

**NINE RINGS  
AROUND A PIT —  
an art manifesto, of sorts**

*Jeremy Fernando*



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**Jeremy Fernando**



for my dear friends,  
Martin Constable and Ng Joon Kiat





# I

*One is photographable, 'photogenic', and this is perhaps the catastrophe, that one can be photographable, that one can be captured and caught in time ...*

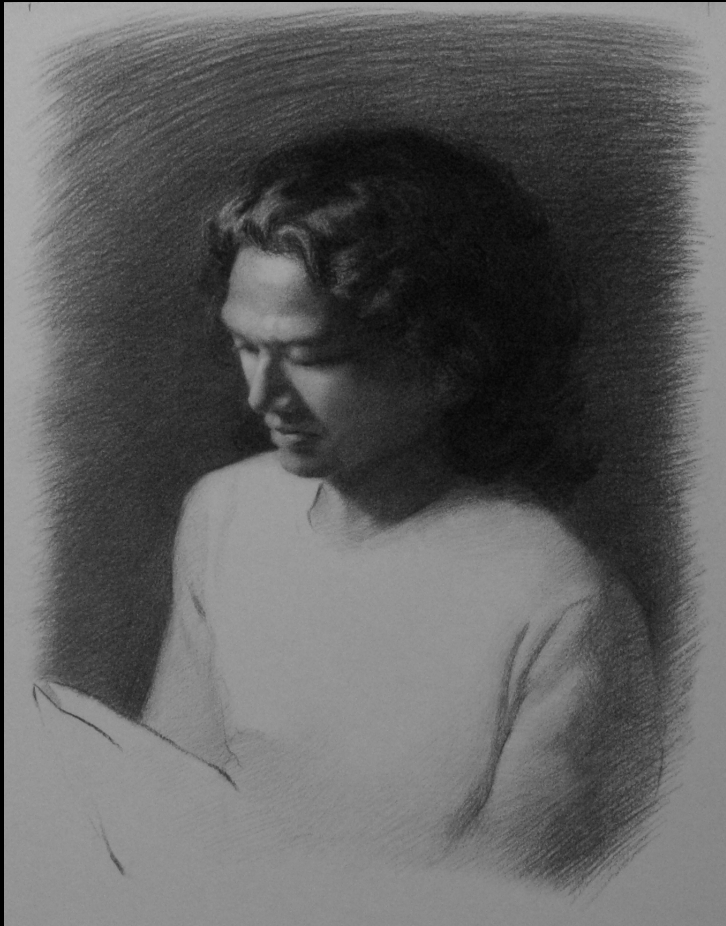
— Hubertus von Amelunxen

... this perhaps being the tragedy of the photographic object, the object that is photographed: that in order to preserve its writing — *a writing of light* — the object has to be consigned into the shadows of time.

Perhaps then, the only hope for the one being captured is to be photographed without being photographable: not so much that one is not in the photograph (that would be too simple), nor that one is the photographer (too banal), nor even that one attempts to resist being objectified (this would be impossible);

but that one remains  
within the photograph ...

... as light.



Yanyun Chen, *Portrait of Jeremy Fernando*,  
Nitram Charcoal on Arches Paper  
2014

## II

*Wealth and speed are what the world admires, what each pursues. Railways, express mails, steamships and every possible facility for communications are the achievement in which the civilized world views and revels, only to languish in mediocrity by that very fact. Indeed, the effect of this diffusion is to spread the culture of the mediocre.*

— Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

In pointing out « diffusion »,  
Goethe were right.

Where he missed the point, though, is in his focus on *mediocrity*: as, not only does that hardly matter, it may even be beneficial. For, it is often easier to diffuse goods, ideas, notions, that are similar to prevalent thought, to current logic, to that which appeals to the masses. One may even go as far to say that rapid diffusion is hinged on mediocrity.

Thus, it is not so much that it is diffusion which spreads mediocrity but the other way round: *things diffuse precisely because they are mediocre.*

*As long as art was making use of its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object, it still was a major enterprise. But art trying to recycle itself indefinitely by storming reality? The majority of contemporary art has attempted to do precisely that by confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies. These countless installations and performances are merely compromising with the state of things, and with all the past forms of art history. Raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even to perverse aesthetic pleasure. Of course, all of this mediocrity claims to transcend itself by moving art to a second, ironic level. But it is just as empty and insignificant on the second as on the first level. The passage to the aesthetic level salvages nothing; on the contrary, it is mediocrity squared. It claims to be null — « I am null! I am null! » — and it truly is null.*

— Jean Baudrillard

For, it is precisely through its *nullness*, that it seduces us; by whispering ...

