Second-hand bookshops are a dying breed, especially in Singapore, where high rents and a preference for new goods make sustaining independent book businesses nearly impossible.

A short-lived exception to this rule emerged in November in the form of Because, the Night, a bookshop put together by artist Heman Chong at 72-13, the flagship venue of Singaporean theater company TheatreWorks. Open for just six nights, Chong offered visitors the opportunity to purchase a used book from a selection of 50 titles for SGD 20 (USD 15) each. Given the prices for similar titles at Kinokuniya, Singapore’s most popular bookstore, where the cost for a paperback can reach SGD 50 (USD 37), Chong’s fare was reasonable for a good read.

There was, however, a catch. Chong’s operation was only open to the public at night, from 10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. I imagined crossing paths with an array of figures: inebriated executives pouring forth from the bars of Robertson Quay, or insomniacs too sleep-deprived to manage a meaningful conversation.

The setup was simple and sparse: a cashier oversaw sales of the books. To the right side of the room, visitors found seven works from Chong’s “Stacks” (2003–), a series of sculptures, each a collection of fiction and monographs, with tumblers—some vintage, others new—piled neatly on top. These reminded me of the towers of closed books that rest beside beds, in some cases serving as nightstands, the result of admirable intentions that have been sidelined by the banalities of modern life.

The provisional feel of Because, the Night indicated an economy of means: the desire to do with what one has. Apart from the books for sale and the “Stacks” series, Chong had appropriated all fixtures from TheatreWorks’s store, including canvas sheets that were used as temporary partitions, scaffolding, and striplights that gave off a harsh white glow. The artist’s hand was apparent in the arrangement:
mirrors propped against the wall in pairs reflected the glass tumblers in “Stacks,” for instance. The striplights had also been carefully arranged, in a jagged constellation that could easily be read as a rejoinder to the fluorescent light sculptures of Dan Flavin.

Chong used a similar method to select the books that were for sale. Their titles were mentioned to him by friends and strangers in conversations on Facebook, and covered a range of immediate issues: racism, inequality, climate change and overpopulation, among others. Some revealed Chong’s connections to the art world, such as Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, a favorite among contemporary artists and curators. Others represented popular tastes, including Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as a few science fiction novels.

The selection reflected the sweeping influence that Facebook has not only on our social lives, but also our intellectual and cultural choices. Though the social media platform can expose us to new people, information and media, we are left wondering about a well-worn trope: do the titles in *Because, the Night* reflect the kind of conversations that people have only because they want to be “liked” or “followed” on Facebook?
However, how and why the books came to be there was arguably not the point. While the titles represented an invariably limited spectrum, they also reflected a selection unmediated by market forces, where books are sold because they appeal to popular demand and are backed by publishing houses with the money to promote them. Chong’s selection—or, rather, the book titles shared by his contacts—was instead crowdsourced beyond these structures.

This element of contingency was integral to Because, the Night. The project itself was an unusual hybrid—part bookshop, part exhibition—which required a shift in expectations and behavior to be enjoyed. Through this framework, Chong created an unusual space in Singapore, one out of kilter with normal business hours and which embraced different forms of knowledge and being. Towards the end of my visit, I found myself perking up after conversations with new acquaintances. Clutching a novel by Chris Kraus, perhaps I wasn’t ready to retreat to bed with my new acquisition just yet. Because, the Night had only just begun.

*Heman Chong’s Because, the Night was installed at 72-13, Singapore, on November 9–11 and 16–18, 2017.*

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