

_TEXTS

-
1. **UNIVERSAL NOISE** (5128 words) - pp.. 2-13
 2. **BANDWAGON TO BUCHAREST** (2125 words) - pp. 14-20

Two conversations between Mark Kremer and Tiong Ang

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Mark Kremer & Tiong Ang

UNIVERSAL NOISE

_A conversation

Tiong Ang is developing a work entitled *The Second Hands* for the 9th Bucharest Biennial 2020-21. This is a collective enterprise. Under the name Tiong Ang & Company, he leads a core team of ±15 people, which for certain parts of the work will be expanded with a group of dancers and extras. In terms of intention, *The Second Hands* is a philosophical work that draws a sort of parallel line with the events in Bucharest and Timisoara at the end of 1989, leading to the deposition of Nicolai Ceausescu and the end of Communist rule, but in today's world, 2020-21. At that time, we in the West were able to follow these important events. What was special about the Romanian Revolution was how close the media and reality came together and almost merged. The Romanian State Television broadcasted live images of a dictator who appeased the masses while gunshots, clamour, and chaos in the background wiped out his story.

Rebellion, revolution, and the celebration of freedom are imagined as moments of passage in Tiong Ang's work of art: that is the intention. This is not made explicit, the indicated line is fictitious, but it is palpable and emerges in descriptions of the project. Essentially, *The Second*

Hands is conceived as a large film production, divided into five films under the direction of different makers. The themes of the five films are strongly interconnected: political oppression (Ola Hassanain), mass demonstration (Esther Arribas, Bart van Dam), coming of age in uncertain times (Fey Lehiane), a trip through Europe to Romania filmed as a road movie (Robert Wittendorp) and finally the Congregation, a collective performance in Bucharest (Tiong Ang) as an Ode to Freedom.

Because of the corona situation, Ang had to postpone *The Second Hands*. In March I spoke to him for the first time about his project.* Just before that, he had to stop all the film productions. In June Ang proposes to talk further. A new momentum has emerged with waiting as a motto, now that the opening of the work in Bucharest has been postponed for a year. Let's deepen, he suggests, our conversation by juxtaposing the Bucharest plan with another complex work: *Universality: Decorum of Thought and Desire* (Guangzhou, 2015). Ang wants to use that installation, whose set-up resembled that of *The Second Hands* - 8 different films were made for *Universality* as part of a fictional evening programme, a full night of television - as a template for his new project. I suggest to also consider a third presentation, that of a young Ang at the *Havana Biennale* in 1994. His participation in that biennial, at the very start of his career, was a formative experience of a 'revolutionary' manifestation in a changing art world.

Freedom

Mark Kremer: Tiong, next to film and performance, architecture is an important component in *The Second Hands*. You want to build a temporary scaffolding construction on a square behind the former People's Palace in Bucharest. A modern, streamlined structure, both a parking lot which accommodates cars and caravans, and a contemporary motel where people stay. The construction is based on the caravanserai - the Persian word is a contraction of 'caravan', a group of people travelling together and 'palace', a building with courtyards i.e. a safe place, an inn. Why do you actually use that exotic concept? Caravanserais were in use in Asia along the Silk Road, in North Africa, and less in the Balkans - and more in the country than in the city. Originally they belonged to a vast Islamic world. There was also one in Bucharest: Hanul lui Manuc, built in 1808 and run by the Armenian entrepreneur Emanuel Mārzaian, better known by his Turkish name Manuc Bei. Does the construction you want to realise represent your idea of freedom?

Tiong Ang: Through this old form I refer to a time prior to contemporary global geopolitical thinking. Cultural exchange was a slow process, it occurred haphazardly, in relatively small doses, and by means of physical encounters. The personal stories are marked under *A Thousand and One Nights* and History of the 20th Century, and buried below them. The social revolutions have

ended up on Wiki pages, shreds of an archive that concerns abuse of power, oppression, revolt, and violence roam about on the internet, but how can one retrieve, get to the true emotions of those involved, their hopes and sufferings? The former People's Palace (now called the Palace of the Parliament), the pinnacle of Ceaucescu's megalomania, is today the number one Bucharest tourist attraction. One can get a guided tour of all those huge, unused, marble halls. At the back of the building the Museum of Contemporary Art has been set up. At the very site of its parking area, we will build the scaffolding and put our caravans, as if we raise our finger towards the building and its history. And then young people join in.

MK: And they raise their finger as well?

TA: That's not what I'm saying...

(Laughter followed by a short silence.)

MK: I'm curious to know more about the people in your team. In project descriptions of *The Second Hands* you give your collaborators a prominent place, you cherish artistic friendship, and express appreciation for their expertise. You lead a team of ±15 'employees'. In March you told me: 'Four of them are crucial: Esther Arribas, Robert Wittendorp, Ola Hassanain and Andrés Novo form the house of this project, the construction'. You use their knowledge of choreography (Esther), architecture (Andrés), and politics (Ola) for your work. Robert is the leader of the band that would drive two cars and two caravans to

Bucharest. He is one of your artists who in older work of yours transform into true performers. Ingrid Sanghee Edwards, Jan Yongdeok Lim, and Heekyung Ryu are others. How is the contact with your team now?

