INTERVIEW WITH
Kai Syng Tan

by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, May 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition
Curator: Jeremy Hight
Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

Who were some of your early influences? Who are some of your more recent influences in your work?

Everyone/everything comes from somewhere, and we come from many different places indeed, but if there is any one single work that encapsulates many of our life-long leitmotifs, and shaped our approach to art (and even life?), it has to be Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) which we experienced for the first time when I was 19 years old, fresh off the boat in London. It screwed us up big time –we cried buckets at the afternoon matinee at the Everyman Cinema. For us, the film crystallises powerfully the notions of *restlessness* as a philosophical and political approach to life, and related to that, the notions of plurality, multiplicity, resistance of definition. And talk about violent contradictions: the film is political and philosophical yet unapologetically poetic and personal too; aggressively rigorous theoretically, but trivial, light, indulgent and flecking hilarious; full of pathos albeit without any sentimentality; defiantly subjective but at the same time self-deprecating; utterly cynical yet simultaneously life-affirming;

affirmative of the power of art but at the same time ruthlessly shredding itself apart; fully-packed and self-contained as a work, yet simultaneously expansive, ungraspable and open-ended. Prior to that we had already been practicing (allegedly professionally since the age of 4, according to our biological mother, when we won an art competition), but *Sans Soleil* defined for us what the most interesting art could be, and made us want to make work like *Sans Soleil* –and even make *ourselves* and *our life/lives* like *Sans Soleil* itself, too!

These traits can be seen to different degrees in our other influences (early and recent), who include: Paul Cezanne, EM Cioran, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Agnes Varda, Maguerite Duras, Laurence Sterne, Andrei Tarkovsky, Dziga Vertov, Roland Barthes, Glenn Gould, Peter Kubelka, Martin Arnold, Maya Deren, Kathy Acker, Taka Iimura, Stan Brakhage, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Tsai Ming Liang, Garin Nugruho, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jan Svankmejer and Werner Herzog. Influences specific to our current research *A Rough Guide To The Meaning of A Life 3.0: Kaidie's 1000-Day Trans-Dimensional Run 12.12.2009–09.09.2012* include: Michel de Montaigne and Sei Shonagon (the diary form); Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,* Dante's *Divine Comedy,* and the works of Bruce Chatwin (travel); Masaki Fujihata, Blast Theory (locative art); Tehching Hsieh (durational performance); the Lumiere brothers' actualities and Michael Apted's *Seven Up* (the 'realist' tradition of cinema); JS Bach, Steve Reich, Samuel Beckett (repetition, cyclical nature of life); Lao Zi's *Dao De Jing*, Albert Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and of course, the brilliant Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (absurdity).

How has your trajectory from painting to video to locative media come to be and how have these different threads infused your current aesthetics, conceptualism and sensibilities?
This is a good question. We will respond to this in a two-fold manner: 1) our actual journey from the 'old media' art (painting, sculpture and so on) to

'new media' (including locative media) over the past decades, as well as 2) with respect to the primary theme of our work, which is about location and journeys.

Location –and dis-location– is a leitmotif of our work, life, and lifelong work, from our earliest 'mature' paintings (aged 14) to our current work (*Kaidie*). Our earliest drawings were invariably of other, imaginary, faraway lands, often infused with quasi- science-fictional or fantastical aesthetics. After having had enough of painting large (or shall we say 'large' in so far as they were approximately equivalent to my physical size) oil canvasses and building even larger sculptural installations, we started experimenting with photography and video in about when we were 18. It was in the wild wild west end of London (to be exact, Gower Street) that all notions of 'art' that we had had were shattered in all directions. It was at the Slade School that we were confronted and challenged, head on, by all sorts of things that called themselves art and artists. That opened the path for us to explore with a wide range of forms (sound art, text, hypertext, performance art, etc). Our Chris-Marker epiphanic encounter launched our 15-year-long investigation with the film and video (and later digital video) medium (cinema screening, installation, 'live' VJ performance, performance-lecture et al) as a means to imagine / interpret / critically question the/our reality/'realities', and we found it satisfying in offering a coherent bringing-together of our various loves: of the image-music (having tinkled the ivories for 11 years) -text (for all our pretentious philosophical and semiotic inquiries). This coincided with our (self-)consciousness of the increasingly media-saturated environment of ours. The truth was also that by then we had lost faith in the creation of a single grand, perfect statement in one 'good' image (in oil or watercolour or acrylic), and instead enjoyed the layering and sequencing –or *mapping*– of images and sound *through time and space*. We had also decided at that point to stop 'making*'* 'things' and to stop adding objects to the world, but instead work on editing, arranging or re-arranging things that are already existing (including image and sound). This manifested as a montage