*I can be whatever  
you want me to be*

### III

One should try never to forget the possibility that *art* is the very movement — *trans-* — of what is brought forth through craft, by *tekhne*, into something else, something other than itself. Not that the one who makes it is any different — even if (s)he might never quite remain the same after. Even though, perhaps precisely because, there is no guarantee that (s)he might ever be able to do so again, repeat it, make it again; nor even if (s)he might be able to recognise the possibility of art in what (s)he has crafted.

Where perhaps *what is art* and *what is craft* might well be the same, but at the same time, *same same but different*.

Where, it is not just that difference lies within sameness, nor merely that there is sameness in difference, but that what is same is always already different — for, the very notion of same is a relation, and in relation lies difference.

Where, in its relation to craft, art might always be *un pas au-delà*.

Thus, quite possibly unseen, un-seeable —  
and where, the one who sees the art in any moment  
of craft might well be the only one who sees it,  
might well be hearing what (s)he thinks is a call  
from and of the work, might well be hearing only  
what (s)he hears.

For, all (s)he can do is to be in relation with the  
work; and more precisely, a relation of « not  
understanding in a way of holding myself in front  
and of letting come », as Hélène Cixous might say,  
has said, continues to say, when speaking of love, of  
our relation to someone or something we love, of  
the relationship called love.

Which is not to say that art is antithetical to  
knowing, to knowledge, nor its antonym: but that it  
is a knowing that does not know,  
*un savoir qui ne voit pas.*

Which might well be why her owl only flies in the twilight — for, the goddess perhaps knew that the transformation from *tekhnē* to art happens due to the movement of the world. Not that one sees the world differently — nothing that banal — but when there is a gap between the object and what is seen. When a chair is both a chair, in all its usefulness, its so-called purpose — and, at the same time — not-quite-just-a-chair; where the purposefulness of crafting this chair lies somehow just slightly beyond its purpose:

*just slightly beyond*

— this gap — being nothing other than not just *un pas au-delà*, but another name for the *chair-ness* of the chair.

**art :**

or, another name for  
a transcendence that is not transcendental,  
an *immanent transcendence*.



Which also means that it might well be a moment that escapes one — not because one did not experience it, nor that this experience did not register with one, but that it is quite possibly an instance which writes itself into one in the very instant it is scratched out of one.

For, one should keep in mind that each scribble, *scribere*, not only scratches into, stains — paints — the surface on which it is writing, but also scratches out, tears, opens, quite possibly tears out, *erases*, in the very moment in which it is attempting to make its mark.

Where all one can do, might be able to do, is to remark on the trace of this erasure, on this erased trace.

Where, art is quite possibly nothing other than the trace of that very encounter — the trace of one's encounter with the work.

A moment,  
which can only be *read*.



John WP Phillips, *Jeremy Fernando*  
Digital Photograph  
2016

## IV

It is in front of you.

Tall, broad, strong; wider than any other.

The gallery beyond all galleries.

Only you cannot see it.

Not because it is not there. But, due to the fact that, at any one point, someone is blind to it. Today it is you. Perhaps it even chose you.

So, let me see it for you.

You walk in.

Quite immediately, turn.

Not because you choose to — it's just how the path blows you. Maybe even with a certain lightness. But, this is not a flow for the sake of drifting, even less so an appreciation of flowing, of flows. Instead, it is the embodiment of the very moment it would like to call art, have you name as art — the transfer, transmission, transaction, of not so much the work itself, but the frame surrounding it, the name undersigning it, the signature around which this transference revolves.

The gallery doesn't need you to see it.

It has long since disappeared.

/

*Nothing just vanishes; of everything that disappears there remains traces. The problem is what remains when everything has disappeared. It's a bit like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, whose grin still hovers in the air after the rest of him has vanished ... Now, a cat's grin is already something terrifying, but the grin without the cat is something even more terrifying ...*

— Jean Baudrillard

## V

*(Unwriting this text, I assert my small specificity  
against conceptual art's grandiose blankness.)*

— Chris Kraus



Jeremy Fernando, *l'écriture d'Helios*  
Digital Photograph  
2017

## VI

*The affirmation of the body contains the seeds of its own destruction: the movement of the body is a one-way path towards the non-body. In this movement to its negative dimension, the body articulates language. Without body, without corpus, all that remains is the gravitation of the absence/presence dichotomy. By the way, there are corpses.*

— Mariela Yeregui

All whilst trying not to forget the haunting, beautiful, beautifully-haunting, hauntingly beautiful, reminder which comes to us through Antonin Artaud that, « no one can say why the plague strikes the coward who flees it and spares the degenerate who gratifies himself on the corpses ».

