



THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE, A FALL OF MOONDUST, CORRECTION, BLINDNESS, 2008, four books and four glasses, from a series of mixed-media installations.

In some ways, Chong's career parallels the Singaporean government's recent emphasis on local and international cultural promotion in an effort to re-brand the technocratic city-state as a creative hub. In 2001, Singapore Art Museum (SAM) curator Ahmad Mashadi selected Chong's *Molotov Cocktails (Grey Aquarium Remix)* (1999), to represent the country at the 2001 India Triennale. There, the multi-channel video installation, which explores urban ennui in the daily routines of two characters, an "artist" and a "muse," was one of nine works awarded a jury prize. In 2003, in addition to appearing at Venice, Chong was one of five artists featured in the second biennial President's Young Talents at SAM and also, through the help of a NAC grant, became the first Singaporean artist chosen for the prestigious Künstlerhaus Bethanien International Studio Programme in Berlin.

In 2005, Singapore selected another artist, Lim Tzay-chuen, for a solo exhibition in the national pavilion in Venice but still gave Chong a massive budget to organize a party at the expansive Palazzo Pisani Moretta. By many accounts the party, which, unusually for Venice, required no VIP privileges, was a runaway success. Wave after wave of art revelers showed up and there was no shortage of alcohol. Lim, who installed high-concept public toilets in the Singapore Pavilion to much fanfare after his proposal to bring the country's iconic Merlion statue to Venice was rejected, apparently "freaked out" at being upstaged by Chong's side event.

Chong dismisses any suggestion that the Venice party could be considered an artwork or an unofficial contribution to the Biennale, quipping, "Give me a break, it was a great party, kinda happens sometimes; I just had one last night in my studio." However, in a decade still dominated by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics—that artworks can implicate broader society by inducing viewers' participation—his retort also seems like a self-conscious attempt to distance himself from prevailing trends. Certainly, the Venice party's apocryphal afterlife as an audacious social event is difficult to parse from Chong's interest in projects combining elements of collaboration, performance and audience interaction. With his fluency in modes of late-20th-century conceptual art and the self-promotional skill required of the 21st-century artist-as-entrepreneur, Chong embodies the dissolving boundaries between an artist's life, commercial projects and studio practice.

Born in Malaysia in 1977 and raised in Singapore, Chong studied graphic design at a local technical college before earning an MA in communication art and design from London's Royal College of Art in 2002. He began his art career while still in Singapore, initially focusing on over-wrought, atmospheric videos about urban disaffection in the manner of Asian art-house filmmakers such as Wong Kar-Wai and Tsai Ming-liang.

However, Chong took a new turn in his work during his stay in Berlin. His residency exhibition, "The Silver Sessions," consisted of assemblage works made using everyday objects. Dominating the main space was an enigmatic white steel door installed into a wall, above which beamed a panel of white lights. For another work, Chong stole chairs from across the residency facilities and arranged them in stacks in a corner of the gallery. In doing so, Chong simultaneously created a vision of impromptu, everyday beauty, and triggered social disruption throughout the residency as people were inconvenienced by the missing chairs. A more humble piece

consisted of four used, empty glasses stacked on top of four seemingly random paperback books placed on the floor.

Up to this point, Chong had purposefully kept his design background at a distance. But these first assemblage pieces pushed him further in the direction of embracing the practicality of design—its ability to convey a concise, visual message, or integrate text and image—and its efficient, modular approach to composition. Indeed, every year since 2003 Chong has marked the passage of time by making his book assemblages, which he calls simply “stacks.” The stacks have no particular formal structure but contain certain recurrent qualities: they are always composed of books he has read in the past year and sit alongside domestic vessels, mostly drinking glasses but occasionally perfume bottles. In the case of the original stack, the theoretical anthology *Thinking About Exhibitions* anchored Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, a book titled, simply, *Living in Singapore* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*. The green-tinted tumblers that rose totem-like from the books had been used for gin nightcaps. The metaphor here is direct but not labored: the containers are translucent and empty, and like the books, they embody the potential that resides in everyday objects to be facilitators of social or private activities. As sculptures, the stacks negate the monumental and instead serve as mementos to some prior—perhaps meditative—event.

Chong reflects on the sudden shift, “I became convinced I was simply bad at making video works, that I had nothing new to contribute to the genre. If anything, I was more interested in making a proper film, but then I really don’t have the patience for the intensity of collaborations or the time and energy required to make a film.” He adds obliquely, “So I thought maybe I’ll just write a novel. It’s more Heman Chong anyways.”