style of editing in our film and videos, which was an extension of the compulsive collaging and layering style of our 2D still works. Most importantly, the 'abandonment' of painting and sculpture and turn to what we perceived to be media that is less tangible or impermanent was related to a decision to slowly but surely strip ourselves of things, and to always be on the move, in transit, and not fixed in a single country/city/place/locale, to understand that everything (ourselves included) is transient and to follow the (Buddhist) dictum of non-attachment Everyone knows that one travels best when one travels lightest, when one is one (solitary, with neither companion, family, memory nor history), carrying no baggage, with nothing to declare at the Customs. Finally –or shall we say *at this point in time*– with Kaidie, we are moving closer to a total abandonment of the production of objects in the primary world, and instead only of image, sound and text on that exists in the 'cloud' of the Internet, in the 'nonspace' or 'ether' of Cyberspace. Kaidie is a product of and response to the technological conditions of today. With mobile technologies, we are location-independent, and can work and indeed, live anywhere. Kaidie is a manifestation of such a 'digital nomad' that we are or can be. Kaidie traverses the world(s) by running across dimensions, in the primary world as well as the worlds opened up by the Internet. Some of our traverses can be tracked (via GPS, for those occurring in the primary world. See <http://www.gpsies.com/mapUser.do?username=3rdlifekaidie> for instance), while others are mapped imaginatively (see <http://3rdlifekaidie.com/category/mandalasmaps-of-kaidies-cosmologies/> for instance) Kaidie is by definition un-pindownable, located as she is dislocated. (Hence, we do not classify our current venture as only belonging to the genre of 'locative media', but performance, essay/diary, collaborative digital (and non-digital) storytelling as well, i.e. inter- or hopefully trans-disciplinary!) Kaidie is a manifestation of our desire and principle to refuse to be stationary, to be still. Having come from a place that is small, a wanderlust has besotted us early on, since we were 14 –'What is out there? Surely there is more to life than this!'. Today, we are still asking this question, and Kaidie is our respond to this nagging question,

by running across realities. Kaidie is us, and is also everyone else; Kaidie is specific as she is generic.

Interestingly, if you were to ask us, 'what next' with regards to our artistic journey, we would not be able to answer, more so now, since we are beginning to 'return' to the 2D form of painting again!… (gasps of horror?...)

You are also a musician...What do your other interests and skills bring to your work as an artist and in your process?

Not having played since we were 15, we would not dare describe ourselves as musicians, as that would be a huge insult to musicians, although you have struck a chord indeed, for we still nurse the fantasy of being a (mature) concert pianist. 11 years of music lessons however have indeed shaped the way we structure our world(s), in that we think about it in terms of such notions as tempo, rhythm, repetition, cycles, variations on themes, and so on. Which coincides with what we learn from Kaidie's current vocation or obsession of long-distance running (which is perhaps what drew us to it in the first place?) Sadly, making art, having an interest in music and running sums up the 'interests and skills' of our life/lives. We wish we could boast of exquisite culinary skills like Peter Kubelka (or chess-playing like Marcel Duchamp) and discuss how that enriches in our work/lives, but our expertise lies only in mastering the microwave. Does that count?

Can the semiotic read and construct of an avatar bringing a new aspect and opening new possibilities and discussions/context to location aware art?

We would hope so! As mentioned, our avatar, Kaidie, is a proxy of us. Kaidie is what we are already doing, a manifestation of all that which is already happening. Several readers have told us how Kaidie does what they want to do, and embodies their subconsciousness as digital nomads. Kaidie as a concept is not radical at all, but hopefully just a little more heightened and coherent as a visual form (or data?). Kaidie is us, and is also everyone else;

Kaidie is specific as she is generic.

How different is Kaidie from Kai Syng?

