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Museum Van Loon

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SUSPENDED HISTORIES

Suspended Histories has been more than years in the making and three years in production. Its curatorial process spanning five continents and countless countries, copious places, interactions, and most valuable conversations with artists and curators alike. In many ways it shaped a curatorial thinking and an academic career of an art historian constantly querying the role of art and art history and of the locus of art in relation to history. What if history lies suspended? This became the ultimate question. The contemporary French critical thinker Jean-Luc Nancy first considered a set of 'parentheses' (and 'sketches') outlining possible future approaches to history. "History is suspended, without movement, and we can anticipate only with uncertainty or anxiety what will happen if it moves forwards again... or if it does not move at all."*

The exhibition *Suspended Histories* presents a multiplicity of unique artists' responses in reactivating these *suspended histories*, connecting collections of colonial history to responses by contemporary artists. Artists have always questioned the role of art in relation to history, thus leading the *suspense* and *suspension* of *history*. To incite the parentheses of *suspended histories* through the work and life of the artists essentially causes a contemporary art defined through art and the work and life of the artists in the making of art and of new (art) histories.**

Contemporary art is not just art now, but art that continues to be present. The difference is to overcome old discourses of historical time and historical progression in favour of a multiplicity of artistic processes, parentheses, and creative engagements with histories that lie suspended. The first step in considering the suspense and suspension of history considers the processes of history making, linked to historicity as the creative agent of history making in the critique of static historiographical representations.

Suspended Histories follows the proposal to rethink art through art history and history through art. Located in the house of the Van Loon family it connects contemporary art and artists to the suspension and suspense of colonial history into the post-colonial world, reactivating a multiplicity

of *suspended histories* in relation to the history of the Van Loon family. *Suspended Histories* takes a direct and effective proposition of an artist into a proposition for an exhibition marking the causation of the grand narrative of history, of being part of history and processes of history making.

Points of departure are the multiple reflections by artists from across the Asia-Pacific and The Netherlands to regions that the Dutch travelled in their search for the 'riches of the East'. Rather than asking artists to critique the grand narratives of colonial history (written and performed largely by men and therefore a highly paternalistic and patriarchal history), artists were invited to reflect on the history of the actual Van Loon family and their home, now a museum. The history of the Van Loon family in many ways becomes a matriarchal and maternalistic history—a historicity that is capable of linking the grand narrative of the colonial past suspended on the walls and ceilings of the Museum Van Loon to a multiplicity of direct responses by contemporary artists from across the globe in reactivating the suspense and suspension of multiple histories suspended inside the family, the house and its collections.

The result could not have been more inspiring. Arriving at the Museum Van Loon, visitors are confronted by the large neon work of Newell Harry. Born in Sydney and of South African and Australian descent, Harry has also been working across the Pacific, particularly on the Island of Vanuatu. *The Natives Are Restless* provokes the complex anagram of cross-cultural identification: 'Who are the natives?' It may become clear that the natives are actually the Dutch, restless about their own history as colonial history hangs inverted and suspended in the language of cultural hybridity, and as spin-offs of cultural and linguistic migration. The work becomes particularly strong in its inversion of the English language. New Zealand-born artist Lisa Reihana (who is of mixed Maori, English and Welsh descent) further brings the inversion of history by offering the ships to return in the arrival of a traditional Maori canoe, the *waka*, on the canals of Amsterdam.

Inside the museum, artists further reflect on the convoluted *suspended histories* of both the colonial past and the present-day realities of everyday life in cultures and traditions across the Asia-Pacific. These histories are further affected by colonization and globalization. In the Blue Drawing Room Arahmaiani features in the reappearances of forgotten histories of women slaves in the Dutch Indies, linked to the domestic workers of the present day, working under the conditions of globalization. The photographs reappear as specters of the past into the embodied performance of the present, linking *suspended histories* of slavery into the present-day reality of domestic workers.

Across the hallway, in the Dining Room, the Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann (who was born in Sabah on the Island of Borneo) continues

the important contact between past and present in the presentation of the *Orang Besar* (literally 'Big, Powerful Men'). They reflect the uninterrupted role of these 'strongmen' cultures across the Malay Archipelago. They come to serve and literally are 'being served' as the meeting ground for multiple encounters with *suspended histories* connecting the past into the present, including in the continuous use of the Dining Room in hosting dinners for Heads of State, businessmen and government dignitaries.

Downstairs in the Kitchen, the Dutch-born artist and long-term resident of Indonesia Mella Jaarsma has created an installation reflecting on tea drinking cultures. From its origins in the 'Far East', past the plantations and trade routes of Java (Indonesia), to its institutionalization in European cultural traditions, tea drinking reflects the concealment of the harsh realities of the *suspended histories* of colonial trade and power beneath accustomed cultural traditions. Reflecting on the *Mooi Indië* ('Beautiful Indies') representations of exotic landscapes, Jaarsma has reinvigorated the convoluted *suspended histories* of Dutch colonial traditions.

