



**BE CAREFUL  
OR  
YOU MAY BECOME  
THE CENTRE**

0 / Chong Kim Chiew / Kim / TOPY



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25th September- 30th November 2015

## SPACES, BORDERS AND IDENTITIES

There are many different ways of reading an art piece. In order to decipher its meaning and get closer to the work – everything must be allowed. Above all: watching and thinking, which actually are processes of referring all visible to human experience bound to a specific time and space. According to the postmodern theories, we are living in the space age, the simultaneous, the near and far at the same time<sup>[1]</sup>. But what kind of space are we dealing with? A private, public, political, geographical, postcolonial, limited or de-territorialised space? And how is dealing with space and its limitations affecting the self awareness of cultural, national or gender related identities?

The artist Chong Kim Chiew is showing his manifold oeuvre at Wei-Ling Gallery. According to the artist the very differing pieces produced since 2007 are meant to represent different artistic personalities he is dealing in his work with. Beyond Chong Kim Chiew's art pieces we get introduced to creations of "O", "Kim" and "TOPY", the artist's avatars. This very pluralistic understanding of his many identities, art, but also life, can be taken as a key point for the interpretation of these not only aesthetically and materially, but also discursively rich works.

4 The diversity of media and styles used by originally one artist seem to be a great exhibition's concern. Design, photography, sketches, installations, multi media canvases made out of tarpaulin, stripes, acrylic and other materials mark the gallery setting. There is the very clear yet simple and strong effect of TOPY's work "*Exhibition logo design No. 1*". It is a commitment to classical design, illustrating a black graphic figure on a yellow background, throwing its own head in a waste basket, and raising questions about one selves as parts of society – like all pieces of Chong Kim Chiew's imaginary artist-fellows.

Kim's video installation "*Skin Time*" is enigmatic in its own way. The number 480'00 dented into skin and hardly readable, could be understood as a snapshot of a frozen time. The photography captures one single moment, a glance in time, and is therefore a reminder of a long gone moment. On the other hand there is the scar that bypasses the importance of time, when the memory of a certain moment in time becomes a lifelong journey, inscribed into the skin, worn always and everywhere. Seen as a canvas, the skin has now the same function as an art work which in a classical sense tends to be timeless, maybe even endless, related now only to the space it is being placed in – like here, the gallery.

[1] Foucault, Michel: Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias (french original edition: Des Espace Autres, March 1967), translated by Jay Miskowiec, in: Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 (October 1984), p. 46-49.

Among other works even "*Unreadable Wall*", made out of shredded and blended newspaper pieces from all around the world that form bricks can be seen as a reference to the negotiation of space: bits of larger information, critics, ideologies and beliefs from different world cities come together in one single art piece: diversity within unity.

Undoubtedly, "*Boundary Fluidity*" are the most impressive pieces in this exhibition that deal with space. The very large tarpaulin pieces are hanging from the ceiling, consecutively installed in one line, whereas others lie spread out on the floor, are rolled-up and leaning against the wall or are presented as photographs and videos in an installation. It is the refined, harmonious aesthetics of the different colours, shapes, lines and words which capture the beholder in the first glance. But a closer look at the beautifully composed rosé, black, white, grey and bluish acrylic formations and criss-crossing lines reveal a deeper meaning. What we get to see are diverse overlapped maps with marked borders. We decipher places as Gemas, Malinan, Malacca or Singapur- the old colonial Malaysia stated additionally in the words "*Malaya Britanica*", separated or connected through a number of fine or bold lines. Though globalization suggests a de-territorialised world, borders are omnipresent and a sociological and political fact – controlling the migration of people all over the world. 5

The overlapping of the many layers of different maps – belonging to different eras and political commitments – isn't just standing for one state of being, but for many simultaneously. Like a palimpsest, traditionally a manuscript page scraped off and reused by writing over it several times again, Chong Kim Chiew's "maps" are symbols for human multilayered history which actually is defined by continuous exiles, wars and migrations<sup>[2]</sup>. A fact that the artist is affirming by choosing a tarpaulin for the base material – a common material for the construction of temporary tent shelters for migrant camps.

