What our unread books say about us

By Jed Gregorio

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Herman Chong and Reniel Staal’s “The Library of Unread Books” is a travelling reference library of donated books, which provides a glimpse to a treasure of unwanted knowledge. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND DESIGN

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — A man wakes up one day and sees by his bedside a stack of books, cups on top. Like a coup de foudre, what he saw ignites in him a transcendental epiphany. Eureka!


Here Chong puts forth preference — you might also call it “taste” — as identity and message. Though of course the paradox of choice is that available options to choose from have already been limited; the book you pick in the bookshop was already first picked by a publishing house among a pool of manuscripts, for instance. David Foster Wallace made a comment on this act of choosing when he served as editor of 2007’s “The Best American Essays” anthology.

Wallace, self-referentially, notes that “the reality we’re experiencing and making choices about is maybe actually just a small, skewed section of reality that’s been pre-chosen for us by shadowy entities and forces, whether these be the left-leaning media, corporate cabals, government disinformers, our own unconscious prejudices, etc.” We activate freedom, but on hidden restrictions. Chong’s library of book titles has the lyrical charm of haikus, but to appreciate it to that end misses the possibility that this leitmotif is in fact more ominous than poetic. The gravitas of the work lies in the awareness of this reality.
The previous owner of "The Problems of Philosophy," one of the books in the library, wrote in its pages a reason for donating the book: "[Because] I’ve got enough non-ontological problems of my own." Screencap from MCA/DV8SITE

There is also something to be said about the stacks’ formal appeal. Take into account both colors (of the book covers, the spines — 2011 was a year of black and white books) and composition (the juxtaposition of solid sheets of bound paper and translucent glass that reflects light). After all, don’t all book lovers fetishize books-as-objects? Though more to the point they are annual autobiographical vignettes, conceptual self-portraits. Beyond that, they are also recommendations, thus clues not only to an inner life but also an outside world.

Throughout Heimam Chong’s career he would repeatedly talk about how chaos is a strategy he employs in his work, and that “the more ambiguous, confusing, or messy” a prospect is, the more he is drawn to it. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND DESIGN

Chong recommends Bolaño a lot. “The Savage Detectives” takes a spot on the 2013 stack. There is also Bolaño (also Cormac McCarthy, Jean Didion, Sartre, etc.) in "Inclusions," where Chong takes over a shelf in a London gallery’s gift shop, and replaces books that were originally there with his picks of second-hand titles.

He says his favorite novel is “2666,” which is, in part, about the enigmatic fictional writer Benno von Archimbodi. The author’s career is fully conjured but his actual fiction is never shown. “Instead the titles of Archimbodi’s books recur as a kind of pulse of implication,” says Jonathan Lethem in a review of the novel (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/books/review/Lethem-t.html). “... until the conjectured power of an unknown literature has insisted upon us like a disease ...” Chong conspicuously makes use of books the same way, be it with the stacks or the billboards that he first presented at the Singapore Biennale in 2008. One billboard, a behemoth measuring ten by seven meters, says “One Hundred Years of Solitude” in black type on a white wall.
In line with the literary leitmotif, "The Library of Unread Books," a traveling reference library of donated books and one of Chong’s latest projects, was recently mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) — under their MCAD Commons programme — in a coworking space in Escolta (http://cnnphilippines.com/life/style/design/2017/05/03/first-coworking.html). This library in Manila is the second staging of what would be a 10-year-long endeavor, pioneered by the artist with collaborator Renee Staai, who’s also chief librarian.

According to a leaflet provided onsite, “Every single volume you see on the tables has been donated by an individual who has, for some reason or another, not read the book they previously had in their possession.” Anyone who donates is supplied with a library card, on it a serial number of the donated book. The card is really more memento than tracking device, since the books, about 300 total so far, are stacked at random. The arrangement, or lack thereof, is intentional, says Chong. Throughout his career he would repeatedly talk about how chaos is a strategy he employs in his work, and that “the more ambiguous, confusing, or messy” a prospect is, the more he is drawn to it.
Any artist who flirts with chaos ultimately risks ending up with work that’s opaque. In Chong’s case, the confusion is often overcome by a need to systematize. The sophistication perceptible even in the artist’s most experimental works can perhaps be chalked up to the conceptual parameters that he shrewdly lays out.

Artists who present collections as art usually don’t intend to show off objects. Instead, they’re staging a performance of accumulation. What one witnesses are not relics on showcase for scrutiny, but a theatre of obsession and stamina. Consider two other such works of Chong’s: “Monument to the People We’ve Conveniently Forgotten (I Hate You),” which feature blacked out business cards covering the entire expanse of gallery floors, and “Secrets and Lies (The Impossibility of Reconstitutions),” in which 326 spy novels were shredded and exhibited as a massive heap, thereby revealing an irremovable universe of spy-novel language. The repetitive nature of the enterprise of determined collecting has an almost musical payoff, experientially, almost akin to listening to something like Ravel’s “Bolero,” a ballet score of 18 variations on a theme, played successively with different instruments of the orchestra.
The ongoing collecting at play in “The Library of Unread Books” aims beyond this soothing metronomic experience, however. Chong sees the library as a “consolidation of unwanted knowledge,” of once-private possessions crying out for engagement in a reinvigorated public space. In many of his other works that involve books, Chong seems driven by the agenda to make the practice and experience of literature as non-solitary as possible. It’s a noble cause, especially because gods before him have acknowledged solitude as inextricable from the craft — in his 1954 Nobel speech Hemingway says, “Writing, at its best, is a lonely life.

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Notwithstanding, Chong appears unfazed. “Philip,” a 2006 project where Chong spearheaded the completion of a science fiction novel in a week, involve seven other writers, among them David Reinfurt, a graphic designer who worked on the New York City subway’s MetroCard vending machine touch-screen interface, and Francis McKee, a medical historian. Chong will be first to say that it is “not great literature.” (He’s right. In any case, the book is available on Amazon, and as a free PDF on Chong’s website [http://www.hemanchong.com/stuff/PhilipNovel.pdf].)
What the project did achieve, Chong believes, is the fostering of a community within an art world that is so often consumed by petty politics. In 2012 at the Singapore Arts Festival, Chong staged “Advanced Studies... (Ten Lessons for Life),” a performance installation where students 13 to 18 years old would sit down with an adult and conduct a one-hour lecture on novels like Sartre’s “Le Mur” and Dostoevsky’s “Poor Folk.” Do the projects attempt to be panacea for the loneliness of literature? And if so, do they succeed merely as placebo?

Either way it’s premature to judge the conceptual merits of “The Library of Unread Books”; much of its life, as ours, has yet to unfold. As it is now, it’s a fascinating compendium of books on varied subjects, from stalwart classics like Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” and Shikibu’s “The Tale of Genji,” to philosophical treatises like John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” and Bertrand Russell’s “The Problems of Philosophy.” Some have handwritten annotations on why the book was donated. The previous owner of “The Problems of Philosophy” wrote: “[Because] I’ve got enough non-ontological problems of my own.”