

WeiZen Ho

t h e s u b t l e b e i n g s

at Articulate project space, 497 Parramatta Road, Leichhardt, 15 – 25 March 2018

*This piece is written in 4 parts; the first after some research in anticipation of meeting WeiZen, the second after we had met; while she was in the process of making the installation for her performance and the third after seeing her perform. A fourth part was added on reflections during a walk with WeiZen, and is written by others who generously shared their thoughts after the performance.*

### **Part 1: Anticipation**

#### ***She walks not***

Even before meeting this inter-disciplinary performing artist I have been captivated by an image of her in mid-performance. Filling the frame of the shot, a Chinese woman lies belly-down on a wheeled platform, appearing to propel herself along the floor by the sweeping, claw-like actions of her bare and muscular arms. Her legs drag behind her. On her face is an expression of such strength and intrigue I have read it over and over many times, trying to find a meaning. I can't. It could be anything from admonishment to pain to possession to otherworldly knowingness, maybe even a species of mirth, but it is certainly fuelled by sheer grit and endurance. If eyes alone could speak ... but no, in performance art it is the entire body that narrates, and in this image WeiZen Ho walks not, but drags herself. Then again, while legs and feet may not power her, she has wheels, and she rolls smoothly and efficiently, paradoxically (but so effectively) *speaking with a look*, from a traditionally disempowered space, or actual 'platform'; lying low and horizontally.

This is the power of performance art, and specifically for Ho's practice, the use of the visceral body and its movement and location in space (or site) *as material*. In much the same way as a visual artist would use material such as charcoal or paint, here it is the body and its abstract movements in space that relate her particular interest in exploring socio-cultural histories, translated and expressed through her body, as performance. The histories-as-performances are drawn from her own lineage, and beyond, accessing a variety of cultural practices across East Asia; some localised, some carried along by diaspora and others an intermingling somewhere between the two (as is typical of much of this part of sea-connected Asia). WeiZen has spun her performances from the influence of local folklore and mythology frequently interwoven with migration, colonial, feminist and local features. Her solo performance series *Stories from the Body (#1-4)* 2014 – 16 and performed in Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and here in Australia presented such powerfully fraught and fractured encounters. In each piece the concept of mediumship was central to her conception, and ultimately, performance.

WeiZen's current collaborative arts project, t h e s u b t l e b e i n g s continues this interest in the performative body as medium. It specifically references her encounters with rituals of possession, shamanism and animism encountered directly in her research and travels over a two-year period to Sabah, Malaysia and Hanoi, Vietnam. The project's culmination was the installation at Articulate project space, ultimately realised in a series of performances in March 2018.



WeiZen Ho, *Stories from the Body #5* (PLATFORM 2017) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (15 July 2017)

## Part 2: installation

### *She articulates*

I meet WeiZen, finally on a Friday. WeiZen and I it turns out, come from the same part of South East Asia and also share a similar cultural history in that we are descendants of Chinese people who fled into what was then British Malaya in the wake of political conflicts. There is a frisson as I discover that WeiZen has visited my hometown Kota Kinabalu, as part of her research trip to Malaysia as well as Hanoi in Vietnam. She has been driven by an interest in researching and witnessing the rituals around trance and possession, rituals that are also a shadowy part of her own socio-cultural history, shaped by time, place and perspective. While in Sabah, she spent time with the indigenous Orang Rungus people from Kampung Minyak, and it is their own whispered description of the origin of their characteristic dance movements that provided the genesis for the title, *t h e s u b t l e b e i n g s*.<sup>1</sup> WeiZen whispers the actual words the Rungus used, pre-translation, *orang halus itu* and I am grateful to hear it, for the blanketing sensation of a familiar language, spoken with its rolling *r*'s, guttural *ngs*, *s* liaison and also for the evocation of a distant mirage in which barely discernible figures, *the subtle beings* move with delicacy and deliberation among a thick jungle.

*t h e s u b t l e b e i n g s* - all lower case, with spaces between the letters. The concept, so eloquently expressed in text, suggests a physical conflation of democratic markers and open spaces. We all have bodies in which we collect lived experiences, yet it is the pauses between actions, the spaces between the trees, the silence among noise, the absences where we are open, and where something may happen. Perhaps a space created for performance, as medium, or as vehicle for possession.<sup>1</sup> In her reflective essay *Potus Sedere*, WeiZen elaborates on the nature of space as absence, a generative and fertile place for her to work from.

*there is the notion of possession as the filling in of, and meditating on, many kinds of absences. It makes me wonder about the kinds of qualitative states that may make possession possible: mental vulnerability, uncertainty of social identity, lack of access to deeper communion or devotional spaces, ... the thinning veil between life and death, the need for empowerment, unbelonging, dislocation, displacement and uprooting.*<sup>2</sup>

As a performing artist, her interest is in the point where the performance of ritual-like experiences of being possessed becomes a transformative experience for both the performer and the onlooker. Her intent is to reach beyond the passive performative model and arrive at an active performance, in which the audience is engaged with her actions. An essential aspect of her practice is the continual refinement of a minimally conceived performance methodology; enabling a large part of each performance to be open to improvisation, experimentation and a collaboration of sorts. In person, WeiZen is animated, eloquent and expansive. As we talk she shows me a gesture of her arm, *see how much more interesting this movement is* (an awkward twisting gesticulation), *compared with this* (this time, a graceful, balletic flourish). In this I imagine her performance to come, likely to challenge my role as viewer, for her preference for the awkward over ease, in bodily expression as well as conceptual intent.

