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# No Models:

## Sriwhana Spong's *Instruments*<sup>1</sup>

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WONG BINGHAO

### Abstract

*Deploying essayistic and curatorial modes, the author approaches artist Sriwhana Spong's ongoing, and as yet untitled, series of works, referred to here as the Instruments.<sup>2</sup> Drawing from heterogeneous sources that range from pop culture and transgender studies to feminist philosophy, ethnomusicology and Southeast Asian studies, the author works to avoid the pressures of sedimentation and, as Patrick D. Flores articulates, "harness [the curatorial gesture's] potential to always be in contention."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this critical methodology is, the author suggests, apropos of Spong's own artistic and conceptual sensibility, which performs the intricacies of her lived experiences and networks.*

I've always been hesitant about what belongs to me and what doesn't.<sup>4</sup>

Sriwhana Spong

It's hard to explain

Inherently it's just always been strange

Neither here nor there

Always somewhat out of place everywhere

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Ambiguous  
 Without a sense of belonging to touch  
 Somewhere halfway  
 Feeling there's no one completely the same  
 ...  
 And you'll always be  
 Somewhere on the  
 Outside

Mariah Carey, lyrics to her song "Outside" (1997)

Dewi Ayu had forgotten that there was no way the Japanese soldiers could be winning the war without any information, such as the fact that she was the child of a Dutch family. It wasn't just her face and her skin that gave her away, but also the city's public records, the entire archive of which the Japanese now controlled, and so they weren't going to believe she was a native, whether or not her name was Dewi Ayu.

Excerpt from Eka Kurniawan, *Beauty is a Wound* (2002)<sup>5</sup>

## Overture: Outside

Ever since her official debut in 1990, singer-songwriter Mariah Carey, otherwise known as the Elusive Chanteuse, has been vocal about the difficulties that she faced growing up as a Black biracial girl. In a recent interview that honoured the legacy of her skilful penmanship, the melismatic virtuoso poignantly reflected that "Outside", the coda track to her "introspective" 1997 album *Butterfly*, was:

completely about being biracial ... not just being biracial but being me, and not feeling like everybody else, and needing somebody ... yet never having that person to connect to and say "Oh, they're the same as me."

anytime people have connected with that song, it's someone that kinda doesn't feel like they fit in with what's considered 'the norm,' and for me it always had a lot to do with being biracial ... I felt like I didn't fit in to the boxes that people cut out for us to be put into so *they* can feel more comfortable.<sup>6</sup>

As the sincere and unembellished title of the song indicates, Mariah feels like she will always be an interloper because of her biraciality. But those who think that “Outside” is some sort of triumphant reclamation or declaration of a newfound wholeness will be sorely disappointed. The only rhyme of the roughly five-minute-long song, tantalizingly written into the middle of the first stanza, thwarts any expectation of emotional resolution. On the contrary, feelings of loneliness are compounded: the speaker remains in limbo, “neither here nor there ... out of place everywhere.” The intriguing poetic diction that follows—when the speaker tries, but fails, to “touch ... a sense of belonging”—only serves to underscore the painful elusiveness and impossibility of their endeavours toward commonality. Elegiacally, Mariah will always be left on the outside.

Although Mariah wrote the melancholy ballad to exorcise demons of her particular past, she is also reflexive about the song’s wider impact. For instance, in the same interview, she cites the many instances of ‘lambs’ (her fans) who told her that “Outside” helped them when they were coming out. The song addresses both a unique and universal ‘I’.

\* \* \*

The abovementioned scene from Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty is a Wound*, an epic allegory of Indonesia’s history set in the fictional town of Halimunda, narrates a bewildering, existential conundrum facing our catty and worldly protagonist, Dewi Ayu, as the Japanese invasion steadily encroaches onto her hometown. Despite her steadfast identification with her “native” name<sup>7</sup> and upbringing, Dewi Ayu is prepared for her imminent arrest at the hands of the Japanese because she is documented as Dutch. Indeed, as the speaker suggests, official “information” like this is powerful enough to help the Japanese “[win] the war”. In her conviction that upon consulting the “city’s [authoritative] public records”, the Japanese “weren’t going to believe she was a native”, Dewi Ayu reveals an uncharacteristic frustration when coming up against a system that privileges and reifies supposedly indisputable facts of existence. Conversely, by her admission of helplessness, Dewi Ayu also intimates a sincere belief in the complexities of her biography, personhood and family history. Although Dewi Ayu’s physical appearance (“her face and her skin”) give her away as Dutch, it is also a testament to her indigenous background. About 20 pages prior to this excerpt, Kurniawan describes Dewi Ayu as a “mixed-blood girl” with “gleaming black hair and bluish eyes”, features that allude to both her Dutch and Halimundan lineage.

It would not be farfetched to estimate that one of the authoritative “records” that sealed Dewi Ayu’s fate would have been the categorical census, whose “feverish imagining”, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, produces the “fiction ... that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place” in society; “no fractions” are allowed.<sup>8</sup> But, as in the case of Dewi Ayu, the presumably unambiguous facticity of such data is often attenuated by the excesses of corporeality and affective attachments. Few, Anderson conjectures, “would have recognized themselves” as they were labelled by a census.<sup>9</sup> Hence the paradox that this abbreviated scene conjures: Dewi Ayu is both Dutch and native, and, at the same time, neither Dutch nor native.