TA: I keep in touch via email, apps and phone calls. But things are shifting. Some of my people are struggling because of the pandemic, isolated from their families abroad they need to focus on their own situation. In a small group we celebrated the day of the (non-)opening of the Bucharest Biennial on the Museumplein in Amsterdam. We drank a glass of wine, on mats in the grass. Andrès was there, Esther, Ingrid and Heekyung, and me. Robert couldn't be there, he lives all the way in Drenthe, up north. He looks after the caravans that we bought; they're kept in a farmer's barn in Kallenkote.

Doing

MK: So Robert Wittendorp is the instigator of *The Second Hands*?

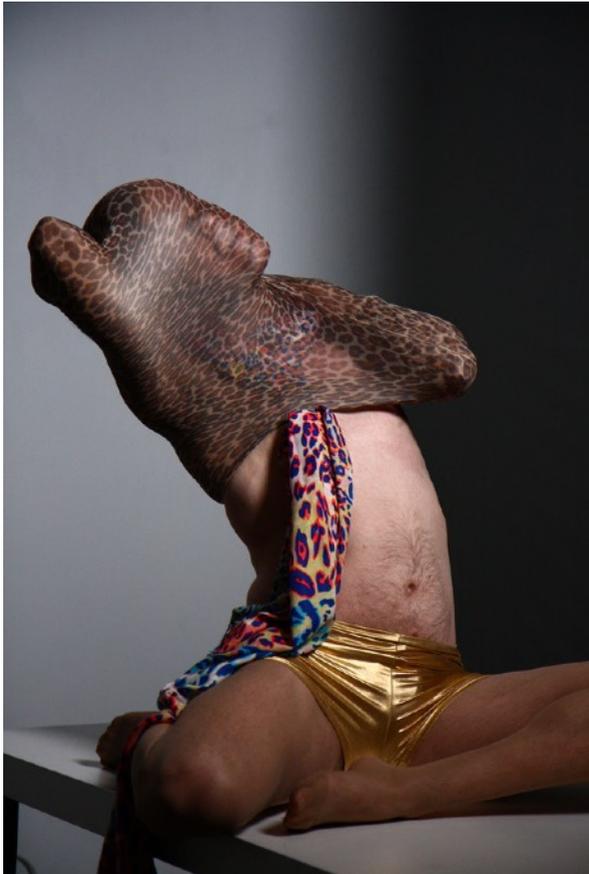
TA: That's right! A work of his from 2012 still accompanies me, it is a source for my project. Before I go into this, first some context. Robert belongs to a small group of ex-students with whom I have often worked in recent years. When I started as a tutor at the MA department of the HKU, this was in 2003, I didn't want to look over the shoulders of students, and survey their attitude and work,

but I wanted to stand next to them, or in their midst. I wanted to learn from both their artistic perceptions and how they organise their lives and develop as human beings. Their motives to do so impress me. With some ex-students there is a natural contact that allows us to stay in conversation, and which can turn the mentor-student relationship into something new.

I met Robert at the HKU-Master, he was already in his 30s when he started. He himself taught new media at the Willem de Kooning Academy. He had really lived, left a heavy history behind him. And he has certain obsessions, is fascinated by Kinbaku (Japanese bondage). In our Master period, he made a work, a 'conversation on the road', for an exhibition at De Appel in 2012 of young curators who wanted to work with students. For that work, called *Symphorophilia*, he had invited three scientists, a philosopher, a geographer and political economist, and a sociologist who he drove around in a car and talked to. He recorded those conversations. At that moment he was homeless, he only had his car. I have a special bond with Robert. I saw a great potential in him. Not necessarily as an art professional - he didn't see a career for himself with the kind of work he wanted to do - but as a free spirit!

In Utrecht he graduated with a bondage work; a professional rope artist had completely laced him up. He was blindfolded, gagged, and almost naked, except for a loincloth, and some motley scarves around his neck and torso. The work intertwined burlesque

elements with sado-masochism. After his graduation, I asked him for a performance at Galerie Lumen Travo, as part of my exhibition *How To Act* (2013). Again he did a very physical bondage, which I filmed. Two years later I integrated these images in *Universality*, as if it were a documentary about the behaviour of animals on an evening of television! When I approached him for *The Second Hands*, and told him what role I had in mind for him, he simply said: 'Okay! Let's do it!'



Universality

MK: Let's go back to 2015, to the Guangzhou Triennial in China, which also bore the name 1st Asia Biennial. How did *Universality: Decorum of Thought and Desire* come about? To do justice to this installation we have to talk about various elements: context, motif, design, title, inception.

