

# **Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting**

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**John Spiteri**

**Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh**

**Christoph Preussmann**

**Noor Mahnun Mohamed**

**Moya McKenna**

**David Jolly**

**Talking with Jonathan Nichols**

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These conversations originated in thinking about what happened in painting in the last few decades. I put this question to each of the artists I spoke with, except Boedi Widjaja whose art-making started later, deploying it at the outset of each conversation as a means to consider how and why the collective shape of painting during a key period has been relatively undocumented from a contemporary art perspective.

From the beginning of the 1990s and well into the 2000s, there was a kind of unofficial moratorium on painting in the art world, and although this moratorium wasn't uniform, during this period it certainly formed part of the art world experience for me and other painters in Sydney and Melbourne. At one level this was a turn in theoretical framing, with medium-specific discourse giving way to more generalised debate. What is interesting though is that this turn in theory was fortuitous in practice. As I remember it from the perspective of my own studio, the perceived silence around new painting – not to mention the audience, so to speak, “looking the other way” – left room for the development of a more horizontally extended culture of painting. I came to see it as something like a minor scale that only a few were willing to use. For a time, this granted painting a new energy which stayed through to the late 2000s when painting once again experienced a period of resurgence. All this forms the first reason that the following conversations are with painters specifically, rather than with artists more generally.

The second reason for the medium-specificity of these conversations is that painting is a system that seems inexplicable without a foregrounding of the painter's actual experience (of painting) and knowledge (of painting). My own sense is that painting is more like a subject than an object. Paintings are reflexive and generative in similar kinds of ways that other subjects are: they operate not unlike people do in situ – this is the shorthand of it. Paintings have a life or duration independent even of the artist, and while there are certainly wider relations that are shared and distributed, a painting first takes shape around the character of the painter.

Lastly, these conversations follow my own biographical pathway, or overlay. By this I mean that they largely draw from the art worlds of my own experience: Sydney, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. This quality is particularly important for me. I take advantage of long artist friendships. In this, the conversations themselves are not so different from the verbal back and forth one finds in artists' studios – they roll and circle, are not always definitive, but nonetheless catch and hold affects that might be common to particular zones of practice, not unlike the way paintings do the same.

– Jonathan Nichols

Boedi Widjaja is an artist who works across media. He was born in Solo (Surakarta), Indonesia, in 1975 but left his home due to ethnic tensions, emigrating to Singapore with his elder sister at the age of nine. Widjaja completed a Bachelor of Architecture (Hons) at UNSW in 2000. Audrey Koh trained as a lawyer at the National University of Singapore and was admitted to the Singapore Bar in 1999. She has collaborated with Boedi Widjaja as an art producer for more than ten years. They have a daughter, Naomi.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations in December 2020 and January 2021.

**Jonathan Nichols:**

Your *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air* exhibition at ShanghART in Singapore in 2018 included a very large, suspended work [figs 2.1 and 2.2]. I remember visiting that show with you and describing the work as a painting. You found that curious but didn't take the same view. Can we revisit that conversation? It's interesting to me how this "not painting" might actually relate to painting, if it does. Other than weak or minor references to painting, which we also talked about, how would you think about what's going on with this particular work?<sup>1</sup> If we discount that the work is actually on canvas and we discount that it's on a frame, do you have a formal way of describing this method that you use, and how you came to adopt it? I'm trying not to use the word painting. But do you see them as particularly painterly, or drawing, methods? How did you come to a project like this, using these materials?

**Boedi Widjaja:**

First of all, I would use the term mark-making. Maybe next to it I would add on tracing. Because the images that were marked on the canvas were produced through a process of linear tracings of film stills. The idea is in tracing a source image. Mark-making, tracing and frottage, these were the processes we used to create the black surfaces. After using a carbon sheet to trace the film stills onto the unprimed side of the canvas, we transferred [what was left of] the carbon sheet – the carbon layer – onto the primed side of the canvas and then peeled away the paper.

**JN:**

The artwork has the sense of an account, of an action and its process, and this is primary. The artwork is a remnant of these activities. The undertaking of those actions drives the way you are understanding the work. Is this how you see it?