As the artist himself states, boundaries are fluid. They keep on transforming endlessly – a characteristic that is related to identities too. According to Stewart Hall, Identities are never completed, in fact, they are always in motion<sup>[3]</sup>. They are the starting point of history, so it is more than obvious that history and its changes are nothing but a mirror of the unstable human identities.

[2] Enzensberger, Hans Magnus: Die große Wanderung: Dreiunddreißig Markierungen. Mit einer Fußnote „Über einige Besonderheiten bei der Menschenjagd“ (3rd edition Frankfurt am Main 1992), 7th edition Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 10f.

[3] Hall, Stuart: Kulturelle Identität und Diaspora, in: Hall, Stuart: Rassismus und kulturelle Identität (1st edition Hamburg 1994), 4th edition Hamburg 2008, p. 26–43. Here p. 30.



From this perspective, Chong Kim Chiew's works seem to transform the classical awareness of frontiers and borders as places of conflict into places of great potential. The many intertwined lines can be read as a grid system, a net holding together all the different spaces, places and identities. They even can suggest the growth of identities like rhizomes<sup>[4]</sup> into a lot more new identities, suggesting pluralism or hybridity as our natural state of being. We learn that "races", as well as nations are built up artificially, through codes and ideologies<sup>[5]</sup>. That is also, why it seems inappropriate to press artists into passports – there simply is no national authenticity<sup>[6]</sup>. The only truth is: Movement is the basic principal of humanity, and movement means change and diversity.

Chong Kim Chiew is using the creative potential of all of his art work to identify himself as a hybrid identity. His overlapping maps, borders and identities are revealing an almost cartesian philosophical world order which absolutely denies hierarchy and the power of one single centre. The title "*BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE*" may therefore seem like an ironical threat, reminding us of the fact that uniformity does not exist in nature. If each identity can become a potential centre, the consequence is a lot of diverse centres – a "plurale tantum"<sup>[7]</sup>. As the land of all (identities) his works are symbols for heterogeneity, celebrating the equality of diversity and possibilities. For him as a versatile artist this means an unlimited creative working process in a territorially and socially still limited world: a clear benefit for the exploration of the boundaries between art and life.

Dr. Hanni Geiger

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[4] Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Félix: Mille plateaux, Paris 1980, p. 1-15. Based on botanical rhizome Deleuze and Guattari use the philosophical concept "rhizome" and "rhizomatic" to describe theory and research that allows multiple, non-hierarchical system representation and interpretation.

[5] Enzensberger 1993, p. 15f.

[6] Rushdie, Salman: Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991, London 1992, chapter 3.

[7] The expression is referring to Jan Assmann's quotation: „Without diversity there can be no unity, without difference no individuality.“ Assmann, Jan: Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, München 1999, p. 136.

## BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE – the three faces of Chong Kim Chiew

*“The path I choose through the maze makes me what I am. I am not only a thing, but also a way of being--one of many ways--and knowing the paths I have followed and the ones left to take will help me understand what I am becoming.” — Daniel Keyes, Flowers for Algernon*

It perks you up immediately when an artist says, “There are a number of personalities in me, and it never gets lonely. They never leave me in peace, and want to go to different places at the same time, and though at times we end up nowhere, that is still somewhere. No?”

Yes. No. There really is no accurate answer to that line of interrogation. It is like revisiting John Lithgow's Raising Cain, without the daddy issues, but the lines "*Hickory Dickory Dock, Cain has picked his lock, He's done a bad deed, Now Josh comes to bleed, Hickory Dickory Dock*" stays throughout. And Chong Kim Chiew's varying degrees of works do appear, at the first, second, third glance, as if accomplished by different people. His latest offering, his solo (and 'group' show) debut with Wei-Ling Contemporary, carries a title ominous, dark, macabre even. *BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE* is a hodgepodge of works comprising a video installation, a photo installation and a series of tarpaulins tortured with acrylics, tape and knives all done by the artist's three avatars: O, Kim and TOPY.

*BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE* is six years' worth of work, first conceptualised when he was invited to a close friend's art gallery in Guangzhou, where he had also studied art from 1997 to 2001. At the time of these writings, except for his tarpaulin massacres, none of his other works were available for viewing, which to an extent, makes explaining them that more challenging.

He showed illustrations of his installations, so meticulously drawn one could visualise what the final inventions would look like. In his words, "*This exhibition attempts to deconstruct the capabilities and limitations of a solo creator, to seek various possibilities in terms of connections, disconnections, and how creations can become multifaceted coming from one single entity, and fragmented into personalities which are poles apart*".



A writer would have favourites, or rather would revisit a particular piece over and over again. In this case scenario, it is TOPY's wall painting, *Exhibition Logo Design No: 1*, a monochromatic insignia of an androgynous persona standing perpendicular as her/ his decapitated head sits in a waste paper basket. What is Topy saying: times are bad but we shouldn't lose our heads? Or times are so bad we've already lost them without realising it? This avatar's rebellion against convention, the war inside his head is vehemently piercing; he pitches, he hits, uncaring of the outcome, because in this particular realm, beheading is a fondness dreadful, and we wonder in the end, if any remain alive.

Now we arrive at O's inkjet print, *Your Place and My Place*. Set against a grainy stark-white background, the solitary light switch makes for a severe minimalist piece, O utilising everyday objects for a forceful and psychosomatic effect. It is retrogression to Martin Creed's 2001 Turner Prize winning Work No: 227. Sure, Martin's entry was not exactly popular, one chagrined artist threw eggs at it in a fit of rage, but Tate Britain did purchase it in 2013 for its permanent collection, Martin's disquietingly empty room with lights pre-timed to go off every few seconds. O's own entry has almost no content, he envisions the space as a medium to be cast, like clay, and this clever, biting and sensorial work gives a whole new meaning to the term 'viewing pleasure'. *Your Place and My Place* is O's way of saying, "You explain it and I'll listen, and if it unnerves, better still. Just tell me why".

Up next is Chong Kim Chiew's *Unreadable Wall*, a bizarre fortification of bricks fashioned out of newspapers. As Mark Twain wryly observed, "If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you're misinformed". So what does Kim do? He mashes it all up, turned them into mortar, plastered each one on top of one another like some expert bricklayer, and there it is: a brand new way of absorbing information. It is perhaps, what the brain resembles like from too much, from too little, from nothing. *Unreadable Wall* is Kim Chiew's gleeful politic, his own epistles and revelations for making the ill-informed even more so, and the mad madder.

From the snippets previewed, Kim's video installation *Skin Time*, of the time 2.04 embossed on actual skin just begs for wild rhetoric. In this universe of flesh, Kim Chiew's feverish installation is testament to Bertolt Brecht's, "The human race tends to remember the abuses to which it has been subjected rather than the endearments. What's left of kisses? Wounds however, leave scars". *Skin Time* is an exploration of things ephemeral, of illusions, of life being equally enigmatic as it is vulgar. And when one has been hurt terribly, the bleeding never really stops.

And there is more. Much more. His acrylics and markers on canvas, as seen in *White Over White, Black Over Black-Map* is a gruelling account of his love/ hate/ indifferent attitudes to current political events, the breakdown of maps observed in other pieces a sober reminder of what could and would happen if we remain in our comfortably-soporific state for extended periods of time, and the broken-down flag in *Boundary Fluidity* represents lands made sterile from unforgiving, brilliant tempests which rage viciously.

In *BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE*, these three artists' works are gritty and beautifully unapologetic. As he splits from his primary physical form and takes on different roles, we see three sets of ego: him as the royal court jester with the chilling sense of humour, we see him as the instigator/ rebel questioning traditions and accepted ways, and we see him as the contemplative entity who cunningly howls of fury and love.

