



Towards a Museum of Colonial Sweat

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Abstract

This essay looks at "Solar: A Meltdown," a performance lecture by Ho Rui An that meticulously deconstructs the semiotics of colonialism through a wholly unexpected and uniquely obscure entry point: sweat. Sweat is Ho's rhetorical and deconstructive weapon. He takes a minor, almost invisible element of a cinematic narrative—sweat—and like a sweater that begins unraveling from loose threads that later cause the whole sweater to fall apart, Ho creatively deconstructs the role of sweat as an entry point to unravel imperial hubris. In this performance, sweat in cinema is "an index of colonial anxiety," seemingly connoting loss of control, ineffectuality, futility, indignity, or humiliation. Ho also weaves a unified field theory of the "Global Domestic," a pernicious maternalism or soft power which, under the pretext of "hospitality," makes more palatable the conquering of non-Western cultures by global capitalism. Ho has a withering suspicion towards hospitality and how its rhetoric of openness is a euphemism for global capitalism's ruthless drive to expand and cannibalize markets. In fact, his performance could launch an entire new discipline called "Critical Hospitality Studies". Ho has an attraction to invisible or overlooked subjects (sweat) that a conventional critic might deem inconsequential (to the film narrative) from which he then launches a drastic overhaul of all our assumptions. Ho's performance is marked by a predilection to seize upon subject matters that seem innocuous or benign in order to generate the most dystopian or socially disturbing interpretation of them.

Keywords: Ho Rui An/ semiotics of colonialism/ Critical Hospitality Studies

Beginning with a sepia-colored photo of the sweaty back of a colonial anthropologist, we enter the world of "Solar: A Meltdown", a performance lecture that meticulously deconstructs

the semiotics of colonialism through a wholly unexpected and uniquely obscure entry point: sweat. Singapore-born Ho Rui An's performance was first curated in Berlin by (Documenta curator 2017) Bonaventure Ndikung for Savvy Contemporary Gallery in 2017 and then shown at Berliner Festspiele in 2018. In "Solar: A Meltdown", we find ourselves sitting in a pitch black theater gazing at a succession of relentlessly cheery technicolor-bright stills of (mostly) Hollywood films, which are consistently undercut with Ho's brooding deconstructions of the invincibility, control, or poise of the colonial (usually white) protagonist by examining their relationship to sweat. Beginning with images of a Dutch anthropological expedition where pygmies were 'discovered' ending in an aborted flight, Ho describes "sweat as an index of colonial anxiety." Later we see film stills from a 1950's Hollywood Western where cowboys try to reflect the sun with mirrors perched on high mountains, where Ho describes the oppressive constancy of the sun and "the vengeance of a sun that cannot be eliminated". We then come to the Tropical Romance film genre in "The Year of Living Dangerously" (1982) where American journalist (Mel Gibson) arrives in Jakarta to cover a coup d'état against the President of Indonesia and is ensnared in complications. At one point his character wakes up in a pool of sweat, as Ho describes "a colonial man drowning in his own sweat". Sweat is Ho's rhetorical and deconstructive weapon. He takes this minor, almost invisible element of a cinematic narrative—sweat—and like a sweater that begins unraveling initially from some loose threads that later cause the whole sweater to fall apart, Ho creatively performs deconstructive readings of the role of sweat as an entry point to begin unraveling the impenetrability of imperial hubris. Why sweat? Perhaps because it symbolizes loss of control, ineffectuality, futility, indignity, or humiliation. This section of the performance is not without its share of enigmatically portentous pronouncements—for instance, when Ho says, "There are no histories of sweat--such stories can only be told outside history." Why is it that histories of sweat can only be told outside history? Is it because history is told by the victors, a shiny polished medallion of pride and conquest, with sweat a mere nuisance that can only surreptitiously slip in through the cracks of the narrative? Is it because history is filled with finished thoughts, finished acts, finished battles, and finished trajectories—whereas sweat is something verging on the inchoate, something formless, something abject, with no definitive beginning or end, no letters of introduction and timelines preceding it to render it monumental enough for history?

