DIGRESSION(S), ENTRY POINT(S): AN INTERVIEW WITH HEMAN CHONG

Artist, curator and writer, Singapore

BY LATITUDES

01 Photo: Joan Kee

HEMAN CHONG'S ART PRACTICE IS COMPRISED OF "AN investigation into the philosophies, reasons and methods of individuals and communities imagining the future" [hemanchong.com]. His ongoing project, *The Lonely Ones*, looks at the representation of solitude and the "last man on earth" genre in art, film and literature, and is the basis for a forthcoming novel entitled *Prospectus*. Chong's recent solo exhibitions include *LEM 1,* Rossi & Rossi, London (2012), *Calendars (2020–2096),* NUS Museum, Singapore (2011) and *The Sole Proprietor and other Stories*, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou (2007). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions including the Asia Pacific Triennale 7 (2012), Performa 11 (2011), Momentum 6 (2011), Manifesta 8 (2010), Busan Biennale (2004), and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003) representing Singapore. A monograph of his work entitled *The Part In The Story Where We Lost Count Of The Days*, edited by Pauline J Yao, will be published in June 2013 by *ArtAsiaPacific*. This interview was initiated at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, in the context of Chong's invitation to Latitudes to make a curatorial residency as part of *Moderation(s),* a year-long series of programming between Spring and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.

Latitudes: The *Moderation(s)* project initiated in October 2012 with a meeting in Rotterdam that convened over a dozen artists, curators, writers, etc., all of whom have been or will be involved in one way or another with the development of *Moderation(s)* and the various forms that it will take during 2013. During that meeting the way you introduced the project – in terms of generosity, making "soft" the borders between artist and curator, as well as its unfolding as a porous process across several participants, publics, and host institutions – we felt really chimed with many of the themes we are attempting to engage with in this *#Open-Curating* research.

   There are several ways in which we could begin to unpack this, but let's start with the question of how you have approached and adapted your role here as a "moderator" via your work as an artist, curator, and writer. What distinguishes the moderator? What is moderating involving, and what is it not involving?

Fig.1
Moderation(s)
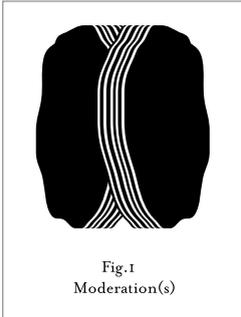
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"Moderation(s) is a lot about production, but also about questioning how and why something needs to be produced."

02 *Moderation(s)*
emblem by Heman Chong

Heman Chong: It has become very apparent to me that within this year-long programme there are multiple possibilities to somehow instigate a heightened situation where groups of people can come together to do things without compromising their own practices. I am interested in rethinking the notion of collaboration, and perhaps – to answer your question about what "moderating" involves or not for me – the strategy is to let things happen in a situation where the different participants can bring a series of things to the table where we can discuss and then process them into some kind of discernible "text". A situation where everything can be usable, and there is a lexicon of forms that can be expanded upon to make other things. It's a lot about production, but also about questioning how and why something needs to be produced.

Having said that, the idea of developing a master plan for *Moderation(s)* presents itself as a very boring and purposeless endeavor – this desire to sink one's fingers into every single inch of a given territory and to design it purposefully according to one single definitive vision. I mean, we're not building a biennale in some godforsaken country here. While I am conscious that a certain structure is necessary for the many parts within *Moderation(s)* to be produced, at the same time I am attempting to keep multiple doorways open for different infiltrations from the huge amount of individuals within the programme to occur at any given point of time, and for the programme to be infected and changed accordingly.

This involves a lot of risk and places a huge amount of stress on the two institutions who have commissioned *Moderation(s)* – <u>Spring Workshop</u> and <u>Witte de With</u> – and are hosting it for the entire of 2013. For example, this method of working is a complete nightmare for press and communication, with ideas shifting all the time, individuals joining the project and leaving the project, things created on the fly – it's a fucking nightmare!