Sarah NH Vogeler

18 September 2015

Sarah Vogeler is an arts writer who contributes regularly for Malaysia's National newspaper, *The News Straits Times*.

***Across your space, across his (her) space, across my space***

O exhibits a photo installation constructed by dotted lines. This set of images was captured from daily spaces. The installation is also a simulation of structures in daily spaces. Photography works of floor, wall and others scattered in different corners of the exhibition space. Here the artist attempts to graft different spaces into the site through environmental details photographed in other spaces. He has positioned “Other Space” and “This Space” side by side to create an ambiguous illusion of overlapping spaces. It allows the member of audience to simultaneously depart from the environment he is in and place himself in the “other field” within the site where he physically stands.

These photography works that look extremely similar to the actual exhibition space were inspired by the act of “mimicry” in biological theory. When a member of audience looks at the work, he would not be able to distinguish if the work exists and the work could be easily neglected. Some might even ask if this an art installation, or if it is just the actual condition of the space.

O plays on the intervention of public and private space through the mimicry of “actual existence that looks like non-existence”.

(Translated by Au Sow Yee)



*Across your space, across his (her) space, across my space*, installation view  
Photo sticker  
Dimensions variable, 2015



*Across your space, across his (her) space, across my space*, installation view  
Photo sticker  
Dimensions variable, 2015

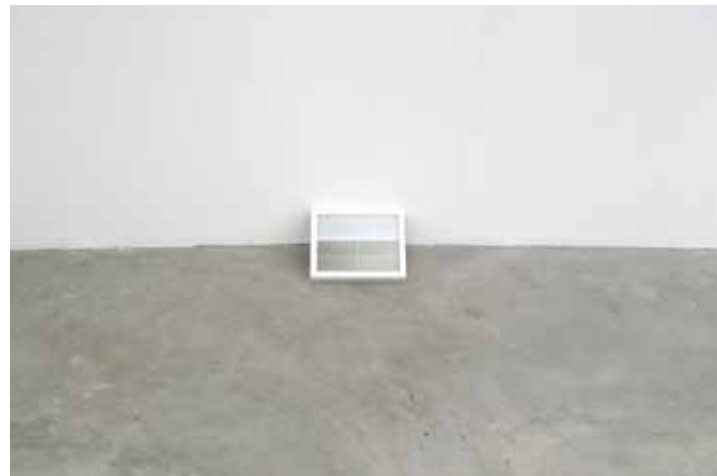


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*Your Place and My Place* (detail)  
Inkjet print  
18 x 24 cm for each photo  
2015



13



*Your Place and My Place*, installation view  
Inkjet print  
Dimensions variable  
2015



## Chong Kim Chiew

### **Boundary Fluidity**

In 2007, Kim Chiew started on a project entitled *Boundary Fluidity*. *Boundary Fluidity* extends from Chong Kim Chiew's regular gaze on maps. Through maps painted on tarpaulin, video and photography, he has dug into the misinterpretation of maps, metaphors of history and exploration of the third space, particularly regarding its suspended situation and sense of place yet to be included in official discourse.

Here, Chong Kim Chiew has painted layers of maps on water proof industrial tarpaulin turning them each into a hand carried scroll, allowing the map to return to its original means of existence. Chong Kim Chiew deliberately retained traces of writings and drawings on the tarpaulin, incessantly pouring acrylic onto the tarpaulin, painting intersecting lines, and then repeating the steps again. Hence traces of the previous step are erased and covered by layers of color, revealing the ambiguous process of painting. These indistinct layers of colors and lines, are also an extended clue of the artist's definition.

The artist has also brought the tarpaulin map to daily places (the third space) that are metaphorically familiar but ambiguous. Names of places are not revealed. He then videographed and took photographs of places such as a car park, balcony and sea shore, an attempt to rediscover the third space that is being neglected, and to extend implications on fluidity as well as floating of maps. Traces on the map refers to traces of changes in history. Hence, the act of the artist walking away with a map and continuing on a flowing path, might also resemble the drifting life of history.

