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From Purveyor of Meanings to White Cube, Parergon and Installation

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Abstract

This essay is positioned as a self-reflexive practice and exegesis in examining my past installation works made from 2002 to 2013, and to discuss these works concerning the notion of the practice of artist and the art made as “purveyors of meanings”, as an open interpretative possibility. It extends the discussion on the notion of the artist as a ‘purveyor of meanings’ as a proposition developed from a previous article based on my artistic practice and understanding, which considered some of the complexity of such implication as a conceptual approach of artmaking, especially when it takes into consideration various aspects of audience interpretation and how the artwork would operate and perform in an exhibition setting. The ensuing discussion posits the concept of the ‘white cube’ as a kind of overpowering exhibition space and as an aesthetic ideology by O’Doherty as a critical examination of the role and function of these white or neutral tone exhibition spaces in many art museums and galleries featuring Modernist art. The essay proposes the notion of maintaining conscious pursuit of a liminal state of presence in the reading of artworks, raising the question who is the one who conferred an artwork meaning, and in what manner and condition et cetera. Such conferring of meaning(s) as arbitrary as it would, confirms that the one (not just a human, person or agency) or perhaps that which judge (its meanings) would hold the artwork (and the meaning) ransom, i.e. a conscious return to a liminal state is always necessary to counter the tyrannical judgement of meanings held to ransom.

Keywords Installation art; Conferring of meanings; White cube; Parergon

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Introduction

This essay extends the discussion on the notion of the artist as a ‘purveyor of meanings’ as a proposition based on my artistic practice and understanding which was developed in another essay, ‘Artist as Purveyor of Meanings: Notes, Proposition and Reprise.’ (Yap S. B., 2020) The previous article considered some of the complexity of such implication as a conceptual approach of artmaking, especially when it takes into consideration various aspects of audience interpretation and how the artwork would operate and perform in an exhibition setting. In other words, the artwork enters a circulation of institutional framework and discourses of validation, or invalidation and rejection. But such dependency of a sustained framing or reframing by (art) institution is limiting and shortsighted, in the sense of it becoming a temporal, spatial and discursive constraint of other possible multiple contexts. It is a dependency which the previous text sought to problematize and was not able to resolve conclusively, but suggesting that there are other social, cultural, and political institutions and frameworks under which an art object or work could be examined. It is in this spirit I understand my practice – to invite and facilitate the different possibilities of readings.

Hence, this essay is positioned as a self-reflexive practice and exegesis in examining my past installation works and to discuss these works concerning the notion of the practice of artist and the art made as “purveyors of meanings”, as an open interpretative possibility. I would begin by highlighting concepts vital to my understanding as part of this discussion and connect that with selected works I have made from 2002 to 2013. The selections are from four different installations or series which share a common feature, namely the ubiquitous ‘picture frame’. The initial idea of using a picture frame as a principal element is based on earlier exploration in the issue of the ‘white cube’, a concept which informed by the reading of the seminal text of Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (O’Doherty, 1999). The picture frame would play as both a signifier as well as a visual element anchoring the entire installation or sculptural form. Hence the four artworks share a similar formal visual elements – the picture frame – which was used and referenced across eleven years. The relevance of these four works is both of the potential institutional critique of art space and also the contestation in the possible meanings and interpretation of an artwork which these four works attempt to investigate in my practice in this period of time.

The discussion of the concept of the ‘white cube’ as a kind of overpowering exhibition space and as an aesthetic ideology by O’Doherty was a critical examination of the role and function of these white or neutral tone exhibition spaces in many art museums and galleries featuring Modernist art. It was synonymous with the sublimation quality of many a modern (and selectively contemporary) art which valorised the exhibition ambience as a privileged sanctuary of disinterested aesthetics experience. The white cube isolates both the audience and the art object from the outside world in a space of purity – an exclusive social and cultural site which the audience is made to forget the class and privilege in operation for such aesthetic experience to be constructed and produced. O’Doherty had also identified the early installation works of Duchamp’s ‘1,200 Bags of Coal’ and ‘Mile of String’, Schwitters’s ‘Merzbau’ and Robert Barry’s ‘Closed Gallery’ amongst others which either expanded the discourse on the space and site of art or had challenged and transgressed the definition and perception of the white cube (O’Doherty, 1999, pp. 10, 44). But he had also pointed out that despite the criticism and transgression attempted by different conceptual or avant-garde practices, the system or institutions were able to internalize and in a sense the white cube, as a kind of space that continues to perform as an (in)visible backdrop alongside other expanded field of art (market) and cultural institutions as O’Doherty observes ‘the gallery space has again become the unchallenged arena of discourse’ in the Afterword section of the Expanded edition of the text (O’Doherty, 1999, p. 113).

