

A SHORT STORY ABOUT MATH PAPER PRESS

by Heman Chong

with Kenny Leck

visible

***where art leaves its own field and becomes
visible as part of something else***

An interview between Kenny Leck (KL)
and Heman Chong (HC)

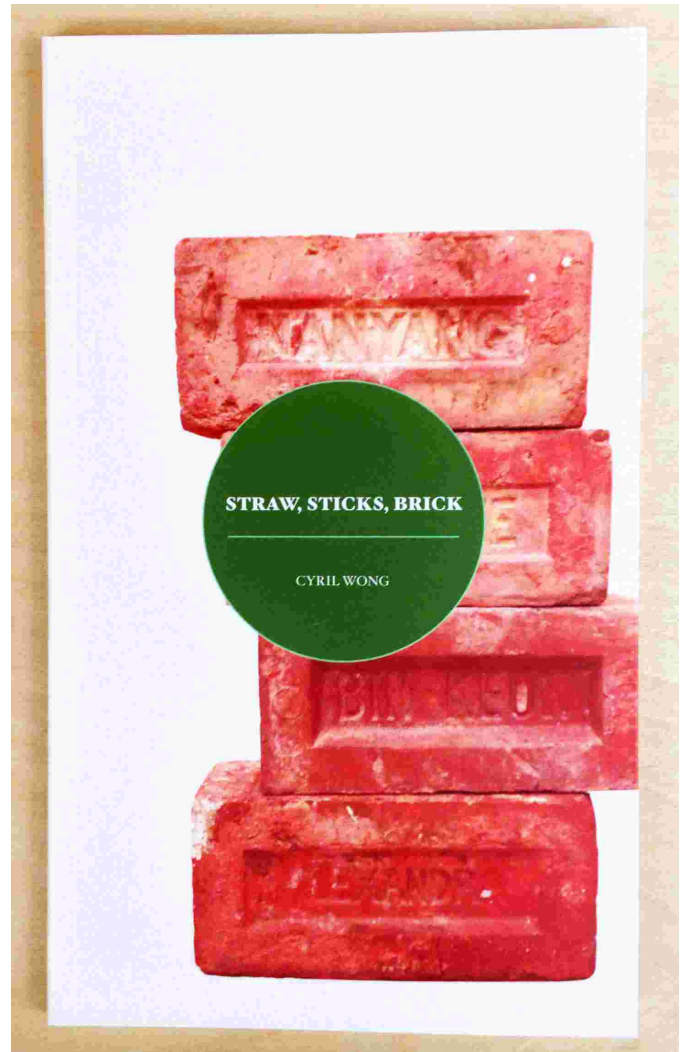
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HC : Tell us a little about yourself.

KL : I attended Guangyang Secondary School at Bishan Street 12. I was in the normal stream, which means that it took me 5 years instead of 4 years to complete secondary school. I did literature in Secondary 1 and 2, but wasn't able to for Secondary 3 onwards because the education system didn't offer literature for normal students.

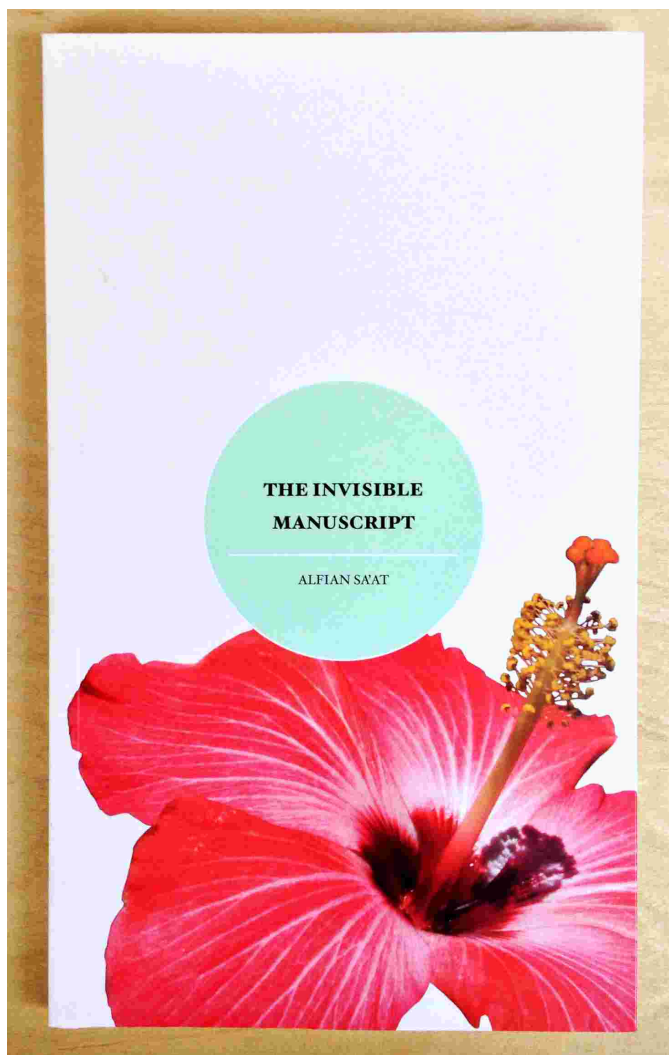
I came from a low income family. My dad was a taxi driver, my mom is a house-wife. As my dad was the sole bread-winner of the family, I had to finish secondary school and enter a polytechnic to get a 'proper education' so that I can start earning money to support my family as soon as I can. I entered the Accountancy course at Nanyang Polytechnic. After two years of being in the course, I decided to quit the course. I applied for a Visual Communication course at Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) and actually got in, but unfortunately, I have to do my National Service. So I had to skip it.

