

the virus

and the oracle

jane goodall

'The word is now a virus,' William Burroughs wrote in 1960. 'It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system.' To walk through a gallery of contemporary art is to witness the external signs of this invasion at every turn. Graffiti has spilled in from the streets to occupy large expanses of expertly lit wall. Newspaper print, road signs, product names have embedded themselves in the exhibited works. Neon letters glow out from darkened spaces. Vast landscape paintings insist on talking to you, their hills and rivers overlaid by printed words jostling for primacy.

As an artist you may work to control this jostling, fading the letters or breaking up the words and phrases into elusive fragments. But the brain of the viewer defeats you. Cognitive primacy is with the words, because words are what the urban brain produces in response to images. Silence is too much to ask. We have lost the option of silence, Burroughs insists. 'Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk.'¹ Mona Lisas and Grecian Urns (according to Keats) may escape the viral chatter but most of the works in contemporary galleries are born of it and must find their communication wavelengths through an airspace in which words breed like hot-housed bacteria. Whether or not to allow them to be overt presences in the work, and if so on what terms: those are the options.

As viruses, some words are more lethal than others. Some are antidotes, on the homeopathic principle of answering toxins with toxins, which may partly explain Burroughs's preference for obscenities – the words classified as toxic by a verbally infected society. Obscenities and expletives are always popular with artists, who understand that walls somehow demand them and that public space graffiti is only a form of obedience to this imperative. What is demanded can have mysterious complicities with what is banned. In 1992, a group of Singapore artists led by Suzann Victor and Susie Lingham calling themselves the *5th Passage* were forced to close an exhibition in response to media outrage and government pressure. The immediate trigger was a performance by Joseph Ng, in which he cut away his public hair in public: a 'public protest' as it was styled. As a counter-protest, Suzann Victor created circles of cursive letters made from human hair, words referring to the maternal hidden and forbidden:

*Vagina clitoris, labia, amniotic fluid, mammary glands, fallopian tubes*²

Words are signs. That is a truism to a semiotician, but their visual presence in art makes them work as spatial indicators, suggesting that they contain directions or instructions. A number of artists have picked up on the subliminal, pervasive role of the road sign in giving us directions. To the law and the rational mind these may be applicable only for traffic control, but there are residual parts of the brain that do not know this. Once the cognitive circuits have opened themselves to the imprint of an imperative, the preliminary response mechanism will kick in: be alert... pay attention... do as you are told... go where you are directed. The brain, after all, has always had a sneaking suspicion that these signs are metaphysical, that they are messages from the cosmos about the direction of your life. An artist can exploit this so as to confuse your relationship with signs of all kinds, especially those that carry imperatives (as perhaps all signs do at some level of communication.)

like the sun has the day

What is an imperative? In an installation coinciding with the Commonwealth Games earlier this year, Tony Schwensen sat in a building site shed watching television coverage of the competition with the orders FAIL AGAIN/ FAIL BETTER taped in block capitals on the floor in front of him. The words are Samuel Beckett's and their role as antidote in this context is obvious. Possibly Beckett – notorious for his particularity about the terms in which his words were presented – would not have liked them applied specifically to athletic competition. Their application is surely nothing less than metaphysical, in a world of Darwinian competition, where the imperative to succeed has become a general fiat.

Of course, art has imperatives of its own and the imperative mood is often to the fore in its experimental guises – agit-prop, dada, situationist, futurist, punk – precisely because these movements have been energised by responses to the institutional imperatives of academies and national collections.

moving a-long with speed

Cheo Chai-Hiang's installation *Singapore River* in this year's Singapore Biennale alludes to an episode earlier in his career, when he submitted some abstract minimalist works to the Singapore Modern Art Society and had them rejected for being 'hollow' and 'monotonous.' Representational paintings of the Singapore River were the premium currency of the Singapore art establishment, so this becomes the central message of Cheo's new exhibition, which includes the text of the 1972 letter from the Modern Art Society, each of its pages blown up onto floor to ceiling canvas screens. Instead of representations, there are frames: neon rectangles, a black metal trolley frame, and an ornately carved picture frame containing this printed text:

*There are at least 40 Singapore River paintings in the Singapore Art Museum alone. Hundreds of other such paintings have been produced and consumed, simply forgotten.*³

Images, too, can be a virus invading the cultural nervous system with an agenda of complete take-over. When this happens, words may be resorted to as a counter-strategy.

