

UNSPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Brian Curtin and Steve Dutton

The genesis of *Unspeaking Engagements* was in our discussions about curating an exhibition of contemporary art that would explicitly address an international basis. We quickly decided that the representation of national or trans-national affiliations was not at issue. (As if the reinforcement of notions of national difference, for the purpose of comparison, is a useful or interesting thing to do – if even possible). Rather, we became concerned with ideas of how subjectivities can be produced by an artwork. This concern has the vantage of signaling notions of ‘difference’, national and otherwise, while creating a space for the production of understandings that are not reducible to some essential sense of locality. In other words, the experience of art could be understood in terms of the active production of meaning rather than as a detached deliberation on the significance of a given object; and, the

production of meaning may be related to cultural identity but not reducible to it. Thinking in these terms brought us to theoretical debates about performativity and more recent inquiries into relational and/or participatory art. The critic Claire Bishop claimed Thailand as the “spiritual home” of the latter; and, indeed, the work of a number of artists in Thailand has informed much writing on that topic. But theories and understandings exist to be expanded, revised and contested.

Unspeakable Engagements approaches major questions within international contemporary art practices - who does what, how, when, and to or with whom - as a consequence of linking theoretical debates about the intersection of performance and performativity to critical issues of relational and/or participatory art. However, the international and transnational basis of *Unspeakable Engagements* highlights different terms for understanding common methods and aims. Theories and sensibilities developed in one part of the world can be radically tested in another, provoking unexpected intensities and new formations, which, one could argue, is the main task of both the curator and the artist. As Nicolas Bourriaud suggests in *Altermodern*: “keeping the ball in the air and the game alive: that is the function of the critic and the curator”, to which one could add the artist.

The artists in *Unspeakable Engagements* explore processes of physical and/or durational

engagement as a means of constituting the art’s *work*, as opposed to the *art-work*. Each artist addresses their own and/or the viewers’ awareness of issues of the human body in relation to time and space. The question at stake is how such awareness can be cultivated, felt, represented and ultimately proliferated through the *work* of art and, of course, what such cultivation might mean to the work of art itself.

Unspeakable Engagements showcases artworks as sites of shifting experiences, in differentiation from artworks that require detached observation and propose fixed or final interpretations. The common theme of the human body and duration, suggested to the artists at the start of the project, has not so much been dissolved as thoroughly picked over and represented in pieces as part of our trans-national and international context. Moreover, this common theme has morphed into a certain understanding of the body, particularly in relation to time, space and labour. This may simply be an unexpected outcome of the international scope along with the limited budget of this project but what nevertheless results is a form of short hand, or abbreviation of ‘the body’. Surrogates, often in the form of video, or sound, or drawing are plentiful; the various limits which surround any such project have, in this case, made a clear, if poetic, relationship between body-image-language.

In a number of artists’ work the human body can be understood, almost counter-intui-

tively, not so much as a corporeal thing but a corporeal thing *in transit*. The body is not so much a site as a method of transportation of site and self, and is also that which is transported (planes, trains and automobiles brought much of this work to Bangkok). The question of what happens to the body in the process of exchange and movement is significant. How do we, as an audience, perceive this reconstituted body? As residue, a-less-than-body or an equivalent, or are we able to perceive the body differently: as a thing or site always in motion and thus always involved with some form of doing (labour)? Are we, as audience, more 'real' than the work with which we engage?

In some works in *Unspeaking Engagements* we are left with a series of ghosts, images and shadows transported through space. Unlike something actually broadcast, these ghosts attempt to re-occupy a site from which they emerged in some form of haunting. Indeed, when reproduced they redefine the site from which they emerged, by actually re-constituting it and re-imagining it. They address directly the issue of the human body and what it means to not be present yet still manage to 'perform' some kind of presence.

There is something of a madness about some of these artworks. In transit, the body (and its absence) is marked by linguistic blips, utterances, whispers and faults – sounds which have an almost physical quality due to their supposed lack of meaning: repetition, stammers, guttural grunts, the animal: always something of

a reminder of origins. However, despite the density and heaviness of the body, much of the art finds in itself a capacity to float or to disappear and reappear.