\* \* \*

To be clear: my intention in parsing these pseudo-biographical vignettes is not to somehow empirically ‘prove’ and pinpoint, or tokenistically glorify and essentialize, biraciality, as if the disclosure and verification of the authors’ biodata could uncomplicatedly explain their concomitant cultural production and life paths in a cause and effect equation. My treatise takes quite the opposite approach. Indeed, as Ariel Heryanto’s provocatively and rhetorically titled essay, “Can There Be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?”, suggests, the ‘truth’ of identity is far more ideologically entangled than it is straightforwardly impartial. In his essay, Heryanto interrogates the efficacy of political reclamation by Southeast Asians within the discipline of Southeast Asian studies. Paradoxically, he argues, there continues to be a “wide gap [between] being a Southeast Asian to being a Southeast Asianist”<sup>10</sup> because Southeast Asians are treated as both “asset” and “suspect”;<sup>11</sup> their insider knowledge and cultural credibility, though valued, are equally doubted for their perceived bias. It is perhaps unsurprising that Heryanto concludes his essay on a decisively futile note, dissuading Southeast Asian scholars from “direct[ing] their energies towards recuperating indigenization” in the field of Southeast Asian studies.<sup>12</sup>

Writer, director and activist Janet Mock prefaces her first memoir, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*, with similar caution. “Though [she] highlight[s] some of the shared experiences of trans women ... of colour”, Mock also clearly expresses that her book “was not written with the intent of representation” because “there is no universal women’s experience”.<sup>13</sup> Mock’s is a vital contribution to public and academic discourse because it discusses, in detail, the impactful realities of race and class on trans lives. But, like Heryanto, Mock is under no

illusion of change and exemption. Despite (successfully) striving “to remain separate and be the exception” to the deathly, desensitized destitution of trans women of colour, Mock admits with raw honesty “the reality was that [she] was one of these women”.<sup>14</sup>

Mock’s thoughtfulness is significant, given that the genre of transgender autobiography is so often publicly sensationalized and reduced to a pivotal ‘before and after’ surgical moment that perpetrates the pathologization and objectification of trans and gender diverse people. Cultural critic and historian Jay Prosser decries that the writing of a trans autobiography often “endow[s] the life with a formal structure that life does not indeed have” by chronologically organizing and hence flattening the “desultoriness of experience”.<sup>15</sup> A coldly cohesive autobiographical narrative—one that captures and neatly demarcates the progressive stages of “suffering”, “epiphany” and the final “arrival ‘home’: the reassignment”—is a common prerequisite that medical authorities demand of trans people in order to ‘justify’ the provision of life-giving healthcare and legal and administrative aid.<sup>16</sup> Counterpunching these regulatory structures, Prosser spotlights the agency of trans people who “shape medical practices as much as they have been shaped by them”, choosing for instance to “transition partially [and] intermediately” in order to strategically “rewrite the telic structure of conventional autobiographical narrative” and critique their gatekeepers’ narrow, uninformed and definitive prescriptions of gender expression.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, art historian Jeannine Tang illustrates how transgender artists are too often cornered into reductive cultural genres and collectives that insist on stabilising or neutralising their transness and gender variance in the name of superficial inclusion and historical posterity,<sup>18</sup> begging the question: what is the cost of memory, love, opportunity and (by implication) a semblance of banality?

As these accounts have intimated, a life story, especially one that is irrevocably politicized as it is lived, cannot simply be compacted into titbits of information for easy consumption and classification. Each is a matrix, an emergence of incubatory intellectual and methodological questions, that might account for a broader, even more ambiguous, sense of self and community. A moral, ethical humility should be the empathetic precondition in any attempt to understand the complexities of another’s world. Through her formulation of “critical transgender infrastructures”, Tang does just that by underscoring how transgender artists, curators and creatives “respect self-determination and creative experimentation alike” in their cultural production, gesturing hopefully towards critical and historiographic methodologies of contemporary art that will be more attuned to the subtleties of both the aesthetics and experiences of trans people.<sup>19</sup>



It is with this productive traction that I approach artist Sriwhana Spong's *Instruments A–H* (2015/16–ongoing), artworks that are part of an “ever-expanding personal orchestra inspired by the percussive instruments of Balinese Gamelan” and are performatively and acoustically activated by dancers, musicians and gallery invigilators based on the artist's fastidious instructions.<sup>20</sup> Spong's impetus for creating these works recalls the ambivalences and apprehensions she feels with regards to belonging and authenticity. Growing up in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Spong felt “estranged” from, and an “outsider” to, her Balinese family and heritage.<sup>21</sup> In ways that recall Mariah and Dewi Ayu's dilemmas, Spong continues to grapple with and think through her “distance yet nearness to Bali”.<sup>22</sup> This tension is particularly palpable in her series of *Instruments*, which both are and are not wedded to geopolitical specificity. Described by the artist as her “personal gamelan”, the *Instruments* are, despite their titular clinical seriality, parenthetically named after close friends (D and E) and collaborators (A, B, C, G) who have either played or been commissioned to write a score for them.<sup>23</sup> In the artist's own words, they are therefore “records of the places I work in and the people I collaborate with”.<sup>24</sup> In the same way that each gamelan has a unique pitch and tenor endemic to its community,<sup>25</sup> Spong's *Instruments* are tangible manifestations of her search for kindred spirits. It could be said that they are her habitus.

