Ongoing at the NUS Museum is *Calendars (2020-2096)*, the latest installation work from Heman Chong. For seven years, Chong went around taking photographs of different spaces in Singapore that are seemingly abandoned (most of them weren’t) and created this amazing grid installation of a future Singapore. It’s probably the best exhibition to come out this year, or at least it’s right up there in my books.

Our story on him and the show came out in today’s issue [here](http://blogs.todayonline.com/forartssake/2011/12/05/we-rat-on-heman-chong-and-his-calendars/). But we also wanted to know more about, not only this particular work, but his practice as well. So if you’re up for reading an uber-long interview transcript, scroll down, as Chong talks about, among others, the problem with “South-east Asian art”, his artist “cooperative” Plural, and why taking people hostage with a short story is sheer choreography.

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Calendars (2020-2096) is an installation that clearly reveals a kind of emotional investment...

It is a very emotional project in that, within those seven years that I was working on it, I was travelling a lot. Every time I returned to Singapore, there was an element that I was returning to something. Even if I was away for two months or two weeks, it still had that kind of emotional thread.

But at the same time, you also mention that you don’t treat it as a kind of catharsis. How did you balance that?

For example, I would consider all one thousand and one images as one work, so I don’t individualise the photographs. There are no titles to the photos but only for the entire installation. So with that sort of decision, I think it immediately creates a space out of spaces. In fact, what you’re looking at is an entirely new configuration made up of all these different individual interiors. Of course, the fictional aspect of the project comes across very strongly because it reads like a novel or a fragmented narrative.

I’ve always been interested by the notions of science fiction for example, where there’s always this sort of post-apocalyptic event and the human race will actually retreat to a single architecture, whether it’s a spaceship or a high rise block as in JG Ballard’s (High Rise) or the notion of the underground, of interiorised spaces. It’s built up to this metaphor of interiorising our fears, our retreats.

I’m interested in that as a practice of cartography. How do we chart a territory not based on an overview but the most micro elements of that territory, which is rooms? Rooms are the smallest unit within the notion of architecture. You’ve got a building, the floor, then you break it down and what you have, really is a room.

**Heman Chong as a conceptualist taking photographs to tell a story. Can you share the process behind Calendars (2020-2096)?**

I was interested in formulating a kind of process that would allow me to combine several daily routines. I walk a lot, so it’s already part of my things to do–

**Like a flaneur is it?**

I think a flaneur is different, because he walks for walking’s sake. Most of the time, I walk for a reason.
As an exercise, of course, and also to think through certain sets of works that I’m working on. Or I walk to forget. That’s a very specific function for the walking, whereas a flaneur walks to get lost, which is not what I’m interested in. And walking when you’re drunk is not funny…

So it’s actually a combination of several daily rituals that I have this affinity for: walking, photography, waiting and doing nothing – how all these banal routines could combine into an action that produces meaning for me. It was a very clear artistic strategy to take for the idea of producing documentation of interiors in Singapore without people.

**If you can map this all out, it would seem that you’ve virtually crisscrossed Singapore.**

I don’t think it’s a project that’s all encompassing across territory. A lot of it deals with the spaces that I’ve encountered. It’s not about claiming this mantle that “I’ve photographed every space possible” as much as “I’ve photographed the spaces that I have been to.” It surfaces from that ritualised way of living my life.

![Image of a room with tables and chairs]

Some places are new to you and some you’re already familiar with. Can you share how you’ve worked out the “planned” versus the “accidental” encounters?

When I encounter a new space, I begin to have a relationship with that place. When I encounter a space I’m very familiar with, it’s a continuation of that relationship for me. There are many layers of concern. Some of these spaces are really purely for conservational purposes, like the National Stadium or lots of the very old shops that I like because these are very ambiguous contexts for me. You walk in and don’t know what to buy. You don’t even know what they’re selling.

And I like the faceless spaces as well, and spaces that connect other spaces.

