

RECAST

PRESENTING RECENT WORKS BY

ANTHONY CHIN

& GREEN ZENG



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CURATED BY BERNY TAN

STARCH
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RECAST

presents recent works by Anthony Chin and Green Zeng, two artists who interrogate historiographies of Singapore and the region through their multidisciplinary practices. Their second collaborative exhibition, Recast focuses on little-known local and regional histories through the mediums of sculptural installation and video, revealing otherwise unacknowledged structures of power in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

Chin's installations feature the technically ambitious strategies that have become a hallmark of his artistic practice. They surface narratives of human labour that lie on the margins of major historical events, pivoting from the construction of the Johor-Singapore Causeway, to the Japanese army's Malaya-based steel industry during World War II, to the lasting impact of American imperialism in the Philippines through sports. Objects at the centre of these narratives—a granite rock, a sword, a basketball trophy—find new incarnations through the labour-intensive transformation of seemingly mundane materials.

Zeng's works build on his research into public assemblies in Singapore in the post-war and early independence years, a period marked by labour unrest and student protests. He revisits this history as it manifests in Singapore's archives, appropriating texts from photographs, letters to the press, and transcripts of parliamentary debates. By reframing and re-presenting these texts—in two video works as scripts to be performed, and in another work as a mock protest banner—Zeng illuminates the ambivalence of the archive; how it preserves fragments of histories in danger of being forgotten or suppressed, while only ever occupying the peripheries of what it seeks to document.

Within this exhibition, the act of 'recasting' can thus be understood in two ways. First, as the giving of a different physical form to an existing object or material. It is sculptural—the melting down and reshaping of metal; the freezing of water into ice in a specific shape. Second, as the allocation of a role to a different actor than originally intended. It is filmic—words and actions, already determined, performed by a person in another time, and captured in another frame. To do either, then, can also relate to another use of the word 'cast'—to cast an object, a situation, a history in a different light. The retelling of a story, in order to see something anew.

This exhibition is curated by **BERNY TAN** (b.1990), an artist, curator, and writer. Her interdisciplinary practice explores the tensions that arise when one applies systems to—and unearths systems in—intangible personal experiences, complicating the false binary between rational and emotional. Tan holds an MA (Dist) in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths, University of London, and a BFA (Hons) in Visual and Critical Studies from the School of Visual Arts. As an artist, she has exhibited her work in Singapore, New York, and the United Kingdom. Recent curatorial projects include *Maybe we read too much into things* (Singapore; January 2021) and *Deviations* (London, UK; February 2019).

CURATORIAL NOTE

There are ghosts in this exhibition. I don't mean that it possesses an element of the macabre, or that the artworks are memorials to people that have since passed. I mean it in the most matter-of-fact way I possibly can. There are human bodies here, or echoes of them. There are the people who serve as proxies for those who lived many years ago—the actors and non-actors who appear in Green's videos, speaking words and ideas that belonged to another, noisier Singapore. There are the objects, too, that speak of those who laboured to bring them into existence—the frozen facsimile of a rock that Anthony collected from the Causeway, which must have been placed there initially by the hands of one worker among thousands.

Maybe it is bigger than ghosts. There are spectres that loom, a fog that envelops entire countries and regions. There are the conflicts that so utterly changed the course of our history—the Second World War, and the Cold War that came after—and there are the nations that felt they had a right to own others, to deem far-off lands their territories and to determine their fates. There are the governments and the armies whose wills mobilised us en masse; or immobilised us, or silenced us. They prescribed our laws, our ways of life, even what we might do for leisure. Yes, they are here in this room.

I am thinking of these ghosts and spectres—I am thinking of the way Anthony and Green choose to revisit the events of the past—I am thinking of their works as reverberations of that which came before, which were in turn reverberations of whatever transpired before that. I am thinking of reverberations in a different, more material way, as layers in the process of making, removed from but inextricably linked to their source. The salt, for example, which Anthony collected and

crystallised from the sweat of basketball players, then made into the body of a trophy. Where it touches the metal plate, a greenish tinge has started spreading in the months since he made this work, unintended by the artist. Reverberations can take on a life of their own.