Through spells, incantations and performances, it is language and image in all its abstractions that will travel and become transformed on the way. It is language and image that will weave a web around the body as though the body is a 'spoken' or 'imagined' thing, a thing conjured up from nothing and about to fall back into nothing.

Dr. Brian Curtin is a freelance art writer and curator based in Bangkok, and is currently an adjunct lecturer on the PhD program in Design Arts at Silpakorn University.

Steve Dutton (RCA) is an artist and Professor in Creative Practice at Coventry University in the UK. His projects have been exhibited throughout the UK and internationally.

ADAM JAMES
PARIS VAGABONDS

I consider myself to be somewhat of a social voyeur. Through a process of stalking, sketching, annotating and sometimes smelling, I developed a close yet distant relationship with five different Parisian tramps. My series of films *Paris Vagabonds* is an exploration of my own transformation into slapstick parodies of these modern day vagabonds. Employing strategies of the fool, I have attempted to deconstruct my own social standpoint to the 'modern day witch' as a way to unpick my relationship to the 'other'. Each film is a micro-nonsensical performance, in which the protagonist has been transplanted from his dystopia to a temporary utopian stage. These short films were created during a two month residency at Cite des Art in Paris, and were shot in the 19th century dream-like park loved by the Surrealists: Parc des Buttes-Chaumont.



Adam James
MR POSY 2008
Digital inkjet, 18.5 x 25.4 inches



Hester Reeve
THE CANONISATION OF HRH,
FROM THE BOOK PROJECT RELIC 2009
Photograph by David Williams

HESTER REEVE
THE DEVIL IS UNDONE

The Devil is Undone is an interactive screening of a live art action *The Devil is Undone (The arraignment of the Evil word set out before the Evil World?)* I carried out in the city of Lancaster during 2002. Traveling on foot from the so-called witches' cemetery on the outskirts to the 12th century witches' dungeon in HM Prison Lancaster Castle, I used my body and a large spear to spell out the letters of a 1604 death sentence on the famous Pendle Witches. The death sentence was spelt out letter by letter and backwards – in effect undoing the text that had sent 12 innocent people to the gallows.

The Devil is Undone (The arraignment of the Evil word set out before the Evil World?) was made in reaction to the beginning of the 2nd Gulf War, in terms of political leaders' reliance on the word 'evil' as a scapegoat term. The word evil is possibly the most meaningless word in the English dictionary. However, just like the Pendle witch death sentences, the word can be a spear in the hands of powerful political leaders and used to exterminate life. This work forms part of a series of 'body-spelling' pieces through which I explore ways of forcing flesh and text literally together in an effort of conscious agency-in-the-world as well as a creative means of involving the audience in documentation.

INSTITUTE OF BEASTS

CYBER-MONGREL

Cyber-Mongrel is a DV animation of a 3D rotating mutant cyber-dog head; the head is a collage; half mongrel dog's head and sculptural object. The head rotates 360 degree in deep space. The head (half dog, half flashing multi-coloured and multi-faceted sculptural object) is a contemporary creature; simultaneously animal and machine that emits a bestial voice reciting a narrative on atrocities to the body.

The work transcribes Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, it is a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. The narrative plays upon a real and mythic time, full of anxieties and atrocity that is both theorized and fabricated. The head 'is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence.'

Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), p150.



Institute of Beasts
CYBER-MONGREL 2009
DV animation



Michael Lee
A PSYCHOTECTONIC EXPERIMENT 2004
Digital video

MICHAEL LEE

A PSYCHOTECTONIC EXPERIMENT

How can a neurotic become a psychotic?! *A Psychotectonic Experiment* is an attempt to address this question through a 3-pronged approach: photographic self-portraiture, installation and video. My portraits were first taken in numerous poses using digital photography. Then they were printed as miniatures, cut into two-dimensional figurines, and installed around various spaces, forms and objects in my (then) home. These installed self-portraits were filmed on video in these environments, accounting for two defining formal features of film/video, namely, time and movement; and finally edited to music and tongue-in-cheek captions. Through the play of scale and disjuncture between portraits and domestic architectonics, this work variously reinterprets furnishing into architectural forms, appliances as industrial machinery, the home as a city; whilst allowing me to explore my relationships with my mind and home, which are otherwise easily and often brushed aside.

