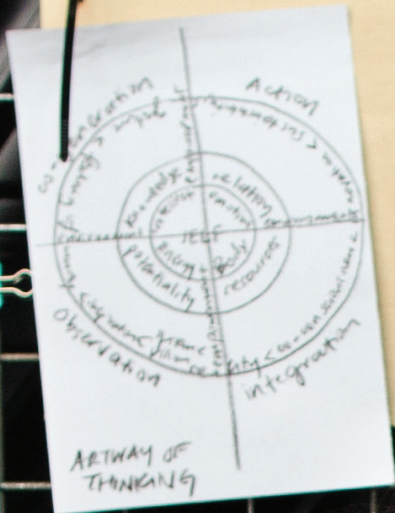


ALECIA NEO



CHAPTER
3

A...

CONVERSATION CIRCLE

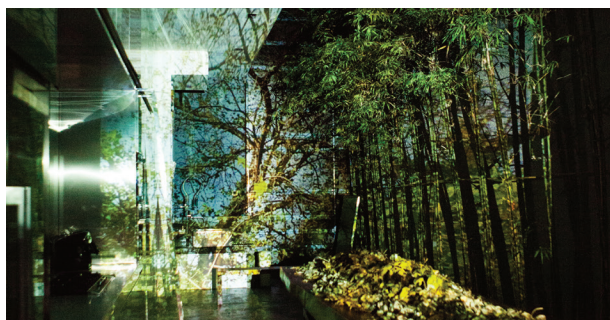


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“[Alecia’s] work involves social, relational, and community elements, often thought-provoking and informed by rigorous research.”



HOME VISITS, 2009
Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo



GARDEN OF BEING, 2015
Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo

Alecia Neo (b. 1986) is a visual artist who works primarily with photography, video and installations. Through her work, she seeks to explore issues like memories, identity and peripheral communities.

Alecia graduated from Nanyang Technological University’s School of Art, Design and Media (ADM), with a degree in Photography and Digital Imaging. Her work involves social, relational, and community elements, often thought-provoking and informed by rigorous research. Her solo debut, *Villa Alicia* (2011), offered insights to the life of the late physician and feminist Dr. Nalla Tan, who was living with advanced Alzheimer’s disease. The six-day photography and sound installation was held in Dr. Tan’s 1950s-styled residence. It explored themes of memory and space, and also served to activate dialogue about alternative histories and the role of women in society. One of Alecia’s notable works is her ongoing long-term experimental education project, *Unseen: Constellations*, which offers a platform for youths living with visual impairment to explore self-identity and their future. Since embarking on it in 2014, Alecia has been commissioned to work on *Unseen* with numerous collaborators in Singapore and Malaysia.

Another meaningful project by Alecia is *Home Visits* (2009) – a series of narrative portraits of HDB residents of Queenstown, the neighbourhood where she grew up. The portraits captured the way people engage with their spaces, offering a peek into the psyche and lives of ordinary Singaporeans. Likewise, *Public Conversations* (2010/15) explored migration through foreign workers in Singapore who seem to occupy public spaces due to a lack of personal space.

Alecia’s commitment to her craft has clinched her the 2013 Young Talent Programme Winner’s Solo Exhibition by Ion Art Gallery and Affordable Art Fair, Singapore for *Wondering, Wandering (Che Cosa è la Vita?)*.

As artist lead and co-founder of Brack – a platform for socially engaged art-making – Alecia helps initiate and develop projects with other artists, with aims of expanding knowledge in this particular field of art-making. In addition, she is the Director of Unseen Art Ltd, a non-profit arts company with a focus on developing arts projects and experimental educational programmes with diverse communities. Always keen to contribute to the arts scene in Singapore, Alecia is also a part-time tutor at her alma mater, NTU’s ADM. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH ALECIA NEO

*Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts.
Who or what were your key influences?*

From a young age, my mother exposed my siblings and me to a range of artistic experiences, from drawing, drama, writing to music, and we enjoyed the complete autonomy to decide our preferences as to what we wanted to learn. Creativity was very much encouraged at home. In my teenage years, I was interested in learning painting outside of school, my mother found an independent art school run by artist Boo Sze Yang, and I signed up for painting and drawing lessons with him. I recall, as young students, we were invited to his solo art exhibition, and it was here that I started to think about the artist's intent and how the artist's message would resonate with the audience.

What are some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works?

My artistic process revolves around human relations and an expanded practice, which involves how we use space and dialogue to draw out potentialities of being. I initiate projects or platforms to develop a sense of relatedness amongst people and to help them seek out methods for navigating each context's limitations, contradictions and power structures.

One of the biggest challenges is to be able to create a space where individuals and groups can develop a sense of agency and be compelled to take action. This is not an easy process, and often requires building trust with those involved, enlisting the support

of multiple collaborators, stakeholders and also ensuring long term commitment and engagement from them.

What motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

I am motivated by the possibilities of changing the way people live and think about issues surrounding us. Artistic collaborations and intervention have the potential to shift our perspectives by opening up spaces to reflect, negotiate and question. What excites me is the entire spectrum of artistic provocation and action. I believe that art also has the ability to manifest change in a real and tangible way.

"I believe in connecting people through the understanding of difference, and that people have the potential to rise above these differences."

What is your personal philosophy in life, and how does it translate into your photographs, videos, and installations?

I believe in connecting people through the understanding of difference, and that people have the potential to rise above these differences. When I first began exploring photography and video, I wanted to show how our environments and the varied social systems which we pass through in life deeply shape our beliefs, desires, behaviour and relationships. I portrayed individuals in their domestic spaces, and allowed their personal



GODDESS OF MERCY, 2012
Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo

objects, rituals and physical environment to reveal societal, familial influences and their latent desires. For example, my installations such as *Goddess of Mercy* (2012), *Villa Alicia* (2011) and *Garden of Being* (2015) also explore these and the role of rituals in meaning-making.

At present I am in the process of developing art projects that have longitudinal explorations situated in the social sphere. For the past two years, I have also delved into projects developed together with youths living with visual-impairment, where the youths and our collaborators enter into a process of exchange, negotiation and art-making over time, allowing issues of social exclusion, disability, agency, interpersonal relationships and identity to emerge in multi-faceted ways and diverse contexts.

What do you want the audience to experience through your work?

I am interested in developing a humanistic lens towards the world through my art. As such, I focus on issues of empowerment, inequality and exclusion, as well as our inseparable relationship with our environment. I would like my audience/viewers/participants to expand their understanding of art and the art-making process to experience and participate in reshaping our world.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

I would encourage them to think about the impact of the work that they are creating and how they would like to influence society. There is something really precious and powerful about being young and idealistic, so I would ask them to hold on to it for as long as they can while maintaining a critical eye on the situation. Being able to question and recognise how a system works and channels influence can open doors to making the changes we want to see. ■



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to the National Arts Council for this award. A huge thank you to each and every one of my mentors, collaborators, participants and supporters who have guided and challenged me in my work:

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