

TELL ME MY TRUTH

**SIMON FUJIWARA, HELEN GRACE, AMALA GROOM, FX HARSONO,
HE XIANGYU, JAMES NEWITT, TONY SCHWENSEN, JOHN VON STURMER**
27 MARCH - 16 MAY 2015

Tell Me My Truth seeks to address persistent and often contentious relationships that frame the individual within the group. Exploring the motivations of artists for whom a questioning of the veracity of the status quo is a defining aspect of their practice, *Tell Me My Truth* presents works that give form to alternative narratives. Contrasting fiction with the documentary, remembrance with negation, responsibility with impunity, and privacy with surveillance within the public realm, *Tell Me My Truth* is at once a provocative demand and an admission of the futility of splendid isolation in a world that more than ever is defined by our connectedness.

This is the second exhibition instalment of *MASS GROUP INCIDENT*, a major five-month multi-stage project curated and produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Comprising a series of exhibitions, site-specific projects, performances, film screenings and public programs, this broader project's central theme is the power and limits of social engagement and collective action as experienced by the individual. Within this construct, *Tell Me My Truth* takes a more analytical and meditative approach in its investigation of the causes of social friction and mutual understanding.

Bringing together artists from Australia, Asia and abroad, new works have been commissioned by 4A especially for this exhibition, complemented by significant existing works presented in Australia for the first time. Taking longer historical views are works that seek to reveal the hidden or otherwise suppressed aspects of identities and geographies, for instance, those that relate to Sydney's Chinatown and Indonesia's persecuted Chinese minority. Underscoring history's immense role in shaping individual lives are deeply personal studies, as in an artist's attempt to re-stage a moment from his mother's past, contrasted with investigations into the spatial dynamics of public space in which mass demonstrations are contained. Whilst *Tell Me My Truth* focuses on the use of digital technologies in recording and relaying often abstract and de-personalised experiences, more traditional methods of representation are also utilised to articulate marginalised perspectives.

Tell Me My Truth holds a mirror up to audiences, one in which we might recognise the embodiment of dissent and the dangers of expediency in the age of perpetual revolutions.

PRODUCED BY



FUNDING SUPPORT



One of the initial curatorial discussion points that took place between us at the outset of the development of this project was the question of the central role lens-based media plays in re-defining individual identity as mediated in collective histories. Of particular interest was the way that photography both reveals and conceals often hidden, repressed or contentious narratives that can be utilised by both the state and the individual to different ends.

Wishing to commission a new work especially for *Tell Me My Truth*, we approached **Helen Grace** (b. Warrnambool, Australia), a new media artist, filmmaker, writer and academic whose work has played an active role in the development of art, cinema, photography, cultural studies and education in Australia and regionally for the past three decades. Grace has created *Map of Spirits* (2015) using a small wearable device that tracks and photographs the pathway of walks undertaken by the artist and others in a former precinct of Sydney's Chinatown that was demolished in the first years of the 20th century to make way for Wentworth Avenue, a grand boulevard leading to the newly-built Central Station. The Chinese cabinetmakers, small businesses and residents occupying the narrow treeless streets stood in the way of 'progress', and ironically, given Grace's methodologies, police facilities (the Federal Police Building, the NSW Police Centre, the former CIB building on Campbell St) have occupied almost every corner of the location since – a long history of 'security' concerns. In Grace's provocation of 'incidents' in micro-performances, *Map of Spirits* traces photographic resonances of Liang Qichao (梁啟超), a political refugee and one of the most important thinkers of modern China, visiting Australia at the time of the Commonwealth's inauguration, and the names of the area's residents who disappeared after Federation (when restriction on Chinese immigration was legislated).

The shifting meanings to be made or found in the narratives we build around the photograph and the process of how one remembers through images is often intensely personal, especially in contrast to impersonal socio-political agendas. **Simon Fujiwara's** (b.1982, London, UK) film *Studio Pietà* (*King Kong Komplex*) (2013) takes as its starting point a photograph of the artist's mother that predates her relationship with his father and that depicts his mother in the arms of another man on a beach in Beirut in the late 1960s. As the artist narrates a reimagining of this scene otherwise not part of his own historical chronology – itself inflected by psychosexual drama – Fujiwara stages tangential narratives that explore identity, race and politics in service of what is at heart a yearning for connection.