TANYA MADSEN MAHON

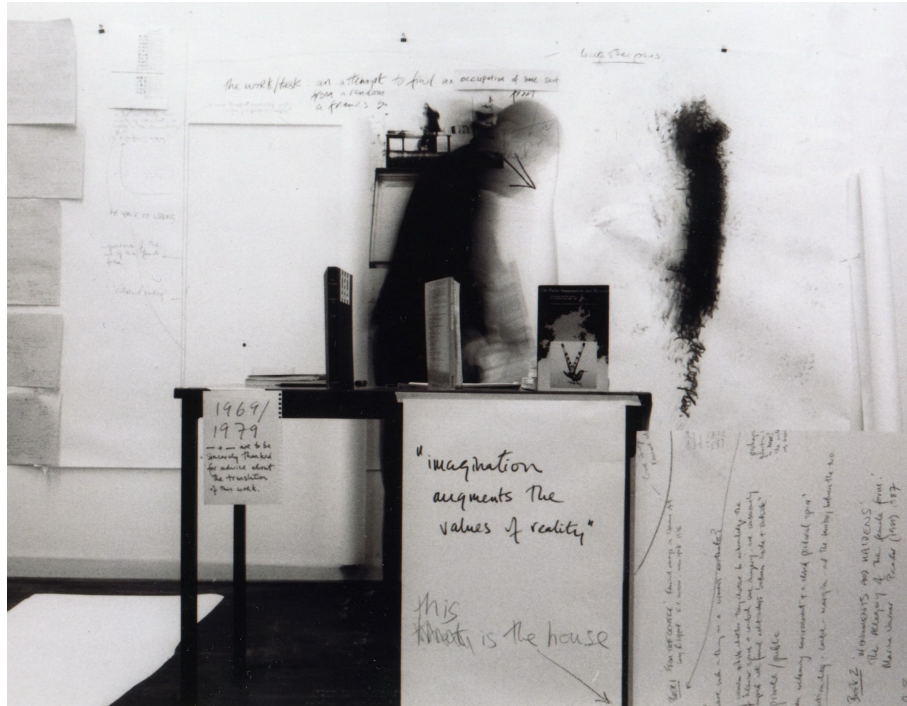
LITTER TWIN

Lets talk trash alluring at your feet, junking up every corner that meets.
Handsome litter orphan, in a field,
Waiting to be adopted after being peeled.
Then you get trashed, causing an unwanted rash
Oh my fantastic symbol of cash,
Melting blue sky with every buybuy.
Scrapping rubbish cleaning crews, sweeping up the daily
weekly last month news.
Who is the boss of your toss,
As you sponge in space like modern moss.
Oh dear lazy litter, where is your kin?
Sitting next to you in grand clutter, your obsessive reflective,
Litter Twin.

This is a public art intervention. All events are un-staged. Litter is a global epidemic and has a pathological kickback on social behaviour, global consciousness, and our precious resources. Litter casts an apathe-tic society. *Litter Twin* attempts to mimic reality using chalk drawings. The drawings become reflections or doppelgangers that draft relations between ego-cultured landscapes and our shared collective landscapes. Ironically, as I mock litter, it mocks me, simultaneously reflecting my good life, my inspiration, my privileges, my rights, and the future of my art.



Tanya Madsen Mahon
LITTER TWIN 2009
Chalk, dimensions variable



Brigid McLeer
 HABITAT, ON-GOING
 Installation and performance

BRIGID MCLEER
 HABITAT

My work is an ongoing exploration of contingent subjectivity: a staging of equivocal and complicated presence, knotted up in different registers of the 'real'. Having an interest in process, often the work consists of extensive durational and laborious activities including solitary writing or drawing that translates particular sources. This process of appropriation and translation is recorded and the records are reconfigured to become new works. Consequently the artist herself operates as an ambiguous agent of the work, enmeshed in the representational realm that she is also producing.

