

M A T

M A T

The exhibition attempts to explore the generative synergies between three artists beyond the formal understanding of a group exhibition. It considers the informal enmeshment of collective processes and dialogues surrounding identity, while contemplating other trajectories of exhibition making. The exhibition is also driven by these questions: How can identity break away from supposedly self-perpetuating identity preoccupations? How can identity take sides with quasi varieties, unstable and heterogenous, while being open to an incoming other? And if so, what forms do these excesses take?

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FOREWORD:

SEARCHING FOR / WITHIN

Farizi Noorfauzi

I was first approached by Zul in 2018, who personally messaged me at the time telling me about a small show he was organising in early September titled *Malais-a-trois*. The show was held in a cozy studio-space-turned-exhibition-space in Joo Chiat generously lent by Leow Wei Li and Dominic Khoo of Sobandwine, in the last few weeks of their studio lease. From first impressions with Zul and Norah, to setting up for the show, to having conversations with people who came to visit, to sitting down and eating chicken rice in the studio after tearing down our works and sharing our personal experiences and ideas of what being Malay meant – I fondly recall experiences of intimacy within each step of the process of planning the show.

Intimacy, vulnerability, sensitivity and understanding were conditions that facilitated and enabled *Malais-a-trois* – now *MAT* – as a space of sharing / reaffirming / reassuring our ideas of identity. It is important to consider the position of *MAT*, which is situated within an epoch of intersecting politics of race, class and gender recurring in and frequenting daily conversations and thoughts, as more than a show; it functions well as an exploration of spaces that encourages and realises possibilities of bodies and identities beyond imposition and external frameworks. *MAT* to me, as I hope it is to you, is a practice of hope and optimism, in searching for / within our own identities and ourselves.

CURATORIAL ESSAY

MAT _____ :

A REFORMULATION

Zulkhairi Zulkiflee

The word 'mat' is a vernacular and sociolect familiarly used by Malay-language speakers to refer to Malay males of a specific age group and socioeconomic background. Mostly an honorific that is egalitarian in nature, the word is flexible in its assignation, often taking on clearer meanings when paired with a lexical item. For instance, the term 'Mat rep' is easily understood as men (often young) or teenagers who are thought to be delinquent, mischievous and aggressive. This group can be recognised through idiosyncratic signifiers that indicate a brand of rebellious masculinity. They are identifiable through a pared-down sense of fashion (oftentimes a faux pas): fitted basicwear emphasising their streamlined bodies, and tattoos and coloured hair amongst other symbols (following internet culture's lexicon, a 'Mat rep' 'starter pack' may consist of a snapback cap and a pack of Marlboro Reds!)

Here, terms like 'Mat rocker' (literally, a rocker), 'Mat kental' (an equivalent to a nerd; not hip), 'Mat jiwang' (a romantic) or 'Mat rempit' (often used by Malaysians to refer to Malay bikers) are also commonly used to signify other group identities. More often than not, most Malay males are subjected to the term based on a superficial understanding (a probable shorthand for 'Muhammad'), either as a convenient way to establish kinship, or used in a derogatory fashion. In his doctoral dissertation, Sophiaan Subhan considers how the term Mat Rep is used as an out-group referent, where distinctions between the Malay/Muslim middle class, and the former set of 'Mat' categories — as typically from a low

[1] Subhan, Sophiaan. "Linguistic Negotiations of Identity Among Malay-Muslim Male Youths in Singapore." Griffith University, 2014.

socio-economic background — are drawn [1]. In this manner, the assignation of 'mat' adopts different meanings based on the users' intent.

To some extent, it can be argued that it is limiting to articulate identities based on such essentialist terms, especially for the purpose of future becomings. Caught in a space of intersecting global cultural economies, linear signifiers and determinants are often undermined based on contemporary practices and formations. Identity and identification become part of a complex process of relation and dialogue - sometimes missed, talked over, unheard, gatekept, discrepant, hegemonised, patronising, captive - and then fought over: reclaimed, strategised, disidentified, decolonised. It is impossible to be fully constituted; always under some kind of transformation and subjected to the force of history and power. These powers exist as a matrix regulated by modernity, or moreso, a legacy of inherited colonial practices. The way we see the world and ourselves can never be inherent.