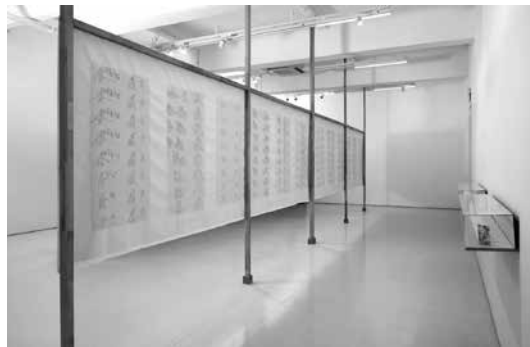
**BW:**

The idea of traces – the idea of echoes – was quite important. So when I trace these film stills [cartoon film images of Chinese Indonesian characters, c. 1980s], it was first of all a very deliberate way of watching a film. By tracing the stills, I felt that I had put myself into that kind of a situation of watching the film, through tracing, through drawing. It

struck me to be the most intense way of looking at something. And it was about encoding the film stills into another form, into another visual language.

**JN:**

Do you connect the works to yourself specifically, where you are tracing your own actions into the work?



**Figs 2.1 and 2.2. Boedi Widjaja, *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air*, ShanghART Singapore, 2018. Photos: Cher Him. Courtesy of Beautiful/Banal**

**BW:**

Not in a symbolic or illustrative way but I reckon that the process itself already pointed to a very bodily engagement. Much of my practice seems to gravitate towards a phenomenological process. The artwork is a trace, it is a remnant of these processes that have taken place. I wasn't trying to circumscribe that process.

**JN:**

The process is open. While your work is process-orientated, it's open to an audience or anyone to re-interpret however they might?

**BW:**

I wasn't trying to give the process a name. I wasn't trying to give it a definite shape. Although it was a significant part of the conceptual dimension, each of the steps was there for a reason. In my mind at least it exists very much like a process, not something that I could put a frame around.

**JN:**

We might distinguish the trace and the mark separately in your work – as two separate concepts – in that they are registering in two different directions. The tracing of a symbolic association and the mark as an action of the maker or action of making. So each is kind of a different form. When it's tracing a symbolic association, it's the thing you're tracing but also it is connecting to your recollection of what this thing is. And the other one is the mark itself. It's marking your place or specific action in quite a deliberate way. So I think we can separate those two things. The body mark doesn't trace, it is not indicating a prior history or recollection. Rather it's very much within the moment of its action. Whereas the trace is actually presupposing a thing that precedes it. I think that's interesting in thinking of your work in painterly terms, and that these differences kind of cohabit but are held separately.

**BW:**

Am I right to say that we are trying to think about the mark as the action, and the trace as some kind of intention? Is that what you are meaning?

**JN:**

I think they both have intention. They are both indexes – indexical. One in real time, with the mark in real time. But the trace is a different type of attribute. The mark conducts itself in real time and there is a performative logic to it and we've talked about this relation. But the trace logic buys into a different type of action. Of remembering, of repeating something. Which is suggesting a new scope or is implicated in a different type of time. For me it operates as a different scheme of understanding from the performative mark. Together they might be co-dependent, or even perhaps slightly contradictory, or alternate to each other – however. For me though they hold each other in a kind of abeyance.

**BW:**

As well I think I should add in an important aspect about that work. This came in somewhat later in the process and this was the form. Really it became clearer to me once the work was installed because we didn't have the space to install it in the studio. The physical form of that work could also be an echo of the wayang screen, the shadow puppets. The fact that it had two facings. Because the wayang also has two facings. One side where you could see the puppeteer, where you could see the actual puppets. And the other side where you could only see the shadows of these puppets. The puppet screen is two-dimensional but to me it is extremely multidimensional. It becomes something else. It becomes more than a piece of fabric; it becomes a universe of some kind where the stories and culture exist. I think more importantly for me it is a very potent space where Javanese beliefs exist in time because people watch this wayang and they understand what is being said by the puppeteer, by the *dhalang*, and with the gamelan music, with the singing, it can be quite immersive and trance-like.