My works in *Unspeaking Engagements* have books as their starting point; in one case, a random section of a friend's bookshelf and in the others Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and a Penguin collection of Flaubert's three short stories, *Three Tales*. Using drawing, inscription and time-based and photographic recording, the books become subject to performative reoccupation. Their translation effecting a shift from the intellectual to the physical, from mind to body, object to space, sign to stuff, and back again: endless oscillations between states and values.

In this sense the work is not solely about these books though they remain as invocations, and catalysts, stalking their new forms. The work is also about less literal things: getting through time; being Other; with-ness; whiteness; not being able to speak; getting out of time and that impossibility; failing to be human enough; enduring.

HO MING-KUEI

BUBBLE TREE

My drawings are reproductions of momentary images I receive from daily experience. The shapes and forms stay concrete only in my mind. Then they are transformed into something fragile and almost indescribable.



Ho Ming Kuei
BUBBLE TREE 2008
Ink on cotton paper, 23.3 x 26.4 cm

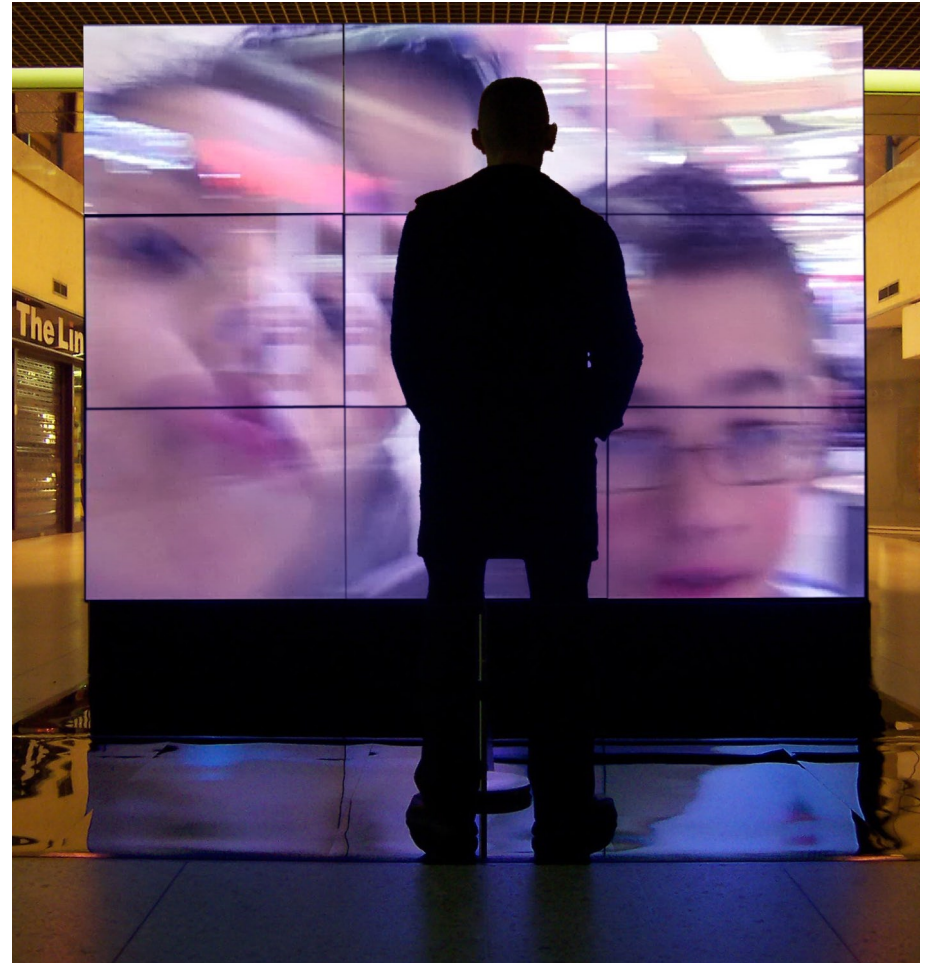
ELIAS WYBER AND NIGEL POWER

DRAWN IN

Drawn In is an interactive artwork that seeks to blur the boundaries between audience and work. The piece transforms live video input of the audience into a visually simplified animated display that shifts and pulses in response to movement. The piece aims to encourage playful interactions and corporeal explorations as the audience seeks to resolve the ambiguous relations between themselves as actors and as visual representations through movement and improvised performance.

