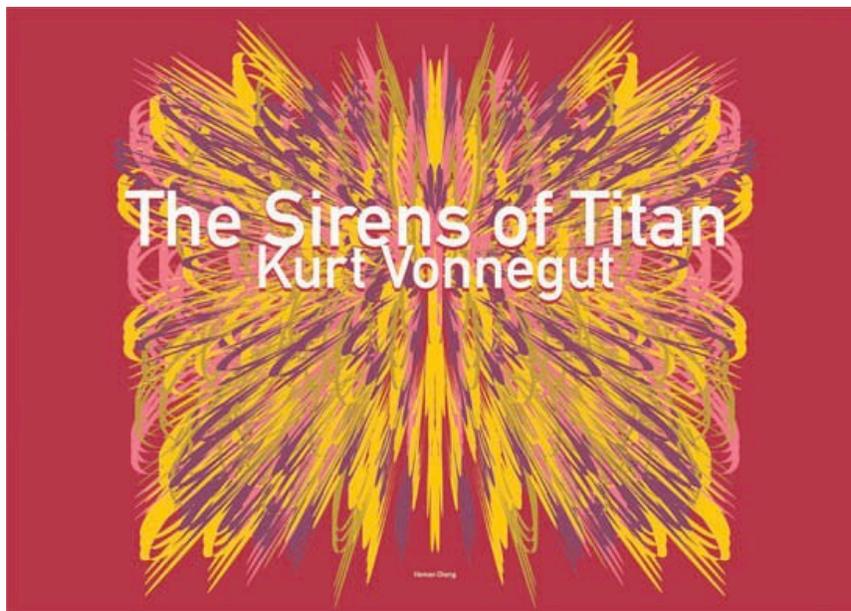




### ON RECORD #1: Heman Chong

#### 8 Rules for Writing Fiction: Heman Chong on Influence and Appropriation

ON RECORD is a series of dialogues with contemporary artists about the ideas and influences that inspire their works. ON RECORD #1 was conducted and recorded using an online chat program and edited by ART IT in collaboration with Heman Chong. All spelling, grammar and punctuation that appears below has been retained from the original chat.



*The Sirens of Titan*, catalogue page for Manifesta 8, 2010, offset print, edition of 2000.

[5/28/10 1:37:36 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: ok lets start  
lets do a text chat  
i'm more lucid that way  
i'm thinking : lets not talk only about Stalker  
cause i think the issues are much wider than that  
plus we're both not experts in it  
and there has been so much talk about it already  
so i'm proposing to talk about

[5/28/10 1:38:45 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: the anxiety of influence  
how one thing becomes another  
what do you think?

[5/28/10 1:39:05 PM] ART IT: sure  
so you'll be talking about your personal influences?

[5/28/10 1:39:30 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: no, lets talk about it as an issue for artists

10/06/04 19:54

ON RECORD #1: Heman Chong

2010/6



ビュティ界のエバンジェリストが結集!

SAKURA

渡辺 佳子

Glam

日本美談会

大崎 京子

永富 千晴

collaboration with IPSILON



[5/28/10 1:41:57 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: We've all been there before, and some have left it but other are stuck in it. Your Godard moment, The Tsai Ming-Liang Obsession, Kobe Abe Rocks!, Haruki I want to have your baby!... and so on. Countless situations where we feel at once empowered but at the same time, somehow distraught... with artistic material... what to do with it? Where to go with it?

The parable of Noah from the Bible becoming Robinson Crusoe becoming Foe by J.M Coetzee... the possibilities are endless yet what makes a good remake or a good rethink? I think its one of the prominent questions that afflict contemporary artists today.

[5/28/10 1:44:38 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: are you going to chip in?  
or do i just keep going?

[5/28/10 1:44:51 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: its better that you chip in

[5/28/10 1:45:02 PM] ART iT: really? I was waiting to see where you were headed

[5/28/10 1:45:09 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: hahahahaha  
over the cliff and onto a desert island

[5/28/10 1:46:26 PM] ART iT: well, how about the substantial number of artists working with sci-fi? just bumped into Martha Rosler earlier and she mentioned her own sci-fi project what is so attractive about that genre to artists?  
or i should say a certain type of artist

[5/28/10 1:48:28 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: That genre is useful for artists who are concerned about the state of the world that we live in, but cannot somehow bring themselves to the front line (or are arrogant enough to think that an art object is an effective political tool) of activism, to have this situation where you can introduce ideas about an alternative(s). Well, at least that's how I'm using it.

[5/28/10 1:49:22 PM] ART iT: so is it a rethinking of sci-fi though, or just an appropriation?

[5/28/10 1:49:58 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I don't think sci-fi belongs to anyone, especially not the sci-fi writing community.  
So its really up for grabs, I guess.

[5/28/10 1:50:45 PM] ART iT: so there's no anxiety of influence there?