Broadening this theme into the public sphere, **James Newitt's** (b. 1981, Hobart, Tasmania) *Spectacle* (2013-14) explores processes of collective social action, surveillance in the public realm, and the veracity of lens-based documentation of historical events in formulating aesthetic constructs for historical narratives. Depicting scenes of the anti-austerity protests that have taken place in the streets of Lisbon, Portugal, in recent years, Newitt's work engages with how on-the-ground social protests are documented as they occur and the implications of this for the artist seeking to represent the double-bind of participation/documentation. Similar to Fujiwara's work which appears on an opposing screen, *Spectacle* employs a spoken word narrative that is at once symbolically removed from the moving image, a formal means of conflating what can be heard and what can be seen as a metaphor for the working logic of propaganda, itself of particular importance in a small Western European nation that many forget experienced one of the longest running fascist regimes in modern history.

For this exhibition we are presenting video documentation of conceptual Chinese artist **He Xiangyu's** (b. 1986, Liaoning Province, China) sculpture *Death of Marat* (2011/15) after 4A was repeatedly denied a temporary export licence to allow the work to leave China. In its original installation, *Death of Marat* comprises a hyper-realistic representation of the artist Ai Weiwei, constructed from silicone, wearing a suit, lying face-down on the ground, inert and presumably dead. As one of the world's most visible and recognised faces, He Xiangyu's subject requires little introduction, and in this sense his sculpture can be said to literally embody certain current political debates concerning China and especially its netizen activists. Borrowing his title from Jacques-Louis David, the 18th century painter who was intimately involved in the aesthetic and political machinations of the French Revolution, He Xiangyu has created his own version of David's painted homage to the martyrdom of radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat, only this time with possibly the world's most (in)famous living artist and activist, himself the son of a modern poet denounced for his writings. He Xiangyu's work has a subtle message that transcends the Chinese situation, implicating each viewer's own passive or active role as both spectator and participant in the perpetual re-definition of personal freedoms.

Similarly, **Tony Schwensen's** (b. 1970, Sydney, Australia) droll video/performance *Be Alert But Not Alarmed* (2003), as literal a response to official government warnings aimed at its citizens as one is likely to find, makes visible the inculcation upon flesh of bone of the absurdity of the early years of the so-called War on Terror. Referencing the Australian Government's much-lampooned 2003 campaign to educate Australians about the dangers of terrorism – issuing hundreds of thousands of fridge magnets with the statement, 'Be alert but not alarmed' linked to a hotline for the reporting of suspicious behaviour in the public realm – here the artist's body is rendered virtually soulless, merely a dumb vessel for the acting out of propagandistic dictums, whilst at the same time humorously subverting the earnestness of this situation through a performative gesture that broadens the commentary to include a subtle critique of art and its audiences. Taking things right up to the present is **John von Sturmer's** (b. 1943, Lismore, Australia) *Birds Don't Know. So Shut Up* (2015), a Twitter feed that communicates the artist's immediate observations of his real and online presence in the world. As a widely respected social anthropologist with a long and distinguished career in Aboriginal studies, von Sturmer's action is a direct commentary on *Tell Me My Truth* in its playful, confessional and challenging textual admissions.

Amala Groom's (b. 1979, Casino, Australia) *Journey to the Ninth* is an autobiographical work, which explores memory, spirituality, religious practice and consciousness. The work articulates a series of interconnected episodes in the life of the artist which took place across a span of several years. These episodes – profound life events involving death, rebirth, revelation, injury and momentous change – ultimately facilitated the artist's engagement in a series of Wiradjuri ceremonial experiences, each of which is represented in this multi-tiered sculptural work. Also taking a deeply personal approach to conceptual strategies, **FX Harono's** (b. 1949, Blitar, Indonesia) *Pilgrimage to History* (2013) and *Ndudah* (2013) represents related but different parts of an ongoing investigation into the history of the persecution of the Chinese in Indonesia. Taking place in the artist's home town of Blitar, East Java, Harono produces rubbings from Chinese characters engraved in memorial sites, reinscribing historical artefacts as if willing them to 'tell me my truth'.

Pedro de Almeida, Toby Chapman and Aaron Seeto
Curators, MASS GROUP INCIDENT

UPCOMING

48HR INCIDENT

FRIDAY 29 MAY 2015, 6PM – SUNDAY 31 MAY 2015, 6PM

MASS GROUP INCIDENT will culminate with *48HR Incident*, a program of live performance works and other forms of artistic actions running over 48 hours in 4A's gallery spaces over one weekend. Featuring short works through to longer durational performances, 48HR Incident is a call to action, a test of audiences' will and commitment to meet the challenges that artists present them, and an admission that at the irreducible core of any collective action or movement is the latent power of the individual.

