

This dynamism so often attributed to the scene confronts the flawed infrastructure of the city of Metro Manila. While mobility between Quezon City to Makati equates to the same travel time from the Philippines to another Southeast Asian state, art practices continue to gain support—not from the government, but from peers, private entities, and the global scene alike. Spanning generations, this DIY spirit proves that even left on its own, a community can endure. ☺

FUTURA 89+ Hans Ulrich Obrist & Simon Castets interview ZOU ZHAO



THE FUTURA 89+ SERIES FEATURES INTERVIEWS WITH ARTISTS, WRITERS, ACTIVISTS, ARCHITECTS, FILMMAKERS, SCIENTISTS AND ENTREPRENEURS WHO WERE BORN IN OR AFTER 1989.

Earlier this year 89plus presented your work as part of a Filter Bubble-themed Prospectif Cinéma event at Centre Pompidou. You suggested that platforms like YouTube and Instagram were forms of “authoritarianism disguised as freedom.” Can you tell us more about this?

The far-too-available convenience of online platforms becomes a most difficult habit to kick these days. Now, people seem a lot less patient with their experiences of the world. These online avenues promise to us a mode of efficiency and comfort compatible to the general ethos of the age of globalization. In my view, the trade-off is one of endurance for the onslaught of excess and spectacle. This has meant that substantial platforms and mediums that demand our time and attention, such as the book, the film, or the exhibition have become secondary. With ready-to-circulate images everywhere, we live in a world that promises us a culture of the just-enough. In my opinion, it straight up compromises a full experience otherwise de-

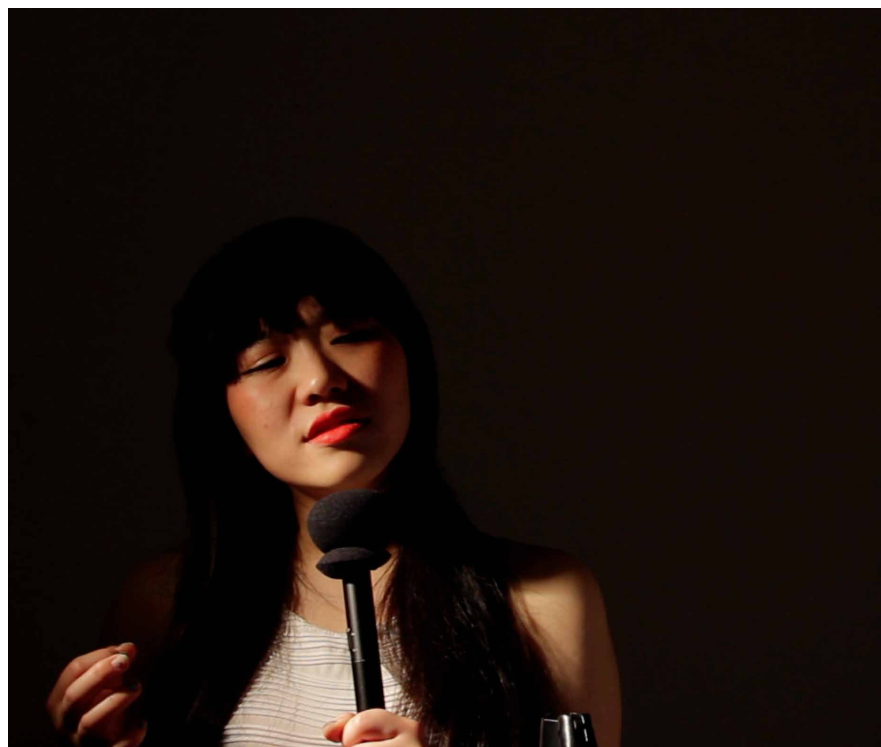
Zou Zhao (Chinese-Singaporean, b. 1989) is an artist who was raised in Singapore and trained in London—her interest in language being a direct result of her lived experience as a member of the Chinese diaspora.

manded by critically reflexive aesthetics. We find ourselves always going somewhere, always in a rush. We spend probably more time texting, tweeting about an exhibition, gathering news from online bulletins while commuting on public transport, than we put into rigorous engagement. This, to me, is to avoid engaging with a frustration, an enigma, or an impasse—which I see as a necessary premise from which revelations and autonomous thinking begins.