I think what comes across very strongly is how these spaces now are connected through one project. I’m not concerned about people making sense of it as a whole as much as that they would see themselves within it. It’s very close to the processes of literature. When you are reading something, you are literally generating your presence within the narrative.

**And in presenting these as uniformly void, it’s an obvious invitation to enter, I guess.**
Yeah, I mean the reason I photographed them without any human presence is to really try to circumvent any kind of additional narrative to it.

The second reason is that I’m primarily interested in looking at interior architecture. So it becomes a lexicon, a language of interiors, of the material they used to construct interiors, which are based on how we envision these interiors as rational spaces, functional spaces, ideological spaces, or non-spaces.

There’s a lot in the project that needs to be unpacked, and presenting it in this way does allow for a kind of simple way of unpacking it. People can talk about it very easily. “Oh, I saw this, I saw that” –

**But you complicate things.** The take-off point is that of calendars, which are chronologically sequential. But for the installation, you’ve moved things around, you’ve flattened the images into this grid on walls, which negates the very idea behind a calendar. Why?

For me, I think our rationale of time, or at least for most people, is very linear. We count minutes and minutes become hours and hours become days and days become weeks and months…

But if we were to consider time in relationship with experience, then it becomes a totally different thing. Because a minute could be hell as compared to an hour of bliss. Time, in a way, is elastic. While being a non-renewable resource, it’s pretty stretchable. We do experience different times even when we’re in the same space with the same people. So it’s interesting for me to complicate things in that manner.

![calendars](image)

**It is, literally, a project about time and space.**

Yes, literally. *(laughs)* This show is as literal as you can get. But of course, the most literal things can be the most complex. Just as situations that require seemingly easy, simple answers are sometimes the most complex. There’s almost these polars involved in the project that I like a lot. Elements that are clearly disenfranchised from one another but when you think about it, it comes together in a way that becomes an experience.

That’s what I’ve always wanted for my audience. It’s not so much only allowing them to understand aesthetics but also to say, like when you look at something, why do you expect something more than just looking? There’s a sort of literal dimension to it that then expands quickly to something crazy, very metaphysical, which I’m drawn to.
Life is essentially entropic. Every minute we are fighting a kind of... mess. (laughs) Our hair is getting longer, our skin is actually flaking every second... we’re constantly moving through these kinds of miniscule, microscopic processes.

And I don’t see why we shouldn’t talk about it, and why we always see reality as a flat plane that we’re constantly obsessed with having to explain. What’s wrong with not explaining it?

You spent seven years on this. But at the same time you had other projects. What was your schedule like?

I spent a lot of time with this. Mostly, when I needed to be away from the other projects, I would be working on this one. This was kind of a mother ship of sorts that I could somehow cradle in to feel safe. The underlying process is very well defined and drawn up. All I had to do was literally walk around and photograph these spaces.

What about the timeframe of the calendars, how did you decide on when to end it?

I stopped it at 1,001 images simply because I couldn’t go on. I’d photographed much more than 1,001 but I couldn’t continue the process. That was, again, a decision that deals with a very real fact, which is that I’m sick of it after seven years of photographing.

Do your projects feed into each other or do you compartmentalise them?

I think I compartmentalized. This project was literally this project. Within the last seven years, there was no other project like this one. Except for the one I did before, which is the postcard shop (God Bless Diana), which had the same sort of panorama, in 2002 to 2004. It was a preceding project that somehow got extended to this one. It also dealt with this idea of collecting, documenting, and having to deal with things that are found.

Another aspect in the show is this kind of creepy, Big Brother feel to it. Like you have all these video screens of places everywhere. A panopticon.

I did not start with any kind of intention to include any criticism of political processes, but having said that, I believe very strongly that whatever we produce as artists is political. So it does allow readings of...
that sort, concepts of surveillance, but it wasn’t my intention. But I think panopticons are like mirages, where the eye does not really see as much as it invokes the subject to think it’s being seen. It’s funny that I literally superceded the panopticon by really seeing things.