Ann Stoler's study of legal documents concerning métis (mixed-race people) in French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies speaks to this primordial concern for place, kinship and verisimilitude. Métis quite literally blurred the supposedly intransigent boundaries between ‘European’ and ‘non-European’, demographics that were once thought to be separate and mutually exclusive. Affronting the ‘purity’ of European identity and sovereignty, métis



were easy targets for colonial paranoia towards legitimacy and fraudulence. They could just as easily be nurtured as valued cultural intermediaries or castigated as insidious, contaminating threats to absolute power. Therefore, Stoler argues, *métis* were either “categorically denied” or favoured for “incorporation” into the inner workings of empire based on an “arbitrary logic” of control.<sup>26</sup> Building on Stoler’s work in her analysis of court records concerning inter-Asian intimacies in colonial Burma, Chie Ikeya contends that transcultural relations affectively exceeded their imposed binary categories and “[threw] into sharp relief the ... instability and amorphousness of putatively unchanging and unitary identities”.<sup>27</sup> Rooted and unmoored, concrete and abstract, present and absent—Spong negotiates what Patrick D. Flores has called “geopoetic”, rather than geopolitical, phases through her series of *Instruments*.<sup>28</sup>



## Scattered Possessions

True to this sentiment of affective and intellectual itinerancy, Spong's *Instruments* are both artworks and functional musical apparatuses that bear varying degrees of formal and conceptual fidelity to gamelan instruments, bringing to mind the fruitful tensions between pensive contemplation and live activation, innovation and tradition, change and continuity, local and foreign—rhetorical segregations for all intents and purposes. “In Indonesia,” Jim Supangkat argues, “modernism developed without tension alongside many other kinds of art that remained within a traditional framework”, and “did not necessarily conform to the European modernist rejection of tradition”.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, perceiving Dutch colonial modernity as but a brief and ineffectual period in Indonesian history, Harry J. Benda warns against the ostensibly inexorable impulse of a “rectilinear fallacy which presents change as a progressive, unidirectional process ... nowadays often called modernization”.<sup>30</sup>

Not dissimilarly, with the rise of the supposedly more “progressive and modern” practice of regularized notation since the second half of the 19th century, the “old oral tradition” of gamelan has been thought of as “backward”.<sup>31</sup> But it is precisely the ungovernable essence of a reputedly atavistic orality that guarantees the gamelan's modernism. For musician, scholar and teacher Sumarsam, “gamelan class is not goal-oriented, but rather process-oriented learning”, referring to a focus on imparting intuitive methods and approaches rather than standardized notations, rule-bound formulas, or textbook content.<sup>32</sup> When a piece of music is passed down orally, it “is never fixed, but ... in a continual process of re-creation with every performance [and] every repetition”.<sup>33</sup> Personalized inventions, not obsequious cloning, characterize this transmission. Accordingly, Judith Becker theorizes that each gamelan piece is “at once contemporary and the cumulative result of ageless tradition”.<sup>34</sup> Tellingly, Adrian Vickers describes Balinese painting as “a living art”, signalling a similar imbrication of change and continuity in the genre, arguing that “tradition does not mean [an] absence of change”, because dynamism, innovation and “individual expression comes from the manipulation of pre-set forms”.<sup>35</sup> Regarding atemporalization, it is opportune to refer to May Adadol Ingawani's theorization of a Southeast Asian animism: a communion between a potent past and vulnerable present that gestures toward a gainful future otherwise foreclosed and unknown. To “fabulate” this temporal connection, as Ingawani posits, is to generate an emancipatory “ongoingness” between past, present, and future.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the impulse to historicise—and deaden—is flummoxed.

Typically, a gamelan would consist of an ensemble of about 25 predominantly percussive instruments, including gongs, metal xylophones, “fiddles, flutes, and zithers”,<sup>37</sup> that are played by orchestras with as many as 30 performers.<sup>38</sup> With eight unique creations and counting in her personal troupe, Spong jokes that, when she is older, she would probably have amassed as many instruments of her own. Some, like *Instruments A (Antonia)* and *B (Vivian)*, quite ostensibly resemble a bronze xylophonic structure in the gamelan’s repository known as the *gendér*. *Instrument C (Frances)*, an aluminium bell plate festooned with foliage, can be perceived as the artist’s version of a gong, which has been described as “the core instrument of the gamelan”, one that holds “supernatural significance” and even the power to enact impactful changes in our world.<sup>39</sup>

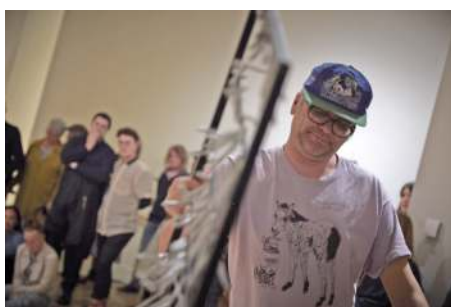
As the alphabetical order ascends, however, faithful ties to the physical appearances of gamelan instruments and the socio-cultural site of Bali are intriguingly loosened. Greater liberties are taken with the materials of construction and sources of inspiration, paralleling the tensions between tradition and innovation in narratives of Balinese painting and gamelan. Barring any clear likeness to a gamelan counterpart, *Instrument D (Vera)* looks like a deconstructed xylophone or piano whose keys have been strung up in horizontal rows. The keys are in fact aluminium casts of French fries, which the artist once saw her siblings put out as a religious offering in Bali. Also without clear lineage or referent, *Instrument E (Tina)* is a set of eight bronze handbells named after her friend Tina Pihema that are casts of the artist’s cupped hands, gesturing perhaps to the reciprocity—giving and taking, control and freedom, individuality and collectivity—with which she approaches this series of works. With this hypothesis in mind, I was unsurprised to learn that Tina is also a member of The Coolies, a rock band from Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and Spong’s frequent collaborators. Referencing Spong’s in-depth research on the writings of women mystics, *Instrument F (Alice)*, a concentric glass jellyfish of sorts, was inspired by the crystal castle in Teresa of Ávila’s 1588 spiritual guide, *The Interior Castle*.