According to Barthes, “To sweat is to think”, indicative of the psychological labor involved in giving birth to a crime:

Yet another sign in this Julius Caesar: all the faces sweat constantly. Labourers, soldiers, conspirators, all have their austere and tense features streaming (with Vaseline). And closeups are so frequent that evidently sweat here is an attribute with a purpose. Like the Roman fringe or the nocturnal plait, sweat is a sign. Of what? Of moral feeling. Everyone is sweating because everyone is debating something within himself; we are here supposed to be in the locus of a horribly tormented virtue, that is, in the very locus of tragedy, and it is sweat which has the function of conveying this. The populace, upset by the death of Caesar, then by the arguments of Mark Antony, is sweating, and combining economically, in this single sign, the intensity of its emotion and the simplicity of its condition. And the virtuous men, Brutus, Cassius, Casca, are ceaselessly perspiring too, testifying thereby to the enormous physiological labour produced in them by a virtue just about to give birth to a crime. To sweat is to think - which evidently rests on the postulate, appropriate to a nation of businessmen, that thought is a violent, cataclysmic operation, of which sweat is only the most benign symptom. In the whole film, there is but one man who does not sweat and who remains smooth-faced, unperturbed and watertight: Caesar. Of course Caesar, the object of the crime, remains dry since he does not know, he does not think, and so must keep the firm and polished texture of an exhibit standing isolated in the courtroom. (Barthes, 1957, 26).

This section of Ho’s performace was reminiscent to me of Barthes’ passage on sweat in that both Ho and Barthes serve as interlocutors of the social, cultural and political backdrop of sweat. For both Barthes and Ho, sweat is the lens through which we can break down interrelated tropes within the cinematic narrative concerning the reversal of power structures and impending political impotence.



Ho Rui An, *Solar: A Meltdown*, Berliner Festspiele 2018, Courtesy of Artist

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Ho raises the stakes in the second half of his performance, with globalization being the next target of his incisive critical dismantling. We watch a vignette from the once wildly popular 1956 musical *The King and I*, a film about a woman from England who comes to teach the King of Siam's 42 children and live in his royal palace in the 1860's. Before Ho even utters a word, this film is charged terrain for any postcolonial critic (which Ho appears to be in spades) to enter. Here is a film depicting a 19th century English woman in the heyday of European colonialism, being a governess-like appendage to the highest echelon of society of an Asian country and having "culture clashes" about everything from owning a house, to the proper treatment of women, to slavery, to polygamy. (The film was banned in Thailand because of its buffoonish portrayal of the Siamese monarch and its denigration of Thai culture as inferior to Western) (Diviak and Symonds, 2000).



The King and I, 1956, film still

In Ho's performance we watch the sunny blonde Deborah Kerr sing, "Getting to Know You" to the 27 pint-sized and pig-tailed cloyingly endearing royal children from the 18 wives of the King of Siam with the insipid cheer that only a Rogers and Hammerstein musical can evoke: "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you. Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me." Here Ho weaves a unified field theory of the "Global Domestic," using Deborah Kerr's character as the symbolic linchpin of the colonial mistress "located at the threshold of inside and out," who "protects the empire by protecting herself." Ho posits that the global domestic is the originating figure of globalization, invoking a world of endless communicability with no strangers, laying the groundwork for how cultures will get to know each other as a subtle act of cultural imperialism. Ho hints that the seemingly benign maternal sphere Kerr's character creates in the film is but a microcosm for the model of macro-globalization—a pernicious maternalism, or "soft power"—to make more palatable the conquering of non-western cultures by the forces of global capitalism. Kerr represents the language of absolute hospitality, the language of openness, eliding the fact that the act of opening something is tantamount to violence. Once again we have the high contrast that runs through Ho's entire performance: in this case, Deborah Kerr in her mindless cheer singing the seemingly benevolent, innocuous and vapid song, "Getting to Know You" in bright technicolor Hollywood hues, undercut by Ho's withering suspicion and attribution of an almost sinister (or at least subtly malevolent) subtext to the scene. Once again we get an undefined sense that there is some very intriguing and dense

