

A Reflection on Monologue Dialogue 4: Mysticism and Insecurity.

The Koppel Gallery
(4 May – 1 July 2017). Curated by Professor Andrew Stahl.

ART IN AN INSECURE AGE

By [Kai Syng Tan](#) (UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, KCL) and [Andrew Stahl](#) (UCL Slade School of Fine Art)



Foreground: Yellow River (Andrew Stahl 2017).

Middle ground: Telstar (Eric Bainbridge 2017).

Background from left: The Immeasurable Art 1-2 (Sansern Milindasuta 2017),

Climax A Victory (Yvonne Feng), and part of Bless My World (Panya Vijinthanasarn 2016).

Photographs by Kai Syng Tan except otherwise stated.

MONOLOGUE DIALOGUE

Monologue Dialogue aims to celebrate transcultural conversations. The programme has grown from a British Council initiated and funded residency and exhibition in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2006. From then onwards a series of exhibitions have taken place in Bangkok and London with an evolving and expanding group of participating artists. The 2017 iteration featured 16 artists who come not only from Thailand and the UK but also Bangladesh, China, Singapore and Japan

This exhibition *Monologue Dialogue 4: Mysticism and Insecurity* (4 May–1 July 2017) and its associated events opened up a fertile space to continue the dialogue. The stage, The Koppel Gallery in Baker Street, London, played out the tension captured in the title

of the show, *Mysticism and Insecurity*. Windowless and punctuated with heavy, armoured doors, this recently decommissioned bank vault is reminiscent of a panic room, at once a refuge from, yet also an affirmation of, the world-in-flux today.

Insecurity frequently plays a major part in the discussion of art. Art often can refer to perceptions of the mystical and magical nature of human life across all cultures. Insecurity comes into play often because of the inability of art to fully express and realise these transcendent ideas. This is primarily because of the world's materiality, because of materials being resistant, dragging against intentions even for the use of language, and symbolism. This resistance is what is most ecstatic and interesting, where the material itself whether it is paint, objects, performance or virtual media contains the magic and frailty of our existence by being resistant to manipulation. The one thing that unites us all is our materiality and a sense of 'is-ness'.

It is not *Monologue Dialogue's* intention to illustrate a theory or concept. Instead of an overriding manifesto, it places work on a platform for discussion, and presents a rich multilayered complexity, or soup of possibilities with materiality a key link to much of the work. *Monologue Dialogue* calls attention to cooperation and conviviality, by inviting participating artists to install or construct work in the space together.

A LIVELY CONVERSATION

Cornwall-based **Miranda Housden's** *Shameless* greeted the visitor at the entrance to the vault. Standing at one-metre tall with a tapering top and heavy bottom, it reminded one less of Norman Forster's 591-foot St Mary Axe (more commonly known as the 'Gherkin') guarding London, and more of Vladimir Tatlin's infamous *Monument to the Third International*. While the Soviet architect's ambitious work could not be materialised in 1920, *Shameless* saw the world, nearly 100 years later – albeit in the form of a phallic bandage-wrapped steel structure that appeared almost bent and withering. Downstairs *Monologue Dialogue's* curator **Andrew Stahl's** *Yellow River* sculpture consisted of found materials, including pieces of discarded yellow foam and other abandoned objects and toys all assembled in situ. The sculpture is held together with paint and glue borrowed from fellow exhibiting artist **Astuko Nakamura** revealing his interest in the flow of thoughts and how the viewer can discover small toys and identities in the work perhaps echoing the way identities are revealed in Chinese scrolls. Much smaller in size was an obelisk of pencils by Thai artist **Jedsada Tangtrakulwong**. *Spellbound* consisted of pencils that had been painstakingly hand-painted, glued and stacked together. Its top half looked precariously balanced suggesting collapse, as did **Eric Bainbridge's** *Telstar*. Bainbridge's large white plaster ball, which represented the moon, was placed on the end of a large tripod telescope. Top heavy and suggestive, this had a humorous and powerful presence.