TA: Curator Henk Slager said: 'I invite you. "Asia Biennial": suits you perfectly, but what do you want to do? By now I was experienced in China, I knew pretty well how I wanted to tackle this. So I said to Henk: 'I think I'm going to do it bigger once again. I want to expand. In my orientations, references and methodologies'. I then made some drawings for a curators' meeting in China where Henk would discuss artist proposals with Chinese colleagues. I said: 'I'll give you a total television or film studio. Give me a large museum room - 16 x 16 m - and I'll build sets in it. -There will be projections and objects. Posters and sound. Light and darkness. Different 'illusory spaces'. And I concluded my text with: "The space seems like an abandoned tv-studio."

MK: I remember a model in your workplace in 2015! At that time, you told me about 'Universal Studios', the film studio and theme park you visited in Hollywood, and mentioned it as a source of inspiration. You are fascinated by the studio as a place of creation, in which the atelier of the solitary artist is only one of the relevant models! This is most evident in your sitcom *The Making of Painted Strokes* (1995) where your own studio, very literally, turns into the workshop of a collective.

TA: I visited Universal Studios in Hollywood in the autumn of 2001, just after 9/11. The theme park was still open, but there were hardly any visitors. It was desolate, the atmosphere resembled the lockdown this spring, 2020. In China, I used the form of the studio to play on, and address a larger art context. *Universality* was a critique, dressed up as a fantasy. Fantasy in the broad sense: an imaginary, abandoned television studio, a fictitious television night with disposable images! In China the first reaction was: that's special, to address the world or idea of 'universality' in a work of art. I was interested in the concept of universality, which at the time was seen as something obsolete in the identity debate, as mostly a Eurocentric convention. The concept seemed to suit my purpose, namely to harass the Chinese art context that has had its eye on the Western artist typology - organised around the individual, the solitary artist-genius - for some time. Today that context has in fact adopted such a typology with star artists, galleries, auctions, collectors, a mass of new museums, biennials, you name it...

MK: You seem to use the concept of *Universality* as a trickster term!

TA: You know, that has a personal background. I want to use that term, since universality is important to me as a Diaspora Chinese. In Europe, I am an immigrant. In North America, they jokingly call me Fake Chinese or 'le Faux-Chinois'. When I exhibit in China, it's evident that I don't fit in... But I appeal to the idea of universality! 'Behold, I am human!' What I look like, what my background is, it doesn't matter. This is who I am! This reality is the condition of my art. The concern goes back a long time. At the Havana Biennial it was already a theme, but at that time I still had the feeling: I'm telling a universal story.

MK: *Universality* was a large installation. You showed eight video tracks, each made following a different production method, as if you wanted to provide a television evening - a full programme of news, advertising, live sports, announcements, documentaries and finally the late night movie. Each part was a different collaboration and the final installation of all the parts was designed as a television studio. There was a small section with posters, and objects in showcases. In the middle there was a large sculptural stage where three performers just sat around at the opening. In your main film we see an African man in a state of euphoria and confusion reciting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Like a historical relic. Cast a light on the Asia Biennial?

TA: The Guangzhou Triennial was set up by the Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, China's third largest city, to counterbalance the hegemony of Beijing and Shanghai as cultural centres. In China itself, the city of Canton, Guangzhou, used to be a kind of alternative voice. Already in ancient times Canton was an important place. It is relatively close to Hong Kong, southern, different climate, different intellectual ambience, resisted the big dynasties from Beijing plus the big traders from Shanghai, and is a gateway for non-Western cultures. The Guangzhou Triennial originally intended to be such an alternative voice. However, it takes place in the Guangdong Museum of Art. That is a massive museum of the national apparatus, the province, and the city, thus a cumbersome institute. To give this initiative global momentum, they were looking for an alternative name.

MK: The 2015 edition was called *Asia Time*, the 1st Asia Biennial/5th Guangzhou Triennial. A strange artifice that ignores important biennials in Korea and Japan!

TA: I saw the new name as a remarkable navigational error. But I could make good use of that in my artistic orientation! I had been active in Asia for some time now, developing a story about myself through my projects. In the large installation in Guangzhou there's also a fictional artist, a megalomaniac at work! Despite the fact that all the video tracks were made with others, I held the final direction.

MK: In almost all of *Universality's* films I encounter figures - human forms, but also man-made or computer-made forms - who float as it were, as if they are separated from the world, struggling to connect with their environments. It's a layer that I also sense strongly in early Antonioni films!



TA: I wanted to make a work where the Chinese visitors - although they would probably recognise the set-up as a kind of studio - could lose themselves in the multitude of different images. In the structure and the chaos. I wanted to show different forms of production. Some forms seem to be very much studied in terms of image. They are subdued, well-considered, well recorded and so on. On the other hand, the much more sketchy forms suggest that you can also make something out of looseness. The feeling of losing yourself is also a sensation of freedom.

Titles

— MK: The title of your work for Guangzhou is *Universality: Decorum of Thought and Desire*. I considered that an allusion to the ambition of big biennials. But I could not reconcile that with your deliberate idealism. Then I was reminded of that famous work by Lawrence Weiner, the sentence that appeared on the facade of the Fridericianum in Kassel: *Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects*. It was his commentary on Documenta 7 (1982). (The text work was part of this exhibition.) A factual observation in which I sense sadness.