sociopolitical ideology underlying Ho Rui An's performance that we are not entirely privy to, but which we catch only glimpses of in his quantum leaps of association. Like nerve ganglions that travel at half light speed and must jump synapses, Ho's rapid fire chain of association from *The King and I*, to the "Getting to Know You" song, to hospitality, to global capitalism, could have benefited from some expository explanation (to help us better connect the dots). But then this begs the question, does Ho intend for us to take literally his postulations, or instead treat them more as a poetic rhapsody stream-of-critical-consciousness?

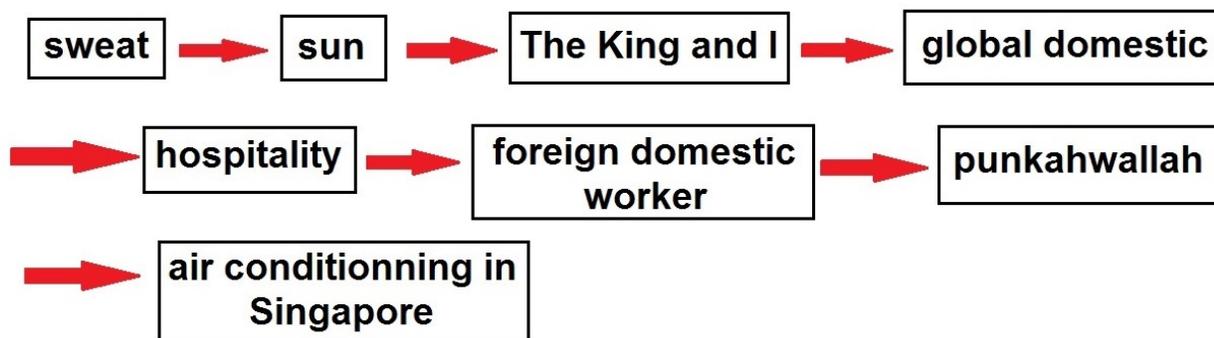
Whatever the case may be, Ho's riveting quasi-demonization of "hospitality" could, in and of itself, spark the birth of a new academic field: Critical Hospitality Studies. Ho then moves on to discuss the foreign domestic worker, women from poorer Southeast countries sent to Japan and Singapore (or wealthy East Asian nations) to be nannies, maids, or surrogate mothers to the children of wealthy East Asian families. This is perhaps the best exemplification of Ho's assertion that a chain of brutal displacements are required in order to become part of the globalized economy—it is as if the subjugation of poorer countries by global capital results in a perverted version of domesticity and maternalism predicated on inequality and economic colonialism, embodied in the figure of the "foreign domestic worker." The foreign domestic worker is invisible: she displaces her own domesticity in order to secure domesticity.

The final leg of Ho's performance moves to the figure of the punkahwallah, a person of the lowest social caste in India and Pakistan who manually operated a large ceiling fan during the height of colonialism, before the advent of electricity. In the figure of the punkahwallah, Ho thereby consolidates all his previous tropes of sweat, the global domestic, colonialism, and hospitality. Like the peeling of the onion, Ho performs various deconstructions of subtexts of film passages, weaving in and out of various films such as *Passage to India*, the prima facie film on European colonialism. Referencing a scene where the main character, an Englishwoman, Adela, is testifying at a trial of an Indian man she accused of raping her, Ho shows a scene of the punkahwallah operating the fan in the court room. Ho then hopscotches through various other film clips, particularly one absurd one where there is a punkwallah to fan the fanner; i.e. the man operating the overhead ceiling fan for the room is equipped with a small boy fanning him as well. If we understand sweat to represent the almost invisible or repressed remainder-traces of labor, ineffectuality, and anxiety of colonialist hegemony, then the punkahwallah responsible for fanning away their sweat exposes the logic of the colonial project. It is at this point that the

largely visual-oriented performance finally becomes tactile, as we have a large punkahwallah—looking like a mini-curtain and spanning the width of the stage--looming large from the ceiling appearing suddenly like a ghost, as the audience begins to feel a breeze from the fan.