I am writing this before we have moved into the space, but I am thinking too of another kind of reverberation; how the exhibition will sound, a different kind of aural / oral history. I imagine that I will hear decades-old opinions on whether labour strikes should or should not proceed—whether a worker might choose the inaction of their own body as a means of resistance—while, every few minutes, the steel blade of a sword hits the surface that grinds it down, drowning everything. It is a sound that would not feel out of place in an industrial setting, those factories that might have ground to a halt when workers thought it necessary to refuse the conditions of their labour. It is a sound that is both interference and accompaniment.

If I had to represent a reverberation visually, I would first leave a blank core defined by a single outline. Another line would be drawn *around* that first one, following its shape but larger and more amorphous, and then another line, and another. We perceive narratives as having a core, as a way of saying things out loud when it is otherwise so easy to leave them buried. But there are also the spaces *around* these (hi)stories—their reverberations, softer, not quite the same sound or shape. The photographs, objects, documents, letters, transcripts, and all these artefacts that lie in their wake. The people—including us, today—whose lives have been so irreversibly shaped by forces so much bigger than us. Sometimes, it is in speaking around a history, speaking in and from the margins, that one speaks about a history too. Or tells us, at least, that something can no longer be said. A blank core where a story—another version of it—should be.

ANTHONY CHIN

ANTHONY CHIN (b. 1969) is a designer turned visual artist who holds an MA in Industrial Design from the Royal College of Art in London. He creates immersive site-specific installations that poetically and conceptually respond to a given site's architectural presence and history. His works emerge from a process of extensive research, using common materials to invoke particular places with attention to their geopolitical implications. He has exhibited in various local and overseas art shows, including his first solo art exhibition in Beijing's 798 Art District (MoShang Experimental Space), residencies and exhibitions at the Taipei International Artists Village and the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, as well as participating in three programmes by local arts organisation OH! Open House.



fig.1



fig.2



fig.3



fig.4



fig.5

Air Doa Selamat | 2020

Water from Pulau Ubin quarry, ice moulded from Causeway granite rock, display freezer 50 x 50 x 77 cm (freezer); 20 x 10 x 15 cm (ice)

Air Doa Selamat is a work that responds to the history of the Johor-Singapore Causeway **fig.1**, and the labour and resources that were expended for the project. The title refers to the occasion when members of the Johor royalty poured ceremonial waters into the Johor Straits during the laying of the Causeway's foundation stone. Built under British colonial authority to resolve traffic congestion between the two states, the Causeway was officially completed on 11 June 1924, after a five-year construction period that involved more than 2,000 workers and consumed about two million cubic metres of granite that were blasted from quarries in Pulau Ubin. Today, those deep quarries are now filled with rainwater **fig.2**.

For this work, a piece of granite rock was taken from the Causeway and used as a master for a mould **fig.3**. Water was then collected from a Pulau Ubin quarry and frozen within the mould to create an ice block in the shape of that rock. In doing so, Chin's sculptural gesture replicates the geographical journey of the raw materials used in the construction of the Causeway. The collected water becomes a poetic representation of the cavity left behind by a violence enacted upon the land, for the sake of better connecting and modernising colonial territories. In part as a nod to bilateral relations between Singapore and Malaysia today—which must be consistently tended to (and even sometimes calmed)—the frozen water is reliant on a constant supply of electricity to generate the below freezing temperature that maintains its solid form. The work thus necessarily remains in a fragile state in order to exist and be exhibited, and could be damaged or destroyed with a single flick of a switch.

TROPHY – object | 2020

Vintage American basketball trophy, sweat-salt, epoxy resin, 10 shirts
Dimensions variable

Created while Chin was an artist-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, *TROPHY – object*

responds to the history of basketball in the Philippines. First introduced to the population as a pedagogical tool during the period of American imperialism, it remains one of the country's most popular sports **fig.4**. As Lou Antolihao discusses in his book *Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines*, sports "helped introduce new beliefs, practices, social behaviors, and moral standards and encouraged a conformity that helped the colonizers maintain control over their colonies".