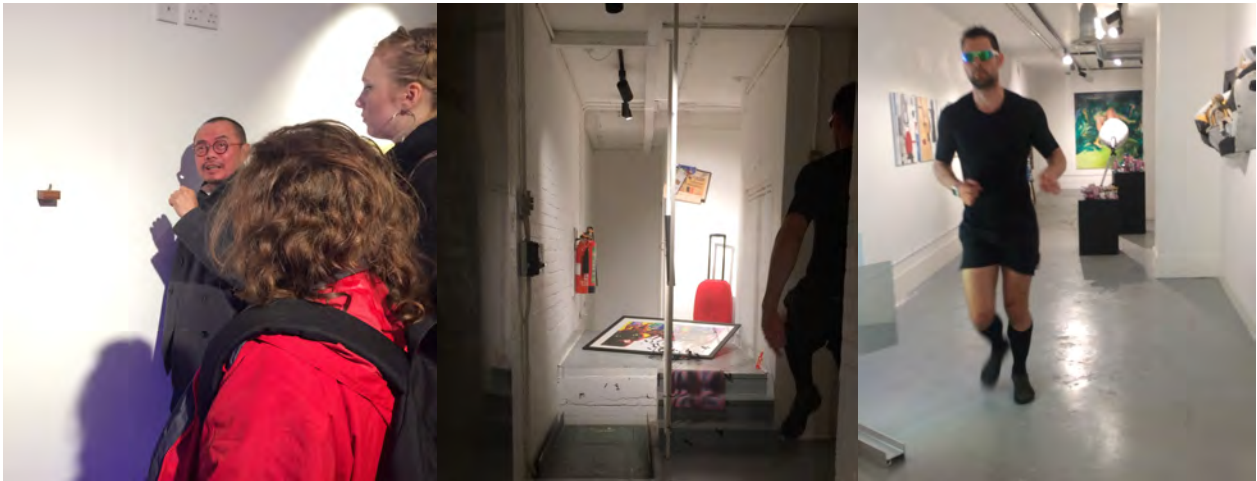
Left-right: *Shameless* (Miranda Housden 2017), *Spellbound* (Jedsada Tangtrakulwong 2017, close-up, photo by Tangtrakulwong), *Trans-Pollock* (Be Takerng Pattanopas 2017, close-up).

Be Takerng Pattanopas's *Trans-Pollock* (2017). Here, painter Jackson Pollock's status as a slightly macho figure in Western art history is rebalanced and queered. The Bangkok-based artist's intricate galaxy of what appeared to be ornamental beads were in fact clusters of the highly-poisonous epoxy. The work is reflective of the interior of the human body and the organic vulnerability of our structure. Another major artist of Western art history makes an appearance in *Monologue Dialogue* – albeit reconfigured. Pablo Picasso's iconic *Weeping Woman* (1937) was one of two works given the 'deconstruction treatment' in **Sansern Milindasuta's** *The Immeasurable Art 1 and 2*. A sowed reproduction of *Weeping Women* was cut randomly into patchworks for a quilt. This played not only with value and authority, but authorship, as it was Milindasuta's mother Rinee who sewed the quilt. The quilt was hanged – softened, folded over an empty picture frame. Also connected to interrogating power were works by artists **Tuksina Pipitkul** with her trio *Mining tool-playing Parts (1-3)* (2017) and **Yvonne Feng** with *Climax a Victory* (2016). Reassembled from resin casts of mining tools and created by 3D printers coloured in bright pink and blue, Bangkok-based Pipitkul's sculptures resembled oversized toys of the *Transformers* franchise. Feng's large painting depicted the illicit love scene from the ultimate expression of fascism and intolerance, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Barbed wires surround the cavorting couple who are enveloped in exuberant, green and lush gestural strokes, infusing the canvas with painterly materiality.



Curator Andrew Stahl speaking by Tuksina Pipitkul's Mining Tool-playing Parts 1-3 (2017) during a talk 14 June 2017. Photograph by The Koppel Project.

Nipan Oranniwesna's *The Storm Continues to Rage Outside and the Wind Sweeps Relentlessly Across the Land from the Same Direction* consisted of a Myanmar coin that was recreated from a melted coin from Thailand. In one eloquent stroke, the Thai artist draws our attention to the longstanding history of complex conflict in the area and migration over the Thai-Myanmar borders. Equally fond of long-winded titles is **Kai Syng Tan**, who presented *Crossed wor(l)ds (unfloored) (brain drawing) (2019 itinerary) (after Brexit, Chagall, Billingham, Wes, Savage)*. An unfinished and collapsed painting positioned next to the toilets and obstructing access to a storeroom displays a fragility and materiality that reflects the chaos of the world at the moment. This painting was surrounded by a broken suitcase, a pair of fire extinguishers and other miscellanea, reflecting the awkwardness and anxiety around Brexit.