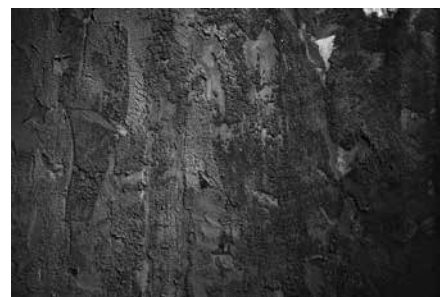
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**JN:**

With your work *Black—Hut* at ICA Singapore, did you intend to create a pictorial sense of concrete?

**BW:**

I'm not too sure about the pictorial aspect of that surface [of *Black—*



**Figs 2.3 and 2.4. Boedi Widjaja, *Black—Hut*, ICA Singapore, 2016. Photos: Cher Him. Courtesy of Beautiful/Banal**



**Fig. 2.5. Boedi Widjaja, *Black—Hut*, *Black—Hut*, in 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2018. Photo: Natasha Harth. Courtesy of QAGOMA**

*Hut*, 2016 – figs 2.3 and 2.4 – and its second iteration in 2018 – fig. 2.5]. I never thought of making images using the concrete surface.

**JN:**

I'm curious about where the surface is in these marks you use in *Black—Hut*. Thinking as a painter, in my own experience of painting, you are constantly trying to build the right surface. You know, you could paint a thing a thousand ways but you choose one. What makes you choose? And in these works there is gesture in the surface and its activation is in the hand and in the mark-making.

**BW:**

Yes.

**JN:**

And the sense that they are concrete, that they are referring to the material itself. Maybe it is that both of these things are in the work. They are the image of a thing and the fact of a thing.

**BW:**

With the first *Black—Hut* at the ICA Singapore the trowelling techniques were really used to express the method of applying concrete. I think it was the method we chose to express the membrane-like quality of concrete. Because concrete in architecture is usually associated with something massive and thick. It's rarely expressed as almost like a veneer. That way of applying concrete was very important in *Black—Hut* because I had always wanted to – in a way – play around with a material that is so associated with the Western international style – the Le Corbusier school.

**JN:**

Would you extend that to the likeness of Western painting, the likeness of black paintings or field paintings?

**BW:**

I can see the relation to it. I can see that relation.

...

**JN:**

It's an interesting thing to realise the sense of a work occurring later, after the event so to speak. At what point was the intention – who knows? Do you know what I mean? Intentions are sometimes not always so clear or to the point, and to me that's a very painterly expectation. You can't presuppose you are always conscious or knowing in painting. And painting itself has a part to play. This feeling of not knowing as a painterly expectation as against where we've often talked about performative thinking, I hold these in contrast. What is painterly and what is performative are two different kinds of understanding. To know that your motivations are not necessarily conscious, and then to know and need to anticipate that this is actually part of the procedure of art-making. So this is to know your intentions are necessarily obscure and this conceptually underpins the procedure of art-making. This is a painterly or figurative understanding. But the performative in contemporary art has been used in part as a corrective or counterpoint to painterly ideas of art-making. They are conceptually distinct.

**BW:**

What you are saying brings to my mind my architectural training. In architecture it is very expensive to be performative. Because time that passes is money. The act of acting. Using performance. Using action in the context of building. You can call it prototyping, but it's not exactly that. I think the process that you describe – to be performative – is much more immediate. It's a feeling and thinking kind of process, the way I understand it at least. But in architecture we are conditioned to plan, to lay out a scheme in our mind, and then to execute it on site. I think I am feeling those effects in my art-making. Before I make a work I try to lay out the scheme of the work in my mind. However, what you have been pointing out is that despite that process there are still these subconscious impulses that are carried into the process without me being clear about it. Despite all the efforts to clarify, plan, conceptualise, to take everything into account. And one other thing – I don't know if this is relevant. I realise that when I make a drawing today, I find it difficult to trust that performative process that you talk about. And I think that, maybe, is something that I might want to get back towards, to re-examine. There is a beauty there.



...