Thence the questions emerged in my practice and related reading are, what or how are values of art conferred or determined, despite the many criticisms towards the institution of art? And more importantly how are the meanings of an artwork decided or how does it manifest, especially in the context of an art exhibition? This led to the discussion of the politics of frame and framing, derived from Derrida usage of the Kantian term ‘parergon’ of Greek origin. (Derrida J. a., Summer, 1979) ‘Para-’ which is beside/beyond/outside and ‘ergon’ means the work, as Derrida discusses the parergon as “...neither work (ergon) nor outside the work, neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work” (Derrida J. , 1987, p. 9) .

In certain modernist and contemporary paintings, the picture frames were no longer used or discarded as unnecessary to the autonomy of the painting (as surface or object?). Yet contemporary museum still uses extremely huge Perspex Acrylic box to encase photograph and paintings for protection and preservation purposes, especially for valuable artwork. These Acrylic

boxes serve as transparent yet physical boundaries of the artwork, hence functioning as parergon too. Whether in the white cube space or be it a salon or conventional museum and gallery – there is still the need for a device to demarcate boundaries between the work of art and the non-art space. The picture frame is such a device, so are the wall label for title and caption, artist signature on the work to many other connected apparatus, curatorial texts, and perhaps gallery sitter and docent – all performing an essential task of demarcating, pointing out, explaining, and in return confirming the art – the ergon. They are operating, performing besides, alongside the work despite not being the work of art itself. Derrida argues against such arbitrary binary between the artwork and the supplements (parergon), be it the picture frame, columns and pedestals, drapery of a sculpture et cetera. And I may add that such binaries include the many other mechanisms in the gallery and museum space which provides the context for the legitimacy and auratic appearance of the artwork.

It is such notion that I seek to destabilise or attempt to pry open and reveal the differences in operation, in the process of determining or interpretation of an artwork. I will proceed by describing the selected works and will reflect after, in relation to the discussion of the white cube and the parergon/frame.

ERGON I: The Great White One

‘... *who gave birth to the Great White One...*’ (2002) (hereafter TGWO) was an installation made in 2002 for the Young Contemporary Art Awards competition organised by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. It is an installation piece consisting of 3 parts (i) a smaller artwork, a white canvas painting titled ‘[coated/coded/loaded] canvas on which many meanings have f(r)ailed’, 91.5cm x 91.5cm in dimension, (ii) a white picture frame mounted on a mobile unit and (iii) the exhibiting wall and floor which is partly covered by a rolled-out red carpet which the painted white canvas and white mounted frame individually hang and placed on (See Figure 1) The statement for the piece is also included as part of the installation, engraved on zinc plate as is placed to the right-hand side of the red carpet which runs from the floor to the wall. It runs as follow,

Who gave birth?

*[local/ regional/ world/ western] art discourse,
the institution, the agency, the site, the space,
the audience, the artist, the label, the frame,
the medium, the material, the real,
the experiential phenomenon, the mystical;*

Who should be the producer of meanings?

*Who, in fact should provide/ has provided
meaning to the piece of object?*

Who has conferred it as art?

*If allowed of so many 'whom', whose meaning
would be chosen and whose at stake?*

*Can they all be recognised as equal Shadow
fallen under the same Sun?*

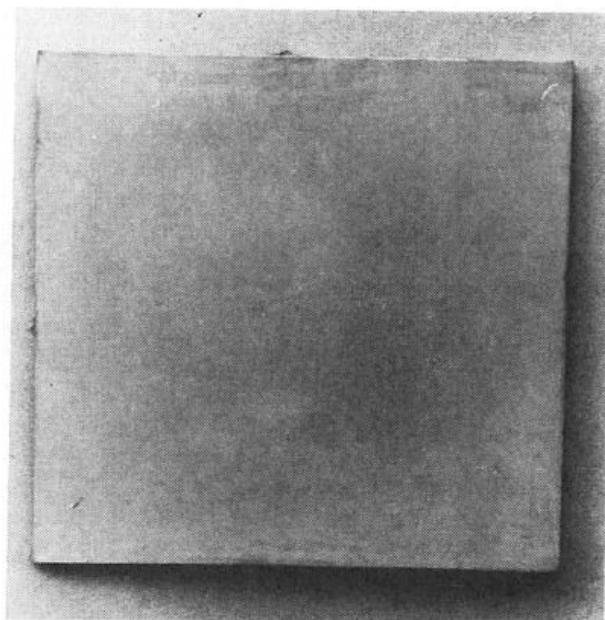
What exactly is the Great White One?

