

Taking Space for Asian Diaspora Narratives

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26 x 2 = 0

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Taking Space for Asian Diaspora Narratives

Curatorial Essay by **Annie Jael Kwan**

WORD COUNT:4,147



Abstract

This curatorial essay discusses an experimental performance programme, *Being Present*, which included three works by three artists from the Asia-Art-Activism Research Network. The performances occurred as part of an exhibition, *Speech Acts*, held at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2018–2019, and in conjunction with a scholarly symposium titled “The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice”. This essay reflects on the origins of the commission, the mission, and ethos of Asia-Art-Activism (AAA), and how each artist’s bodily explorations of identity connected to *Speech Acts*, the wider theme of solidarity, and the significant yet somewhat forgotten contributions of diaspora and immigrant artists such as Li Yuan-chia in histories of British art. Finally, with reference to the virtual and digital after-archive, it discusses the implications of AAA artists extending their performances as interventions on the digital platform of *British Art Studies*.

Speech Acts and Asia-Art-Activism

On 6 March 2019, the Manchester Art Gallery, in collaboration with the Paul Mellon Centre and Central St Martins, launched the symposium “The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice”, with an evening performance programme. The symposium was organised as part of the public programme for its temporary exhibition, *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition*, curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson.¹ One of the evening’s activities was *Being Present*, an experimental performance programme that I curated in response to the exhibition.² It presented three works by three artists from the Asia-Art-Activism Research Network within the *Speech Acts* exhibition galleries. These were *Sound of Other Spaces with the Speculative Others* by Ada Hao; *Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)* by Bettina Fung; and *Yellow Peril* by Nicholas Tee.

Asia-Art-Activism (AAA) is an intergenerational and interdisciplinary research network that was launched in May 2018. Spurred by an opportunity to apply for studio and event space at Raven Row, London, it was initiated as an experimental one-year format for sharing knowledge through activities that explored and complicated the broad paradigm of “Asia”.³ It also sought to explore alternative ways of working, and question what it meant to bring diaspora and migrant bodies

together in shared space.⁴ It is not difficult to recognise some immediate connections between AAA, *Speech Acts*, and the central project of the LYC Museum and Art Gallery that was founded by Li Yuan-chia, in Cumbria in 1979.⁵ Established by diaspora and migrant practitioners, AAA similarly emphasises the importance of “networks and practices”⁶ in the “relational and participatory work of art”,⁷ and shares Li’s “commitment to art as a mode of experimentation ... and social interaction.”⁸ Most significantly, the *Speech Acts* exhibition configured a complex and inclusive interweaving of artistic narratives that acknowledged Li and other diaspora artists’ contribution to British art history—that indeed, the narrative of ‘British art history’ must encompass all artistic activities within the UK, even those of the diaspora, immigrants, and migrants.

The performances by Hao, Fung, and Tee expressed the overlapping anxieties of migrant artists in the UK, but exemplified different embodied approaches and aesthetics. Despite each artist’s varying level of commitment to AAA, they also inescapably draw on its network and its public stance, echoing Nasar and Jesson’s curatorial focus on Li’s practice as “one example of how networks of people shape artistic practices and determine how artworks circulate. It suggested that affinities—between people and practices—help create the shared stories that forge meaning in art.”⁹ Given the loose not-quite-a-collective-but-being-together nature of AAA, it may be more accurate to consider its work as a “social formation”, following Judith Butler’s description of “a politics of alliance” that might exist “among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism.”¹⁰ Crucially, AAA’s project operates in London, in the context of fraught ongoing Brexit negotiations, the UK Home Office’s Hostile Environment policy targeting migrants, and increasing occurrences of overt racism in the public sphere.¹¹ Butler’s politics of alliance is “not just what it means to ally with one another, but what it means to live with one another ... [where] a politics of alliance ... requires, an ethics of cohabitation” in the struggle to “make a claim in public space.”¹² In view of Butler’s proposition, I would suggest that AAA finds and forms resistance by bringing migrant and diaspora bodies together, in times of increasing precarity and hostility, simply by *being present* and taking up space.¹³ For the performances at *Speech Acts*, it was fundamental that the AAA artists were present and took up space—both physically and in terms of attention—aligning their contemporary practices with the longer trajectories of British art history and British migrant art history.