I was exposed to reading at a young age, partly because I was religious and had access to Christian literature, but also there's the usual Ladybird and



Enid Blyton. I had a lot of 'Lao Fu Zi' (Old Master Q), which are serial comic books from Hong Kong by Alfonso Wong. My parents were pretty liberal in that they allowed me to spend my pocket money on books. They also encouraged me to visit the library often. Perhaps because the time that I spent reading allowed my mom a lot of free time for herself.

I worked at Tower Books for eight months before I entered National Service (NS). And after NS, I worked at Border Books for 2 and a half years, which I regarded as their 'good years'. After Borders, I realized that I wanted to have a bookshop, and was thinking



days, we had to cart all the books away. At that time, we had no storage space or a shop, so we have to store everything in my bedroom.

At that point, we decided that our ambition was to have a bookshop. So, eight months after Karen and I started working together, we found an affordable location on Telok Ayer Street. In retrospect, I'm not so sure if we could actually afford it, but we just went for it. That was in October 2005. We finally had our bookshop.

HC : Have you ever attempted to write?

KL : Yes, I did. But that was a long time ago, when I was in Nanyang Poly. But I can't write. Maybe not yet. I would love to. Words have power.

HC : When did the idea of establishing Math Paper Press come about?

KL : When we started BooksActually, some of the writers in Singapore heard about us. They visited us, to see if we would carry their books. I am familiar with Singaporean writers from my time at Tower Books, who were very liberal with all sorts of books; basically they would take anything you offered them. They stocked titles from many local writers.

I felt that BooksActually needed to support local content. Through the writers, I met up with their publishers and distributors and started to bring in books from Singaporean writers. In the beginning, it didn't sell well. Really. Five, six years ago. nobody wanted to

of either an online or an actual bookshop. Initially, I supplied books to literature students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) who would always have books that they needed to read. But that didn't go very far.

I met Karen Wai, with whom I am running our bookshop, called BooksActually. In early 2005, we started participating in book bazaars at NUS, mostly at the arts faculty. We would rent two tables and sold books. That was tough. You would literally bring twenty boxes of books, be there for three days. It was hot and uncomfortable. And at the end of three

read Singapore literature.

HC : How many books have you published?

KL : If I'm not wrong, we have produced 54 books.

HC : Tell us about the team behind Math Paper Press.

KL : We have an editorial team comprising of two professional editors and two freelance proof-readers. A full-time graphic designer. A marketing manager. And everyone who works in the bookshop function as spare-parts for whatever needs to be done.

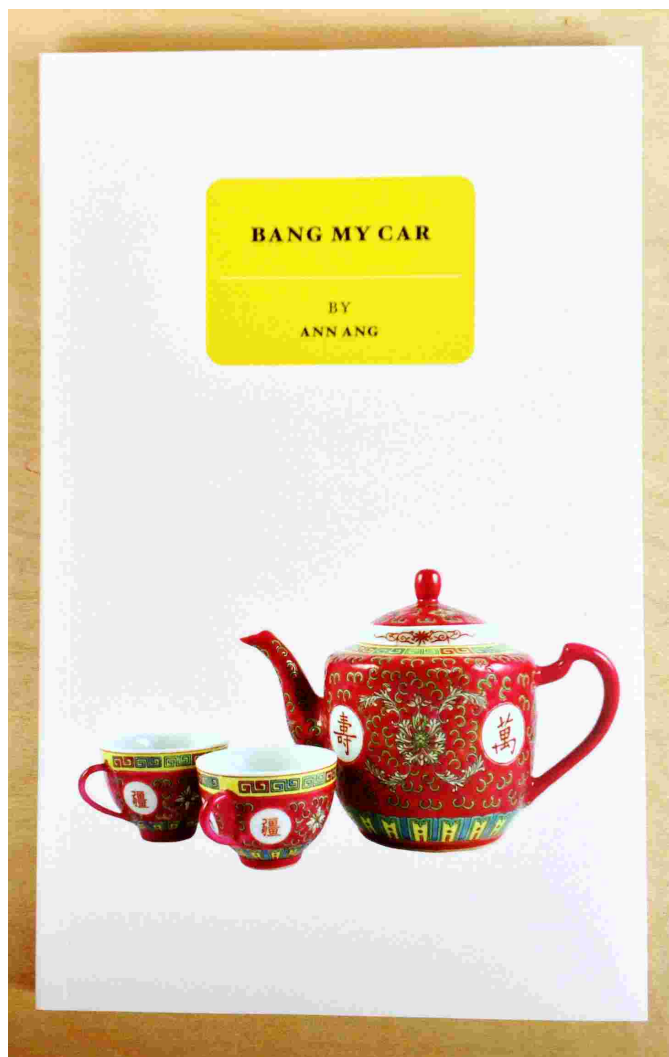
HC : What do you think about the dynamics of a small press?

KL : Small presses have the ability to craft a demand for niche literature.

HC : Did you encounter any resistance from other publishers when you started Math Paper Press?

KL : I hope not (laughs). No, but seriously, I feel that there are not enough publishers, bookshops and writers in Singapore. I would prefer to see a surplus of these, rather than a lack. I would rather have people fail trying than to not have anything at all. It's so much more vibrant that way. Things coming and going. We don't have that in Singapore.

