Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art

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**Editor’s Note**

Yishu 64 explores the phenomenon of private museums in mainland China, propositions for new ways of thinking about exhibition-making, and two artists who were not born in China but who have worked within and around its contexts.

The museum system in China is distinct in that most art museums are privately initiated and owned. The discussion between collector Budi Tek and Wu Hung took place in the Fall of 2012, eighteen months before Tek’s Yuz Museum Shanghai opened, but it offers insights into the curatorial process of imagining the future exhibition space, how artworks will relate to each other, and what purpose the museum serves. This is followed by a discussion between Budi Tek and Gii Jahe that focuses more on the philosophical underpinnings of the Yuz Collection and the Yuz foundation that has in consequence emerged. Julie Chun reports on another private museum in Shanghai, the Long Museum West Bund, that also opened in 2014. She acknowledges the worthy intentions of collectors to make their collection public, but is cautionary about the potential shortcomings of such ambitious projects. In the conversation between Zheng Shengtian and Yang Chao, Director of the Xi’an Art Museum, a candid overview of private museums in China makes transparent the undefined relationship between the developer, government, and the public.

Bijana Cic’s Alternatives to Ritual and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Spring Workshop’s collaboration, Moderation(s), are two exhibition projects that, in their exploration of inventive strategies that animate a program or space, challenge traditional museum exhibition practices. The artists in Cic’s exhibition literally occupy the German Consular office space in Shanghai, and Heman Chong, the moderator for Moderation(s), introduces a multidisciplinary ethic that opens itself to the vulnerabilities of unanticipated flexibility.

The two concluding texts feature artists Paul Wong and Shezad Dawood who represent different generations and come from different regions of the world, but they share an interest in postcolonial identity and its complex relationships with popular and traditional cultures through the means of new media.

Keith Wallace
Lee Ambrozy is a Ph.D. candidate in Chinese Art History and Archaeology at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; she has an M.A. in Art History from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, and is a graduate of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. She was editor and translator of Ai Weiwei’s Blog (MIT Press, 2011) and from 2010 to 2012 she was the editor of Artnet International’s Chinese language website Artnet.com.cn, where she is currently editor-at-large. She lives between New York and Beijing.

Defne Ayas is Director of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. During her directorship, Witte de With, together with Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, co-commissioned Dai Hanzhi: 5,000 Artists, a large platform dedicated to the legacy of scholar, curator, and dealer Hans van Dijk, which includes two exhibitions, public programs, and a publication. Other projects directed by Ayas include Moderation(s), by artist and writer Heman Chong, a two-year long programme set up between Witte de With and Spring Hong Kong; and the open archive and collection Talks 1880 to 2018 by Paula Pivi. Ayas curated Blueprints by Chinese artist and thinker Qiu Zhijie (2012), Line no. 2 (Holy Bible) by Turkish-Swedish artist Merc Algun Ringborg, and co-curated Surplus Authors with Philippe Pirotte (2012). In addition, Ayas launched Witte de With’s new online platform WiW Review. Before moving to Rotterdam, Ayas co-founded Arthub Asia in 2007, an Asia-wide active research and production initiative, where she remains a Director of Arthub Asia. Ayas has also been a curator of PERFORMA, the biennial of visual art performance of New York City, since its inception in 2004.

Stephanie Bailey is the Managing Editor for Ibraaz. She has an M.A. in contemporary art theory from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a B.A. in classical civilization with English literature from King’s College, London. She is currently on the editorial committee for Naked Punch, the editorial team for South as a State of Mind, and a correspondent for Ocula.com. Her writing has appeared in publications including ART PAPERS, Aesthetica, ARTnews, Artnet, Frieze, LEAP, Modern Painters, Notes on Metamodernism, and Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art.

Julie Chun is an independent art historian and lecturer who has resided in Shanghai since 2011. She received her M.A. in Art History from San Jose State University, California, and serves as the Convener of Art Focus for the Royal Asiatic Society China, where she delivers monthly lectures on the topic of Asian art. Her writings have appeared in academic journals, and she is a contributing writer for Randian, a bilingual online journal dedicated to exploring Chinese contemporary art within a global context. She has been covering and following many of the new museums in Shanghai, including the China Art Museum and the Long Museum in Pudong and West Bund.

Christina Li is an independent curator and writer based in Hong Kong and the Netherlands. She studied art history and comparative literature at the University of Hong Kong and participated in the de Appel Curatorial Program, Amsterdam, in 2008 and 2009. She was curator at Para/Site Art Space between 2005 and 2008 and was assistant curator of a solo presentation of Making (Perfect) World: Harbour, Hong Kong, Alienated Cities, and
Moderation(s) brought together an international group of artists, curators, and writers to participate in a two-year-long program of contemporary discourse and production between Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Singaporean artist, curator, and writer Heman Chong was invited by Witte de With Director Defne Ayas to moderate the program which included a conference, two exhibitions, three residencies, and a book of short stories, with the involvement of more than fifty artists. In speaking about this project in the press release for Moderation(s), Heman Chong proposed ‘to make ‘soft’ the practices of both artist and curator, so that one becomes easily soluble in the other, while retaining their unique forms and patterns of working. The participants are continuously encouraged to indulge in the pleasures of exchanging knowledge and tools without any pressure to collaborate.”

Moderation(s) set out to create both a time and a space that would allow for a specific kind of creative production in which, instead of rapid installation and short-term consumption, each project could embrace the need for long-term development and a slowing down of the artistic processes. The program took place from August 2012 through August 2014. It was initiated by Defne Ayas (Director, Witte de With) together with Mimi Brown (Founder, Spring Workshop), steered by Heman Chong, and developed together with Samuel Saelemakers (Associate Curator, Witte de With).

The following is a Q & A on the process of Moderation(s) and its progress.

**Question:** What was the urgency to set up a program such as Moderation(s)? What was the main motivation to do this?

**Defne Ayas:** When considering the explosion of interest and hype around Asia, I have, for a decade now—also having lived and worked in China—found it urgent to accelerate encounters between the younger generation of artists and peers between the two continents, between Asia and Northern Europe. Here at Witte de With, we decided to do this by creating a long-term programmatic oasis between our own base here in Rotterdam and the city of Hong Kong.

Also, late New Museum founder Marcia Tucker, who started the museum in her one-bedroom apartment in 1977, has always been a guiding spirit for me. She said it best with her motto: “Act first, think later—that way you have something to think about.”
**Question:** Tell us more about the set-up of this program, which took place over two years?

**Define Ayas:** We decided to dedicate a long time-frame for the project punctuated by events and visits of varying durations by artists and writers from both continents in order to create first and foremost a spirit of generosity and sharing among curious minds. This was accompanied by an intellectually rigorous program that could function as an alternative or trigger to the many globalized mapping efforts that are out there, and of course there was a long-term learning curve on both an artistic and institutional front. To be able to deliver this properly, we had to reconcile the different operational modalities and nuanced desires and instincts of the two asymmetrically scaled organizations—Witte de With with its two-decade-old history embedded in visual art aesthetic discourse, and the newly born Spring Workshop with its fresh outlook and liberated take on the cross-section between art, music, and mercurial curiosities.

In the end, Moderation(s) provided a programmatic oasis for the art scene in Hong Kong without Witte de With having to leave its home base. It began unfolding in August 2012 through its different projects that included three residencies in Hong Kong, a workshop and a day-long program of performances and non-heroic gestures titled *A Thing at A Time* in Rotterdam, a two-week-long fiction-writing boot camp in Hong Kong that resulted in a book of short stories, and a rigorous conference in Rotterdam with members of the next generation—indeed, the youngest and brightest thinkers—titled *Stories and Situations*. A group exhibition titled *The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else* at the Witte de With featured forty-seven artists including the late Chen Zhen, Félix González-Torres, and On Kawara, as well as emerging talents such as Lee Kit, Nadim Abbas, and Chu Yun, which will be accompanied by a forthcoming publication. All of these projects developed independently from one another yet often naturally informed and shaped each other. The exhibition and the publication interposed the Moderation(s) process and marked a point of culmination in this long journey.

**Question:** Did you find that the process raised meaningful questions or created sustainable connections?

**Define Ayas:** We kept asking the very crucial question: How can a thread be established among artists and institutional desires while deliberately avoiding the grand cultural paradigms between Asia and Europe. By paradigms, I mean the traditional binary of Asia versus Europe, which is not at all the concern of the current and younger generation. In order to see what is possible, we decided to license this narrative to an artist and writer with full confidence in his capability to weave, stitch, and crochet between these two nodes. Heman Chong accepted our invitation on the spot with no hesitation, and, rather spontaneously, when I met with him in Hong Kong in May 2012. He agreed to take it on, to steer the project, and, in his own words, to “moderate.” And to his brilliance, he was able to bring a group
of people together to create a feeling of community. And with his artistic program, he was able to communicate that the desired framework would be one of synchronicities, slippages, and quick transmissions rather than exoticizing economies of difference.