TA: That is right. My title has a subdued critical component.

MK: I don't know much about the Chinese language but I like to watch the films - preferably the Wuxia films, because of the beautiful wild Chinese landscapes - and they often have strange titles, *A Princess and the Warrior*, for example. Your title is Chinese-like? It seems to mix up big notions... Chinese language works with hanzi, isn't it, characters or pictograms, in which the visual and the conceptual come together.

TA: This was my umpteenth exhibition in China. And the title has invariably been difficult, a one-to-one translation obviously is impossible. The visual element in Chinese is essential, but we can't say anything about it, to us it is obscure. But even more

important in the Chinese context is that many key concepts have been distorted by the communist system. In 2008 I had an exhibition in Beijing with Ni Haifeng, where the original title *Between the Light and the Dark* really was not possible. Ni Haifeng had talked about it for three hours with his friends. When he came back, he said: 'if we translate it as it is, we'll get this: "...". But that's a Cultural Revolution slogan!' We had better avoid that!

MK: So how has *Universality* been translated?

TA: I have no idea! It got a translation. They reassured me: we have a Chinese word for it. And that means: 'what applies everywhere'. I love this game, precisely because it's completely beyond my control. *Decorum of Thought and Desire* was even more impossible to translate.

Objects

— MK: What did you tell your fellow workers when you started the work process? I mean, the people you had in mind to work with you on *Universality*. How did you pitch the collaboration?

TA: Good point. I didn't give them the whole story, because I was still at the beginning of a working relationship with everyone. For example, Heekyung Ryu graduated in 2014 with a relational,

almost immaterial work that included objects giving light. She had approached many people with an invitation: 'Please, bring your own lamp - or anything that can make light to the exhibition.' She allowed the participants to place their lamps - bed lights, desk lamps, torches - on display for the duration of the show. Some lamps were on a shelf, other ones were put among other artists' works around the space. After the exhibition, the lights were switched off and returned, the work disappeared again. After her graduation, she wanted to keep in touch with me. She became my assistant in Taiwan, where I had a film production going, *House of Shyness*. That also worked out very well. So we had that history.

MK: How did you instruct her? What was the framework for collaborative work?

TA: Nothing specific really. We had to find out. We decided to make a staged video recording.

MK: In which she has a part or acts?

TA: Well, she came to my studio. I found her way of perception very significant. I wondered how I could catch that. Her open, yet inquisitive gaze. How she interacts with the world, how she looks at things and takes them in her hands. How she doesn't speak. How to translate that into a work? I told her that I would like to make a video with her, but I didn't know what to do yet. I

just set up the light, as if I wanted to make a photo portrait. I had several lamps, and I saw to it that the illumination was just right. This resulted in all kinds of things, but we didn't find the essence immediately. I asked her for another session. In the week before, I brought together a collection of things, that were very personal to me, but would not mean anything a priori to someone else. Very diverse things.

When she came back I simply said: 'Look at those objects, I'll just record you. Sometimes I want you to look into the camera and show the things to an invisible audience.' She looks at and examines all those strange objects. She turns them in her hands, like props. A plastic helmet from Indonesia, an old colander, the hand of a mannequin, a little camera stand on wheels, a letter holder from my parents. Her movements are unrehearsed, her observance is pure, but slowly her expression changes - as if her engagement with these things is being saturated by her own projections.



There's a particular passage in which she holds a braided ball, of Takraw (sepak takraw) the South-Asian ball sport. Off frame, I give her another ball, almost identical to the first one. She holds one in each hand. She takes time to weigh one ball against the other as if confronted by a choice. When you look closely, there's a tear of emotion when she's about to drop one of them.

MK: Beautiful. Thus you juxtapose universality with specificity! You told me that the scene you edited of this, in which the objects in the picture are also given a letter-and-number code, was inspired by the *Blade Runner* films where the monumental face of a woman lights up in the city at night, like a futuristic hologram. I view your character as a Spirit from the Future: she looks amazed at today's world and its objects!

TA: When I finished that recording and looked at the rough cut, I knew right away that it could become very strong when I would present it as a large projection. A silent, Asian woman - Heekyung had once told me that she sometimes felt like a ghost in Western society - with things that belong to someone else's life. An ambivalent presence, that defies stereotypes, unveiling unexpected emotions. And I realised I had the first building block for my installation, which inspired me to design my 'multi-dimensional' space.

(A little pause)

Layers

MK: I see these layers in your work: 1. As an artist you challenge art as power, you work with art as power pole, e.g. the biennial-discourse, or 'art speak' in general. Your titles make this skirmish very clear. 2. Your work tells stories - be they shreds, fragments, falling apart - or with the story unfolding, a viewer intuits a larger back story that remains however implicit; the universal story of humankind maybe? In short, the narrative is important. 3. Every work is probing emotions, fathoming a deeper layer of feeling. E.g. the universality of the tear in your work for Guangzhou. My question concerns this last dimension. In our conversations you give a lot of information about the first two dimensions. With the third one it is different, as if you are protecting it. Once in a while it suddenly comes in the open. But you don't start about it spontaneously. Is this third dimension evident to you? Or are you also groping and searching there? As if it needs to be tapped over and over again?