We play only one dimension of Kaidie (i.e. real life). So there are limitations, for Kaidie would have been able to fly (literally and metaphorically) without this flesh-and-blood baggage that is Kai Syng. In another words, Kaidie is the epitome of what we would have liked to be. While the locomotion of flying would have been so much more poetic (think Icarus, and the dreamy mode of flight in Second Life for instance), Kai Syng cannot fly. However, Kai Syng *could* run (in fact *any*body too –which is one of the reasons why we have selected running as our strategy) and Kai Syng has picked up running for the project. That Kaidie is always-mediated (or rather, compromised) by the dynamics of the real world (including all the limitations and flaws of Kai Syng's) is important. In so many ways, it would have been much easier to have cooked up Kaidie as a purely imaginary figure that works perfectly on paper and on screen; Kai Syng's being interrupts that, and always pulls us back to reality. Which really is the point of this work –and, if we may say so, at the risk of sounding grandiose– the point of why we do what we do as artists, that is, to use (our) art to look at (our) reality.

So Kaidie is a more complete (and improved/ evolved!) version of Kai Syng, although there are many overlaps. Hence, the use of the personal plural pronoun of 'we' in the work. Rather than the majestic plural, or the 'we' purloined by Margaret Thatcher ('Our money') and the current Coalition government ('We're in this together') that attempts to implicate us, our work embraces and celebrates the different and conflicting 'us' in the various dimensions as we traverse them. One of the reasons why we engage in trans-dimensional running is to precisely reject any notion of singularity or homogeneity. Following this, the first person plural that is foregrounded in this thesis is an inclusive 'we' that carries multiple meanings that shift according to the contexts of discussion. When we throw ourselves into testing out the notion of trans-dimensional running in real life, we are no longer merely a hypothetical 'one',

but personified in a specific character called Kaidie. Kaidie is not any 'one', but anyone could be Kaidie (although currently, she is the only character testing out our theory of trans-dimensional running). Instead of an 'Other', or a distancing 'they', Kaidie embodies 'us'. And, as Sherry Turkle says, instead of 'Who Am I', the more pertinent question in the Internet-mediated reality would be 'Who Am We?'. With the ubiquity of social-media platform since 2004, this question has taken on even more urgency. As exemplified by Wikipedia and Youtube, the user can be producer, and the client contents-creator at the same time. Hence, 'we' can refers to us who assume the multifarious identities of audience-author-actor that each of us can assume in Web 2.0, while at the same time encompassing the 'you' of Youtube, 'my' of 'Myspace' and 'i' of iPhone and the plethora of Apple products. Thus, the 'we' in the work can be the reader (you, who run with the author in our 1000-day journey) and author, or the artist (Kai Syng Tan) and the actor-protagonist of the case study of the thesis (Kaidie).

Is there a pun/commentary on lifespan and data in the last three letters of Kaidie's name?

Yes indeed. To attach death to one's name (and life) is to remind us of one's/our mortality. 'Kaidie' also tells us that Kai (Kai Syng Tan) has died. The artist has been named as the 'mother' of Kaidie in her Facebook profile (http://www.facebook.com/3rdlifeKaidie?sk=info) and has been explicitly declared dead from the beginning of the narrative (http://3rdlifekaidie.com/2009/12/tabula-rasa), the same way readers know that the premise of this project is that we have a limited lifespan (of 1000-days), that Kaidie exists for the single reason of running to look for the/a 'Meaning of Life' and must expire on the last day of the Nondon Olympics on 09.09.2012.

Yet there is a secondary character in Kaidie's life called 'Kailive' (or 'Kailives'), who had first appeared to be Kaidie's stand-in when the latter was kidnapped into Second Life (http://3rdlifekaidie.com/2010/03/kaidie-absent) in March 2010. 'Kailive'

is also our real-life manifestation when we perform 'live', allowing us to talk about 'Kaidie' as third person and also allowing us to generate a degree of critical distance from Kaidie in our pseudo-austere lecture-performances (http://3rdlifekaidie.com/2010/09/drha)

What of Web 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0 has Kaidie run through? What comment is being made of such designations and delineations in your work?