**JN:**

Thinking about my own work and the methods I've used to make artworks, I used to trace quite a lot. The way I would do it is find images on the internet. I was very aware that there were kinds of figure images on the internet that offered something that was potentially new. I had been trained in sculpture, but since leaving art school had moved more and more towards painting. Painting to me was something I understood least about art-making, and as well I didn't think that you could learn the mechanisms of a studio in an academic context. There were other reasons too for moving towards painting. Partly it was an economy of means. I couldn't carry or hold onto [store] things. I didn't have lots of money. Sculpture was always a very physical thing in my mind and I was moving cities often. I perhaps had a pretty retrograde view of sculpture as being primarily about objects. If I was really smart maybe I should have stopped thinking about it this way. But nonetheless I was moving more and more into painting. I would take an image, copy or cut out an image – from the newspaper or from the internet, from all kinds of sources – and I would use a lightbox and watercolours and would trace these figures, to carry across something from these places into the watercolour.

Now the fact of this process was that when you trace these diversely sourced figure images you get a tracing, the first watercolour copy. This was, say, version one. But I would trace it again and have a second, and then a third and a fourth, and so on, each with the same image. And each time I felt I was looking for something. I was in a way looking past the image, searching. Each time I would begin tracing I was learning about the image anew and this would affect the outcome of the watercolour. At a point, be it the fifth version or the sixth, the watercolour would change. I would start to see a character of the figure in a way where the earlier versions were just diagrams or outlines. Or was it that I would project a personality onto the work? At some point, the work would not be a diagram or a copy. It seemed to have qualities about it that were very different, starkly different, yet it was still ostensibly the same image. If you were to show each of the watercolour images then

everyone would I'm sure agree they were the same image. But even then, you would see differences. Particular works would stand out as having something more.

When I think of your works, for instance the large drawings from NYC, the negative image artworks [fig. 2.6], I would have thought you experienced similar feelings and thoughts about the subjects you were making pictures of. The amount of time you spent on one image. Earlier you were saying your process was about a really intense way of looking at a subject. You were cohabiting with them, walking up very close to them. Do you recognise when I [say that I] have very different reactions about what appears superficially to be the same image or copies of the same thing? The way I am looking for this unusual investment of my own? Does this explanation correlate with yours? I think this description traverses the idea of the performative at one end, and something quite different happening at the other end. When the picture looks back at you. When the painting looks back at you. There is an instinctive thing that separates individual works. Is this an analogy that makes sense?



**Fig. 2.6.** Boedi Widjaja, *Declaration of*, Helwaser Gallery, New York, 2019

**BW:**

I could see that process too. Because I have been tracing these martial arts figures for some time now. The ShanghART [Gallery] work wasn't the first time. I think the first time I did a similar series [fig. 2.7] was at Peninsula [I\_S\_L\_A\_N\_D\_S art space in Peninsula Shopping Centre, Singapore] in 2018.



**Fig. 2.7. Boedi Widjaja, *Imaginary Homeland: Kang Ouw (—), I\_S\_L\_A\_N\_D\_S*, Singapore, 2018**

**JN:**

Ah yes, I remember those.

**BW:**

I can see an evolution in how I've traced types of images since then. I find the phrase you use very fascinating: "when an image looks back at you." I think that's a very beautiful phrase.

**JN:**

That's very kind. I find it's nearly like a question of why I am interested in any image. When the painting looks back, so to speak, it's this quality that grabs your whole psychology. And that's not a performative logic.

It's a subject itself, not an objective logic. It separates from associations with derived imagery or anything like that. It makes the thing that you are interested in very lively. I've always associated that sensation with your work, where you were starting with these derivative images, these secondary image sources.

**BW:**

I would like to add something, which is – I think – yes. I do want to get an image that looks back at me. But also at the same time there was a desire to look at that image and be involved with the process of doing it. I think that there was a double purpose.

**JN:**

How was that again if you can? You want to look at those images? These historical Indonesian political figures for instance. You were studying them?

**BW:**

Yes. To explain, I would have to talk about the mediated experience that I'd had as a very young child growing up in Singapore. Hence these images of Indonesian political figures, Chinese martial arts film stills and others. They are images to do with home and being separated. When I say that I was looking at the image, what I meant was, it was the only way that I could engage with these aspects of home, because I was not physically growing up in Indonesia. So the images and drawing became the primary sites for thinking, for experiencing and contemplating home.

