

## Curatorial Statement

Lo and Behold!

“There are no facts, only interpretations.” Nietzsche

Putting ourselves on trial and questioning our beliefs as arbitrary is a real act of faith. Tsang Kin-Wah has taken this core value as the basis of his art practice. Steeped in the studies of religion and philosophy, Tsang examines the systematization of beliefs by differentiating the very gaps that separate facts from interpretations. Tsang considers both notions as open-ended, for we are forever caught in the struggle to satisfy our desire for an objective truth, whilst denying the very conflicts a truth poses to our subjective experience. How can one thing be true if we all have different experiences? In relation to the visual arts, how do we draw a person's attention through looking? How do we arrive at a value judgment through perception? These questions are the key to understanding Tsang's hermitic art practice.

Having taken a long-term interest with Nietzsche and religions, and best known for his large-scale video installation with text animation, Tsang Kin-Wah deconstructs the hegemony of a dominant ideology whereby truths are merely interpretations. Since 2009, Tsang has been developing a body of video installations titled *The Seven Seals*. Five editions of *The Seven Seals* are now complete. The phrase *Seven Seals*, taken from the Book of Revelation, describes the opening of the individual seals of a scroll and the subsequent judgment or apocalypse. Tsang states his intention behind the making of *The Seven Seals*:

Animated phases and short sentences appear and move and float, sometimes like a murmur and sometimes like an admonition, revealing the nature of human beings and the changes of our emotions. The texts remind us of issues like war, terrorism, revolution, death, murder, suicide, self-denial, etc.<sup>1</sup>

By extracting keywords from the Bible and gathering materials that reflect his own daily experiences, Tsang will then draft a script in order to form the base narrative structure for a video installation. The artist then determines the colour, speed and font size of the moving texts, as well as their orientation in sync with the characteristics of the exhibition venue. Undoubtedly, the dogmatic style of presenting moving texts somewhat resembles the artwork by American artist Jenny Holzer. Tsang pushes this form of expression further and explores how our desire to preserve a set of moral ideals deviates from our own action that runs contrary to the set principle. For example, *The Fourth Seal*, which was recently shown in Yau Ma Tei inside a temporary venue, consists of texts that are projected from the ceiling down. Simple phrases like 'The Fate', 'The Fall', and 'The Mortal' first appear in swirling motion like a snake. These are soon followed by more complex sentences: 'You Don't Have The Right', 'HE Doesn't Have The Right', 'You Should Take All The Blame', 'HE Should Take All The Blame'. The pronoun of a sentence 'You' [as an individual] is replaced with 'HE' [as someone who has greater power or in the Christian context as Jesus Christ] in the subsequent sentence. The sudden font size increase of the projected sentences in a matter of minutes, coupled with dramatic sound in the background, builds up an emotionally charged situation. The once sparse moving texts now consolidate to create a large colour field followed by an implosion in the middle before the video loops back to the beginning. The Fourth Seal is not intended to discredit Christianity, but rather challenges the validity of its eternal value in relation to our everyday lives. Religion, as a set of canons, and our relationship with it are very different things altogether, but we are sure that the practice of religion is a power struggle that is never completely free from the influences of people and politics.

While *The Seven Seals* employs language to critique hegemony, the use of found footage in Tsang's recent project *Ecce Homo Trilogy 1* questions reality and politics in a more direct manner. Using found footage taken from the 1989 televised trial and subsequent public execution of Nicolae Ceausescu, the former leader of the Romanian communist regime, as the main subject matter for this project, Tsang investigates our moral complexity in response to a judgment and the deliberation of a legal sentence and the extent in which they disavow our dignity as human beings.

'Ecce Homo' are the exact Latin words [translated as "Behold the man" or "Here is the man"] that Pontius Pilate used when presenting Jesus to an angry crowd before crucifixion. Even though Pontius Pilate found no faults with Jesus, he left him to the mercy of the Jewish priests. Dating back as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Passion theme has been widely used in religious paintings by artists like Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Titian, Tintoretto, Durer and many others. I want to focus specifically on the painting by Baroque painter Caravaggio. We see three figures in his *Ecce Homo*. Pontius Pilate, on the right side of the canvas, who is staring squarely at us with an open hand gesture, presents Jesus who is holding a judgment staff with his hand tied to the public. Jesus is looking pensively downward, while his torturer is in the background covering Christ with a purple robe. The use of chiaroscuro lends focus to the physical body of a common man to the crowd that wishes to crucify him. Caravaggio's depiction of *Ecce Homo* deals with the initial moment when real justice was compromised in favour of satisfying popular opinion, the very juncture when the fate of one individual is determined by others. It is as if Tsang is taking on the role of Pontius Pilate by restaging a similar moment and its potential consequences in this exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts taken from An interview with Tsang Kin-Wah