**Question:** Why Heman Chong and no one else?

**Define Ayas:** Heman Chong is an alert and sensitive thinker with a keen eye for art and experiences all around the world including Berlin, where I first met him in 2005, New York, London, Hong Kong, and his hometown of Singapore, where I later met him again. His artistic interests include literature, graphic design, and choreography. He likes to break the mold in general. He has a deep commitment to whisk off prejudices. And throughout the process he proved over and over how he is capable of embracing each moment as an activator and is comfortable in moving into different fields, whether in a fiction-writing camp or curating an exhibition through inspiration from the American dance choreographer Steve Paxton’s Contact Improvisation, a method of producing movement in which two or more dancers enter a space and their bodies come into physical contact without any preconceived choreographed movements.

**Question:** What were the difficulties?

**Define Ayas:** To juggle the longevity of the process with its unknown knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns all at the same time. In that regard, I am grateful to my team at Witte de With for believing in the open-endedness of the process as well as Spring Workshop in Hong Kong. Both teams were committed to putting artists back in the centre of the institutional conversations and to tune into their versatile minds and vision.

Naturally, every project in general at an institution has its own life, and every project remains a testing ground for how an institution can be an enabler for artists and help them to exceed their everyday life. In the case of Moderation(s), the focus was on instituting protocol and identifying effective nodes for improvisation, spontaneity, and arranged encounters while keeping art and its dance as the focal point.

**Moderation(s): The Program**

**May 2012, Hong Kong**
Singaporean artist and writer Heman Chong was invited by Define Ayas (Director, Witte de With) to moderate a program between Witte de With, Rotterdam and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong.

**August 2012, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong**
*Teaser: Guilty Pleasures*
The program kicked off with a performative teaser. Guilty Pleasures by artist Ang Song Ming who engaged the assembled audience as participants in the setting of a listening party.
January 2013, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong

Incidents of Travel
During its residency at Spring Workshop, the curatorial duo Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Cânepa) produced Incidents of Travel, in which the duo invited artists including Ho Sin Tung, Yuk King Tan, Nadim Abbas, and Samson Young to develop day-long tours articulating the city of Hong Kong and their respective artistic practices through routes and waypoints.

April 2013, Witte de With, Rotterdam

A Thing at a Time
Performances by artists including Mette Edvardsen, Anthony Marcellini, Eszter Salamon, Benjamin Seror, and Koki Tanaka took place in and around Witte de With during A Thing At A Time. Alongside the programmed performances Director of Performa, RoseLee Goldberg, gave a talk and writer Guy Mannes-Abbott was invited as a witness to reflect upon the two-day program.

June 2013, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong

A Fictional Residency
For A Fictional Residency, Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard was invited to be writer-in-residence at Spring Workshop. During his stay in Hong Kong, Van den Boogaard together with artist Nadim Abbas, writer and director Enoch Cheng, journalist Doretta Lau, and MAP Office architectural duo Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix, all based in Hong Kong, wrote a short story exploring the role of fiction within their respective practices.

October 2013, Witte de With, Rotterdam

Stories and Situations
Stories and Situations was a day-long conference where discourse and objecthood were the core subject matter discussed from multiple angles ranging from linguistics, archeology, to philosophy. For this, invited curators Lee Ambrozy, Amira Gad, Christina Li, and Xiaoyu Weng worked in collaboration with moderator Heman Chong. Guest speakers included Brian Castriota (archaeological conservator, New York), Chris Fitzpatrick (Director of Objectif Exhibitions, Antwerp), Vincenzo Latronico (writer and critic, Berlin), Vincent Normand (writer and curator, Paris), Rosemary Orr (Senior Tutor and Lecturer Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences, University College Utrecht), and Arnisa Zeqo (art historian and co-founder of Rongwrong, Amsterdam).

October–December 2013, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong

The Social Contract
At Spring Workshop, the artist duo A Constructed World (Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva) produced The Social Contract, a work in which the audience is asked to sign a legal contract restraining them from speaking about what they saw inside the exhibition.
May–August 2014, Witte de With, Rotterdam

The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else

The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else was a group exhibition at Witte de With that dealt with the transmissive qualities of objects, situations, and storytelling, where one is soluble into the others. The formal relations between these three vehicles of mediation are rendered visible in the exhibition, which includes works by over forty artists. Artists included A Constructed World, Nadim Abbas, Allora & Calzadilla, Ang Song-ming, Iván Argote, Bik Van der Pol, Pierre Bismuth, John Cage, Chen Zhen, Chu Yun, Céal Floyer, Aurélien Froment, Félix González-Torres, Douglas Gordon, Minja Gu, Sharon Hayes, Ho Rui An, Ho Sin Tung, Tim Etchells and Vlatka Horvat, On Kawara, Patrick Killoran, Kwan Sheung Chi, Nicolás Lamas, Lee Kit, Michael Lee, Lucas Lenglet, Gabriel Lester, Marysia Lewandowska, Charles Lim, Katarina Löfström, MAP Office, Anthony Marcellini, Ahmet Ogüt & Cevdet Erek, João Vasco Paiva, Patricia Reed, Willem de Rooij, Mor Shani, Pranee Soi, Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi, Koki Tanaka, Narcisse Tordo, Freek Wambacq, Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong, Magdalen Wong, Adrian Wong, Haegue Yang, Trevor Yeung, and Johan Zetterquist.

Ongoing, Witte de With, Rotterdam, and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong

Bibliotheek (Library) is a list of books that functions both as a bibliography for Moderation(s) and as a temporary physical library. All participants to Moderation(s) are invited to suggest books, creating an ever-expanding common library that can be replicated easily by any individual, community, or institution. One is welcome to download the latest version of Bibliotheek (Library) at http://www.wdw.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Bibliotheek-Library-02.pdf/.

http://www.wdw.nl/event/moderations/
Two years on, in the wake of an ambitious program in two different cities consisting of a listening party, a host of tours, a conference about language, a series of performances, a book, a legal contract, a library, and an exhibition, only now have I been able to start taking hold of what was previously an almost impossible exercise: forming an account of the multifaceted project Moderation(s).

The project was initiated and hosted by Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, which invited Singaporean artist, curator, and writer Heman Chong to take the lead in devising a program that would unfold episodically, linking the two cities between August 2012 and August 2014. As the invited main “Witness” of an endeavor that traversed both time and distance, I was asked to chronicle the proceedings I experienced from the sidelines, while at times assuming different designated positions within the various components of the project.

In contrast to how witnesses function within court situations, where they can speak only when summoned or questioned to relay truths and facts of an occurrence, the multiple roles that I have adopted in the Moderation(s) project, such as that of covert author in A Fictional Residency and of co-curator of Stories and Situations, gave me space in which to manifest different presences, modes of address, and means of expression within the project’s two-year period. Keeping the role of the witness in mind, I refrained from contributing to processes as an active participant, like someone who held a backstage pass for the entirety of the project, closely shadowing and interacting with Heman Chong and the other participants. Though my role was not clearly outlined, I understood that in witnessing Moderation(s), I was to document and eventually discern and interpret the motivations and framework of the different elements of this open-ended venture on a blog linked to both Witte de With and Spring Workshop. In this essay, fragments of my witness accounts in the past two-years will be cited to trace a possible reading of the project at its tail end.

The Space Between You and Me
Observed through multiple vantage points, Moderation(s) could be understood as an attempt to realize a mode of open-endedness, stretching the limitations of conventional institutional time and resources in the era of accelerated cultural production and consumption. Much of the basis
of the project rested on the manifold ways people come to speak to and encounter one another and the aftereffects that emerge as a result of such processes. The situations Heman Chong created allowed invited artists, curators, and writers to enter multiple, fragmented, yet highly concentrated moments of exchange spanning both cities. Early on in the project, in the autumn of 2012, core participants were brought together in Rotterdam for a brainstorming meeting to discuss the possible interpretations of the word “moderation” as a method of thinking, working, and relating to one another in engendering a reciprocal space. The collective questions and aspirations that eventually emerged from this two-day meeting became important pillars in defining the potential capacity of the cross-continental project:

How can we use the potential for misunderstanding as a productive space that is constantly being reformulated through the process of moderation and through the fractures that are intrinsic to language and communication? Can we picture Moderation(s) functioning like a third institution between two existing institutions, artists and curators? Additionally, could we think of it as an open-ended sentence where thoughts and objects could be generated out of this mode of working?  

