

ROH

LABYRINTHS (LIBRARIES)

HEMAN CHONG

JUN TIRTADJI  
5 DECEMBER 2022

ROH is pleased to present *Labyrinths (Libraries)*, our first solo exhibition of celebrated conceptual artist Heman Chong (b. 1977 Malaysia, raised in Singapore) whose work is, according to his Instagram profile, “located at the intersection between image, performance, situations and writing.”<sup>1</sup> Through his practice, Chong challenges as well as highlights many of our preconceived notions pertaining to the things we come across in the everyday. He deploys a wide array of aesthetic strategies to communicate his ideas, and often goes either beyond the boundaries of contemporary art itself, well into the realm of other disciplines such as literature, design, performance, and architecture, among others, or within, through questioning some of contemporary art’s own ontological underpinnings.

As homage to *Everything (Wikipedia)* (2016), a performance work in the exhibition that represents a “futile attempt to vocalize a representation of the entirety of human knowledge” a Wikipedia entry pertaining to existentialism may be most apt:

**Existentialism** (ɛgzɪˈstɛnʃəliːzəm/ˌɛksəˈstɛntʃəliːzəm) is a form of philosophical inquiry that explores the problem of human existence and centers on the abstractions of thinking, feeling, and acting. Existentialist thinkers frequently explore issues related to the meaning, purpose, and value of human existence. In the view of an existentialist, the individual’s starting point has been called “the existential angst”, a sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, or anxiety

in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps impossible to consider larger sociological and systemic structures without consideration upon its lowest common denominator, the singular person. It may therefore be argued that Chong’s forms of more macro inquiries into societal structure are also inseparable from the questions that pertain to human existence itself. As expressed in *Everything (Wikipedia)* (2016), there exists a certain tension between what appears to be a cognizance pertaining to the most futile as well as audacious attempt by Wikipedia to encapsulate the breadth of human knowledge and democratize it for anyone in the world to access — an impossible task — with an appreciation towards its fundamental ambition and aspiration. Although the performers who activate *Everything (Wikipedia)* (2016) will never be able to read the entirety of available Wikipedia pages that exist on the internet given the limited duration of the exhibition, there is nevertheless a sincere attempt, or ambition, for the performer to do so. The seeming absurdity of attempting to achieve that which is intrinsically unattainable from the start is a core tenet of existentialist thought. The process of working through, and persevering despite the lack of knowing the ends by which one eventually attains has been a focus point for many existentialists. But Chong is not a nihilist. Despite, and through, his criticism, it may be argued that Chong is also a humanist through and through, both in a certain expectation, if this is the right word for it, for change in our behavior through the realizations obtained through conversation about his criticism, as well as in a certain recognition perhaps pertaining to the audacious attempt to continue doing and endeavoring despite not knowing the ends by which one is working towards.

A semi-autobiographical movie by Japanese director Takeshi Kitano, *Achilles and the Tortoise (Akiresu to Kame)*, in which Kitano himself plays an aging artist struggling constantly to seek success, comes to mind. The title of the movie itself refers to Zeno’s paradox, an Aristotelian philosophical thought experiment that concerns a race between Achilles, known for his superhuman speed, with a pedestrian tortoise. Quoting the Encyclopedia Britannica, “a general knowledge English-language encyclopaedia”<sup>3</sup>:

“Zeno’s argument rests on the presumption that Achilles must first reach the point

where the tortoise started, by which time the tortoise will have moved ahead, even if but a small distance, to another point; by the time Achilles traverses the distance to this latter point, the tortoise will have moved ahead to another, and so on.”<sup>4</sup>

The movie traces the life of Machisu, a child painter prodigy who eventually attends art school as a young man, and then becomes more and more obsessed with contemporary art at a later stage of life, trying his best to become a successful artist. Machisu is likened to be the Achilles in this story, with the notion of success compared to the idea of the tortoise. Success seems to be constantly on the horizon, so closely within the grasp of Machisu as he grows older. He constantly offers his works to curators and art dealers with his newest bodies of work, but is constantly rejected and suggested to continue exploring new ideas once again all over. On the walls of some of the art dealers’ galleries, however, are sadly works of Machisu’s from a much younger age, that he himself had discarded and forgotten. Success was constantly so close in front of Machisu, while simultaneously perpetually elusive.