TA: The importance of that layer is undeniable. I even think that this layer is the key. It is my motive to work with images. And not with language.

MK: Language is interwoven in your work. But you don't say, for example: 'I work with actors who put raw emotion on stage, through their bodies and words...!'.

TA: I'm talking about something under the skin, suppressed, or hidden...

MK: Feeling that needs to be set free?

TA: Feeling needs to be set free and for that to happen, a texture needs to be created in which it can thrive.

(Short silence.)

Scream

— MK: Let's go even further back in time. The first Biennial you participated in was in Havana as early as 1994. You were still a young artist, and only recently had had your breakthrough. You showed a powerful and charged installation with paintings and veils. One painting shows a young face, depicted from the nose to the bottom of the chin, with the mouth wide open. A scream but without sound, as if something fundamental cannot be expressed.

TA: The works were the result of a longer period of production. I think it goes back to 1990, when I was still at the Rijksakademie. There was this holy adage: a work of art is only good when it is finished: the perfect object. This affected me, that polished



element also occurs in my paintings from that time. I did my utmost on their execution, the choice of materials, the veils of course, but that intensive process was a grueling business. That and the heavy theme of displacement, ritual blindness and the unfinished body... I was successful with the paintings, they gave me my breakthrough, got sold. But public appreciation is relative. I struggled with my work, found the paintings too much decoration. Too restrained, too passive. As if I didn't manage to bridge the distance to myself.

When I arrived in Havana I quickly finished installing. I was able to compare my presentation with how many of the other artists, on site, were in the midst of a process of making things. At the 5th Biennale of Havana some 200 artists from mainly non-Western countries participated. And then I soon got the thought: how stupid that I screwed my works into those crates, put so much time and money into transport! I saw that most of them didn't do what I had done. I saw the nomadic practice of art! Its verve! My encounters and intense conversations with British Black Art artists and curators like Rasheed Araeen, Keith Piper, Chila

Kumari Burman, Gilane Tawadros (Iniva), as well as the art critic Jean Fisher (*Third Text*) made a big impression. They spoke with heart and soul the post-colonial discourse that was then much more developed in England than in the Netherlands. It gave me a lot to think about.

MK: You got a real taste of doing it differently! Earlier you told me about the revolutionary character of that biennial, where the spirit of Che Guevara was still alive.

TA: A rather double-edged experience was the visit of a Communist party official to the Biennial headquarters, Centro Wifredo Lam, where I showed my work. All the young curators instantly swapped their normal clothes for military uniforms and paid their respect. Fear and Trembling, as long as big chief remained. Once he was gone, all attention went back to art. This was what I would call decorum!

(Laughter!)

Crates

TA: Still in the Netherlands I had already had a fax from Havana. The organisation wrote me: 'There is a South African artist who is asking permission from all the artists who have a transport, whether - after the work has been removed from the crates and they've been shut again - he may use these crates in

his work, for the duration of the show'. I gave permission. It was a conceptual and critical work. It addressed the problem of all those transports arriving for a huge exhibition. With finished art works that have a value, and have to be in crates, with protective material and the needed forms. The biennial was happy with the idea because they had no storage: problem solved! The idea for storage as a work came from Kendell Geers. He arrived with nothing but spoke with all the artists who had said 'yes'. He piled up all the boxes and built a kind of Tower of Babel! What attracted me to this work was the potential of the relationship, with the place, the context, the people; he also talked to me, and after I was finished we went on reconnaissance, to see the other artists work. The circumstances were difficult, also because of the economic crisis, but among the artists I saw a lot of solidarity. The people I was hanging out with - the British, South Africans and Brazilians in particular - were busy in the city. They still had to produce the work, make it and negotiate for it.

MK: They connected with everyday life?

TA: Yes, and with concrete spaces such as the historical Morro Castle. I remember their work, but above all, all kinds of working activity. I can still see how a group of young people, led by the Argentinean Victor Grippo, worked on old tables for his installation. And how Sue Williamson, another South African, was talking to young people with a lot of concentration as she needed a sound installation for her spiritual lamentatio. She

exhibited in that fortress, in a bunker. Her solemn work featured a black female musical voice; it almost made me cry.

MK: There is a difference between object-based art and art that seeks a relationship, in which (wo)man is the central subject.

TA: Right! And I felt then, I'm going to do it differently. Make and Break was a given anyway, I was quite familiar with it. My paintings had deep grounds: intense emotions vibrate underneath that serrated surface. A year later, in 1995, I made the sitcom *The Making of Painted Strokes* in the Netherlands, with Carter Kuster. At that time everything had to be destroyed. I blew up my entire painting production!



MK: Cool! Walter Benjamin has written a fine observation, *Der destruktive Charakter*, about the pleasure of destruction and the creation of space. In

Universality there is an animation of one of your old paintings. A futuristic representation of the new still life, which by the way relates to the Korean woman and her precious objects. Good motif for an animation! And on yet another animation, also part of *Universality*, a logo is shattered in front of your eyes. This 'leader' is a kind of ironic commentary on universality. I see this is as an image of, even an ode to Universal Noise!