JONATHAN SHAW
FRENCHGATE CENTER

My Frenchgate Centre piece explores our understanding of spectatorship reflecting something that occurred in the same space in the past – a self-imaging: something more akin to surveillance. A video camera was mounted on a pedestal and installed in the Shopping Centre, giving it the appearance of an exhibit in itself – like a sculptural intervention which allows visitors to interact with directly. Revolving independently, without the presence of the artist, the camera was simultaneously unobtrusive and intriguing, inviting visitors to come and investigate it. As it revolved, the camera recorded continuous moving images of the space at 3 frames per second. This slow shutter speed meant that the static background of the centre was recorded blurred and distorted, while the visitors circling the camera, watching themselves on the monitor, remained in focus. The viewer is drawn into a shuffling dance of capture and evasion in which the participants seem to drive the process. The resulting hours of moving image footage is then edited down into a seamless loop of approximately 15 minutes. For this installation the original audio has been specifically re-engineered into 5.1 surround sound. This new composition resonates throughout the space creating depth and movement, engaging the viewer in both a visual and acoustic landscape.



Jonathan Shaw
FRENCHGATE CENTER 2004
Digital video installation with video engineering by Paul Adkins



Carl von Weiler
RECORDING *NOT ME IN SITUATION 1* 2009

CARL VON WEILER
NOT ME IN SITUATION 1

I explore an area between video image, sound and sculptural object. Performative in nature, my work often focuses on the phenomenon of gravity, particularly in relation to the de-materialised nature of both sound and the video image. Often using techniques of inversion – *both literally and in terms of our expectations* – I variously attribute sound with a visual and physical weight or promote the passive TV monitor to a status of structural importance.

For *Unspeaking Engagements* I have made a new work comprising a single speaker from which emits the sound of a rapidly speaking voice. The speaker is engulfed by chaotically stacked chairs that form a new barrier beyond which the viewer cannot pass. For *Not Me In Situ 1*, I recited and recorded the Samuel Beckett text *Not I* whilst hanging upside down. The twelve minute piece casts an intense, driven and troubled voice over the audience

Tintin Cooper
DUET NIC AND SLY

I am starting to appreciate that my start in life has made me a type of nomad or 'stranger', and that my practice is to identify that space; its vantage point, its attributes, and shortcomings. Recent installations of mine continue to express an uncertainty about life, which is not just personal but extends to that of the human condition. My observation is that there is a connection between the constant movement of a wandering life and art because both have an innate ability to establish a greater collectivity with the world.

Perhaps the first thing my practice brings to mind is not a delicate balance. But, in fact, that is always what my work has been about – a balance between the combination of media (for example, video vs. sculpture and wood vs. metal); a balance between the cerebral and physical; and/or a balance between opposing ideas and elements. Balance can create a tension or a moving energy within.

I never intend to recreate the past or a childhood experience directly, but often this becomes obvious after completing the artwork. Childhood is a special time when we are easily impressed, even by small things, and have the gift of being truly spontaneous. This gift is a quality we seek as artists so its only natural we revisit our childhood in order to make art. My art highlights the dichotomy of being a Eurasian and growing up in both Western and Asian societies. But, on a wider level, my practice alludes to the power struggle between the West and the East – American and China respectively.



Tintin Cooper
DUET NIC AND SLY 2009
Sketch for digital video



Be Takerng Pattanopas
POUS SOUP 1 2009
Mixed media and light, 150 X 50 X 10 cm

BE TAKERNG PATTANOPAS
POUS SOUP

“It’s like putting vaginas on a Richard Serra”.

Lawrence Chua, an architectural scholar at Cornell University, once described a Pattanopas sculpture, HAL-O 2, as such. HAL-O 2 is a rusted monolith with two ‘peep-holes’ through which the viewer can perceive two richly textured and seemingly amorphous tunnels lit by artificial light. This perceptual experience is about the space within, a fathomless space that suggests the interior spaces of the human body.