Upstairs, on the second floor, in the Drakensteyn Room, Lisa Reihana continues the interactions between pictorialism, cultural representation, authenticity and reality. *In Pursuit of Venus* (2012) builds on accounts and illustrations of the 'Discoverers of the East'. The digital wallpaper depicting Captain Cook's and Louis de Bouganville's Pacific voyages of the 19th Century French 'scenic wallpaper' *Les Sauvage de la mer Pacifique* (1804–05) by Joseph Dufour is juxtaposed with the wallpaper of Jurriaen Andriesen covering the walls of the Drakensteyn Room. Cut into individual scenes and played on monitors in the room are the digital renderings of descendants of the Maori culture – people of the Pacific Islands performing their cultural traditions, who thus become the agents of their own histories.

In the front room on the second floor, Fiona Tan's video installation *Nele/Nellie* is presented in the site-specific locale of the Bird Room. For nearly a year Tan worked with Museum Van Loon on researching the convoluted fabric of the Bird Room, until by a rare find they were able to retrace a bundle of the identical fabric in France. The fabric formed the basis of the cinematic procreation of the life of Cornelia van Rijn, the illegitimate daughter of Rembrandt van Rijn who would migrate to Batavia (present-day Jakarta) at the age of 16. Tan carefully renders the construction and the fabrication of *suspended histories*, reviving forgotten pasts into their coexistence in the present. She thus considers the true contemporaneity of contemporary art as the continuous 'being present' of art in contact with historical recreations of time, space, and identity.

Across the hallway in the Red Bedroom, the Indonesian-born Dutch

artist Tiong Ang continues the compounded musings on *suspended histories* in *Achtste Hoofdstuk / Eighth Chapter*. For several months, Ang immersed himself in the dismembered archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The archives are in decay, texts and documents are being lost to the passing of time and to 'ink-rot' (*inktvraat*) – a process whereby the acidity of paper and ink lead to oxidation and disintegration. *Suspended histories* find their cause in the natural decay of matter (i.e. material) and its contents (mind). The process of remembering becomes a struggle of survival, endurance, and mediation. Ang uses the archival materials in building up the stage and the installation for the historical setting of multiple layered reengagements with history. The installation forms the set for a video production on Multatuli, author of the renowned book on Max Havelaar, played by Peter Faber who also starred in a 1976 film adaption of the book. The 1970s were also the time when the Dutch reconnected with Indonesia, this time under the New Order Regime of General Suharto. In Ang's production, Multatuli is depicted as an old demented man who speaks in fragmented speech, similar to the fragmented sentences in the VOC archive and today's engagement with colonial history.

Returning to the first floor, in the Red Drawing Room, the Indonesian artist Titarubi has produced a royal dress made out of over 10,000 individual nutmegs that have been carefully plated in pure gold and metal. This truly unique and special work follows the track of nutmeg sent to the port of Amsterdam during the times of the VOC. It reflects the numerous wars and suffering of the people of the Banda Islands where much of the world's nutmeg is produced. Titarubi has been working closely with the community of the Banda Islands since 2010, and is often confronted with the Banda Massacre in which almost all 15,000 original inhabitants were killed by Dutch troops and mercenaries, including from Japan. The remaining 1000 inhabitants were forced into slavery to work on the production of nutmeg. Beneath the surface of the exterior beauty of this dress thus lie many tormenting histories that lie suspended in the production, transportation and instalment of the dress in Museum Van Loon.

Throughout the museum, two artists have chosen to interweave their works in the collection. Donna Ong, who lives and works in Singapore, has created miniature worlds, natural and man-made environments that can be opened, explored, and transferred from the fictional world into the real world. Space and time become miniature environs, atmospheres, and tiny stage sets on which audiences can make contact between fiction and reality, including historical fiction and inventive reality. Each of the boxes contain intricate depictions of exotic landscapes – flora and fauna taken from illustrations from the collection of William Farquhar who was the Governor of Singapore during its founding years. Occasionally Farquhar

would hire local artists to illustrate local flora and fauna in a European style. Their unique manner becomes symbolic of the hybridity of these painters as they combined their own vision and artistry with the European demand for pictorialism. Now produced into three-dimensional installations that are contained in beautiful boxes they unlock the *suspended histories* into the creative minds of the artist, artisans and the viewer – all of whom become the bearers of historical transformation and imagination.

The Chinese born, Dutch artist Ni Haifeng has provided an astute response to the *suspended histories* that link the past of Dutch colonial trade and occupation to the present time of globalization and Chinese wholesale commerce. Throughout the museum, objects in the collection that used to represent the prized history of the Van Loon collection, have been cunningly replaced by fakes *Made in China* that cause the antagonization and wonder of the visitors. These objects represent both the conjuring and the veracity of the world we live in, and the dispersal and dispense of global capitalism in causing the alteration of *suspended histories* into histories of exchange and reproduction. The procreations cause the proliferation of historical representation into the pastiche. They transpose no historic value, no historic truth, and no historic reality. Instead these objects constitute the true innovation of creative transactions of the contemporary artist in directing contemporary production into the collection and the history of Museum Van Loon.

