


Dance Me Through The Dark
The Photography Of Tan Ngiap Heng





Ocular Desires: Movement and Visuality in the Photography of Tan Ngiap Heng

V e n k a P u r u s h o t h a m a n

Our sense of who we are and the manner we picturize and visualize ourselves is engineered by the mechanical possibilities of technology. The invention of the camera and its attendant activity of photographing took painting into a new economy of organizing and experiencing the world, our lives. In the 21st century, digital photography and the ability to record ourselves through a mobile phone and other digital apparatuses has quickened the pace of human expressions. As images demonstrating multiple social and personal networks, exhibited in an endless sequence of epistolary forms in diaristic sites such as Facebook and MySpace is ever increasing in scope and latitude, who we are is determinately becoming homogenous, blank, and insignificant.

On the other hand, there are artist-photographers who problematise the fast pace of photographing, of photography. I use the phrase artist-photographer, with the intent to acknowledge the dual possibilities that photography straddles - its commercial economy and its aesthetic desires. Through a random play with ideas of chronology, the politics of representation, the transformative potential of the spectacle and the exchange between the gaze of the artist and the viewer, these visual metaphors of artist-photographers signpost contemporary art photography against the sea of diaristic documentation. Tan Ngiap Heng is one such artist-photographer.

Tan Ngiap Heng is a Singapore-born photographer whose creative enterprise straddles engineering, dance and photography. Holding a PhD in Nonlinear Dynamics from University College London, Ngiap Heng developed a passion for dance, which served as a release valve to his pressurizing postgraduate world. He persevered to certify himself with a one-year commitment to dance at the London Contemporary Dance School.

Ngiap Heng's interest in photography came through dance. Despite his engineering degrees, he returned to Singapore in 1997 and worked for the performing arts centre, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay where he started photographing performing arts groups for Singapore's then English-language magazine dedicated to the arts, The Arts Magazine. This spurred his career as a full-time photographer. Ngiap Heng balances between art photography and commercial photography. He has travelled far and wide learning from renowned masters in photography such as Paul Elledge (USA), Andreas H. Bitesnich (Austria) and Anders Petersen (Germany) and has documented works in England, China, Italy and the United States.

Ngiap Heng's field of expression in this body of work is dance and the notion of performing to a set of structures designed by the artist-photographer. It is no secret that there is an abundant public circulation of dance photography today. They present a mimetic representation of common areas of mastery including capturing rapid movement and presenting bodily expressions. This mastery displays the self-authority of the artist-photographer's in spectacularising the ability to objectify that which is fleeting, rapid and momentous.

Dance Me Through The Dark (2008) differs in this regard. It is a diaristic rendition of Ngiap Heng choreographing/visualizing movement. Working with dancers from the Singapore Dance Theatre company, the photographs seek out a particular type of neo-classical objectivity that exude traditional values peculiar to a dancer's world. The subjects in his photographs interact performatively and yet, they do not interact socially, semiotically. At the same time, the viewer can find implicitly rooted are Ngiap Heng's own personal histories, passions and tribulations. However, the key feature of his works is as much about the act of photographing as it is the act of choreographing. The photographer's desire to choreograph 'still-life' as frozen movements to textured tonality of the visuals is most evident. There is a large amount of detailing: almost certifying his own self-representation through the movements; yet having a potent ethnographic schematic to the methodical mannerism in which the dancers are made to 'perform'. Here commonplace dance forms are replaced by performance structures that deny the theatrical audience the right to enjoy the aural and visual element of dance and enforce a strict code of only visualizing the movement and its sounds. The shift from theatre to gallery is tectonic; hence, making the viewer the active reflectors of the photographs while the dancers become silent and passive subjects/objects of the photographer.

The exhibition is guided by three trajectories: firstly, the shift from classical portraiture to contemporary expressions in photography; secondly to exhibit the artist-photographer's artistic developments from formal structures to the study of the performing body to the disappearance of the classical body in dance today; and thirdly, to provide the viewer a different visual and spatial approach to engage with photography.

Ngiap Heng's works, effortlessly elegant, painstakingly staged, poses the viewer to return to the question of how we should see or read art as Dance Me Through The Dark makes the shift from stage floor to gallery wall, dance movement to painterly composition, and auratic soundscapes to silent stillness. I allege, that it is difficult to unpack these three shifting modalities since the act of seeing or looking at art in itself is an act of terrorism.