The first phase of the presentation of the *t h e s u b t l e b e i n g s* at Articulate project space, was an installation in progress. Built gradually over the weeks, it was at once a nest, a building site in transition and a suspenseful stage for the performance to come. The work utilised distinct imagery and material as a response to the research areas. In response to WeiZen's encounters with the *bobohizans* of Sabah were hair sculptures, both human and synthetic,

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<sup>1</sup> WeiZen Ho, 'Imageries in response to Sabah, East Malaysia' post on [www.weizenho.com](http://www.weizenho.com)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.weizenho.com/> WeiZen Ho, 'Potus Sedere' in *Part of the Stories from the Body Performance Series*; Rabbit 20 – Dance, A Journal for Non-fiction Poetry, RMIT, 2017, pp. 86 - 97 at 90.

loosely spiralled on the walls, suspended in clumps and occasionally entangled with vegetation.<sup>3</sup> These abject vestiges of the body evoked a strange simultaneity of repulsion and attraction. A costume resembling an enlarged slice of skin, with horsehair filaments sprouting outwards is displayed nearby. Elsewhere, and among these bodily items were reflective surfaces and motifs – these were WeiZen’s responses to the witnessing of Len Dong rituals in Hanoi and they were installed to invite participatory actions from the audience.<sup>4</sup> The reflective surfaces act to mirror viewers in the performance along with the artist. In addition to the hair and reflective elements, the proposed performances were to also utilise text, sound, sound circuitry, movement, vocals and video.

So the next phase of the project was to move into the series of performances. She walks not but articulates as performance, those *s u b t l e b e l n g s*, as WeiZen herself says, coming from a basic premise that “all of human living is performed”.<sup>5</sup>



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (installation detail) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (March 2018)

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<sup>3</sup> A Bobohizan is term for high priestess, a ritual specialist and a spirit medium in Kadazan-Dusun pagan rites: Wikipedia.

<sup>4</sup> Lèn đồng is a ritual practiced in Vietnamese folk religion and the mother goddess religion Đạo Mẫu, in which followers become spirit mediums for various deities: Wikipedia.

<sup>5</sup> WeiZen Ho, ‘Potus Sedere’ *Op. Cit.* at 92.



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (installation participation) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (March 2018)

### Part 3: Performance

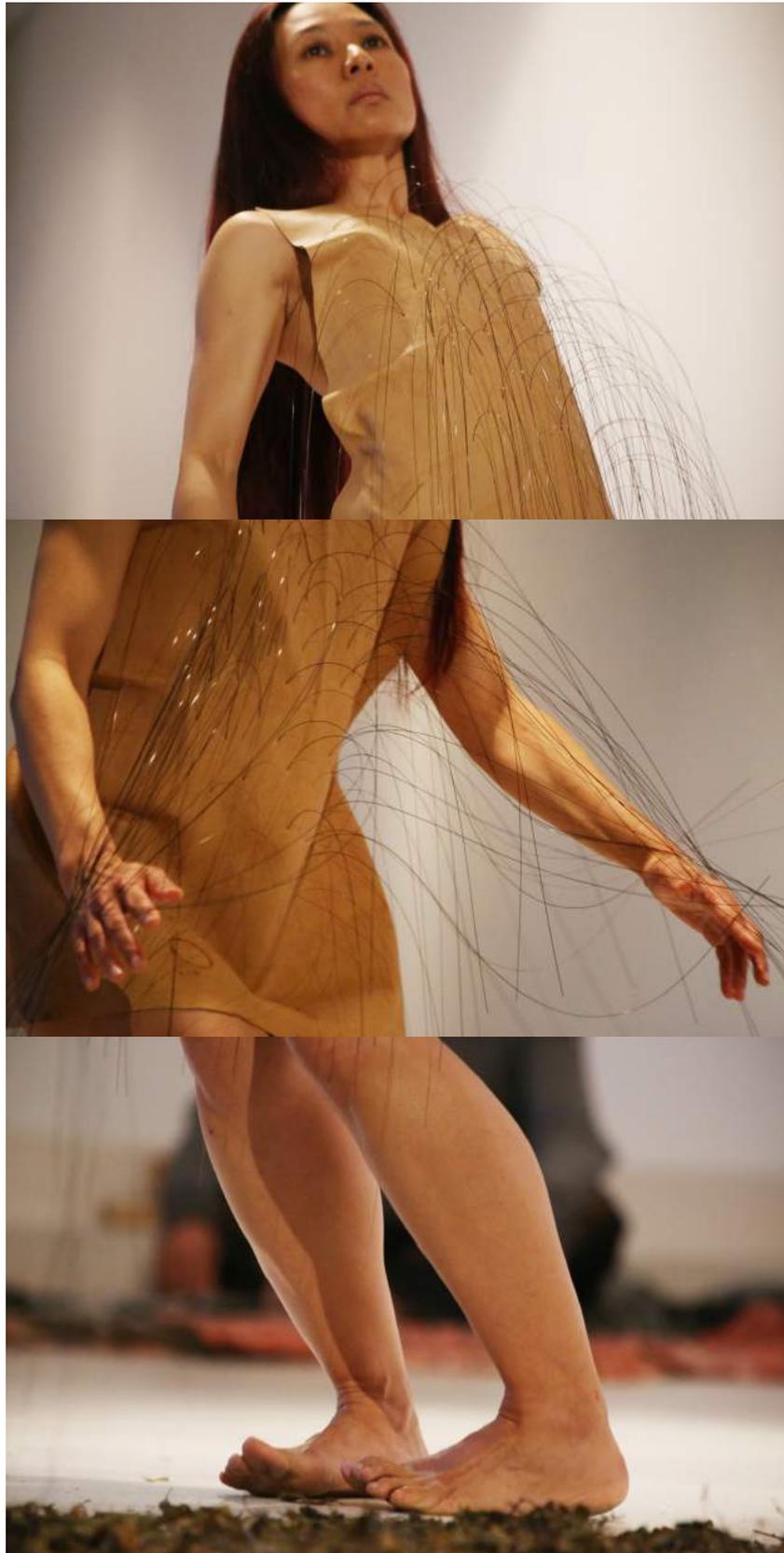
#### *She shakes, she speaks, she transcends*