**JN:**

It was a way of coming to know what home was?

**BW:**

Yes, I had to imagine home through images. They became this terrain. They are just strange spaces that I inhabited mentally, that I desired to enter into.

...

**JN:**

Earlier you said that drawing struck you to be the most intense way of looking at something. And then you added, “it was encoding the film still into another form, into another visual language.” I took that to suggest that there was something special in this and translating it into a new form was an important gesture in itself.

**BW:**

I think the primary impulse was to visually manifest the act of looking. The encoding into drawing – the tracing – was the method to show you that I have been looking at these things. To manifest the process of looking intensely at these things. But I’m also concerned with an aesthetic thinking, its reception, and I’m aware that in the Chinese tradition one’s handwriting or mark is associated with the expression of your personal character and inner being. I am aware of how, or I consider the way that, these visual outcomes are going to be interpreted.

**JN:**

As a kind of accountability of character? The works represent a kind of personal accountability. Audrey was saying the other day that your [spoken] Chinese wasn’t very good. So, you speak English generally.

**Audrey Koh:**

Yes.

**JN:**

Especially when you are speaking to someone from China. They can be pretty brutal I imagine and make fun of your poor Chinese. And question you in your person, in a way I suppose, because your character is somehow diminished in their eyes, because your Chinese is so terrible.

**BW:**

It’s true [*laughs*]!

**JN:**

It relates to what you are saying at a level.

**BW:**

I think so. I think so.

**JN:**

To create this thinking [these artworks] have a certain sense of accountability and justice. A kind of validity is asserted. To give validity to the thinking, to show the characterisation in its full depth. This is an interesting thought. There is a prejudice in the world which will always for instance say that the best Chinese will come from China. We all experience these kinds of prejudice. Singapore is full of these kinds of cultural hesitations. Australia as well. These are outlying places, and the centres were always somewhere else – although this is not the case any more especially with respect to Singapore. “Real” culture is elsewhere and we are derivatives removed a thousand times. You are never an original. You know the feeling. And to work in art-making and in traditions where your own mark can indicate your character and to believe that. It’s a very awkward feeling to reconcile. It’s completely right. But viewed from the centre or a better vantage point it is invariably never enough. It can’t ever be right.

**AK:**

Can I add, and I’m saying this for myself, not Boedi. For me, in addition to the accountability and aesthetic priority that he has, I would say that the rigour of holding a technique, or presentation, for me as audience, is extremely important. I love the improv of improvisation works, but if it is by a child I will say, oh, how charming. But if it is by an adult I would like to see it by a master.

**JN:**

You want to see the knowledge.

**AK:**

Yes. I want to see an evolved knowledge or form. Because there is an inherent beauty in developing knowledge and in developing skills. For me as the audience I prize it quite highly.

**JN:**

When we think of your work as mark-making and yet it can very much appear or sit within a reproduction or copying genre. There is a strong equivalence with the original source being copied, in the way that we have talked about just now. Nonetheless, this is your mark in this very

complex way. It's a mark-making that operates within the expectations of Chinese image-making and Western traditions. I totally accept that. I'm really aware in my own work when I use Chinese paper that in Singapore the reading is likely very different from the reading here [in Melbourne.] There are these extra implications and expectations that are carried along with the task of even using Chinese paper. Here [in Melbourne], those kinds of expectations are quite invisible. And my feeling is that here too, the idea of finding a character or a quality of character, within a mark or accumulations of painting marks is much less adhered to. It definitely once existed at a time.<sup>2</sup> But now, in popular culture as well as in the art world, it's nearly impossible to find seriously any more. It's an interesting dilemma.

...