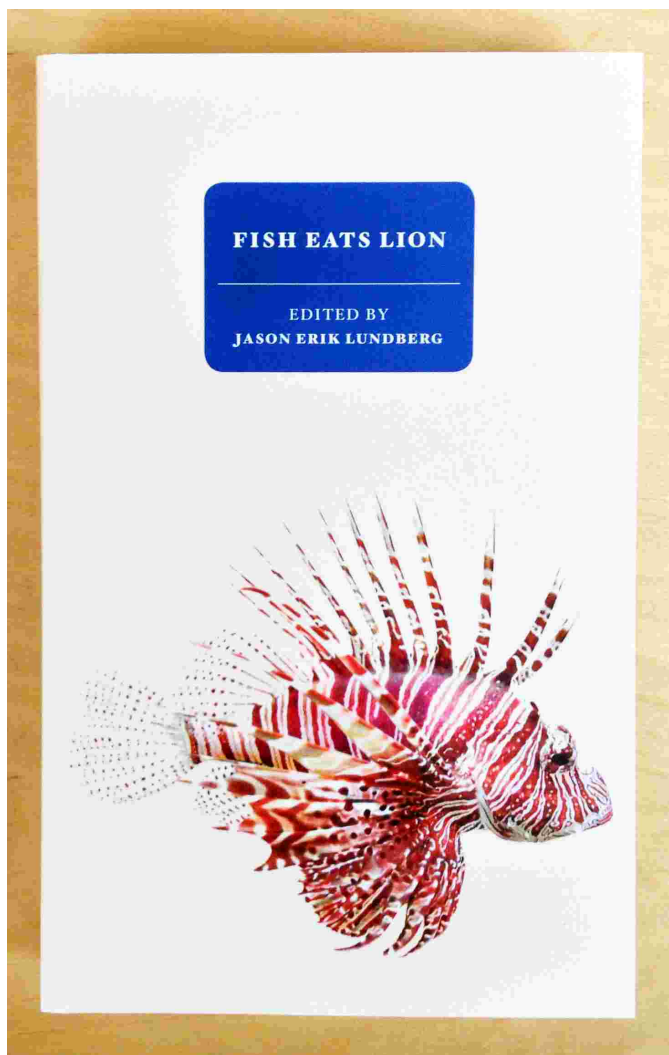
I think we are in a unique position in the publishing world in Singapore because we started as a bookshop that



carried books from other publishers like First Fruits, Ethos and Landmark Books. We have always been supportive of their books, so they saw us more as an ally than competition. I got a lot of advice from them about setting up Math Paper Press, especially about the pitfalls of publishing Singapore literature. We were younger than these publishers, and hence had more courage and were more reckless.

HC : What are the pitfalls?

KL : Going bankrupt, I guess. Publishers in Singapore don't print more than 500 copies of a local title. Even for this small amount of books,



Boy With The Flower That Grew Out Of His Ass'. Seven years ago in Singapore, a book with this title would never be picked up by any publisher, or it would be picked up and Cyril would be asked to change the title. But for us, we decided to go with it. We printed a 'chap book', which is printed digitally instead of the conventional offset print, and for the binding, we folded and hand-stitched all three hundred copies. Everything was super nice. We sold it for \$26. The cost of making each book was \$8. But we felt that if we carried on this way, it would be unsustainable, as the costs were too high and also, there was a concern to reach out to more people.

HC : Would it make sense to consider the future of publishing in Singapore within a regional context of South-east Asia? What about the possibility of a publishing network in South-east Asia?

you'll be surprised that it actually takes a couple of years to sell even half of this amount. Frankly speaking, there's no money in it. Most publishers would apply for grants from The National Arts Council (NAC) and that helped to get the books out, which I suppose, is a good thing.

As we always have a desire to produce our own content, we want to see things that are not available anywhere else. There's a lot of content in Singapore, perhaps to due to the focus of the other publishers, that wouldn't be picked up. For example, the first titles we published as Math Paper Press was Cyril Wong's short novella entitled 'The

KL : Yes, in a way, for me, it makes sense to use Singapore to access the rest of South-east Asia, and of course, the rest of the world, probably because of the fact that we have English as our first language. Within the region, Singapore is often a first stop for a lot of books before being re-routed to Thailand and Indonesia. Although, at this point, the network of publishers and bookshops within South-east Asia is pretty tenuous and nobody seems to have any long-term vision to build any sort of partnership. For example, each press would have to be willing to test out demand for books by supplying each other with complimentary copies of certain books. Every player in that

network will win in that situation. We do that with Math Paper Press, but I doubt anyone else does.