For one, this is mediated by image-making. Take for example: images (visual, conceptual or imagined) are employed as a way to justify control; the 'image' of the indolent natives was conveniently created to justify subjugation [2]. And while the resistance towards certain colonial exploits can be seen as determinism today, such refusal was previously conceived as 'indolence'. These imagings also became part of a larger affective economy where emotions are employed. According to Sara Ahmed, emotions "involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness'" where impressions depend on a complex cultural history, and memories [3]. For instance, an 'awayness' can be felt through the above mentioned indolence, or in today's context, a sense of 'distrust' when thinking of racial-religious affinities Malay people have beyond a shared national identity. This consequently develops into fear and as a resultant effect, becomes an overarching emotion in everyday interactions with the 'other'. While this is not to suggest that such impressions are linear and constant, the sociality of emotions relies on a power that sustains such impressions. Ahmed continues to suggest, "... emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow 'others' with meaning and value [4]."

[2] Altas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese ...*, Routledge, 2013.

[3] [4] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

But if so, how can identity be reoriented differently beyond such insidious regulations? How can one reconcile multiple identities when faced with negative constructions by not caving in to shame and disavowal, but instead adopt modes of disidentification that situate oneself within but also against? Can these impressions be undone?

MAT attempts to enter into these possibilities through a sense of *clearing*. As a point of departure, the exhibition moves away from a rigidity of tropes and attempts to disarticulate particular affects. For instance, if we continue to think of mat(s) as marginalised identities (before re-engaging new formations), they also then, for the purpose of this exhibition, act as a cliché device that is a folk devil and a disrupter of modernity's regulative desire (if later, not disrupting themselves). As a first step towards such re-formulation, the delinquency and disobedience at task here refers to the terminology gained through decolonial practices, one familiarly understood as delinking (or creatively, *delin(k)quence*) and epistemic disobedience.

[5] "Decolonial Aesthetics (I)." TDI Transnational Decolonial Institute, 17 July 2017, transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/.

In the context of a visual arts exhibition where aesthetics is a prominent feature, the decolonial functions as an option that merges various artistic practices that may otherwise be unfamiliar. Moreso, these artistic practices act as a kind of re-existence, where multiple identities come together in countering imperial tendencies that ignore other modes of lived realities. When thinking of delin(k)quence - a play on the word 'delink' - the decolonial promotes interculturalism rather than the constructed notion of multiculturalism [5]. The latter can be problematic

on various fronts, mostly seen as an administrative strategy that has contributed a sense of further 'othering'. For example, in the instance of representation, a simplified and coded understanding of different races is internalised through media-visual portrayals [6] which limits one from understanding difference beyond tropes. This can also be extended into the field of art making where an artist's race might often be seen as a significant marker when thinking of medium/media/topic of choice - if not, a 'recourse' from such conflation would be to drastically pander towards neutral and Eurocentric notions of art making as a way of being non-parochial and 'progressive'.

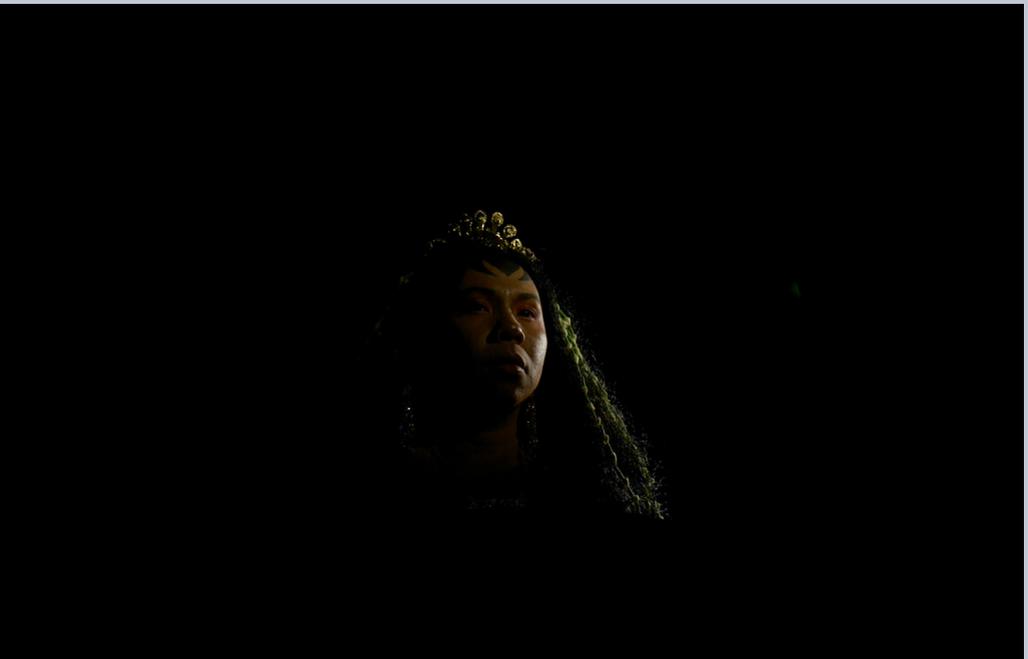
Here, in the vein of interculturalism and the decolonial, artists are seeking proper recourse by questioning roles that are assigned to them, rearticulating authentic narratives that may be hidden through colonial policing, at the same time promoting a sense of plurality that veers away from a macro-narrative. Simply, the decolonial exists not as an ideology, but an option to move away from one hegemonic understanding.