Chong is proactive and protective about shaping his own history. On his personal website there is no documentation of his early video works. The simple design features a column of selected solo and group exhibitions organized by date. Displayed prominently on the right hand side is a hyper-link annotated: “If you have only time [*sic*] for one thing on this bloody site, it should be this.” The link leads to a page for *God Bless Diana*, a 2004 installation made for the collaborative curatorial project, “LAB,” at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands.

Chong took thousands of snapshots of scenes from his daily life, compiled over four years’ time, which he then edited down to 550 selections. They were presented as postcards for sale in a boutique-style wooden shack that was part of the architect firm Gruppo A-12’s maze-like design for the entire exhibition. The postcards included studies of friends’ faces, fragments of advertising lightboxes, urban signage and building facades shot from odd angles. Seeking to develop a relationship with viewers beyond merely presenting them with images, Chong decided to use the postcards as a way to incorporate individuals’ prosaic decision-making into his art process. He envisioned visitors to the installation working out which postcard to buy for their girlfriends or boyfriends, or spontaneously deciding to send a card to a family member who likes dogs, for example.

Although the overall concept was not a very far leap from basic principles of mail art and Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, Chong considers *God Bless Diana* his first successful work. “The images

themselves were not so special. What was special was the process of editing them into something specific. The idea of the postcard, which has a utility, was also important. It convinced me to stop working with images—photographs or videos—and work with objects.”

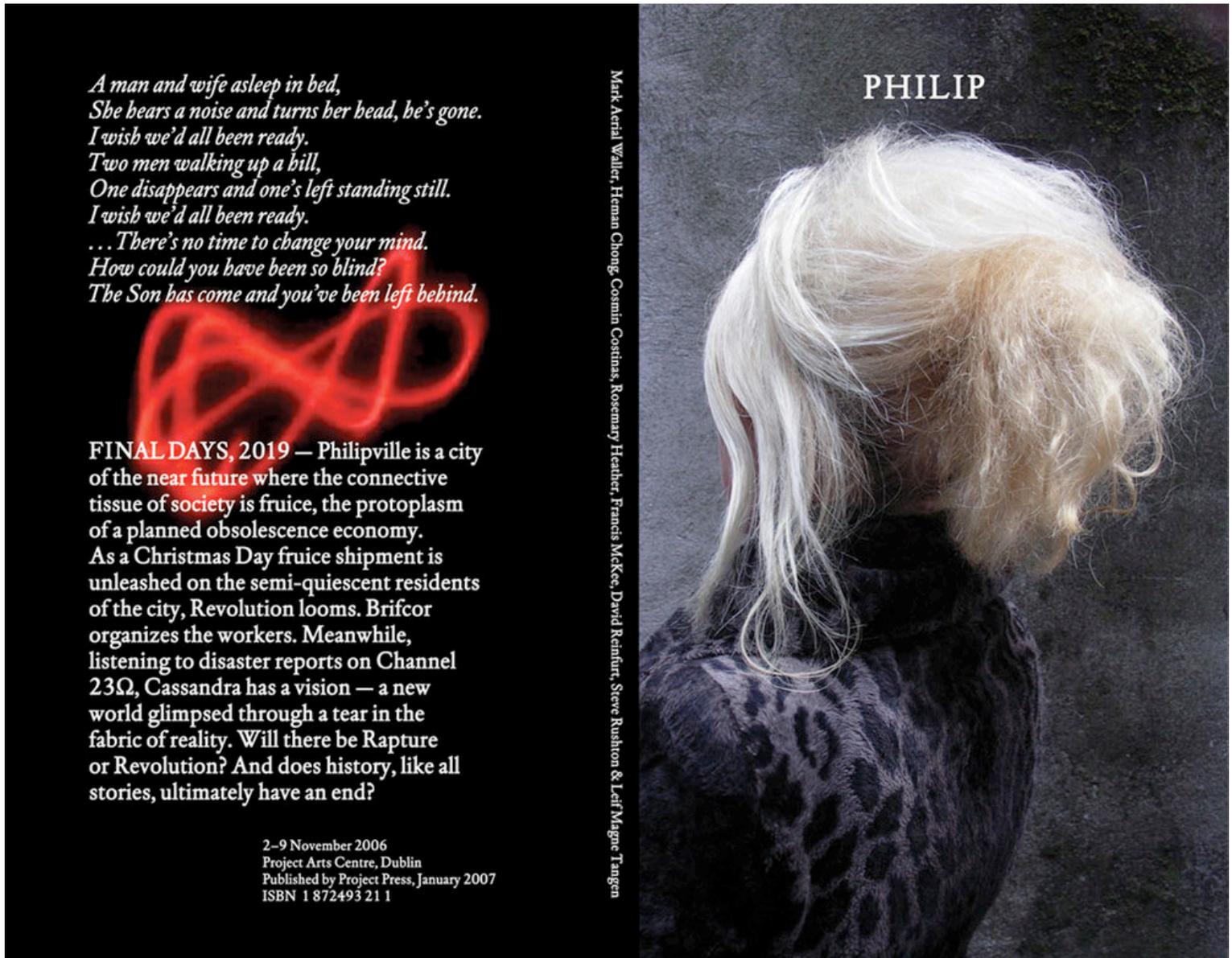
As such, many of Chong’s recent works read like false icons. Not quite functional, they are also stripped of meaning. “Snore Louder if You Can,” Chong’s solo exhibition in late 2004 at Singapore’s venerable alternative art space The Substation—one of the few venues for experimental art in the city’s circumscribed scene—featured appropriations of works by seminal conceptual and minimalist artists such as Ed Ruscha, John Baldesari and On Kawara. Writing in the Australian contemporary art and culture periodical, *Broadsheet*, the reviewer Emily Chua chided the show as “solipsistic” and comprised of “statements of inadequacy.” In particular, she singled out Chong’s restaging of Baldesari’s instructional piece *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971) for criticism. In the original piece, Baldesari had students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design scribble the eponymous phrase all over the gallery walls, and then sent for exhibition a video of his own hand repeatedly writing out the same phrase on a piece of paper. For his version, Chong had 10 Singaporean artists scribble the phrase on the gallery walls during his exhibition opening, although, as described in the review, the result was half-assed, with “only a small portion of a single wall somewhat defaced,” and the appearance of incomplete variations of the phrase suggesting a decided lapse in discipline.

