

# **Biased, actually.**

slanted commentary and one-sided reviews

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- [HOME](#)
- [ABOUT](#)

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**TAG ARCHIVES: SOPHIA NATASHA WEI**

## **All Last Saturday's Parties for a Conspicuous lack of Autumn**

Posted on [September 28, 2008](#) by [Bruce Q](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Strange looking down at the Children's Crusade (for Edgy Fashion) having a flea-market in the brief lulls in Agnes Yit, Kai Lam and Paison Plienbangchang's performance. Does any of this really register? Is it all some sort of window-dressing for them? Are they perhaps our window dressing in hopes of attracting more people to art events? Stranger still the neat row of merchants hawking (mostly) overpriced comestibles in the other section of the courtyard – shall these events succumb to this malignant homogenisation of light refreshments, much as the contemporary Pasar Malam will, without fail, feature Tako-yaki, Doner Kebabs, Taiwanese Fried Things and Soups etc? Are we to be haunted by the same jolly crew of polystyrene mannequins serving Tiger Beer in limited edition bottles? Anyway, to business:

Six artists enacting three performances in three distinct spaces within the museum. Different number of artists comprising each performance, different subject matter and different approaches, each adopting a different roadmap of audience interaction. Almost as if the curator, in making these selections, meant to showcase differences *within* performance art. Pedagogical, perhaps.

Agnes Yit, Kai Lam and Paisan Plienbangchang's performance immediately calls to mind the theatrical in its staging, in the apparently specific *roles* played by each performer, and the wealth of objects/props cast in flowing narratives of possible interaction – an association I would draw would be a tropical fruit-bazaar staging of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, with Agnes as Simone, Kai as the narrator and Paisan as Sir Edmund. Maybe it was just the pineapple blowjob, I dunno. The role of the Eye would then be inhabited by the multitude of objects assembled in the informational snow of shredded documents – governed less by a chain of contiguities and similitudes than a dispersed network of interactive possibility, its dispersion and lack of focus continuously generating new interactions. The individuals, then, serve not as the protagonists traversing their informational field, but as accessory or emotional intensifier to this fecundity of object interaction.

It seems to me that exceeding these possibilities rests largely on accepting as true the symbolism and meaning which the performers have invested into the objects, evinced by some fairly loaded objects; fruit as sexual metaphor, say, or a Merlion statuette for... something about Singapore, I suppose. The same would go for the slogans and truisms shouted by Paisan. I'd suppose the use of such loaded signs would permit, basically, two directions – the observer investing (similar or not) meaning into them, and thus constructing a narrative of some sort based on the interactions between the objects and performers, or an alternative of using the sheer connotative weightiness of the objects to explode the possibility of meaning; Kai holds aloft a shattered watermelon with a Merlion inside, Agnes shreds paper and dismembers fruit, Paisan bites an inflatable tiger or screams slogans – a strange triumph.

In contrast to the sheer wealth and density of materials, Sophia Natasha Wei and Sabrina Koh's performance comprised, materially, only themselves, a large white cloth, the fountain in the courtyard and some background sound. It became rapidly apparent that the only elements that *really mattered* in this performance were the performers themselves, locked in a solipsistic self-flagellation – a strange sort of self-flagellation which turned out to be inflicted more on the observers than the performers, like being embarrassed on behalf of an eccentric uncle with a diaper fetish who tells wildly inappropriate jokes to your friends. I think there was supposed to be some sort of symbolism involved with the water and the wrapping of Sophia Natasha Wei with the cloth, but it was just too irritating to really *watch* the performers turn vulnerability and apparent emotion into a lofty plinth to which we were, in some sense, expected to bow.

On the subject of vulnerability in performance, Ezzam Rahman's performance offered, in contrast to the exhibition of a represented vulnerability in Sabrina Koh & Sophia Natasha Wei's performance, something resembling actual vulnerability – a resemblance in the sense that Ezzam still exerted a sort of control over the situation. While, technically, there were points at which the future direction of the performance seemed to be wholly in the hands of the observer, Ezzam had already defined (if sketchily) the variables in play, the field in which the observer could move. As if the role of the observer in developing the narrative of the performance had been anticipated and charted in advance, a trajectory plotted with object-cues to make the observer *want* to fulfil the role.

Still, those instances still carried a certain amount of risk – the risk of the performance taking a direction completely unanticipated, which makes for an almost-vulnerability that, while laudable, shouldn't be mistaken for anything but. However, as much as I might pedantically insist on the distinction between vulnerability and almost-vulnerability in performance, I would have to say that the points where the audience was supposed to jump in were really quite enjoyable – there was a certain sense of collaboration, not with Ezzam, but with the rest of the audience who had decided to jump in and *do something*. In that sense, those points in Ezzam's performance could be said to form a focal point or catalyst for collaborative action, which is rather nicer than a performer demanding a certain sort of interaction.

The denouement of the inverse-horticultural ritual was strangely protracted and unfocused, though, with all of the elements of the performance expiring and folding in on themselves, generating or giving way to further elements to fold in on themselves. Weirdly exhausting.

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