**JN:**

I'm interested in how David Joselit introduces the idea of two lives, where times have changed and – in a global age – two or sometimes more senses of life are synchronised materially by the artist in the artwork. Artists' lives that are overlapping but are not necessarily synchronised otherwise. Therefore, for Joselit, it is the artwork that fuses these like the "figure of the fossil."<sup>3</sup>

In a related way, a friend here, Quentin Sprague, who is an art critic and writer, suggests that many contemporary artists recognise the porous boundaries of cultural contexts and sort of push into these materially with their work.<sup>4</sup> It's as much that an artist can knowingly play into the material gap between cultural expectations, where things are not completely clear culturally so to speak.<sup>5</sup> There is a strategic awareness of gaps or in-between spaces that might be shared rather than literally thinking that there are life experiences lived separately. Is that too much to say?

Michael Taussig is an anthropologist who discusses how identities are tested and forged by artists making artworks and activating cultural contexts.<sup>6</sup> The role of the artist is special and there is a kind of training or allowance that is involved, an agency that is distributed by artists. Do you recognise this?

**BW:**

I do read artworks from several cultural realities as I understand them. But many times I devise meanings that are simply wrong and out of context. I'm not surprised if I misconstrue something or a particular reading. In some ways it is related to the works at Peninsula [fig. 2.7] and the work that I did at ShanghART [figs 2.1 and 2.2]. Very much what I am interested in with the Chinese martial arts figures has to do with the multicultural character of the genre. How you have a fantastical imagined sense of China – historical China – but in fact it's extremely inaccurate. And you have at the same time that Indonesian political dimension of having watched these illegal Chinese films growing up in Solo before I migrated to Singapore. I think the presence of Singaporean pop culture in the '80s and '90s is folded in as well. And I don't see much of this culture in the contemporary art world. I think you are quite right to point out that artists do look for the cultural gaps. At least I instinctively navigate towards these gaps. Because I find them to be very fertile with ideas. I think that is a very important mode of making artworks in my practice.

**JN:**

Quentin has worked in the past with an Aboriginal artist from the northern part of Australia, who has now passed away, her name is Ms N. Yunupingu.<sup>7</sup> He has suggested that there is a kind of wry humour in her work, as I understand it, because she is aware she is producing for outside audiences, where other mysterious kinds of expectations get involved, and as likely they never quite get where she is coming from. His feeling is that her work unavoidably played into Western expectations of meaning.<sup>8</sup> But there are other gaps and clichés in understanding painting. In the art world, a word like transcendence, for example, gets used to indicate a kind of summary gesture in painting, whereas I'm not really sure what transcendence actually means. It's a very agnostic thing to say in a way. I find it very difficult to measure and weigh up the more philosophically inflated descriptions of what is happening in painting. Words like transcendence, or immanence or transformation or deformation are too often used to describe what is ultimately happening in painting. They get thrown around as kinds of primary motivation. But I find these are usually derivations that are firstly very philosophically

specific and only make any sense in the philosophical contexts they come from. Even words like materialisation or externalisation, which I use a lot myself – sorry – are very blurry descriptions. I get the urgency but the usage in relation to painting can be very fuzzy. Some of my own personal favourites would be, say, Paul Klee's higher forces, or, say, Theodor Adorno's primordial shudder.

**BW:**

Oh. Yes.

**JN:**

Or Merleau-Ponty's lacuna or Bergson's primal drive. Another is Hegel's night-like pit of memory – I like that one.<sup>9</sup> My point here though is trying to measure and weigh, if we can, this gesture of playing into cultural difference. Playing into the doubt or cultural gap. Is there a way we can get to closer terms, about the rightness of artworks and especially when we are actually making artworks? By example in your mind do these motives when you are working come from above, in an idealised or aspirational way? Or is it that you reach downward such as say in a primordial shudder? Do you pinpoint these movements, or motifs, however you think of them for your own part?

**BW:**

Okay.

**AK:**

For me the descriptions you suggest are associated with a sense of the sublime and it's not so popular in today's art discourse. When you talk about the sublime there is always the question of the unknown – the mysterious. And I like how you follow this with the question for the artist: are you reaching up or reaching down? Because when you talk of up and down it again reinforces that there are planes, there are spheres beyond how we are materially engaging with one another. In today's contemporary art discourse, in Singapore especially, it is very much about culture in a micro movement. Almost like a minute kind of observation, like a minute-by-minute culture. So, questions of even a helicopter view, of humanity, become very tied to minute-by-minute movement. So, I don't see the sense of pulling up or a contempla-

tion of sublime. I also observe that contemporary art discourse is very words-driven. To the point that when I read text and there is so much text surrounding a practice, when I encounter the artwork, the text becomes the artwork more than the art object.

