrative.

An example is his work for the Biennale of Sydney in 2014. For the event the artist designed and coordinated an open proposition to the public: “Enterprising” persons who got hold of certain pages from the 2004 Biennale catalogues would receive the use of the Artspace Gallery 1, AUD\$4000, 4 nights hotel accommodation and official inclusion as one of the invited “artists” to the Biennale. In his typical way of operating, Lim Tzay Chuen subtly altered a system, in this case the curatorial process.

Another instance of how Lim’s reflections on the way art institutions engage with artists and the public is his work for the Singapore Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale. The artist had originally proposed to uproot the Merlion, national and cultural icon of Singapore, and bring it to Venice for installation in the courtyard of the Singapore Pavilion. However, this plan was considered impractical and too costly by the Singapore government. As a result, Lim produced an installation for the Pavilion and put outside its entrance a signpost which reads: “I wanted to bring Mike over”.

About the artist



Portrait of Lim Tzay Chuen

Lim Tzay Chuen was born in Singapore in 1972 where he lives and works in Singapore. Lim studied briefly at the then-LASALLE Art College and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, before embarking on a 3 year degree programme at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. Since graduating in 1997, Lim has participated in numerous exhibitions in Singapore and internationally. Amongst his more notable exhibitions and projects in Singapore include those realised at the Substation (2001) and TheatreWorks (2003), while, internationally, Lim's work has been exhibited at Polypolis at the Kunthaus Hamburg (2001), the Gwangju Biennale (2002) and the Sydney Biennale (2004).





Lai Yu Tong, *And Now, I Am Cloud*, 2014.

Lai Yu Tong: escapism in repetition

German philosopher Nietzsche's famously said that "if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." Artist Lai Yu Tong draws precisely from this idea for his artistic practice: "A good starting point for creating art is to pick out what stares back at you as you stare into the abyss. In my case, the monotony that surrounds my everyday happens to be what stares back at me."

To the artist routines are not always equal boredom: they can at times represent a form of escapism and even fulfilment. To communicate that, he obsessively creates experiments involving repetition and invites viewers to contemplate the mundane and the banal.

This comes across as evident in his 2017 self-published zine "How To Make A Clock Spin Anti-clockwise", and his video "Counting 35 Stars (Singapore)". His conceptual piece "Forever (2016)" consists in a song written on 31 December 2016, and meant to be relearned and re-performed every year on 31 December, trying to make each re-performance will attempt to be as similar to the previous year's as possible. To the artist, this is must be done annually forever as proof that he is still alive.

The presence of counting and numbers is recurring in the artist's work and represents for him a practice of simplifying his daily encounters into numbers, patterns and rhythms. His art is meant to suggest an alternative way of navigating through daily life and even seeing beauty in these repetitive rhythms we live through everyday.

About the artist





Portrait of Lai Yu Tong

Lai Yu Tong is born and lives in Singapore. He studied at School of the Arts, Singapore and participated in a NOISE apprenticeship under the guidance of Robert Zhao Renhui. He took part in the exhibition Undescribed (2016) featuring 13 works from 6 photographers at DECK, Singapore, and performed at the Espanade with Singaporean-raised Japanese musician TSU.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

[#Jack Tan](#)[#Lai Yu Tong](#)[#Lim Tzay Chuen](#)[#Naima Morelli](#)[#Terry Wee](#)[#Zihan Loo](#)

Leave a Comment

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Evernote makes it easy to remember things big and small from your everyday life using your computer, tablet, phone and the web.