Imperatives produce counter-imperatives, and so propagate their species. 'The art situation is not to be interpreted visually' is the instruction of a work by Malaysian artist Redza Piyadasa, also in the 2006 Singapore Biennale. The message is presented in stencilled letters on a white plywood board.⁴ When the distinct sign systems of words and art are played off against each other, they can present as parallel semiotic universes, eternally signalling to each other but never to merge in a shared wavelength of communication. Alternatively, they can present as if on a collision course, where the impact will cause a melt-down in human comprehension in the way that a Zen koan does, through fusion and confusion of irreconcilable cognitive circuitry. An accompanying work by Piyadasa is a classic round-seated wooden chair with the seat bisected, one half painted white and the other glossed in a natural wood stain. The back is whole, but also divided by the bi-colour scheme. Its message is: 'Why did the Chinese artists refuse to halt reality in a single instance of time?'⁵ Both works were originally created in the 1970s but their capacity to nag at the consciousness is undiminished.

There are overt Zen references in Heather Ellyard's work: the Sengai-style circles, triangles and squares juxtaposed with her sketches of the Willendorf Venus; her preference for interspersing images from the ancient world with verbal hints of timelessness and eternal enigma. Ellyard is unashamedly meddling in the prophetic in her recent work *Inventories*

and *Commentaries*, an extended sequence of alternating image and messages with the overarching motto: 'Empires rise and fall, stars are born and die.'⁷ Images and messages carrying with them the aura of deep time suggest, perhaps, that somewhere back in prehistory they had a common birth,

What did he say?

a birth in which heavenly bodies or unknown gods may have been involved. If this remote point of intersection were to revisit us, what then? White letters, like a child's chalked writing on a blackboard, might have been scripted by the sphinx. 'If I am without name then who am I?' In the square beside them is a primordial bull like the

ones we know from the Lascaux caves. Streams of tarnished red like old blood stains pour over its head and shoulders. Are we supposed to be reminded too of that most traumatic of the ancient mysteries, the ritual of the Tauroboleum, where the initiate was placed underneath the grid upon which the giant sacrificial bull was slaughtered, so as to be bathed in its blood? Ellyard's work is a world away from that of the Vienna action group, though. Antiquity speaks here in a quieter voice, always enigmatic:

naming the Rose in Hebrew or Arabic makes no difference

in the dark

sometimes elegiac:

by the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept

ultimately penitent:

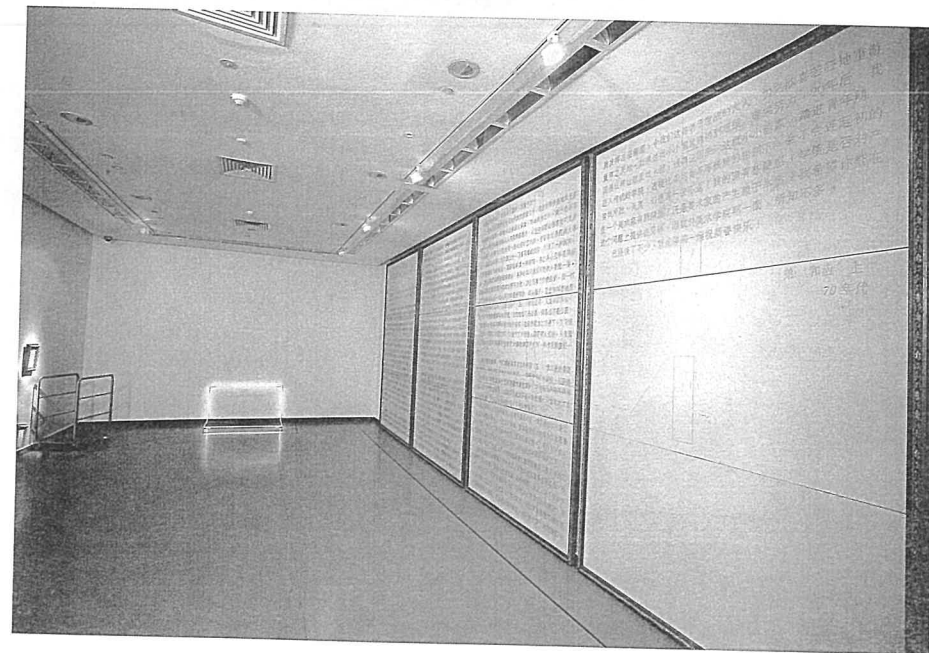
Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.