Top left: *Be Takerng Pattanopas* addressing visitors to the 4 May talk on *Nipan Oranniwesna's* *The Storm Continues to Rage Outside and the Wind Sweeps Relentlessly Across the Land from the Same Direction* (2017).
 Top middle: *James Steventon* working in collaboration with *Kai Syng Tan*, performing on 16 June in front of her *Crossed wor(l)ds (unfloored) (brain drawing)* (2019 itinerary) (after *Brexit, Chagall, Billingham, Wes, Savage*) (2017).
 Right: *Steventon's* performance unfolds. To his left on the wall is part of *Neil Jeffries's* *Glyph*, while to his right on the floor is part of *Nathaniel Rackowe's* *DG06* (2016)

Neil Jeffries presented three metal works including a duo entitled *Glyph* and *Hermit*, which he referred to as 'relief paintings', 'emotional constructs'. Both had expressionistic imagery, with a chunkiness and a magical fairytale quality that referenced Robert Crumb, Max Beckmann and aspects of folk art, as well as a mono materiality that emphasized their physical presence. In contrast was **Nathaniel Rackowe's** highly technical *DG05* and *DG06* (2016). Made of glass, they revealed different colours from different angles as you moved around the work. The aluminum and fluorescent lights had sharp, hard edges, and had translucent and gravity-defying lightness reminiscent of the magical lights of the city at night. The geometric mode resonated with **Rana Begum's** delicate and patterned sculpture titled *No 723 Mesh* which greeted you as you descended the staircase into the vault. Begum's visual language takes a plethora of forms drawn from the city and geometric patterns from traditional Islamic art and architecture. Next to her was **Tintin Cooper's** *Temple* (2017) featuring an expressively painted male figure on shiny white bathroom tiles in a stance reminiscent both of a self-defence move as well as godly prayer, blurring the lines between power and piety. **Panya Vijnthanasarn's** *Bless My World* refers to and includes the BMW badge from his own car and consists of black silhouettes of aeroplanes painted on a small canvas. *Bless My Ways* has conflicting materials featuring a small Buddha and silver metal structure, both pieces refer to social disorder and collapse and pray for a better future. This was different from Vijnthanasarn's more traditional painting in *Monologue Dialogue 3*, though on close inspection even that painting revealed an underworld. Nearby, **Atsuko Nakamura** spirits us away to a magic land despite the use of an everyday material like glue. *A Silence In Between* (2017) was dramatically created and assembled in situ with a glue gun. Despite its organic appearance, under the dramatic lighting and staged within a vault with darkened walls and a heavy door, the installation also seems to refer to the artificiality of a 3D printer.



Left: Manick Govinda (ArtsAdmin), one of the guest speakers on 14 June, speaking by Rana Begum's No 723 Mesh. Middle: Tintin Cooper by Temple (2017). Right: Panya Vijnthanasarn by his Bless My World and Bless My Ways (2016)

AN EVENING OF DISCUSSION

Entitled *Transcultural Dialogues in an Insecure World*, the evening included a discussion with guests Manick Govinda (Artsadmin), Loredana Paracciani (Asian art curator and specialist) and Thai artist Parinot Kunakornwong. Many of the exhibiting artists were also present, and they discussed their work alongside the broader discussion that ensued. The on-going and social nature of the coming together of the group of artists in the exhibition was raised. As the evening unfolded guest performance artist James Steventon working in collaboration with Tan, provided an underlying lively presence with an intervention for approximately 45 minutes. By running through the space at times quickly, at others slowly, he confronted and conversed with the various works. Steventon conjured the spirit of the historical running postman common in earlier days.



Left-Right: Neil Jeffries standing by one of his relief paintings. Nathaniel Rackowe's DG05 and DG06 (2016). Atsuko Nakamura's A Silence In Between (2017).

MORE CONVERSATIONS

Amidst the global shift today towards isolationist and regressive policies, *Monologue Dialogue 4* sets itself up as one example of a complex transcultural exchange. We must continue these vital conversations.

NOTES

Monologue Dialogue 4 was supported by the Royal Thai Embassy in London, UCL Global Engagement, UCL Slade School of Fine Art and Leeds College of Art.