TA: The communist and post-communist spirit manifests itself rather differently in contemporary China than in Cuba in the 1990s, or in Romania after 1989 until today. To what extent can one translate such a spirit into an art manifestation? The question is huge! On the other hand, in my view, a critical confusion about ideology must be part of art.

Mark Kremer & Tiong Ang
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* 'Bandwagon to Bucharest', the first series of conversations that had started in March 2020, a week before lockdown in the Netherlands.

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BANDWAGON TO BUCHAREST



A conversation with Tiong Ang about *The Second Hands*

– by Mark Kremer

A year ago, Tiong Ang was invited by curator Henk Slager to realise a so-called keynote project for the Biennale of Bucharest. Under the title *The Second Hands*, Tiong Ang & Company is organising an extensive project, consisting of three films made in the Netherlands, and a trip with used cars and caravans from the Netherlands to Bucharest, from which the fourth film, a road movie, follows. Eventually there will be a collective happening in an architectural structure on a square behind the former People's Palace, the symbol of Ceausescu's dictatorship. That gathering - Tiong Ang calls it a congregation - will be the fifth film.

whom we are developing this, called me yesterday: “I have just bought the second caravan in Limburg.” We were also tracking down used cars, an old Mercedes and an old Volvo - to drive to Romania in May.’

In the past twenty years you have participated in several biennials, festivals and exhibitions abroad, especially in Asia. How do these experiences recur in this project?

Mark Kremer: Good morning Tiong! Do you actually have time for this conversation? I can imagine that you can use all your time for the project now, how to proceed?

_Tiong Ang: ‘I really want to do this project! It has been postponed, not cancelled. The consideration is to extend the biennial. So instead of opening an entire manifestation in one go, creating a tiered sequence of events. This biennial has a different set-up anyway. Henk Slager didn’t want to make a large exhibition, he thinks that format is outdated. He prefers to make a small exhibition, with four keynote projects, as he calls them, which in turn provide material for reflection, seminars and free speculations. In the meantime, things continue. Robert [Wittendorp -MK], one of the artists with

_’By all means it’s an attempt to summarise my work, all my working methods. And also many things that have not been picked up yet. Almost all previous projects are relevant. I can go deeper into the work produced in Indonesia in 2016, *A Year of Living Dangerously*. This is an adaptation of the only Hollywood film, made in 1982, in which Indonesia was shown in 1965, the year in which all those turbulent political events took place. It was one year before my family and I left the country. [Tiong Ang was born in Surabaya in 1961-MK] Mel Gibson plays a Western journalist who is looking for someone to make images, and that will be a Chinese dwarf, a photographer/cameraman played by a white woman, Linda Hunt. This fact has always haunted me, it’s such a strange

position, such a crazy starting point! Because we are talking about western journalists, western observers of a situation, a western perspective. When I saw the film on television I was in my early 20s. I realised that I didn't know my own history, although it is about the period in which we had to leave Indonesia. I was ashamed of it. My desire as an artist was to return to Indonesia through that film, not via the archive or memory, but by way of that fiction. I wanted to reconstruct one scene from the film, viz. the large Communist demonstration at the American Embassy in Jakarta. When I explained this to people in Indonesia, they said: "Yes, that's exactly our criticism, it's a Western image. We don't want that, we have our own perspective." But I said, "It's different for me, I'm actually a Westerner. I don't understand what really happened, but I understand the movie." Via that construction, by ways of such reasoning, I found an entrance so that we could re-stage the demonstration.'

You stayed with your intention.

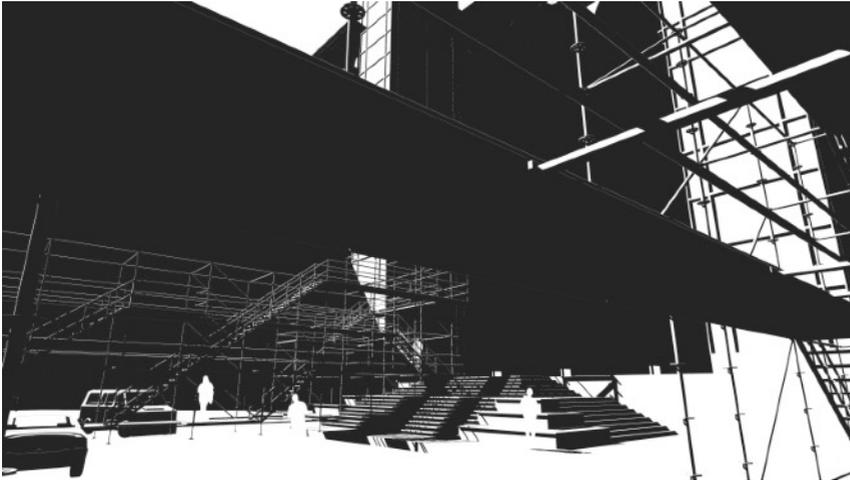
_'I had to admit, I had to take a stand: the perspective of the one who leaves and looks back, that's my point of view. And I



grew up with Hollywood movies on Dutch TV rather than Indonesian documentaries. That is my legacy, I feel accountable for it. As if you're always looking through a layer of lenses, not one but several. I'm constantly aware of that. Multiple perspectives taken together become one perspective, and they are all in me. The question is, how can I capture this as an image? From this point of view it's almost necessary to operate as a collective. I tend to ask the question where my perspective, my subjectivity falls short. That's why I want to come to decisions, images and situations, through exchanges. In the project for Bucharest this started quite organically.'

