Conversation between Raimundas Malašauskas and Mel Chan

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Raimundas Malašauskas (R)
Mel Chan (M)

R: Can you tell me more about the title of your thesis — “If a Tree Falls in a Forest”?

M: It comes from the classical philosophical question: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? In my thesis, which is in the form of a story, the protagonist was spending the last day before the end of the world in the depot of a museum. With the collapse of all the conditions that make art art, such as institutions, society structures, artists and viewers, she was surrounded by objects which were losing their meanings. What is art under such a situation? What is art when there’s nobody around?

R: Is it based on a real museum?

M: Yes, Boijmans.

R: In what sense is it based on Boijmans? Its architecture?

M: Yes, its physical space. But also the structure of this institution. In the story, only one artwork was chosen to be preserved for the future. That was the *Tower of Babel*, featuring artwork of Boijmans.

R: By Bruegel, right?

M: Yes, that one.

R: In your thesis the story took place in the storage space of the museum. At the same time you are interested in hypnotherapy. Both lead us to the subconsciousness, something that is hidden from the spotlight of attention, of self awareness. A hidden world. You need to access those areas in special ways, like, through hypnosis.

M: True. In the story I haven’t mentioned hypnosis, but my thesis instructor says that the story is very hypnotising to read, because of the personal pronoun ‘you’. As in hypnosis, when giving suggestions, ‘you’ is the pronoun being used.

R: It is a very specific way to address someone. Usually in writing, people use first person ‘I’ or third person ‘he’ or she’. ‘You’ is a form of affective connection, or influence, an implantation. It

also opens a way of intimacy. As if, like, ‘O, you make me suffer, you make me cry, you make me laugh’. A deep intimacy, between the one who suggests and receives.

M: At the same time it sounds almost like giving instructions, of how you should feel, how you should think. At the beginning I wanted to give some critical space. ‘I’ is way too subjective. There is no distance left. So I split myself into two, and talked to myself from a distance. I hope to create a critical space, open up a conversation, or even to judge my own thinking.

R: Could you describe your path to the whole thinking of the apocalypse?

M: On a very personal level, apocalypse is embedded in me because of Hong Kong politics, that I grew up always with political deadlines, or deadline upon deadline. For me, “the end” is a prolonged process of uncertainty that we are forever trapped in. The metaphor of paradigm shift has become a permanent state of temporary. In this borrowed time, at this borrowed place, I see our existence torn among the forces of colonialism, de-colonialism and neo-colonialism. But taking a step backward, I tend to think that the idea of the end of the world is always embedded in human nature.

R: Why? Is it like a fear of collapse, or is it a kind of death-drive?

M: True. Everybody gets their own take on what apocalypse means, be it personal or human race as large. I tend to think that it’s embedded in our nature that we are constantly looking for, or even longing for outside threats. Fear is always part of us. That’s why there have been so many unfulfilled prophecies of apocalypse throughout human history. The fear of collapse also suggests the resistance of change.

R: Interesting. I think if you live in really miserable conditions, you want those conditions to change. You don’t want to maintain the status quo. If you were a slave, working under a king, in the open field, you probably want to change. So it’s related to which kind of position you are in, socially. When I was living in the late Soviet Union in the 80s, there was a sense of, not at all apocalypse, but permanent unchangeability. You actually felt doomed, locked in in some unchanging paradigm, an unchanging world. It’s just the way it was, the Soviet Union time. It was very bleak to be in that world, to feel the unchangeability of it. But then the collapse was like a total rapture of everything. I’m quite sure that throughout history, people did experience that a lot of times. The fixed order of things. The sense of permanence.

M: Actually we are living in such a stage. We think that there is no alternative to capitalism. ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’, right? But in the Soviet Union in the 80s, did people look forward to the end of the world? Was the apocalypse part of popular culture?

R: Good question. In popular culture it did pop up. But I think that the dominant feeling was the infinite unchangeability, the permanency of that system. At least that is how I remember it was

like. But I'm sure that someone might describe it differently. But what happened was that system was replaced by capitalism. And, as you say, it feels unchangeable now

M: Indeed. Historian Harari has a similar view, that 'liberals don't understand how history deviated from its preordained course, and they lack an alternative prism to interpret reality. Disorientation causes them to think in apocalyptic terms, as if the failure of history to come to its envisioned happy ending can only mean that it is hurtling towards Armageddon. Unable to conduct a reality check, the mind latches on to catastrophic scenarios.' So in a way, the end of the world is a romantic idea. It is a reset button. We press this button and hope that the world will be destroyed so we can start all over again. It is a fantasy. A beautiful one. The apocalypse narrative, be it in popular culture such as movies, be it in political statements, be it in religious beliefs, be it in scientific logics, all paralyse our thoughts and action. It makes people believe that they do not have the ability to change the system, the status quo.