In relation to *Everything (Wikipedia)* (2016), then, *Cover (Versions)* (2009 – ongoing) and *Labyrinths (Libraries)* (2022 – ongoing) then seem to carry the added weight of representing the solace, or guidance, that comes from the premises by which these book covers and library shelves potentially represent. In *(Free) Trade* (2022), the questions Heman poses related to existence seem to be upturned once again by an intervention provided by an empty space of nothingness. This empty space could have become one that suggests or is associated with a much more nihilistic, pessimistic consideration. On the contrary, the work instead speaks about considering the empty space as a site for contemplation and a site of meaning departing from our imaginations. Through an ambitious installation that represents an art fair booth, conventionally associated with the notion of trade in relation to commerce, Chong instead invites the audience to consider the space to trade ideas and thoughts between each other. It is perhaps a most fitting show to present at the end of 2022, to invite our audience to also contemplate throughout the show and reflect upon the times to come together.

<sup>1</sup> Chong, H. (2020) Heman Chong’s profile [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/hemanchong> (Accessed 2 December 2022).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Existentialism’ (2022) Wikipedia. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism> (Accessed: 2 December 2022).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Encyclopædia Britannica’ (2022) Wikipedia. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclopædia\\_Britannica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclopædia_Britannica) (Accessed: 2 December 2022).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Achilles paradox’ (2022) Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achilles-paradox> (Accessed: 2 December 2022).

LABYRINTHS  
(LIBRARIES)

HEMAN CHONG  
FOR ROH PROJECTS

The multi-layered, trans-disciplinary art practice of Heman Chong often reveals the socio-political complexities of the world we share. Chong lives and works in Singapore. He describes his ways of art making as revealing and challenging the inherent hegemonies of systems woven into the everyday. This is unsurprising for an artist whose practice is deeply rooted in his obsession with looking at, thinking about and pointing to the state of authoritarian capitalism in Singapore.

This exhibition revolves around several series and works that allow us ways of understanding these complexities that surround the work of the artist.

*Labyrinths (Libraries)* (2022-ongoing) is a set of images resembling maps of spaces produced out of tight grids. These are spaces that are highly organised, with very little room for any form of improvisation. Horizontal and vertical lines dominate the surfaces of these paintings, forming pathways that are navigated in one's mind but not break out of. Within every library, we can locate books which contain many opposing ideas. These paintings think about multiplicity and the relations between these books and the spaces between them as a landscape of our contemporary time. The visual language within each painting found in *Labyrinths (Libraries)* is a constant oscillation between positive and negative spaces; sparking an interest in thinking about how ideas can be easily veiled and hidden behind other ideas.

*Cover (Versions)* (2009 - ongoing) is an on-going series of book covers imagined as paintings. The selected titles are taken from an extensive and idiosyncratic list that is constantly expanding via recommendations sent to him by his friends. Most of these books have never been read at the time the painting is produced, but is to be read

at some point in his life. Each painting is improvised; there has never been an assumption of how the painting might look. Chong discursively exhausts two sets of parallel vocabularies found in painting and graphic design. The abstracted book covers are not intended as reflections on or interpretations of their literary titles, but rather as a way to highlight relationships between textual and non-textual forms.

*Everything (Wikipedia)* (2016) begins with an encounter with an individual walking around a room. It is revealed that this person is reading from their personal mobile device. Beginning with the article of the day on Wikipedia, accessed off the servers in real time, the reader reads that article, without any emotion, and moves onto the next article, which is a link that they can choose from within this page. He/ She or They repeats this action, over and over, until the pre-defined hours of the performance has ended. This is a durational performance that is a futile attempt to vocalise a representation of the entirety of human knowledge. The hyperlinks across a multitude of entries written by the everyday person eventually spirals into the depths of irrelevance from the original article of the day.

*(Free) Trade* (2022) is a new work that appropriates the architecture of an art fair booth and transposes it as a large scale, temporary situation that is located in the middle of the gallery. It is a minimalist sculpture that surfaces out of a set of instructions, constructed whenever it is exhibited. After the show, it is dismantled and recycled, only to reappear at the next show. Born out of Chong's interest in the infrastructures found in everyday life, *(Free) Trade* transposes the ubiquitous art fair booth straight into the gallery, producing a space of contemplation, not unlike structures like pavilions in gardens or jetties at lakes. It is via this emptiness and nothingness that we can collectively think about the possibilities of these spaces as sites of meanings that can arise out of our own imagining.