The work of Norah Lea, a transgender self-portrait artist, traces her past lives through 'avatars' of her different selves, relocating her position of difference in the Nusantara. Here, she escapes Eurocentric frameworks and traces queer histories through a sense of relinking in storied genealogies of the Malay archipelago, seeking narratives hidden in ethnographic documents.

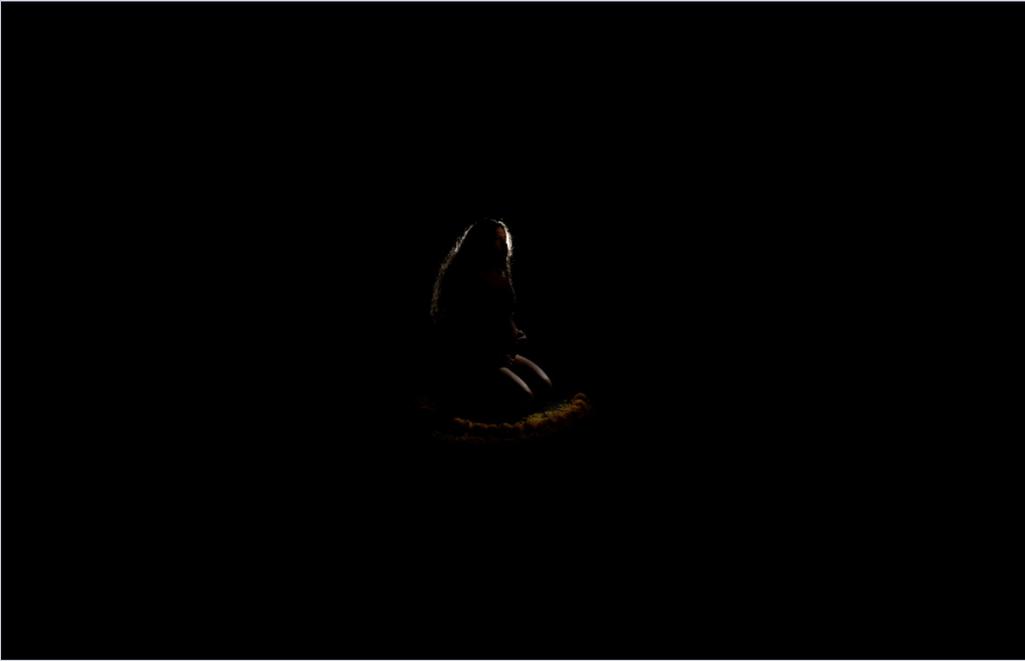
[6] Tan, Kenneth Paul. "Ethnic representation on Singapore film and television." *Beyond rituals and riots: Ethnic pluralism and social cohesion in Singapore* (2004): 289-315.

Her body mediates the 'past' through video and self-portraiture, specifically, in a landscape that is *tersirat* (hidden in plain sight). It is here where the *tersirat* can be seen as an epistemic exercise for the artist.

While we may be comfortable with Malay identity as one conflated with the Islamic belief, and transgender bodies as disparate within this belief system, Norah's pursuits creatively offer a radical opening for understanding, and aligns with a plural universe where other modes of lived experiences are able to co-exist. On many levels, Norah delinks and relinks based on variegated methodologies of her own identity making: tracing the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals; Genealogy of Malay Kings)* and if disparately, referencing Michael Sealey's *Hypnosis for Past Life Regression* to serve her agenda.



Norah Lea, *Past & Present Lives of* ____



Norah Lea, *Past & Present Lives of ___*

Here, as a form of clearing, or according to Gayatri Spivak, 'clearing space', Malay identities in the exhibition are addressed in the form of a self-separating project. The latter can be interpreted as an opening, forbidding itself from collecting into a seamless unity. In some sense, unity has a tendency to be 'unwelcoming' when resolved, yet when incomplete,

[7] Derrida, Jacques, and John D. Caputo. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell a Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Fordham University Press, 2008.

is said to lose its identity [7]. As a proposition (and reiteration), the exhibition rallies for a unity that is not conclusive but one that circulates, rather than arrives at total completion. Norah seeks to address Malayness as one that is self-differentiating and heterogenous.