Seeing is existential - the act in itself is one of all knowing, conscious of one's presence and surrounding, psychically informed by the viewer's ocular desire and libidinal economy. Looking, on the other hand, is an act of conditioning. It is enacted from the viewer's communicative practices designed by the social, which s/he is located. The act of looking is distinctively ingrained within a linguistic code learned and discursively shared within a community. As such, any act of looking does not depend on the work in itself but with the modern pre-occupation to visualize our existence through art. We are mere bystanders overwhelmed by the spectacle of art.

As spectators we enmesh a textual reading of art with a visual reading. Spectatorship implies a non-active role for the viewer in determining the production of meaning in art which problematises the visual experience. W.J.T Mitchell notes "the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practice of observation, surveillance and the visual pleasure) [is] as deep a problem as various forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpreting, etc.) and that 'visual experience' or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable" in the current model of textuality (Mitchell, 1994: 16). Hence, the act of looking at a piece of art, that is the viewer's perspective on art, while is political as the viewer imposes subconsciously a conceptual or aesthetic reading, s/he is kept busy with the technical decoding of visual codes. This polemic may seem reductive and essentialist but it is strategic to shift the focus of looking at art from the object in observation to the act in itself.

The viewer's non-active role is abetted by the Ngiap Heng's use of perspective as a device for representing reality. How we see reality in art is defined by the precision of his perspective. During Renaissance and classical times the study of perspectives in art was informed by the tangential interest in the science of how the human eye worked. Leon Batista Alberti spelt out the rendering of three-dimensional perspective onto two-dimensional canvas in his 1435 treatise on painting, Della Pittura that stressed that perspective in art was akin to seeing with a single eye as opposed to two of normal binocular vision. Martin Jay notes: "it was conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. Such as eye, was moreover, understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated rather than dynamic, moving with what later scientists would call 'saccadic' jumps from one focal point to another...it followed the logic of the Gaze rather than the Glance, thus producing a visual take that was eternalized, reduced to one 'one point of view', and disembodied" (Jay, 1988: 6).

If we go with Jay's critique, then we have to agree that perspective is a device used by Ngiap Heng to capture and represent visual. It is only an effect, rather than a reality. It is a device that empowers the artist-photographer to impress a singular viewer with his skill in creating something that resembles reality rather than represent it (Mirzoeff, 1994: 39-41). During the Renaissance period, that singular viewer was a king, prince or a patron for whom the work was made but today, this singularity plays out to the masses that are trained in a set of universal educational values that define and shape interpretation. Perspective is in the end, a cold and abstracted form of schematic that is devoid of the artist's emotional entanglement with an object of study (Jay, 1998: 8) hence, leaving the viewer with the inability to project their psychic or libidinal desires onto art as they remain reified outside the margins of interpretation. Only the disembodied, absolute eye remains.

In modern art theory, informed by the social theory of Michel Foucault, I would argue that the vanishing point of perspective is also the point of control. Perspective in art is Foucault's panopticon. Using the leitmotif of a prison, the panopticon sought to control prisoners (viewers?) through a system of visibility and surveillance. Foucault notes that the panopticon was the ideal model for the modern social organization of the disciplinary society. The visual arts have always existed within a magical and sacred preserve (Berger, 1972: 32). That disciplinarity has seeped into this preserve thus, I allege, contemporary photography has become a tight mélange of disorienting repetitiveness, monocularism and surplus of fragmentary images aiming to represent the unrepresentable playing on the aura of melancholy and the aesthetic of the sublime. It has become complicit of global power as it is controlled through a system of visibility and surveillance.

*Viewers today come with a monocular point of view – a preconceived notion of viewing photography, positioning it within an unbreakable frame of reference – as to the way photography should be engaged, tackled and revisited. This is a global conundrum as photography falls into the control of the masses. The desire of the viewer, abetted by photographers, is to fit contemporary art into the neat folds of market economy; that is, within an abstracted language; a vicarious picturization; and a conceptual *de rigueur* that resonates of simplistic notions of aesthetic construction. The market economy is filled with the bland as cool.*

The viewing eye is lying – lying to the true self of who we are and what we are looking at.

Ngiap Heng photographs the primal scene – his histories, passions and tribulations remembered in a dreamlike sequence. His narratives are condensed into a 'still film' providing an opportunity for the viewer to engage with the assemblage of the movements and textures. His imagination is an allegory to his past thereby reaffirming his self-identity as artist-photographer. His 'I' is imagined by his ocular 'eye' hidden from the desires of the viewer. Ngiap Heng's photography objectifies dance yet gives it a greater emotive leverage. His works reveal that the process of documenting need not be at the expense of the passion and admiration for the form in itself.

