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Murmur is an exhibition that considers the relationship, and transformation, between words and its corresponding etymologies, ideas, images, and form, in a manner that thereafter forms a discrete cycle. The show presents the works of multidisciplinary artists from different parts of Asia dear to ROH—Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Indonesia—in a dialogue with each presenting works that consider these transitive sequences. Time and memory are, as well, important aspects of the show. How does this cycle occur in the presence, or lack thereof, of a written instrument, or historical record? How has the internet and the mass interpolation of big data interjects upon how these cycles occur today? And with humanity's current preoccupation with Artificial Intelligence—the future? Itself onomatopoeic in terms of its origins, formed by the sound by which the word is itself associated with, the word *murmur* itself, and some of the ways in which it may be understood, provides a framework by which to understand the exhibition further.

The art historical context in terms of artists and the incorporation of words in their work is not without precedent by any stretch of the imagination. Among many others, the foundations have been laid out in terms of the Western canon since the post-war period of the 1960s by Lawrence Wiener, Joseph Kosuth, Jasper Johns (albeit through numbers), Ed Ruscha, Barbara Kruger,

and Jenny Holzer, and responded to in Chinese contemporary art by Xu Bing and Gu Wenda in their consideration of Mandarin text. But for the purposes of *murmur*, it would perhaps be apt, and interesting, to reconsider the “quintessential” conceptual art precedent, Marcel Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*. The primary reading, or essence, to the work's significance in the way by which conceptual art, and thereafter contemporary art as consequence, has been related to how Duchamp was successfully capable in recontextualizing a ready-made object as bona fide work of art vis a vis its conceptual/contextual premises. But another way of looking at the work, related to how Duchamp signed the work using the pseudonym “R. Mutt”, considers *Fountain* as a predecessor of sorts towards how artists have been using words as medium in their work.

Initially as a means to conceal his authorship towards *Fountain* in applying towards an exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists, to test the conviction of their foundational principles that all members' submissions had to be accepted, “R. Mutt” becomes interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the Society of Independent Artists at the time rejected the submission of the work due to its indecent characteristics. But the outcome might have been different if the work was signed off with the name of Duchamp himself. “The fact that “R. Mutt” was an unknown artist meant that Duchamp could test the openness of the society to artworks that did not conform to conventional aesthetic and moral standards without compromising the outcome or his relationships with board members, though at the expense of being able to avow that the work was his own.”¹ Conjectures began to spread, as it later became known that Duchamp was the true artist behind the work, for instance, that “R. Mutt” was itself a “was a pun on the German word *Armut* meaning poverty[,]”² perhaps as a political gesture against the elitist aspects of the art world itself. Many years after in reflecting about *Fountain* Duchamp clarified in his explanation:

“Mutt comes from Mott Works, the name of a large sanitary equipment manufacturer. But Mott was too close so I altered it to Mutt, after the daily cartoon strip “Mutt and Jeff” which

appeared at the time, and with which everyone was familiar. Thus, from the start, there was an interplay of Mutt: a fat little funny man, and Jeff: a tall thin man ... I wanted any old name. And I added Richard [French slang for money-bags]. That's not a bad name for a *pissotière*. Get it? The opposite of poverty. But not even that much, just R. MUTT.”³

The exhibition considers the word *murmur* within a framework of thinking perhaps analogous to Duchamp's consideration, or utilization of “R. Mutt”. There is a certain sculpturality to the word in terms of how *mur* is repeated twice in *murmur* in terms of the structure of the word itself. That the word *murmur* is also meant to imitate in terms of how it sounds in relation to its meaning—an indistinguishable, or barely distinguishable sound, usually from a voice, but also perhaps from a source in nature—makes it interesting for its further multiple layers of etymological connotations. There is something perhaps strange in the notion of a word that has been engineered to sound like something that in its very nature is indistinguishable, or that people who speak the English language then relate the repetition of *mur* twice, as being in their mind somehow what that indistinguishable sound is. That there is somehow a concrete form, in the shape of the word *murmur*, for something that is potentially abstract and more shapeless in nature. But as one utters the word *murmur* in one's mind that one cannot help but feel that the word is quite accurate in depicting what it attempts to represent nevertheless. The artists in this exhibition also look at the ideas in their respective works, and therefore their respective practices, also in this manner of visualizing through their various forms of aesthetic communication those things that transcend what their own mediums are able to contain within the constraints of their own materiality, and further into the realm of the speculative and conceptual.