Sound of other spaces with the speculative others by Ada Hao Xiaoyu

Being Present opened with Hao’s performance, which interrupted Nasar and Jesson’s curatorial tour for the conference guests and members of the public. Playing on the form and content of the curatorial tour, Hao utilised the equipment and protocols usually employed in making such a public presentation. Wearing a suit and a microphone headset while fiddling with her beeping audio-receiver pack, Hao greeted the audience and announced she was “present” in honour of Zoe Meng, who hired her as a performer and from whom she would read a message via a series of notes.

Hao’s performance teased out the slippages of meaning in the transmission and circulation of text, the performativity of language systems, and the ruptures that lead to a breakdown in communication. Her next reading disintegrated into pauses, interruptions, slips, and stutters as it reflected on the intersections between observation, bodies, identities, art production, artistry, and the philosophical meaning of sentience. Hao read out Meng’s words—instructions to her to utilise a magnifying glass that is similar to the one Meng uses to read. The glass was to stand in

for Meng's 'eye', as a point of observation. The text then speculated empathetically on Meng's alleged autobiographical link to Li Yuan-chia, both having shared experiences of adoption, even as Li's works also meditated on the 'point' as an aesthetic and philosophical search for origin. Through this performative play with words and gesture, Hao questioned the accepted understanding of embodiment as equivalent to inherent humanity—if the human merely replicates a transmission of meaning, is its utterance human?

Hao's performance referenced Michel Foucault's fourth principle of "heterotopia"—where "heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies."¹⁴ It then speculated on whether the body itself might constitute a spatio-temporal vessel of sorts; but what kind of "heterochronies" might be created by and within the human/post-human body? And thus what might be created *between* bodies—would it be accumulative or fluid? What were the implications for togetherness and solidarity?

According to Hao, her "collaborator", Zoe Meng, is a pioneering university professor and lecturer at Shanghai University, with a list of academic and research credentials that mark her as being multi-located. She was born in Kazakhstan, grew up and studied in the USA, and pursued further research in China on the themes of post-humanism, heterotopias, and gender studies that resulted in an impressive resume of publications. While I had suspected from the outset that Meng is an alter ego, Hao insists that Zoe Meng is a real living individual. However, upon close inspection, Meng's biography is full of inaccuracies in the names of research centres, institutional departments, and publisher names, where the titles sound almost accurate to an existing entity, except for a misspelling or the use of a different word. Perhaps it is possible to infer that Hao's manufacture of an alter ego demonstrates there may be accumulative meanings imbued in the performance of identity, which is itself constructed and deconstructed, accumulative and yet always in flux—displaying the operation of heterochronies in a single embodied/disembodied performance.



Figure 1

Ada Hao performing *Sound of other spaces with the speculative others* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

Figure 2

Ada Hao, still from *like a flower paddle my teeth*, (8:25), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.



Figure 3

Ada Hao, still from *like a flower paddle my teeth*, (7:50), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.



Figure 4

Ada Hao, still from *like a flower paddle my teeth*, (5:30), 2019. Digital image courtesy of Ada Hao.

***Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)* by Bettina Fung**

Born in Hong Kong, the British-Chinese artist Bettina Fung immigrated to the UK at the age of eight. Fung conceptualised her performance drawing piece as a tribute to Li Yuan-chia, having felt a strong connection to Li's past as an immigrant artist, his artistic practice, and his philosophy of "all and nothing" as expressed by celebrating the point as the origin and end of creation. For *Being Present* at the Manchester Art Gallery, Fung laid a large piece of blank drawing paper on the floor where it sat in front of a colourful window pane with the softly illuminated initials "LYC" installed in the *Speech Acts* exhibition, a homage to the window created by the sculptor David Nash for the LYC Museum. As the performance began, she stepped into the middle of the paper and paused, taking several breaths. Then she squatted down, picked up a graphite crayon, and smoothly pivoted counter-clockwise on one foot to draw a circle whose radius was defined by her arm span. Then, moving clockwise, she proceeded to painstakingly erase the drawn circle, as if to unwind the movement and its consequences. Over the duration of the performance, Fung completed 26 circles around her body, each circle to mark a year Li spent in the village of Banks in Cumbria, where he set up his beloved LYC Museum that generated numerous artistic encounters, until his passing in 1994.