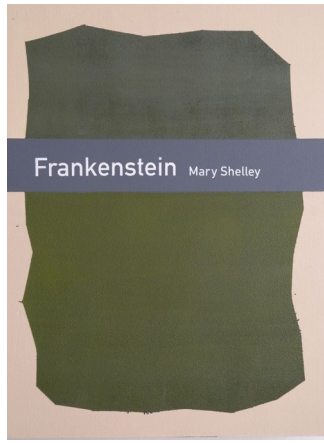


*(Free) Trade*  
2022  
Instructions leading to the construction of  
an art fair booth (rendering)  
300 × 900 × 600 cm

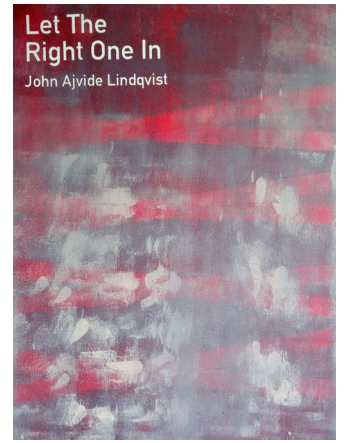




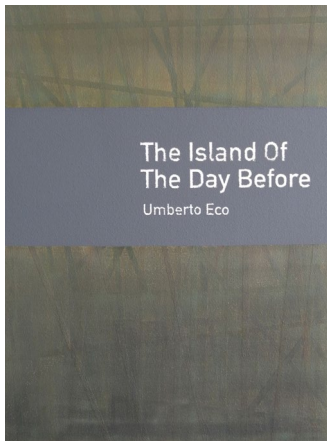
*Fight Club / Chuck Palahniuk*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



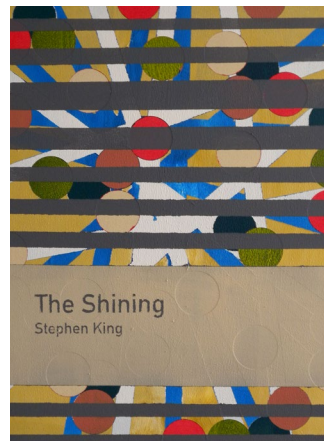
*Frankenstein / Mary Shelley*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



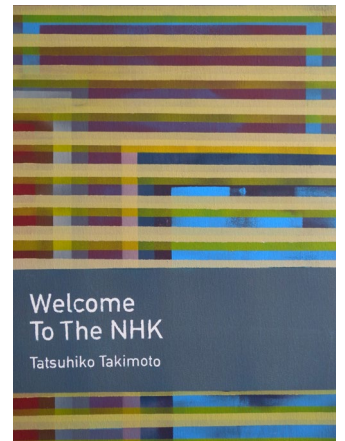
*Let The Right One In / John Ajvide Lindqvist*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



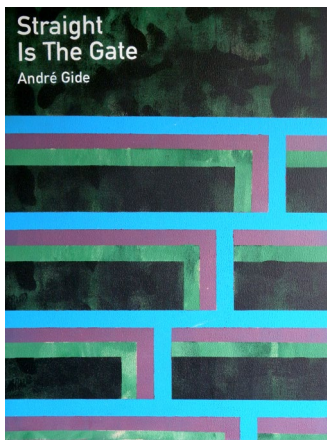
*The Island of the Day Before / Umberto Eco*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



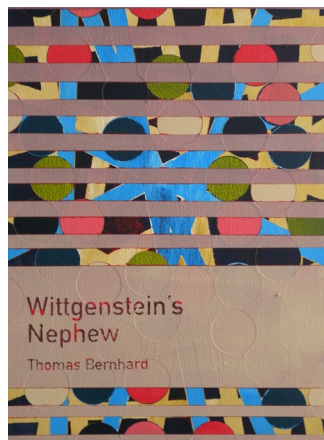
*The Shining / Stephen King*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



*Welcome to The NHK / Tatsuhiko Takimoto*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



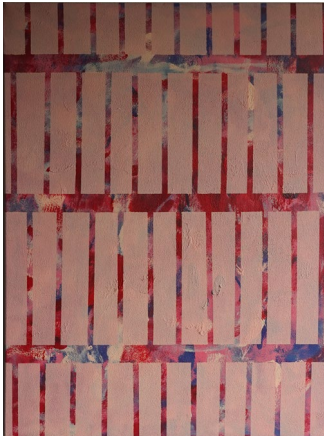
*Straight is The Gate / Andre Gidé*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