After moving to modern-day electric punkahwallahs sometimes found in restaurants, Ho concludes his performance with a wry commentary on what he considers to be Singapore's bizarre love affair with ubiquitous and ceaseless air-conditioning. We see various images of gargantuan indoor environments with white domes that look like a mall crossed with a planetarium crossed with natural history museum, looking airless, sterile, and too-impeccably manicured. All of them are obsessively air-conditioned in Singapore, as Ho slaps the moniker "The Air Condition Nation" onto Singapore.

blueprint for "Solar: A Meltdown"



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In 1957 post-structuralist theorist Barthes wrote *Mythologies*, a compilation of 28 short essays on wildly divergent and seemingly banal topics, from soap, to toys, to wine, to writers who take vacation, to wrestling. Seemingly inconsequential topics not normally deemed the purview of lofty literary criticism were dissected and deconstructed to reveal insidious overarching deep structures, or "myth". In a similar vein, if Foucault had started out talking about the expected subjects for a historian or sociologist—government, state, theories of democracy—his critical operations would not have had as far, nor as deep a territory to subvert. But by taking as starting point entities considered obscure or marginal vis à vis a modern history of the state—hospitals, prisons, insane asylums—he conducted a drastic overhaul of the entire architecture of mental categories from which we take for granted as the starting point of critique. Similarly, post-structuralism's greatest reversal was not an attack on a concrete institution, state, or government,

but in reversing intangibles, such as the point of entry at which we enter critique and dismantling assumptions we took for granted as universal (i.e. universal “truth,” the existence of “human nature,” the “self” as a coherent autonomous subject, history as a linear progression towards a goal, etc.). Barthes’ project was to “explode apparency”—to dismantle what seemed to be “apparent”—which is myth. The project of post-structuralism was above all else a discrediting program: a project to discredit, demystify, dissect and deracinate hegemonic thought structures. According to Barthes, “myth” is an arbitrary pattern of signification that becomes naturalized, imbued with a patina of inevitability, and becomes emptied of the specifics of its historical subjectivity to be implanted with a false meaning. Myth is basically a mechanism by which meaning is deformed. Barthes says:

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. (Barthes, 1957, 152).

Ho’s performance and his analysis was a delightful (and much needed) resurrection of this initial militant stage of poststructuralist critique. Ho’s withering suspicion, his attraction to invisible or overlooked subjects (sweat) that a conventional critic might deem inconsequential (to the film narrative) from which he then launches a drastic overhaul of all our assumptions, his predilection to seize upon subject matters that seem innocuous or benign in order to generate the most dystopian or socially disturbing interpretation of it, as well as his compulsion to use his critical tools to re-cast the colonial master in a context of humiliation to discredit the aura of inevitability of hegemonic figures—all these traits would earn him a place in the pantheon of the masters of suspicion of the 1960’s and 70’s (i.e. Derrida, Foucault, Said, Barthes, Kristeva, etc). Above all else, Ho is—or thinks—like the literary critics of the post-structuralist era. By seizing upon subject matters that seem innocuous or benign and generating the most dystopian or socially disturbing interpretation of them, post-structuralist critics were creating a parallel consciousness, a parallel or alternate set of reference points from which to look at a situation, in order to put us in conflict with (or alienate us from) our present reality. This is precisely what Ho does—with great flourish and aplomb.