The video you shared at the 89plus Prospectif Cinéma, *Chinese is Not a Language!* (*Bring in the wine*) (2014) deals with language and its perceived notion of autonomy. Can you tell us a little about your ideas behind this work and how it came about?

Chinese is Not a Language! is a thesis that I came up with as a sequel to *One of my Troubles*, a performance I did for the UCL art Museum. In it, I explored more explicitly the limits of English as a representational language, meditating on what it promises, but fails to deliver. I had been interested in the notion of the authentic self as pre-supposed by

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the grammatical structure of the subject-predicate where the presence of a consistent ego is suggested through the “I.” This contrasts with classical Chinese, which famously “lacks” the concept of a sentence, the concept of an “I.” The element of rehearsal was a structure that I came up with whilst in conversation with the London-based artist Gary Stevens, in which we were discussing the productivity of the everyday, and most importantly, “stillness.” I wanted to “perform” a number of “voices” through the model of the rehearsal to suggest the treachery of the authentic selfhood, in that all claims to identity, as with the sovereign “I,” is something that has to be pre-supposed, practiced and performed with good faith in order to have repercussions.

Bring in the wine came after. It was conceived as a separate performance in which I intended to suggest an alternative to understanding subjectivity: specifically, that in the age of globalization, translation produces subjectivity. This is opposed to the notion of language as a transparent medium. Instead, I wanted to use language as material to bridge immediacy, and to suggest the treachery of



89plus is a long-term, international, multi-platform research project co-founded by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, investigating the generation of innovators born in or after 1989 through conferences, books, periodicals, residencies and exhibitions. 89plus.com

FUTURA 89+

the consistent “I” prior to language.

You collaborated with several different people to produce that video. Do you often work collaboratively? To what extent? What is the collaboration process typically like for you?

I have always relied very much on my peer group: a significant network of friends, artists, musicians, philosophers and filmmakers who shared moments together but are now scattered all over the world. It is to them whom I frequently return for opinions, feedback and criticism. Of course, due to increased mobility and global nomadism, this space of shared knowledge has shifted from dinner gatherings to, more often than not, the Internet. But

anyone who addresses the present with a sense of urgency, and is invested in stretching people’s attention span for discourse, falls into my niche of collaborative communities. Sustained conversations and discussions on an organic level definitely help to ensure an element of surprise in my own growth, which is reflected in the works. Quite a few lines from my performance conjure the feeling of disjointedness, as if occupying different perspectives. It is an aesthetic that I particularly relish in, as they are sometimes lifted directly from conversations like that.

More significantly, though, Gary Stevens has had a great influence on me in developing a sensitivity towards the aesthetics of the everyday, simplicity in presentation, and the potential of “stillness” through workshops and conversations. Other artists and curators who’ve helped in producing the videos also gave piercing feedback to my sometimes overly-complicated structure. I appreciate these interactions, as they help me distill my performances to forms that would deliver effectively. These engagements ensure that I grow intellectually and achieve more self-reflexivity.

Speaking of collaboration, later this year, you will be participating as an 89plus artist in the exhibition “Co-Workers: The Artist as Network,” opening in October at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Can you explain a little about the work you’ve envisioned for this show?

I would still be interested in mobilizing the idea of the Seminar through the medium of performance. To achieve a sense of immediacy, on the other hand, I would like to recontextualize elements of folk tunes rejected historically—in this case, reiterating a Buddhist folk tune from the Tibetan tradition—in the hopes of creating a temporality that would direct focus to a faculty of listening. Through the materiality of the voice, I’d like to direct