As a gesture of constant undoing, Farizi Noorfauzi articulates identity as performative. If identity is something we acquire and deny, the performative conduit of a piece of fabric / article of clothing acts as skin that is worn and disarticulated. This disarticulation also attempts to give form to an impression, constantly undone and (in)formed by contact. In his work, *Baju Kurung, Sangkar Burung (Baju Kurung, Bird Cage)*, Farizi adroitly orchestrates an impression that is forceful yet urgent. Here, a culturally potent object like the baju kurung forcefully impresses itself on the skin of diverse characters, as if radically gesturing a 'towardness', in the words of Sara Ahmed. If such contacts were once apprehended with negative emotions based on a history of 'otherness', Farizi rewrites a different ending that is performatively collective. Yet, as a way of double-think, the constructed baju kurung also appears cumbersome and inconvenient, as if suggesting the weight of identity and its burden. This is concurrent to Farizi's practice where contrary to his 'Malay-centric' works, they engage and scrutinise the relevance of culture. While Farizi revisits and acknowledges the remnants of his cultural identity, he often interrogates their very function with conflicting results.



Farizi Noorfauzi, Baju Kurung, Sangkar Burung

If the mats mentioned previously subscribed to the spectacle of styles, the mat in this exhibition acts as a point of departure towards other heterogenous varieties. The mat is in some sense, undone. If their resistance, from a subcultural sense, is to resist subordination through their 'uncouth' disposition and masculine styles, the exhibition undoes such a strict semiotic distinction, embracing identities that are fluid in their formation. As a new strategy, social distancing (defensive othering) is not a recourse but is set aside for a conceptual alliance, where to decolonise is to face the one shunned in a frank and immediate way.

As an artist-curator, my practice heavily concerns notions of Malayness, and currently, group formations, homosociality and the intersections of global culture with race and class. In relation to group formations like the Mat Reps (or mat in general), this can be originally traced back to earlier groups from the 70s to 80s. Sophiaan Subhan traces how Mat Reps for instance, have roots in youth subculture during post-independent Singapore. These groups were largely influenced by the musical landscape of the time and were infamously known as Mat Rockers. As such, they were "routinely type-casted as deviants who propagated anti-establishment sentiments [8]." While they were poster-boys for their musical genres then, such dynamics have changed ever since the 90s with the formation of the Mat Reps.

[8] Subhan, Sophiaan. "Linguistic Negotiations of Identity Among Malay-Muslim Youths in Singapore." Griffith University, 2014.

In tangent, my work references a repository of personal photographs belonging to my father taken in the late 70s to early 80s. In the set

of approximately 60 photographs, Malay men from a working-class background have been documented in a casual, point-and-shoot manner. Yet, interestingly, these men also embodied the styles of the hippie culture that arrived in Singapore through the musical landscape of the time.



Zulkhairi Zulkiflee, A group picture belonging to a repository of photographs from the artist's father

Distinctively, their hair was mostly kept long while their attire was quintessential to the fashion of Western music culture then. If permissible to state, these are unofficial photographs of Singapore in the midst of establishing a strict national identity easily two decades after independence. It is not surprising that these were subjects of tough policing as hippie tendencies were synonymous with attitudes of indulgence and individualisation.

Based on various entry points, these photographs also run contrary to the 'postcard-perfect' formalism of photography that may have mediated our understanding of post-independent Singapore in the throes of development. Here, the distinctions between the official and the personal are equally assessed, where the latter attempts to make space for other perspectives that may have otherwise been occluded due to specific conditions put in place (i.e. taste; formal art practices). Importantly, the subjects depicted are not placeholders of notions of place but people of dynamic, lived agency.

MAT is then an exhibition that attempts to reformulate the values we attribute to people / groups / communities as mediated through visual media. It purports that stratifications are neither simple dichotomies of minority versus majority, nor (often) quantifiable through group size. More than ever, looking inwards becomes a productive exercise where prejudice and discrimination may be found closer to home. Here, as this essay has unpacked, the notion of the mat is seen as an out-group referent for the Malay people, one intertwined with class dynamics.

And if ever, through a conceptual bridging, such group formations become productive points of departure for decolonial action where 'disobedience' is reformulated as epistemic uncovering.