In many ways, the inherent temporal and geographical gap among all the participants, alongside their diverse scopes of interests and intellectual concerns, became an opening rather than an obstacle in seeking out common interests and attitudes for rethinking the word “collaboration,” which has been popping up within the discourse of contemporary artistic and curatorial practice during the past decade. In light of new proposals concerning collective working and the proliferation of ambitious international projects that criss-cross the disciplines of literature, performance, exhibition making, and public programming, they fall, more often than not, into the trappings of false or sometimes forced collaboration or box ticking. With this in mind, Heman Chong’s decision to employ a tangential language and tone in presenting the project, and refusing straightforward explanation or contextualization of Moderation(s) as a whole, might be perceived as cryptic, resembling the idiosyncratic and enigmatic language that David Levine and Alix Rule argue has recently become pervasive in art communication. But it also could be seen as means to instil within the project a malleable approach that could pry open productive spaces of thought circulation beyond accepted categories or models.

Assuming the role of moderator, perhaps a defiant gesture against the role of curator, Heman Chong took on the responsibilities of various different positions. As a curator, he selected his collaborators, setting up the framework and necessary conditions for the project, as well as the parameters of each encounter; and as taciturn organizer, he gave free rein to invited artists and curators to develop their responses. Take, for example, the Barcelona-based curatorial duo Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna) and their project Incidents of Travel, at Spring Workshop,
Hong Kong, in January 2013. This was developed out of a month-long residency in which they invited local artists to devise personalized tours of places and locations relevant to their artistic interests as a complement to other commercially available tours that mediate one’s experience of Hong Kong. Initially thought of as an extended studio visit with an artist, configured within a tourist tour format, the artist tours offered both the artists and Latitudes an opportunity to rethink how artistic practice and city experiences could meld together, be translated, and considered outside of professional art world relationships.

As in many of the other components of Moderation(s), the intention of Heman Chong and his collaborators was perhaps not to reinvent formats such as tours, conferences, or exhibitions per se, but, instead, to reclaim the space of hospitality and interaction, making the interpersonal connections and exchanges that developed out of the project profound ones that would lead to new collaborations beyond its initial framework.

Choreographing and configuring scenarios where such interactions could occur naturally was a delicate task. More often than not, the events at Spring Workshop revolved around inviting participants to act outside of their comfort zones to explore new ways of working beyond their usual, familiar disciplines or environments. With his invitation, Heman Chong offered collaborators a situation that was shaped by nominal curatorial interference, a defining mode of working within Moderation(s). The resulting public presentations and publications, the project’s concluding publication, to be launched in the Fall of 2014, were materializations of collaborative processes that would be otherwise barely perceptible to and accessible by the public. While not detrimental to the understanding or reading of the project itself, these oﬀstage moments remained spectral and were made palpable through intentionally embedded traces in my witness account and story for A Fictional Residency.

The participants leave the provisional pocket of elastic time and fictional space bit by bit, emptying Spring of their own
personal effects. The rooms slowly return to their usual states, and what is left of this intensive experience will now find an afterlife in the readers’ minds.  

In response to Spring Workshop’s mission to provide residency opportunities that afforded moments of deep engagement with Hong Kong, as evidenced by Incidents of Travel, the subsequent Moderation(s) episode in Hong Kong, A Fictional Residency, in June 2013, saw local writers and artists congregate alongside invited Dutch playwright and writer Oscar van den Boogaard to write a book in four days. In A Fictional Residency, my role was that of an unnamed ghostly writer working alongside the list of authors featured on the book cover. The final story in the book, “Salon de refuge,” is a meta-narrative of the four-day experience of the writing residency that fills in the gaps and connects the dots and places that surface in the other stories. My account registered various situations and highlights mutual influences that otherwise would remain concealed in the other stories, and at the same time forms a backdrop in which readers can contextualize the compiled stories within. As witness to various moments within Moderation(s), such as A Fictional Residency, I described the spaces of fluid time that escape representation via straightforward photographic or video documentation, yet appear to find some form of materialization through witness reports like mine hinged heavily on subjective interpretations from the sidelines.

Flows, Leakages, and Circulatory Systems

As Moderation(s) stretched across two cities and spaces—Hong Kong and Rotterdam, Spring Workshop and Witte de With—the two nodes could almost be seen as bookends or brackets. Heman Chong’s programming for the respective spaces was conceived in consideration of the similarities and asymmetries within the institutions’ functions and the cities’ contexts. The series of activities that unfolded during the project operated in two different time zones, in (inter-)dependent fragments. In a networked era, where time is easily synchronized and events instantly filmed and streamed, the project acknowledged and embraced the difficulties of transmitting experiences through time zones and geographies. In limiting the dissemination of the various project installments through institutional publicity, event documentation, commissioned texts, and witness accounts,
Moderation(s), on the one hand, privileged the participants’ involvement, and, on the other, looked at the way happenings could leave traces to be reactivated by encounters with readers, historians, and art professionals at a later date. It also posited questions about what the idea of presence means in this day and age, as well as whether one can speak of or create one’s own experience of a moment in history/time without being physically present. A particularly pertinent example could be traced from one event from the performance weekend at Witte de With, *A Thing A Time*, in which I wrote:

Last week in Venice, I saw Koki Tanaka’s presentation at the Japanese Pavilion, which willfully embraces the fragile potential that emerges within temporary communities. Among the videos documenting such moments which he calls “precarious tasks,” on recycled walls leftover from the last Venice Architecture Biennale, hung a series of images of his performance *Precarious task #6 going up to a city building taller than 16.7m*, which took place in Rotterdam’s Bilderberg Hotel as part of *A Thing At A Time*. Drawing from the 2011 catastrophe in Fukushima, Tanaka asked a group of audience members to share thoughts on this major event as experienced on varying scales, depths, and geographies. In choreographing a collective situation rather than re-enacting it, the audience was invited to take joint possession of other people’s experiences of one event, Tanaka establishes these moments as departure points where our experiences could intersect (across geographies, from Fukushima to Rotterdam to Venice, for instance) in re-imagining the possibility of seeing the world differently.¹⁰

As part of the series of performances, *A Thing At A Time*, Tanaka’s performative event in Rotterdam zoomed into a singular encounter that touched upon the mediation of re-enacted presence and dedicated attention. His *Precarious task #6 going up to a city building taller than 16.7m* expanded further on this approach to time, production, as well as the consumption and dissemination of events, and the resulting work existed twofold. One was a concurrently individual and communal experience for those who were present in Rotterdam, while the resulting documentation, as a series of photographs of that moment, engages with audiences to invoke empathetic connections to what transpired during the event in Rotterdam and in Fukushima in other exhibition locations. The accompanying documentation for Tanaka’s event and other temporary events within Moderation(s) signals a conscious act of elongating time and compressing geographical bearings—an act in which participants can come into contact during and beyond Moderation(s).

Working against the hastened communications that we have become accustomed to, Tanaka’s poetic work resonates with the project’s attempt to
reconsider human connections via the coexistence of, and possible mutual understanding that can be found in, individual experiences originating from nodes of shared references and events.

Moderation(s), a fragmentary two-year undertaking, was grounded by Biblioteek (Library), which functions as a set of anchors in both locations. The idea of Biblioteek (Library) started as an exercise by Heman Chong in the initial brainstorm meeting, and the titles in the library’s collection consist of recommendations by an expanding list of writers, curators, and artists either participating in the project or who share affinities with the project, as well as books relating to Heman Chong’s own interests. And yet, the collection of books is not meant to serve as a set of straightforward footnotes or orientations to make intelligible, or provide explanations relating to the threads and concepts that emerged from Moderation(s), but, rather, as a space to gather and circulate disparate forms of knowledge and myriad interests, not unlike the loose company of participants brought together throughout the diverse components that comprise Moderation(s). Speaking of this library, Heman Chong explains:

What binds us all into this system (Biblioteek (Library)) is the fact that we have all taken time to read through the list of books and have come up with a series of recommendations that are reactions to this list. There are some very surprising recommendations, which have already triggered off certain conversations amongst the contributors, which is already very telling of how this system can function both as a site and a tool.11

While the book list is jointly hosted on websites of both Spring and Witte de With,12 visitors to the physical libraries in both cities are encouraged to browse through the stacks as regular library users to potentially draw their own readings (or not) of the various components of Moderation(s) or to form conceptual links with the regular programming in both institutions. Continuing with the idea of creating a third institution that connects both art spaces, the library can be seen as a shadow that criss-crosses the various chapters of the overall project, and is activated by visitors and participants; for example, it was utilized as inspiration for the writers taking part in A Fictional Residency. Echoing Heman Chong’s intention to manufacture sites and interfaces of potential interactions, Biblioteek (Library), like other project elements, represents his continued investigation into utilizing existing configurations and formats as intermediaries for candid exchange, where the moderator enters into a dance of mediation and encouragement between the opposite poles of predictability and improvisation.
Speech Clouds

Mid-way into Moderation(s), using the summer break as a moment to take stock of Moderation(s), the image of speech clouds became an apt analogy in discerning the project's overall intention, as I wrote:

In comic books, speech clouds are repositories of thought and speech of characters, facilitating the story's narrative over a succession of multiple frames. ... What can be said and how we can say things, and the ensuing meanings produced within these empty speech bubbles will offer us much thought in the various conditioned scenarios that Chong and the contributors will collate. In these instances, we all become characters, summoning manifold thoughts and speaking in countless tongues, and providing multiple possible storylines in this open sentence called Moderation(s).