**There’s another kind of creepy going on here. All these empty spaces, it’s not hard to imagine something ghostly here, or that a sort of sort of scream surrounds all this absence.**

Yah, it’s really a kind of suggestion to haunt the spaces. And somehow it’s also going back to the roots of photography. When people were being first photographed, they thought their spirits were being captured. And there was all this sort of alchemic relationship to photography, about what it was, and people can only explain it within the sphere of superstition and religious beliefs. A lot of photographers played upon that. So in a way, photography is very close to this sense of haunting. It’s me haunting the spaces, and the spaces will haunt you.

**What about the idea of cliché. Everyone’s talking about spaces these days in Singapore, this whole nostalgic trend about old buildings, about buildings being torn down. Something like this work could very well be dismissed as another “HDB photography project” or something.**

Having grown up in Singapore, it’s almost inevitable to talk about the fact that we are surrounded by an entire construct, whether that construct involves our education, our political views, architecture, even the food we eat. In a way, it’s also one of the reasons why I’m drawn to science fiction. Because of this notion of having this relationship with a built environment that is completely designed and completely instigated for very, very specific purposes.

Nothing is left to chance. There’s very little slippage we can trace within Singapore to talk about issues that fall in-between issues. Everything has its compartment, its place. If it does fall out of place, it is put into its place. There’s this obsessive compulsive restructuring of reality, which is also what I’m interested with in this project. To show a kind of compulsion in collecting and documenting a project that seemingly claims a certain “completeness”. But of course, when you look at it, it’s not complete. It’s also a project that can never be completed. Because the minute you would have photographed the space, then it would change into another space. The minute you associate a certain function with this space, that function would get stripped away.

**You look at Calendars (2020-2096) as a narrative, but it’s also, in this post-apocalyptic world, the end of one. A full-stop.**

For me they’re like staccatos. Like a novel that’s written with many full-stops but it’s still a novel. The constitution of a narrative for me is very, very elastic. I believe very strongly that we should be challenged with new understandings of narratives, of what intellectualism and conceptualism would mean for us. And we should do away with this whole East/West, North/South binaries of looking at things. Inside/Outside – come on, give me a break, seriously. It doesn’t help.
PART TWO

(Erm, which basically means having coffee outside. NUS Museum boss Ahmad Mashadi hangs out with us for a while)

There’s one particular quote from a previous article on ArtAsia Pacific magazine describing your work as a “kind of sideways art that you either get or you hate”...

But you see, what you’re reading is someone’s interpretation of my work. It’s never my intention to create something that has barriers around it, to be encrypted in this unknown language. But having said that, I acknowledge that art in itself is a language. You will need certain sensibilities in order to read it anyways.
But the idea of “sideways” for example. All art is sideways anyway….

Ahmad Mashadi: The term “getting it” is a problematic term. In the sense that it’s kind of insisting that there’s must be a singular message that Heman’s trying to project. Therefore, if one doesn’t get it, either “There’s something wrong wrong with the language or something wrong with me” –

Heman: Or “The artist is f**king with me.” Which is not my intention.

Ahmad: I mean, it’s a kind of a retardation of what the intent could have been… The intent, coming from Heman, is developing a system which, I wouldn’t say is open-ended but a system that generates perspectives through negotiations. And that negotiation is absolutely essential for something to happen. Without that negotiation between the audience and the object, or the audience and the situation, nothing will occur.

I guess now’s a good time as any to ask this. Putting up a billboard with the words One Hundred Years Of Solitude during the Singapore Biennale 2008, or holding people “hostage” in a room at TheatreWorks 72-13 and making them memorise a short story, or stacking books – where do your ideas come from?

It’s very obvious that I’ve inherited this legacy from Conceptualism. One of the things that conceptualism tries to do is to point people towards things. And I’ve sort of interpreted that as the notion of recommendations.

One Hundred Years Of Solitude is literally a giant-sized recommendation of a book existing in a public space. And of course, then you can start thinking about why isn’t there more advertising for knowledge in public space when we all can, on some level, agree that knowledge is important for education for human beings.