I saw the last and final of four performances, held on a Saturday night. The performances had been conceived in relation to the space, which was in turn carefully prepared by the artist and her collaborators as a series of installations and video projections. We were directed to move through the space via three distinct performance pieces, or cumulative phases, all of which evoked aspects of possession and mediumship, cloaked in ritual. <sup>ii</sup>



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (installation detail) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (March 2018)

At the point of entry ritual helpers received us. These women explained practical details of the performance it had the effect of clarity and welcome. The gesture was one of kindness. The first performance took place at the far end of the downstairs space, reached by traversing past a video taken in Sabah – and the characteristic percussive gong sounds followed our progress, <sup>iii</sup> past the hair installation, which had grown in number, thickness and metaphoric potential. There, by the shrine and a kneeling ritual assistant, we waited, until the heavy anticipation broke and she appeared. Her body, slight and naked, evoked empathy. She was helped into – or onto – the skin-piece – a prosthesis glued directly on to her body. <sup>iv</sup> Her long hair was unbound and loosened. Somehow, the fragile projecting filaments of hair from the front of the costume echoed this unfettering gesture and guided her first, tentative actions. Her movements were small, light, subtle as air currents, which she sniffed audibly, her head nodding, swaying, absorbed and apparently oblivious to the audience. Conversely, her arms and hands, held behind the body, wrist to reversed wrist, started to tremble violently, suggest binding or physical resistance. <sup>v</sup> Some, though not all, of her movements stood out to me, hinting at indigenous dance movements local to Borneo. Among a pile of dried leaves on the floor, her toes curled and crawled. There was a walk – of tiny shuffling steps – in which the inner and outer soles of the feet were used and a singular moment when her bare heel extended and knocked on the floor. These were disparate, truncated, remnant actions, broken parts of a language of the body offered up haltingly, not spoken fluently or with grace. This performance closed abruptly when the ritual assistant, who had been holding her, loudly slapped her on the back, propelling her forward and stumblingly into space. <sup>vi vii viii</sup>



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (performance) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (March 2018)

For the second phase of the performance, we were ushered upstairs, with script in hand, to gather among a minimal architectural assemblage. Suspended from above, sheets of reflective film were positioned around simple timber benches, and a line of red cloaks (another aspect of audience participation).<sup>x</sup> In a change of costume, she wore a shimmering double-layered skirt which she pulled up over her head, transforming herself into bodily geometry; an inverted double triangle. In doing this she turned herself into a symbol: becoming a moving, vocalising *figure of speech*. She uttered loudly and occasionally through the fabric, materially present, but with muffled voice and face masked. This is where language was first uttered, and to hear spoken English was a little unsettling, though the words and phrases were not coherent communication but more of a verbal flourishing. In our earlier discussion, WeiZen had described it as an *unreadable text*.<sup>xixii</sup> Traditions of absurdist theatre were evoked and the audience was invited to take part, in parts of three parts;

*perpetual purgatory(Y that  
expels A foretelling  
bared with ebonian  
slumbeR crowing  
insipidnesS ...*

and so we intoned in a group incantation, over, through and among other spoken threads. This known or more familiar format of performance was cut with the unknown; she also voiced gutturally, in deep reverberations followed by upward arcs into melancholic strains that suggested the plaintive strains of Chinese opera. Once I thought I heard the circling rise of the Imam's call to prayer before it dissolved into something else. Aside from the vocal elements, she moved among us, using eye contact and issuing pronouncements – prophetically delivered.<sup>xiii</sup> Like her bodily movements in the first part of the performance, this was not fluent masterful language but chopped and dislocated parts of utterance.<sup>xiv</sup> She was with us, but not really, the effect was of a lighthouse beam turning, illuminating something and then moving on. Her movements here, upstairs and with sound were a contrast as they were confident and assured. Without hesitation she climbed a bench, hugged a corner, strode out and spoke up.<sup>xv</sup>



