

Education (you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink)

'Derrida is a heathen.'

Out of all that I learnt at the University of Sydney, these are the words that I remember the most. A fellow Bachelor of Arts student had uttered them with desperation in the aftermath of a lecture on Modernism, that had evacuated the artist biography, the socio-historical context and the material properties of the work, to privilege the discussion of the European avant-garde through the theoretical lens of post-structuralism. I remember the student's words so clearly, as it was not only the sentence – the particular string of words that he had chosen to form – that resonated so deeply with me. It was the way he had said it. He sounded the words with spittle and pressure; they cracked with conviction, maybe hurt, and most definitely frustration. I imagined they asked, 'If this is not a pipe, then what is it?'

It was also at the University of Sydney that I first met Shane Haseman. He was a tutor in the Art History Department, and was for that particular semester, mine for a class on Post-War Australian Art – art in the periphery after the Shock of the New. Indeed Haseman's dual role as an academic and artist is an important thing to consider in any attempt to understand his work. And while the relationship between practice and theory is often seen as a parasitical one – the cry of the student previously mentioned being one such symptom – the intoxicating love affair between the two, of mutual legitimisation, dependency and distortion, provides for Haseman a way to pursue an ideological position on art that is both studied and enacted.

For Haseman, the historical avant-garde has been a consistent point of reference. This can be seen across his doctoral thesis, that considered Marx and the Situationist International (SI) – including Guy Debord's argument in his philosophical treatise, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, that 'all that once was directly lived has become mere representation' – to his ongoing production of painted commercial signs executed by a professional sign writer to read such things as, 'Symbolic Objects Closed Since 1933', 'Half Hearted Alterations Mon/Wed/Fri' and 'Absolute Sell Out', which play on the SI's ideas of *détournement* to consider how such an idea might still be vital in, as Haseman says, 'the diverse syntax of contemporary art and theory.'

In an inversion of the teacher and student role in which I met Haseman, I first met Ivan Cheng while managing the JUMP mentorship program in New South Wales for the Australia Council for the Arts. In this program that favoured intergenerational knowledge sharing, Cheng was paired with the performance maker Nigel Kellaway. Cheng's practice was interdisciplinary in the broadest sense, with him displaying an impressive aptitude across artistic forms – he could sing, dance, play the clarinet, make costumes, and construct memorable scenography. In my estimation he had all the tenets of prodigious and well-trained talent. That year he was also going on to complete his tertiary music studies at the Sydney Conservatorium via the Royal College of Music in London, bookended by two sessions at the artist residency of the experimental theatre director, Robert Wilson – the prestigious Watermill Centre in New York.

In one of our earliest conversations Cheng mentioned to me he was interested in youth and privilege as topics of concern. It was a clear display of his hyperawareness of the position from which he was producing. This self-reflexivity also extended to the writing and the direction of his productions. His biography – and those of his family, friends and acquaintances that he cast as performers; daily musings, reading and conversations; philosophical, high and pop cultural references; all appeared as material in his work. It is as if everything he consumes or came into contact with was of some importance. For me, this wide net casting, typified a generational shift in knowledge production that was horizontal rather than vertical, and marked by a plurality and fluidity, and aimed to avoid histories previous failings by inclusiveness.

Indeed Cheng's most recent works have continued to parasitically grow, inflating in size, the number of participants involved, and the references that they employ – or that they suggest that they do. This often makes it hard to establish a hierarchy of how to understand the information presented, so levelled and in abundance is its application and form. This verbosity is typified by the ambition of his last performance *epoche-lacan-orbits*, 2013 to be a *gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art – and his current and ongoing production of complex dossiers to accompany work. These dossiers are filled with scattered digestions of philosophical ideas, correspondence, recommended reading, and diversions. As Cheng said to me in one of our email exchanges: 'my practice now, is interested in precociously demonstrating that it is aware of everything possible, but shaping the audience experience so it transcends that. Within this, I constantly question my ability to perform this task, and whether I even have the clarity required to do so.'

Between Shane Haseman and Ivan Cheng there exists some surface commonalities: an interest in the canon of the modern avant-garde, formalism, a critical engagement with the spectacle, re-enactments or re-readings, pedagogy and the demonstration of knowledge, provocations for interpretation, the relationship between theory and practice, language and image, and two clarinets. The pairing is though most significantly intergenerational. To think generationally is to think within history, to define unique markers of time, and to invest in a belief that there is something to gain from this. This intergenerational structure is mirrored in the common pedagogical relationship of teacher and student, parent and child, and, in the trajectory of the art historical canon, from senior practitioners to those that follow behind.

In Jan Verwoert's *The Passion of the Pedagogical*, 2006, he asks, 'How to conduct the ceremonies of the pedagogical?' then raises:

'Questions concerning the ethics of the practice are of course also a crucial issue when it comes to teaching itself, or any kind of work concerned with the communication or production of knowledge, for how can you ever claim the right to make others listen to what you believe they should know? ... It is the question of how to deal with the position of authority you inevitably assume when you make others listen. Is that authority not always imposed, thus making anyone who claims it an impostor? Moreover, does speaking from the position of what Lacan mockingly calls, 'the subject who is supposed to know' not always entangle you in all the tedious Oedipal power games of forced loyalty and adolescent rebellion, which this roles provokes? Can there not be other scenarios for producing and communicating knowledge?'

Could this be the space of the performance? Like the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the parent and the child, is the one between the artist and the audience – you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. It requires a mutual investment.¹

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1. Jan Verwoert, 'The Passion of the Pedagogical' <<http://oneandthreewords.org/processo/2009/05/07/the-passion-of-the-pedagogical-by-jan-verwoert/>> , last accessed 6/4/2014

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