[5/28/10 1:51:19 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I don't have to play out definations of what sci-fi is and what it is not. For example, many mainstream writers like Michel Houellebecq and Kazuo Ishiguro have written novels that are totally sci-fi but whether or not they want to see it as that, its another thing altogether.  
A lot of it depends on how you define it and distribute it.

[5/28/10 1:54:08 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Tarkovsky's films, Stalker and Solaris are absolutely sci-fi, and are adapted from sci-fi novels which are canons in the genre, but I wouldn't necessarily say that he's interested in sci-fi. In fact, in the documentary, Voyage in Time, in a conversation with Tonino Guerra, he states that he hates sci-fi!  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voyage\\_in\\_Time](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voyage_in_Time)

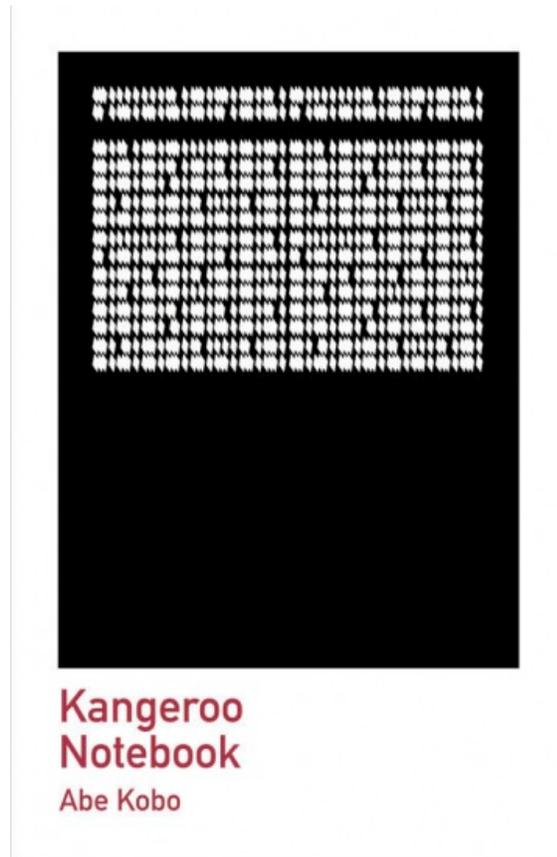
[5/28/10 1:55:50 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Cinema has from the very beginning been a great source of inspiration for artists. Although I'm not sure if its such a good thing... There's really very little to produce out of it, except to appropriate.

[5/28/10 1:56:37 PM] ART iT: like Cindy Sherman's film stills?

[5/28/10 1:56:39 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I mean, there are countless projects out there about L'Avventura, countless art films that are bad remakes of Godard rambles  
I guess Sherman's film stills somehow signal the beginnings of it all.

[5/28/10 1:58:07 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Don't get me wrong, I'm not an old fart who regard Appropriation as a bad thing.  
As with all other artistic strategies, its pretty hard to get it right, and I suspect you can't get it right all the time. So artists who use it ALL the time can find themselves in a big deep rut...

I don't think cinema is the only influence that's tricky. I think literature is pretty tricky too. I guess all sources of influence are somehow hard to manage, and you need a certain amount of dexterity and intelligence to deal with it



Selection from *Untitled (Paperback Covers #02)* (2007), Laserjet print on paper, unique, 129 x 990cm.

[5/28/10 2:05:45 PM] ART iT: what about kobo abe, what makes him significant to you?

[5/28/10 2:08:16 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I got very interested in Kobo Abe because he's one of those writers who are immensely cruel to his characters. They often don't make it out at the end of the novel alive, or if they do, they are usually broken down to a point, you can hardly call them a character anymore. Its about encrypting the narrative in a kind of life process of the character and allowing it to surface as a series of conversations with his/her surroundings in a highly abrasive manner.

Its quite similar, I think to the characters you would find in a Michael Haneke film

[5/28/10 2:09:30 PM] ART iT: so do you see him as an influence on many artists or just a personal influence?

[5/28/10 2:12:24 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I think his film "The Woman In the Dunes" which was produced out of his novel has influenced many artists (I can imagine someone like Mike Nelson would have seen it and loved it) but I don't think many artists have read the entire scope of his work, which contains similar themes found in "The Woman in the Dunes" but in a much larger expanded manner. The Ruined Map, for example. I think Abe imagined the entire Tokyo as the hole found in "The Woman in the Dunes" and allows for certain similar cruel acts to be enacted in this urban nightmare.

[5/28/10 2:13:17 PM] ART iT: have you read The Box Man?

[5/28/10 2:13:49 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: That's so fucked up.

Its like the source material for "Cube".

[5/28/10 2:15:13 PM] ART iT: what's Cube?

[5/28/10 2:15:17 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I think Haruki Murakami stole a lot from Abe. Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World is totally stolen from Abe.

