The many fictions of Heman Chong

Heman Chong___Since 2000 I had been away from Singapore for long periods of time, but I had more or less decided that I would never leave Singapore permanently. I would be living in another city for two or three months and then I’m back in Singapore, in my studio, surrounded by all my books, my past work and all my shit. Back in 2004, I wanted very much to write fiction, but I was completely unable to. I was quite depressed for a few years, trying to deal with this incapacity, and something that I could still do was to walk aimlessly around Singapore. I started to play this simple game in which I would wait for a moment where there is absolutely no one in the frame before releasing the shutter. The idea of using the photographs to accompany calendars of future years came about much later, around 2008 or 2009, in a conversation with Zhang Wei and Hu Fang of Vitamin Creative Space (Guangzhou). I didn’t see the spaces as bleak or “soul-less”, a term that is often used to describe Singapore. For me, these public interiors are full of personal stories. I’ve always found it interesting that the built environment in Singapore is made up of mainly generic materials: glass, brick, concrete, steel — materials which can be bought in bulk, and for cheap. The result is an interconnected series of spaces that look like every other space. It’s no coincidence that we have the best airport in the world. The entire city is built around this airport. Transient workers, mill in and out with great ease, and with a high turnover. But, even so, these interiors still function as spaces in which people interact and communicate with each other. I feel strongly that the project will mean a lot to people who have spent a substantial amount of time here. I’ve always wanted to produce a work that has multiple functions. Calendars (2020–2096) begins a set of usable calendars over 77 years into the future. It is a catalogue of all these generic architectural materials that are used; not only in Singapore, but in major cities around the world, out of which I can imagine a science fiction photo novel. I’m only interested in things that can be more than one thing at a time, open to all sorts of misinterpretations, like falling into all the wrong cracks and crevices.
Heman Chong

Calendars (2020–2096), 2004–10,
1,001 offset prints with matt lamination.
Photo: Kazuo Fukunaga
Courtesy of The National Museum of Art, Osaka
Heman Chong

God Bless Diana, 2000–04,
550 postcards.
Kroeller-Mueller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands
Photo: Heman Chong
It sounds like Calendars served an important transitional role both emotionally and artistically, opening up the possibility of writing fiction.

2006 was an important year for me because I decided to leave Berlin and return to Singapore. It was a decision based on an exhaustion with my work, and I wanted to be in a situation, a context that didn’t feel so alien. This transition introduced a certain slowness, pockets of idleness in which I could just sit and write. Writing was something that had been on my mind since I met the writer Alfian Sa’at in 1999. But somehow I couldn’t bring myself to begin to write. I’ve worn many hats over the years, beginning as a graphic designer, designing flyers and posters for The Necessary Stage and The Substation. I then moved on to making videos between 1999 and 2003, videos which I have since disavowed and destroyed. I’ve tried my hand at curating since my time in Berlin, and still maintain an approach to art via curating and thinking about exhibitions as a method of producing meaning. I found writing fiction difficult until 2006. Back then, I was also extremely poor. My financial situation propelled me towards writing, not because I’m deluded in thinking that I can make money from it, but because sitting down in a library and cranking out a couple of hundred words cost me nothing. I was also deeply influenced by the writings of Lawrence Weiner at that point, and what I took away from him is that sometimes all it takes is a couple of words to trigger off a large image in the mind. The basis of all my writing begins with spring-boarding off this legacy of 1960s American conceptualism, leading up to recently being influenced heavily by writers like Roberto Bolaño and Clarice Lispector.

Your conceptual approach to photography, like seminal works such as Ed Ruscha’s Every Building On The Sunset Strip (1966) and Dan Graham’s Homes For America (1967), documents seemingly mundane subject matter that becomes revelatory through repetition, accumulation, and unusual approaches to presentation and circulation. As with Every Building On The Sunset Strip that was printed as an artist’s book, and Homes For America, first printed in Arts Magazine, in Calendars and your prior piece God Bless Diana (2005) you adapt existing printed formats for presentation and distribution. The calendar and the postcard are a means of distributing vast numbers of pictures, that might otherwise seem unremarkable, into the world.

God Bless Diana was the photographic project that preceded Calendars. The methodology behind all my projects that involve photography is ritualistically similar: walking, waiting, collecting, discarding, indexing, and so on. I’m obsessed with the idea of note-taking and it became very important in my practice, this accumulation of notes. That stack of notes would become a massive collection, based on certain guiding concepts and ideas. Very little is wasted. The 550 images found in the work are selected out of a personal archive of 6,000 photographs I shot on 35-mm film over the course of five years in 2000–04. I thought for a very long time about a way to create some sort of intimacy between the audience and these images and finally settled on the idea of making a postcard shop where people can select and purchase each postcard at one euro. I didn’t want to give them away for free because I wanted people to choose their sets of images carefully. I’ve always wanted to produce photographic images—not as fine art prints, but as completely mundane and accessible objects.