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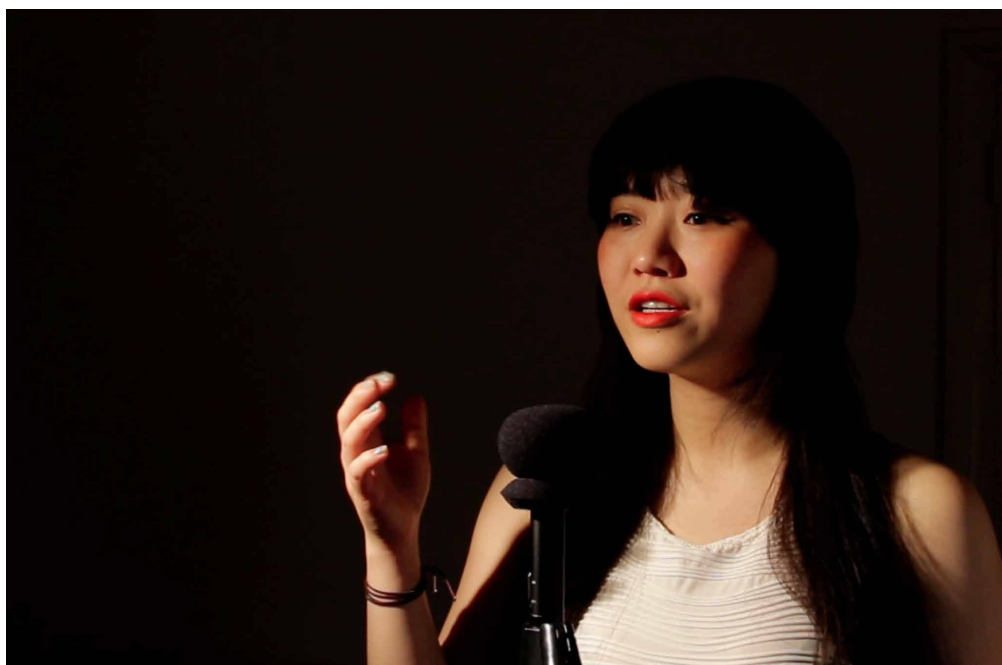
mathematical English but perform in bastardized syncretic speech patterns points to a rich history of autonomy and creativity in the area of language use. I must have by then internalized the playfulness of the poetry practice, despite not being very good at it. I remember relishing in playing the role of the migrant, miming the peculiarities of the new society while I was assimilating as a child.

Further movement to England for university inevitably provided me with another space for experimentation. I remembered being impressed with how conscientiously articulated English becomes, and further surprised by the class hierarchy implied through accent. My work naturally responded to the need for me to be taken seriously, rather than simply as a foreign tourist in the country. But participating in the London student protests made me realize the invisible status of the international individual in that country; one is relegated to a supporting role. Part of my performance practice at the time was motivated by the reflections on these experiences. I was interested at the outset in the investigation of the dominant attitudes, in perspectives of xenophobia. My performances negotiate institutional racism in order to bring my own ideas across. Eventually, I was brought to look more deeply at the very medium of language, in the spirit of wanting to eventually contaminate some of its rhetorical moral high grounds—to demonstrate that in its promises to bring people together, it actually separates the temporal communities.

One of the interesting things about many forms of visual art is that they have the ability to transcend language. Painting, sculpture, installation, sound work—each can communicate without words. Is this perhaps what drew you to art?

The world in the aftermath of the Cold War still experiences its constructed antagonism today. The hostility between

All images: Zou Zhao, *Chinese is Not a Language!* (*Bring in the Wine!*), 2014
Courtesy of the artist



focus on the performativity of language: an important albeit often neglected element in the field of visual arts.

Borrowing the form of the traveler who returns with her travel journal, I am envisaging a detractor of John who will be putting across a brief introduction that in defense of the lie—that is, the necessary bluff. Here, I respond to Chad Hansen’s citation of the Bible—“Thou shalt know the truth, and the truth shall set you free”—as ethics. On the one hand, I’d like to use this as an opportunity to explore the element of bluff within Mahayana Buddhism; on the other, I’d like to destabilize the notion of the mother tongue as pure in legislating cultural entity. After all, Buddhism’s entrance into a Chinese context has influenced speech patterns since the 8th century, and continues to manifest itself today.