Each repetition provided an enhanced awareness of another moment of time passing, which also enabled a kind of remembering of Li—connecting the present passing moment with the accumulating past. As Fung erased each traced circle, it invoked reflection about the transience of life and legacy—*What remains? What is lost? Who remembers? Who or what endures?* While the repetition of 26 circles was enacted in memoriam for Li Yuan-chia's years in Cumbria, it is notable that Fung's performance was actually inspired by an artistic proposal Li conceived that was never realized.¹⁵ Alongside her empathy for Li's struggles as a migrant artist, Fung expressed a Taoist philosophical interest in the act of drawing—one that she embodies also in her Tai chi martial arts training, which has conditioned her ability to execute delicate balletic movements to materialise her drawing.

One might read in her performance the diasporic urge for institutional representation as well as a form of Derridean “archive fever” towards “an impossible archaeology” and the desire “for a return to the authentic and singular origin, and for a return concerned to account for the desire to return.”¹⁶ If a return to origin is impossible even via acts of memory, perhaps a bodily-inscribed gesture leaves remnants that speak to the past as a continuous (re)construction in the present. Fung's performance left scattered rubber shavings. Using a paintbrush, she carefully swept them to form a central mound where, after she exited, they were displayed for the remainder of the evening. The sheet of white paper framed this central point of rubber shavings, a still clock without the activation of Fung's movements, whose silence resonated her bodily absence. In relation to “archive fever”, it is significant that during her research in the Li Yuan-chia archives at the John Rylands Library, Fung's request to access Li's letters was refused because they were written in Chinese, and the library did not have anyone with the language skill to verify if the letters contained sensitive information. Fung, of Chinese heritage, has the language skills required, but was prevented from accessing the materials due to institutional policy and protocol. One might wonder for whom these archives have been established, and whose sensibilities these created boundaries to access are protecting? Do archives hold knowledge, or do they bind knowledge in a stronghold? Where can the memories of migrants take up space, and continue to participate in a broader understanding of British migrant and immigrant history? Interestingly, Fung has retained all the shavings from performance at *Being Present* and other iterations since, in a container as her personal and artistic archive. She says they are “a bit like ashes in a funerary urn, dead drawings in a way. But they are the documentation of the work too.”¹⁷ Fung's performance materialised an abstracted utterance of the difficult issues regarding migrant identity, representation, and subjectivity in one's adopted nation. Having experienced the language barrier on arrival and various instances of racism, Fung has discussed her confusion and discomfort about her cultural identity as an artist:

*I used to stay away from anything that represented my cultural heritage, I didn't want to represent, because I couldn't represent ... [I] identified with not belonging anywhere and ... recently realising if you do identify as not belonging, than you might put yourself in a position where you might feel you don't have the right to take up space.*¹⁸



Figure 5

Bettina Fung, *Circle Loop*, 2019. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.



Figure 6

Rubber shavings made during Bettina Fung's performance of *Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.

***Yellow Peril* by Nicholas Tee**

Nicholas Tee's performance took inspiration from Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *Who Am We?* (2000), a print exhibited in the *Speech Acts* exhibition that explored the act of scrutiny and visibility with regards to thinking about the tension between individual and collective identity. His performance of *Yellow Peril* was situated within the the first gallery that explored "reflection"; these artworks included portraits, self-portraits, and works expressing the complexities of representation and performative subjectivity, and the acts of looking or obscuring.

Bridging a practice between the theatre and live art, *Yellow Peril* reflected an awareness of staging as a way of inviting a gallery audience to view his performance. Tee, dressed minimally and somewhat absurdly, in dark industrial jeans with huge cuffs and black boots, shirtless but with metal chains crossing his body — was not unlike a tragicomic Samuel Beckett character living on the fringe of society.¹⁹ He began his performance by sitting still and silent behind a large magnifying sheet, upon an upturned bucket. He was framed doubly by the sheet and the metal posts of the clothes rack upon which the sheet was hung — together they formed the outlines of a makeshift proscenium stage where his distorted puppet-like head took centre stage. The audience was invited — compelled — to inspect his visage.²⁰