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS



MEDIA PARTNER



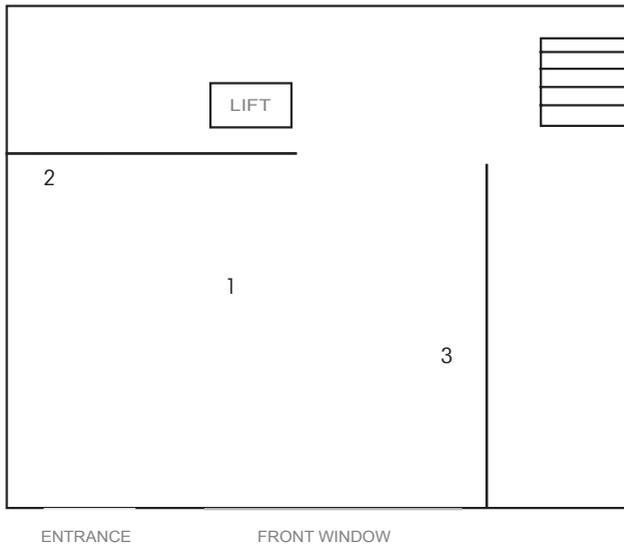
EVENT PARTNERS



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GROUND FLOOR

1

Amala Groom

Journey to the Ninth (2014)

Dirt, fresh gardenias, found plastic statues, found porcelain statues, found metal statues, cotton, paper, sulfur-crested cockatoo feathers, currawong feathers, miniature bibles, sticks, papilionidae memnon agenor, Papilionidae maackii maackii, syringes, alarm clocks, acrylic paint, wooden crosses, glass bottles, fresh stargazer lilies, electric candles, rosary beads, tea, plastic greek column/wedding, decoration, selenite tower, clear quartz wand, clear quartz tower, milky quartz, gum nuts, dimensions variable.

Courtesy the artist. The artist wishes to thank Harriet Macarthur.

2

FX Harsono

Pilgrimage to History (still), (2013)

single-channel video

13:40 mins

Courtesy the artist.

3

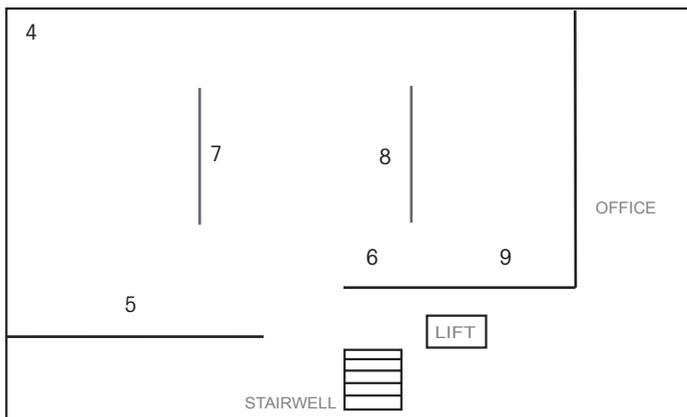
FX Harsono

Ndudah (2013)

video documentary

21:18 mins

Courtesy the artist.



FIRST FLOOR

4

Tony Schwensen

Be Alert But Not Alarmed (2003)

SD video, 62 mins

Courtesy the artist, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney and STATION, Melbourne.

5

Helen Grace

Map of Spirits (2015)

narrative clip image capture and archival compilation on Android tablet display system

Courtesy the artist. The artist wishes to thank Barbara Campbell, Toby Chapman, Ashanti Fogden, Laurens Tan, Nicholas Tsoutas and Yu Ye Wu; and acknowledges Inauguration of the Commonwealth (1901), National Film and Sound Archive; City of Sydney Archives, National Archives of Australia, State Library of New South Wales. Courtesy the artist.

6

John von Sturmer

Birds Don't Know. So Shut Up. (2015)

Twitter, iPad

Courtesy the artist.

7

James Newitt

Spectacle (2013-14)

HD video with stereo sound

9:40 mins

Narration by Syma Tariq

Courtesy the artist

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

8

Simon Fujiwara

Studio Pietà (King Kong Komplex) (2013)

single-channel video

20:30 mins

Courtesy the artist

Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation.

9

He Xiangyu

Death of Marat (2011/15)

single-channel video

7 hours

Courtesy the artist and WHITE SPACE BEIJING.