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Work Denise
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Work Denise Kwan ing Materials Curtain

Hung over the threshold, it was a simple piece of reddish-purple fabric, on one side was a slight rubber coating while the other was bare and soft. This burgundy curtain was my friend.

The curtain would wrap around my head. Spinning until it tightened to make a sturdy knot, it was anchored from the head to the top of the doorway. Twisted and locked, it became the hair of dreams. Dramatic and gravity defying, my locks reached into the sky with outstretched arms. During working hours, the majestic hair vanished and resigned to reality with a fringe and short sides.

On one occasion, my 6 year-old self was chatting a jumble of ill pronounced English. A customer from behind the curtain asked about the high frequency chatter. In response, my uncle propped a reluctant niece on the tall counter, a democratic net for the world, it was unpredictable in its courtship, willing and wanting to catch whomever: families, youths and regulars. But exposed upon the counter, the excitable chatter drained away. His facial contours and skin tone glowed unfamiliar under the florescent lighting.

Behind the curtain, the home that seemed so fixed grew unstable with time. The indecipherable function of domesticity and business rolled into one, the dissolving of the two aspects revealed itself in improvised cardboard chip boxes masquerading as storage, food packaging as cling film, nameless plastic containers housing teabags. In comparison, the world in front of the curtain appeared more assured and defined, the *real* world, and its counterpart seemed amateurish and unconventional.

Most public spaces succumb to a social expectation to 'put up a front'; keeping the redundant front door even though it is never used, or the ever-replenished supermarket shelves, spreading the illusion that nothing is bought and the world has abundance. If a surface can be identified and handled, it has the potential to be manipulated and controlled for social expression. It's no coincidence that this consciousness of the self has locked itself ideologically into our spoken language. In South-East Asia, it rears its head through the phrases such as 'to save face'; acknowledging the self requires an allowance of dignity to socially function and avoid embarrassment. Informal urban slang such as 'frontin' describes contemporary male peacocking, and even the bright idiom 'keeping up with the Joneses' expresses an anxiety to control exterior appearance and its interpretation.

the exhibition space has its own battles

In the lineage and creation of spaces, the exhibition space has its own battles. Occupying the intersection between the private and the public,

it is slightly different as a place of engagement. It cannot afford to simply be a site of aesthetics, even though it is a

foremost aim, and while recent years have increasingly viewed the gallery space as an arena for participation, it's not necessarily a gym. The exhibition space is dressed accordingly or paradoxically, it is dressed by a state of undress; freshly painted walls, finely tuned baths of light and their accompanying shadows, hushed tones, and neutral smell. In the attempt to frame an interpretation of artwork, the visual tools of exhibition-making become a form of syntax in creating a common

language for a projected public. It physicalises as wall vinyl and labels, literature guides, barriers and dividing walls which frame and shape the experience of artwork, performing as a foothold for the viewer.

Curator Adam Szymczyk describes the endeavor of exhibition making, '(it) hazards a message relayed in the hope of establishing communication and effecting a transformative experience, it is not far from a communion and very close to an imagined community'ⁱ. The endeavor of communication is gracious, however, equally an over reliance on the framing of artwork can have the opposite effect, as Brian O'Doherty describes the aesthetic process and its effect upon the visitor,

*Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial - the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung and scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes... This eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion.*ⁱⁱ

In the gallery, to create an environment of complete focus means to draw divisions between functions; walls, ceilings and floors are kept bare and seemingly neutral and unobtrusive, lighting and temperature are meticulous monitored and cables are hidden. The preservation of visual contemplation and the intellect is privileged over other bodily abilities such as touch, smell, taste and sound; unless they are already inherent to the artwork. Equally other mundane necessities are glossed over, for example the toilet, which can be surprisingly challenging to find and even basic doorways either into or out of an exhibition. The gallery performs a sealing, and to ask for directions suggests an exteriority of the very place you are situated. Paradoxically despite being on its *inside*, your close proximity casts you even further out on its shell.

Tall, taut walls can feel transparent like jewellery glass cases. As solid and concealed as gallery walls may appear, there lurks a sense of another presence, one that is watching your watching. In an environment that is so conscious of the viewers' interpretation and engagement, it nominates some aspects while eluding others. The space is preserved clean and anew in anticipation of its next viewer. As Walter Benjamin so poignantly puts it, 'To live means to leave traces'ⁱⁱⁱ and in effect, the elimination of distractions or evidence of any history amplifies the consciousness of space and so merges into the viewer, as the self sees itself feeling.

Comparing the act of conversation to the process of jazz, classical violinist and writer, Stephen Nachmanovitch suggests the possibilities of improvisation over the reliance of the predetermined musical score and proposes the potential of assuming a focused child-like free play without distinction for an end result. As Nachmanovitch suggests,

All art is improvisation. Some improvisations are presented whole at once; others are doctored improvisations that have been revised and restructured over a period of time before the public gets to enjoy the work.^{iv}

Time

is

un

still

It is a challenge to inhabit the energy of spontaneity into the traditionally static format of display. Often there is the burden to sincerely replicate the former, resulting in a representation of an *appearance* of action or idea, rather than embodying the thing-itself. While improvisation underpins creativity, a sense of doctored improvisation inevitably runs to the heart of exhibition making. Experimentation by its nature is temporal which contrasts to the exhibition space as a place of finality and display.

Improvisation has many forms of disguise; the stumble of charcoal, a verbal stutter, a paper wedge propped under a door, they closely align with the improvised and making do. Repetition and refinement cultivate the idea of skill and distances itself from improvisation. However it'd be limiting to assume that only perceptible slippages can be classed as 'improvised' because the very nature of the improvisation underscores every action and thought that is done and felt. Perhaps it is a matter that some hide their improvisations more securely than others, rather than eluding improvisation altogether.

Time is unstill. The constant passing of time distinguishes each moment slightly alien from its former familiarity. In the spirit of improvisation, the exhibition space can be considered in a similar way. Not solely as a site for rehearsed display or an aesthetic display case, but a place that lives its process and the spirit of curiosity to let slip and that despite the differences of appearance; underneath it all, the questions and impulses are more alike than it first appears.

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- iii Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz (ed.), Edmund Jephcott (trans.), Schocken Books: New York, 1986, p.155
- iv Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts*, Jeremy P Tarcher: New York, 1993, p.5

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