



APRIL: DISCOVER

The Month of The Substation Associate Artists
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George Chua presents
Silent Agreement II

5 April 2007, 8 pm
The Substation Theatre

Silent Agreement II

Silent Agreement is a series of concerts presented by George Chua, an associate artist of The Substation. The focus of this series is an “interest in the materiality of sound and dedication to the experience of listening.” George’s work challenges the impression that sound is a minor player compared to the dominant visual elements of contemporary art.

In particular, *Silent Agreement II* consists of one night of laptop computer performances by George Chua and Li-Chuan Chong. For the two, listening to sound is as powerful as seeing, and their work defies the privileging of the eye in modern life. Using their laptops George and Chuan aim to expose the power of the listening experience, and its subsequent emotive responses. *Silent Agreement II* will not, however, incorporate any of the fictional characters and local references that many of George’s followers have become familiar with through his Genealogy project. *Silent Agreement II* is not a rehearsed performance: George and Chuan will “prepare” their files of sound on their laptops, and then the performance is improvised from there. It will take the form of three sets, each artist performing a solo set followed by a joint set.

George Chua

Whether it is a CD full of silence, or loops from randomly chosen records, sound art is usually regarded as a difficult art form. At times it takes the form of everyday mundane domestic noises, a clock ticking or tap dripping. Like many genres of contemporary art, sound art is often interdisciplinary -- typically engaging digital audio technologies, extended techniques of musical instruments, psycho-acoustics, and "found sound" (like visual art's found objects). Sound artists create abstract soundscapes using "noise" like a painter uses colour. A loosely associated group of media art practices that concern sound and listening as their focus, the genre evolved as artists wanted to move away from producing the conventional art object/commodity. Some examples of sound art have their origins in early twentieth century art music, while other examples draw inspiration from non-musical and architectural sources.

In Europe, sound art developed from the work of the Dadaists, Surrealists, the Situationist international, and Fluxus Happenings. Experimentations in sound works have continued to grow out of these early ideas, and the rise of digital technology and its accompanying conveniences has intensified these processes. Today, sound art is largely computer generated; taking the form of a performance, it is also known as Live art. Though some sound artists are inspired by the history and practice of experimental or Avant Garde music, it is important to note that works of sound art are often not considered "music" for a variety of formal, conceptual, and political reasons. Today, some of the stars of international sound art scene include Japanese artists like Atau Tanaka and Ryoji Ikeda. In 2000, for instance, Ikeda created the sound installation *Matrix* for the Millennium Dome in London.

When it comes to sound art in Singapore, George Chua is among the island city-state's best know practitioners. George, in collaboration with Alwyn Lim and Yuen Chee Wai, was invited to perform at the 2006 Singapore Biennale, *Belief*. A performance artist, sociologist and designer/photographer, respectively, the three worked together to examine the nature of social and human relations in urban spaces with their piece, *The Fog is Rising*, a mixed media installation, comprising of a complex sound installation in a darkened room.

An Associate Artist with The Substation since 2002, George's previous shows at The Substation include *The Unnamed Servant* (june 2006) and *The Ceiling That Shifted From My Body* (november 2005).

George's sonic art practice is not restricted to one register, rather it can adopt the form of performance, installation, or sound recording. He regularly performs solo work and group improvisations in art spaces, alternative spaces and theatres. Using sound, George explores the themes of memory, invisibility, the body, theatre and cinema. On his website, he wistfully recalls his childhood: "1980 – that year I turned 7 and began to taste melancholy. Much changes took place. I remember a sound that is like distant thunder." Listening to his piece entitled *1980*, one is deeply moved, reminded perhaps of a past experience or a moment of intense feeling. All this is done using files of music on Georges's laptop. The files are "prepared" but never "rehearsed", and the outcome is often an intensely affecting experience.

Among George's influences is the work of French avant-garde poet and musician Henri Chopin. Chopin has been called an "explorer of the body's voices." Through the systematic use of microphones, amplifiers, tape recorders, editing and mixing consoles, Chopin attempts to go to realms beyond modern or experimental music. He uses electronic devices to relentlessly explore the pneumatic body -- i.e. the body as inhaling, exhaling, speaking, singing, snoring -- but never gives way to the temptation of artificially fiddling with noises.