Akin to this diverse array of materials and intellectual influences, there is no standard, enduring formula with which the *Instruments* are presented or performatively animated. They have been exhibited singularly and in various combinations, and are usually “scattered” among Spong’s other artworks to generate associative points of resonance.<sup>40</sup> This organizational freedom belies Spong’s punctilious practice of planning and marshalling. As per the artist’s regulations, her *Instruments* are “only ever played by invited performers on specific occasions”.<sup>41</sup> They are both conditional and unconditional gifts. Neither purely static nor interactive, there is no single, repetitive way in which

they are enlivened. While some (like A, C & F) have generally been played according to strict scores set by the artist or a designated composer, others (like D & E) have been left to the vagaries of musical and performative improvisation. Spong's preoccupation with mystic writing bleeds not just into the material look of the *Instruments*, but also into the composition of her gamelan arrangements: the musical notes of a 12th-century hymn by abbess Hildegard of Bingen are transposed onto a gallery's operational hours, indicating the specific times that invigilators are to strike the bell plate of *Instrument C*.<sup>42</sup> Through these deceptively small but significant gestures, the artist unites and indeed creates worlds. In stark contrast to this delicate precision, and to inaugurate Spong's past exhibitions, The Coolies have performed their signature experimental style of music on mini-ensembles of the *Instruments*, thrashing them on the ground and leaving scratch marks that bear witness to their performance.

For her personal gamelan, Spong gathers an expansive set of referents and relations, affording viewers the opportunity to rethink ideological assumptions of kinship. In a similar fashion, Alexandra Vazquez brings together auditory and visual clues left by immigrant artists from Vietnam, Cuba and Korea, signposting the "transformative potential" of such "alternative channels of belonging" and companionship.<sup>43</sup> Deploying diverse offshoots and affinities as theoretical accompaniments to her thesis on Cuban music, Vazquez "puncture[s] the notion that Cuban music can be known" comprehensively and unquestioningly "through a singular text, art exhibit, tour package, and compilation album".<sup>44</sup> Spong's gamelan is, by turns, both like and unlike a traditional Balinese gamelan. In her thoughtful genesis and presentations of this body of work, the thirst to apprehend a clinically demarcated stereotype of culture remains unquenched.

In what was, for the artist, the most realized and consummate presentation of this series of artworks, *Instruments A–F* were assembled in a recent solo exhibition for the 10th Walters Prize 2021, held at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.<sup>45</sup> The six *Instruments* were dispersed, loosely, concentrically, around an otherwise uncluttered room, leaving the core of the space void, suggesting a foregone insularity and courting inhabitation by other bodies and energies. This is a fitting description of the artist's intent with this series. For an approximately 30-minute performance on the occasion of the exhibition opening, Spong invited three local experimental musicians to activate the *Instruments*. Though the women were previously acquainted, they usually performed solo and had never shared the stage.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, they were only congregated a few days before their performance—The Coolies, Spong's regular collaborators, had become unavailable at the last minute.



On the day itself, the impromptu trio improvised and riffed off each others' behaviours and musicality. For the majority of the performance, one musician played one *Instrument* at a time in a freeform rotation. Someone shook *Instrument D* instead of hitting its keys, while another struck the glass domes of *Instrument F* in an increasingly frenetic rhythm. Although each musician brought with her equipment such as mixers, pedals and amplifiers that intensified and distorted the sonic acoustics, relationality was the performance's true crescendo. One musician activated the sonorous *Instrument C* while keenly observing and appearing to tune herself to her new collaborator's melodies on *Instrument A*. In the final minutes of the performance, the three musicians gathered around *Instrument E*, playing it from all angles as if in an arcane, ritualistic procession. For Spong, the acme of this body of work is that, once performatively animated, it has "nothing to do with me ... it goes somewhere I could never take it."<sup>47</sup> Implicit in this statement is the intention for the *Instruments* to organically "activate conversation" and nurture a sense of community among its participants.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore sensible that this particular iteration of the *Instruments*, with its additional elements of chance collaborative permutations, epitomized Spong's vision for the work.

Spong's cherished *Instruments* can therefore belong to other people, spaces and times once she relinquishes possession of them.<sup>49</sup> More than a one-way transfer of ownership, the *Instruments* often facilitate and even initiate other modes of selfhood, affect and relationality. It is perhaps not entirely serendipitous that Becker discredits the notion of a sole creator or artist in her study of the gamelan, asserting that "individualism or pyrotechnic display have no place" in a gamelan performance.<sup>50</sup> Resembling other forms of Javanese arts like the *wayang kulit*, gamelan is experienced as "deeply communal and nonindividualistic".<sup>51</sup> This much is also true of Balinese painting, which, according to Vickers and Siobhan Campbell, has always been a "communal" and "collaborative" enterprise, mainly between family members.<sup>52</sup> A leading artist would start the process of making a painting by delineating figures in ink or pencil, which would then be filled in with colour by apprentices. Spong's *Instruments* align both philosophically and pragmatically with practices in the arts of Bali.

## non-self

During the Covid-19 lockdowns of early 2020, Spong developed a routine commute: she walked to and from her home and studio in London. Along the way, she would pass two 24-hour chicken shops, commonplace and





classed alimentary establishments around the city that promised its patrons affordable and comforting food. Over the next nine months, while taking this path, Spong would collect the many chicken bones that were blithely discarded on the pavements by satiated customers. Once home, she boiled the bones to remove any remaining meat. She then separately cast the pristine bones and some twigs in bronze, fastening the individual components together with stiff cable ties to create a rigid, skeletal, three-metre-long whip, a “Frankensteinian” psychogeographical artistic experiment that she named *Instrument H (Monster Chicken)*.<sup>53</sup>

Like her previous *Instruments*, this most recent addition to Spong’s gamelan was birthed under specific conditions. Commissioned for a group exhibition at Tai Kwun Centre for Heritage and Arts in Hong Kong, the work needed to be activated without Spong present, as she could not make the trip overseas. In her place, Spong assigned a gallery invigilator to walk with *Instrument H* from the second-floor exhibition space down a central spiral staircase to the ground level, out into the compound’s yard, and back into the exhibition room at the same time each day. There was some wiggle room within these routine parameters: the invigilator could position it on their bodies however they wished, and, when exhibited as a static art object, there was no fixed mode of display. At Tai Kwun, an invigilator draped the ungainly chain over their shoulders and carried its ends in their palms. Once back in the exhibition space, the *Instrument* was hung on the walls in different wave-like formations. At a subsequent exhibition in Vancouver, it was exhibited on the floor.