If the core purpose of Moderation(s) lay in devising episodic opportunities for exchange and collaboration, the medium of language as transmitter for points of departure took centre stage in Stories and Situations, a one-day symposium held at Witte de With. This was an occasion to call attention to various facets, elements, and processes that form and problematize the way language can transpose ideas and produce meanings. Aside from aspects of linguistic and cultural issues integral to influencing the way we express ourselves, the day's proceedings also concentrated on decoding intentions behind speech acts that animate/activate otherwise mute artifacts, parasites, and museological displays. Lee Ambrozy's curated session of presentations placed its focus on the perception of objects in which patina is regarded as a tell-tale trace of history, as well as an unwanted blemish on an artifact. Here, the role of the conservator, in his or her act of conservation, is the moderator of divergent approaches toward preservation or restoration, steering pluralistic testimonies in which the material witness will tell, and, in turn, form parts of historical or cultural narratives.

Almost like ventriloquists, the invited speakers, through their presentations, animated various objects and elicited conversations among the juxtaposition of animal specimens, bodily organs, parasites, and artworks, unconsciously furnishing various definitions of the word “moderation.” The tongue, as a motif of speech, appeared metaphorically as well as in visual cues multiple times throughout the day’s presentations, unveiling the pitfalls of the ability of language to adequately convey thought, meaning.
and communication as well as its resulting subversions. Arnisa Zeqo’s talk in the session *A Mind of Two Tongues* attended to the materiality of language and its influence upon thoughts and ideas, citing examples of word ingestion found in religious paintings, while relaying the schizophrenic autodidact Louis Wolfson’s peculiar relationship to words. Born in 1930 in New York, Wolfson developed a particular disaccord with English, his mother tongue, and in his process of ridding English from his daily life and surroundings, replaced with his own jumbled melange of French, Hebrew, Russian, and German. Delving deeper into the spectrum of involuntary and imposed speech, the tongue in Chris Fitzpatrick’s presentation *The Intestine or the Tapeworm?* spoke through the form of a parasite, *Cymothoa Exigua* (a tongue-eating louse), functioning as the voice of subversion. Represented by an uncanny female voice, Fitzpatrick sat on stage as a mouthpiece, as the voice of the parasite, and recounted instances of infiltration into systems and art institutions, as I recalled on the blog:

In summoning a number of (un)invited artist interventions in various structures, such as Dexter Sinister’s interception in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, by means of expropriating its dissemination and circulation of discursive and promotional texts; the performance elicited the multiple ways in which one could still imagine the institution as a fertile site for interruption during a time where the term “institutional critique” has become threadbare in contemporary artistic practice. The covert parasitic act here becomes one of value and political aptitude in claiming autonomy, thus making available pockets of maneuvering outside the traps of systematic instrumentalization.15

Fitzpatrick’s performative lecture pried open the fraught space of reciprocity and abuse between the parasite and the host where, in either case, new meanings and interpretations are produced through this violent intervention. Seen within the context of the Moderation(s), it highlighted the potential disruption within the situation that Heman Chong, the Moderator, constructed for the entire project and his guests. Even with the sincerity and openness that pervaded Moderation(s), and marked the group of participants, there was a certain unpredictable risk implicit within his invitation for those to participate in and contribute to the project’s various components, which might precipitate a conflict between ideas, roles, and expectations throughout the collaborative process. Even though the strength of Moderation(s) lay in working with and manufacturing spaces to instigate communication, in the most positive sense, recognition still ought to be
given to those uncooperative acts that possess the power to disrupt the host-Moderator-guest relationship, in which critical commentary towards possible interpretations of an invitation, and the complex machinations which form it, could be generated.

Coming after the discussions in Rotterdam around language and communication one of the last program segments to take place in Hong Kong as part of Moderation(s) was the November 2013 installation *The Social Contract*, by resident Australian artist duo A Constructed World. Taking the prohibition of speech as a premise, the work reclams the cogent space of silence and secrecy in the age of networked media and over-sharing via social media. In order to view the installation that was located behind constructed walls, the artists had visitors sign a legal contract of confidentiality in which they agreed to abide by the terms of non-disclosure over a period of time or risk being held liable for unspecified damages. The secrecy asked of the audience challenged their understanding of the embedded terms and conditions of the contract and the trust that is necessary beyond the artwork itself, and, by extension, the most basic human interactions. In my account of the evening, centred on my observations of the opening crowd, the work is seen as a device to understand our relationship to rules and laws that we inadvertently adhere to:

In this self-imposed, and somehow collectively respected code of silence, floating in the air that evening was a strange sense of being alone, yet being together as a community sharing knowledge of an unspeakable secret. . . . Not to be blindsided by the legalese constituting the project, in fact, the core of The Social Contract lies in the establishment of personal trust being made with the artists, a bond that most people are inclined to upkeep through good faith in a society that is otherwise governed by social codes, and state enforced discipline.  

A Constructed World regarded the contract itself as the work of art rather than what was on display in the installation. This collaborative effort produced a space of isolation shared by artists and participants and almost could be seen as an inversion of the space of speech; that is, it was a valorization of silence. On the surface it might seem like the artists’ concerns were to regulate speech, but, in fact, as a gesture, the contract could also be seen as redemptive of genuine interpersonal relationships built upon reciprocal trust in an increasingly mediated of superficial friendships and hollow connections. *The Social Contract* as a proxy and a thinking tool uncovered the attitudes and controlled conditions necessary in forming openings for collaboration founded on trust and mutual exchange. The lifespan and the culminating point of the work is ambiguous; that is, should the work be regarded as complete only when a participant
breaks his or her silence after the contract period? What could be made of the violators or, conversely, those who would rather keep this knowledge to themselves for an extended period beyond the contract time? Keeping in mind the various modes of mediation and dissemination built within Moderation(s), this specific project expounded on ideas of speech embargo and delayed documentation; what the work ultimately did was to address the untranslatable experiences that exist in the realm of private thoughts and outside of public archives or discourse.

The Pleasure Principle
The notion of parenthesis can be understood as the overarching structure behind Moderation(s), while the production of conversational space is its modus operandi. As one considers the various fleeting presentations that composed Moderation(s), the epilogue exhibition, The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else, at Witte de With, stood in sharp contrast to all the other components because it was the only one that was material-driven. Appearing almost as a gesture against the ubiquitousness of moving images and technology in contemporary art, all works on display in this exhibition encapsulated form and medium as a primary concern, creating asymmetrical echoes and disjointed associations within the exhibition space, and functioning as manifold brackets or anchor points. One example could be found in Patricia Reed’s piece *Perfect Present* (2013), made in homage to Félix González-Torres’s "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*) (1987–90), both of which were displayed in different places in the exhibition. Reed’s frantic clock hands create a striking juxtaposition with González-Torres’s evocative rumination on death as a rupture in the notion of time and eternal love. The curators, Heman Chong and Samuel Saelemakers, created similar kinds of variations and repetition of shared motifs among other works that framed the viewing experience of an
exhibition that, in this case, proffered no central statement or thesis. It was as though the artworks at times became hushed objects dotting the lines of prospective conversations, awaiting activation by the audience, who were also informed by secondary materials presented in the exhibition guidebook and suggested readings. As compact vessels, these introverted objects were imbued with meanings and intentions shaped by the trace of time and experience and served as indications of past events or situations in which these works were created within and outside the context of Moderation(s). In a roundabout way, the exhibition brought forward a concentration of physical presence of works, but revealed the limitations of the transmission and transferral of histories and experiences, on par with the mode of thinking evident in the other components of Moderation(s). In face of the impossibility of possessing complete histories of the events that transpired within and prior to the project, The Part In The Story and other events required the wilful involvement of viewers entering the situations conceived by Heman Chong, thus precipitating a condition of multiple readings and interpretations.