L: In a recent *Artforum* <u>article</u> on Paul O'Neill's book *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*, Julian Stallabrass questions O'Neill's "horror of fixity" and advocacy of contemporary curating as "a durational, transformative, and speculative activity, a way of keeping things in flow, mobile, in between, indeterminate, crossing over and be-

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03 19 & 20 October 2012
Moderation(s) workshop at
Witte de With, Rotterdam.
A Constructed World
(Geoff Lowe and Jacque-
line Riva), Nadim Abbas,
Defne Ayas, Mimi Brown,
Heman Chong, Amira Gad,
Natasha Ginwala, Lati-
tudes (Max Andrews and
Mariana Cánepa Luna),
Michael Lee, Christina Li,
Pages (Nasrin Tabatabai
and Babak Afrassiabi),
Vivian Sky Rehberg and
Samuel Saelemakers
Photo: Witte de With

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tween people, identities, and things, encouraging certain
ideas to come to the fore in an emergent communicative
process". Stallabrass states that "a show that has an argu-
ment may at least be challenged critically; the art event
that as a matter of principle shuns coherence appears and
aspires to lie beyond the reach of critique". ★ What do you
make of this? Is *Moderation(s)* deliberately indeterminate?
HC: Given enough time, things unattended will start to
fall apart. I have no idea why I've just written what I've
just written, but it was almost like an immediate response
to what you've just posed. Perhaps I'm becoming delu-
sional from lack of sleep. I digress. Apologies. For me,
everyday life is "a durational, transformative, and specula-
tive activity, a way of keeping things in flow, mobile, in be-
tween, indeterminate, crossing over and between people,
identities, and things, encouraging certain ideas to come
to the fore in an emergent communicative process" which
requires our minute-to-minute attention. But it doesn't
mean that this cannot be critiqued. I think it warrants a
certain level of introspection that often moves between a

"troubled" state and a state of stability. Again, I digress.

As to whether *Moderation(s)* is indeterminate or not, I think it's too early to tell. I would like it to be, and in many ways, I've resisted transforming the project into determinate forms such as defining collaborations involving artists looking at relationships between Rotterdam and Hong Kong (ugh! bleah!). But its very clear that I'm not the only one pulling the strings here. I'm also not interested in jousting for a central position in this programme. I find it so much more interesting to phase in and out of control, allowing for either Defne [Ayas, Director of Witte de With, Rotterdam] or Mimi [Brown, Director of Spring Workshop, Hong Kong] to take control at certain points, to inject their points of view into *Moderation(s)*, just as how some of the artists are increasingly gaining ownership over certain sectors of it.

I think of "Bibliotheek (Library)" – a list of books identified by the group to function both as a bibliography for *Moderation(s)*, as well as a planned physical library that will be installed both at Witte de With and Spring – as a kind of basis for this indeterminacy. It is a list that expands without much control involved which can accommodate these rhizomatic approaches to how we build something together, and can be used in another context, either individually or for another collective situation.

Having said that, I don't think *Moderation(s)* is necessarily a platform for people to come together to exclusively feel good about themselves and their work. And it's also not necessarily a situation or structure that will only exist with the time frame of a year in 2013. I envision that the participants within *Moderation(s)* will continue with a degree of access to each other outside the program, and that they'll each have the possibility to instigate that. I hope that It will develop potentials to become a series of engagements that plays out over several other projects.

L: Picking up on your earlier observation about press and communication, this is something we've been mulling over a lot recently with *#OpenCurating* and in thinking through contemporary art's relationship with, or lessons to be drawn from, the internet's uprooting of print-led journalism. For example, it is curious to see the tenacity of faith in the ink-on-paper newspaper review as a gold-standard

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measure of success of an exhibition, and the persistence of the traditional decree-like press release as a primary means of managing communication. As you intimate, these formats may have been appropriate to static and unchanging exhibitions, but seem at odds with evolving or dialogic programming such as *Moderation(s)*. The notion of contemporary art being wholly subsumed into broadcast culture seems undesirable, yet there is surely a great deal of unused available "bandwidth" in terms of the writing and reading that accompanies or forms a part of artistic or curatorial work. Would you agree with this?

