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SINGAPORE

TALKING ABOUT TALKING: "BETWEEN CONVERSATIONS"

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ZHAO RENHUI, *Group Portrait With a Bus Stop*, 1970s, Tuas, Singapore, 2013, archival Piezographic print with orange border, 100 × 150 cm. Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.



WONG LIP CHIN, installation view of *Exquisite Paradox* (2013) at Yavuz Fine Art, Singapore, 2013. Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.

With a reputation for being less than accommodating to notions of free speech—approaching, at times, a caricature of regimented utilitarianism—Singapore is perhaps not the first place one would look when seeking an open dialogue. “Between Conversations” curated by Louis Ho at Yavuz Fine Art—featuring the work of 20 Singaporean artists variously engaging the subject of conversational process—therefore acquires greater significance as a timely exploration advocating speaking *with* one another rather than speaking *to* one another.

The deceptively dubbed “Our Singapore Conversation”—a year-long government-sponsored consultative initiative launched after the 2011 general elections in the wake of the ruling party’s worst electoral showing in history—serves as the exhibition’s point of departure. Characterized as an empty PR gesture—offering boosterism masquerading as dialogue without any actual redress to, and often overt avoidance of, sensitive subjects—the state-driven national conversation forms an illustrative counterpoint to the approach of the show. Process-based, organic, open-ended and experimental, the exhibition “runs contrary to the spirit of micromanagement we see so often in Singapore,” said Ho in an interview with *AAP*.

The first “conversation” took place in the month preceding the show’s opening. The gallery was transformed into an open studio for the artists and curator to come and go at their own pace. Such a format might have posed something of a risk for the gallery, which boldly threw open its doors despite having effectively no idea what it would be hosting in a month’s time. In fact, even a week prior to the show’s opening, when asked for specifics regarding the show’s setup, Ho admitted, “at this point, your guess is as good as mine.”

Though conversations do tend to espouse collaboration, the format was not required of the artists. However, many did end up pairing together of their own accord—whether based on prior working and social relationships, shared interests, or other factors—and their conversations led to various forms of collaboration. Some of these conversations tended to bud off from the open studio into various online forums, but the results had a tangible presence.

The works are now on view at Yavuz, and, as the show’s title in the plural might suggest, “Between Conversations” doesn’t concern itself with one conversation in particular, but many that occur among a shifting group of interlocutors. In addition to the variety of conversational groupings, the importance of fostering overlap between disparate subject matter is also emphasized.

A particularly eye-catching result of a one-on-one conversation is found in the collaboration between Wong Lip Chin and Zhao Renhui. Wong’s *Exquisite Paradox* (all works in the show produced on site, 2013) comprised a reinterpretation of a 1970s-era bus stop, with tiled flooring and a single, sparkling orange seat. Meanwhile, Zhao’s print *Group Portrait with a Bus Stop* features a group of sight seers at the last bus stop in the sand dunes of one of Singapore’s reclamation zones. While sharing the familiar icon of the bus stop, each artist examines different facets of the city-state’s growing pains.

Conversely, in their collaborative effort 黑社会 (which translates as “Triad”), Stelah Lim and Kim Whye Kee seek to synthesize their respective voices, combining their practices to form a unified whole. The piece they created consists of vitrines that require viewers to peek through scratches on the surface in order to view the objects within, commenting obliquely on the challenges of belonging in Singapore, a state achieved only by way of a long, drawn-out process.

Expanding the conversational arena, Green Zeng, in his work *Our Singapore Constitution*—which features all 163 articles of the constitution in red, inscribed on a white pillar—invites several other artists to respond to specific areas of the document. Among others, Mark Wong addresses the free-speech clause by supplying synthesized-speech excerpts from John Cage’s *Silence* in the four official languages of Singapore—English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese—while Chloe Cheng responds to the subject of citizenship with a copy of her birth certificate, effaced with a golden marker.

As if to underscore the open-ended, indeterminate spirit of the show, *Assaying Eden*, the interactive collaboration between Ezzam Rahman, Vincent Twardzik Ching and Ching Chor Leng, alludes to the possibility of a definitive final state while never actually presenting such an end. An array of mundane, tactile materials, like PVC pipes and rubber bands, available to be reconfigured, presenting the viewer a variable set of possible experiences. This open-ended format is an attempt to inspire reflection on the target-driven nature of development in Singapore, and to offer possible of alternative solutions.

Cultivating continuous interactivity and exchange, and highlighting the tendency of conversations to branch, fork and end up in odd tangents, with the presentation of the artworks in “Between Conversations” the conversation has just begun. Scheduled walk-throughs and round-table discussions are planned to see where else the discussion may lead.

Between Conversations is on view at [Yavuz Fine Art](#) from August 31–September 22, 2013.