George has extended his own sound work with the incorporation of video footage and photo stills as well as collaborating with practitioners from various disciplines. In his Genealogy Project, he has created installation and performance art using objects, voices, body movement, video and sound. He has created fictional characters like Uncle Song whose collections of treasures prompt reminiscences and explorations of various themes. According to George, the Genealogy Project is an "umbrella under which various performances, presentations and exhibitions will take place." It is linked to a series of "enigmatic characters whose history and stories awaits some kind of unfolding." This project investigates the act of storytelling using various mediums, and taking into account a rich history of performative "users" of stories and tales. The history of mysterious characters like Uncle Song, the Grand Theatre of children, The Seven Legged-Spider Dance

Troupe, Aloysius Tan Seng Kiong, Cew Chong Choy may not be readily apparent to the uninitiated audience. Perhaps Genealogy's ambiguities can be explained by George's interest in the equally complex Eastern fairy tale tradition which inspires it.

It is George's hope that the listener will be both emotionally and physically engaged with his work; he believes that the primary value of sound art is that it encourages you to pay attention to *how* you listen, and to experiment with new ways of listening.

More on George Chua

www.georgechua.com

Li-Chuan Chong

Li-Chuan Chong (better known as *Chuan*) is a composer and sonic artist. Chuan started his training in music on the piano with Madam Yeo Bee Choo at the age of seven. At fourteen, Chuan moved from Singapore to London and continued to study the piano. His interest in composition was fostered during that period and he later made it the focus for his bachelor degree (BMus) at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Chuan continued his piano studies during his undergraduate years, concentrating on keyboard music by J.S. Bach and Dimitri Shostakovich.

Chuan went on to obtain a Masters in Composition (Studio Pathway) and PhD in Composition, at Goldsmiths. Starting out as a pianist gave Chuan a strong classical training from which to develop his ideas about music, composition and sound. He gradually went into composition and later pursued electro-acoustic composition. Chuan also has an interest in philosophy and tries to weave that into his work as a composer/sonic artist.

It was while studying as a post-graduate student at Goldsmiths that Chuan took part in the London free improv scene. There he played solo on laptop computer and also worked with other musicians who play more traditional instruments.

Chuan is keen on collaborating with artists from other disciplines, involving sound as a key element in concept and realisation. Chuan has worked on numerous projects with practitioners in theatre, performance and visual arts, writing music and sound design for film and video, and hopes to continually expand his horizon in the field of sound organisation.

“I usually start off with an idea, a concept or conceptual placeholder. It could be inspired by a mood, a situation, a poem, a political essay, a mathematical conundrum, a piece of music, and so on. Then I move on to think about how I’d best describe the idea in words, or in pictures, or in sounds, or perhaps a mixture of all of the above. The realization comes next and it involves making a choice of medium and presentation method. The process of creating my work is two-prong, and always, I hope, involves the process of listening on my part and that of my audience.”

More on Li-Chuan Chong

www.angelfire.com/electronic/phase/

Method and Material: An Interview with George Chua

By Ang Song Ming

taken from The Substation Magazine (posted September 2005)

George Chua is a Singaporean sound artist who works primarily on the laptop. His latest release is *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (January 2005), a collection of understated pieces well packed with nuances. Besides releasing albums and doing sound design for theatre, George is interested in multidisciplinary works, and collaborates on various projects with other artists. As a fulltime practitioner of his craft (something still uncommon in Singapore), and hence generating a consistent output of works, a listener may distinguish recurring themes and developments in his works.

In recent times, George's output has gravitated towards ambient excursions. It is an uncommon form of ambience due to its strong presence—his music is often characterised by palpable gestures, with sounds unfurling gradually over trajectories, carrying with them their own logic. Of special mention are his accompanying scores for films by Guy Sherwin and Lynn Loo at *Flicker Orchestrated* (June 2004), his concert *In the Gap Between Night and Morning* (January 2005) with Aspidistra Fly, and his multi-media presentation with Choy Ka Fai and Lim Woan Wen in *Control Room Live Unit* (May 2005). All three shows are especially effective for their use of visuals to complement the themes of invisibility and memory in George's music.

Since then, his improvisations at *Una Voce* (July 2005) and *Shadow and Subterfuge* (August 2005) have developed into more frenetic affairs, involving greater dynamics and more surprises. Throughout all these performances, George Chua's music reveals subtle but traceable hints of humanity. In computer music, it is a quality that remains difficult to imprint without invoking the straightforward (and oftentimes clichéd and uncritical) use of traditional instruments and human voices. Despite using the laptop—a medium often charged as soulless—as his main composition and performance instrument, George's music is infused with identifiable gestures that testify to the presence of character.