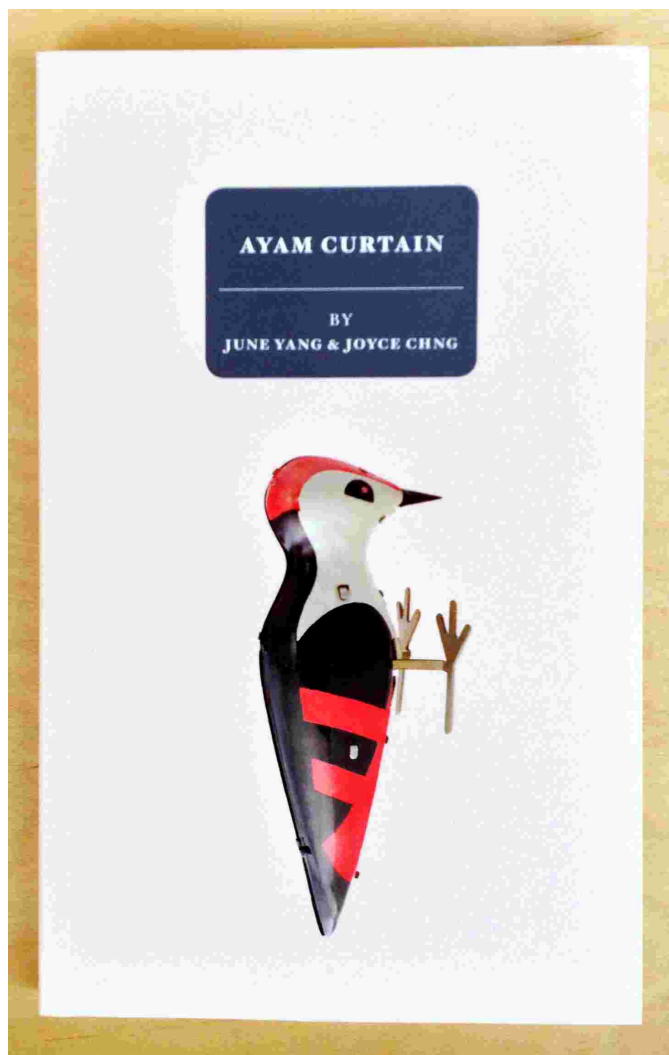
HC : Are you interested in contacting other bookshops?

KL : Yes. With as many as possible!

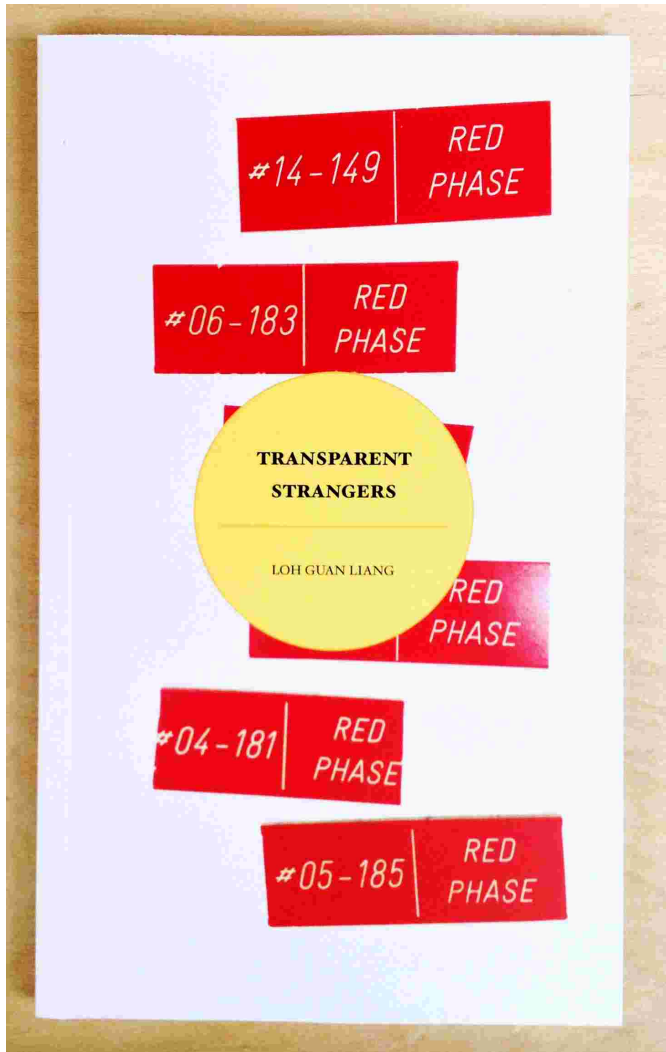
HC : How have you attempted to reach out to new readers?

KL : Several examples come to mind. We have friends living in Thailand who told us about two really great bookstores, one in Bangkok called Book Moby and the other in Chiang Mai called The Booksmith. We approached them but they turned Math Paper Press down because our books are in English. I thought, fuck it, I'm going to pack 100 books into a 10 kg FedEx box and send it to Book Moby. I included a note where I said that they are free to sell our books at whatever price they want, and that they can keep all the profits. It turned out that our books sell well in Bangkok! And now, Book Moby and The Booksmith would order in small amounts from us. That little attempt cost me \$350 for the shipping, the printing of the books cost me about \$150, so I lost about \$500 in sending them my books, but I saw it as a gamble and gained a new possibility for distributing our books. The authors are glad to have their books distributed in Thailand, and that makes me happy. It's all about generating different possibilities.

We started this new thing in early May. It's called 'The Barbershop Reading



Project'. To date, we have about seventy barber shops and hair-salons in Singapore having four or five copies of our books. You and I both know that these shops provide reading material that you would read while you wait for your hair cut or while your hair is being cut. The literature's not great, with stuff ranging from soccer magazines to The New Paper. So in a way, it's a way of producing an encounter with Singapore literature, even if people don't read it, there's more or less, a contact with the books. It's an ongoing project, and we plan to seed our books in as many barber shops and hair salons as soon as possible.



HC : Do you depend on publishing grants from the National Arts Council?