This work is a modified vintage American basketball trophy that dates back to 1946—the year the Philippines gained independence from the United States. Central to the work is the sweat collected using shirts worn during the basketball games of a local community in Bagong Silang. This was later processed into 'sweat-salt' **fig.5**, and subsequently cast to form the vintage trophy's base, using the original trophy as a cavity for moulding. The modified trophy weighs down the shirts from which the sweat was originally collected. The 'sweat-salt' functions as a literal and metaphorical 'crystallisation' of collective labour and human physical exertion, juxtaposed against the trophy as a symbol of achievement, victory, and conquest.

日南製鐵 Rinnan Steel Mill – INGOT | 2021

Japanese shin guntō steel blade, digital print of steel ingot
100 x 10 x 5 cm (sword); 14 x 10 cm (print)

The 日南製鐵 Rinnan Steel Mill series grew out of Chin's research into the hundreds of Japanese people—ex-soldiers and civilians alike—who stayed in Malaya after World War II, in order to participate in the Malayan Communist Party's guerrilla struggle to liberate the region from British colonial rule. By 1960, only two remained: Shigeyuki Hashimoto and Kiyooki Tanaka **fig.6**, two military engineers who were employed at the eponymous steel mill. Through them, Chin saw how geopolitical conditions could be embodied by the actions and choices of a single individual.

The object at the core of this series is a World War II-era Japanese ceremonial sword, known as the *shin guntō* (新軍刀, or new military sword). Unlike the traditional hand-crafted military sword, which is time-consuming to make, the *shin guntō* is created using an industrialised process whereby the blade is cast and hardened from steel. It is a weapon made possible only by Japan's rapid modernisation and industrialisation, to meet requirements before and during the war. Raw material for these blades likely originated in Malaya **fig.7**, processed at factories such as the Rinnan Steel Mill.

For INGOT, Chin worked with a blacksmith in Malaysia, who was instructed to take a cast of the original blade, melt it down to an ingot, and document this in a photograph. The steel ingot is then cast back into a blade using the mould taken before it was melted. Finally, the sword is speared through the image of itself as an ingot. This sculptural object captures different states of its own material being, relating back to Chin's interest in Hashimoto and Tanaka, and the mutability of their political identities.

日南製鐵 Rinnan Steel Mill – GRIND | 2021

Replicated Japanese shin guntō steel blades using Malaysian steel, grinder, wood, acrylic, parachute cord, power supply timing circuit, LED light, books 150 x 60 x 50cm

Like its counterpart, this work centres on a World War II-era *shin guntō* (new military sword). In this case, however, it is a new steel blade replicated by the blacksmith, who casted it from the original sword. The focus of this installation is the process of grinding, which gives the blade its 'cutting edge' and therefore its purpose, while simultaneously and unavoidably reducing the steel object. The grinding of the blade causes sparks to be emitted, yet the red-hot steel filings cool down quickly and become invisible to the naked eye. The vitrine encasing the grinder thus presents the spectacle of this fleeting glow—a result of this duality of making and unmaking—all while collecting the steel filings, which have the potential to be recast in future.

In order for the work to function, it also has to engage in other acts of balance. Books relating to Chin's research are attached to the blade, acting as a weight to pull the blade towards the grinding surface; the machinery operates at timed intervals to prevent it from burning out due to the heat that it generates. At the intersection of the blade and its grinding surface, then, is a layered precariousness, a distillation of the region's violent history which was marked as much by large-scale production as it was by large-scale destruction.



fig.6



fig.7

FIG. 1. Distribution of Iron Mines in Malay Peninsula

GREEN ZENG

GREEN ZENG (b. 1972) is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice explores issues of historiography and identity, and examines how history is written, interpreted, and disseminated. Focusing on issues such as student activism and the connection between archives, the state, and the individual, he reactivates fragments of the past and questions the artist's role in truth-telling. In 2015, his debut feature film, *The Return*, made its international premiere in competition at the 30th Venice International Film Critics' Week. Zeng's work has been presented in group exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore and Para Site in Hong Kong, amongst other venues in Singapore and abroad. Recent solo exhibitions include *Notes for the Future* at Art Outreach, Singapore (2021) and *Returning, Revisiting and Reconstructing* at Foundation Cinema Oasis in Bangkok, Thailand (2019). In 2020, he was an artist-in-residence at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.