This interview with George took place at the newly opened Flux Us music store, which specialises in retailing experimental music. Here, George shares his opinions about the processes and contents relating to computer music, such as method and material.

Song Ming: How do the methodologies and operations of computer music relate to your artistic concerns?

George: I'll begin by talking about organisation and system [as these are essential processes] in using a computer. First, you are framed by the [operating] system of the computer. Second, your choice of software also sets certain boundaries [thereby constituting another system] to how you organise things.

When working with computers, you are basically working with files. This is the way I organise my sound files: For the past one or two years, the sound files I have been working with are always the same few; I'm still utilising certain sound files that I've been using since two years ago, but I use them differently now. I do not try to always look for new sounds, but when I do, I start a family tree: something like having a 'father' and 'mother' sound file, and for the next ten months, using only the combinations of these two sounds. These two sounds then create a new family of sounds, which will in turn create another series of sounds. If I were to trace the root of any file, I can always find where it originates.

Of course these are not hard and fast rules; I allow accidents to happen. Occasionally, I even break my mould of working; I like to create interruptions in my system—for example, sometimes I will randomly sample something. My room is pretty messy, so sometimes I do not know the location of my stuff. Say, I'll take the second CD from the first rack and I'll sample the first song, whatever the song is. So, before I start sampling, I have no idea what it's going to be, and sometimes I end up with snippets of very obvious stuff like U2, but no listener can tell. To me this [way of working] is an interruption... trying to use something that I don't actually want to use. And these interruptions become part of the family [of samples] also. This [methodology] leads to the notion of genealogy—I'm always thinking about what makes you start something in the first place. And as you go through the process, you forget the initial impetus of why something happens. The same goes for storytelling, which is what *Genealogy* is about.

SM: Can you explain more about the *Genealogy* project?

G: *Genealogy* is the umbrella name of a long-term project under which various performances, presentations, and exhibitions take place, linked by a series of characters I've created throughout the last five years. The project examines the inexhaustible nature of storytelling using various media, and

adopts an investigative approach towards the act of storytelling via evidence that unfolds in each presentation.

SM: What are your motivations for starting *Genealogy*?

G: Sometimes we create characters and stories—I have been doing that for the past five to six years—and I start to wonder about certain things when I look back. Why are these characters like that? Upon looking back, I can't really recall. Even if I can, what I recall is very different from what I used to think about, because I've undergone several personality changes since. The thing is: [my objective] in investigating how and why we tell stories is not to come to certain conclusions, but to provide a platform for discussion, and give life to the characters that I create. They are not physically present, but there is always some evidence pointing towards them, such as the space they stay in, the clothes they wear, and the beverages they drink.

SM: You mentioned that in *Genealogy* and your own sound works, you like to explore the notions of memories and invisibility—two terms that have references to non/materiality. Yet, you try to present these subjects in a material way, focusing on the evidence of things not seen. In parallel, computer music composition is also framed by the use of materials, such as grains and particles, which are very physical terms. I see the incorporation of material vocabulary as a reaction against what some people perceive as the facelessness and immateriality of digital music. What are your thoughts on this?

G: In art, you cannot avoid talking about materials—film, photography, painting, and installation all have their own materials. Even concepts are a kind of material. The very nature of the creative process demands that you talk about material. In terms of grains and particles, they are just units. You need units to measure things. From the sixties or seventies when the granular synthesis technique was introduced by composers such as Iannis Xenakis in his room full of computers, until now when we can actually do it on the laptop—it informs us that people are using measurements. Also, the use of measurements and calculations of particles and grains say a lot about who these inventors are—

SM: Mostly scientists and mathematicians—

G: And they are interested in calculating units, which informs us of the larger context, not just within sound itself, but also of the human need to quantify

things. So I guess grains and particles are just ways to quantify the materials. Perhaps it's not the best way, but it's a useful way of quantifying them, so that we may take them apart.

SM: And of course quantifying things is also another way of organising things.

G: Which is necessary, because you need to organise materials if you work with them. Even if you don't organise them, you need to recognise that you are making a choice not to organise them. And recognise the fact that you have an either/or situation—to organise or not to organise.

SM: The binary system also happens to be the language of computer/digital music. Ironically, despite being structured by the ostensibly simplistic binary system, computer music is often abstract and quite alienating to many people. Do you try to clarify the ambiguities inherent in the medium of your art? What are your strategies for clarification?