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (performance) at Articulate project space  
Photographer: Vsevolod Vlaskine (March 2018)



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Having moved from a bodily to a vocal emphasis we were readied for the final performance. During a break, ritual assistants handed out glasses of subtly scented water.<sup>xvi</sup> So it was with the taste of cucumber-infusion in our mouths, that the final and most dynamic phase of the performance began.<sup>xvii</sup> She descended downstairs and we, her audience watched, mostly from above, looking down. This juxtaposition suggested disempowerment, an inversion of the raised stage or at the very least dislocation, and cast her in a somewhat abject position relative to her audience.<sup>xviii</sup> This was amplified as she removed her shirt, crawled on to a reflective rectangle and flipped her hair forward so that a video projection was cast directly on to her naked back.<sup>xix</sup> At once she became a fleshy part of the black and white scene. With her hands she took her hair and began to use it. She filled her mouth with hair – a silencing act. She then began to wipe her hair over the flickering images on the floor, appearing to clean, erase or perhaps polish the surface/screen in slow and deliberate actions. With this action, she created a layered temporal ritual in which she occupied, in the one moment, different stratas of time; the past time of the film and the present time of the performance collapsed into one. Connecting these layered temporalities were a lineage of women; the woman on the floor, the women in the projection, indeed all the women who have gone before in performing these traditionally feminised actions, of cleaning, grooming and sewing. In one particularly poignant moment, she produced a large needle and started to sew her hair. Simultaneously, the video image showed another woman tossing her hair. Social, feminine and personal rituals collided. This compression provided a powerful visual narration of mediumship as a type of lineage.<sup>xx</sup> Notably, the use of and reference to hair connected us back to the beginning, to the clumped, severed and *disembodied* hair display forming the hair installation.<sup>xxixxi</sup>



WeiZen Ho, *the subtle beings* (performance) at Articulate project space  
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In a forum subsequent to the performance, one of the ritual helper performers, Oliver offered an insight into interpreting the three performances and the three personas.<sup>6</sup> He thought of them as a movement from the pre-personal, to the personal and then to the trans-personal. So in this work WeiZen Ho moves perhaps from representing being without identity – as consciousness, through to identification with language - communication and finally, to a multi-tiered plurality - transcendence. This interpretation lends a progressive analysis, in that the performances are enacted as a series of ritual transformations (via representation as possession or mediumship) that are layered and cumulative in effect.<sup>xxiii xxiv xxv</sup>

So now I have traversed the many faces of her, this WeiZen Ho, from interpreting that initial image, to meeting, talking and walking with her, to witnessing her perform as three hers. Like the enigma generated by that first fixed gaze, her performance work, like most good and interesting art, defies a singular explanation but instead opens up an expanse for interpretation, originating as it does from a similarly expansive field, a hybridization of personal history, place-specific research and socio-cultural ritual.<sup>xxvi</sup>

*I want, saya mahu, to go, pergi ke, there, sana ...*

Lisa Sharp  
April 2018

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<sup>6</sup> Oliver Damian, collaborator and ritual helper in *the subtle beings* performance.

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## Part 4: Endnotes

### *Her audience writes*

These Endnotes are a collection of unedited written responses to Weizen Ho's installation and performance, collected after the event, selected and inserted into parts of the text to expand upon ideas and to offer up other observations and interpretations.

<sup>i</sup> *The illusion is that the body although always decaying is somehow solid. Whereas the body you evoked was not only so but even more interestingly instead unstable, fluid and finally porous. A leaky vessel which ego may desperately attempt but never quite succeed to hold together in some sort of cohesive identity. Never quite succeeds because everything is in flux. This subtle body, in what I read in your depiction, that slipped so easily between spaces and identities seems to retain its inner sacredness without the trappings of religion. Perhaps it's not reading in too much to say that it felt like you were intuiting a new way of being embodied by reconnecting the troubled (unsustainable) present with the oh so human ancient supernatural practices of old Asia. This dance of unity between the living and dead spirits seemed so life-enhancing when seen against the dead hand of paranoia and angst being played out in post-sacred consumer culture intent on consuming everything... self, other, space, food, air, water. Commodities consuming commodities to the point that continuity is threatened, paying no respect to those past and having no heed of those to come.: **Don Mamouney**, Yoga teacher, Ex-director Sidetrack Performance Group, [www.metyoga.com.au](http://www.metyoga.com.au)*

<sup>ii</sup> *It's quite hard to put into words the responses that I had, but I'll try. Some of the complexity has to do with how the work sits at the edges of ritual and performance, terms which in so many ways stand in for each other – so it shimmers back and forth between them for me, somehow still both at the same time.: **Clare Grant**, Honorary Lecturer, University of NSW Freelance theatre maker, dramaturg, performer, <https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/about-us/people/clare-grant/>*