The artist will also change the installation view of the project while the exhibition is going on. Members of audience will then witness an ever-changing work.

(Translated by Au Sow Yee)



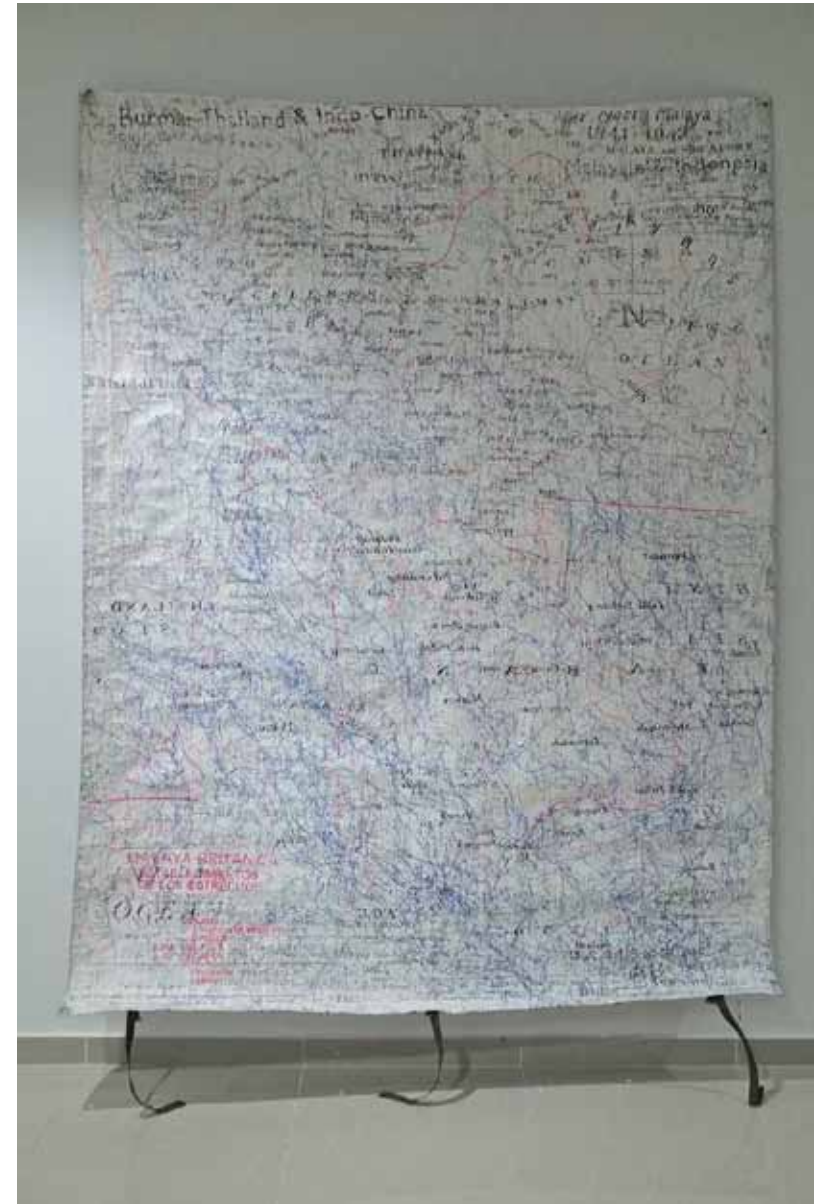
*Boundary Fluidity*, still image from video  
Single-channel video  
13 mins 46 sec  
2014-ongoing



*Boundary Fluidity #2*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
240 x 180cm  
2008



*Boundary Fluidity #3*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
240 x 180cm  
2009



*Boundary Fluidity #5*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
240 x 180cm  
2010





*Boundary Fluidity #6*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2010



*Boundary Fluidity #8*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2011





*Boundary Fluidity #9*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2011



*Boundary Fluidity #10*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2014



*Boundary Fluidity #15*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015



*Boundary Fluidity #16*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015





*Boundary Fluidity #17*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic, marker and compass on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015