G: One of the ways I try to clarify things is that I don't spend too much time clarifying my works; I feel that the work should be able to speak for itself. Yet, I also like to talk to people about who I am, [not as a self-aggrandising gesture,] but to expand on the work in terms of showing where it's coming from. It's not really a strategy, but one way of dealing with it [the ambiguities] is to be willing to talk about it, and even admit that I don't know where this work is coming from. On the other hand, if I do know, I'm willing to share: where this is coming from; what I'm observing or how I feel when I'm creating this work; what are the things I'm trying to synergise.

Another thing I try to do is to be very conscious of the strokes in my works—a well-defined stroke brings clarity to the work. There was once when I was performing with two other musicians, and somebody who isn't familiar with our kind of music came up to me, saying: “Your music isn't any easier to listen to than the other two, but it has a quality that I can identify with, which I cannot hear from the other two.” I'm not saying I'm better than the other two performers; I'm just saying the listener can distinguish my strokes. Even in abstract paintings, you can see strokes—you can see energy and movement. I think a lot about strokes.

The Substation Magazine is available online www.substation.org/magazine

Coming up next in the **Month of Associate Artists**



Because We Have Big Mouths

The Substation Gallery

19 & 20 April, 8 – 9 pm

\$16 / \$14 from Gatecrash

No admission for children below age 6.

What do ants do when they approach a building? They crawl into its crevices and maybe even make their homes in the cracks. Rizman Putra, Zulkifle Mahmod and Noor Effendy Ibrahim take to the The Substation Gallery like ants to honey, in a multi-disciplinary show encompassing sound & performance.



**Little Red Shop and The Substation present
Between Woman and Man: The Erasure of Verena Tay**

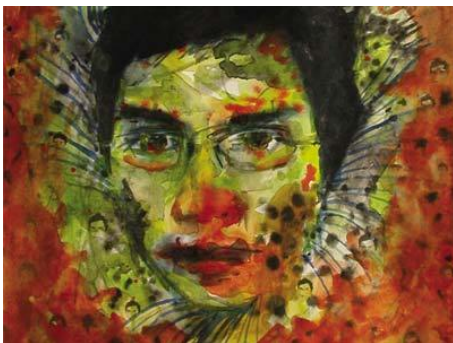
The Substation Theatre

Male Instincts (20 April 2007, 8 – 9 pm)

Women Wise (21 April 2007, 8 – 9 pm)

\$20/\$15 per show, \$30/\$20 for both shows from Gatecrash

Verena Tay is doubtful whether she is actually a man or a woman. She looks supposedly like a woman – since she is biologically one – but she behaves like a man, or, to put it simply, she has the character of a man. She is obviously very frustrated. She asked Richard Chua if there he would be interested to see Verena as a man. He decides to erase her off...



Trading Craft

A performance of curators by Khairuddin Hori

The Substation Gallery

24 april to 4 may 2007, 11 am - 9 pm

Opening reception and performance Monday 23 April 2007, 7 pm, free admission

What is a curator, and who wants to be one in Asia? In *Trading Craft*, Khairuddin Hori, an artist invites curators to "perform" and "play" in The Substation Gallery - questioning the roles of artist and curator, and expanding our expectations of what is curating. Organised and presented by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, with support of The Substation

APRIL: DISCOVER

The Month of Associate Artists of The Substation

Discover more about the Associate Artists of The Substation this month of April with a series of shows and events presented by Associate Artists encompassing the visual, sound and performance arts.

The Associate Artists Scheme is a programme for artists' development at The Substation.

Set up in early 2003, this scheme provides artists with rehearsal, performance or exhibition space as well as curatorial, administrative and publicity support. It was created to rationalise The Substation's work and also in response to developments in the Singapore arts scene. While there is an increasing number of arts events and activities, it is still difficult to sustain a full-time artistic career whether you are an individual artist or a member of an arts group, and there is little support for developmental work - the process of training, research, experimentation and rehearsal before an actual presentation. The scheme prioritises the research and development aspect of the artist's work. Artists selected for the scheme have to demonstrate a commitment to deepening their practice. They are usually artists working independently and not attached to or employed by another arts group.

The amount and type of support The Substation offers each Associate Artist depends on each artist's needs. There is also a commitment on the part of The Substation to help the artists develop viable careers and opportunities for the future, with the objective of sustaining the artists' practice. The Substation co-produces and presents projects by Associate Artists throughout the year.

Written and prepared by Julia Waite

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