It’s interesting that you talk about collecting and hoarding, also in relation to giving away the work. So, with God Bless Diana, these postcards are your version of everyday life that anyone can go and buy. You are in effect redistributing your existence. That same strategy comes back in the Embassy of Stanislaw Lem at the Biennale of Sydney. Can you talk a bit about that kind of contradiction around collecting and hoarding, the disbursement of things?

A lot of curators and critics speak about my work in relationship to the idea of archives. But I am not interested in building an archive. None of my collections have an index. I’m not interested in attempting to make a list of things or to become an archivist or an anthropologist or a scientist or a museum. What interests me is how a part of something can become a part of something else, and that many things are connected and it doesn’t take very much to reveal those connections, or to build new ones. A curator once told me to stop making things up. But I don’t see what else I am supposed to do as an artist. There’s a trend now where artists are asked to be everything else but artists. And that exhausts me. But it’s also true that these days I involve myself in many diverse and strange things, like running a bookshop that sells only books by Stanislaw Lem or a library made up of unread books from individuals who have donated them. I am happy when things are left
to chance and where accidents can happen; things that we don’t plan for can totally produce the work. It’s really about not developing a master plan for absolutely everything. I am not into this Richard Florida bullshit suggesting that we can grow everything in a vitrine and produce culture via public policy. I hate his assumptions about life in urban centers and how we should instrumentalise gay communities etc.

This refusal of the master plan is also in response to the situation in Singapore.
The People’s Action Party (PAP) that has run Singapore for the past 50 years is clearly obsessed with infiltrating every single blade of grass found on the island. I have developed terrible reactions to this, especially after serving 28 months in the conscript military. These days, I find it hard to be in the same room with anyone who displays an authoritarian attitude, and this does not only apply to politicians or corporate types, but to artists and curators as well. It’s incredible how much and how often we are told what we can or cannot do, how we can or cannot behave, and this irritates me profusely. I try and address these forms of control when I build my projects, so that things remain as loose as possible and nobody gets told how they should look at the work or what they can do with the work. This guides my research into the work of On Kawara and Felix Gonzales-Torres. I feel very strongly that both their practice are crucial in this non-instructive way of engaging with people. They never attempt to over-prescribe but also refrain from talking down the big ideas. As an artist, I like to think that I have inherited their legacies.

I guess the question in the context of this conversation that we’re having is that Singapore lends itself to the work of science fiction. Does it seem like a dystopia, or a place where you can find some sort of freedom?
The reason why I’m attracted to fiction (not just science fiction) is because, for me, everything surrounding us, our “reality”, is in fact drawn up as some kind of fiction in someone’s mind. I think we can all mostly agree that nationalism and fundamentalism requires a certain group of people to believe in various aspects of uniformity to produce what William Gibson often refers to as a “consensual hallucination”. He coined this term to refer to how we would exist in cyberspace (what an ancient word), a kind of infinite dreaming and waking, all rolled into one, and I think that’s how I mostly feel about existing: that we’re really stuck in someone’s very terrible idea of a computer game which replicates the grueling day-to-day situations in life, a game like The Sims. I’m just sticking around to find out what happens when the simulation ends. So, to answer your question in a massive round-about-way, yes, Singapore is very obviously a dystopia for me; and, yes, all of reality is also just as terrible.

So, the reworking of sci-fi and then other book covers is about this kind of writing and rewriting as things circulate through the world? Or is that another trajectory in your practice?
That project really started as a strategy of introducing conversations into my exhibitions. Nobody seemed interested in talking about my work, so it became much more interesting to talk about my work through the work of someone else. I find it hilarious, in a totally un-cynical way. In any case, I often tell people that making paintings is more or less a day job. This does not mean that I dislike painting or that I do it with a grudge. On the contrary, I love making these paintings, and there is an immense amount of psychological and physical pleasure in producing each and every single one of them. I don’t see why artists should be asked or, in some cases, pushed to try and earn money from another job or, worse, to pick up a new skill, just to make ends meet. But I don’t want to be prescriptive in dishing out advice about what artists must do in order to survive.

Better to talk about fiction. As I understand it you’ve recently in the last year or so done a residency with Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, writing fiction again, and we haven’t really talked about Philip. Do you want to talk a bit about current and past writing projects? Philip worked because the people who were involved—Leif Magne Tangen, Francis McKee, Steve Rushton, Mark Aerial Waller, Rosemary Heather, David Reinfurt and Cosmin Costinas—were so incredibly open and generous with their writing. If you are able to data-dump your own writing into a deep nebulous pool and allow that writing to be torn apart and reworked into something that works as part of a larger narrative—that takes real guts. The project wouldn’t have been possible without Francis and Steve, just because they were such amazing editors who made the entire text so unbelievably readable, although I wouldn’t go as far as to call Philip great literature.
Clockwise from top left:

**Heman Chong**
The Tower / Isa Kumari, 2015, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy and © the artist

**Heman Chong**
One Fierce Hour / Alfian Sa’at, 2015, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy and © the artist

**Heman Chong**
LEM2 (The Embassy of Stanislaw Lem), 2016, Books written by Stanislaw Lem, performance by sales assistant. Installation view, Carriageworks, the 20th Biennale of Sydney
Is that because art people describe everything instead of actually making something happen?