Taking the idea of the exhibition further requires a further leap of the imagination in terms of *murmur* and reconsidering the reading of the word as a pun, reading the word as “R.Mutt” too perhaps read or understood prior to Duchamp's more comprehensive explanation behind its meaning. In the Indonesian language, the word *mur*,

¹T. (1919, January 1). ‘Fountain’, Marcel Duchamp, 1917, replica 1964 | Tate. Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

²T. (1919, January 1). ‘Fountain’, Marcel Duchamp, 1917, replica 1964 | Tate. Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

³Camfield, W. A., (1987) “Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917”, *Dada/Surrealism* 16(1), 64-94.

one half or *murmur*, is used to define the hexagonal nuts, or forms of a gear, that contain a hole in its middle that corresponds to a screw and therefore secures its position. The *mur* plays a definitively utilitarian function, usually for the specific purposes of industrial products that contain metal components of an almost infinitely diverse array of possibilities. But interestingly, when the word *mur* is repeated twice, and in the Indonesian language with the addition of a hyphen in between (*mur-mur*), it becomes the plural version of itself. When *mur* is repeated twice, with a hyphen in between in particular, it can become any number of *murs* more than one *mur*, up to infinity *murs*. So the title of the exhibition, *murmur*, also perhaps looks at this notion of looking at this idea of a more abstract utilitarian device, and the theoretical possibility of it being multiplied upon itself in an infinite expanse.

These two possibilities of looking at *murmur*, interconnected perhaps, but also distinctive in their own ways, perhaps provides a framework by which to better understand what the artists in the exhibition attempt to encapsulate in their work, as well as the theoretical dialogue between them. There is an aspect to what they are trying to express through their work that attempts to bring form to those things that may be inherently formless, and indescribable through words, but paradoxically in manners that respectively depict their respective intentions accurately. And secondly in this notion of looking at the possibility of looking at their work in a manner similar to looking at a word in multiple languages, and the consequence of therefore looking at their work in layers of simultaneous contexts together. Like looking at the onomatopoeic device of translating that indiscernible sound into a concrete word that is *murmur*, while imagining the nature of a utilitarian device repeated infinitely.

As introduction to the exhibition, Pratchaya Phinthong's *Untitled* (2023) is itself an unfinished work that takes the form of two front pages torn from two different books— Fred Polak's *The Image of the Future* and Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image*. Selecting the two titles and placing them adjacent to one another reflects the simultaneous consideration of two

different concepts, similar, though also fundamentally at odds with each other the way the exhibition considers the idea of *murmur* as expressed in the previous paragraphs. The image of the future, and the future of the image. Two statements that may appear like a palindrome at first glance, but in fact is not one. But conceptually may be much more like a palindrome than many other palindromes.

Polak's *The Image of the Future* is a futurist, sociological treatise written in the 1960s (interestingly during the time by which many artists began to use language in their work) about the impact by which society's collective vision of the future has an impact on materializing those aspirations in the present. It is a book about the "future" in *The Image of the Future*. Whereas Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image* takes the form of essays within the realm of philosophy and aesthetics that considers art as being intrinsically interrelated and therefore irreplaceable from each other. *The Future of the Image* looks at the "image" aspect of its title, rather than the speculative considerations of what the future may be. Just as politics and art may not ever be considered separate from each other, though, can any consideration of what the future of the image may be, be conducted in a manner that disregards the future altogether? And vice versa, can looking at the image of the future disregard the notion of the image? Or are these two titles tautologous in nature? Though seemingly the case in first glance, do Polak and Rancière respectively prove that the two statements may be very fundamentally different in the first place? These contradictions, or paradoxes, are present in *murmur* in various degrees of magnitude and formulations.

Tsang Kin-Wah's text-based work *YO UWOULDNE VER...YO U WOULDNE EVE R ANDY O UWOULD N EVER...* (2023) is in its title a repetition of the three words you, would, and never three times, forming an epizeuxis, or the rhetoric repetition of words or phrases in immediate succession. Like repeating the word *mur* twice, but in this case perhaps three times. An epizeuxis is a rhetorical device mainly utilized for the purpose of emotional emphasis⁴. In this work, as well as in Kin-Wah's practice, words, in the typographical shape of

its constituent letters, act as a medium in and of itself reconstituted through moving image or as more static text placed upon various surfaces, usually in large scales. Kin-Wah's work, in this case, is barely decipherable in terms of the relationship between letters, words, and fragments of sentences that appear to concentrically immerse Gallery Apple. That the words, and letters of Kin-Wah's works take upon the nature of being able to act as its own aesthetic form in and of itself, is perhaps most analogous to the approach of the exhibition itself in considering the notion of *murmur* in its various modalities as discussed earlier. The words in Kin-Wah's works are therefore at once discernible as what they are in terms of the audience's cognitive response, but at the same time act as fluid aesthetic devices that transcend the utilitarian aspect of language as communication device, but rather beyond as aesthetic formulations in and of themselves.

The *A Tea Poi on Moo* (2016) series by Bagus Pandega relates to Tsang Kin-Wah's work as perhaps a kind of conceptual counterpart in a similar way that Polak and Rancière flip the different words around in the respective titles to their work. In Pandega's work, an array of record players express animations of moving mouths that, due to an interaction with strobe lights, gives an impression that the mouths are speaking, albeit indiscernibly. In the case of Pandega, the words implied by the work are completely invisible in form, whether through written word, or through an auditory reference, but rather through the perceived notion of how images of mouths are moving in his installation. It is only in speaking with Pandega further that he reveals that the three people depicted in the work are homeless people struggling to make ends meet on the streets of Bandung, where he is based in, is the viewer able to then provide further color to their own conjectures pertaining to what is being said. Although once again the words being said remain almost completely within the speculation of the viewer.

