



1404 ppm

cover:

**The Colonies Bite Back II:
Exploring the British Isles
2000**

collage made from pages
of book fed to termites
48 x 117 cm (detail)

right:

**The Definitive ABC
of Ethnography
1999**

bound book with text and images
on handmade and glycerine papers
made from disintegrated pulp
copies of VS Naipul's "Among the
Believers" and Margaret Mead's
"Coming of Age in Samoa"
26 x 16.5 x 2.5 cm
(detail from artist's original)

top left:

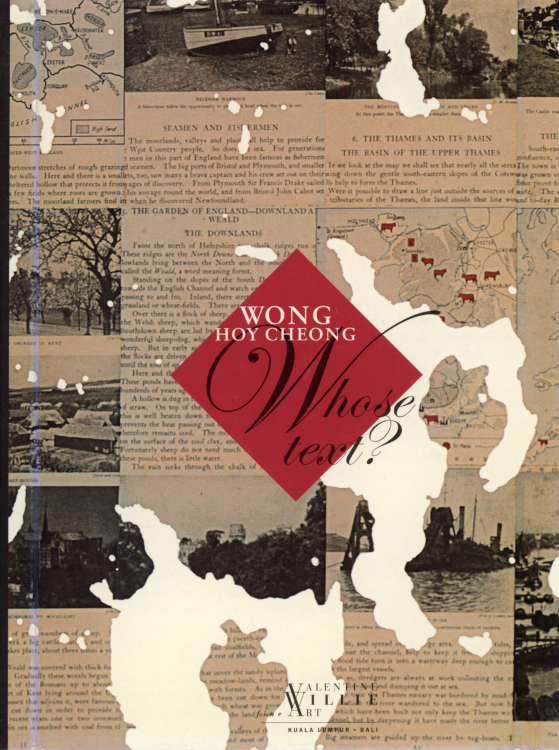
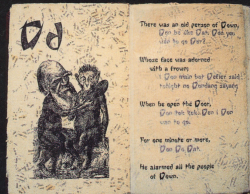
**In Search of Refuge during
the October Downpour
2002**

colour photograph installation,
encased in resin
15 x 20 cm (x31)
(detail from 1st in edition of 2)

bottom left:

**Text Tiles
2000**

290 tiles covered with disintegrated
and pulped text taken from books
470 x 550 cm



WONG HOY CHEONG: RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Wong Hoy Cheong: Whose Text? asks a question about what and how we read and learn about ourselves. "We", specifically, are a people in a country with a colonial past, a nation born into the modern age, a society of the exoticised "Far East".

The exhibition brings together for the first time a significant body of the artist's works, made over the past three years, which take as their starting point the historical document. The anthropological treatise, the political tract, biographies of statesmen, schoolchildren's textbooks, even the Malaysian Constitution, are each in their turn subjected to processes of destruction and reconstruction. Traditionally stable forms of reference like the map, the photograph, and the dictionary are re-invented as heightened metaphor.

As a result, we are faced with a "museum" of altered documents. The authority of the published text or other form of so-called authentic documentation has been undermined, leaving us discomfited. In some of the works, we are forced to re-read and question what has been told to us, largely by those looking in or down at our history and experience from a privileged vantage point. In others, we are teased into locating ourselves and our responses within a projected imaginary text.

We begin, fittingly, with *The Definitive ABC of Government* and *The Definitive ABC of Ethnography*, commissioned for the "Babel" project at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 1999. These are two handsomely-bound volumes,

rather Victorian in look, that purport to be alphabet books on serious, adult subjects. For *Government*, the artist has pulped and blended, for the paper, copies of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's ground-breaking publication "The Malay Dilemma" and Adolf Hitler's infamous "Mein Kampf". It is a controversial marriage of the thoughts of one loathed and one respected authoritarian leader, both of whom wrote their respective treatises in exile, and both of whom explored the concept of racial genetic heritage in relation to governmental policy. For *Ethnography*, he blends anthropologist Margaret Mead's "Coming of Age in Samoa" with V.S. Naipaul's "Among the Believers". The entries are irreverent and iconoclastic, turning into pastiche quotations and appending them with kitsch images. The whole is a debunking of the guileless way in which we read.

Text Tiles is a work commissioned for Kwangju Biennale 2000. Carrying on from the idea of regurgitated texts, the artist pulps books on Asian history and the biographies of Asian and other world leaders, recreating them as patterns on 290 tiles. Photographs of the politicians are then weaved into insets. We are invited to walk on the tiles, to perform the act of standing on, or trampling over, our given history. The act is at once sombre and impertinent, particularly given Asian taboos about feet and uncleanness.

The Colonies Bite Back (2001), shown at the inaugural exhibition of Sydney's Gallery 4A, is a droll indulgence of the post-colonial chip-on-the-shoulder. With a slight nod to Yukinori Yanagi's *Pacific* (1997, Tate Gallery collection), the artist has fed late colonial period textbooks to a colony of termites, who eat through "Great Men of the East" and "Exploring the British Isles" to (de-)compose/(re-)edit maps of a post-colonial era. In a darker mood, the artist has then

fed to his colony the Malaysian Constitution and two core Malay cultural chronicles, "Hikayat Hang Tuah" and "Sejarah Melayu" in *The Colonies Turn on Themselves* (2002). These maps delineated by a process of erasure, of consumption, designate an absence of identity, imperial or national.