Despite its coherence with its predecessors, *Instrument H* also marked a pivotal turning point in this series. It is the first of the eight existing *Instruments* that is portable, interactive and therefore dependent on bodily movements and contact. Principally, it is also the first *Instrument* that is not named after individual persons, who are usually Spong’s close friends and collaborators, but rather an unidentified horde of gluttonous, vampiric mouths—human and nonhuman, consumer and scavenger alike.<sup>54</sup> Spong is cognizant of the “perverse” irony that, at the height of social distancing measures, she physically salvaged littered leftovers stained with strangers’ saliva and viscera to make this work, perhaps signalling an “abject” turn in her search for intimacy and connection as embodied in her *Instruments*.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, reiterating the main tenets and intentions of her practice, Spong is clear about opting to “take [her] position out” of her work, thinking instead about her practice as “a mirror of how others perceive her”, based on their own preconceptions or experiences of biraciality.<sup>56</sup> Paradoxically, the artist inverts her curiosity and desire for interpersonal relations, deflecting





or, more accurately, *sharing* these expectations with people who experience and are involved in her artwork. Placing herself at this conceptual remove, the artist does not shy away from her personal and socio-political affiliations, or wish for her work to be somehow transcultural or airy-fairy. Any attempt to totally eradicate the affective and lived realities of subjectivity would only invoke what literary theorist Madhavi Menon calls a dastardly cue for “an anodyne liberalism that insists one can be whatever one “chooses” to be”, a politically and ethically untenable path.<sup>57</sup> “Embracing the universal,” as Menon insightfully argues, “does not ask for the sacrifice of the particular but only an indifference to it. Far from telling us to ignore ontological categories, universalism demands that we acknowledge the fact of our restless movement among them.”<sup>58</sup> It is in this vein that Spong intentionally mediates her artworks, not with an aggrandized ‘I’, but with the personas, presences and utterances of others—musicians, family members, strangers, animals, art objects made by other artists, the deceased—in order to arrest the reductive instrumentalization and facile transmission of symbolic purity. An experience of her work calls for a formal and sensorial engagement with the conceptual complexity at hand. In this regard, Spong is acutely self-reflexive. Personifying an experience of her artworks would feel something like a tense dance: guarded yet selectively forthcoming, holding steadfast to a sense of wonder without giving in to (too much) naiveté. Her artistic world is charmed, hermetic, protected, yet porous. Admonishing responsible transformations of the self that underline the necessity of limits within such itinerant intensities, philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes the notion of a “sustainable subjectivity” that welcomes “vitality and transgression ... without self-destruction”.<sup>59</sup> Excess and exploration, in this instance, are grounded in an ethics of the self.

Jettisoning her subject position, Spong thus summons a potentially generative act: the event of spiritual possession, which conjures what Ashley Thompson theorises through the Buddhist concept of the “non-self”, an “experience of the self (if we can still use this name) as radically de-possessed of itself, emerging as a site of radical *mise en abyme* of any possible subjectivity.”<sup>60</sup> Thompson formulates this concept in relation to her analysis of the Phimeanakas inscription, a 12th-century epigraphic account of Buddhist spirit possession, in which one Queen Jayarājadevī channels the spirit of her deceased husband, the late king, to her own body. But this process, Thompson argues, is not one of a simplistic, subservient, or phobic effacement to make way for a hegemonic patriarch. On the contrary, “not unlike the Buddha, Jayarājadevī comes into her own as a sovereign subject as she accomplishes a process of self-mastery by which she sheds her personal self.”<sup>61</sup> The event

of possession in Jayarājadevī's instance, as Thompson postulates through her analysis of the inscription, further suggests and sublimates associations with Buddha and nature itself.<sup>62</sup> Reminiscent of the paradoxical detachment and closeness that Spong's *Instruments* give rise to, Jayarājadevī's relinquishment of her self actualizes a supreme, omnipotent version of that very self.

Thompson emphasizes how possession can “engender history”, how it can “literally and figuratively” *make* history by “giv[ing] voice to ... ‘subject positions’ that are silenced in traditional histories”, in particular a femininity that “might not always be attributable to or characteristic of women” and biological assignations.<sup>63</sup> That said, she makes apparent that this is not merely a teleological recuperative exercise, obedient to a myopic politics of inclusion.<sup>64</sup> Thompson argues that history (and indeed the practice of historiography) does not “simply striv[e] for mastery” but engages in a “dynamic balance between mastering and letting itself be mastered”.<sup>65</sup> Interpellated, history's subjects in turn interpellate its apparatus and power. Consequently, possession generates productive “reflections on notions of individual and community in Southeast Asia ... in particular to theories of territorial boundaries and cultural belonging.”<sup>66</sup> It is precisely a “very disciplined practice [like possession] which opens up [these] previously conceived and yet often unperceived limits.”<sup>67</sup>