Farizi Noorfauzi, No-Corner

AFTERWORD

MAT, AND THEN
NOT

Norah Lea

For Hari Raya this year, I ditched the baju kurung set and went for a batik top instead. This is my second year celebrating Hari Raya as somebody who feels very detached from their Muslim upbringing. Initially, there was the *nawaitu*, or the *niat*, to reconnect with the Muslim part of my Malay identity during Ramadhan but like the saying goes “Puasa yok yok, pagi pagi bukak periuk”. What does it mean to be Malay and to observe Ramadhan or Lebaran when you can no longer connect to the sentiments of being Muslim? When you have terms like *masuk Melayu* to mean a non-Malay person’s conversion to Islam in this region, what does it really mean to be Malay and not Muslim? I am still trying to figure it out, but a direct consequence of this disconnection is subconsciously forgoing the much awaited Bazaar Ramadhan at Geylang. This would result in not procuring myself a baju kurung set. This too, would result, in my own, um, ‘misracialising’ (like misgendering, but racial *gitew*).

At my granduncle’s place, Tok Sabtu, my grandmother’s brother asked why was there an Indonesian Chinese man in the house. I was not aware he was referring to me. I looked at my mother after he made that comment. She is mixed, yes, but she is not even directly biracial. I don’t even look racially ambiguous (well, at least to me). Where was this joke coming from? It had to be the fact I was wearing a batik top instead of a baju kurung!

When I first met Farizi Noorfauzi, I was astounded by his simple yet powerful word play on the *kurung* aspect of the baju kurung. What are the things that we put on ourselves that can also potentially *kurung*, cage or confine us? If the baju kurung is a cultural marker that defines Malayness that we can put on or take off, what are the markers that we cannot take off? My involvement in *MAT* must and should be contested - what is a transgender Malay woman doing in a show called *MAT*? Why am I misgendering myself on purpose?

If I had to introduce myself to a stranger, I would first say I'm a multidisciplinary artist and then that I am trans, Malay and a woman. Most of us immediately associate transgender with the word "transition", which is not wrong at all because it previously meant that you are taking steps medically to prepare your body's biochemistry to transition from a body that is usually associated as "male" to something more aligned to what is more seen as "female". However, now more than ever, there needs to be an understanding that there is no one way to be transgender.

If we want to get clinical, I am a pre-op and pre-hormones transgender woman. As much as I align my own identity with womanhood, I am unable to take the necessary measures to align my body with how I feel (yet). This is due to my current circumstances and also out of safety. There are also many other transgender women like me who are unable to take the necessary measures, and I might go a step further to say that there are just as many of us who do not wish to make any changes to our bodies or the way we present ourselves. Having established that I am unable to present more effeminately, I am often mistaken as a Malay "male" to most strangers. With my family, I "perform" the Malay man out of my own safety. I wear pants on most days and my face is makeup free. Nobody would immediately associate me with womanhood on days like that until I say so.

For the central image for *Past & Present Lives of _____*, the audience is treated to my own rendition of a very pregnant "Bumi", otherwise also known as "Ibu Pertiwi", a pre-Islamic goddess figure with Indic origins (see Bhumi and Phritvi) often associated with images of the Motherland, brought up in the post-colonial. I want to attribute her as a source of feminine

energy for the lands of the Nusantara. Yet it is an image created through a body that is unable to conceive a child. Similarly with the other images for this project, these past figures that I perform are all cisgender women. It culminates in the final life sequence where I make an oath that I will be born without a womb in my next life.

That being said, I will tell you that cisgender and transgender women have different life experiences. The same way that no two tigers have the same stripes. Every experience of womanhood is different, even with two cisgender women. In *Past & Present Lives of _____*, I perform both proximities of Malayness and womanhood (my own term) deviating from the expected performances from the Malay “male” body. I want to say when we first got together for *Malais-A-Trois*, it was a relatively small show and it was merely me doing a self portrait to sort of reconnect with my grandfather’s heritage. When we decided to do this show at Objectifs, I understood this was major and my work was going to reach out to people whom I will probably not even have the opportunity to talk about my work with. This time round calling the show *MAT* required me to reconfigure my placement in the show, though the topics are very much the same topics we’ve been discussing since Day 1 since Zul, Farizi and I came together.