HC: A lot of this unused "bandwidth" is being occupied very rapidly. There's now even talk of establishing a ".art" domain, something which will encapsulate more of this occupation. For me, the issue has always been about how we can provide content for free or at a very low cost rather than restricting it or having it in the hands of a very select few. This is particularly important, say, for regions that have historically suffered from having a lack of access. Until recently, it was very difficult for an artist in Southeast Asia to have instant access to stuff about contemporary art and the discourses surrounding it. I think up to even the early 2000s, we generally had that problem in gathering material that we could talk about. The reality is quite different now. You can be in Yogyakarta or Phnom Penh and an artist can come up to you and start talking about Tino Sehgal or Jérôme Bel, for example.

Perhaps this is also something that *Moderation(s)* can be involved in – the ability to expand the capacities of both Witte de With and Spring Workshop, in order to channel these distributive states into a situation much larger than each other. I do believe that there is a lot of room for this. But at the same time, we need to start to think about how to avoid a certain sort of exhaustion that comes from having too much information. There needs to be a heightened sense of authorship in developing content about contemporary art that moves beyond mere reportage. For example, I think we need to rethink how we describe a certain work via words and how that can further the work within the critical field.

L: Can you describe how the PLURAL initiative came into being: what it is, its focus and how it functions? We're in-

03 Poster for PLURAL
Workshop (2)
8 January 2012
Joanne Pang

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terested in how it has created a shared forum for dialogue amongst artists in Singapore, as a form of peer-review, a "moderation" process more familiar from academia, something that leans towards participation and transparency yet without being completely "open".

HC: PLURAL started in this very intimate manner where it was pretty much defined as a friendship between the Singaporean artists Ang Song Ming, Genevieve Chua and me. We'd have these conversations where we'd spend a lot of time talking about each other's work, being completely

04 Poster for PLURAL
Workshop (3)
13 April 2012
Heman Chong

open and brutal, and also convincing each other that we can help by editing one another's work. It has become very clear to me that one of the strategies that we can employ to resist the high speeds in which contemporary practice is defined and consumed is to convince artists to generate in-depth, concise research about their given fields in order to produce works that have some kind of coherence over time.

We opened up the conversation after a couple of months to include other artists like Charles Lim, Michael Lee and Chun Kaifeng, and we physically met for the first time in 2009 in my apartment on Depot Road to form the first "workshop". In this, we talked about the references which influenced our work. It was an incredibly luminous session. Artists like Matthew Ngui and Ming Wong have also been a part of some of these conversations along the way, but because they don't live in Singapore it sometimes gets very difficult to sustain. Younger artists like Ho Rui An and Joanne Pang have also recently joined PLURAL, and this has helped us gain access to the perspectives and thoughts of a different generation of artists from Singapore.

So in a way, PLURAL is an institution, but refrains from the unimaginative ways of institutionalization that is endemic to collective activity. It has no permanent address, but a cluster of addresses that can be triggered for multiple purposes, be it a seminar, or a book launch. It benefits from the generosity of its surrounding community. It is also about creating an extended circle of participants with this process.

L: In your approach to projects it seems you're working as an artist as much as being an artist making works; there is a subtle but important difference between the two tacks, a relationship to collaboration and process on the one hand and a singular voice and "contained" artwork on the other. We're thinking here in particular of *PHILIP*, the collectively-written sci-fi novel which you instigated in 2006. Could you describe the project, its importance to you, its successes and failures as you see it now?

HC: *PHILIP* was a project curated by Mai Abu ElDahab and Tessa Giblin at Project Arts Centre in Dublin at the end of 2006 which involved a group of international artists, curators, designers and writers including Mark Aerial

Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt and Steve Rushton. They were invited by Leif Magne Tangen and me to take part in a writing workshop, public talks and film screenings which concluded with the publication of a limited edition sci-fi novel produced at <u>Dexter Sinister</u>'s Just-In-Time Work-

06 Cover of *PHILIP* (2006) novel collectively written by Mark Aerial Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt, Steve Rushton, Heman Chong and Leif Magne Tangen Based on a concept by Heman Chong. Curated by Mai Abu ElDahab and Tessa Giblin at Project Arts Centre, Dublin November 2006

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shop & Occasional Bookstore in New York.

