Installation view of “The Artist, the Book and the Crowd” at The Substation Gallery, Singapore, 2013. Courtesy of the curators.

“The Artist, the Book and the Crowd”

WEB EXCLUSIVE BY MELANIE POCOCK
THE SUBSTATION

The influence of literature is pervasive in Singapore’s contemporary art scene—from Heman Chong’s textual references to the book-bound architecture of Michael Lee. Earlier this month, at Singapore’s Substation, curators Ho Rui An, Ang Siew Ching and Karen Yeh took a timely look at this relationship, inviting various local artists to reflect upon and revise texts that have been formative to their practice. “The Artist, the Book and the Crowd” transformed the gallery’s premises into a communal reading space, allowing participants to rethink the book in terms of speed and rhythm and to explore its potential for multiple modes of communication.

A Dream Generated From Other Dreams (2013) by Debbie Ding offered one such alternative. Employing a Markov text generator—the tool in word processors that algorithmically creates filler text—Ding conjured the description of a future dream. Entering details from her previous dreams, the resulting composition invokes a déjà vu—replete with half-baked scenarios and imagery. Referencing etymology itself, A Dream Generated From Other Dreams enacts the endless recycling of words to form new meanings. Heman Chong’s Day (2) (2013–ongoing) also plays with the conventions of text. Following the “language-as-found-object” premise of American poet Kenneth Goldsmith’s seminal work Day (2003)—in which Goldsmith retyped the entire contents of an edition of the New York Times, disregarding breaks and paragraphs, and then published it in book form—Chong proposes to type, word-for-word, the contents of the Straits Times, Singapore’s daily English-language broadsheet, on the day of his 39th birthday. In doing so he packages the book as a concept, suggesting that it need not be read to be understood.

DEBBIE DING, A Dream Generated From Other Dreams, 2013, Digital print on archival paper, 42 × 29.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Other artists warned of the book’s tendency to lull readers into habitual, uncritical modes of reading. Song-Ming Ang’s extraction of Bob and Roberta Smith’s *Make Your Own Damn Art* (2004) from Singapore’s National Library and its subsequent display in the gallery actually performs the book’s imperative, making the library’s copy his very own “damn art.” Similarly, Lee Wen’s *The Wen Paper: Monday January 3, 1994 (2013)* reappraises Singapore newspaper *New Paper’s* coverage of Singaporean artist Josef Ng’s politically charged performance *Brother Cane* (1993), which was highly misrepresented in print. Carefully executed in graphite and color pencil, Wen’s account of the event demands a slower reading, countering the rabid consumption of information associated with mainstream journalism.

In the exhibition, writing—or rewriting—gave artists the chance to articulate rather than simply interpret. Susie Lingham’s *If the Universe, Between Circle and Ellipse, Slips* (2004/13) grapples with the ambiguous geometrics of the parabola and ellipse via a playful tousle of words and form, poetically commenting on the reciprocal engagement between comprehension and creation. “Read-Speeding,” a workshop run by Substation that invited participants to write to, at and around works of art, further emphasized this relationship.

Despite the dizzying conceptual relay between art and text, the exhibition’s display was relatively straightforward, clearly distinguishing rewrites from the original texts. In addition, the artists themselves revealed a surprising breadth of influences. Zhao Renhui, for example, counted a volume by the Phasmid Study Group (a group professing a fascination with stick bugs), and *The Landscape of Fear: Ecological Implications of Being Afraid* (2010) by Laundré, Hernández and Ripple (which observes fear patterns in animals), among his sources of inspiration.

If there was one criticism to be made of the show overall it was its absence of a ‘crowd.’ The evocation of a reading room within a gallery was almost too neat, with limited room for the unexpected manoeuvres that a crowd might instigate. Yet this observation could be equally indicative of the exhibition’s precocious vision. The curators—envisioning both a publication and future iterations—made an admirable attempt to create a discursive space for audiences of visual art and literature alike.
The Artist, the Book and the Crowd was on view at The Substation from August 2–11, 2013.

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