Map of Buckingham Street and its Vicinity (2002) begins Wong Hoy Cheong's most recent project. This is topography of a different genre, working with history's density rather than its fragile weightlessness. Taking commonly-named landmarks of London, the administrative heart of Empire, and Penang, one of the two main seats of the British colony in Malaya and the artist's hometown, as a focus point, the current map of one city is transposed onto that of the other. Each detail is copied, drawn and embellished in a manner which harks back to 15th-17th century cartography, the map-making of empires, early demarcations of claimed territory. The artist's fantasy map throws the conceit of the contained state, and we find here at once a wishful projection of political equality between empire and colony, and residual ties within the collective imagination of two post-colonial societies. Both Britain and Malaysia have sought to wipe out their colonial history, playing down its role in shaping their respective societies today. Nostalgia and displacement here bring a few skeletons out of the closet and force a reassessment of post-colonial identities. The power of the work lies in the eye of the beholder, in the way in which we negotiate this bewildering space, whether we belong one side of the Pacific or the other, or if we find ourselves belonging to both, or neither.

In Search of Refuge during the October Downpour (2002) stands apart from Wong Hoy Cheong's work to date, bearing a burden of personal emotion generally eschewed in favour of a more disinterested approach. October 2001 witnessed American reprisals for the September 11 terrorist

attack and, incidentally, heavy monsoon rains in Malaysia. The monsoon downpour forced large numbers of earthworms out of the soil around the artist's studio and into his working space. The work consists of photographs taken of the creatures as they crawled up his walls and windows to die. These are encased in acrylic resin and mapped out on a random graph, each piece located at the height of death and disintegration, and engraved with this statistic. A fair number of the artist's works have staged protest against political persecution; *In Search of Refuge...* is a more poignant document of the futility of escape, a sort of writing on the wall which, incidentally, bears fleeting resemblance to Arabic script.

Wong Hoy Cheong's intellectual and academic interests began in the field of literature rather than fine art, and his immersion in and fascination with scholarship and rhetoric show up most clearly in these works. His choice of art as the discipline in which to formulate his ideas about text is peculiarly apt; for, while non-fictional literature stakes a claim to authority, art is pivoted on illusion and, in its modern and post-modern form not only allows for but sanctions the personal and the fantastic.

The artist here creates the illusion of the authoritative document in order to expose the ambivalent nature of such texts, often loaded with masked personal or consensual agendas, open to varying interpretations and even susceptible to corruption. The artist's own agenda is clear - his elaborate visual renderings of the verbal pun are aimed at a paradigm shift.

Beverly Yong

Wong Hoy Cheong was born in 1960 in Penang, Malaysia. He studied literature, education and fine arts at Brandeis University, Harvard University and the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) in the USA.

His work in the 1990's has been inter-disciplinary, involving areas such as drawing, installation, theatre/performance and video; and has explored the interrelationship of history, politics, culture and ethnicity.

He has exhibited widely in Asia, Australia and Europe, as well as within Malaysia. He has participated in large international exhibitions such as ARS 01 (Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, 2001), Kwangju Biennale (2000), *Cities on the Move* (The Secession, Vienna, 1997; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, 1999; Hayward Gallery, London; 1999), Fukuoka Triennial (1999), and the Asia Pacific Triennial (1996).

He has also been involved in smaller-focus exhibitions and text-based projects such as *Refuge* (Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Norway, 2002), *The Spice Route* (ifa Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany, 2002), *Mutation/Urban Rumours* (Fri-Art Contemporary Art Centre, Fribourg Switzerland, 2000), *Poisonous Targets* (Gallery 4A, Sydney, 2000), *Overtag* (BildMuseum, Umea, Sweden, 2000), *Babel* (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1999), *Intervention* (Museum-in-Progress/Der Standard, Vienna, 1999), *Apa? Siapa? Kenapa?* (artisproactiv, Kuala Lumpur, 1998) and *Schools* (Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 1998).

His solo exhibitions include *Of Migrants and Rubber Trees* (National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1996), *Whose Text?* (Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 2002) and a forthcoming touring exhibition in United Kingdom, starting at Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 2002. This exhibition, organised by OVA (Organisation for Visual Arts), is a survey of his work over the past 8 years. In conjunction with this exhibition, he has also been commissioned to produce a new work with a residency based at Gasworks, London.

Towards the end of 2002, he will be collaborating with Viennese theatre groups Ohne Grenzen and Schauspielhaus for a project loosely based on Marco Polo.

Hoy Cheong has previously taught painting and drawing at The London Institute/ Bandar Utama College, Malaysian Institute of Art and University of Massachusetts, USA. He was Artist-in-Residence (1992) at Canberra Institute of Art, Australian National University; Visiting Tutor (1998) at Central St. Martins, London; and Visiting Fellow (1999) at Goldsmith College, University of London. He is presently teaching at the Centre for Advanced Design in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

He is currently based in Kuala Lumpur and Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor, Malaysia.