KL : We have never applied for a publishing grant from NAC. There's only one book that has used a grant from NAC, but that was because it was a special project that they did for last year's Singapore Writers Festival. The book, 'An Ode to Masuri SN', would be freely given out to the public. That was a big highlight of Writers Festival, where they had an entire exhibition of his works, and they commissioned us to produce the book for them. So, it was really much more a commission than accepting a grant.

HC : Why not?

KL : We have refused funding from NAC for several reasons. One is because we assumed that if we do take grants from NAC, then we would be subjected to forms of censorship. We are certain that there's always going to be a fair amount of it, and there will always be perimeters that we have to operate within if we do subject ourselves to being dependent on state funding.

The other reason is that we are essentially a business, which generates profits, so we might as well become good at what we do, which is to sell books. To me, all things are connected. If the books from Math Paper Press are funded by grants from NAC, I don't have to worry about whether the books will be sold. I don't have to think about making a loss, and I will easily move from one author to another, from publishing one book to another, because I know that I will always have money coming in as grants. We will actually be helping NAC out, because the money is there, and they have to spend it. We will become their poster boy. It is a fact that it is a trade-off, if you take the grant, you have to give something in return. But we fear the over-reliance on the grant system, and very early on, we got advice from Enoch (from First Fruits) who relies a lot on the grant system, that there were some books they couldn't publish, because the books did not fit the perimeters set out by the NAC. And if he wanted desperately to publish that certain book, he would have to come up with

the money himself. He realized that he could not do without the funding once he started on it.

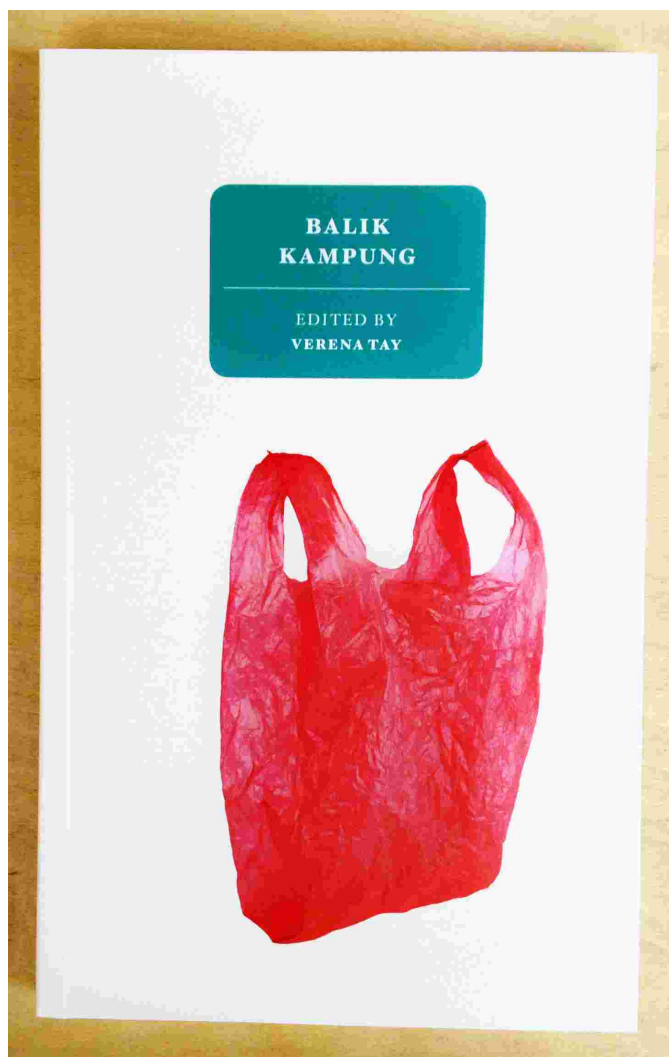
HC : What was his advice?

KL : His advice is very simple. He told me, "If you don't apply for the grants from the very first book, fork out the money from your own pocket, and try and figure out a way to sell your books?" We would like to think that this advice has hopefully made us sharper by learning how to sell as many books as possible.

And anyways, on a personal note, I don't have any personal faith in the grant system. In Singapore, grants for writers and their books have been around for about ten years, and if it is truly effective, we would have, at least, witnessed a writer or two winning something like, the Booker Prize?

The function of grants is to make the daily lives of our writers less stressful and to allow them to focus on his or her own creation, but I suspect that it is making them complacent, that it stops them from pushing themselves harder. I don't want to be in a situation where the money is easy and it's comfortable and we are happy to produce books that fit the ideals of the NAC.

Do you know the playwright Elangovan? He has written three plays that are banned from production by the Media Development Authority (MDA). We are planning to publish all three plays, Talaq, Smegma and Stoma, within a



single volume. I can assure you that this is one project that the NAC will not be interested in funding. One of the main reasons why we are interested in publishing is that we believe that writing is a way of documenting our lives and it is important that future generations can have access to these documents. Publishing Elangovan is a way of making sure that his work exists, and that it is not forgotten over time.

HC : How did know of his work?

KL : It was through BooksActually. Six years ago, he emailed us to ask if we would carry his books. He has always self-published, and straight-away, we

said yes, because we make it a point to always be open to carrying books from Singaporean writers. The decision to publish his three banned plays was because of the banning of 'Stoma'. We were hosting a reading from two writers, Cyril Wong and Alfian Sa'at at United World College, and after the reading, we sat and talked, and one of the things that came up in that conversation was 'Stoma' and how Elangovan was being once again, banned from staging his work. Alfian then suggested that we publish all three plays, and we ran with that idea. We emailed Elangovan immediately and he agreed. So now, we're good to go.