Exemplified in her most recent solo exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery, Spong's meticulous instructions, formations and parameters for the people handling her *Instruments* actually expand and transform sonic, performative, communicative, conceptual and interpersonal possibilities. Moreover, by consciously extricating herself from what is, at its roots, a familial and personal investment, and introducing as mediators synchronic cultural sources, strangers, experimental musicians and a whole host of other unpredictable and theoretical variables, Spong dilutes the purchase of identitarian deliverables for assimilation and categorization. She works in ways that recall Luciana Parisi's appraisal of queer theory's “ontology of performativity”, in which Parisi speculates that in order to evoke “a politics of future sexual becoming”, one needs to aspire towards “novel utterances and modalities that do not and must not revolve around being queer itself” in order to resist the ease of “falling back onto the ontological constitution of queer sexuality.”<sup>68</sup> The criticality of performativity—the prerogative to speak and enact into being—is discerned precisely at its nascency, when criticality is *not* an exorable endgame, and the abstraction of that which has not yet happened is permissible, breathable, non-deterministic.

Following Parisi and Thompson's expositions, I argue that Spong's self-effacement in her artworks paradoxically broadens inherited constitutions of

an ‘authentic’ or acceptable Southeast Asian art history and discourse: What subject matter might this field comprise? With what methods and approaches can it be conceived? Where is it located, if at all? Who can belong within its spheres of life and thought?

## No models

For her 2018 performance, *Tasseography of a Rat’s Nest*, Spong delivered an original script deriving from her reading of the leaves in a rat’s nest outside the window of her residency apartment in Berlin. The rat had become an unlikely but welcome companion during her time in a foreign city. Describing the presumably “silly” act of communicating with a rat through the equally cryptic and occult medium of tea-leaf divination, Spong said she was “trying to understand” the rodent.<sup>69</sup> Leaving the analysis of the many complexities of this performance for another occasion, this arguably impossible endeavour shores up a central aporia in the artist’s practice: a desire for connection and familiarity that the artist establishes and then intentionally foils. It is as if she completes a figurative puzzle, only to purposefully mess it up and start over with yet another conundrum that requires her devoted attention.

Sharing the impasses and difficulties that she faced while trying to finesse her artistic approach, Spong feels that there was “never a model” for her.<sup>70</sup> Realizing the futility of trying to “close the gap”—between, for example, origin and diaspora, representation and abstraction, fidelity and dispersal—Spong works *with it* instead to think through her “constant negotiation between intimacy and distance.”<sup>71</sup> I would go further to argue that it is that very *lack*—of canonical likeness, contextual situatedness, receptive empathy—that may in fact prove productive as a model in and of itself. It can therefore be hypothesized that Spong’s *Instruments* perform her ceaseless negotiation of place(lessness) in the world.<sup>72</sup>

To that end, Spong’s practice mimics a web onto which seemingly stray references and paraphernalia stick without hierarchical arrangement, communed via her unique synaptic network and politics of association that brook no singular stratifying authority. Sounding a valiant call for the “autonomy” of Southeast Asia, historian John D. Legge argues that characteristic to the region is its ability to “borrow or absorb” the “external pressures” of other cultural and regionalist influences, whether Indian, European or otherwise, while maintaining the “independence and authority [of its] local cultures”.<sup>73</sup> Spong’s artistic methodology can be viewed in the same light: unfamiliar or foreign references, modalities and actants actually speak to, rather than against, the integrity of her artistic, conceptual, political and personal core.

The generative tension of vague (in)decipherability is key to Spong's artistic stratagem. In her fieldwork on and with high fashion editorial models in New York and London, sociologist Ashley Mears similarly describes their peculiarly ineffable yet highly coveted "ambiguous specificity", a "contradictory twin imperative for sameness and difference, to simultaneously fit in and stand out."<sup>74</sup> An aspirational template of exclusivity and success, a model ironically has nothing to model herself on. Comparable to this prevarication, Spong recalls observing the improvisational "ambidexterity" of gamelan troupe members when playing their respective instruments, a performative quality that she intentionally carries over into her own set of *Instruments*.<sup>75</sup> With a comprehension of the untranslatable gravity of history and context, I refer further to SA Smythe's compelling articulation of a "black nonbinary method", which calls for a "neither/nor divestment from any of the currently presented options in favour of something else yet to be presented or embodied"—an "imaginative freedomscape".<sup>76</sup> Smythe's method is the imperative ingredient to their proposal for a racially politicized European Trans Studies that is accountable to the plurality of Black life and emancipated from the academic institution's opportunistic genrefication.

Equipped and enabled by the cumulative force of these critical methodologies, I hope it has become apparent that I do not perceive Spong's artistic practice as atomistic objects, cultural performativity or identitarian claim. Rather, as the artist puts it, her practice *is* her many different (and perhaps even divergent, opaque and labyrinthine) approaches to things.<sup>77</sup> Spong's artworks perform the entanglements, contradictions, vexations, passions and complexities that make up her lived reality and networks. Likewise, in her testimony-driven ethnography, anthropologist Wen-Chin Chang reneges on one-dimensional frameworks. Chang calls attention to the agency, "dynamism" and "power" of Yunnanese Chinese migrants who move in and between the borderlands of China, Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia.<sup>78</sup> These "borderlanders on the move," Chang motions, "compel us to rethink the [derogatory connotations of] marginality and other peripheral attributes ascribed to them" by nationalist dogmas that draw a "strict line" between inclusion and exclusion, stability and vagrancy, civility and savagery, power and subordination.<sup>79</sup> The Yunnanese Chinese migrants of Chang's study, especially the women and religious minorities that she foregrounds, speak to the reality that their never-ending physical and metaphorical search for a place to call 'home' can in fact be an edifying way of life. Mirroring Spong's aesthetic and conceptual sensibilities, they move through the world in-veterately interstitial, giving nothing away.