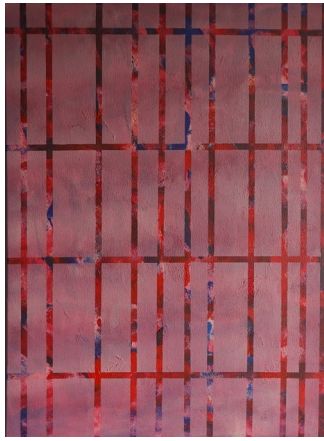
*Wittgenstein's Nephew / Thomas Bernhard*  
2009 - ongoing  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.8 cm



*Labyrinths (Libraries) #01*  
2022  
Acrylic on canvas  
61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



*Labyrinths (Libraries) #2*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



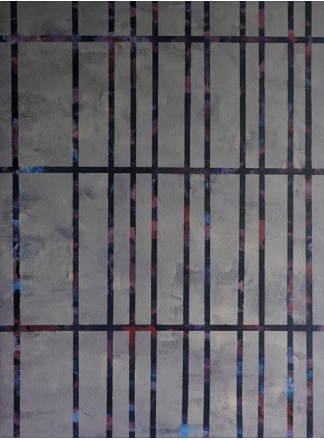
*Labyrinths (Libraries) #3*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



*Labyrinths (Libraries) #4*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



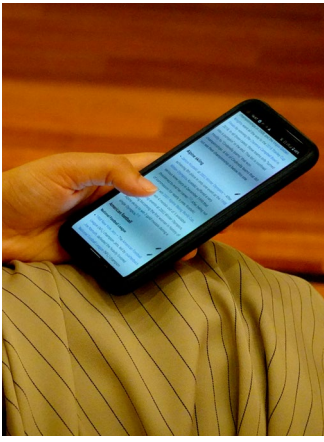
*Labyrinths (Libraries) #5*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



*Labyrinths (Libraries) #6*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



*Labyrinths (Libraries) #7*  
 2022  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 61 × 46 × 3.5 cm



*Everything (Wikipedia)*  
 2016  
 Durational performance  
 involving reading off a mobile  
 device  
 Edition of 3 + 1 A/P

B. 1977, Malaysia  
Lives and works in Singapore

Chong is the co-director and founder (with Renée Staal) of The Library of Unread Books which has been hosted by the NTU Center for Contemporary Art, Singapore; The Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, Philippines; Casco, Utrecht, Netherlands; Kunstverein Milano, Milan, Italy; Jameel Arts Center, Dubai, UAE; tranzit.cz, Prague, Czech; I\_S\_L\_A\_N\_D\_S, Singapore and the 7th Singapore Biennale.

Heman Chong is an artist whose work is located at the intersection between image, performance, situations, and writing. His practice can be read as an imagining, interrogation and sometimes intervention into infrastructure as an everyday medium of politics. He received his Masters in Communication Art & Design from The Royal College of Art, London, UK in 2002.

His work is included in the public collections of Art Sonje Center, Kadist Art Foundation, M+ Museum, The National Museum of Art Osaka, NUS Museum, Rockbund Art Museum, Singapore Art Museum and Weserburg Museum.

His solo exhibitions include *Peace Prosperity And Friendship With All Nations* (2021) at STPI, Singapore; *Spirits in the Material World* (2019), Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Netherlands; *fiktiofiktiofiktio* (2019), Weserburg Museum, Bremen, Germany; *Legal Bookshop* (2018), Swiss Institute New York, USA, 2018; *Never is a Promise* (2018) Calle Wright, Manila, Philippines; *Because, the Night* (2017), 72-13, Singapore; *Ifs, Ands, or Buts* (2016), Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, China; *An Arm, A Leg and Other Stories* (2015), South London Gallery, London, UK; *Never, A Dull Moment* (2015), Art Sonje Center, Seoul, South Korea; *Correspondence(s)* (2014), P!, New York, USA; *LEM1* (2012), Rossi & Rossi, London, UK; *Calendars (2020–2096)* (2011), NUS Museum, Singapore; *Common People and Other Stories* (2007) Art in General, New York, USA; *The Sole Proprietor and Other Stories* (2007), Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, China; *Vexillology, Cartography and Other Stories* (2005) at Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam, Netherlands; *Snore louder if you can* (2004) at The Substation, Singapore; and *The Silver Sessions* (2003) at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany.

In 2006, he developed a writing workshop with Leif Magne Tangen at Project Arts Center in Dublin where they co-authored *PHILIP* (2007), a science fiction novel with Mark Aerial Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt and Steve Rushton.

Between 2012 and 2014, Chong produced *Moderation(s)*, a third space that exists between Witte de With Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Netherlands and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong which involved more than 50 artists and comprised a conference, three exhibitions, three

THANK YOU

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