**JN:**

When I think of contemporary art in the way that you're speaking of it, there is a kind of shorthand at work.

**AK:**

Maybe this started as a means to have a clearer orientation but it has progressed to the part where also there is a rejection, a verbal rejection, a written rejection, of the mysterious and the kinds of experiences that you have described. Yet as human beings we have an inescapable reaction, like an encounter, despite what we protest deep down. I think every one of us has a primordial shudder. And we sometimes might not recognise it because we no longer have the words to describe it. In contemporary art I very seldom come across an acknowledgement of the sublime. Of course [it is] there but it is a very small sphere.

**BW:**

The Singapore art world, the discourses we have here – and these are discourses that are facilitated by independent curators, institutional curators, artists, exhibitions, talks – are very much influenced by the [art world] discussions that are floating around globally and especially those that are predominant in the West. You can be circumscribed by discourse. They are what they are.

**JN:**

When I think of art world institutions I think of them in terms of their framing or curating gestures. They receive and try to build meaning around a thing, so as to absorb the artwork. In this sense framing and curating are the structuring devices, and in this they are external to the artwork. Whereas in my conversation about painting, both internal and external motivations are part of painting and involve the painter directly. In painting, externalisation doesn't happen via a curatorial gesture or an external summary gesture, it happens within painting itself. There is a gap or lacuna that I'm trying to find here in our conversation.



The art world's systems of materialisation, of framing and curating an artwork – to me these are [part of] a system that is external to the artworks themselves. For instance, with the example of Pierre Klossowski and Paul Klee, it is that artworks come to life, “and breathe according to their own laws.”<sup>10</sup> The artwork takes its own course in this sense. It has its own agency and this needs to be anticipated in subsequent actions. Klee's and Klossowski's conceptions presuppose that art or painting kind of pushes itself. Painting itself, like a subject, is reflexive even in terms of the painter who is painting it. Painting is not a one-way street, but a two-way street. Painting has a collective voice that affects an artist through the making of the work.

**AK:**

The weight of painting's history bears on this reading.

**JN:**

That's true. Boedi, how do you feel about it?

**BW:**

I would like to try to answer your earlier question about whether I reach upward or reach downward.

**AK:**

[*Laughs*] I'm quite curious too.

**JN:**

Oh sorry. I realise these are very obscure questions.

**BW:**

First of all the metaphor is very interesting of one reaching up and of one reaching down. There is a spatial orientation in this suggestion and I find it very interesting. Because it is not something that is very obvious to me. And also the metaphor of inside and outside that you just now use to describe the internal rules of the artist I guess, and to some extent painting itself.

I would like to refer to something you just said earlier, where Michael Taussig talked about how an identity is formed. It goes through testing and forging before it is ever shaped. I can relate to that in the way I

conceptualise an idea for my artworks. I would first test ideas as far as I could probe them to be something intrinsic to me and to my life experiences, to my position towards the issues that are entangled. And I think the process of making the artwork is where the forging takes place. And I would like to believe that in the process of art-making there is both transcendence and shudder because I can't think of a separation between the two. With respect to internal and external motives, I do not think of these as separate either. These are embodied within a subject. It is a subjective metaphor because what is internal and what is external is always in reference to a subject. I'm curious about who are the subjects.

...

**JN:**

I'm sure it was Marcel Duchamp some while back who suggested that an artwork has a life of about 20 years.

**BW:**

An artwork needs to be animated in order to have agency. Until there is artificial intelligence in a museum then it will require human agency to animate an artwork. I think the cultural discourse coming from mainstream culture, coming from museum culture, the art world culture, this is the driving force that will determine whether a piece of art is going to be talked about and appreciated at any given time. I don't think any artwork has a lifespan on its own. If I am to refer to something that I know, such as the wayang kulit, artworks are just like puppets.