<sup>iii</sup> *It is interesting to consider whether the musical sounds emanating from the videos in relation to the performance and whether is intended to be akin to diegetic sound in film, associated directly with the action of the performance and performer, or indeed whether is in non-diegetic, in which case it is heard as 'background music', a setting to the action, and intended only to be heard by the audience and not the performer: **Lisa Sharp**, artist and writer, <http://lisa-sharp.tumblr.com/>*

<sup>iv</sup> *I appreciated the nudity because of the quiet vulnerability it brings to the space - of course for you as the performer but it also does something to us, the audience - it quietens us and sets up a space of respect/ sets a tone, for the performance as a whole.: **Linda Luke**, dancer, performance-maker, educator [www.lindaluke.com.au](http://www.lindaluke.com.au)*

<sup>v</sup> *I found that piece the one that spoke most strongly of a narrative, or condition. It seemed to represent subjection, vulnerability (and vulnerability as a woman – which opens up another whole dimension), bondage and perhaps imprisonment; perhaps a journey as a prisoner. I couldn't directly read the shirt, or second skin with protruding hair! But it looked very specific and therefore very symbolic. I hope this doesn't sound too lame, but it was a very intense opening, and it resonated in the rest of the performance.: **Tim Bass**, painter-poet*

<sup>vi</sup> *My experience over the hour was accumulative. I wasn't quite sure how to read it at first but it made more sense in hindsight. The way the gentleman (I don't know his name sorry) was quietly seated before the performance started -from a performative point of view, this already created a sense of potential. Then how he had a kind of role to take care of you. the way he*

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took care to dress you and the violence of which he pushed you to 'dance'. not violence in the way we use the word in the west - i.e. in a negative way- but a violence in a necessary way. his balance of care and 'violence' was... it made sense to me. It made me think about ritual and ceremony and how it is impersonal - not about the self.

Overall I loved the way the gentleman was set up to not only 'hold' you but he was also a caretaker for us all as he indicated for us where to stand look etc.: **Linda Luke**

vii ...I would like to think that the re-enactment of traditional space/values (as your performance was, perhaps) re-asserts the values and frameworks of that traditional space, even though still in a geographic space dominated by modern values (of contemporary art, modernity etc) That reminds me of Lefebvre's claim that the 'abstract space' that he claims emerged in Europe after the Middle Ages (which must be what others call modernity) overlaid the earlier [traditional] space of the body, but the latter was still able to continue, though in an altered way (eg the Catholic church continues today, but in an altered form compared to when science and modernity were not around).

...your enactment was of a process in which an imagined or virtual world (of the possessing spirit) enters into this physical world (via your body), in contrast to the conventional modern art form of an artwork that takes the viewer's mind (which imagines spaces etc) away into another place, leaving its body standing in front of the physical form of the artwork. I was thinking of your performance as valuing the physical space of the body (because that is where the artwork's important action occurs), whereas the modern convention devalues the physical space of the body as the important actions occurs somewhere else (eg on the other side of a pictorial 'window'). This is important in terms of the problematics (ie. suicidal nature) of a modern culture that devalues place, despite our own bodily need for places to live in (eg we can't live in pictorial space). I am curious about how art practices support that devaluation, while some challenge it, and your performance does the latter by making your own body the important destination in your performance (and your body is part of physical or bodily space). For this idea, the difference between the traditional ritual space (eg in old China and parts of SE Asia) and your re-interpreting of it (in Sydney), is that the latter happens in a context that is perhaps more dominated by modernity, which is thus more obviously available for critique by comparison. Whereas if you do that performance in places in SE Asia where the traditions of ritual space are still strong, it may mean something different.: **Margaret Roberts**, installation artist, <http://margaretroberts.org>

viii The first performance was really captivating. I think the chest piece worked really well, especially the way it looks skin-like and how it was attached to your skin (when it was pulled off and it stretched your skin that was really interesting). The hairs are great, I particularly liked when you grabbed them in your hands. Your movements were really interesting too, crouching and stretching on your toes, stamping and flicking your head back. I loved the way the performance ended with your assistant helping you dress and then shoving/slapping you forward.

If you use the chest piece again I would be interested to see you perform movements that activate those wires more, perhaps getting them swaying from side to side or bouncing up and down? I say this mainly from a visual/aesthetic perspective and I understand that it may not gel with your ideas about the work.: **Tom Isaacs**, performance artist, sculptor and curator. <http://tom-isaacs.com/>

ix Performance 1 is riveting and gives the sense of something happening here. I don't know what, exactly, but perhaps it's the timing, the staging/blocking, but I sense it's bringing change to the performing figure. With my sense of time/expectation muted by arrival and simply being with the installation, I'm open and alert to each moment's beauty and 'shock' of this part of the performance. I don't mean shock in any large sense – just that awakening that the forceful body actions create. Loved the placement of the actions in the space, knocked out by the costume, and by the openness of the performing body to the action.: **Clare Grant**

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<sup>x</sup> I can't help but frame my response to the work with that comment you made ages ago at a meeting between Thi, Binh and myself at my place - where you talked about "cultural code shifting" - the subtle adjustments in presence and behaviours in your relations with friends and family in Malaysia, Vietnam and then Australia. So that was the first context I brought into the room - and I liked the big projection of the ritual in front of the shrine - with the woman engaged with ritual dancing with the sword/spear..... For me it was my "okay, Dorothy, we're not in Kansas anymore" introduction..... a sense of placing the Sydney audience into the thick of the cultural context. Put in a simple way, for me it was a representation of what you had encountered and then as we moved further into the room we experienced your response to that.