Space, light and the human body continue to be Pattanopas’s major concerns as a sculptor of illusive spaces. For *Unspeakable Engagements*, the artist has begun to more readily acknowledge and incorporate the fact of time. The wall-based work *pous soup 1*, 2009 gives the impression of a vast cosmic space, as if visualizing the origin of time, yet its rich, blood-like colors and subtly pulsating light suggest an obscure form of life. Or, perhaps, the work suggests a primordial ‘soup’ that indicates the beginnings of life itself. An accompanying sculpture, *pous soup 2*, 2009, is a floor-piece that literally breathes. A textured and ‘hairy’ blanket made from rubber hovers above the gallery floor, moving gently as if some strange creature exists beneath and is gasping its last breath. Both sculptures insist on questioning the perpetuation of life and the inevitability of death: the core of Pattanopas’s interests as an artist.

KAMOL PHAOSAVASDI
POLITE EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT

My objects, defining balance and tranquility, lead the audience to the experience of gentle sensa and an abstract state of mind induced by scent. The provocation of sensa triggers the workings of the imagination and suggests equilibrium with breath in terms of abstraction and with the seduction of the space.



Kamol Phaosavadi
POLITE EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT 2008
Installation view at H Gallery Bangkok

UNSPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

Dr. Michael J. Pinfold

We communicate through presence.

It is not words that offer communication, but the interpretation and understanding of those words, their mediation, and their expression. Acts of speech are simply movements of the mouth, somebody making a presence felt; exhaling air, or sucking it in, with the timbre of chords reverberating. Trying to connect with the sheer poetry of being, the excellence of tears and laughs and crinkled skin and sudden ejaculations.

Without words it is presence, a presence presented, abstracted, relayed through enactment. There is the captured performance of being. There is the documentation, caught in exhibition, public display. There is some level of prostitution – giddy girls and powerful women and rent-boys empowered as signs. There are men and there are women, trapped in the bodies they share. There is the sign language.

When engagement is unspoken:

“...what matters is the physical, bodily, labial proffering of the word: open your mouth and let it out (be obscene)”. Barthes, 1979, p. 152.

Some self speaking itself; some being endlessly interpreted and misinterpreted, open to investigation. Becoming the self we are wanted to be. The giving of it away.

We are lost without the physical presence of each other, the corporeal reality, the touch and smell, the gesture and configuration, the inter-twinings. There is always some connection, some way of reading. We have an unending inter-course.

There is also the sight, the something we see and think about. The something we carry in our mind's eye. The something we see before it is even there. The sight and place and space of art. The artwork manufactured through bodily presence, the activities of production, and seen in passing. Shared as soon as it is conceived, to become real and made known through the galleries and

corridors, the streets and fiestas, through (self) publication and (self) promotion.

There is the art-work that is our own, kept to ourselves, and ravaged through contemplation. A sense of living purposefully, of our own bodies just present. With no escape from the penetrating gaze of those who look upon us. Ourselves owned and placed by (the) other(s).

Artists in this exhibition make themselves available. They are presented and they self-present. They are curated and contextualised, constantly escaping both commodification and confinement. They are there to be mocked and scorned, to be loved and adored, to be noticed, disregarded, blended into a background of all of our presence. We know that they are there and we can walk on by. So can they (HESTER REEVE dressed or undressed, just another one; HO MING-KUEI, similarly). We have a relationship with them. They want to lure us in, make us part of their humanity, their common attributes. (TANYA MAHOUN, BRIGID MCLEER, names by which bodies are known). Artists from around the globe crossing boundaries and transgressing, breaking through the barriers we now all break-down (Distant lands and just next door, an intercontinental air-space away, a breath away – BE TAKERNG PATTANOPAS, INSTITUTE OF BEASTS, CARL VON WEILER). Space. Time. (MICHAEL LEE HONG HWEE making a self known, a revelation, an identity, just playing with an identity we may recognise. So far away. So close. Adam James, being himself, being someone else). We collide with them, thoughts racing and bodies all but bumping into each other, pricking consciences, curling toes, flyaway hair, imperfections and absolute perfections.

Artists making of themselves art.

PRESENTS.