**BIOGRAPHY**

**Wong Binghao** eclectically constellates and mediates ideas, scenes, and devotions. They generate contextually specific, conceptually capacious and emotionally available readings and experiences of art in the hope of more expansive, ethical worlds. They are currently C-MAP Asia Fellow for the Museum of Modern Art.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The writer extends their sincerest gratitude to the editors, May Adadol Ingawanij, and an anonymous peer reviewer for their intellectual prescience and direction on an earlier draft of this essay, and most of all to Sriwhana Spong for two years (and counting) of conversation, shared curiosity, collaboration and camaraderie.
- <sup>2</sup> I am especially indebted to May Adadol Ingawanij and Roger Nelson for their illuminating signposting of the “essayistic” and “curatorial” respectively in my approach to contemporary art.
- <sup>3</sup> Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008), pp. 60–1.
- <sup>4</sup> Sriwhana Spong and Caterina Riva, “Sriwhana Spong: A Re-Enchantment of the World”, 28 October 2020, <https://so-far.online/weekly/sriwhana-spong-a-reenchantment-of-the-world/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Eka Kurniawan, *Beauty is a Wound* (Sydney: New Directions, 2015), trans. Annie Tucker, p. 80.
- <sup>6</sup> “Mariah Carey Genius Level: The Full Interview on Her Iconic Hits & Songwriting Process”, 16 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdMQ31DITjg>. See also “Mariah Carey: “Nobody Could Fully Understand My Experience” | The Oprah Winfrey Show | OWN”, 7 August 2020, first filmed in 1999, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pcz\\_72\\_8a58](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pcz_72_8a58). On being biracial, Mariah said: “I felt completely different. I felt like there was nobody who could fully understand my experience.” Mariah also mentions that she wrote “Outside” to express these feelings.
- <sup>7</sup> See also Eka Kurniawan, *Beauty*, p. 71: “Don’t be foolish, child,” said Hanneke. “Japan will not just pass you by.” “Whatever the case may be, a Stammler must stay here,” she said stubbornly. “You know as well as I do who we must wait for.” Brought to tears by her hardheadedness, Marietje wailed, “They will make you a prisoner of war!” “Grandma, my name is Dewi Ayu and everyone knows that’s the name of a native.”
- <sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, “Census, Map, Museum”, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 166. Kurniawan and Anderson were familiar with one another, having first met in Jakarta in 2007. A year later, Anderson introduced Kurniawan to English-reading audiences by translating one of his short stories for a journal on Indonesia published by Cornell. Anderson also penned the introduction to one of Kurniawan’s novels, *Man Tiger*. Kurniawan in turn wrote Anderson’s obituary when he passed away in 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> Anderson, “Census”, p. 165.
- <sup>10</sup> Ariel Heryanto, “Can There Be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?”, *Moussons* 5 (2002): 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Heryanto, “Southeast Asians”, p. 6.

- <sup>12</sup> Heryanto, "Southeast Asians", p. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), p. 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Mock, *Realness*, p. 13.
- <sup>15</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 116.
- <sup>16</sup> Prosser, *Second*, p. 101.
- <sup>17</sup> Prosser, *Second*, pp. 8, 174.
- <sup>18</sup> Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures", in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 373–4.
- <sup>19</sup> Tang, "Infrastructures", p. 375.
- <sup>20</sup> Sriwhana Spong and Tendai John Mutambu, "In Conversation with Sriwhana Spong", *Ocula*, 6 July 2018, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sriwhana-spong/>.
- <sup>21</sup> Spong and Mutambu, "Conversation", and Spong and Riva, "Re-Enchantment".
- <sup>22</sup> Spong and Riva, "Re-Enchantment".
- <sup>23</sup> Correspondence with artist, July 2020 and November 2021. For example, Antonia wrote a score for *Instrument A* and Frances wrote the timings for *Instrument C*.
- <sup>24</sup> Spong and Mutambu, "Conversation".
- <sup>25</sup> Spong and Mutambu, "Conversation": "Traditionally, each village in Bali has its own tuning system, so you cannot take an instrument from one village and play it in another, as the pitch is unique to each community." See also Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical Traditions: Reimagining Culture in Balinese Contemporary Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 145: "Like singers, each gamelan has a unique *embat* or tuning/timbrel quality ... A gamelan's *embat* comes to represent an aural watermark for a community. Gamelan outline an auditory and social space corresponding to particular notions of territory primarily concerned with mutual acquaintance. Everyone knows what it sounds like to be home." I thank Spong for recommending this book.
- <sup>26</sup> Ann Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 3 (July 1992): 520, 550.
- <sup>27</sup> Chie Ikeya, "Colonial Intimacies in Comparative Perspective: Intermarriage, Law and Cultural Difference in British Burma", *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14, 1 (Spring 2013).
- <sup>28</sup> Mark Rappolt, "Singapore Biennale 2019: An interview with Patrick D. Flores", *ArtReview Asia*, 21 November 2019, [https://artreview.com/ara\\_winter\\_2019\\_interview\\_patrick\\_d\\_flores\\_singapore\\_biennale/](https://artreview.com/ara_winter_2019_interview_patrick_d_flores_singapore_biennale/).