Framed thus, and taking place only three days after the passing of Lee Wen (1957–2019), Tee paid tribute to the pioneering Singaporean performance artist's iconic performance of *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992–2012) (fig. 7), and reinscribed Lee Wen's 2010 *Anyhow Blues Revival Project* into *Yellow Fever* by playing his track, "Missing You", from the four cassette players strung about his torso. Lee's performance of a warbling folk singer that made mistakes was originally intended as a critique of Singapore's first de facto ban of performance art in 1994, and subsequent instrumentalisation of the niche form for art fairs and large exhibitions.²¹ Tee's reference to Lee's musical project connected this critical ethos emerging "from the outside" in a Singaporean context, with the negotiations that *Speech Acts* brokered with institutionalised hierarchies of power — specifically with regard to the demarcation of Tee's performance by what

was acceptable to Manchester Art Gallery. While transgressive acts by artists have been canonised as part of performance art history, Tee's proposal for cutting his body was prohibited by Manchester Art Gallery to avoid seeming to condone self-harm in youth, which an increasing social concern for the city of Manchester.



Figure 7

Lee Wen, *Journey of the Yellow Man*, 1992 (City of London, Polytechnic). Digital image courtesy of the estate of Lee Wen and the Southeast Asia Performance Collection

Hence for the latter part of his performance, Tee exited the building and knelt in front of the older wing of the Manchester Art Gallery (previously the City Art Gallery building), which was constructed between 1824–1835. Commissioned by the Royal Manchester institution, a scholarly society formed in 1823, this building was designed by famed British architect Sir Charles Barry in the Classical European revival style of architecture that was emblematic of knowledge and power. Beneath this imposing façade, with its protruding portico and six columns in the Greek Ionic style, Tee's excluded body prostrated symbolically at the feet of the institution of art history. Ironically, by displacing his act from institutional space and onto the street as a guerrilla intervention, Manchester Art Gallery heightened the possibility that his action might be misread as self-harm or part of a sub-cultural fetish. As the curator (and lone individual) supporting Tee's performance on the street, I became acutely aware of his exposed body and its vulnerability to the elements of Manchester nightlife. Awkwardly laden by the cassette players (approximately 4 kilograms), Tee's posture gestured towards the burden of artistic legacies and concerns that as a young artist he might be expected to bear or chafe under.

Under the symbolic shadow of the institution, Tee displayed the cut words "Bloody Foreigner" to some passers-by who stopped for a closer look. For the audience that passed casually and did not have the benefit of background information regarding Tee's practice or *Speech Acts*, how Tee applied the cuts was less important than the 'sign' of his bodily incisions. The wounds invoked visceral empathy, and perhaps spoke to the foreigner's anguish to make meaning and be

understood—the state in which, as Jean Fisher observes, “the teller’s struggle to make sense of senselessness touches our *own* experience of a deeply felt *aporia* in human existence.”²² Tee’s silent cuts testified to other forms of silencing—for the many other, and increasing, number of migrant and immigrant bodies considered transgressive that are barricaded and excluded—outside the mainstream acceptable narratives of art history and society in the United Kingdom and beyond.



Figure 8

Nicholas Tee Performing *Yellow Peril* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 9

Nicholas Tee Performing *Yellow Peril* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 10

Nicholas Tee Performing *Yellow Peril* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.



Figure 11

Nicholas Tee Performing *Yellow Peril* at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019. Digital image courtesy of Nicholas Tee.

Being Present on a Digital Platform

The invitation from *British Art Studies* to create a series of artist collaborations for this *London, Asia* special issue presented the *Being Present* project with an opportunity to consider what it might mean to ‘be present’ and take up space on a digital platform. For a team of diaspora and migrant curators and artists, the possibilities of participating by interjecting our programme into the journal’s two paradigms—what might be deemed ‘British’ and what might be the scope of ‘art studies’—were particularly tantalising. As a curatorial steer, I invited the artists to consider how they might extend their *Being Present* performances onto the 2D screen-based digital plane, utilising the different web frames (as prescribed by the available formats and technical capacities