The hair appeared as a beautiful universe - whirling galaxies, close up, and distant clusters, exploding nebulas - trails across the sky..... shamanic essence caught in a lock of hair - Webs that could ensure..... props that could cover and disguise..... again this shamanic sense of ones body as a vessel in ritual for the channeling of trans personal information/energy..... a constellation of ghosts.

I loved discovering the little shrine room at the back of the gallery - and what I took to be a "contemporary" figure in black to the right - visitor / intermediary / guest / intruder / witness. The opening dance/movement section was a pretty stunning tour de force - did anyone else realise the technique needed to hold poise and arch back on toes like that for such a sustained period !!? A very brave, no holds barred moment....to abandon the every day temporal and approach naked to be clothed in a ritual skin - to invoke the spirit to move this "new ancient" body.... A kind of rebirth, and not without struggle - the re - ignition of "cultural memory".:

**Peter Kennard**, composer and percussionist, peterk@differentdrum.com.au

<sup>xi</sup> Performance 2 involves placing the cloth over myself and waiting to see what is meant by 'movement', or what it will mean for me this time. Something happens in the field around my body - a kind of wave up the left side of my body. Maybe the cloth moved, I don't know, but my neurons did.

So I'm inside this - and I remember I have to speak some lines. Will it be solo or in a group I wondered earlier in the evening, and now I'm sure it will be a group and that's important, re the performance/ritual question. It brings us all into the same place, even if we don't know what that place is exactly. It's simply a place in which a group of people speak some words together as part of something we are both beside and within.

I can't explain this further but at times I wanted to know more about what it means for the performer to shift from within her space to addressing the public. I avoided using the word audience there. Or participants. I wanted to know what it meant for you, the performer. Sometimes I didn't feel the use of language was entirely landed in the body, but I loved that nothing was 'intoned'! and I liked reading aloud, a second way of becoming active in this space. I wished I had taken more time to read the words before I read them aloud, but I was too engrossed in everything else - not to be able to 'perform' the words better, but to have a better sense of their importance - or function. I was very distracted by my interest in the effects of a group of strangers speaking together. And at the same time I was intrigued by the feeling of not being sure of the function of the speaking, but that it didn't matter - quite significant to one very interested in the performed word.: **Clare Grant**

<sup>xii</sup> Weizen's writing I find intriguing. It is syntactically correct and grammatically coherent but her word choices are wild, unexpected, making a text that is both resonant and mysterious. I'm talking about the three pieces for the audience on one side of the A4 sheet, and also the one piece (which I didn't hear spoken?) on the reverse. It is to me writing that requires an audience/reader to complete its meaning but that meaning will be different for every audience, every reader. Tell her I also found it very enjoyable to read out loud and maybe that is where the meaning is found - in recitation, or rather, speech.: **Martin Edmond**, writer  
[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Edmond](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Edmond)

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<sup>xiii</sup> *I found the second performance interesting, but also a bit frustrating. I found your way of talking was often quite evocative, but I couldn't follow what you were saying and there were so many words I despaired of even getting a sense of your meaning. Since I couldn't follow the words, all I could do was think about what an overwhelming profusion of words could signify. At first I thought you sounded very liturgical, like a (catholic) priest. Then later you sounded more like a poet (James Joyce's Ulysses or Finnigan's Wake). Then when you were up on the table your erratic movement and your turn of voice made me think of someone who is psychotic or manic, the way you teetered on the edge at times or threatened to step off the edge added to that feeling (the combination of this psychotic vibe with the verbose language made me think of Ophelia from Hamlet). Two other thoughts that came to mind towards the end were prophecy and possession.: **Tom Isaacs***

<sup>xiv</sup> *The mirrors and the dance under red "veils"..... I learnt from Iqbal that it was both you and Binh under red cloth in front of the flame - at his family home (?) in Vietnam.... Again it spoke to me of concealed and complex layered identities - red cloth as both protective layer and of cultural filter approaching the centre flame / essence..... But once again - the subsuming of temporal identity through ritual to connect with the transpersonal. I wondered of the experience of what seeing the flame from behind the cloth would have been like.... And appreciated the opportunity to don cloth and watch myself shimmer in the mirror - however small empathetic a taste that was of what you might have experienced. There was a powerful moment for me upstairs when the "fractured"poetry delivered with an urgent questioning tone finally cascaded into ritual chant - and the audience were served scented water (orange blossom?) We were released from the burden of seeking intellectual discourse / explanation and were catapulted once again into ritual space.: **Peter Kennard***

<sup>xv</sup> *Your comments on the text I think I understand. It's exploratory, almost like a sort of frozen free-association piece. And there are other writers too who disrupt the normal patterns in different ways (Joyce and Beckett come to mind). I found your writing very 'musical', if that isn't too loose a term; I mean with an ear for the sounds of words, repetitions of sounds, assonance, etc etc... The text worked well as a group reading, mainly because the combined voices erased normal reception, and replaced that with a sort of drone or chant. I'm unclear about the import of the text itself when read literally, or as 'poetry' (genres being very porous), except perhaps as a musical element. Does that matter in your mind? I felt there is substance in the text, but at the same time it is sort of encrypted...: **Tim Bass***