Across the pathway in the museum garden, which holds the multiple *suspended histories* embedded in the plants and trees (quite a number of species were brought back from the Far East), in the old Coach House, Simryn Gill (who was born in Singapore, lives and works in Sydney, Australia and Port Dickson, Malaysia) has produced a wonderful work that is highly reflective of the reverberations of *suspended histories* at Museum Van Loon. It tells a story and considers the outcome of that story as it becomes related to a multiplicity of histories, personal thoughts, and thus recreates new stories, and histories. *Blue* comprises a series of paintings made with the stain of a *Clitoria Vine* (also known as Butterfly Pea or Asian Pigeonwings), presenting a remarkable blue colour. The seed from which the plant, its crop and watercolours were produced, was inadvertently carried in the artist's pocket when returning from Port Dickson, Malaysia.

Suspended Histories speaks of the resourcefulness, the inventiveness, and the creative processes of the artists in reactivating and reconstituting the suspense and suspensions of histories through art. Making histories and historicity is taking time, seeing, touching and sensing how the world unfolds in relation to our creation and creativity. *Suspended Histories* ultimately asks of each individual and their collective senses to undertake

action in recreating our world. What better way to reactivate the *suspended histories* through our engagement with art and the work of the artists? This exhibition is neither located in the past or in the present, nor in the future of art and art history. Rather it is located in the presence of contemporary art by making its significant contribution to reactivate the *suspended histories* found in Museum Van Loon.

* Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Finite History' in Jean Luc-Nancy, *The Birth of the Presence*, translated by Brian Holmes & Others, Meridian Crossing Aesthetics Series, Stanford, CA, Stanford California Press, 2003, 143–166. Quoted on page 144.

** Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997. The study is based on modified versions of three essays written by Guha in 1986–87 and first published between 1988 and 1992.

Born

1971 KOTA KINABALU, SABAH, MALAYSIA

Lives/Works

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

YEE I-LANN

Tabled (2013)

In her art practice, Yee I-lann (*1971, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*) seeks connections between history, landscape, memory, recording, charting, perception and cultural identity. Yee incorporates various media including (digitally manipulated) photography, film, and installation. Her visual vocabulary is drawn from historical references, popular culture, archives and everyday objects. In her work she addresses Malaysian history, Southeast Asian cultural identity, the cross-cultural nature of the globalized world in which we live, and the impact of political structures and the unfolding of history on collective and individual experience. These hybrid forms also draw attention to Yee's background in Sabah, which is located on the northern tip of the island of Borneo, sharing its borders with North Kalimantan and the Sultanate of Brunei. Sabah has always been a strategic location in the Malay Archipelago, with a rich cultural history.

For *Suspended Histories* Yee created *Tabled*, an installation that is in a way a follow up of her photo-mediated batik series *Orang Besar* (2010–ongoing) for which she has gained much international acclaim. The literal translation of *Orang Besar* is 'Big Man', a common term dating back centuries and used throughout the Southeast Asian archipelago to denote a person of elite socio-political-economic class in a community. The series traces, surveys, and recollects the *Orang Besar* structure – including the body politics, iconic imagery, and symbolic legacy of these 'big men', and how they continue to be a major character in the region's political and economic structure of modern Malay society.

Thinking about *Suspended Histories* and the encounters between former colonizers and their former colonies, Yee was drawn to the dining room in the Museum Van Loon. The dining room has hosted, and continues to host gatherings for dignitaries, Heads of State and the Orang Besar of today's political and economic world. For Yee *Suspended Histories* is about bringing 'stuff to the table' with the table itself being a symbol of colonial administration, power, trade, diplomacy and resolution. The plates in the *Tabled* installation are blue and white in the style of old Dutch-British-China ceramic trade wares linking a specific colonial time and aesthetic to contemporary commentary. With *Tabled* I-Lann creates a meeting ground to bring the general populace into the dominion of the Orang Besar. Hundreds of people photographed walking the streets of Malaysia and Indonesia carry the weight of humanity, the weight of history with them. They are, at once, the conduits of histories, zombies of circumstance and agents of future incarnations.

Yee I-lann graduated from the University of South Australia in Adelaide, in 1993, majoring in photography and cinematography. In 1999, Yee represented Malaysia at the 3rd Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia. She participated in prominent exhibitions, including the 7th Kuala Lumpur Triennale (2013); *Welcome to the Jungle: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia* (2013) organized by the Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan; *Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists, 1984-2012* (2012) at the Asian Art Museum in Fukuoka, Japan; *Fluid World* (2011) at the MSAC Gallery in Taipei, Taiwan; *Negotiating Home, History and Nation* at the Singapore Art Museum (2011). This year Yee will participate in the 4th Singapore Biennale and in the Noorderlicht PhotoFestival in Naarden, The Netherlands.

Yee I-Lann, *Tabled*,
2013, digital photo's on 50 ceramic plates