Malais-A-Trois now abbreviated as *MAT* had a stronger gendered implication and I expected questions of gender relations to come up along the way. I wouldn’t be part of a show if I feel that who I am as a person didn’t align with it. I agreed to be part of the show, even more because it is an experience that I am also a part of, even though the experience is a whole other narrative altogether. If my practice as a self-portrait artist had

previously explored the performances of identities, my participation in *MAT* required me to reevaluate how I grounded my own participation in culture — I am no longer just performing the identities assigned to me; I am interrogating the communities that I am both a part of and apart from through the images that I create. Who decides if I am *MAT* or not? Who decides if I am woman enough or not? I do. I am secure with my identities but when the audience looks at images of me, will they be comfortable with my security in my own identity?

I am *MAT* and then not.

NARRATIVE

EXPOUNDING THE MAT

Norah Lea [NL]

Farizi Noorfauzi [FN]

Zulkhairi Zulkiflee [ZZ]

When the car turned, I could see a road block. It was close to three in the morning. My driver was Chinese. He rolled down the windshield and soon we were out of the car. My bag was not with me but I could imagine illegal items in my possession, half frightened and then defensively, humoured at such possibilities! Me? I thought of the officers. One asked, "Went out with friends?" I saw myself through his eyes. I succinctly replied with a smile, "Yes" He continued, "Break-fast with friends?" It was the month of Ramadhan. I was slightly stunned - I said "Yes." He asked for my identity card and I gave my student card instead: undergraduate; safe markers. Quickly, I took a blurry picture of the road block and sent it to my sister. I typed, "Road block." My sister understood immediately and said, "Takde pape la - Ur clean." I said, "The police v nice though. I guess I don't look like mat rep." She joked, "Kau innocent."

[ZZ]

Would it be different to see them behind the screens? Every pose carefully thought (and cropped), every analysis paced, arms dressed in cryptic insignia, mostly an aesthetic choice, if not, already smothered by the modern world. The only clan today would be capitalism: “Hi guys, just supporting a friend. Follow this new brand!” On another channel, memes aplenty: (A Spongebob picture supports a risible text) “When the person you like thinks you’ve got hoes.” Or a line in Spanish: “lo siento mama por mi vida loca.” An option offers SEE TRANSLATION: “Sorry mom for my crazy life.” Then a shirtless photo; a screenshot of a conversation. A profile caked in makeup comments on a handsome and filtered porcelain-face: “Apasal muka macam gay boy ni?” Just harmless banter, perhaps problematic in the larger world but in this instance, a queer form of flirting. He replies with a face of a girl - nose lifted and eyes twisted: “Gay boy takpe, jangan muka macam gini, susah dapat kerja!”

[ZZ]

Opposite me there is a young Malay lady in a hijab. For the past five minutes since I have entered the train, she has been making glances at me. This is not an entirely new experience for me, but unnerving altogether every single time this happens. Does she know me? Is she related to me? Now I know not all covered ladies suffer from a superior religious complex but I can't help but to wonder if in her mind, she has already decided for me a fate of damnation in my afterlife. I mean...What kind of mamat wears makeup in the middle of Ramadhan? Tak tahu malu ke? Sometimes I delude myself into thinking that I am perhaps racially ambiguous. Perhaps people look at me not because I am an anak Melayu hanyut, but rather trying to figure out whether if I'm really Malay...or Chinese? Filipino perhaps? For all I know, the scrutiny that I am often subjected to could also be people trying to figure out if I am a boy dressing up as a girl? A girl dressing up as a boy? The mind in the state of anxiety can very much pull delusional stunts.

[NL]

This young Malay hijabi looks at me wide-eyed and says “Sorry eh... if you don’t mind me asking?” I take off my earphones and pretend as if I wasn’t aware that she was headed in my direction. I look up from the screen of my phone. “Sorry...may I help you?” “You Melayu eh?” “Yeah!” “Great! Boleh tumpang tanya?” “Ye saye?” You pakai highlighter eh?” In that moment, my heart sank! But in a good way! I do not really know how to explain it but I felt good, relieved but also disappointed at myself. I reach my hand into my tote bag and show the lady the Fenty Beauty highlighter palette that I had applied earlier in the day. “Chic freak! Girl cantik!!!” “Thank you!” The MRT announcement goes off: “Next stop, Raffles Place!” The lady smiles at me and asks if I have an Instagram account. “You’re so much prettier than me! I feel like I’m not woman enough for not knowing how to do makeup like you” My heart whispers a faint “Ya Allah”. The lady alights the train and I have two more stops till my destination. I check my follower requests and there I see “khadijxh has requested to follow you”.

[NL]

“mat, ko tak naik moto eh?”

mat (informal), you don't ride a motorcycle eh?

“asal tak nak lesen kelas 2?”

why don't want class 2 license?