Appearing abstract in nature at first impression, Tromarama's *Abundance* (2023) works represent a technical analysis candle chart that refers to different points in time pertaining to the stock prices of Twitter before it became a private company in 2022. The

⁴ Hauser, G. A. (2002, February 1). Introduction to Rhetorical Theory. <https://doi.org/10.1604/9781577662211>

work refers to the collective's interest pertaining to the increasingly blurry lines between labor and leisure, and the ways in which data—in this case from tweets, which can be further broken down as words, are conglomerated from millions of people around the world—is tangibly valued in monetary form through a stock price. Underneath the golden lacquer pigment, representing value, are traces of the cotton polyester base material that Tromarama utilizes, which is commonly used for the purposes of outfitting mattresses. Interestingly, the underlying pattern repeated upon the surface of this cotton polyester material represents the Chinese words *shuang xi* or *Double Happiness* in English. A repetition of the Chinese character *xi* twice (喜喜), which individually means joy, and when repeated together becomes an aspiration of sorts for the possibility of an infinite joy. The *feng shui*, or energy harmonization of a site, may positively be affected by the careful placement of *shuang xi*. The way that murmur in the Indonesian language creates a speculative possibility of an infinite device is also what Tromarama is similarly referring to in their reference to the most likely misleading aspirations of happiness interwoven towards the increasing dependence the human species has towards technology, as well as the inherent dangers of not being able to discern the distinctions between their own labor and leisure.

Gary Ross-Pastrana's (*Eidolon I*) *Lot- 01 Provisional Objects Series* (2019) reconstitutes Tromarama's considerations in an altogether different visual form. Boston Dynamics' iconic mobile robot *Spot*, itself a symbol of how far artificial intelligence is able to mimic, or even expand beyond, the capabilities of a pet dog, as a replacement towards man's proverbial "best friend", is rendered in a detailed monochromatic wooden sculpture, sitting still upon a wooden pedestal. The translation of the form of *Spot* in this sculptural form makes it ambiguous to the viewer as to when the sculpture was created. Was *Eidolon I* made in the past as a relic to remind future generations of how important this creature was to humans at the time? But at the same time this could not be true given the fact that Boston Dynamics' *Spot* was only very recently invented and released to the public. And so perhaps by formulating a notion of looking at something now as if it were a relic in the past, Pastrana postulates perhaps, then, a manner in which humans will one day look at the new inventions being created today replacing the things held dear through generations prior. And therefore to reconsider the "image of the future" presented by the potentialities inherent in technological

innovation.

Dusadee Huntrakul continues to further develop his ceramic-making practice for *murmur* in the form of very delicately crafted, eclectic, sculptures, as well as new drawings on plates. Inherently feeling at first impression, similar to Pastrana's sculpture, as relics that come from a more ancient origin, but in further inspection contain representations of unclear chronological origins. The works act as a means by which Huntrakul connects different moments in time utilizing his works as points of reference—little dinosaur figurines, anonymous eggs, unidentified flying objects, as well as delicate recreations of shells and gecko dung also made out of ceramic. Huntrakul therefore engages the viewer to look at his work by compelling them in a manner that simultaneously pertains to the past, present, and future.

Holy Chamber (2023) considers *murmur* from a more singular direction of time, and the means by which it also contains quite substantively the aspect of memory and the past. Throughout Agung Kurniawan's practice as an artist, he has been consistently drawn towards the events that have happened during, as well as the consequences pertaining to, the mass killings in Indonesia. Collecting clothes that have been donated to him by survivors of the genocide, who he developed close friendships with throughout the years, and have now passed away, Kurniawan has reconstituted these articles of clothing into a more architectural form of an installation that the viewer can enter. The installation suggests further the notion of how a *murmur* may also be expressed through means other than language. Faisal Habibi perhaps looks the other way, albeit as well in a singular direction, once again into the future from the perspective of ecological considerations. In both *Mind the Gap* (2015) as well as *Forged by Heat* (2023), Habibi reconstitutes waste products into materials to develop abstract sculptures, reconsidering scrap metal from a workshop as well as plastic waste material as integral properties of his work.

Aracha Cholitgul, Banny Jayanata, and Nadya Jiwa together provide a more narrative, fictional aspect to the exhibition through their respective paintings and compositions, which once again do not provide clear hints of time origin in their works—it is as if the works were not, or did not have to, come from the present. Their respective considerations of painting and drawing as medium is again difficult to contain in words, and perhaps expresses the idea of *murmur* in the way that the word

is onomatopoeic towards the idea it represents; their paintings represent the idea of what a *murmur* would be if somehow it could be expressed through painting.

Artists

AGUNG KURNIAWAN
ARACHA CHOLITGUL
BAGUS PANDEGA
BANNY JAYANATA
DUSADEE HUNTRAKUL
FAISAL HABIBI
GARY-ROSS PASTRANA
NADYA JIWA
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Exhibition content

