

Some exercises in futility

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An exercise in futility is an activity that has no point, use, or meaning; which produces no result, and is therefore not worth attempting. Defined by its own negativity, futility seems to have no exit – a cycle we wouldn't necessarily want to find ourselves stuck in. To enact a futile gesture, then, is to contend with the prospect that it might all come to nothing. Yet we might choose or feel compelled to persist regardless.

In this group exhibition, five artists come together to examine the otherwise futile: repetitive processes that seem to have no clear outcome; objects stripped of the functions for which they were made; tasks with outright impossible goals; rituals that have lost their significance for one reason or another. Through varied explorations on the margins of productivity and purpose, these works contemplate the transformation of futile exercise into fertile ground.

A few points about pointlessness

Curatorial Note by Berny Tan

When I first reviewed the list of artists who are part of this exhibition – the artists, along with the theme of futility, were confirmed before I came onboard – I remember thinking that Fiona Seow's practice was the most logical fit for the show. Fiona's drawings often begin as systematic exercises to pass or mark time; a process that has no concrete objective beyond repeating the same form. Eventually, they might accumulate to form a larger work, but that is not something she actively labours towards. I was surprised, then, when she encountered a peculiar challenge in preparing for this exhibition: she feared that her work was becoming overly deliberate; her methods too purposeful in their lack of purpose. Futility, after all, is a kind of going-nowhere, while an artwork and exhibition is somewhere-to-go.

What later worked for Fiona was to remove 'futility' as a specific goal, to return to the meditative aimlessness inherent in her practice. Another artist faced a different type of challenge by making a futile task central to his project. When Marvin Tang first set out to archive Tengah Forest, it was already progressively being cleared for the construction of a new HDB town. He knew that this archive would never be fully achievable, and his work was meant to acknowledge this impossibility. As the months went by, however, the forest became even more inaccessible – hoardings went up

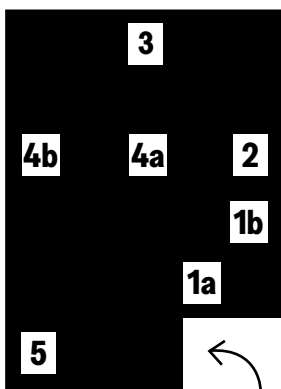
around its perimeter, and it was designated a no-fly zone for drones. The conditions that made the project so appropriate for this show were also making it more difficult to produce anything substantial. How does one make images of a subject that can no longer be seen?

In light of these obstacles, it might seem that our theme was incompatible with our efforts to build an exhibition around it. Yet I think of futility as an inevitable, even necessary part of artmaking. As artists, we do things without always knowing where they're going and if they'll work; we must constantly judge if we should persevere, pause, or give up entirely. We make sketches and studies, write out ideas and discuss them with our peers, and still these might never manifest as fully realised artworks. In fact, this exhibition grew out of a proposal by Genevieve Leong, written for a residency opportunity that she did not ultimately secure. This is an experience familiar to many of us in the arts: the tiresome process of writing applications and proposals, only for them to end in rejection or less-than-ideal grant amounts. One disappointing email can turn all our work into yet another futile endeavour.

An equally familiar experience, though, is when earlier ideas find their way back into our practice – in better forms, at better times, for situations and audiences that are better fitted to them. Genevieve's residency proposal evolved into this exhibition, and her artworks built on past creations that are now starting points for a whole new series. For Ryan Lim, an assortment

of fleeting, peripheral moments became the foundation for a suite of photographic and sculptural objects. Otherwise unimportant occurrences – a sore throat, a common architectural feature, deleting photos from one's phone – can be brought together to reflect the strange poetics of the everyday. An artwork about futility does not have to be pessimistic or nihilistic; at least not outrightly so. It can be quiet and thoughtful too, an unassuming space of observation, making room to contemplate life's many weightless tangents.

The futile, the pointless, the worthless, the useless – these are not rigidly defined, nor are they permanent states. In this exhibition, the artists oscillate between the futile and the fruitful in order to make new meanings. Like Marvin's project, ila's work originates from an accepted impossibility: that the human connection to *semangat*, the energy within all living beings, has long been disrupted by Singapore's endless urban development. Still, ila gathers what she can from the margins. Disparate voices relate histories, musings, and recollections over mirage-like scenes that seem to carry vibrations from the landscape. These voices and scenes cannot fully illustrate *semangat* – nor the absent shrines that they reference, once vessels for that energy – but they can speak of, about, around a thing; sustaining a narrative, even in fragments. I recall an idiom that implies futile labour: "going in circles". I think about how sometimes the only way through is to go around.



Artists

1) FIONA SEOW (b. 1992) works with geometric forms to explore time, existence, labour, and impermanence. Her works are primarily driven by an obsession with perfection and order, coupled with a compulsion to repeat. Her drawings and installations are often a by-product of various processes that she engages in to achieve a meditative state or a sense of pleasure.

2) ILA (b. 1985) makes intimate works that incorporate objects, moving images, and live performance to generate discussion about gender, history, and identity. Negotiating alternative

nodes of experience, her works reconfigure and merge speculative fiction with factual histories, informal archives, and collective experiences, conceiving them as sites for empathy and connectivity.

3) RYAN LIM ZI YI (b. 1996) pursues an artistic process based on encounters that occur within both public and private surroundings. By collecting and reconfiguring these moments, his works form new narratives, characters, compositions, and situations. His installations tend to comprise images, sculpture, and text, inviting us to meditate on our relationships with otherwise inconspicuous areas of reality.

4) GENEVIEVE LEONG (b. 1992) attempts to visualise the intangible in her art practice. Beginning with the immaterial, her work often combines text, image, found and made objects, and the manipulation of space to create what she describes as "an almost physical image". Her work seeks to shed new light onto her emotions, sensations, and realisations.

5) MARVIN TANG (b. 1989) uses images as a tool of investigation. His research questions the linearity of historical narratives and the effects of policy-making on shifting social structures. He is particularly interested in applying this research to

Singapore, attempting to interrogate its own historical account and how this relates to its expanded narratives across the globe.

Curated by

BERNY TAN (b. 1990) is an artist and curator who explores the tensions that arise when she applies systems to – and unearths systems in – her personal experiences. She has developed a curatorial practice built on principles of empathy, sensitivity, and close collaboration with artists. Her exhibitions are often accompanied by approachable writing that illuminates the processes and materialities of art-making.

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