強烈抗議人協理事會無誠意談判
STRONGLY PROTEST AGAINST
THE MANAGEMENT BOARD (P.A.) INSINCERITY TOWARDS NEGOTIATION.

"HANDS
OFF"
UNIVERSITY
AUTONOMY

WE WANT MORE
FREEDOM
THE MORE UNION
IT MEANS THE
LESS FREE
NO

Fellow
Clerical Workers!
Plant Workers On
Strike,
So Take Leave
until
Strike is Over

DOWN with
Anti Union
Blood Sucking
EMPLOYERS

BOMB PARIS
NOT
THE PACIFIC

Boycott
for
JUSTICE

WE CONDEMN THE PAP'S
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
FOR REFUSING US TO SETTLE
THE DISPUTE AMICABLY
WITH EMPLOYER

PROTEST SIGNS AND BANNERS, 1960 – 1974 TRACED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

Production Team

June Chua (Producer), Vinod Varma (Cinematographer), Tan Cheng Hwee (Gaffer), Hussin Ismail (Sound Recordist)

Cast (Letters To The Press)

Anna Foo, Loh Chang Kuan, Mabel Lim, N Ranjan & Shan Rievan

Cast (Industrial Unrest)

Aldina Anis & Isaiiah Lee

This series was first developed under the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore Residencies Programme in 2020.

Give the
workers
the facts

MOVE TO
CONTROL
STRIKES

Public feels
no sympathy

'Singapore now a nest
of social unrest'

'WE DON'T WANT
COWARDS IN
GOVERNMENT'

HEADLINES OF VARIOUS LETTERS TO THE STRAITS TIMES REGARDING INDUSTRIAL UNREST, 1955

Letters to the Press | 2021

HD video

Aspect ratio 16:9, colour, sound, 19 minutes

Set against a plain green background, a succession of people—non-actors selected from different professions—read a series of ten letters to the press that were published in *The Straits Times* between 1953 to 1957, before the People's Action Party was first voted into power in 1959. These strongly worded letters discuss the issue of industrial unrest in Singapore, some speaking for the strikes, and others against them. Many even directly address political figures about their management of the unrest.

The work focuses not on any particular perspective or position, but rather the act of speaking out about political issues, openly and without fear of repercussions. By repeating these words written over six decades ago, *Letters to the Press* brings the lively political discourse of the past into sharp contrast with the comparatively apolitical present. As each scene progresses, the camera zooms in gradually on its subject, culminating in the subject staring directly at the camera for a few moments at the end of each letter. Their unwavering gaze seems to challenge the viewer, as if to invite us to question how and why things have changed over the years.

Industrial Unrest (20 March 1962) | 2021

HD video

Two-channel, aspect ratio 16:9, colour, sound,
11 minutes (left) / 20 minutes (right)

In this two-channel video work, two young actors read from an edited transcript of a 1962 debate on industrial unrest in Singapore's Legislative Assembly. One actor reads the words of S T Bani of the left-wing party Barisan Sosialis, then Member for Thomson, as well as the president of the Barisan-aligned Singapore Association of Trade Unions. He spoke sympathetically about the trade unions and workers who have been striking, also reminding the members of parliament that the People's Action Party (PAP) was brought into power by the trade union movement. The other actor reads the words of the PAP's S Rajaratnam, then Minister for Culture. He spoke at length about Communism, arguing not only that the Barisan Sosialis were Communists, but that they put the disruption of society over the interests of the people in order to serve a revolutionary cause.