A lot of your work stems from your experience as a member of the Chinese diaspora. Could you tell us a little about your experiences with language, having migrated to Singapore at the age of six before moving to London for university?

I started picking up English as a written language when I migrated with my family to Singapore around 1997. Prior to that, I had a fairly comfortable relationship with Mandarin, due to a luxury of time on the side of my parents under the ivory

towers of socialism. My father worked as a lecturer at Hua Qiao University in Fujian, my mother in the school’s hospital. My education was standard classical Chinese, rooted in the engagement with classical poetry at a very young age, interspersed with generic Chinese-socialist rhetoric. The fun of learning classical poetry lies in a strange standard, measured by the learner’s ability to utter some of the lines while recontextualizing them as if one’s own (a necessary bluff, one wonders?).

The migration to Singapore was a drastic shift, not just in terms of language, but also ideology. Singapore offers some interest in the same practice of Chinese poetry, but only in utilitarian manners. What struck me instead was the performative bastardization of both Mandarin and English at the level of the everyday, which proved immensely satisfying. The parallel standard of having to write in gram-



Nobuo Sekine
Phase of Nothingness —
Black No.13, 1977

imagined communities is a result of this arbitrary division of the world into two. In my view, it is only further exacerbated by the contemporary mode of existence, characterized by alienation and individualism within the celebratory politics of neoliberal globalization. This, I feel, is the real culprit that caused barriers between individuals in general. Of course, physical distance matters too, and language is only one symptom of this crisis. I engage rigorously with the world through performing “languages”: those rooted in representation, as well as those rooted in the aural. In exploring their potential, I deflect to disciplines such as linguistics and comparative philosophy to supplement the discourse that argues against our imagined distance from each other. Hopefully, convening knowledge, affects and feelings through art—

and particularly through performance—reveals the silly contradictions in assumed moral high grounds and brings people closer to each other. I like “performing” knowledge, insofar as it enables a rhythm of engagement and destabilizes rhetorical assumptions. I think that as long as we are talking to each other, understanding and empathy are able to emerge. This is also the only way to create a culture to call our own. Hopefully, it would be a culture of hospitality and openness. ☺

PIONEERS Mika Yoshitake looks back at the art of NOBUO SEKINE



THE PIONEERS SERIES AIMS TO SHED NEW LIGHT ON ARTISTS WHO HAVE CREATED TRULY INNOVATIVE WORK, TRAILBLAZERS WHOSE LEGACY LIVES AND REVERBERATES IN THE CURRENT GENERATION.

Can you explain the beginnings of your career? I am especially curious about your primary sources of inspiration, as well as your interest in topology—a major theme that defines your early practice, distinguishing it from the trend of optical distortions initiated by the “Tricks and Vision” exhibition in 1968.

I began to think at the time that one of the major themes within contemporary art should be a “new awareness and interpretation of space.” So I became interested in topology, a subset of non-Euclidean geometry. Within topology, forms are stretched, compressed and treated very freely.

Questioning how it would be possible to make topological space experiential, I began to work on a group of relief sculptures (which I initially considered paintings) titled the “Isō” series (*Isō* is “Phase” in Japanese)—or, as it became known, the “Topology” series. As you mentioned, I exhibited this work in the 1968 exhibition “Tricks and Vision,” held at Tokyo Gallery and Muramatsu Gallery in Tokyo. For this reason, this body of work is often referred to as “tricky” (optically, as with Op Art), but the original

Nobuo Sekine (Japanese, b. 1942) is an artist who lives and works in Tokyo and Los Angeles. He is represented by Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

impetus behind the work had always been to enable viewers to experience topological space.

Could you talk about the shift between those works and the subsequent series “Kusō (“Phase of Nothingness”)?

You are asking me why I began titling my works *Phase of Nothingness* (*Kusō*) instead of *Phase* (*Isō*). Personally, I thought *Phase* was just fine, but as I began to make works with truckloads of raw oil-clay, or by levitating stones weighing several tons, I started to feel a disconnect between the title and the works, which by then were heavily engaged with matter. As conditions surrounding my work changed, the word *Isō* felt limiting. I began using the term *Kusō* to de-