(TINTIN COOPER taking us inside and out of ourselves). A gift. The gift of self. The poking and prodding and soft caress. We are reminded of our possibilities and of our proximities. (JONATHAN SHAW and KAMOL PHAOSAVASDI filling space and filling time, drawing us (in)). We are able to recognise and we now have a body to play with. We now encounter the body free of sexed subjectivity, the flesh, the meat, the parts that are common, and those that differ, differentiate, the parts that make the difference:

“That penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth, are named sexual parts is both a restriction of the erogenous body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole.” Butler, 1990, p. 114.

There is a wholeness to think through, because it is our wholeness, all the senses of every inch, of every circumvention, and every invasion. We share the body and the body politic. The body is the source of our commonality. Holding our bodies close. Or giving them away. Sacrifice. Soldiers marching off to war. Housewives and superstars. Bodies speaking of presence in a long tradition, a long march of humanity, spanning the planet and forever.

“It is important for us to guard and keep our bodies and at the same time make them emerge from silence and subjugation.” Irigaray, 1991, p. 43.

The exhibiting of the body as art-work allows it to speak on its terms, the terms of the subject recognising the levels of subjecthood, the body in thought and speech and corpor-reality. It becomes a language we all understand.

We are offered the self in society, the place and space of the known within the continua of life's breath and planetary scope, physicality as textual representation:

"By seeing the body in context, one can see around the body, and glimpse the human mould." Burroughs, in Weber, 1991.

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BRUCE WEBER (photographs)
Treville Co., Tokyo, 1991.

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ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

Tintin Cooper is based between London and Bangkok. She is currently studying for a post-graduate degree at Slade School of Fine Art in the UK. Cooper generally works in video and large-scale installation.

Institute of Beasts was established by Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells in 2008 after they completed a residency programme in Seoul. In 2009 Stephen Calcutt was invited to join. Swindells is a Reader in Creative Practice at University of Huddersfield in the UK, where Calcutt is also based.

Adam James is based in London and a graduate of the Royal College of Art. Adams' work moves between the live and the restaged. His performance and film based work has its roots in masquerade and role-play and draws inspiration from early Dadaism. He teaches Live Arts and Digital Media at Kingston University.

Michael Lee is based in Singapore and exhibits internationally. He explores his concern with desire and space through different art forms especially the model, book, photography, video, installation and text.

Tanya Madsen Mahon was born in Canada and is based in Taiwan, R.O.C. where she completed her MFA at the University of Kaohsiung.

Brigid McLeer was born in Ireland and is based in the UK. She trained at University of Ulster at Belfast and Slade School of Fine Art, London. McLeer exhibits extensively and is currently Course Director of the BA Fine Art programme at Coventry School of Art & Design.

Ho Ming-Kuei is based in Taiwan and works at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts in Taipei. Ming-Huei exhibits internationally and held a residency at BankART Studio NYK in Yokohama during 2008.

Be Takerng Pattanopas is based in Bangkok and is represented by Catherine Schubert Fine Art Gallery. His sculptures and installations explore light and space in terms of references to the human body. Pattanopas is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Architecture of Chulalongkorn University.

Kamol Phaosavasdi is based in Bangkok and renowned as one of the forerunners of conceptual and new media art in Thailand. He has exhibited widely and participated in the 50th Venice Biennale. Phaosavasdi's work is typically situational, participatory and/or site-specific.

Elias Wyber (currently based in New Zealand) is a digital artist exploring the boundaries between human and machine and environment.

Nigel Power is a Bangkok-based artist, designer and academic. He leads the MfA in Communication Design at King Mongkut's University of technology Thonburi.

Jonathan Shaw is a lens-based artist based in Birmingham in the UK and is Associate Head of the Media and Communication Department at Coventry School of Art and Design. He is largely concerned with the representation of time and movement in, and through, photography. His work can be seen as part of a long tradition of experimentation whereby the camera becomes both an instrument of scientific record and a tool for aesthetic exploration.

Carl von Weiler was born in the Netherlands and is based in Newcastle in the UK. He has had solo exhibitions nationally and internationally and teaches regularly at Slade School of Fine Art, London, Sheffield Hallam University and Newcastle University. He held the Art and Architecture Residency at Kielder Forest, Northumberland, for 2004-5.

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