stones and shoes

IMAGES THIS SPREAD: Barbara Campbell 1001 nights cast 2005-6, writing prompts for performance, watercolour, each approximately 7.2 x 10.5 cm.



WHY DID THE CHINESE ARTISTS
REFUSE TO HALT REALITY IN A SINGLE
INSTANT IN TIME?



There are signs that the elegiac, the enigmatic and the penitent are making a comeback in the art world, together with the cognisance that to live under the sign of understanding is both a moment and a marathon. Sydney artist Barbara Campbell recently celebrated the halfway mark of her *1001 nights cast* project. Each morning, Campbell posts a prompt on the internet, a little phrase taken from one of the newspaper reports from the Middle East, but extracted so that it seems to leave its context and grow into some other kind of reportage, cryptic and oracular. 'Like the sun has the day', 'drifting sideways', 'emerged from the dust', 'What did he say?', 'moving along with speed', 'stones and shoes: the words are blocked against a watery, translucent colour wash so they look as if they might have spontaneously manifested on the screen, and from them a new story is grown, by one of Campbell's volunteer contributors who may be in some distant part of the globe, to be told at sunset in a real-time web-cast.

It is worth remembering that the Sphinx always spoke in riddles, playing little games of brain-scrambling strategy with the enquirer. If the messaging obsessions of the word virus could work themselves out of the trap of short-circuiting imperatives they might reveal something else about

FACING PAGE: Redza Piyadasa **BACKGROUND:** *Entry Points* 1978, acrylic on wood, 152cm x 136cm; **FOREGROUND:** *A Matter of Time* 1977, mixed media, 144 x 352 x 200 cm, collection of National Art Gallery, Malaysia. **ABOVE:** Cheo Chai-Hiang's 'X 5' (*Re-thinking Singapore River*) neon, framed statement, trolley, *Proposed* 1972, re-contextualised 2006 for Singapore Biennale. Collection of the artist.

themselves: a secret yearning not to give orders but rather to be oracles, channelling strange truths from who knows what sources. Even William Burroughs gives way to the oracular, here and there, amidst the outpourings of abjection and pornography.

'Listen to my words anywhere. Listen to my last words any world.'

He calls upon 'the all-powerful boards and syndicates of the earth,' posing a question worthy of the Sphinx:

'What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit?'

Unlike the Sphinx, Burroughs is compelled to answer his own question, as if the answering word just refuses to be held back, and the answer is 'the word.'⁸

¹ William Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* in James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg, eds, *Word Virus: The William Burroughs Reader*, London: HarperCollins, 1999, p208.

² *ibid.*

³ Suzann Victor, 'His Mother is a Theatre' 1994, documented in Suzann Victor and Susie Lingham, *An Equation of Vulnerability*, Singapore: contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2002.

⁴ Cheo Chai-Hiang, text for *Singapore River*, Singapore Biennale 2006.

⁵ Redza Piyadasa, *A Non-Visual Art Situation*, 1976, Singapore Biennale 2006.

⁶ Redza Piyadasa, *A Matter of Time*, 1977, Singapore Biennale 2006.

⁷ Heather Ellyard, *Inventories and Commentaries*, Span Gallery, Melbourne, 2006. Also featured in *Artlink* Vol. 26 no 3, 2006, pp34-39.

⁸ William Burroughs, 'Nova Express', *The William Burroughs Reader*, p225.

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