None of us were writing fiction consistently at that point, and it seems unrealistic to expect this of an art project. There’s a huge difference between being able to write and being able to push a narrative forward. It often seems like there’s a lot of writing happening in the artworld, although I don’t really understand more than half of what I read. I do enjoy the writings of artists like Miranda July, Matias Faldbakken and occasionally Paul Chan.

So are we to understand that you’re currently playing writer and being writer rather than artist? What approach do you think you’ll take going forward?

At this point, I am leaning more towards longer fictions. Who knows? I think there’s a lot of unlearning to do before I can actually figure out the kind of fiction that I can write; after years of writing grant applications, project proposals and artist statements, so much of my writing revolves around trying to make a point in the smallest possible real estate. I want to attempt fictions which are very simple and upfront. Just stories that have a beginning, a middle and an end. I’m currently working on an idea which is a serialised novel called “The Book of Drafts” where the narrative surrounds a couple of artists giving up being artists, and a couple of writers giving up being writers, but slowly entering other worlds, only to realise that they will forever be haunted by their own ways of seeing. The novel is written on my Macbook, but also on my iPhone, so you can imagine, there are many passages that are patched together in order to give a semblance of a coherent narrative. I need to channel my inner editor in order to make this work.
Can we talk about your projects where you play bookseller? How did that come about?

I was offered a solo show in 2012 at Rossi & Rossi, a commercial gallery in London. Fabio Rossi was very kind to accommodate the first iteration of a bookshop; in this case, one that carried sci-fi and fantasy books. This was LEM1. We had a lot of books for LEM1 as I had found numerous people in the UK trying to offload their entire collections of books. So what I did was to buy up entire private collections and dismantle them for the science fiction and fantasy titles and resell the rest of the books in order to buy more books, although I had saved all the espionage novels to make another work. LEM1 later travelled to the Sharjah Art Foundation and that was pretty interesting too, as it was a city almost devoid of bookshops.

LEM2 came about when Stephanie Rosenthal had approached me to be involved in the Biennale of Sydney with a very specific task: to repurpose a small bookshop. I pondered over her request and came up with the idea to produce a small retrospective of the science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem. Through our discussions, it also made sense that this bookshop became an embassy within the constellation of all the other embassies supporting her framework for the biennale. We carried both English and Polish editions of his books that we trawled on eBay and other secondhand book sites. Unfortunately, the bookshop closed before the biennale opened. Stephanie was really upset about this. We tried to find another bookshop in Sydney to work with but that didn’t work out at all. After a couple of weeks, I told myself that since the project has been set adrift from the original premise I should just keep it afloat, and that it would be a bookshop without a home. And that is exactly what you see in the biennale, a small bookstall made up of a table, two chairs and some books.

For my solo show, _Ifs, Ands or Buts_ at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai earlier this year, I collaborated with the science fiction writer Ken Liu, on a bookshop that completely displaced the gift shop in the museum. The bookshop was called _Legal Books (Shanghai)_ and it was made with a list of books that Ken had provided me with, based on my instruction to him that I wanted a list of books that would assist me in navigating the nebulous legal system in China. The idea of running a shop as an art work or as an artist-run space is not new, although it is particularly useful within my practice as a way of revealing my references without being prescriptive or long-winded. People can make up their minds about how they want to engage with the bookshop: browse, read, not browse, not read. I don’t really mind how an audience interacts with and/or uses my work.

We heard you recently began a new project. A library?

Of unread books?

_The Library of Unread Books_ will be a library built with individual donations over a period of ten years. I started collecting books from my friends this June and this accumulation will continue till June 2026. Each book is an unread book from their book shelf, so I’m immediately bringing an object that has been inanimate for a long time in a personal space, activating it in a more or less public space by inviting people to come and sit and read the books. I’ve always been interested in developing an artist-run space, but I wanted to completely avoid the idea of making exhibition after exhibition, sinking myself further into the art-world machine. I wanted this space to avoid becoming a pawn of the system. I envision a space where people can come and really spend hours away from their routine—to read something that they don’t usually think about reading. So, again, this idea of a chance encounter is brought into play. Just the other day, two young artists, Yu Tong Lai and Marcus Yee, came to the library and sat and used the space to discuss a work that they wanted to make together. And I think these are the kind of spaces which are lacking in Singapore; spaces where people can discuss their work and their lives.

Heman Chong has recently held a trilogy of interconnected solo exhibitions at Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai (_Ifs, Ands or Buts_, 2016), South London Gallery (An Arm, A Leg and Other Stories, 2015), and Art Sonje Center in Seoul (Never, A Dull Moment, 2015). Between 2012-14, he was guest curator at Witte de With in Rotterdam and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong and produced Moderation(s), a sprawling program involving more than 50 artists across conferences, exhibitions, performances, residencies, and writing workshops.

Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh are curators and writers working internationally. Since 2014, they are Executive Co-Directors of the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.