I like these sort of relationships that generates such questions. And also, in relationship to the idea of A Short Story About Geometry, I guess the sort of beginnings of the project came about when I became interested in how, through dialogue, you would require a series of improvisations which then becomes a kind of space where your relationships between artists and audience could switch.

When we began the memorising (part), very quickly the (participant) becomes the choreographer of the piece. They choreographed me to say “repeat that”, “say that from then”, “do that from there”. I like that sort of switch where I become the subject or dominated persona when we always think the artist is always imposing meaning and ideas on a kind of spectatorship.

The “stacks” work in line with the billboard in that at once you have that dimension of the four books, which are recommendations, per se. But also parallel that with the glass objects, which immediately, you can see the relationship (with the books) – the books as physical objects are vessels of knowledge and how these cups are also vessels for things.

Humour is also one recurring element in many of your works. But it’s also something you can completely pin down. Like there’s a joke in there somewhere that you can’t get.

It’s a bit like the perspective of the Comedian in Watchmen, where if you just stand back and observe how things are being played out within what we understand as reality, it’s a f**king joke, right?

A lot of it is pretty absurd, how we actually vote into power ridiculous people to run our society. For example, why does the Philippines allow Imelda back? It’s ridiculous. Why should there even be forgiveness in that context? I just don’t get it. Like Berlusconi, too. It’s ridiculous.

For me, (the world) has always been drenched in a kind of absurdity.
Ahmad: In some ways, (the reason why) people get upset about the things they see from Heman is (because) they over-assert a certain kind of insistence that there must be a rationale to his idea. “I’m applying all my rational thinking towards this end and I’m still not getting it. Therefore I’m mad.” They get upset because of that.

Are you amused or frustrated about that, Heman?

I’m not anything. To be honest, I have absolutely no expectation from the audience. To put it really bluntly, I divorce myself from the repercussions of spectatorship… it’s not my job!

Who would you consider your influences?

I would consider my lineage within the South-east Asian context to three figures. In Singapore, Matthew Ngui. Thailand, Montien Boonma. Malaysia, Redza Piyadasa.

From Matthew, his insistence on a kind of values exchange system with the audience regarding viewership. He works in this format where the viewer almost immediately becomes a kind of participant within the situation, which then raises more problems about spectatorship.

With Montien Boonma, I can’t quite pin it, but I like the kind of emotional response to structure. What do you do when you have nothing else to fall on when you’re that emptied out? In the end of his life, his wife was dying and he created these mini-temples (*Temple Of The Mind*). He created these chanting machines for his wife. They were beautiful sculptures. Black, towering, and had this recording that kept chanting and chanting, and when you enter, it almost feels like the end of things. He’s got nothing left but to do this, that’s the feeling.

And with Piyadasa with his approach towards the mystical reality, this sort of insistence on language as art.

I would quote these references for me as a template to work with and to understand that we have legacies of conceptualism, except that we don’t want to think about it. Araya (Rasdjarmrearnsook) is very conceptual. Apichatpong (Weerasethakul) is very conceptual. It’s just that people would rather see them for something else rather than understand them as working out of this basis.
It’s an insistence on and desiring this primal language within the region. Like, you know, artists who work with bones and bandages and stuff. Heri Dono’s a very good example of a recycling of a pan-Indonesian set of symbols, from Javanese puppets to the Garuda, the angels and everything. It’s very readily consumable for an international collection, for example. “This is South-east Asia. South-east Asia is this.”

But again, I wouldn’t want to formulate projects that resist that. It’s much more important to channel my energy to do what I do anyway.

Do you consider yourself as an anomaly in the local art scene?