What Ho is doing can be understood as a *performative deconstruction* or a performance-deconstruction—a performance that utilizes the methodology of deconstruction, to pick apart

and micro-dissect a topic or entity—a performance based on discursive analysis. Other recent examples of this genre might include Aloneh Rodeh’s performance “Fear of Silence, or a Brief History of the Air Raid Siren” at Transmediale, a performance lecture about the growing use of alarms in public space, or Julieta Aranda deconstruction of debt in her lecture performance at the Artist as Debtor Conference at Cooper Union (Rodeh, 2016; Aranda, 2015). What all these performances have in common (including Ho’s) are: 1.) performance of critical analysis 2.) performance in which the performativity lies in the critical operations of the artist, as opposed to an externalized, demonstrative or dramatized performativity on the part of the artist 3.) a performance that takes an oppositional or polemical stance.

Upon leaving the performance, one is left however with a slightly unsettling irony to the performance, and a question. Much of Ho’s performance exhibits a scathing hostility towards the future of global capitalism, and a stunning indictment of it, with an unrelenting pejorative inflection when he refers to “the language of global capitalism”, peppering his lecture with mantras such as, “He who fails to become global dies” (referencing the brutality of global capitalism). And yet, the world of visual art is one of the greatest handmaidens to global capitalism, operating as a shadow of the stock market, allowing collectors to transfer wealth between countries. Visual art and global capitalism are inextricably intertwined (in a way, that for instance dance/theater and capitalism are not), with the art world being one of the premier international lifestyles of global capitalism. Ho is apparently an artist who shuttles between biennales and other projects in New York, Asia, Europe and the Middle East—an artist who is likely a beneficiary of a globalized art economy. One must wonder, would the first rate critical edge he exhibits towards global capitalism when deconstructing subtexts of films ever be extended to a criticism of his own participation in a field that is the prima facie beneficiary of a globalized capitalist economy: visual art? Or would that be the point where resistance ends, and complicity begins?

Notes

(1) Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. (New York, Noonday Press: 1957), 25 and 152.

(2) Divjak Carol and Symonds, Peter “Why are the Thai authorities so sensitive about Anna and the King?”, *World Socialist Web Site*, April 3, 2000 <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/04/thai-a03.html>

(3) Rodeh, Alona “Fear of Silence, or a Brief History of the Air Raid Siren”
<https://transmediale.de/content/fear-of-silence-or-a-brief-history-of-the-air-raid-siren>, February 5, 2016; Julieta Aranda <http://artanddebt.org/hello-world/>, January 23, 2015.

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About the Author

Andrea Liu is a New York/Berlin-based visual art & performance critic (and artist) whose research often involves genealogy, or the epistemic context within which bodies of knowledge become intelligible and authoritative, as a point of departure in art production. She was curator of *Counterhegemony: Art in a Social Context* (6 week theoretical fellowship program). Since 2009 she was awarded over 14 artist residencies in the U.S., Berlin, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Prague, Italy (various locations), including Atlantic Center for the Arts, Art & Law Program, Museum of Fine Arts Houston Core, Ox-Bow/Art Institute of Chicago, Banff Centre, Jacob's Pillow Research Fellowship, ZK/U-Berlin, Centrale Fies Liveworks Performance Act Award Vol. 4, and was a Core Participant in Anton Vidokle's New Museum Nightschool Program. She gave talks/panels at Geffen Museum of Contemporary Art (*Los Angeles Printed Matter Contemporary Artist Books Conference*), Yale University Whitney Humanities Center, College Art Association, NYU Performance Studies Conference (Affect Factory), Black Mountain College Museum & Arts Center, Printed Matter (NYC), MASS MoCA (Museum of Contemporary Art Massachusetts), Centre for Postdigital Cultures (UK), Royal Holloway Central School of Drama and Speech (London), Graduate Center for Europe (UK Birmingham), Society for Artistic Research Conference, Jan Van Eyck Academie Alumni Conference, amongst others. She has written art/performance criticism for *Afterimage*, *ArtMargins*, *ArtUS*, *e-flux (AUP)*, *Social Text*, *New Museum Social Practice Glossary*, *Postmodern Culture* (amongst others). She received her undergraduate education from Yale University and thereafter was a Visiting Scholar at Centre Parisien d'Etudes Critiques in Paris, France.