<sup>xvi</sup> *The work upstairs was really interesting in how you managed to combine the traditional material and given it a (western) contemporary form and structure to it. Lets face it you were performing in a gallery which I suppose is very much out of context in terms of performing from a place of rituals/shamanism. But hey- it doesn't matter - it's the energy that counts. i.e. why cant this work happen anywhere? the vocalisations mixed in with the physicality was beautiful. I did feel the poetry went way over my head. I just couldn't grasp the language. I sometimes felt the vocalisations were a little too theatrical in context of your performance. A bit pushed. (this is just my opinion of course/ take it or leave it or we can talk further if you want me to unpack this). I love the power of your voice though. But i did wonder why you were vocalising because i couldn't understand what you wanted me to experience through it. But as a form and structure - how you placed the material - so that everyone could see and hear you came together wonderfully well.: **Linda Luke***

<sup>xvii</sup> *I enjoyed hearing your voice very much...I was stimulated by all the varying segments, and they all blended into an enigmatic whole...If anything, it wasn't so much you, but the man who*

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was performing with you was prominent at the beginning, but became like a stage hand later, guiding us, then passing out water, but Alan was doing that too, so his role felt incomplete. Perhaps his visibility / invisibility or presence / withdrawal could be contemplated and worked on further. The Japanese stagehand is called Kuroko. I've seen Opera Australia use them several years ago, and seem to remember they also acted like the chorus in Classical Greek plays in their version.: **Mayu Kanamori**, photojournalist, multimedia artist, <http://mayu.com.au>

<sup>xviii</sup> I thought passing out water and asking people to read was an interesting communal gesture. It reminded me of Catholic mass (the communal sacrament of wine and the call and response sections of the mass). At the same time, the way you directed the audience (as opposed to having your assistant do it) felt like a bit of an abrupt shift... and then I think you shifted back and picked up where the communal reading left off. I was going to say that I think it might have worked better for me if you had the assistant(s) direct the crowd through this part, but one of my friends said she liked the way you transitioned between 'performance/ritual' mode and a more familiar, 'normal' way of talking and interacting. She felt this switching between modes disrupted the image of you as possessed by the ritual, and signalled that it was, after all, a performance. I thought that was an interesting interpretation.: **Tom Isaacs**

<sup>xix</sup> I think your use of the space was excellent, very imaginative and dramatic, using the whole space and not just a proscenium stage presentation. The video projections and music complicated all of this fruitfully in many ways – too many for me to unravel, but that doesn't matter. Likewise, the audience 'choreography' added to this. There was an interesting interplay between you and us, being both spectators and quasi participants. Quite early on I abandoned any attempt to construct / guess a narrative, even though the stories alluded to in the promotional text gave broad contexts. That doesn't mean I could read the performance in an entirely 'abstract' way, (though there were abstract elements) but something more akin to a 'willing suspension of disbelief' – as I think Coleridge expresses it. There is no question about the quality of your individual performance – highly refined and considered. I loved the costume you used upstairs, and the projected images on your body below. : **Tim Bass**

<sup>xx</sup> Your descent into the lower level and our view of you from above was once again, a beautiful setting and seemed to fit the quality of what you wanted to convey. I loved the sewing of your hair - such a powerful and memorable image.: **Linda Luke**

<sup>xxi</sup> Then it came to rest in that beautiful projection on the floor. It was good being on the stairs, able to look down on the twisting, moving back. It was also obvious by then too that everyone had begun to move 'together' in that we moved around each other to accommodate different viewpoints and comfort spots without any self-consciousness or over-politeness. Something finished, and it felt settled. I wanted to be able to stay longer and talk but had another engagement, to which I went in a deliciously calm space.: **Clare Grant**

<sup>xxi</sup> And the final movement piece/dance on the silver floor projection downstairs - where you used hair again to transform - shape shifting - At one stage I saw the a bearded Confucian patriarch - at other times the hard labour of simple domestic circumstance (washing floor with hair) - or was that an image of the cleansing of the past?.....a push and pull interrogation of cultural inertia's weight and influence upon the contemporary "individual"...: **Peter Kennard**

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<sup>xxii</sup> *I'm still not sure how I feel about the final performance. I have seen you perform animalistic movements before and you're very good at it. It reminds me of ritualistic animal dances, like those performed by first Australians. I liked the way you swept the floor with your hair and then sewed it up in a bun, but my initial feeling was that it might be a slightly anticlimactic way to end the evening. The first performance was very strong and then the second one was long and, although relatively static, the way you spoke gave me a sense of building tension. Conceptually, your ending worked really well, reversing the way your assistant pulled out your braid (and also fitting with the Hair Beings installation), but I think I was hoping that the final performance would reach a fever pitch before a collapse, or end like the first, with a slap on the back propelling us forward into the world. Overall, I thought the exhibition and performances were very interesting, with a lot for me to mull over. I feel grateful to have witnessed it.: **Tom Isaacs***