of the journal) as sites for performance. This direction followed a key thematic lead of the issue: the rethinking of archives, from being neutral repositories of objectively obtained materials that offer authentic or authorised knowledge, to “the after-archive”, which is “an active environment that does not remain unaffected by our presence in it”, “for staging ‘epistemological experiments’; not as sites for ‘knowledge retrieval’ but as sites of ‘knowledge production’”.²³ Curating *Being Present* in this context operated with an understanding of the “after-archive” that acknowledges the contemporary social order, within which computers, smart phones, and other technologies make us all archivists and archival producers. For most, there are numerous everyday actions producing, accumulating, editing, sampling, and circulating large amounts of images and text—“a daily routine no longer grounded in the past but in the production of a present.”²⁴ Central to this reframing of the “archive” is the reconfiguring of space and time where the “present” is its focal point, and “all temporal layering is considered an interface phenomenon”,²⁵ where “networks and connectivity”²⁶ supersede the provenance of a single document or file. Curating for the online platform of *British Art Studies* was therefore to conceptualise and address the “ever-present”, where the different works will henceforth be simultaneously present, and may be accessed in any order, repeated any number of times, or skipped through. There is also no absolute guarantee that images or text may not be screenshot and recorded, and remediated by the audience. Where then, in this context, is the performative? What is being performed?

The three artists demonstrate the potentialities and challenges of presenting on the digital plane, with very different approaches to embodying presence in relation to the contextual platform. Ada Hao Xiaoyu’s video contribution, “*like a flower paddle my teeth*”, was edited from the computer screen recordings of the technical functionalities of typing, editing, the changing of font sizes and colour, the collaging of cut and paste, playing with cascades of screens, and so on. She layered the textual interplay with images spliced in from the performance at Manchester Art Gallery, of Zoe Meng at her residence, along with an audio track that is composited with sounds of breath, original music, singing, ambient sound, and voice recordings at different volumes and proximities. With the editing functions made visible, the resulting effect is a disorientating flurry and accumulation of imagery where the artist’s presence is embodied in the work via its movement and sound, but whose sense of subjectivity—that is, “anxiety of being”, as depicted in large font—is simultaneously fractured and constantly destabilised.

Bettina Fung’s *26 x 2 = 0* also reconfigures the sense of linear time with its attempt to conduct an imagined conversation between Fung and Li Yuan-chia, that is expressed with the laying out of both parts of the correspondence side by side on black and white squares. Referencing the squares employed by Li to lay out his poetry works, Fung retrieved materials from his archive and his texts, and reassembled them as a projection of their interaction across space and time. Mediating her skills in drawing in animation, these points of intersection were visualised by red lines, and the display on the journal gestures back to Fung’s performance at Manchester Art Gallery with an audio recording of her material action, and a GIF that depicts a counter-clockwise cycle. The act of recollecting is underscored as a performative gesture in the present. While Fung’s presentation in the galleries had its limitations as a time-based work, online, the sound of her action and GIF cycle remains always ready and always performing.

Nicholas Tee’s presentation in *British Art Studies* has several components: a film recording of *Yellow Peril* in its entirety, a timeline of images tracking his performance at Manchester Art Gallery interspersed with short commentaries, and animated GIF images. The motivation for marking each stage of his performance is underwritten by a desire to have all of it witnessed, as

opposed to the discrepancy between what was seen by the audience within the gallery, what took place outside, and his final brief attempt to leave an imprint on the exhibition wall. The GIFs evoke close scrutiny, especially in the last GIF where Nic showcases a flag embroidered with the faces of his Asian diaspora peers—a call back to Do Ho Suh’s print.²⁷ Nevertheless the timeline provides readers with an interface that offers multiple entry points, with the capability to skip forward, to reverse, and even open up multiple images across several browser windows; and to apply viewing options that vary proximity, level of detail, and scale. All three works sit concurrently “in the present” on the website. Referring back to Butler, she contends that:

*The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that we cannot and hears our voice in a way that we cannot. We are in this sense—bodily—always over there, yet here, and this dispossession marks the sociality to which we belong. Even as located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us.*²⁸

Given this view, where and how might togetherness and solidarity be ascertained in the digital realm? Reflecting on the after-archive, Spieker finds recourse to sociologist Arjun Appadurai, for whom “it is not a matter of creating a community on the basis of an archive of shared beliefs or memories: ‘Where natural social collectivities build connectivities out of memory, these virtual collectivities build memories out of connectivity.’”²⁹ Notably Appadurai finds aspiration in such an archive, and Spieker similarly opines that “the archive opens up towards the present and a (possible) future...”³⁰ Hence the digital after-archive may extend the same preoccupation with networks beyond the interpersonal realm of “friendships” or even “collectives”, to a plausibly global sense of solidarity—that draws together diaspora and migrant experiences of dislocation and marginality.