To be absolutely honest, I have absolutely no insecurities about my position. I don’t think about positioning myself. I’d rather think about issues like friendship. Like I’m very close friends with Michael (Lee), Genevieve (Chua), Ming Wong, (Ho) Rui An, Charles (Lim), Joanne Pang, Ahmad Mashadi…

And these relationships are more interesting for me because they go really deep and they become a situation whereby we don’t talk about the “scene” but about work. Michael will call me and ask me to have a look at his piece, and I will totally destroy it in half an hour – that’s what I’m good for anyway – and he knows that he’s safe with me, because I’m not doing it out of malice.

I’m like %&^%$&^%*^! And he’s like, “Okay I get the perspective, I don’t agree with it but it’s good to have it…”

So this is what we do within our group, Plural, It’s an ongoing, twenty four-seven, motherf**ker crit! And I think criticism is very important and functions between us in an important way because in Singapore, there are no critics. So we do it ourselves. And we learn to be critics and we learn to be polite and honest.

It’s a pretty broad range of practices…

But there are major confluences in how we approach our work. We’re all interested in this sort of research-based practice… Genevieve really looks at fear. Michael looks at the subjectivity to his approach to architecture. Charles looks at how our built environment constantly changes us as we change it. Big questions, it’s great!

But we never seek to stand out as a group. We’re not here to claim ownership. The closest thing you can get in economics is a co-op. We pull resources together to generate resource for our practice, or to form a kind of shelter. It’s the basis of social democracies. I really think Plural will become important because it will become viral. Every year I will take on two new members. Original members two people, Ang Song Ming and Genevieve Chua. Then the following year, I took two, Charles Lim and Michael Lee. Ming Wong is a wild card for me. He’s always been in dialogue with me for the last 10 years. He plays a huge role in establishing certain ideas that I would have with the group. Chun Kai Feng is also an anomaly because he’s like a hermit. Two latest members are Ho Rui An and Joanne Pang, a very young artist who once did an exhibition on her own without funding in a void deck of an Ang Mo Kio HDB.

What we have in Plural is this situation where all these different threads run at the same time without any obvious confluence or meaning, but at the same times, these threads are talking to each other.

For me, it’s the most important project anyone in Singapore should think about because this is exactly what the government wants us to do. They don’t want us to form think tanks. It’s powerful when people start to come together to think.

But here’s an important point about Plural. It’s not about consensus. It’s about disagreement. How we can disagree in order to gain new perspectives on things. Consensus breeds mediocrity.

Going back to the subject of books in art. There are a number of artists that have that kind of link,
like you do. There’s Michael with his book art, Vertical Submarine as well. It’s refreshing but at the same time, literally kind of like an antidote to anti-intellectualism.

I think the problem runs deeper than that. The problem is how since the `70s, a lot of artists, curators and institutions in South-east Asia have explicitly expressed the fact that South-east Asian art should be tribal. It’s true! They would prefer to look at concepts that run along the lines of animism, for example, and reject any form of conceptualism.

You’ve seen it case by case how institutions have rejected conceptualism and the east-west binary as the reason behind it. “You appropriated this from America, we don’t want it.” Whereas it’s okay to appropriate animism from India. Why? “It’s fine because it’s from Asia. But we don’t want you to think about logic.”

I think it’s about justifying easy compartmentalization of practices. It’s about pandering to discourses that have surfaced from territories like Australia, for example. It’s also to deal with the imperial viewpoint of the world. Where we’re either equatorial or sub-equatorial… and if we’re sub-equatorial, therefore we’re cannibals. Think about it.

And it’s not only Asia that suffers from it. South America suffers from it, too. Like when you say Brazil, they say cannibals. They really do in North America! Or bossanova.

But they will not readily accept modernism coming from Brazil. They’ll be like ‘Hah? Neo-concrete? No, no no. Not possible.”

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not here to resist what the institutions are doing. Because by resisting them, it will give them too much credit. So I’ll just do what I do, like I don’t give a f**k, you know. That’s my strategy.
We RAT on Heman Chong and his Calendars! « For Art’s Sake!

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TODAY’s Resident Art-Throb (or RAT for short – but that’s just plain rude) takes a reverent look (or otherwise) at all things arty and farty in Singapore’s visual and performing arts scene.

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