That there is more to life than *this,* is a running leitmotif of the view of the world many of us hold. Over and above the primary world (which we call 'Life 1.0'), we have always run a additional layer (which we call 'Life 2.0'), to enable us to run away from the gravity of daily life. In this internal world, we can let our imagination run wild. In the last decade, the Internet –in particular the so-called 'Web 2.0' or social media of the past decade– has further expanded our Life 2.0. In this online life, we are able to run about anytime, anywhere and as anybody. Recently, the emergence of the so-called 'Web 3.0' has added yet another new layer to our lives. Not only can we now store and access our data on the 'cloud' online, we can carry wireless, portable computer devices (such as 3G smartphones, and 'tablets' like the iPad) in our pockets, thus rendering us location-independent. Gone are the days of 'surfing' the Internet at our desks; we can now run about online while we are also running about offline, outdoors. In this new, hybridised life that we term 'Life 3.0', we now virtually have the whole (virtual) world on our hands as we run about in Life 1.0. Before we run out of breath and the next layer of Life - Life 4.0 - encroaches, we run into the question: how can we run our lives in order to get the best of all worlds of our technologically-layered multiverse today? It is against this ever-growing multilayered *mise-en-scene*, we propose the tactic of 'trans-dimensional running' to run –that is, to navigate, negotiate and manage– our Lives. The methodology refers to running in the physical, virtual and metaphorical senses, in dimensions physical, non-physical and metaphysical, with the assistance of the Internet community, our fertile

imagination, a state of mindfulness and an attitude of playfulness. The tactic of trans-dimensional running is as much a visceral counterstrike as it is a celebration of our technologically-expanded Lives. It is a playful, personal, philosophical, political, poetic and phantastical means of running our mad and marvellous multiverse today, as well as subsequent layers of lives to come. The same way Sisyphus made himself happy when stuck in a neverending existence of work, we can adopt the tactic of trans-dimensional running as a means run our lives and get the best of all worlds. After all, as if in a video game when we have endless lives, life goes on; or rather, lives go on.

What is this cartographic moment we are in? Where may we be going in the near future with gps, gis, ar and cross platform functionality and its growing ubiquity?

We are in an extremely exciting cartographic moment now, we think. With gps, gis, augmented reality and so on, we are viewing, or once again returning to the view of, reality as a *multiverse*, i.e., a reality that contains many (variations and layers of) realities. As writer Margaret Wertheim argues, techno-utopianists of the 1990s considered Cyberspace as the contemporary equivalent of the pre-Cartesian notion of a transcendent 'soul-space'. Indeed, a certain 'Doug' was quoted by Sherry Turkle in saying: 'I split my mind. I'm getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more... I go from window to window... And then I'll get a real-time message and I guess that's Real Life. […] Real Life is just one more window and it's usually not my best…' Today, Doug would have enjoyed the so-called 'Web 2.0'. Online worlds, such as the suitably-named 'Second Life', is but one of such world-within-worlds. The proliferation of wireless, portable computer devices has freed us from the desk indoors, encouraging us to run about not only *on*line, but while we are also on the run *off*line, outdoors. We now virtually have the whole (virtual) world on our hands as we run about in Life 1.0. Geolocative functions of application softwares enable us to superimpose our Life 2.0 onto Life 1.0

in hybrid realities, inviting us to return to the view of the world as one with multiple layers. In some ways this worldview is consistent with many a wise non-western cosmologies (such as Buddhist) that view our physical life and the physical world as only one amongst other possible lives and worlds. And, as Turkle predicted, instead of selecting either/or, we accommodate all worlds in our lives. Hence, rather than being divided by the new world of seemingly endless possibilities, we add layers upon layers, and this can only be, well, augmented even more in the near future. Plurality and multiplicity can only be exciting, for more possibilities are opened out, and more worlds for us to run! Rather than staying locked in from fear, we *move.* The more we move, the more we venture new frontiers, the more our world(s) expand, and so do our mind. Needless to say, we are terribly excited.

What are you working on in the near future?

In the nearest future, in next 500 days of Kaidie's life, there will be a couple of specific explorations including a collaboration with a Japanese media artist. It has also always been a desire of ours to run Singapore –short of politically-ruling it, the next best way we could 'run' it is to do so physically. So we plan to run 41.8km from West-East (which is slightly less the distance of a marathon), as well as 22.5km from North-South (which is slightly more than the distance of a half-marathon). It will be stifling. Nonetheless, some humidity won't defeat Kaidie and we will persevere. Then, the larger ongoing project we are working on is our written thesis for our PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art. Kaidie's work is only one aspect of the PhD, and the written component (of 60,000–80,000 words, in which we theorise the methodology of trans-dimensional running) is *the* real pain in Kaidie's arse as we run. We hope to get this completed on the same day that Kaidie dies (in 500 days' time). Let's keep our fingers (and eyes) crossed.