If one thinks about the objects in The Part In The Story as ghostly traces of what transpired prior to it, the teaser event by Ang Song-ming, Guilty Pleasures, the inaugural event of Moderation(s), in which he invited audience members to share their musical guilty pleasures, can be seen as one that put its focus upon the audience’s presence in the present. Such experiences came to fruition in Moderation(s) thanks to the choreography of various encounters straddling the poles between improvisation and design, and elements of pleasure and liveliness permeated throughout. Like a dotted line in which the invited collaborators, together with Heman Chong, drew out to connect each project episode over the two years, a delineated intimate space was established with informal moments—such as those of Guilty Pleasures, and A Fictional Residency—outside of our familiar art world machinations and rules. Resonating with the concerns of A Constructed World’s piece, which made clear the mechanisms of permissiveness at play within the art world, the Guilty Pleasures event by Ang Song-ming grappled with one’s understanding of what constitutes socially acceptable public display. In spite of this event having taken place prior to the public announcement of the expanded definition of what Moderation(s) might entail, looking in hindsight, Ang Song-ming’s listening party can be understood to have touched upon the overall project’s goal. What might have seemed a casual sharing of personal musical guilty pleasures, Ang Song-ming’s event in fact underlined Heman Chong’s aim to forge bonds and broadcast ideas among people within both the context of art and the format of an event and was continuously explored in the following programs for Moderation(s). To use the silence imposed by A Constructed World to visitors in The Social Contract as catalyst for reflection upon the entire project: within a built-in situation as such, what are the traces that are leftover and perceptible in a belated moment in
time beyond those who were in the room? As the Witness tasked with the responsibility to render online these experiences into words shortly after each event, it could be seen as Chong's intention to institute such questions in instituting a record-keeper within the project itself. Soon after attending the opening of The Social Contract, I documented in my deliberations:

By barring the possibility of speaking of what one has seen, bound by the terms and timeframe of the agreement, what kind of utterances around this project could be traced and disseminated through time, especially in the cult of instant information consumption? Will the fortunate few who have witnessed the project, still be interested in talking about it, after the contract's expiration date at 5pm (Hong Kong time), 15 December 2013? Or will it be old news, deemed uninteresting and banished to the black holes of art history, only to be excavated and re-discovered years later by curators and historians? Only time will tell.

In writing an account of Moderation(s), I recalled my speaking with Hong Kong artist Nadim Abbas, who, like me, performed assorted albeit dissimilar roles in the different instalments of Moderation(s). As tour guide, fiction writer, and artist presenting a work in The Part In The Story, Abbas wore separate hats, shadowing and responding to Heman Chong as the moderator throughout the trajectory of Moderation(s):

Christina Li: ... In this project, Heman calls himself the Moderator, but in a sense he’s the host, and you’re more like a guest that he extends the invitation to. As a guest, you need to evaluate or get a sense of the kind of freedom that could be put forward by this person.

Nadim Abbas: I think Heman is the one who brought all these people together in different situations. It’s like being in someone’s kitchen standing around doing something, but then not feeling like you’re obliged to do anything. It is pretty much a reflection of what I would be doing anyway but by myself. I think there is a lot to be said about engineering these kinds of situations that makes it easier for people to relax and put their guard down.

By drawing parallels to the relaxed moments and convivial conversations that tend to take place in kitchens, one could think of Heman Chong as the host of a dinner party. The kitchen and the dinner table represent a mutable type of informality, familiarity, and engagement among the guests—a mix of Heman Chong’s friends both old and new. It is this attitude towards sociability and pleasure that runs through Moderation(s), bringing the guest artists, curators, and writers together to compose the scenarios and dialogues that were presented to the public in manifold ways and at different times during the project’s two-year journey across two cities. Perhaps as an apt addendum to the overall endeavour, with the exhibition
The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else, the return to objects shifted the focus away from the fleeting and inevitably ungraspable moment of the experience that had passed. Such instances are alluded to and made apparent only now, following the project’s completion, like the leftovers abandoned by guests who left the dinner table, which become traces of what happened, of what was said or remained unsaid, or for some, become pathways to other interpretations of stories and situations that merged within the parentheses of Moderation(s).

Notes:
1 An archive of all the blog entries of my witness accounts can be found at http://www.wdv.ni/2013/09/02/moderations-the-witness-by-christina-li and http://witnessmoderations.tumblr.com.
2 The participants in this informal meeting, which took place at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, October 19-20, 2012, included A Constructed World, Nadim Abbas, Deane Ayas, Mimi Brown, Heman Chong, Amira Gad, Latitudes, Michael Lee, Samuel Sealeemakers, and me, along with guests Natasha Divnala, Pages, and Vivian Sky Riehberg.
4 This refers to the phrase “International Art English,” a brand of English that Alix Rule and David Levine argue has developed within contemporary art writing with a specific syntax and grammar structure, they discussed this phenomenon in a talk at the same name in Triple Canopy in 2012, http://canopypaper.org/magazine/2012/06/01/international-art-english.html. One session of discussions was dedicated to this topic: “A Mind of Two Tongues,” in Stories and Situations, which took place at Witte de With, October 3, 2013.
5 For this project, Latitudes invited four Hong Kong-based artists—Nadim Abbas, Ho Sin Tung, Yuk King Tan, and Samson Young—to develop day-long tours, thus retelling the story of the city and presenting their participant’s artistic concerns through personal itineraries and viewpoints.
6 With contributions by Nadim Abbas, Deane Ayas, Mimi Brown, Heman Chong, Chris Fitzpatrick, Amira Gad, Travis Jepperson, Christina Li, Latitudes, Guy Manns-Abbott, Samuel Sealeemakers, Aaron Schuster, and Oscar van den Boogaard.
8 For A Fictional Residency, acclaimed Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard was invited as writer-in-residence at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. During his stay, van den Boogaard worked with a group of Hong Kong–based practitioners, including Nadim Abbas, Enoch Cheng, Dorette Lau, and Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaux, of MAP Office. The PDF version of the book they wrote together—Nadim Abbas, Oscar van den Boogaard, Enoch Cheng, Heman Chong, Doretta Lau, Christina Li, and MAP Office, A Fictional Residency, (Hong Kong: Spring Workshop and Witte de With, 2013)—is available at https://wdw-ni.s3.amazonaws.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/AFictionalResidency.pdf.
10 A Thing Art A Time was a series of five performances that took place April 19 and 20, 2013, in Rotterdam, and was spread out over two days and four different locations, featuring artists Mette Edvaldsoe, Anthony Marcellini, Kuki Tanaka, Eric Salamon, and Benjamin Seror.
14 The symposium was organized by Lee Ambrosy, Amira Gad, Xiaoya Wong, and me, with speakers Brian Castriota, Chris Fitzpatrick, Vincenzo Latronico, Vincent Normand, Rosemary O’Dr, and Arnissa Zepo.
17 For the duration of The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else, Witte de With invited eight guest moderators to give “readings” or interpretative tours of the exhibition. Throughout the summer 2014, moderated public tours of the exhibition were given by Lorenzo Benedetti, Oscar van den Boogaard Ann Demester, Desislava Dimova, Chris Fitzpatrick, Christina Li, Marnie Slater, and Steven ten Thije.
The Social Architecture of “Situations”: Heman Chong in Conversation with Lee Ambrozy

Heman Chong is an artist whose work dissolves boundaries among literature and the performing and visual arts. As the chief architect of the Moderation(s) project, he expanded his role to include that of institutional curator, employing a range of collaborative methodologies to investigate new ways of refreshing modes of production.

In this conversation, through dialogue with Moderation(s) participant and art historian Lee Ambrozy, Heman Chong elaborates on the strategies this multi-platform project employed to expand what contemporary art production can be. He elaborates on the goals and methodologies embedded within the project, revealing how Singaporean art collectives of the 1990s, Contact Improvisation, and graphic design inspired the program for Moderation(s).

The collaborative frameworks that emerged over twenty-four months in Moderation(s) revealed the fragility of epistemological hierarchies within the art world and the permeable boundaries between the roles that have come to be established with it. The resulting situations expanded and blurred the roles of the participants, and, similarly, migration between two geographically and culturally divergent centres—Witte de With in Rotterdam and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong—lent Moderation(s) an ephemeral character that eluded conventional definition.