*The art, the canvas, the frame, the walls,
the paper where history of art is written on;*

*Of all the possible meanings of an object,
those who judge holds it ransom.*

(Yap J. , 2016, p. 231)

observed in another text, 'not because of the controversy generated, but for its vision to seize the day' and '(in) retrospect, the significance of the project lies not in the Zen/Mysticism overtone approach of art-making in the show, but in the manifesto - the intention of articulating an eastern/localized aesthetic as an artistic identity' (Yap S. B., *Threading Three Figures at NAG*, 2007).



Empty canvas on which so many shadows have already fallen.

Figure 2 *Empty Canvas on Which So Many Shadows Have Fallen*, 1974 (part of *Towards a Mystical Reality* project by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa)
Source: *Towards a Mystical Reality* Manifesto (1974)

ERGON II: The Grand Phantom

'*The Grand Phantom Narrates*' (2004) (hereafter TGPN) installation is an approximate 3mx3m carpeted space cut into half by the exhibition wall, thus the same carpet displaying at both sides of the wall, with a framed 'painting' protruding from both sides of the wall. Picking up from my previous piece, ... who gave birth to the Great White One..., this piece seemingly offers an answer as to whom should be held accountable for parenting the Great White One. The great ones of our society, their ghosts; they just seem to hover at the edge of our consciousness, undeterred, spirited, ever wrestling with us, the present ones, what is still meaningful to us. I have often called the three installations made in 2000 to 2004 at the Young Contemporary Art competition, namely '*Youthful Contention not () Parental Eclipse*' in the year 2000, '*... Who Gave*

Birth to The Great White One ... in 2002, and *The Grand Phantom Narrates* in 2004 as my own Young Contemporary Art trilogy.



Figure 3 *The Grand Phantom Narrates* at the Young Contemporaries Art Awards 2004, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (Collection of Singapore Art Museum)
Source: Yap (2004)

The works approximate a deconstruction approach with the exhibition context, where I think the meaning of the work is tied in with the context of its exhibition – installation; both the artistic context and the actual environment/physical siting of the work, or responding to title (of a show) and deal with the issue of art, the object, the work of art, and the context of its making, showing, interlocution etc. - the context of its showing, including the exhibition, and space. TGPN is the last installation of my participation in the Young Contemporary Art competition, and my concerns with the works revolve around the system and politics of meaning in the arts, the relationship of a (young) artist (and the arts) with the system and institutions and other aspects of the signification process. The YCA trilogy is also a reflection of my practice in relation to the institution/system, the Young Contemporary Art awards, the National Art Gallery, artist and institution (art and cultural history) and the larger social milieu, wondering if an artwork can ever escape (in pursuit of autonomy) or it must always exist in tandem or having an ‘entry point’ (after Redza Piyadasa).

Ergon III: A Closer Look

As parergon approximates ergon, the frame and the framed is one and together, both distinct parts and formed as one. And the affects escalate, as each ‘cut-out corners’ (See Figure 4) is both part of something else and complete by itself (Derrida J. a., Summer, 1979).



‘Could contemplating on the less apparent structure bring us a perception of a much larger whole?’



‘The whole is more than the sum of its parts’ - Aristotle.

Figure 4 *A Closer Look at the Illusion of the Whole* (2005)

Source: Yap (2005)

(Para) Ergon IV: The Whole Illusion

Figure 5 *'A Closer Look at the Illusion of the Whole Phantom'* (2013) at Project Room Fine Art, KL
Source: Yap (2013)

In 2013, I was invited by fellow artist Roslisham Hashim (a.k.a. Ise) to join a mixed-hang group show at the Project Room Fine Art gallery in Kuala Lumpur. *'A Closer Look at The Illusion of the Whole Phantom'* (Figure 5) was a site-specific installation combining components taken from two other works – *'A Closer Look at the Illusion of the Whole'* and *'The Grand Phantom Narrates'*. It was an exercise of adapting parts of different works in the context of a new space, but with no prior idea how the installation would manifest until the various parts were brought into the

specific space. In a sense, it was a return to the studio practice of making an impromptu drawing or compositional study and experimentation of assemblage of items and objects in situ. The temporary combination of various parts of two different artworks to form a new work is also a gestural reminder that an artwork is always a part of, or of parts of another whole. It also destabilises the notion that there is an established complete artwork that is static and unchangeable.

(Para) Conclusion (and in- *différance*)

By foregrounding the politics of the painting/picture frame in framing and perception, the idea which underpins the ideation and making of my work is to attempt and approximate a conscious pursuit of possible and sustainable engagement of liminal reading. Or if possible, a sense of ‘approximate liminality’, as the role of the frame/framing is rendered obvious not as a supplement - a boundary which operates invisibly, but an active reminder of the influence of the frame.