One might posit though that it is in fleeing — keeping in mind that movement is a relation, is an in-between, is a *non-body* — that it is in flinging oneself away, that language is brought forth; the very language that writes itself onto the bodies themselves.

For, in the attempt to throw (*jacere*) one self away (*ab-*) from the scene one is actively attempting to forget — in making a space, creating a gap-between — one does nothing other than to open the place for that very scene, for the object, to write itself into one, inscribe itself onto oneself, into one's self.

*... this is my body  
which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me ...*

Writing itself onto one —  
where the one who attempts to respond, perhaps  
myself in this case, is the very site of the disaster.

*... writing — l'écriture — writhing — screaming —  
crying — cri ...*



## VII

*Do not hesitate to read the scars  
that crater the textual body!*

— Avital Ronell

My maternal grandfather had eczema —  
him, I'd never met.  
I'd like to think, though, that this might have been  
his way of writing onto me: after all, he was the one  
who wrote poems, who wrote poetry; which might  
be something that I've never yet quite admitted to  
wanting to be able to do, to make, to bring into the  
world.

Ever since I've started writing  
— making what I consider writing — I've been  
writhing in my skin.

Literally.

Eczema and writing are indivorceable to me.

*Wouldn't this mother tongue  
be a sort of second skin you wear on yourself,  
a mobile home?*

— Jacques Derrida

My skin tells me what a body is, where my body is;  
especially when it splits, particularly when it bleeds.

Reminding me at the point when it opens —  
opening me to myself at the point of its opening.  
Before which, I had only known it in theory; but  
now as *theoria*, it stages itself on me, to me.

Where, it is quite possible that, as Céline Coderey,  
dear dear Céline, tries to never let me forget,  
« itchiness might well be skin writing — where what  
you, all you, have to do is to not so much listen to it,  
but let it write. Where you are writhing, it is  
writing ».

Keeping in mind a reminder from my dear teacher  
Jean-Luc Nancy, his difficult reminder, that « the  
difference between rape and sex is that in the latter,  
there is no penetration, no wounding, no breaking  
of skin » — the skin-between, the threshold that  
maintains the radical alterity of both, of all, that  
sustains the very possibility of otherness. Which  
brings with it the question, the impossible  
challenge, of how one might be able to respond to  
another's thoughts, words, text — Jean-Luc's in this

instance; but also the ideas, notions, images, opened by and through my friends' drawings, photographs, sketches, their works — how to let it write upon oneself, as one is writhing to it, without appropriating it, taking it for one's own, being rapacious upon it. For, one is always already running the risk of seizing it, plagiarising it, pilfering it, taking over, taking it as one's own; even if, even as, perhaps especially if, one is attempting not to.

Where, one is potentially turning what should be a scene of hospitality into a kidnapping, transforming the one who should be one's guest into a hostage — even whilst one is trying to be responsible.

Oftentimes, precisely when one is attempting to respond to another: for here, we should try not to forget that the attempt to understand another, to comprehend the other, always also brings with it echoes of taking, seizing, *prendre* — where one potentially, quite possibly, subsumes the other under one's self; and where the very skin-between is ruptured.

And where, not only does the space between one and the other disappear but that there is no longer any other.

This being the inherent risk of trying to, the risk in attempting to, reach out to another, to call out to — read, write on — the works of others, in citing another.

Especially the ones you love.



