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THE PLEASURE OF GETTING LOST: HEMAN CHONG AT THE READING ROOM

BY JASMIN STEPHENS

In September, on a Bangkok rooftop, a group of wanderers and forgetters recently offered their concerted support as one of them struggled to memorise and retell word-for-word a story written by Heman Chong. They were gathered at Bangkok's The Reading Room for the third in a series of exhibitions orchestrated by Chong—editions were previously held at [Rossi & Rossi](#) in Hong Kong and [Future Perfect](#) in Singapore—entitled “The Part in The Story Where We Lost Count Of The Days.”

As this feat of memorization unfolded on the roof, visitors in the room below were simultaneously treated to a staged reading with live translation. The Reading Room's director, Narawan Pathomvat, selected a classic Thai text, *A Dancer's Arm* (1950) by Manus Chanyong, to be translated into English. In the cool surroundings of the archive, concentration deepened as listeners followed the cadence of familiar words and new phrases, and were reminded of the themes of agency and destiny. Being read aloud to helped to forge a group dynamic. As the cycle of reading, speaking and listening between the two spaces intensified, there was a heightened sense that Chong's story would be fully realized through the efforts of both groups of participants, through each's sympathetic presence.



Participants in Heman Chong's *The Part Of The Story Where We Lost Count Of The Days* (2013) witnessed a four-hour reading and live translation of *A Dancer's Arm* (1950) by Thai modernist writer Manus Chanyong, from Thai to English, at The Reading Room, Bangkok. Photo by Ho Rui An. Courtesy the artist and Wilkinson Gallery

While Chong's work came with a set of instructions, the tempo of the proceedings was not to be predicted. Through the course of the event, attendees assumed the roles of writer, reader, performer, reviewer, curator and artist, as well as that of host, volunteer, contributor and listener. In the process of memorization and translation, notions of authorship and attribution were loosened, opening up the possibility for reflection on the intangible nature of language and communication.

An astute facilitator, Chong situated processes of remembering, recounting and translating, drawing upon the discourses of conceptual performance and hospitality. The living room setting of The Reading Room brought to mind the Surrealist parlor game of *cadavre exquis* or “exquisite corpse,” as well as chain letters and hyperlinks—alternative systems of communication that rely on fortune and chance. Energised by glitches and aberrations, and operating at the intersection of private desires and proprietary processes, these ideas were echoed in the serendipitous nature of Chong's work.

That evening, language was ultimately encountered as both integral to human thought process and was the subject of philosophical enquiry. Chong, for whom language is as much a consolation as a weapon, cast a quizzical eye over varying formats of communication. With simple interventions, Chong, Pathomvat and curator Tang Fu Kuen kept things shifting, proving the nature of our linguistic relations to be as illusive as ever.

Heman Chong's story, "A Short Story About Saturdays" (2013), is being performed every Saturday at [The Reading Room](#), Bangkok, from September 7, 2013 through September 7, 2014.

Jasmin Stephens is an independent curator who lives in Sydney. She visited Bangkok with the assistance of the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

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