Taking issue with Chong’s statement that he restaged the work simply “Because I like it,” Chua wrote, “Gleefully irresponsible, he samples and remixes other artists’ ideas, as a way of reasserting his individual subjectivity and agency over all the artists and ideas that came before him...it’s difficult to see what meaning they might hold for anyone else.”

Yet in hindsight, “Snore Louder if You Can” crystallizes tensions that unfold throughout Chong’s work, notably his dual tendencies toward appropriation and the obfuscation of clear meaning. His is the kind of sideways art that you either get or you hate. Given its enigmatic, ephemeral qualities, it can appear lacking in content. Often, Chong favors a deadpan intellectual humor that baits viewers into searching for non-existent punch lines, as with a neon sign made during a residency in 2007 at the New York non-profit space Art in General. The blinking yellow sign, installed in a ground-floor window overlooking a Chinatown backstreet, read “SAM BECKETT COME HOME.” Although Chong describes what he does as “an investigation into the philosophies, reasons and methods of individuals and communities imagining the future,” his flippant attitude, mannered carelessness and grating edge tempers any reading of his potential aspirations to a blithe utopianism.

If the art historical references in “Snore Louder” proved deadweight, Chong’s next significant exhibition, in 2006, stepped out of the visual canon and into the realm of literature. Made for the bookshop Basheer Graphic Books—also in Singapore—“Untitled (Paperback Covers #01)” brought to the surface the artist’s abiding interest in science fiction. Selecting 50 novels in his possession, Chong reinvented their cover illustrations as graphic, black drawings on simple white backgrounds, with each book title presented at the top of the page and the author’s name at the

bottom. The blocky, geometric drawings obliquely referenced the titles and contents of the novels, or not at all. Frank Herbert's *Dune* featured an eight-by-four grid of oblong, beaded shapes in the center of the cover. Lucian of Samosata's *True History* was conceived as an upside-down, right-angle trapezoid; Philip K. Dick's *Solar Lottery* appeared as a thick, perfectly proportioned ring, its center emanating an amplified blankness. Chong claims that he had not read any of the novels when he made the illustrations.



PHILIP, 2006, cover images of a novel collectively written by Mark Aerial Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt, Steve Rushton, Heman Chong and Leif Magne Tangen. Based on a concept by Heman Chong.

That same year, Chong and the Leipzig-based critic Leif Magne Tangen organized the collaborative workshop *Philip*, sponsored by the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, for which eight international art professionals and artists, including themselves, convened to produce a seven chapter sci-fi novel in seven days. True to the genre, the prose is uneven but the themes of rapture and incipient revolution are timely. The story centers on a cultish, authoritarian



GOD BLESS DIANA (detail), 2000-04, 550 postcards sold in a temporary store, dimensions variable.

society literally disintegrating as “fruiice,” a bio-engineered substance that forms the basis for all material goods and economic exchanges, has become destabilized and can no longer maintain its solid properties.