<sup>xxiii</sup> *It was moving performance. I thrilled the way you used the entire space - started from the back ground floor ran to upper floor then finished in the middle ground floor gives a dynamic movement. I liked the idea included the audiences being part of the performance; like readings and drinking. I fascinated on your concentration on your performance and your hands 'horse shaking' I found it was very painful. I enjoyed the installation too, especially the rituals video near the entry.: **Jayanto Tan**, jsdamanik@yahoo.com.au*

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Like i said it was accumulative. I collected the layers as you presented / inhabited them and somehow (and i cant say in language really) the piece somehow made sense to me.: **Linda Luke***

<sup>xxvi</sup> *I have followed Weizen Ho's work in Australia over the past decade. An ambitious work, *Subtle Beings* represents an intensification in her practice in the elements of body performance, choreography, and multilingual poetics. Notably *Subtle Beings* moves closer to installation art in a gallery than her previous work, and a little away from Ho's grounding in music and musical improvisation, although an implicit musicality remains. My interest here comes from a sociological interest in art as cultural translation. Weizen's work flows from many intersections of language and cultural experience (Chinese, Southeast Asian, Australian), and immersion in arts practice (music, body performance, poetics). However, such cultural translation is hardly linear or predictable (as in the conventional multicultural fantasy). Rather, Weizen Ho's work is wrought out of a constant turbulence (Nikos Papastergiadis's term) that migrant artists undergo, a conflicted movement between fragments of cultural meaning and embodied experience. *Subtle Beings* focuses on a Ho's interaction with modalities of ritual possession in Asia, responding both to her background and her recent field research in places such as Hanoi and Sabah. Ho's bodily performance seethes with energetic tensions and emotions that cannot be securely interpreted. For me, the suffering and vulnerability of possession seemed central — this was most powerfully enacted in the first performance characterised by bodily shaking and tremor, apparent enforcement and constraint (hands as if tied behind back). Early anthropological thinking saw ritual as powerfully normative, acting to integrate social belief and unconscious structures. By contrast, contemporary modalities of ritual possession are often socially marginal, offering practitioners a counter-tradition to various forms of modernity shaped by powerful state formations. They are ways of being that are struggling for survival, although some traditions such as the Vietnamese *len dong* have been carried with migrants beyond the place of origin. A sense of vulnerability and sometimes violence was present in much of Ho's performance, but also humour, emotional capacities and flexibilities, and cryptic sometimes multilingual poetics, suggesting a host of diasporic meanings. How does this work translate into a cultural field and a specific art space in Australia — a few impressions. There is some tension between the ethnographic footage projected at points in the gallery — perhaps signifying 'authenticity' — and Ho's live solo performance, which is not at all descriptive or explanatory, but powerfully uncanny and at times unsettling. At times, the*

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audience seemed too reverent, as if in a Christian church. How are they to receive this offering? As authenticity, catharsis, critique, fetish or something else? Contemporary performance art and participatory art have developed some ways of inviting audiences to interact with the artist. These invitations are social doorways; but they may result in relatively harmonious participation or in challenging and fractious dynamics. I wondered how effective these invitations were in *Subtle Beings* — the written invitations to take part in or the verbal invitation to take part in a call-and-response reading of texts — “I’d like some help now”. Apparently these invitations worked differently on different occasions. And there was improvisation in response to audience dynamics.

New forms and new imaginaries are being worked through here, suggested by practices of ritual and possession, or ‘ritual-like’ performance (in Ho’s words). They translate effectively — albeit unevenly — into the Articulate space; how could they be presented again to address larger audiences, as the work deserves.: **Phillip Mar**, Qualitative Social Research, Social Policy & Cultural Anthropology, phillipmar@ihug.com.au

<sup>xxvii</sup> *The installation was intriguing, so delicate and layered. Everyone was quiet even before the performance started. It was clear it was a sacred space. When WeiZen appeared naked I felt a shock. I had seen the sign on the door that there would be nudity- but I was not prepared to see my friend naked - I certainly felt a sense of vulnerability for her - and for the audience as well. I thought how brave she was to be naked, then with envy wondered was bravery required with a body so beautiful. The man sitting on the floor behind her seemed to be a predator and carer all at once. The shock quickly dissipated as the nudity became normal - just another material in the space. Her movements felt raw and unfiltered, with hair on the costume so visceral. When he dressed her, it was relief that she was protected, but it abruptly bought us back to this world, time and place. When we went upstairs and WeiZen was on the edge I had to trust she would not fall - I knew she was so mindful and present she would not. Her voice is so powerful and measured, it always leaves you wanting more. The layered words were so free, and the audience involvement was self-conscious and releasing at once. When WeiZen came out of character to serve water and direct the audience I felt disappointed - I did not want to leave that place and time that she had bought us too. But then the projections on the skin of her back, against the shimmering plastic of the floor was so transfixing. She became a series of animals on the side of a pond in a deep dark rainforest that had never been seen by humans. When it was over I could not believe the time had passed so quickly, I could have watched forever.:* **Sarah Breen-Lovett**, artist, curator, researcher [www.sarahbreenlovett.com](http://www.sarahbreenlovett.com)