Heman Chong’s remarks below demonstrate how artists’ roles have adapted to overlapping cultural contexts and shifting geographies. Developing less
distinct roles for players within the art world is an issue of concern in the so-called Chinese art world, where roles overlap more frequently; that is, artist as curator, or gallerist as art critic.

Is Moderation(s) a potential alternative model for art production in a globalized context? Could similar methodologies such as those found in Moderation(s) displace linear models or provide a framework for multiple value systems to productively co-exist? Such questions have multidisciplinary implications well beyond the increasingly complex art world, namely: How can we create freedom within determined structures?

Heman Chong in conversation with Lee Ambrozy, November 8, 2013

Lee Ambrozy: What was your title within the Moderation(s) project? How can we describe your role? Are you the curator, the planner, the Wizard of Oz?

Heman Chong: Things somehow got out of control, and now everyone calls me the “moderator,” which I think is inaccurate. But most of my time is spent putting things together, and what is being produced is the result of this process; a lot of the work actually happens during the process of selecting who is involved in what. The entire Moderation(s) project hinges on this. It is about designing a structure in which people can do whatever they want. I don’t define the content within each of the programs with the overall project. People do that themselves, which can be messy at certain points because these are situations where everything could work, or totally fail. But for me it isn’t so important that everything is successful at a level that it is legible, or that it makes a coherent vehicle. More important is that there is a framework where people can build the social structures or relationships they need for use within the Moderation(s) programs, or for use outside of it.

A lot of Moderation(s) happens between two institutions—Witte de With, Rotterdam, and Spring Workshop, Hong Kong—on different levels. For example, Spring Workshop, because of its location in Hong Kong, is a wonderful site for people to produce mental and creative space in their lives.

Trevor Yeung, Mr. Butterflies, 2012. Installation, in The Part in the Story Where A Part Becomes A Part of Something Else, as part of Moderation(s), Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn.
and do what they want for a month. Witte de With is a different institution; it is almost twenty-five years old, and it functions more like a kunsthalle, so production there is more about engineering modes of seeing things, or ways of plugging into content that would otherwise be part of the exhibition-making processes. This is similar to taking the public programming part of an exhibition and folding it into the exhibition, of making it seamless.

At the same time, a lot of the work there is about refreshing the networks of Witte de With, and a lot of the artists associated with it circulate around Europe. The Witte de With space is a pit stop between other institutions; it is also a co-producing institution. This is important, but it is equally important to refresh it and introduce new people into these networks.

**Lee Ambrozy:** I like the idea of a "refresh."

**Heman Chong:** Yes. This makes sense for me on the level of what [Moderation(s)] does: getting people to define their own content at different points within the structure.

In a way, there are dual roles that I am playing—one is that of a producer, the other is that of a production manager.

**Lee Ambrozy:** I conceptualize your role as more of a facilitator, not a moderator. You were not moderating during the conference.

**Heman Chong:** This is something I’ve been very interested in doing from the very beginning of the project: to work with Defne Ayas at Witte de With and build up the team there, where there is a very conservative hierarchy of roles. It was a way of engaging with the curators within Witte de With: to utilize their capacities, knowledge, and time to develop [Moderation(s)]. That is why I pushed the role of moderator to Amira Gad, who was then curator at Witte de With, so that she could take hold of the situation. And it is also the reason I decided that in the final exhibition that takes place in the spring of 2014, *The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part Of Something Else*, Samuel Saelemaekers, Witte de With’s Associate Curator, will be a co-curator and not a mere administrator. It is important for people at Witte de With to take control of the various parts of [Moderation(s)] and to expand their roles within the institution.

**Lee Ambrozy:** So there is a certain freedom implied in your directives. It was very interesting to observe your working style because there is only one other person I know who works in this manner, Ai Weiwei. In my opinion this is a primary reason for his success, and a characteristic not much discussed. He uses individuals as resources. He trusts people and
gives them very few working constraints. The result is that people working with him develop a sense of responsibility and push projects in directions that he doesn’t always anticipate. He facilitates and enables these situations, but he doesn’t control them. One example of this in an artwork was *Fragments* (2009), when he gave general instructions to a team of traditional woodworkers to make something out of temple fragments, and they made a shape that resembled China. This management style is similar to what I observed at the Moderation(s) conference.

*Heman Chong:* More or less, I think in my case there is a lot of enabling, which really comes from a background of working as an artist in Singapore. In the 2000s, in Singapore, there was really no demarcation between a curator and an artist. Everyone performed these two roles as one, simply because there were no professional curators. For example, theatre directors were also directors of art spaces, and they would be programming for their art space while at the same time rehearsing their own work there.

For my entire generation of artists, like Ho Tzu Nyen and Ming Wong, the way we work is that at the beginning of the project we really function like curators. We are writing proposals, talking to funders and to the gallery itself, and there is very little ego involved in defining the role of the curator or artist.

Coming from that background taught me that in order for this professionalization to occur, it is actually more interesting to understand that the skins between these roles are porous, and that one can seep into the other. It’s also a way of producing ideas in a more fluid manner, without the involvement of the bureaucracy. It is much more interesting when people overlap their ideas.

Of course, there is also the fact that coming from Singapore, where there was no space for critical thinking, while we were producing we were also reflecting on our work with each other. We formed a critical circle, like a critique group. There were all kinds of feedback loops that existed inherently because the scene there was unprofessional, and we were still just doing things because we wanted to, and out of necessity.
Lee Ambrozy: You are speaking about a very specific historical moment. About how many people were involved? Ten? Fifteen?

Heman Chong: The group expands and shrinks. I can speak only about the people who I personally engaged with over a span of ten years, between 2000 and 2010. The artists would include Ho Tzu Nyen, Ming Wong, Matthew Ngui, Ang Song Ming, Genevieve Chua, Chun Kai Feng, Charles Lim, Ho Rui An, and Michael Lee. I have also managed to maintain a dialogue with the curator Ahmad Mashadi, whose advice has been invaluable to my work.

One of the reasons artists are very independent in Singapore has to do with administrative policies. Usually it is the artist who applies for grants, not the curators. It is an online process, and you can log on only with an account, and it is a government website. A curator can’t do this for you. Maybe they can for a group show, but for solo projects and presentations, the artists have to crunch it out themselves.

A lot of this generation surfaced around 1999 — this was the year that we all met — during a series of exhibitions at The Substation, the first independent artist-run space in Singapore. Somehow at this point there were no freelance curators. Even people like Kuo Pao Kun or Vincent Leow who organized exhibitions did not call themselves curators. All the curators were institutional, and by that time the Singapore Museum was almost seen as the enemy. So we took on these roles, forming not so much a defined group, but a loose network of people who used the same space — The Substation.

Of course, there was a long history that came before us, such as the evolution of different collectives that began in the 1980s in Singapore, such as Tang Da Wu and The Artist’s Village, but at a point it became evident that these collectives were tripping over themselves and that new models of collectivity needed to surface. In a way, Moderation(s) is an extension of these modes and attempts to stage similar projects in itinerant modes.

Lee Ambrozy: It is interesting to view Moderation(s) as an instantiation of activities happening in Singapore a decade ago. In a way, you’ve encapsulated that creative tension by building a framework that imitates the creative incubator you experienced there.
Heman Chong: It is clear if you look at most artists in Singapore that we all play multiple roles. There really isn’t one artist who is just a painter’s painter type of person. Even if there were, he or she would be doing something else, like running a lecture series or something in the public library.

There is always a duality to most artists in Singapore that I think is healthy for the scene as a whole, but the question remains whether or not this is a good thing for individual practices. I guess I’m talking about how we cope with our limited resources and time. One of the reasons we haven’t we encountered an internationally recognized artist from Singapore is that we spread ourselves so thin. Everyone is doing too much.

How thin can you spread yourself before your own work suffers? I have witnessed my art practice suffer as a result of my role in Moderation(s). I just didn’t have enough time to look at it. It is a rational equation. When you free up space for other people, you are taking up your own time.

Lee Ambrozy: If you want to look at it in a different way, the question I would put to you is: Do you consider your work with Moderation(s) to be an artwork?

Heman Chong: That is one of the main differences between me and how you discuss Ai Weiwei. His projects are consolidated back into Ai Weiwei’s own studio, but I don’t think that I do that with Moderation(s)—these projects are not consolidated back into my own practice. To answer your question, I consider the structure of Moderation(s) an artwork, but have refrained from appropriating the content.