The work, which has been described as a “sustained performance,” resulted in nothing in particular to exhibit, and Chong refers to the novel itself as “trashy.” Yet in its vision of a dysfunctional zion and the cataclysmic inversion of prescribed values, one can recognize, perhaps, Chong’s attraction to sci-fi and the art of failure as stemming from his own experience growing up in Singapore. Addressing a society where, he laments, “Kids get married really young just so they can qualify for government subsidized flats,” Chong is on a mission to reverse-engineer the aesthetics of control through edification.

∴

This year has been busy for Heman Chong as he participates in group shows across Europe and the US, including “The World is Flat,” which, fittingly enough toured from Overgaden in Copenhagen, to the Center of Contemporary Art in Lagos.

In a June solo exhibition at the Hermes Gallery, Singapore, entitled “The End Depends On the Beginning, The Beginning Depends On the End,” Chong focused on the portentous twists of novels’ final words. Compiling the last pages of books by authors such as Jeanette Winterson, JM Coetzee, Haruki Murakami and Olaf Stapledon, Chong created bound quasi-zines—snubbing copyright laws—stacked waist-high against the gallery wall for visitors to take. These compilations operated as conceptual and actual bookends within a darkened, monochrome space, which contrasted sharply with the glare of the Hermes boutique on the building’s ground floor. The inescapable pall was broken only by the seductive glow of searing white neon maps—cross-hatched outlines of Germany’s borders—installed on the near wall of the rectangular room and a forest of black-painted artificial trees glowering ominously from an alcove opposite. Hidden behind a partition was a narrow corridor, lit by overhead neon tube lights, which led to an impassive white steel door.

Stretching across the black walls of an antechamber was the conceptual drawing *Teardrop (inversed)*, comprised of 3,000 gray-scale, guitar pick-shaped stickers clustered in irregular patterns to resemble location markers or analog read-outs. Chong originally developed the technique for a different work in his debut solo show at Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou in 2007, and has since made it his calling card, adapting variations in design and pattern to any exhibition environment. At the Hermes Gallery, *Teardrop* spread like moss, edging into corridors, elastic and flowing, stretching the limits of the gallery.

Resembling a cryptic data-set, such works invoke the common sci-fi premise of presenting a protagonist—often isolated or even paralyzed—with the challenge of decoding an enigma in time to achieve salvation through knowledge.

Now alternating his time between Singapore, Berlin and international destinations in between, the itinerant Chong is writing

his own sci-fi novel, an episodic narrative beginning in a high-tech city in the near future that is slowly disintegrating and will unfold, he says, “as if the writer and the characters are haunted by a detail they cannot see.”

Other times, the crux of Chong’s work lies in plain site. Ostensibly a book recommendation that exists as a sculpture, Chong’s forthcoming work for the 2008 Singapore Biennale will be a billboard installed across the street from Singapore’s landmark Raffles Hotel, with the phrase “100 YEARS OF SOLITUDE” running in cut black aluminum 10 meters long. Inspired by online advertising banners and the Hollywood sign, Chong is juxtaposing the title of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez’s epic novel—notable for the fact that it is a story where nothing ever turns out as people expect, everyone fails, all are frustrated and few achieve any significant connection with anyone else—against the landscape of a city notorious for government-mandated aspirations to perfection.

Google-search “Heman Chong” and tucked among the thousands of blog postings, press releases and obsolete NAC bulletins touting him as the local boy made good, a peculiarly insistent line will appear occasionally: “Heman Chong is an observer, gatherer and presenter of ideas and images.” On one German site, there is another iteration (in English), “Heman Chong is an observer, collector and moderator of ideas and pictures.” As is typical of the artist, the epithet, already degrading as it moves further away from its point of origin, offers little more than a semantic smokescreen.

On a summer morning in Berlin, as he sat down at his computer and proclaimed himself to be reeking of vodka from a night out, Heman Chong elaborated on his art as a kind of proposition, a thinking tool. Across the digital divide, the instant message promised a new beginning: “Most political works are generated as a reaction to a policy or situation...I was thinking if I can influence people via a series of political imaginations, then it’s much more fucked up and exciting.”

Tools

| [More](#)

© 2012 ArtAsiaPacific

[Credits](#)

[Log In](#)

ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com