- <sup>29</sup> Jim Supangkat, "Multiculturalism/Multimodernism", in *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 113. See also Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 205: "And yet it is likely that for a long time to come, while modernizing at home, the Indonesian national and cultural identity will be stressed abroad, at international fairs, on propaganda publications, or good-will missions, with all the forms and colors animating Indonesia's old traditional arts and institutions."
- <sup>30</sup> Harry J. Benda, "Decolonization in Indonesia: The Problem of Continuity and Change", *The American Historical Review* 70, 4 (July 1965): 1061–2, 1071–2.
- <sup>31</sup> Judith Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1974), pp. 13, 17–8, 25.
- <sup>32</sup> Sumarsam, *Javanese Gamelan and the West* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, University of Rochester Press, 2013), p. 112. See also Becker, *Gamelan*, p. 22: "A student learned method or process from a teacher, not full content. The emphasis has now changed, and the student memorizes formulas, or the content of the piece."
- <sup>33</sup> Becker, *Gamelan*, p. 9.
- <sup>34</sup> Becker, *Gamelan*, p. 13.
- <sup>35</sup> Adrian Vickers, *Balinese Art: Paintings and Drawings of Bali 1800–2010* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), pp. 43–4, 77–8, 161. See also Vickers, *Balinese*, p. 199: "These changes in patronage and social context meant that 'tradition' had become highly mutable, even in a conservative painting style like Kamasan's. However, these twentieth-century changes were but a continuation of a process of change which went on throughout the history of Kamasan art. Kamasan artists have continued to adapt to modern circumstances." See also Siobhan Campbell, "Women, Tradition and Art History in Bali", *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 3, 1 (March 2019): 78: "modernity in Southeast Asia [is] a much more complex process than traditional versus modernising tendencies", and "modernity in Bali undeniably involves the incorporation of modern into traditional forms" and pp. 93–4: "Despite [artist Mangku Muriati's] assertions of originality [in her renditions of the commonly painted narratives of the Mahabharata and Ramayana], innovations of this nature are not considered to subvert the conventions of tradition."
- <sup>36</sup> May Adadol Ingawanij, "Cinematic Animism and Contemporary Southeast Asian Artists' Moving Image", *Screen* 62, 4 (Winter 2021).
- <sup>37</sup> Becker, *Gamelan*, pp. 1–5.
- <sup>38</sup> McGraw, *Traditions*, p. 4.
- <sup>39</sup> Becker, *Gamelan*, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> Correspondence with artist, July 2020.



- 41 Spong and Mutambu, "Conversation". This has not prevented infringements from spectators. Perceiving it as an interactive installation, an especially curious visitor ended up completely shattering *Instrument F*.
- 42 Correspondence with artist, September 2020.
- 43 Alexandra T. Vazquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 29–30, 42. See also Joan Kee, "Corroborators in Arms: The Early Works of Melvin Edwards and Ron Miyashiro", *Oxford Art Journal* 43, 1 (March 2020): 54–5 and 67–8.
- 44 Vazquez, *Listening*, pp. 18–9.
- 45 Correspondence with artist, June 2021 and September 2021.
- 46 Correspondence with artist, June 2021.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Correspondence with artist, July 2020.
- 50 Becker, *Gamelan*, pp. 9, 24.
- 51 Becker, *Gamelan*, p. 6.
- 52 Vickers, *Balinese*, p. 58. See also Campbell, "Women", p. 80. Campbell analyzes the gender imbalance in the production and perception of the work. While both men and women are involved in the production and exchange of art, not everyone who participates in this work is accorded the same status.
- 53 Correspondence with artist, June 2021.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Correspondence with artist, July 2020 and January 2022. Spong is coming to terms with the fact that the lifelong "demand for transparency" often foisted upon her by critics and viewers reveals more about external expectations and neuroses than her internal state of being and sense of self. Correspondence with artist, February 2021.
- 57 Madhavi Menon, *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 22.
- 58 Menon, *Indifference*, p. 13.
- 59 Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), pp. 156–60, 219.
- 60 Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016), pp. 115–6.
- 61 Thompson, *Engendering*, p. 136.
- 62 Thompson, *Engendering*, pp. 134–5.
- 63 Thompson, *Engendering*, pp. 113, 119.
- 64 Thompson, *Engendering*, p. 141.

- <sup>65</sup> Thompson, *Engendering*, p. 119.
- <sup>66</sup> Thompson, *Engendering*, pp. 114, 116. I would add that the contours of an (especially gender diverse) self—their subject positions, bodily assemblages, and internal, psychic realms—can be freed of socio-cultural impositions to ‘engender’ their own paradigms.
- <sup>67</sup> Thompson, *Engendering*, p. 119.
- <sup>68</sup> Luciana Parisi, “The Adventures of a Sex”, in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 72–5.
- <sup>69</sup> Correspondence with artist, May 2020.
- <sup>70</sup> Correspondence with artist, July 2020.
- <sup>71</sup> Correspondence with artist, February 2021.
- <sup>72</sup> Correspondence with artist, July 2020.
- <sup>73</sup> J.D. Legge, “The Writing of Southeast Asian History”, in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Vol. I*, ed. N. Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 25–6.
- <sup>74</sup> Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 119.
- <sup>75</sup> Correspondence with the artist, September 2021. See also McGraw, *Traditions*, pp. 165, 168: This improvisational fluidity of motion finds its likely companion in *ombak*—“literally meaning wave in Indonesian and Balinese”—thus gesturing toward the “fluctuations in temporal and dynamic flows” that are true to the gamelan sound.
- <sup>76</sup> SA Smythe, “Black Life, Trans Study: On Black Nonbinary Method, European Trans Studies, and the Will to Institutionalization”, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, 2 (May 2021): 232–8.
- <sup>77</sup> Correspondence with artist, May 2020.
- <sup>78</sup> Wen-Chin Chang, *Beyond Borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 242–3.
- <sup>79</sup> Chang, *Beyond*, pp. 12–3.

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