Lee Ambrozy: So the structure itself is an artwork, but you do not claim authorship of whatever is transpiring within it.

Heman Chong: Correct. I do not claim authorship of what is inside this structure. Although in a way letting go of authorship is also part of the artwork for me. This is how I define it for myself.

Do you think there are similarities between Moderation(s) and MadeIn Company, for example?

Lee Ambrozy: No, I don’t. What I see as the major difference between these two projects is that MadeIn Company collective employs a quasi-corporatism. MadeIn models itself on corporate structures to such an extent that they even have time cards and have to punch in when they come into the office/studio. That type of activity—even though it is done somewhat in jest—clearly shows their model.

The fact that members of MadeIn refer to Xu Zhen as “Xu Zong” (similar in Chinese as to how one would address a CEO) makes it clear who is at the top of the hierarchy, whereas Moderation(s) is outstanding precisely because it lacks that clear power hierarchy. It allows for a certain type of
freedom that is often stifled by more common types of social structures, systems, and frameworks. In the act of interpretation, we tend to ignore the models that do not have a clear leadership. There is something inexplicable about Moderation(s) in this sense.

**Heman Chong:** Moderation(s) functions on this level, and I am a buffer zone between institution and artists. I don’t make the artists do the press release, etc., and I’m freeing up a lot of the constraints of the bureaucracy that come with working with this type of institution. I’ve become a curator! In a lot of the meetings they would refer to me as “the ghost,” so I take on the role of the specter and can be molded to do many different things within the project.

For example, with *The Fictional Residency*, because of time restraints I was also the book designer. To function as graphic designer when you are the director of a program is crazy. The only other person I know who does this is the guy who ran the Stedelijk Museum in the 1970s, Willem Sandberg. He was crazy enough to work on the catalogues and posters for his own shows.

**Lee Ambrozy:** Why do you choose to do such additional work? Why would you act as a book designer?

**Heman Chong:** Because it facilitates a process in which we can work up until the last minute. People have the chance to produce a short story right up until the last minute, where I am sitting with them. You can’t do that with graphic designers because they would go crazy, unless it was their own project; here graphic designers like David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey from Dexter Sinister come to mind. But I didn’t want to just hire a graphic designer and have him or her be a slave to the project. It defeats the idea of Moderation(s).

So, in order for the project to gain a certain traction that is not possible with other projects I appropriated myself as the graphic designer. This dual role enables a different way of writing.

**Lee Ambrozy:** I hesitate to use the word “ad-hocism,” but I think you could find a similar term for what you are doing.
**Heman Chong:** Moderation(s) grew out of another project that I did in 2006 with Mai Abu ElDahab, at Project Art Centre in Dublin in which we had seven days to write an entire novel. One of the writers, David Reinsfurth, whom I mentioned before, was also the graphic designer for the book, and I saw how working with the graphic designer in-situ while writing a book changed everything. It is a totally different thing, because both the design and literary aspects become a visual experience, and this is then encrypted within the work as a part of text.

What David brought to the book was this notion of Post-Fordism, the idea of “just in time,” or print-on-demand—the idea that you are producing for a specific time and audience. It’s also a way of resisting modes of production that tend to fall into a kind of complacency.

There are certain steps to take to produce an exhibition. You begin with a proposal, the institution says yes or no, and then there is a process of negotiation. But I think that is where Moderation(s) works, because there is no actual linear trajectory that is applicable for all the projects, so each of the projects was negotiated and produced within their specific sets of value systems.

**Lee Ambrozy:** That is interesting, and I like that you frame things within each project’s own value systems and allow for their potential to develop on their own terms.

**Heman Chong:** Exactly, and that was what we talked about in the first meeting we had last October, at Witte de With, where it was really about using what people bring to the table rather than building something from scratch.

So I think a lot of what I do in Moderation(s) is to identify and encourage what people do best and when it is best to use their abilities. It’s a method that is close to what many contemporary dance choreographers use, to work with what dancers bring to the piece. So in this case, rather than going to an artist or a curator or a designer and saying, “I want this to be done,” it’s saying, “How about you do what you do and we see how it will all fit, and if it doesn’t fit, it doesn’t fit, maybe we can use it another time, in another context.” In that sense, this has a lot of potential as a model for working in today’s context; one where artists are often pushed by market forces to develop a signature style or an iconic reference in their work, and, in turn, are only interested in consolidating everything for their work. I feel that I wanted a space that allows for active participatory roles within the art world, and, more importantly, to create spaces where a generous exchange of raw ideas and materials can occur.

What Moderation(s) actually taught me is that it is much more interesting to work with artists and have them work in a range of roles, rather than use assistants to produce one thing. I prefer this format because it is so much more social, and there is more you can learn from the other artists rather than constantly perform the genius mode of telling someone what to do.
Lee Ambrozy: After the Moderation(s) conference, I realized that personal interaction on the project was irreplaceable. The textual components leading up to the experience, or anything that might follow it in terms of videos, press releases, websites, etc.—nothing can recreate the importance of the inter-personal relationships. This highlighted for me the importance of human interaction, which is something increasingly precious in this digital social age.

Heman Chong: It is not new. There was a wave of French artists in the 1990s who already explored the significance of relationships. It centered on artists Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Pierre Bismuth, and is the core of relational aesthetics, more or less. In a way I don’t want to use that term, but that was their approach.

For example, Pierre Huyghe’s 2013 solo show at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris was really both a group show and a confluence of attitudes. You walked into the space and there was a library by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, but Pierre Huyghe built the shelf, and Rirkrit Tiravanija did the labels. It is kind of like that with Moderation(s), not so much about confining it to making artworks but also moving away from a certain form of production that often results in a gesamtkunstwerk. I don’t know—I might be totally wrong to deny the surfing of such productions—but my intuition tells me that there is a much larger format to be explored than having to consolidate things into one place.

Lee Ambrozy: But I feel that there is a distinction between this mode of working and what we call relational aesthetics. I would like you to elaborate on that. What might those be?

Heman Chong: Moderation(s) is not bound to the doctrine of relational aesthetics. Nicolas Bourriaud encountered that group of artists very early on, and he was very prolific in justifying what they were doing, and he translated that into a theory. But Moderation(s) doesn’t rely on those theories; it simply doesn’t have a master plan laid out at all. In a way, it locates itself closer to the progressive education and integrated, experience-based programs that the Black Mountain College in North Carolina exercised from the 1930s to 1950s.

Lee Ambrozy: Exactly.

Heman Chong: The projects functioning under Moderation(s) have a totally different lexicon. We are not imposing one model upon all the programs, which I think relational aesthetics does, where the mode of performance or exhibition becomes a method. There is little method involved in Moderation(s). Every time we come together, we reinvent what each project is. I think it is interesting at that level; again, I like the analogy of using what is on the table, rather than what is not on it. It’s kind of like avoiding reading between the lines, really.
Lee Ambrozy: This is a literal “what you see is what you get” experience. But I feel that you could define it further by making participation mandatory for an authentic understanding of the work.

Heman Chong: I guess so.

Lee Ambrozy: But when I say “participation,” I mean also that an observer or witness would be participating as well.

Heman Chong: There is another factor that contributed to how I designed Moderation(s), which was my involvement with dance choreographer Boris Charmatz, who has a project called Musée de la Danse.

Boris’s project is interesting in that he is a choreographer and a dancer who has also taken on the role of directing a dance institute in Rennes, France. When he got the job he transformed the name from Centre de la Choreography into Musée de la Danse, which is a ridiculous name. How do you even begin to create a museum for something that is evolving every time it is being produced?

When I worked with him for Performa 2011, in New York, we had a workshop with choreographer Steve Paxton. Steve Paxton was part of the whole Judson Church movement in the 1970s, with Yvonne Rainer and Merce Cunningham. Steve Paxton introduced something very key to that whole group of people, the method of contact improvisation; he coined the term.

I think that a lot of Moderation(s) is contact improvisation, you know?

Lee Ambrozy: Yes, I can see that.

Heman Chong: So when I come into contact with you something happens, which translates into something that happens with you and Brian, and that feeds back to Amira Gad, which goes back to Witte de With, then transmits to Spring Workshop, and then comes back to me. And it is one movement, really, and I like the analogy to contact improvisation. Also, in the workshop that Boris Charmatz organized, Steve Paxton said something very interesting that convinced me of something that happens within Moderation(s): When they were performing in the 1970s, a lot of the audience for the works they were performing were artists themselves. And they were making a type of academy; they were forming a school with each other. They were teaching each other things, and the only people looking at the work were members of a close circle of people.