*Boundary Fluidity #18*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015





*Boundary Fluidity #19*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015



*Boundary Fluidity #21*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic, marker and tape on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015



*Boundary Fluidity# 22*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic and tape on tarpaulin  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015



*Boundary Fluidity #23*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
 Acrylic on tarpaulin with cutting  
 240 x 180cm  
 2015





*Boundary Fluidity #4*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
Acrylic and marker on tarpaulin  
180 x 240cm  
2009



*Boundary Fluidity #20*, from the series *Boundary Fluidity*  
Acrylic, marker and tape on tarpaulin  
180 x 240cm  
2015

*Boundary Fluidity*, installation view  
Dimensions variable  
2014-ongoing



## Chong Kim Chiew

### *Unreadable Wall*

It took Chong Kim Chiew 8 years to finish this piece. With this work, Chong Kim Chiew has shredded Malaysian newspapers of various languages that he had been collecting for a long time. The shredded newspapers were then blended into paper pulp with a juice blender. The paper pulp was shaped into bricks. For this exhibition, the artist built a simulated wall with paper bricks according to the size of the entrance to the exhibition space. The paper wall looks thick and heavy but in actuality it is fragile, light and could be easily pushed down. This is a metaphor of the media situation in Malaysia.

(Translated by Au Sow Yee)



*Unreadable Wall* (detail)  
Newspaper  
Dimensions variable  
2013



*Unreadable Wall*  
Newspaper  
Dimensions variable  
2013

## Kim

### ***Skin Time***

Kim is an Asian American residing in New York, U.S.A. He once became a stateless person due to an identity issue. No one knows which country Kim comes from. His name is often mistaken as Korean, Chinese from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan, and even Filipino and Vietnamese.

Kim's major medium is video. His works mainly explore the conversation between body and time. The artist has printed different times on his skin and recorded these traces of time. The duration of *Skin Time* resembles the gallery's opening hours (11am to 7pm). It is an 8 hour stop motion video, constructed from 480 still images that change every 60 seconds. The video is synchronized with actual time, allowing the work to also possess the function of a clock.

A clock is rarely seen in a gallery. It resembles the viewing experience inside a cinema, hoping audiences could concentrate on the present experience of aesthetic by blocking actual time and space. The clock serves as a reminder of the reality. Would traces of numbers on the skin influence the biological clock of the viewing audience and form invisible interruption? Here, the artist reveals the conversation between physical time and biological time by using minimalistic and solemn images.

(Translated by Au Sow Yee)



*Skin Time*, still image from video  
Video installation  
480 mins  
2015



*Skin Time*, still image from video  
Video installation  
480 mins  
2015

## TOPY

### **Exhibition Logo Design No.1**

TOPY is a young designer from Czech Republic, whose profession is logo design. He has not participated in any contemporary art exhibitions. He drew a logo on the wall inside the exhibition space in response to the invitation to be a part of BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE. It is a commonly seen litter Isotype logo, however, the man in the logo is headless and is throwing his head inside the garbage can.

TOPY hopes people would think about our addiction to knowledge in contemporary art through the iconic image. People always read art works in a complicated manner. Why can't we throw the brain away when visiting an exhibition? Of course, this is also a form of self-ridicule on BE CAREFUL OR YOU MAY BECOME THE CENTRE, for the audience needs to think in order to understand all the works in the exhibition.

Moreover, TOPY attempts to interfere with the core issue of the exhibition, that is to break the exhibition form that carries continual subject and coherent style, through intervention from the outside. Hence exhibiting a manipulated Isotype image by a non-professional artist. The existence of TOPY is similar to the Eel Effect, to agitate the vitality of the stereotypical exhibition module.

(Translated by Au Sow Yee)



*Exhibition Logo Design No.1, installation view*  
Wall painting  
240 x 305cm  
2015



*Exhibition Logo Design No.1*  
Wall painting  
240 x 305cm  
2015



## Many thanks to

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