With regards to the next nearest future: It will be interesting to find out what happens after Fall 2012, after Kaidie's death. Will there be afterlives of Kaidie (with 4thlifekaidie for instance)? Will we continue

to run (or engage in other modes of locomotion)? Will there be other forms of the work (such as a novel or non-fictional publication)? Or, will there be a definitive (happily-ever-after) closure, a clean wiping out, where we close our blog and leave all social media (since 'Kai Syng Tan' has no presence in any of the networks and no website)? Will we 'return' to the 'old media' of painting, almost to make a point about 'having moved on' from Kaidie's project (except that this 'moving on' is a regression?!) Will we stop running and finally settle down in Nondon, or rather London, which remains our favourite city in this world? Will we re-learn the piano again? Will be stop making art and travel the world? Or will we abandon the world(s), and live the life of the perfect hermit? Your guess is as good as ours. As always, any suggestions and advice welcome. Please write us (dislocation@3rdlifekaidie.com)

A Rough Guide to (The Meaning of) A Life 3.0

'Kaidie' runs for 1000-days across real life (including the city of 'Nondon') and the Internet (including http://3rdlifekaidie.com) to look for 'the Meaning of Life', with the help of the online community. Will you help Kaidie on her quixotic quest before she dies on the last day of the 2012 Nondon Olympics? '*Kaidie' is the latest incarnation of artist/art curator/art educator Tan Kai Syng Tan.* As part of her PhD research at the Slade School of Fine Art, Kai Syng's current work involves a written thesis and studio work. Entitled *Trans-dimensional Running for Our Lives! A Rough Guide*, the thesis proposes the critical strategy of trans-dimensional running as a means of 'running' (navigating, negotiating, governing and playing in) our 21st century technologically-layered multiverse. Kai Syng's studio-work, *A Rough Guide To The Meaning of A Life 3.0: Kaidie's Transdimensional 1000-day Run 12.12.2009–09.09.2012,* is a 3-year durational performance-mixed-media work with multiple manifestations including installation, film, photography and text. For the purpose of this project, Kai Syng has picked up running in real life and has thus far completed two full and two half marathons, as well as raising money along the way. (Un)fortunately, Kaidie suffered a premature death after the last one that she took part in, the one and only Nondon Marathon 2011 (and on Kai Syng's birthday at that, on 24 April 2011). How did she die? How will she continue to die? Will she run back to life on time to fulfil her quest in July 2012? Find out more on (http://www.3rdlifekaidie.com) Kai Syng's current research is supported by the University College London and the National Arts Council of Singapore.