This is not what I’m working toward in Moderation(s), but I think this is a very important base value for me—that the initial audience for the work
is the artists themselves, involved in the work itself, that we are looking and re-looking at something we have made before it seeps into a larger framework of communicating with the world.

Lee Ambrozy: Put in these terms, I absolutely see the comparison. But I think one way to frame what you are doing is to say that the outcomes hover between the plastic arts, graphic arts, and performative arts. This is an elusive way in which to discuss issues, but your definition of what you are doing with Moderation(s) is precisely why your work is not similar to relational aesthetics, something that has been a buzzword over the past few years. It is different, and it has to do with your experience in the 1990s in Singapore, working with people did not emerge within a context where roles within the “art system” are determined before one begins acting.

Heman Chong: The 1990s was a beautiful moment in Singapore because if you wanted to be an active player, you could be. There were no rules; you could do whatever you wanted to do. There were no gatekeepers. This is an important point to make about the scene in Singapore in the 1990s. It was ridiculous. You could make an exhibition and write the text about the show yourself, and no one would stop you. Whereas today it is no longer possible, you have to go through an application process for the space, and you have to think about the work in relationship to other spaces, and everyone is competitive with programming. Back in the nineties, there was just the one exhibition space for contemporary art.

Lee Ambrozy: In that sense, even though you are relying on models that are inspired by the performing arts and Steve Paxton, you are mobilizing them in a very different, expanded framework. New possibilities and potentials can emerge from this model that you are describing.

Heman Chong: In a way, we can more or less agree that it is not so interesting to produce every project in the same manner. It becomes repetitive and leads to a slow march into banality, to be honest. In a way, what I am trying to do in Moderation(s) is to somehow exhaust the resources that are given to me in order to continuously refresh these modes of production.

Lee Ambrozy: I like the idea of exhausting human resources, as opposed to conserving them.

Heman Chong: Exactly. Everyone goes crazy working on Moderation(s) because I’m 24/7 on their tail, e-mailing Witte de With and asking them to do something that they’ve never done before, or to do something that
sounds totally crazy. And I’m also telling Mimi Brown, the founder of Spring Workshop, with regard to Moderation(s) and Spring Workshop, that I’m transforming it into a space that is pretty similar to what The Substation was in the 1990s: a place where artists hung out.

Spring Workshop too is slowly becoming a space where artists come and hang out. That is really important to me, because the minute that you put five artists in a space and you tell them they don’t have to do anything, something wonderful happens, always. And I really like that; there is no protocol to make them work together, but you know that because of their energies something will surface.

In a recent interview between Nadim Abbas and Christina Li about Moderation(s), Nadim said something really insightful: “I think Heman is the one who brought all these people together in different situations. It’s like being in someone’s kitchen standing around doing something, but then not feeling like you are obliged to do anything. It is pretty much a reflection of what I would be doing anyway, but by myself. I think there is a lot to be said about engineering these kinds of situations that makes it easier for people to relax and put their guard down.”

This is especially important for a context like Hong Kong, where there is literally nowhere for artists to come together do things. Sure, everyone has their studio where they pump out more stuff for Art Basel HK. Sure, you recently have all these new cool galleries for artists to show their work. But, really, there is no space where people come together and think about what they are doing, and I think that is something that we all have to start to actively construct.

**Lee Ambrozy:** So do you think that Spring Workshop is succeeding in filling this void? Are they stepping up to the task?

**Heman Chong:** It is happening slowly, but it is starting to happen. People come and spend five hours here just hanging out, which is ridiculous in this context. But I like that people come and use it for their own purposes.

**Lee Ambrozy:** What are people doing when they are hanging out at Spring?

**Heman Chong:** Well, Nadim comes, reads his books, and then leaves. He’ll come back with a Filet-O-Fish from McDonalds and eat it while talking to Christina. You know? We cook lunch together, sometimes dinner. It’s a lot about having a moment where things become slow.

But what I like about the situation is that the tempo can change within a second. Suddenly, we are in an intense discussion about our work, or we’ll just take out our computers and work. For example, I often use my colleagues as editing machines. I’ll show them something I’m working on, and they will say, “Come on, this part sucks.” We talk and work at the ground level of ideas. There is a lot of value in that, where people offer points of view that you wouldn’t necessarily consider.
Lee Ambrozy: It seems that many of your productions are ephemeral. The things I see you busy with these days aren't the same kinds of things that I see in your catalogue raisonné. It is hard to assign a value to things that are ephemeral, but perhaps the greater need lies precisely in such a task, or perhaps their effect resonates deeper in society.

Heman Chong: I think that it is unproductive to attempt to describe the processes that occur within Moderation(s) when so many of them are transparent. Much of art history concerns description, but, having said that, a lot of its failings come from the inability to describe a work using the critical language available to the field.

Lee Ambrozy: But—just to defend my field here—I find that your most compelling work is that which is indescribable. To me, this type of work really elevates the bar in artistic production, and yet it is the work that you don't feel comfortable talking about.

Heman Chong: I do feel more comfortable talking about Moderation(s) nowadays. But I still haven't found a better way to document it.

Lee Ambrozy: Precisely. As you haven't found a way to document it, it acquires a different layer of authenticity. I guess what I see in Moderation(s)—and you can tell me if I'm wrong—is a type of artwork unified by participation and a common goal. Within this framework of implied productivity, the product, or the outcome, as you said yourself, is unknown.

This is an unusual type of artistic productivity: a process working toward an undetermined end, collaborative but non-hierarchical. In the sense that the end is unknown, the process is exploratory. I don't like the word “authentic,” but in a certain sense it is a more valid creativity because it has fewer predetermined outcomes. This creates a different type of space from artworks that would fall into the category of relational aesthetics because I feel that these establish a framework in which a specific type of interaction occurs, taking into account small variations, but the outcome is essentially known, whereas in Moderation(s), the production commences despite the lack of clear goals and with the outcome as an unknown variable. In that sense this project shares something with the working habits of Ai Weiwei. His model enables and facilitates people to produce, but they are producing under the workshop name of Ai Weiwei/Fake Studio.

Here, although you have a similar mode of working to Ai Weiwei, you do not invest in your personal identity as a brand name. I'm fascinated by the potential that can be unleashed with this mode of working and surprised that no one has discussed this aspect of his studio's output and the corporatism that is alluded to by his name as a brand. But here we have something different, a dissimilar collaborative model.
Heman Chong: Since 2009 I’ve run a small group—I would hesitate to call it a collective—but a small group of artists who look at each other’s work. It is based in Singapore and is called PLURAL.

When I started the group, I wrote rules that the group would adhere to, with the first rule being that we will never rent a space as a group. So every time we needed a space we would gather in someone’s studio or home or we would ask an institution to give us a space to meet. The second rule is that we will never produce exhibitions as a group of artists, so nobody takes on that role and says, “oh, let’s do a group show”—it’s not allowed!

The third rule, which I think frees the group from any engagement with the state, is that we are not allowed to apply for funding as a group. We can apply for funding individually, and an individual may use that funding with another member of the group, but no one allowed to use the name PLURAL to apply.

Rule four: We are not allowed to register as an official society in Singapore. This is what a lot of groups do; they become an art society so that they can apply for funding. So PLURAL is a concise denial of the system that has been created to facilitate artistic production in Singapore and thereby controls it. And it has worked very well so far in that when we meet, we know that it is only about work. Meetings are not to talk rubbish about the art scene, or whatever; they are also not about consolidating resources in that we aren’t there to help each other get into documenta or something.

When we sit down we are taking each other’s works and breaking them down so that everyone can process it. It is more or less a model that reflects information moving through the Internet. There is no mainframe. Everyone crunches ideas according to his or her own capacities and then dumps it back into this pool. It is all very nebulous. This is very interesting for me, this analogy of the nebulous area as something that also exists in Moderation(s). Right at the centre is this very fluid concept that no one can use in a very direct manner, but when people do use it, it becomes concrete. I kind of like that. It becomes very hard to commodify.

I’m not resisting the market. I’m literally transferring what I earn from making paintings, a practice I define as my “day job,” into these projects. It is about sustaining a dual system for me—channeling one thing into something else. For example, I don’t expect payment when it comes to work I put into PLURAL, because the money I earn from my painting “day job” is enough to pay my rent. I want the cake, and I want ice cream and chocolate on top of it, and I want to eat it all in one go.

Notes
2 Heman Chong and Pauline J. Yeo, eds., The Part in the Story Where We Lost Count of the Days (Hong Kong: ArtAsiaPacific, 2013).