While many members of the Legislative Assembly spoke during this debate, Zeng decided to narrow it down to S T Bani and S Rajaratnam, as they provided the most comprehensive arguments from both sides. Zeng's choice of younger actors set against a plain background distances the work from performative re-enactment, instead allowing the rhetoric to take centre stage—rhetoric that feels almost alien to people in Singapore now. Of note is that this debate occurred less than a year before Operation Coldstore, during which 113 alleged Communist sympathisers—including S T Bani—were arrested and detained without trial. This would weaken the Barisan and ensure the victory of the PAP in the 1963 general elections, which also set into motion the short-lived merger of Singapore and Malaysia, and the dominance of the PAP in local politics up till today.

Harry, This Is Not Your Sunday School | 2020

Digital print on canvas

400 x 70 cm

This banner takes its text from a handpainted sign in a November 1963 photograph, documenting local students who boycotted class for a day to protest against alleged infringement of university autonomy and academic freedom by the government. The text—“HARRY THIS IS NOT YOUR SUNDAY SCHOOL SO STOP MEDDLING”—appears to be directly addressing then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, whose English name was Harry. Isolated from its context and replicated in bright red, child-like font, the phrase feels particularly anachronistic; its use of the concept of 'Sunday school' and the word 'meddling' come across as old-fashioned. Indeed, by the 1970s, laws banning public assemblies were being widely enforced in Singapore, making such protests a thing of the past. The banner thus becomes emblematic of the wide gulf between the largely politically apathetic, or at least silent Singaporeans of today, and what comes across in archives as a vocal and politically active student population that existed just half a century ago.

ATTENDING TO SILENCES: *Some thoughts on disruptive historiographical practices in the work of Anthony Chin and Green Zeng* BY LAWRENCE CHIN

It is probably an uncontroversial claim that most, if not all, historiographical work is an attempt at assembling a coherent narrative out of all available, if disparate, accounts of the past. And as such, historiographical work takes place to be acknowledged, accepted, referenced, and then when repeated sufficiently often becomes an authoritative account. Historiography interrogates what is unfamiliar (as in the catchy phrase ‘the past is a foreign country’, which David Lowenthal adapted from the opening line of L P Hartley’s novel for the title of his influential volumes on history and nostalgia) so as to render that past in more familiar terms. Such a framing suggests a natural progression from ignorance of the unfamiliar to knowledge of the familiar; from apprehension of what is different in the past (*qua* foreign) to its understanding and eventual utility for the present—with the past becoming a conceptual hinterland, of sorts.

BORDER CONTROLS

This notion of the past as a tract of foreign land outside of the presently shared cultural norms as alluded to by Lowenthal would seem to downplay another more commonly encountered worldwide phenomena: that of the subdued territory, often achieved through outright conquest, violent annexation, and extended colonialism. What is understood as foreign and innately different exudes an alluring pull, while at the same time suffers rejection or even is suppressed. What is different is a repudiation of the identity of the same—what our local community is *not*.

The differentiation of what-is-not-us can in turn be considered as a necessary function within what Louis Althusser has termed as ‘interpellation’: a calling out of the name of a subject (see “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*). The individual is taken into the fold of a collective subjectivity by being thus hailed or named and ‘the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.’ (ibid. p.175)

Interpellation calls forth individual subjectivities which are otherwise non-existent and silent outside

that act of hailing. But once hailed and subjectivised, that individual becomes defined and recognisable as a Subject; as citizen, as worker, as foreigner, as same, as different ... It shifts an individual from the prior realm of unspoken existence into the arena of identities, for better and for worse. As such, one—and by extension one’s land—becomes ‘foreign’ by way of being ideologically marked as such. Historiographical work, thus, performs the task of exchanging the foreign-as-unfamiliar for a more familiar register of naming by silencing the other non-similar and non-identical states inherent in that which is foreign.