A Rough Guide (To The Meaning Of) A Life 3.0 Video Link: http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast?feature=mhsn#p/c/272279007EEFA15E/7/c_AcS6lrZ78
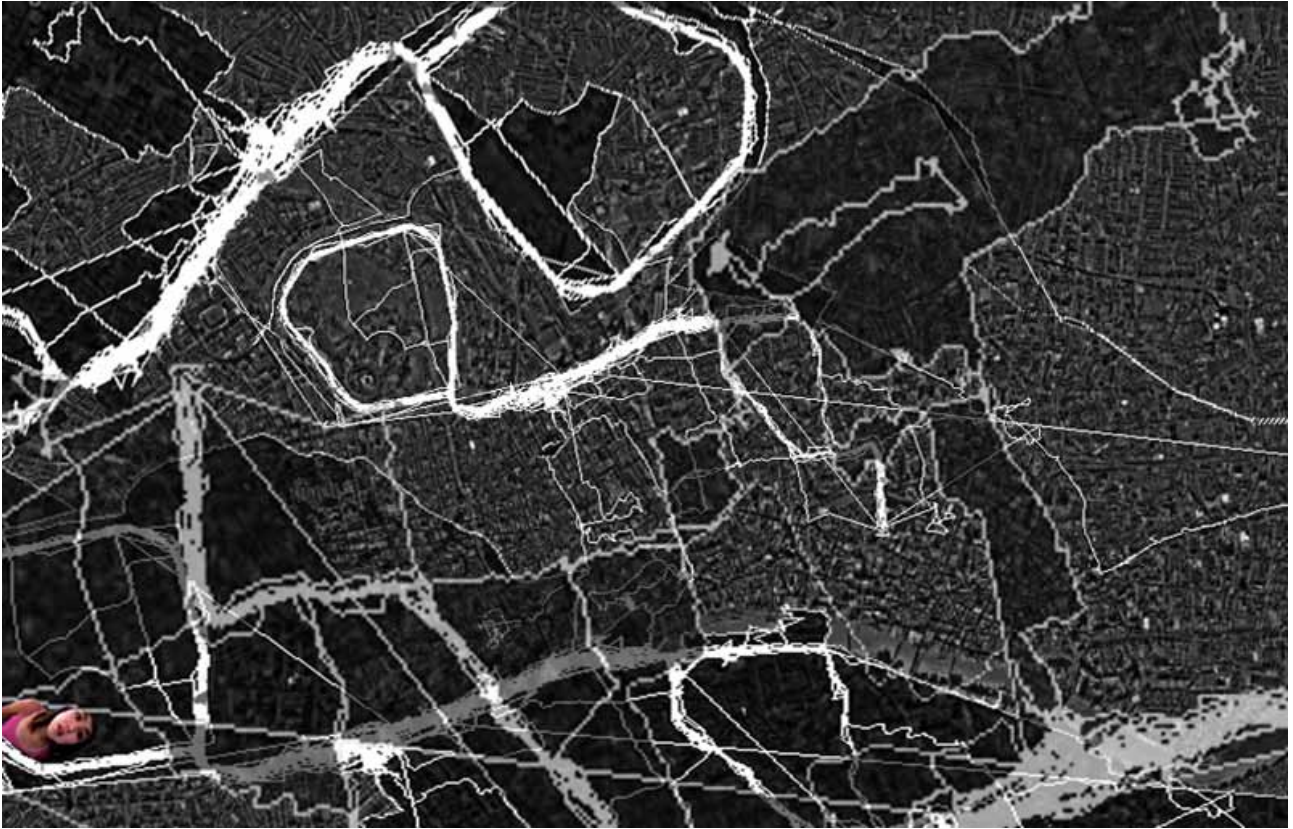
Second Lives, 2010, Kai Syng Tan. All images and video material
are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any
way without the express consent of the artist

Installation, 2010, Kai Syng Tan. All images and video material
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Gps Maze, 2010, Kai Syng Tan. All images and video material are
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Artist's statement

Kai Syng's interdisciplinary work (performance, cine-essay, installation, text et al) examines the notion of 'reality.' In one of her previous lives, she had done this by viewing the world through a self-reflexive video camera of a restless tourist/traveller and had been named 'one of Singapore's foremost video artists'* Her current research, A Rough Guide To The Meaning of A Life 3.0: Kaidie's Transdimensional 1000-day Run 12.12.2009– 09.09.2012, is conducted as part of her PhD research at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, UK. Kai Syng's written thesis, entitled (Trans-dimensional) Running for Our Lives! A Rough Guide, proposes the critical strategy of trans-dimensional running as a means of navigation and negotiation of our 21st century multiverse.

Bio

Kai Syng Tan's work has been shown in more than 45 cities (Guangzhou Triennale, Biennale of Sydney, ICA London, House of World Cultures, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival). Kai Syng has won several awards (SFIFF merit video award, Young Artist Award, Most Promising Young Artist Award aged 18), residencies (NIFCA, Japan Foundation) and grants. She is an advisor in a panel at the Media Development Authority of Singapore. For 7 years she was also a digital arts consultant and film lecturer, and ran a Video Art degree programme in an art university. Trained in Tokyo (MA in Imaging Science and Arts, Excellence Award, Distinctions, Musashino Art University), Chicago (School of Art Institute) and London (BA in Fine Art, 1st Class Honours, Slade School of Fine Art) on full scholarships, Kai Syng's interdisciplinary work (performance, cine-essay, installation, text *et al*) examines the notion of 'reality.' Her large-scale permanent public commission can also be seen at the Bras Basah MRT Station (from 19:29 hours daily) in the Arts and Heritage District of Singapore. ∎

* Dr. Eugene Tan, 2007. *Contemporary Art In Singapore*. Editors: Nadararajan G, Storer, R. & Tan, E. Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore. p:142.