In a way the process was very similar to how I'm running *Moderation(s)* at the moment. I dived into PHILIP without much prior "training" in collaborative modes, and relied plainly on my intuition when it came to how I would interact with the group of writers. Sure, there was a lot of frustration involved from some of them, especially one or two who needed a lot of hand-holding and "direction". But you see, I'm not that keen on telling people what they should be doing, as little as luring them into doing something they might not expect themselves to be doing – it's not malicious, but it is a little sinister.

I did make it very clear that at the end of seven days, we had to finish the novel. There wasn't any room for compromise or negotiation with that. Much like PLURAL, the notion has always been that of the generative (and to understand the situation via what we can collectively produce) rather than just hypothesizing about what we might produce. During the production of PHILIP, we were mainly fueled by this heightened sense of anxiety about our general lack when it came to what fiction writing was actually about. None of us were actually fiction writers, yet we were put into this situation to perform beyond our professional capacity, and had to take responsibility for that. In retrospect, I would still make the project but would have tried a couple more writing exercises with the group; yet I doubt that would actually have changed anything. I felt utterly useless in that workshop. But apparently it got done, so I guess I don't really have to feel so bad after all.

I remember Lawrence Weiner saying in a talk at Tate Modern that he didn't like the word "practice" when it came to art, because he sees art as just doing things. There really isn't any room for practice. You either do it or you don't. Perhaps this might explain why I'm always in some kind of trouble.

L: Could you reflect on your interest in Kenneth Goldsmith's notion of "Uncreative Writing" and appropriation – the notion that "writers don't need to write anything more … they just need to manage the language that already exists"? *

HC: UbuWeb, Kenneth Goldsmith's sprawling and undefinable web archive of all things "avant-garde" is a

> *"I'm not that keen on telling people what they should be doing, as little as luring them into doing something they might not expect themselves to be doing."*

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project that I completely look up to. Over 2500 full length film works alone are accessible here. That's a lot of stuff to encounter! It is an immense resource, and has been an extremely important self-education tool for me. It offers multiple entry points for users across a large spectrum of usages. And that, for me, opens up all kinds of different problematics that we'll need to begin to learn to address, about how we see issues of copyright and distribution alongside what we produce. In light of this, I've also decided to re-stage one of Goldsmith's novels, <u>*Day*</u> (2003), by appropriating an entire newspaper when I turn forty. I'm really looking forward to spending an entire year doing it.

I guess there has been a lot of talk in the last couple of years about artists and archives and it does seem a little jaded to be talking about it right now, even though there is still a lot to think about in terms of a method of utilizing existing material, throwing light on certain details within it, or locating certain idiosyncratic threads in how the archive was put together. I recently also produced a project for the The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (<u>APT7</u>) where the brief from the museum was to primarily think about their twenty year old archive and how it has defined our way of thinking about Asia and the notion of what is produced in Asia as being art. I chose not to place any judgement value on it, to avoid saying that it was good or bad, or retarded or intelligent, but to rather break it down in a manner that would allow for, again this

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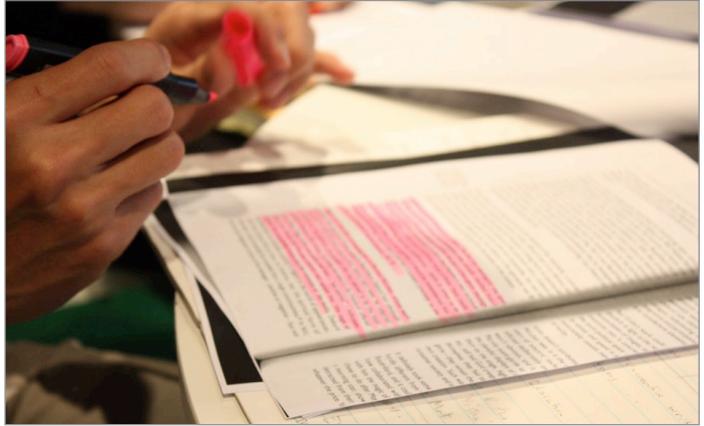
phrase, "multiple entry points" into what we think can and cannot function as an archive.