HC : What do you feel about canonization of certain writers?

KL : There has always been a search for the essential 'Singapore novel', the novel that would bring us international fame, the one book that has won the literary prizes. I do not concern myself with that.

HC : Any luck with the larger bookshop chains in Singapore with Math Paper Press books?

KL : Within the small circle of bookshops and publishers in Singapore, we spend a lot of time communicating and we are on pretty good terms with each other. But most of us just can't get along with Popular bookshop. When I was 14, I stayed at Toa Payoh, and I was always hanging out at Popular after school. It was in Popular that I bought my first book

from a Singaporean writer.

HC : What book was it?

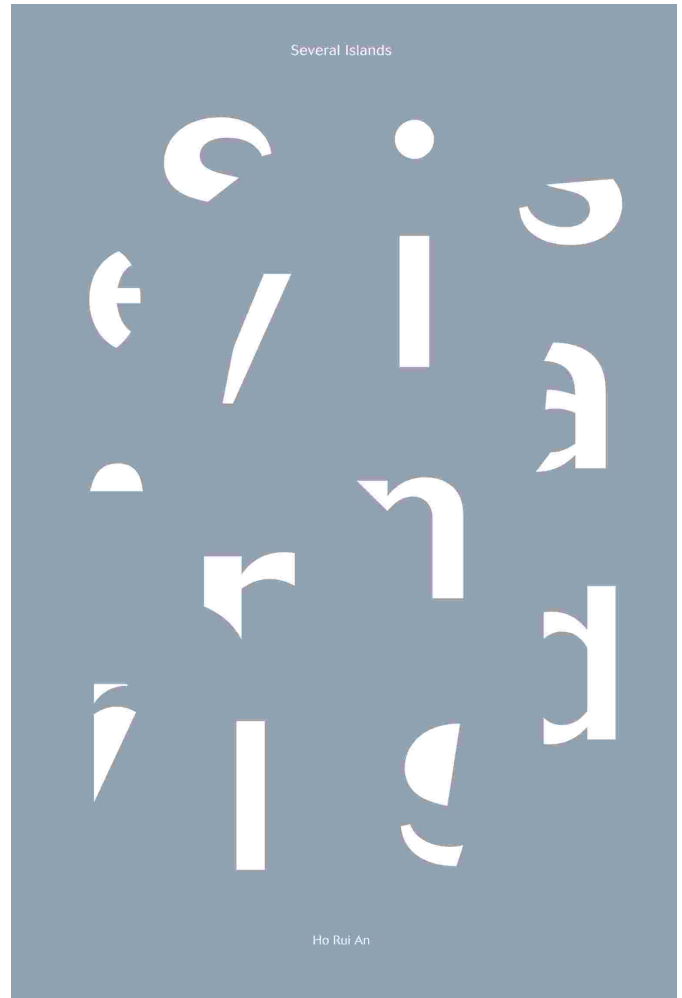
KL : It was 'Spider Boys' by Ming Cher, which has been recently revised and reprinted by Epigram Books. When I read the novel at 14, I thought, "Fuck, this is an amazing novel! Wow, this book has sex in it!" I will always remember that it was at Popular that I encountered 'Spider Boys'. Imagine Popular, with its chain of twenty or more bookshops in Singapore investing in a certain amount of shelf space that carries, not only local literature, but any good literature, it would have an extensive reach to a lot of people. But they don't seem to be interested in this at all. If Popular would be willing to carry Singapore literature in all their twenty shops, if they would devote a nice shelf to this, and if the price of each book is reasonable, you will see at least 40-50% of the books selling. Merchandizing is about creating demand. If you have a good book and if you hide it in a corner in your bookshop, nobody is going to buy it. But if you display it prominently, there's always a good chance that someone might pick it up.

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Part 2

A traveller begins a journey in pursuit of a singular purpose: to seek certitude within the uncertain. Among the characters encountered, there are those who never sleep, those who cannot stop writing, those who have lost their memories and those who are too in the midst of a travel.

Several Islands was written based on the memories of The Substation, the first independent contemporary arts space in Singapore.



Several Islands

Ho Rui An

Novel, 226 pages, softcover

Edition of 500

Graphic design by Joanne Pang

Curated by Heman Chong

Published by The Substation, 2011

Images courtesy of the artist

<http://horuian.com/severalislands.html>

Images courtesy of Joanne Pang

A traveller begins a journey in pursuit of a singular purpose: to seek certitude within the uncertain. Among the characters encountered, there are those who never sleep, those who cannot stop writing, those who have lost their memories and those who are too in the midst of a travel.

Several Islands was written based on the memories of over forty individuals—artists, writers, academics, curators and bureaucrats—who have encountered the Substation, Singapore’s first independent contemporary arts space, over the past two decades of its existence. Re-processing these memories as fictive threads that express the tensions, confluences and potentialities that mark our contemporary condition, the novel seeks to form an archipelago of ideas within which drifts the scattered fragments of an institutional past.