Caravaggio, *Ecce Homo* (1605)

*Ecce Homo* Trilogy 1 revolves around a text-based installation along a long corridor, a series of text paintings on aluminium, and four video projections of found footage that are manipulated in a rather painterly manner, namely the *Prelude*, the *Trial*, the *Execution*, and the *Burial*. If religious painting accumulates a collective moment for our contemplation, Tsang breaks it down into manageable chapters in order for the audiences to become more self-conscious with how we go about judging the artworks on view. The vinyl texts, installed on the wall in the manner of a swirling perspective, recede onto an aluminum painting situated at the end of the corridor. Upon entering another space through an opening on the neighbouring wall, we see the *Prelude*, which consists of moving images of floating clouds that are projected onto the gallery's darkened window. The overlapping imageries of urban scenery from the window and projected images of moving clouds offer a short lapse before entering the *Trial*, the first scene of *Ecce Homo*. The *Trial* documents the hasty 1989 military tribunal of Ceausescu, where he and his wife were presumed guilty without reprieve. The *Trial* documents a military tribunal that is in session; the camera holds the leader captive for public scrutiny. Ceausescu is seen defending himself in front of the juries, yet his fate is sealed. The *Execution* is the second scene, which is projected inside a semi-enclosed space inside the gallery. Ceausescu was taken to Târgoviște for execution by firing squad. In the video, we see the aftermath of the execution; a corpse is lying reclined on the ground subsequently pronounced dead by two examiners. Tsang edits the footage in a way similar to Hitchcock to elevate the level of suspense and to give it a historical quality. Deprived of any pity, the sheer brutality of capital punishment is ruthless. Travelling along another narrow corridor inside the gallery with the windows that recall those shown in the execution video, we are finally at an open space with other aluminum paintings, along with fragments of wall text on their surface. These paintings also function to create illusionary openings throughout the gallery space and to transform the space into a jail. We then enter the final scene of the *Burial*, where bystanders pay final tribute to the dead by placing flowers on a coffin before resting it on the ground with a requiem playing in the background to evoke a spiritual longing.

In terms of the set up of *Ecce Homo*, Tsang has three objectives in mind. First, Tsang creates a self-reflexive state of 'Beholding the Audience' [beholding here means looking at], where the artist reverses the gaze back to the audience, forcing us to witness the unfolding of the whole judicial process, and to question how we go about making a judgment and dealing with its consequences. The common variable is to behold or to look as a form of participation. Second, there is a significant shift from being a reader of the wall text installation to becoming a witness or participant in the video component of the exhibition. The wall text encourages a canonical interpretation of personal belief or doctrine, while the videos invite a subjective transgression where the audience can take on the role of the portrayed protagonists. Third, Tsang's aim is to realise an exhibition that provides different perspectives like the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, and to encourage audiences to take on conflicting roles when walking through the exhibition in order to negotiate with their own moral compasses. Tsang states:

Through this installation, I am trying to engage the viewers to become 'witness' of the whole scene that they may feel like walking through and seeing the last moments of the accused, becoming a part of the scenes, and that they may associate with how the accused, the partakers, and other witnesses would feel in the depicted scenes and ponder on the powerlessness of the accused, the absurdity of the judgment, the brutality of the execution and the sorrow of life and death.<sup>2</sup>

*Ecce Homo* is not about reminding us of the downfall and subsequent prosecution of a communist leader; rather, Tsang has selected a historical episode to illustrate that facts and truths, as the very basis for our value judgment, are in fact elusive and temporal; and presents us with a predicament in order to question how we go about making an individual value judgment for ourselves. We are forever caught in a cyclical mediation with facts and interpretations. It is for this very reason that the ending of this exhibition also leads the beholders back to its beginning or, in Tsang's words, "an eternal reoccurrence and things will just repeat itself with slight variations".<sup>3</sup> To witness the unfolding of a *Trial/Execution/Burial* is to endorse an institutional power that we have grown to withstand and its violent imposition of a set of doctrines, as well as to acknowledge that we are not in the position to reconcile anything in return. It is only natural to feel sympathy for the accused, not for his evil deeds but as a human being, and our apathy may speak more of our true nature. Human beings with our intellectual and emotional nuances are never entirely free from the infringement of ideology; our existence is constantly reshaped by belief systems. Being a conscious beholder puts us closer to our inherent psychological insecurity; to entertain something deviant and radical in the first place may allow us to come to terms with ourselves, however ugly and beautiful in the end. Look again carefully, you will be surprised. Lo and Behold!

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.