Following this reading, these migrant bodies being present and taking up space in *British Art Studies* embody multiple experiences and transborder knowledge—and reconfigure a much needed and reparative perspective of “Britishness” that acknowledges the relational reach of its post-empire legacies. As the future of AAA remains uncertain after November 2020, reflecting the general trauma and malaise of ongoing Brexit negotiations and the global increase of xenophobia towards migrants and immigrants, each moment of togetherness becomes exceedingly precious. In the words of Lee Wen, who was also a builder of archives and communities,

*In the beginning of various forms of collective work, it is always exciting to meet fresh new faces and to learn that we are not alone in our search to make art that has more meaning to it than just being a commodity. There is great rejuvenation of faith in the human spirit. However, things do happen that test our will and resolve. We learn to overcome our weaknesses if we are not just to live with them; we find or make friends and lose them – but hope always they will return or we otherwise meet them again through reconciliation, somehow.*³¹

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feature in *British Art Studies*. I would like to express my affection for my friends and colleagues at Asia-Art-Activism, and especially to Bettina Fung, Ada Hao, and Nicholas Tee, for their support and inspired creativity on this journey. Last but not least, we remember those who paved the way for us: Li Yuan-chia (1929–1994) and Lee Wen (1957–2019).

About the author

Annie Jael Kwan is an independent curator and researcher based in London, who works between Europe and Asia. She founded the curatorial partnership, [<https://something-human.org/>](Something Human), in 2012, to focus on the critical ideas surrounding movement across borders. In 2016, she completed a self-initiated curatorial research residency with Java Arts in Cambodia, with the support of the Artists International Development Fund (British Council/Arts Council England) and the National Arts Council Singapore. This generated the collection of interviews and digital materials that would form a significant part of the pioneering [<https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/collections/southeast-asia-performance-collection1>](Southeast Asia Performance Collection (SAPC)) that holds performance-related materials from artists working in relation to the region. In 2018, she curated the exhibition and public programme, [<https://framerframed.nl/en/exposities/expositie-unauthorised-medium/>](UnAuthorised Medium) for Framer Framed, Amsterdam, which explored artistic practices and ‘alternative archives’ in relation to Southeast Asia. In 2019, she co-curated the [<https://hausderkunst.de/en/exhibitions/southeast-asia-performance-collection>](Archive-in-Residence Southeast Asia Performance Collection) archive exhibition, and consulted on the [<https://hausderkunst.de/en/events/wege-der-performativitaet-in-der-zeitgenoessischen-suedostasiatischen-kunst>](Pathways of Performativity) conference exploring performance in Southeast Asia at Haus der Kunst, Munich. Since 2018, she has co-lead [<https://asia-art-activism.net/>](Asia-Art-Activism (AAA)), an interdisciplinary and intergenerational network of artists, curators and academics investigating the meanings of “Asia,” “art,” and “activism” in the UK. AAA is currently in residence at Raven Row till November 2020. In 2019, Annie was awarded Live Art UK’s Diverse Actions Leadership Award. She is an Associate Lecturer at Central St Martin’s, University of the Arts, London.

Footnotes

1. *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* was exhibited at the Manchester Art Gallery from 25 May 2018 to 22 April 2019.
2. Curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson, the exhibition *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition* was presented at the Manchester Art Gallery from April 2018–2019.
3. The project emerged from a conversation that I had in April 2018 with arts producer and community organiser, Joon Lynn Goh. Both of us have roots in Southeast Asia and have lived and worked in the UK for extended periods as migrant cultural workers. We share overlapping concerns regarding what “Asia” means in the context of London and the UK more broadly. Throughout the 1990s–2000s, Southeast Asian, and to some extent East Asian, diaspora narratives had been hardly visible. Instead, the emphasis conveyed by “Asia” was on

diaspora and immigrant narratives in relation to “South Asia” or in terms of “Chineseness”. See, for example, texts such as Rey Chow’s *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) and Lisa Tyler and Michael Hoover’s *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), which were read for cinema studies in the 1990s. The 2018 volume *Contesting British Chinese Culture*, edited by Ashley Thorpe and Diana Yeh (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan) is the first anthology to explore British Chinese culture. Conversely, for example, Tate Britain’s *Artist and Empire* exhibition (25 November 2015–10 April 2016) included art and objects in relation to the British Empire but excluded any presence from its previous colonies in Southeast Asia.