Text by Ho Rui An

Several Islands

PUB Station turns arts centre

A FORMER Public Utilities Board sub-station will soon become a venue for plays, concerts and art exhibitions. The three-storey building in Armenian Street, which the PUB had left vacant for the past six years, will also be used for cultural groups' activities such as rehearsals, courses and public forums. The Community Development Ministry, which took over the building from the Land Office, is leasing it out for use as an arts centre. The ministry's Cultural Affairs Director, Mr Ng Yew Kang, confirmed this yesterday. He said its location puts it in the "cultural belt", being near to such cultural centres as the National Library, National Museum and the Drama Centre. It also serves the needs of cultural organisations looking for smaller venues than Kallang Theatre, Victoria Concert Hall or National Museum Art Gallery. Four months ago, Mr Ng wrote to several local cultural groups offering them the building for a nominal monthly rent of a few dollars a room. But takers must be willing to pay for renovations to the building. It is believed this could add up to more than \$500,000. He said only two groups came up with good proposals. The ministry decided to give it to the one with the more attractive plans. The ministry will be making the offer in writing soon. Mr Ng said the name of the successful group is being withheld until arrangements are finalised. The group will run the cultural centre. Other groups will be allowed to use the premises, probably for a nominal fee. The centre will include a theatre for 200 people, an art gallery and music studios. There will also be a bookshop selling literature on the arts as well as stationery. Another feature in the plans is a traditional *kopitiam* style cafe in the enclosed backyard of the building. This may also be a venue for performances. Mr Ng said renovation work can start as soon as the ministry's offer is accepted. Late last year, the ministry offered the Telok Ayer Primary School in Cecil Street to five groups for their cultural activities.