[5/28/10 2:15:51 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cube\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cube_(film))  
Someone recently tagged my work with these words : "Referential Systems"  
I quite like that.

The reason why I started making these book covers more and more is because I get so tired of talking rubbish at openings with new people I meet and somehow it became a thing for me and for them to want to talk about the books whose covers I've painted and I guess I'm not so bored anymore.

[5/28/10 2:19:55 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: You know, like I've mentioned, influences come in waves for me. Once, I got screamed at by a curator, Beatrice Leanza who shouted at me when I said I don't really follow the entire oeuvre of an artist as much as falling in love with specific works from them.

For example, I adore "Happy Together" from Wong Kar Wai but I can't stand watching anything else from him.

[5/28/10 2:23:56 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I don't like all of my own works, why the hell should I love every film that Antonioni has made?

The Eclipse is highly influential on my work, but the rest... poof. Forget it. Everyone raves about L'Avventura. I've never sat through a single screening of it. I always fall asleep.

[5/28/10 2:25:47 PM] ART iT: I don't see the point in having to embrace an artist's entire oeuvre

[5/28/10 2:26:22 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: most people do it  
its easier that way

its like eating a buffet  
you just eat everything  
its disgusting

I hate buffet lunches or dinners or whatever. You eat an entire spectrum of stuff and you have all these bad mixes in your mouth afterwards and you don't know what you've eaten. Its sick. Symptomatic of how our society works. You just want everything in your mouth.

[5/28/10 2:33:39 PM] ART iT: so what makes an artist – any genre – influential for you?  
what are you looking for?

[5/28/10 2:34:55 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Humor. But a kind of cruel humor in seeing things for what they are.

Someone like Kurt Vonnegut fits the bill I guess.  
You know his rules for writing, right?

[5/28/10 2:35:52 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Kurt Vonnegut – 8 Rules For Writing Fiction  
"1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.

2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.

3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.

4. Every sentence must do one of two things -- reveal character or advance the action.

5. Start as close to the end as possible.

6. Be a sadist. Now matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them -- in order that the reader may see what they are made of.

7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.

8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages."

[5/28/10 2:36:34 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I love these rules

I use them in my work all the time.

[5/28/10 2:38:04 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Its a kind of straight talk that I feel very close to. I don't mince words and I don't see why my art work should mince words. If there's something to be said, just say it in the least confusing manner possible. Of course, its very hard to achieve... and there's almost always this desire to digress or to use metaphors... But I aspire to these rules. I think they should be taught in all art schools.

[5/28/10 2:38:45 PM] ART iT: so does vonnegut count as an influence?  
or is it an appropriation?

[5/28/10 2:38:58 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: The Sirens of Titan count as an influence.  
And an appropriation.

[5/28/10 2:39:22 PM] ART iT what's that about?

[5/28/10 2:40:00 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Eight Recommendations  
(A Monument for Manifesta Eight)

Heman Chong

The project Eight Recommendations (A Monument for Manifesta Eight) surrounds itself with a series of book recommendations that can very quickly become a tool to think about the exhibition by everyone involved. It has the capacity to generate conversation, without having to revert to small talk. I would like to produce a series of 8 posters (each measuring 841 x 1189 mm, A0 size) as a starting point for this project. This will be displayed as a tableau, one right next to another. This will formulate the visual and material aspect of the project. Another situation I can anticipate is that of a lecture performance, where I will talk about these books, directly in relation to some of the works in the exhibition, producing a floating world, an audio guide that does nothing but digress inwards, deeper and deeper into a series of deconstructed contents.

The eight books are :

The Sirens of Titan  
Kurt Vonnegut  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sirens\\_Of\\_Titan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sirens_Of_Titan)

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle  
Haruki Murakami  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Wind\\_Up\\_Bird\\_Chronicle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wind_Up_Bird_Chronicle)

Correction  
Thomas Bernhard  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correction\\_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correction_(novel))

Gravity's Rainbow  
Thomas Pynchon  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravity%27s\\_rainbow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravity%27s_rainbow)

The Kingdom of this World  
Alejo Carpentier  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_this\\_World](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kingdom_of_this_World)

Noli Me Tangere  
José Rizal  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noli\\_me\\_Tangere\\_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noli_me_Tangere_(novel))

The Brief Wonderous  
Life of Oscar Wao  
Junot Díaz  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Brief\\_Wondrous\\_Life\\_of\\_Oscar\\_Wao](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Brief_Wondrous_Life_of_Oscar_Wao)

Elizabeth Costello  
J.M. Coetzee  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Costello](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Costello)

[5/28/10 2:42:22 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: It takes a long time before I get to work with any novel, and there are many streams involved in it that I don't quite understand yet. There is of course, an initial desire to want to work with it, but also I discovered that it is important to see how the content could somehow influence the dialogues I would have with people about my work, and how talking in this straight but somehow digressive manner can establish a situation where the work is discussed on the basis of the influence. So it becomes a very intimate situation in a very short time.