You now lead a team of over fifteen people. How do you work with them?

_'I should actually introduce everyone, but at the moment the architect, the choreographer, the driver, and the political advisor are important: Andrés Novo, Esther Arribas, Robert Wittendorp, and Ola Hassanain. They form the house of this project, the construction. Later on, I will add or insert others, literally in the performance in Bucharest. Most of my initial work is with Andrés, a young architect from Madrid. He is interested in theatre forms and performance, has supported good artists as an architect. He designs the construction that will stand next to the museum, he draws, calculates, and researches the site down to the last centimetre. He understands how architecture can be used concretely and critically, and can resist its surroundings.'



How do you bring it all together?

_'It's one event, and it's one work. The project is set up as a film production in which five scenes are shot. These are not connected to each other at first, except that I'm commissioning five people to make them. In this whole, I'm the control room, directing five separate productions. I determine the conditions and work with some rules. For example: there has to be a car in it, that's the connecting motive. Everyone is free to interpret this. The car is a great vehicle for projections. Really a film theme! And I was very curious how those five films - number five will be from the congregation on the scaffolding construction near the square behind the People's Palace, which would also be shot by a professional Romanian film crew - would work together. After all, they are not directly connected. Of course I'm not a Godard, but I was curious what the creative outcome would be of that kind of canned chance.'

Do I get it right, one crew doesn't know what the other one's doing?

_'Yes, and that's crucial. I don't believe in deliberation here. Or compromise.'

The title of your project is layered. *The Second Hands* refers to the used cars and caravans that you want to drive to Bucharest. Furthermore to your big group of assistants, you actually say: I need others! But there's something else going on as well. You already mentioned the tilted perspective on artistic authorship that we've witnessed in the Netherlands over the last two decades, the public and political scepticism regarding the relevance of that figure. The title also has personal meaning to you.

_'I grew up as a Zeeland boy in Middelburg, with friends named Tonny and Hans and Jos. When I was young, my father once said, interrupting his own silence: "Well, we have to adapt, we're second-hand after all." As if he said: in this reality, we Indo-Chinese, post-colonial migrants, have to settle for a kind of second-class citizenship. Was that just irony? We wore secondhand clothes, always drove old cars, but that wasn't an issue. That's why I'm using that title now, as a badge of honour.'

You call your collective happening a 'freedom movement'. It takes place around a scaffolding structure, which is a caravanserai made up of two layers, where cars and caravans stand, a place to spend the night and meet. The construction and what takes place there is inspired by the last scene in Fellini's film *Otto e mezzo* (1963).

_'The intention was to show the film of the happening in the museum, as a live broadcast, while we produce it outside. There we shoot our last scene, just as Fellini did, not as part of his film, but as a publicity stunt afterward, a kind of trailer. The scripted ending, Fellini was told, was far too gloomy. Now he was in trouble! Meanwhile, his producer said: we have to make a publicity trailer. They decided to ask the whole cast back -a few weeks later- on location, which was a kind of launch base for a space rocket; in the film the director wants to make a science fiction film. That structure was still there, that's where they improvised the trailer, and it became the ending in the final montage. Everybody is wearing white clothes and then, you know what, they start dancing around the launch pad! That construction is a genius invention, in the film it never gets finished, it's a sham structure, it serves no purpose. But in that last scene, it really makes a mark.'

This brings me to two tropes from art history. The 'Tower of Babel' which is always under construction, and the 'Ship of Fools' in which a cheerful company sets out on a journey in a rickety boat. In your project I detect a tension between the small connection – a band, circus troupe (Fellini) or film crew - and the big connection - the masses

or society. I have the impression that you want to hold up a mirror to the biennial and its superstructure, its 'dispositif'.

_'The Bucharest Biennale is an alternative biennial, discursive in nature, and directed against the establishment. It was set up by two critical philosophers, active in art education, who run a magazine: *Pavilion, Journal for Politics & Culture* - the word 'art' is not even in the title. Here I find space to go about in a different way and do stuff that is more relevant. There are few resources but their commitment is deep and they operate in an informed way. When Henk Slager approached me, I was immediately intrigued. But to return to the beginning of the question, essential in this project is the imperfect, the unfinished. We are under construction! That image from the Fellini film, the whole idea of creating a caravanserai c.q. stage c.q. hangout in Bucharest in the form of a strange scaffolding structure, they only gain in actuality.'