PASSING THROUGH

A multitude of differences are erased by naming the foreign as *singularly different* and hence familiar. This is an ideological comfort, of sorts, whereby the difficult work of making sense of a *mélange* of unfamiliar differences becomes less urgent or even no longer necessary.

Anthony Chin’s ongoing series ‘日南製鐵 Rinnan Steel Mill’ starts with a significant and familiar juncture in Malayan history, when the Japanese Army overran the peninsula during World War II, but takes us further along. Reworking and transforming an artefact which is overlaid with violent imperial symbolism into one that begins to engage with other realms of meaning—of technology, of catharsis, of trans-national memory. This parallels Green Zeng’s own long-standing reworking of official archival accounts of past political struggles in Singapore—marked by events such as Operation Coldstore, industrial strikes, and detentions—by remembering and re-enacting differently.

In being presented with these historical narratives retold in a different and extended register, we come away with the realisation that these interventions by Chin and Zeng speak differently—of ‘truth’, of ‘power’, of ‘history’, of ‘identities’ etc.—because of them being cognisant of other prior states of silence and acknowledging the violence in the partitioning of the unfamiliar / foreign in historiographical work. What undergirds the practices of Chin and Zeng is this act of working with and through the blindspot of brutality that so often arises in the imaginary of a

subdued territory, and the peoples therein. Forgotten histories are considered afresh and revived to be inserted into or alongside commonplace accounts.

On a superficial reading, we might understand this as tantamount to the work of dredging and excavating in order to expose how much of other discarded or neglected past accounts which had been obscured, distorted or even falsified in order to arrive at a more objective or true account. However, this would lead to a paradox, as Jacques Rancière argues:

‘The status of history depends on the treatment of this twofold absence of the “thing itself” that is no longer there—that is in the past; and that never was—because it never was such as it was told.’

THE NAMES OF HISTORY, P63

ITERATIVE SILENCES

This sense of history as *no-longer-there* becomes a metaphorical receptacle or ‘empty signifier’ which performs a heuristic function that seeds, unifies, and even sustains subsequent narratives. While attempting to approach that which is *no-longer-there*, what becomes apparent with each re-telling is, on the one hand, the recognition of the impossible task of saying completely because with each re-telling we must also impose some other silences; while on the other, the differences which accrue with each re-telling would demand an attitude of openness to such a proliferation, if not also an enjoyment of sorts, of differences.

Zeng’s adaptive use of archival documents updates the story of Singapore’s socio-political formation as a realm of fluid and unsettled contemporary narratives. It is the multitude of present-day individual voices reading aloud old letters to the press and political speeches in the video works ‘Letters to the Press’ and ‘Industrial Unrest (20 March 1962)’ respectively which close that gap of unfamiliarity between past and present. The interplay between thinking of what is *no-longer-there* and its subsequent imaginings becomes a way of apprehending our own subject positions as always transiting between the past and the present. Likewise, the casting method employed in Chin’s practice, such as in ‘TROPHY – object’ and

‘Air Doa Selamat’ amongst others, juxtaposes the replication of an ‘originary object’ with additional layers of personal and cross-border story-telling, which also function as points of departure for further re-telling and re-working. Historiographical work needs to be constantly renewed and is never done, especially when it is thought of as already done.

Chin’s ‘Air Doa Selamat’ might serve as a visual metaphor here, wherein the collected water freezes in a given empty mould taking the shape of an object as a stand-in for what is *no-longer-there*. Over time, the frozen object diminishes through the gradual process of sublimation resulting in an irreversible loss of ice crystals, lending it a poetic reading of returning stories to silence. And it is in the ensuing silence that we can begin to imagine a future work of re-telling it again differently by attending to that silent multitude which remains as yet to be called. History may or may not repeat itself but historiographical work and practices such as Anthony Chin’s and Green Zeng’s must.

June 2021, written for the exhibition RECAST at starch
19 June to 10 July 2021

LAWRENCE CHIN writes with a long-standing interest in cultural studies and contemporary art practices, occasionally primed by a smattering of haphazard reading of texts from the realms of continental philosophy and (post)structuralist writings.