R: But, what is the way it numbs people? Like, in the example of the cinema, when you watch these movies and it paralyzes your action to change?

M: Yes. Let's say Donna Haraway. For her end of the world is a fantasy, a dangerous fantasy. Because we should be practical and to live with the trouble, stay with the trouble, instead of looking forward to the end, giving up. We should deal with it, don't lose hope and dwell in the apocalyptic fantasy.

R: Right. Is it how it works for you? Do you think you are in a critical position of the production of such fantasy? What's your take on that? Or how do you feel?

M: I think I'm more like showing the complexity, forces and economy behind. I am always a very contradictory person. There are many ideas out there I find very attractive, and would like to believe in them. Like the slogan of The X-files, "I want to believe". The problem is at the same time I am also aware of the forces that generate these ideas. Be it the end of the world. Be it hypnotizing. Be it art. Be it new age spirituality. There is an economy behind them that I can't quite ignore. I want to believe. But there's always something holding me back too.

R: It's kind of messy.

M: Yeah. So I won't say I'm very critical of them. I would like to embrace them too. All these attractive ideas.

R: For what reasons is it attractive?

M: The end of the world?

R: Yeah. What fascinates you? Because it's about fascination. Fascination is about suspended criticality. On one hand you are critical of that, apparatus, or let's say, the forces that produce that fantasy. At the same time you are fascinated.

M: By thinking about non-existence we can reflect on existence. What is the meaning of it all, the meaning of everything, if we don't exist. I would like to think about 'what is' in terms of 'isn't'.

R: So you're also fantasizing a world without human beings.

M: If you look at history, I mean not just human history but geographical time, history of the universe, human existence is just a tiny fraction. For a very long period of time, there was no humans. That is the usual stage. In the long term, it is also inevitable that human beings will disappear, one way or another. The universe seems really indifferent to us. Or our existence is meaningless to the universe. Such vast emptiness. But still we try our best to make sense of all these, or of our own existence. Quite a futile attempt. I find it very beautiful.

R: For your graduation work, would you still be doing the hypnotherapy service for those who are afraid of the end of the world?

M: Yes. I am staging a promotional event for a company. A consultancy to advise people what they should do on the very last day before the end of the world. What should the itinerary be? What should they think about the moment they wake up? How should they feel? How should they live every moment to its fullest?

R: It reminds me of the movie *4:44 Last Day on Earth*, a movie by Abel Ferrara. It's the last day on earth and everybody knows it's the last day. Do you cultivate the sense that one has to live everyday as if it is the last day in your life? Then you really intensify the perception of it, and appreciation and apprehension of it.

M: Yes. That is the idea of mindfulness that I'm playing with. It is like, you have to appreciate every moment in your life. Like this cup of tea, you have to feel the temperature, the smell, the taste, etc. You have to live in this moment. But I also feel that it's really tiring if you do it all the time. It is just impossible. I really would like to create a guided meditation for the whole day, to guide people to appreciate every moment, until it becomes ridiculous because it'll be so tiring!

R: Yes, it's madness.

M: You have to forget.

R: Yes, you have to disappear from attention sometimes. We keep disappearing all the time. Like a melody, it disappears and reappears in awareness.

Raimundas Malašauskas is a Lithuanian curator and writer based in Moscow, where he is part of the curatorial team of the V-A-C Foundation. In 2019 he is a visiting Professor to HEAD, Geneva. His curatorial and writing practices are notable for their questioning approach to the concept of the exhibition, creating unpredictable, often playful results. Raimundas was curator of

the CAC Vilnius from 1995 - 2006, and Artists Space, New York from 2007 - 09. He recently curated Meeting Points 8, Cairo/Brussels/Beirut, 2017, part of the Liverpool Biennial 2016 and the Lithuania and Cyprus Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013. Paper Exhibition -- Selected Writings was published by Sternberg Press in 2012, and his notebook on Burlesque was published as part of dOCUMENTA 13.