Recently, in Shanghai in 2018, you made a performative installation, *Misconceptions of the Lyrical Cube*, for the exhibition Heteroglossia, at the HOW Art Museum. You called that work a 'social sculpture'. I found that striking. Doesn't that term also apply to your project now?



_'Good thing you mention it. It's important. The term 'social sculpture' is related to Joseph Beuys. I was able to use it in Shanghai because the HOW Art Museum, which is a private museum, recently acquired a large Joseph Beuys collection through their Korean director. Almost as their *pièce de résistance*, an entire floor was reserved for it. It's not that I started with performances because of Joseph Beuys. Although I find his solo actions, like *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (1965) with the hare, or with the coyote, later in New York, very charismatic. They have shamanistic elements, he brings the West and the East together. But I do have my reservations with

regard to didactic elements and art. I don't care much for what Beuys does on those blackboards. I did see that performances with groups, groups of people, always have a kind of pedagogical character.'

In the art context?

_'Yes. People often ask me why I perform with former students. A legacy of education quickly comes into play. That mentor-student relationship continues to play a role. But I wanted to make a performance where I was part of their presence, being with the much younger people together, stand between them. I didn't want to play the teacher. I wanted to learn from them. Not even so much from their art, more from how they arrange their lives and develop themselves as human beings. For example, how they battle to build a life in the Netherlands, coming from Korea. And the motives why. Beuys also did crazy things, for example the rock song *Sonne statt Reagan* (1982). With all his feats of mythmaking, he understood popular culture. I, too, am into myth making, I find that much more interesting. Something inexpressible must remain. I use all kinds of working models, draw inspiration from film, circus,

and music, but I keep looking for forms in which the unspeakable can emerge.'

Amsterdam, May, 2020

Mark Kremer

is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam

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Tiong Ang & Company, *The Second Hands*

/// in process: cinema / circus / caravanserai

National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

The Second Hands: Tiong Ang & Company, Robert Wittendorp, Andrés Novo, Esther Arribas, Karime Salame, Ola Hassanain, Fey Lehiane, Bart van Dam, Heekyung Ryu, Ingrid Sanghee Edwards, Jan Yongdeok Lim, Edna van Duyn, Marius Hofstede, Zwaan Kraijer, Sinta Wullur, Stefan Schneider, Dan Stancu, Alfred Schupler, Andreea David, Tudor Chirila, et al

Tiong Ang & Company's *The 2nd Hands* is a complex, performative investigation based on encountering exchange, a journey across European borders, a tribute to freedom of movement, and a constellation of artistic capacities and perspectives. In light of the current situation, the work as a whole—a collective film production by different groups, a road trip, and a congregation in an architectonic construction—can no longer be done in the present timeframe and/or in the right spirit. The cars and caravans that have been purchased remain stagnant...

Farewell to Research

9th Bucharest Biennale

Various locations in Europe

Symposia 23.06.2020 and 27.06 - 29.06.2020

Keynote presentations in Spring 2021

Farewell to Research, the ninth Biennial of Bucharest was originally planned for the period 28 May to 4 July, but will now take place from June over a period of several months at various locations in Europe. The Biennial was compiled by Henk Slager, who, with reference to Paul Feyerabend's *Farewell to Reason* (1987) and his

farewell to rational knowledge, opts for an exhibition-in-process, in which he examines how art and artistic research can provide an answer to the declining interest in academic research. On the basis of three conceptual spaces ('creative practice', 'artistic thinking', 'curatorial strategies'), an experimental, process-related trajectory will be set up, including several keynote projects by Tiong Ang & Company, Claudia Braileanu, Gustaffson & Haapoja and participants in the PhD in Practice programme of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, research laboratories, performative events, symposiums and publications.

* * *

Tiong Ang is an artist living and working in and from Amsterdam. With a background in painting and video installation, his more recent work has moved towards collective performance, weaving cinematic and theatrical threads into large-scale, process-based enactments. He participated in numerous exhibitions and projects worldwide, a.o. the Biennials/Triennials of Venice, Shanghai, Istanbul, Guangzhou, Tbilisi, Auckland, Yogyakarta, and Havana.

Mark Kremer is a curator and art writer based in Amsterdam. In 2019 Mondrian Fund awarded him a grant to follow the development of artist Christiaan Bastiaans's *Valuable Cargo*, a video installation and live performance in Takamatsu, Japan. Curated exhibitions include *When Elephants Come Marching In: Sixties' Echoes in Today's Art*, De Appel, 2014-15 - a show that tracked and staged encounters between Psychedelia and Conceptualism in the current art landscape.

* * *

**circulation, confrontation, accumulation, conflict,
camouflage, campaign, citizenship, circus,
cannibal, clothing, charm, cornered, clandestine,
cancellation, continuity, circulation ...**

**circulație, confruntare, acumulare, conflict,
camuflaj, campanie, cetățenie, circ, canibal,
îmbrăcăminte, farmec, încolțit, clandestin, anulare,
continuitate, circulație ...**