“apa yang buang masa? naik moto ‘fem sachok dok ”

where got waste time? ride bike ‘fem (abbr. confirm) sachok (eng. stylish)

“kite melayu, pe? mesti ah nak kene naik moto”

we are malays, what? of course we ride motorcycles

kite melayu, pe?

[FN]

mat, derived from mat rep, derived from mat rempit - rempit / “ramp(rev) it”, defined as “the act of whipping with a cane” (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Kamus Dewan.) - mat as a derogatory reference to males who are usually of Malay descent.

mat, or MaT (abbr.), or Malais-a-Trois: a collaboration between 3 MALAY artists, in reference to the term menage-a-trois, understood as

“a domestic arrangement in which three people have romantic or sexual relations with each other, typically occupying the same household”.

[FN]

in the spirit of
tackling the impositions of the mat identity
by examining and exploring various understandings of mat
by reducing it to a subject of scrutiny
through the very spirit of a mat,
in rebellious reinventive intervention
not abiding by your pre-formulated idea(l)s of us
and your second-rate frameworks that you attempt to pigeonhole us into
for you don't bother looking beyond expired ignorance
almost as if you refuse to believe
that we are the same; just people trying to survive day-to-day, living our
lives, though sometimes, with lesser privileges –
albeit, we are people, you and i alike

[FN]

AFTERTHOUGHT

SMALL TALK AS THRESHOLD

Mysara Aljaru [MA]

Zulkhairi Zulkiflee [ZZ]

Mysara Aljaru is a former documentary producer who is currently pursuing her Masters in Malay Studies at NUS. Her interests includes representation of minorities in media, decolonising environmentalism and intersectional feminism. She was a facilitator with Penawar, a support group for women/non-males raised in the Muslim community, dealing with negative experiences from patriarchal interpretations of religion.

MA: Some people avoid talking about identities in their work for various reasons, but you have chosen to embody it in your work. Was this something you had always known you wanted to look at and why?

ZZ: I think if ever, talking about the Malay identity has allowed me to be more attuned to my surroundings. It didn't happen naturally at first because, for lack of a better word, I think I suffered from the 'captive mindset'. I was worried about talking anything Malay. I didn't want to marginalise myself further or put myself at a disadvantage. I can't recall how I began, but I'm very interested in contemporary Malay issues today and how unpacking them in my work can equip others (and myself) with navigating the social world better. I think I also see being different as a kind of strength.

MA: Identity is often put in a box here in Singapore, and the question of 'Who is a Malay', is one we often discuss. What is Malayness / being Malay to you? Is this something you think we can or should even box up?

ZZ: I think firstly, we must consider the concept of place before thinking about the notion of Malayness or being Malay. The dynamics of both are very interesting in Singapore. More than ever, I think Malay people here, if compared to Malays in the region, are generally very fluid. We take on different social personas as a minority. Here lies the potential of already being out of the box. Yet, if we also think of identity as some kind of affective stickiness, I think we have taken on the definition of others, even re-generating it for ourselves like a sense of double-consciousness. If we continue to mine our own authentic realities as Malays and not succumb to the forces of everyday struggles, especially in a capitalistic city like ours, being too self-conscious about 'progressiveness' without understanding the real terms, we can use the time to focus on being Malay

based on our own creative arrangements and lived experiences. I think culturally, Malays tend to fear shame, or 'malu'. I don't think this is wrong but we can start being more 'malu' of having little autonomy when deciding our collective identities.

MA: Have there been any challenges in putting up a work that deals with identity or Malayness? And how do you deal with them, if any?

ZZ: Actually the only challenge is somewhat knowing that your work will not be taken seriously — not because it has no serious implications but engaging with it is like walking on eggshells! I think we are afraid of engaging with the other. I admit that it's tricky. It requires a lot of empathy and care, which are wonderful values. Also, I remember a Malay peer of mine who once shared that identity (politics) is naggy (alluding to the fact that people don't like to be nagged at). Now thinking about it, I think he might be walking on eggshells too — hoping that no one realises he is different. If ever, these challenges are superficial.

MA: The term "Mat" is quite a loaded one, and the usage of it has some negative implications. What does the exhibition *MAT* hope to explore with regard to this term and the Malay male body in society?

ZZ: It's quite inevitable that there will be facets of one's identity or community that will be challenging to talk about. I thought it would be interesting to summon the term 'mat' as a creative move, or rather, a decolonial act. The term mat can be considered as an out-group referent, often used to create a distinction between middle class Malays and those of lower socioeconomic standing. I thought it would be interesting to interrogate such realities, not in an ethnographic sense, but as a creative

exploration. The art world can be a closed space that artists sometimes struggle to navigate. I think that using a Malay vernacular term that is not formal, disturbs the distinctions of various spheres. People may ask, “Why mat?”, and I think I’m trying to prove that there is no stigma or shame behind the term that cannot be undone. The mat in this instance is a proposal for reformulations.