The Straits Times, 30 September 1986



The Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers

ARTEAM, 2009

Permanent installation

http://www.thegardenlibrary.org/about_media/TheGardenLibrary.pdf

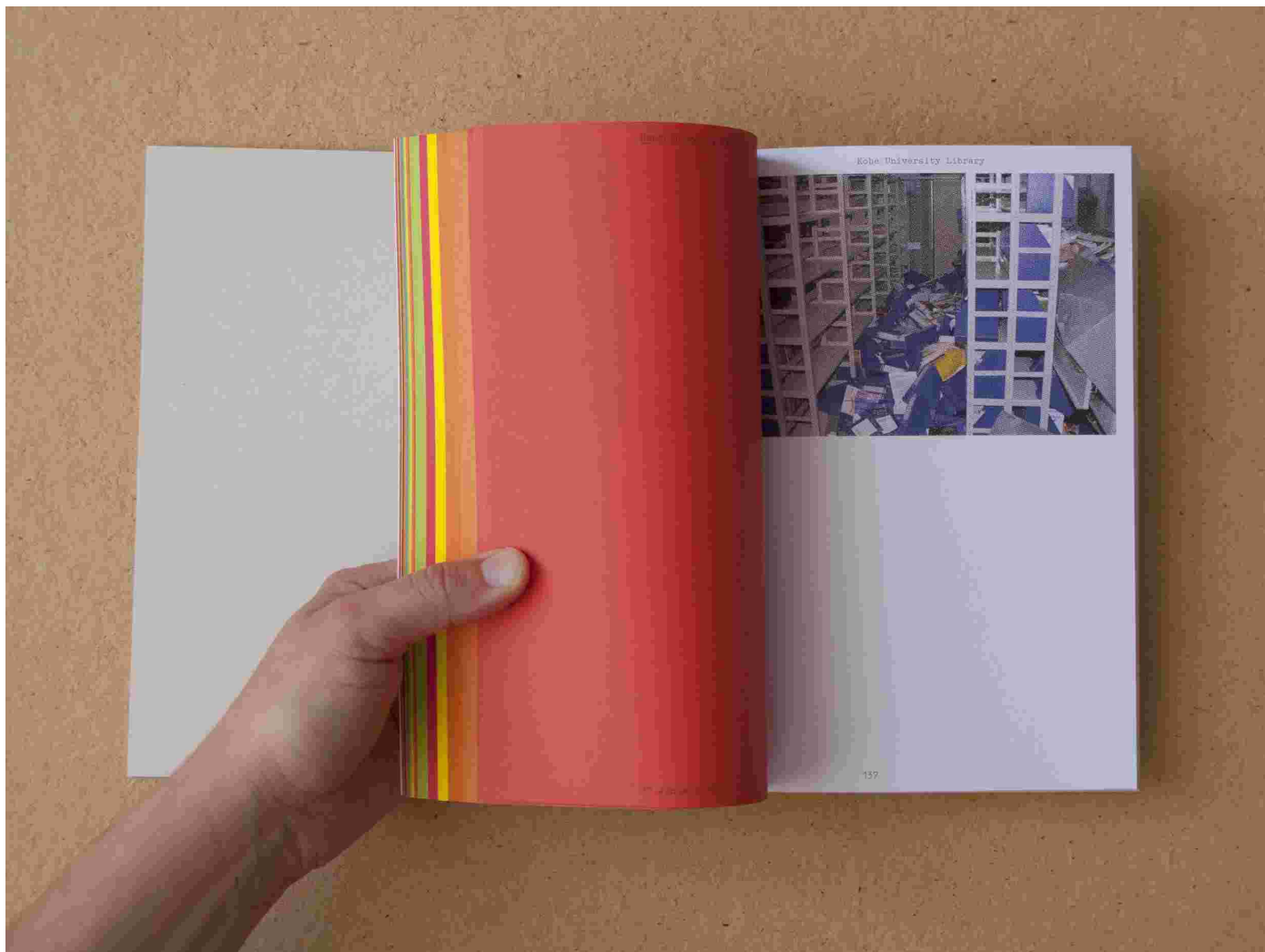
Photos courtesy of Romy Achituv

The Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers

was founded in 2009 as a socialartistic urban community project by ARTEAM, an interdisciplinary art collective. The library is located in the Lewinski Park, by the Tel Aviv central bus station. It has no walls or door. It is comprised of two bookcases, which are supported by the walls of a public shelter located in the heart of the park. The taller structure contains books for the adult readers. It is transparent and illuminated from within so that, at night, the books glow in the park. Across from it is a shorter – children’s height – cabinet. The doors to the small cabinet swing down to form a parquet floor for the children to sit on and review the books. A high, permanent canopy stretches above the two structures, which provides shelter from the sun and rain, protects the books and the visitors, and establishes a space for browsing, reading and social meetings. The library is open from Fridays to Sundays in the afternoon hours. It is operated by a group of about seventy volunteers, and managed by a paid manager who works a quartertime position. Four volunteers man each shift, two of which work with the children.

Text by ARTEAM





Fallen Books

Melissa Dubbin and Aaron S. Davidson

Artists book, 200 x 150 mm, 224 pages

Color cover, color interior, bound
with screw post fasteners.

Edition of 500

Graphic design by Francesca Grassi

Published by onestar press, 2008

<http://www.dubbin-davidson.com/index.php?/smokescreens/fallen-books/>

Images courtesy of the artists

Books are earthquake proof. **Fallen Books** is a book project that brings together images of toppled books housed in seismically active libraries. The photographs, often taken by librarians, are laid out as a chronological index of libraries in the aftermath of an earthquake and include earthquake names, locations, dates and the relative intensity of the earthquake as measured by the Modified Mercalli Scale. The accompanying captions are quotes from newspapers and librarian's notes.

The Modified Mercalli Scale is a descriptive and graphic alternative to the Richter Scale, that quantifies how strongly an earthquake affects the Earth's surface, humans, manmade objects and nature, on a scale of I through XII. Topographic maps of earthquake areas use the Mercalli Scale color code to indicate how far away from the epicenter the earthquake was felt and at what degree of intensity.

This book in the hands of the reader will always refer to the copies of **Fallen Books** introduced into the featured libraries. This book is both an archive and a forecast.

Text by Melissa Dubbin and Aaron S. Davidson

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A project by
Melissa Dubbin &
Aaron S. Davidson

The Modified Mercalli Scale



I Instrumental
Not felt except by a very few under especially favorable conditions.



II Feeble
Felt only by a few persons at rest, especially on upper floors of buildings. Delicately suspended objects may swing.



III Slight
Felt quite noticeably by people indoors. Many do not recognize it as an earthquake. Vibration similar to the passing of a truck.



IV Moderate
Felt indoors by many, outdoors by few during the day. At night some awakened. Walls make cracking sounds. Dishes and windows rattle alarmingly.



V Rather Strong
Felt by nearly everyone; many awakened. Some dishes and windows broken. Unstable objects overturned. Clocks may stop.



VI Strong
Felt by all. Windows, dishes, glassware broken; books fall off shelves; some heavy furniture moved or overturned. Damage slight.



VII Very Strong
Difficult to stand; furniture broken; considerable damage in poorly built or badly designed structures.



VIII Destructive
Damage slight only in specially designed structures. Fall of chimneys, factory stacks, columns, monuments, walls. Heavy furniture moved.



IX Ruinous
General panic. Damage great in substantial buildings, with partial collapse. Buildings shifted off foundations.



X Disastrous
Some well built wooden structures destroyed; most masonry and frame structures destroyed with foundation. Rails bent.



XI Very Disastrous
Most buildings collapse. Bridges are destroyed. Large cracks appear in the ground. Underground pipelines are destroyed. Rails badly bent.



XII Catastrophic
Total damage. Almost everything is destroyed. The ground moves in waves or ripples. Large amounts of rock may move.

Heman Chong

Heman Chong is an artist, curator and writer. He received his M.A in Communication Art & Design from The Royal College of Art, London in 2002. His conceptually-charged investigations into how individuals and communities imagine the future generates a multiplicity of objects, images, installations, situations and texts. In 2006, he produced a writing workshop with Leif Magne Tangen at Project Arts Center in Dublin where they co-authored *PHILIP*, a science fiction novel, with Mark Aerial Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt and Steve Rushton. He is currently working on *Moderation(s)*, a project that occurs between Witte de With Contemporary Art in Rotterdam and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, involving an evolving group of participants generating projects within the framework of rethinking collaborative actions. In his spare time, he runs a nomadic bookshop named *LEM1* that specializes in distributing second-hand science fiction and fantasy books.

Kenny Leck (Math Paper Press)

Math Paper Press an imprint of BooksActually, is a small press publisher of poetry, new wave novellas, full-length novels, and essays. Its eclectic range of literary and visual works also includes photography collections, memoirs and young adult fiction. Math Paper Press also distributes books by selected small presses. Kenny Leck is the co-founder of BooksActually, an independent literary bookstore that specializes in Fiction + Literature titles. He also helps the publishing imprint Math Paper Press, and the handmade stationery line, Birds & Co.

This visible workbook is part of a digital publishing series, started in 2012, and made available for free at: www.visibleproject.org/blog

visible workbooks

edited by Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander

visible – when art leaves its own field and becomes visible as part of something else

is a research project in contemporary art that has been undertaken by Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in collaboration with Fondazione Zegna since 2009



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