4. While the website currently lists 35 London and international members, the exact membership of Asia-Art-Activism is ambiguous and has changed across 2018–2019 with some members leaving and others joining later in the year. Other contributors also participate regularly in AAA organised activities but are not formally listed on the website. <https://asia-art-activism.net>, information noted on 1 September 2019. The 2018–2019 working group for AAA that met more frequently and discussed day-to-day issues of operation generally included Yarli Allison, Burong, Bettina Fung, Caroline Gervay, Ada Hao, Tram Nguyen, Cuong Pham, Jia Qi Quek, Erika Tan, and Howl Yuan.
5. Hammad Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms: Li Yuan-chia and Friends”, *British Art Studies*, Issue 12, (May 2019), DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-12/hnasar, 10.
6. Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 10.
7. Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 13.
8. Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 14.
9. Nasar, “Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms”, 12.
10. Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 27.
11. Robert Booth, “Racism Rising Since Brexit Vote, Nationwide Study Reveals”, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/racism-on-the-rise-since-brexit-vote-nationwide-study-reveals>. Accessed 15 August 2019.
12. Butler, *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly*, 70.
13. James Martel, “Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly, by Judith Butler”, *Law & Literature* 30, no. 2 (2018), 381.
14. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984 (“Des Espace Autres”, March 1967, translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec), 6.
15. Bettina Fung’s proposal, submitted on 9 January 2019 stated that: “The work is inspired by Li’s *All & Nothing* Show, which was a proposed performance to be held at Hyde Park’s Speakers’ Corner in 1967 before his departure for Cumbria. However this event never took place as Li had fallen ill.” This information was drawn from Diana Yeh, “Under the Spectre of Orientalism and Nation,” in *The Reception of Chinese Art across Cultures*, ed. Huang, M (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 239.
16. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 85.
17. Fung, via email 14 September 2019.
18. Quote taken from AAA Radio’s “A Series of UnComfortable Conversations #1”, published on 31 July 2019.

19. Two of his famous plays come to mind: *Happy Days* (first performed 1961) and *Waiting for Godot* (first performed 1953), where the characters blithely repeat actions and refrains without result, or consequence. In *Happy Days*, the characters stay put on the stage and chatter away obliviously, as they become increasingly buried under a low mound of sand. The two hobo-like characters of *Waiting for Godot* also remain loitering on stage, “waiting” for the off-stage persona of Godot who never arrives.
20. Interestingly, Tee confirms that the magnifying sheet is two-way. Audience members who peer closely are similarly magnified when viewed from the other side.
21. Performance art once suffered a ten-year de facto ban when the National Arts Council of Singapore withdrew its available funding after the public controversy of Josef Ng’s performance in 1994.
22. Fisher makes this observation with regards to the use of visual scarring in *7th November* (2001), by Steve McQueen, a Black British artist and film-maker. See Jean Fisher, “Where Here Is Elsewhere”, in Kamal Boullata (ed.), *Belonging and Globalisation* (London: Al-Saqi, 2008), 61–74 (republished from Sharjah Biennale No. 7, curated by Kamal Boullata, 2005). <https://www.jeanfisher.com/where-here-is-elsewhere/>.
23. Sven Spieker, “The After-Archive: Notes on Contemporary Art”, Paper delivered at the “The Whole Life” conference, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Dresden, 23 May 2019, 1–2. https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2019/the_whole_life/das_ganze_leben.php.
24. Spieker, “The After-Archive”, 3.
25. Spieker, “The After-Archive”, 4.
26. Spieker, “The After-Archive”, 5.
27. The flag GIF, titled 谁是自己人? [who are my people?], was made in collaboration with Nicole Chui.
28. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 96–97.
29. Arjun Appadurai, “Archive and Aspiration”, cited in Spieker, “The After-Archive”, 6.
30. Spieker, “The After-Archive”, 5.
31. C.J. Wan-ling Wee, “On the Individualistic Artist and Collectives in Organising Art Events: An Interview with Lee Wen”, in C.J. Wan-ling Wee (ed.), *Practising Contemporary Art in the Global City for the Arts, Singapore. Performance Paradigm* 8, (2012), 2–3, <https://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/issue/view/14>.

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