MA: Some fear they might be tokenised the moment they go into identity and identity politics in their work. Do you ever feel that way?

ZZ: The reality is, everyone consciously or unconsciously deals with a part of their identity when making art. One’s worldview is very critical. I feel it’s second nature for me now to talk about my identity. Personally, I have been working on a range of themes / topics when I organise / curate. I don’t feel it makes sense for me to be tokenised that way. There will be situations where I’m more susceptible to being a token yet in others, perhaps not. Nevertheless, I try not think of situations this way. My focus is always to make space for wider representations. Even if I find myself in such situations, I will ensure more ‘tokens’ are included in some collaborative way!

MA: Is there anything else with regard to Malay identity that you would like to explore in the future?

ZZ: Currently, I’m tapping on images of my father and his friends as a way to imagine what other kinds of groups can come about in the future. I don’t have issues per se with where Malay identity is today. We are very flexible. With that said, I’m curious to see what further orientations Malay identity will take. Sometimes I see this in the works of say, Solange, where she formulates her musical identity by expanding some kind of pseudo

afrofuturism - which considers the future through the lens of African American people. Or recently, she was in the center of a discussion about who can be a cowboy! I think we see different group formations revealing themselves but I'm always envisioning one that is *more* than *performative*. I'm uncertain what forms they will take but that's my future interest.

MA: Could you use two words to describe your experience so far being a Malay man in the art world?

ZZ: Challenging and productive.

GLOSSARY

A VOCABULARY OF *MINOR* AND OTHER TERMS ^[1]

[1] The glossary is inspired by Kamiliah Bahdar's list for the exhibition catalogue, *RUANG*, printed in 2018. Kamiliah Bahdar is an independent curator living and working in Singapore. *RUANG* was co-curated by Zulkhairi Zulkiflee.

Affective (stickiness)

Relating to feelings or emotions. In the context of Sara Ahmed (affective *stickiness*), she sees objects, or identities in particular, as possibly saturated with affect which are sites for social tensions.

Cisgender

Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

Decolonial (thinking)

A move that challenges and reconsiders the totalising tendencies of Western and Eurocentric modes of thinking by recognising one's authentic lived realities.

Decolonial option

One of many methods to exercise Decoloniality which includes various strategies of delinking. This may involve Storytelling, Reframing, etc. (Refer to *Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith).

Delink

To detach or move away. In the context of Decoloniality, to free oneself from the totalising forces of Western and Eurocentric ideals.

Dok

A sociolect that can be translated as 'dude'. Also a term used to indicate a level of homosocial bond between two males.

Also see: Bro.

Disobedience

The refusal to conform or obey rules.

Epistemic

Relating to the study of knowledge, its origin and validation.

Also see: Epistemic disobedience.

Folk Devils

A group of people held or portrayed to be a bad influence to society.

Gitew

A contemporary informal term derived from the Malay word, 'Begitu', or 'Gitu' which can be translated as 'that way'. Often used and popularised by woman or queer people (not exclusive). A slang term.

Also see: 'Very that' (B. Z. Benet).

Homosocial

Relating to social relations between members of the same sex (especially male) that are not romantic or sexual in nature. This often refers to a friendship.

Lepak

A siesta; La Dolce Vita; To relax. Often paired with 'one corner', mostly referring to a sense of (objective) distancing or (critical) indifference. Also a tired stereotype.

Also see: *No-corner*.

Mat

A term most probably derived from a popular Islamic name, Muhammad (also an Islamic prophet). A Malay vernacular referring to Malay males characterised as aggressive and disobedient. Mat can be paired with another lexical item like, 'Rocker', 'Rep', 'Kental' or 'Jiwang' to refer to other group identities. Mat can also be an out-group referent to draw distinctions between the Malay middle-class and those from lower class positions.

Also see: Malais-a-trois, Epistemic disobedient, Delin(k)quence.

Out-group (referent)

A social group that an individual does not identify with.

Also see: In-group

Sachok

A sociolect to describe an attractive male. Bad boy. *Boi Sachok*.

Also see: Hot; Stud.

Transgender

Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

World

An appropriated term used by Malays to suggest a 'know-it-all'. Often paired with 'perangai' or behaviour. Example: "World sial kau!".

Also see: Smart alec.

M A T

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