That's really something that I want with my work, that somehow I can have this temporary intimacy with someone.

7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.

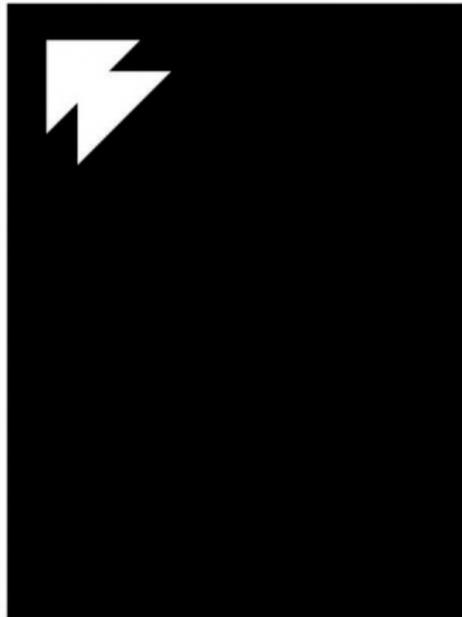
[5/28/10 2:44:46 PM] ART iT: so what was the process toward working with Sirens of Titan?

[5/28/10 2:47:15 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: When I got married to Puyi, we put together our book collections, and I found The Sirens of Titan amongst her books. She highly recommended it, so I read it. You can somehow call it a total shift in my perspective of sci-fi after the experience. Never have I found a novel with such big claims put together with such an incredible amount of irony and hope, all mixed into one massive clusterfuck of an epic.

So it started from a recommendation, which leads me to the discovery of the contents, which translates into an expanded recommendation.

[5/28/10 2:48:24 PM] ART iT: a recontextualization not an appropriation?

[5/28/10 2:48:28 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Yes. I think we'll see more and more of such recontextualizations in my work.



**Roadside  
Picnic**  
Arkady & Boris Sturgatsky

Selection from *Untitled (Paperback Covers #02)* (2007), Laserjet print on paper, unique, 129 x 990cm.

[5/28/10 2:49:46 PM] ART iT: the idea for this chat was to talk about Tarkovsky's Stalker, and then we ended up not talking about it. but then you mentioned you thought Roadside Picnic is better than its film adaption. So why is that?

[5/28/10 2:51:51 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Because Roadside Picnic has humor in it and Stalker doesn't. Stalker is just a daft "Oh Look I'm A Victim" kind of work. Its also not fair to say that Stalker and Roadside Picnic are the same work. They're just totally different.

Made with different intentions with different sensibilities.

All I want to say is that I don't want Tarkovsky to be my neighbor. His energy is too severe for me.

[5/28/10 2:53:48 PM] ART iT: right, humor. I think humor is very misunderstood in popular understanding. Like the Mori Art Museum's All About Laughter show was so depressing precisely because to me it was a complete simplification of approaches to humor

[5/28/10 2:54:10 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: I didn't see the show so I can't say. But yeah, I can imagine.

I think everyone's confusing humor with "a laugh".

[5/28/10 2:55:13 PM] ART iT: I was checking out the Roadside Picnic entry on wikipedia and this caught my eye:

#### **Meaning of the Book Title**

The name of the novel derives from a metaphor proposed by Dr. Valentine Pillman, who believes there is no rational explanation either for the alien Visitation or the mysterious properties of the Zones or the purpose of the artifacts found there.

In the novel, he compares the Visitation to "A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. Cars drive off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around... Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind... And of course, the usual mess -- apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow." The nervous animals in this analogy are the humans who venture forth after the Visitors left, discovering items and anomalies which are ordinary to those who discarded them, but incomprehensible or deadly to those who find them.

This explanation implies that the Visitors may not have even noticed or paid any attention to the human inhabitants of the planet during their "visit" just as humans don't notice or pay attention to grasshoppers or ladybugs during a picnic. The artifacts and phenomena left behind by them in the Zones were garbage, discarded and forgotten without any preconceived intergalactic plan to advance or damage humanity. There is little chance that the Visitors will return again, since for them, it was a brief stop for reasons unknown on the way to their actual destination.

[5/28/10 2:56:02 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: Exactly.

Isn't that super funny? How we always consider ourselves the center of the universe while in fact, we might be just only cockroaches to other civilisations?

If you read the novel, you'll know what I mean. Its also the way its written, how these inhabitants clumsily deal with the technology for their own narrow-minded purposes.

[5/28/10 2:57:20 PM] 00 Heman Chong 00: YOU KNOW WHAT?

Woody Allen should have made the film version.

Its totally Woody Allen.

All images courtesy the artist.

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