Sara Chong, *The Earth and her Girth*  
Oil on Canvas  
2018

## VIII

*Reading can no longer be constituted in the classical tradition of hermeneutics, as an act of deciphering meaning according to a determined set of rules, laws: this would be reading as an act where the reader comes into a convergence at best with the text. In fact, reading can no longer be understood as an act, since an act by necessity be governed by the rules of reading. Reading must be thought as the event of an encounter with an other — an other who is not the other as identified by the reader, but rather an other that remains beyond the cognition of the self. Hence, reading is a pre-relational relationality: an encounter with the other without any claims to knowing who or what this other is in the first place; an unconditional relation, and a relation to no fixed object of relation. As such, it is the ethical moment par excellence.*

— Werner Hamacher

Bearing in mind — for, this is always a load on one, should weigh on one, might even be a burden that one can never rid oneself of, especially if one is attempting to conceive, bring forth, the possibility that reading and ethics are potentially inseparable — trying never to forget, that in citing another, one is always already pulling, ripping, wrenching, the passage, the thought, out of context.

Re-contextualising — if one wants to be generous, be kind to oneself, but really de-contextualising — by putting it into one's text: so, not just a change in context, but always already a theft, a kidnapping.

Where one steals (*voler*), is a thief (*un voleur*), by causing the text of another to fly away (*s'envoler*) — one might even say, *calling out to the text by way of attempting to seduce the text, to lure the text to one self.*

### *Vampirism:*

taking the life of the text;  
sucking the life from the inscriptions  
making it one's own  
for one's self

/

*The connection to the other is a reading —  
not an interpretation, assimilation, or even a  
hermeneutic understanding, but a reading.*

— Avital Ronell



## IX

*Quod scripsi,  
scripsi.*

— Pontius Pilate



## Contributors

**Yanyun Chen** (b. 1986, Singapore) is an artist. She runs a charcoal-based drawing and installation practice, and her works respond to writing — fictional and philosophical — as well as aesthetic traditions and techniques. She was presented with the People’s Choice Award for *The scars that write us* at the President’s Young Talents 2018 exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, and is the winner of the 2019 ArtOutreach IMPART Visual Artist Award.

She received her PhD (Summa Cum Laude) from The European Graduate School. She is a full-time lecturer in the Arts & Humanities division of Yale-NUS College in Singapore; founder of illustration and animation studio Piplatchka; and managing editor of the boutique-publishing house, Delere Press.

She lives and works in Singapore.

**Sara Chong** (c.1986) is a realist–figurative painter from and based in Singapore. Her work has been exhibited in group shows in Florence, London, and Singapore, and owned by several private collectors. She is also a commissioned portrait painter. Sara was trained predominantly at the Florence Academy of Art in Florence, Italy, from which she graduated in 2015, with the award for the Best Painting of the Year, and Best Figure Painting of the Advanced Painting Programme. Before immersing herself in classical training, she had a background in illustration, and puppet animation after the Czech masters.

Empathy for the Monster/Beast is the main narrative feature of Sara’s work, be it in painting, animation or illustration. Her inspirations are coloured by the affectionate monsters of Odilon Redon, set in the acidic, ominous blue, of the skies of Giorgio de Chirico, and expressed in the hands of Rodin. She paints characters and situations that reflect on the idea of the awkward Beast in the land of beauty. She is ever curious about the concept of the Monster/Beast in myth and daily life, especially where the Beast, most often a cultural or social construct, has its own story and its own rejected version of humanity.

**Jeremy Fernando** reads, and writes; and is the Jean Baudrillard Fellow at The European Graduate School. He works in the intersections of literature, philosophy, and the media; and his, more than twenty, books include *Reading Blindly*, *Living with Art*, *Writing Death*, *in fidelity*, and *resisting art*. His writing has also been featured in magazines and journals such as *Arte al Límite*, *Berfrois*, *CTheory*, *Full Bleed*, *Qui Parle*, *TimeOut*, and *VICE*, amongst others; and has been translated into French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Serbian. Exploring other media has led him to film, music, and the visual arts; and his work has been exhibited in Seoul, Vienna, Hong Kong, and Singapore. He has been invited to perform a reading at the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin in September 2016; and in November 2018, to deliver a series of performance-talks at the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Bienal de la Imagen en Movimiento* in Buenos Aires. He is the general editor of both Delere Press and the thematic magazine *One Imperative*; and is a Lecturer & Fellow of Tembusu College at The National University of Singapore.

**John W P Phillips** teaches critical theory at The National University of Singapore. He writes about theatre, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, photography, philosophy, new media, music, military technology, literature, education, cities, and art. He has recently completed a book on Jacques Derrida and is currently writing a book on philosophy and its songs to the dawn.



*In his manifesto of sorts, Jeremy  
Fernando stages how art **lies** in  
the gap between the frame and  
the viewer.*

— Slavoj Žižek