**JN:**

You mean they are the just the objects within the system. They can't do what a person does?

**BW:**

Yes. Whether or not that puppet – that character – is animated, depends on the story.

**JN:**

I think you are right in saying artworks are like puppets. But I also think that when an artwork seems to operate independently – popularly it might be described as timeless.<sup>11</sup> That's one way to say it. But

it's a cumbersome thing to say now – it's lost clarity in contemporary art. What I think is being referred to though is that the time value, the temporal value, is open-ended with respect to painting especially. They are not frozen in time. The artwork sits in a temporal space in the same way that people do. The artwork operates independently in that space just like people with memories and histories and relations affecting them. The idea that an external institution or profession maintains and adjudicates the validity of artworks makes no sense to me. They have no necessary access to the strange temporality enacted in painting. The liveliness of the artwork comes via the artist, it is connected to the temporal workings of artists. For the same reason I'm especially interested in other artists' reactions and expressions exactly because they subject themselves to these equivocating uneven processes of making. This makes the difference.

#### BW:

Can I add where artworks kind of have a force on their own, and affective action of their own. I must say at a time when I had a chance to visit MoMA in New York, when I looked at some of these abstract expressionist paintings, some of them emitted a kind of aura and I was quite captivated by these. But I guess each of us can only speak within or along the contours of this frame that we have built for ourselves and the way that we make our own meanings. Our conversation reminds me of something I read – a text by John Berger – where he says the difference between drawing and a photograph is that a photograph tells you of a moment in time, whereas a drawing draws you into its time.<sup>12</sup> It's such a clear and elegant way to speak about the qualities you find in a painting or a drawing.

1. American art historian Alex Bacon has suggested that painting references are often used in contemporary artworks where those artworks are not intended to be actual paintings. He describes these as “weak” painting references. Contemporary artworks can, “adopt just one [or some] of its components, rather than its totality.” Alex Bacon, “Painting's Minor Present,” lecture presented at Painting Politics Symposium, University of Auckland, July 26–27, 2019.
2. By example, David Joselit writes that: “The painterly mark ... deserves to be placed alongside the readymade, collage, and the monochrome as one of the fundamental inventions of European historical avant-gardes.” David Joselit, “Reassembling Painting,” in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 169.
3. David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt, Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 243–46.
4. See Quentin Sprague, *The Stranger Artist. Life at the Edge of Kimberley Painting* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2020).
5. Fact-checking my own recollections, I should clarify that Quentin Sprague's emphasis is less the artist “knowingly” pushing into these gaps, and more the artwork itself pushing (or being pushed) into the gaps between cultural expectations.
6. “The nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.” And further, “No understanding of mimesis is worthwhile if it lacks the ability to traverse this two-way street.” Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), xiii–xiv.
7. Ms N. Yunupijū's full name is not being used out of respect for the Yolŋu cultural protocols for deceased people.
8. Quentin Sprague, “White Lines,” *Discipline 3* (Winter 2013): 61.
9. See Stephen H. Watson, *Crescent Moon Over the Rational: Philosophical Interpretations of Paul Klee* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
10. “But this is not only what Klee meant: the anatomy of the picture implies that the picture is an ‘in itself’ come to life and breathing according to its own laws.” Pierre Klossowski, “The Decline of the Nude,” in *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 15.
11. Boris Groys describes a more precise sense of timelessness by referring to Wassily Kandinsky's book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1910. Kandinsky, he writes, understood his own artworks to be “timeless” and in this he understood that his task as an artist was to carry symbols/art across the threshold to a new era beyond – “to make transcendental art also means to make universalist, transcultural art, because crossing a temporal border is basically the same operation as crossing a cultural border.” Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 111–13.
12. See John Berger, “Drawn to that Moment,” in *Berger on Drawing* (Cork: Occasional Press, 2005).

Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting

John Spiteri, Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh, Christoph Preussmann, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, Moya McKenna, David Jolly. Talking with Jonathan Nichols

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– Jonathan Nichols





**John Spiteri**  
**Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh**  
**Christoph Preussmann**  
**Noor Mahnun Mohamed**  
**Moya McKenna**  
**David Jolly**  
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