Hence Derrida’s discussion of parergon and the frame, be it figurative or literal, is vital for underpinning (and possibly by itself, could be subverted too) the usage of the frame in the works discussed. The frame as (part of) an artwork is both the parergon and ergon which provides entries to possible readings within the accessibility of politics of reading, such that the work can perform a sustained artistic operation – or reading and experience of the work (as an object) and a situation which is not fossilized – in other words a fluid reading or possible of de- and re-territorialization according to Deleuze and Guattari, as cited by West-Pavlov, is of fixed and fixated interpretation and meaning of an artwork (West-Pavlov, 2009, p. 223). In other words, the installation as space is ‘impregnated’, as suggested by Kristeva’s conception of the Chora, with possible meanings that only reveal upon the questioning and interpretation of the onlooker, the instigator of investigation (West-Pavlov, 2009, p. 39). It is a process with an attitude that ought to be fluid and not fixed and fixated. Yet accepting a certain momentary reading of a work is always (and it must be so) provisional against a tyrannical absolute.

My understanding of the idea of Chora/Khora as discussed by Derrida and Kristeva is to attain a perpetual process/state of ‘*différance*’ (differing and deferring – Derrida). Khora as being the interval space between form and formlessness, a liminal state tussling between semiotic

reading and symbolic certainty. The work I envisioned is to be able to, if adopting a semiotic terminology, a floating signifier that could refer to both micro and macro contexts. Micro in the sense of the immediate context of the site of exhibition – context of an exhibition, or curatorial positioning et cetera, which could then be related to Malaysian art history or art scene. Macro would be the discourse of modernism and global conceptual art – be it decolonial or postcolonial marginal engagement with western and/or global art discourse – and depending on from where and who such gesture is carried out and performed. As observed by Michelle Antoinette,

Investigating the legacy of modern art in Malaysia, Yap Sau Bin's ... who gave birth to the Great White One?: (coated/coded/loaded) canvas on which many meanings have f(r)ailed (2002) 'encodes' the conceptual artwork Empty canvas on which so many shadows have already fallen (1978) ... Yap's installation is also evocative of Piyadasa's conceptual interest in the legitimizing device of the frame.'

(Antoinette, 2014, p. 496)

The discussion of the white cube and painting on wall/easel, frame and parergon is above all discourse of politics of reading, and more importantly to me, the epistemology of knowing and interpretation which the impetus is the attitude of the reader who reads, which differs from the nuanced reading of Antoinette and June Yap of the same piece of work (TGWO), whereby Antoinette had taken a comparative regional art historical analysis, and Yap, a historiographical aesthetic reading of the piece.

In return to the notion of maintaining a liminal state of presence as a conscious pursuit of (pre) reading or post (meta) reading, TGWO asks who is the one who conferred an artwork meaning, and in what manner and condition et cetera. Such conferring of meaning(s) as arbitrary as it would, confirms that the one (not just a human, person or agency) or perhaps that which judge (its meanings) would hold the artwork (and the meaning) ransom. This insistence of returning to a liminal state is always necessary to counter the tyrannical judgement of meanings held to ransom. To subvert and to reveal this operation, the framer needs to be consistently (re)framed.

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Authors' Bio

Yap is an artist-curator and educator based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He teaches for the Humanities Department in the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University. He is a member of Rumah Air Panas [RAP], an artist initiative based in Kuala Lumpur. His practices encompass conceptual work, installation, performance, mapping project and curatorial project.

Yap has participated in the 8th Havana Biennale in 2006; in *Migration Addicts*, a collateral event project in the 52nd Venice Biennale, and in the Shenzhen & Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism & Architecture, in 2007. He had received awards in the Young Contemporaries Arts Award by the National Art Gallery in 2000 and 2002. And has been selected for research residency in Japan under the JENESYS Programme for Creators by the Japan Foundation in 2008. Yap had also worked on the *Narratives in Malaysian Art* volumes published by Rogue Art. He has also served on the jury panel for the 2013 Young Contemporary Arts Award; as nominator for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2014–2016, Arts Maebashi AIR Programme 2016–2018 and the 2017 Hugo Boss Asia Art award. Previous curatorial projects include ‘ESCAPE from the SEA’ organised by the Japan Foundation in Kuala Lumpur in 2017; the BRANDNEW Art Project by the Bangkok University Gallery in 2019; SENSORii for Art In The City Kuala Lumpur in 2021; and in the Curatorial/Collaborator Research team for the first Trans-Southeast Asia Triennial, Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art ended in 2023.