Similarly, the day that we spent at Asia Art Archive with Nadim Abbas, Mimi Brown, Yuk King Tan and Chantal Wong as part of *Moderation(s)* in January 2013 was very much about providing these kinds of doorways into how we can come to terms with the huge amount of material that is found in their space. We used three entry points on that occasion – "Influence", "Itinerary" and "Moderation" – from which we extracted forty-three quotations from the archive that might allow for further readings into that material via our own very limited experience with the archive. In a way I feel that "A Day At Asia Art Archive" has the capacity to open up a kind of wild zone, not unlike the one found in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 1971 novel *Roadside Picnic*. Sifting through debris. Looking for details. Scavenging in some kind of post-ideological, post-traumatic landscape of information. I like that image.

L: We've been focussing here more on your curatorial and collective activities rather than on your exhibitions or art works per se, although the borders are clearly very permeable. Lets conclude by discussing the recent exhibition you made at Wilkinson in London, *Interview(s)*, itself a collaboration with the artist and writer Anthony Marcellini around "the social life of objects". You both agreed to gather or produce one hundred objects in the months leading up to the show, then with no prior knowledge of the other's

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09 Heman Chong in collaboration with Anthony Marcellini, *Interview(s)* exhibition view
Courtesy of the artists and Wilkinson Gallery, London

choices, installed them together on mirror-topped tables in the week before the opening.

As you both <u>describe</u>, it began "with a series of assumptions about the social life of objects. 1. Objects can represent words or sentences in a conversation. 2. An object moves from insignificance to significance (and vice-versa) when transferred from one person to another. 3. All objects have power by way of their relationships with other objects, ourselves included. 4. There are other levels of value to objects, on top of the values certain systems attach, personal, monetary, symbolic, nostalgic, which shift and change over time, sometimes quickly and sometimes very slowly. 5. Time slows down and speeds up due to our relationships with objects. 6. Objects tell stories. 7. Stories are also objects."

The staging of the exhibition seemed concerned to emphasize correspondence in terms of the dialogue you had between the two of you, whether during the discussions you doubtless had at distance over Skype beforehand, or when negotiating how to arrange the objects on the tables

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in the gallery. It also presents correspondence in terms of the correlations between the two sets of objects. Two questions related to this: Were the assumptions you began with "proven"? From your point of view, how has the internet changed our relationship with proximity and the social lives of (art) objects?

HC: Perhaps Anthony can interject at this point…

Anthony Marcellini: At the risk of sounding evasive I think *Interview(s)* was the answer to the first question, so I will move onto the second one.

I think our relationship to objects has certainly changed with the internet becoming the central repository of knowledge. It is certainly not the most expansive, but for those with access it is the first place people turn to for information. Bruno Latour has described our current virtual era as kind of the opposite of Plato's "<u>Allegory of the Cave</u>". In Plato's cave we have to go outside the cave to understand that the shadows, which we mistook for reality in the cave, are simply shadows of reality. But now we go inside the internet for information, we do not go outside the cave to see reality, for when we go outside we see nothing. In a way Latour's perspective is a bit of a stretch, and perhaps a bit technophobic, but it is clear that our way of sourcing information has shifted, from several instruments and several communication devices into basically one. And thus our relationship to these instruments, to these objects, to the objects which they refer, to changes – they are no longer the most direct source of information. Although this is true for any of the great advances in information technology.

What is interesting for me is when certain objects quit being necessary they become in a way autonomous, more independent and more mysterious. Heidegger has an idea about objects that is related, and is referred to by another philosopher named Graham Harman as Heidegger's "<u>Tool-Being</u>". Heidegger says that a thing only comes into being to us, as an autonomous object, an object in and of itself, when it breaks or ceases to function. When a doorknob no longer opens a door we investigate it, and question: what is this thing? How does it work? Why is it shaped like it is? When the internet becomes a library where we can read full books, we start to question what

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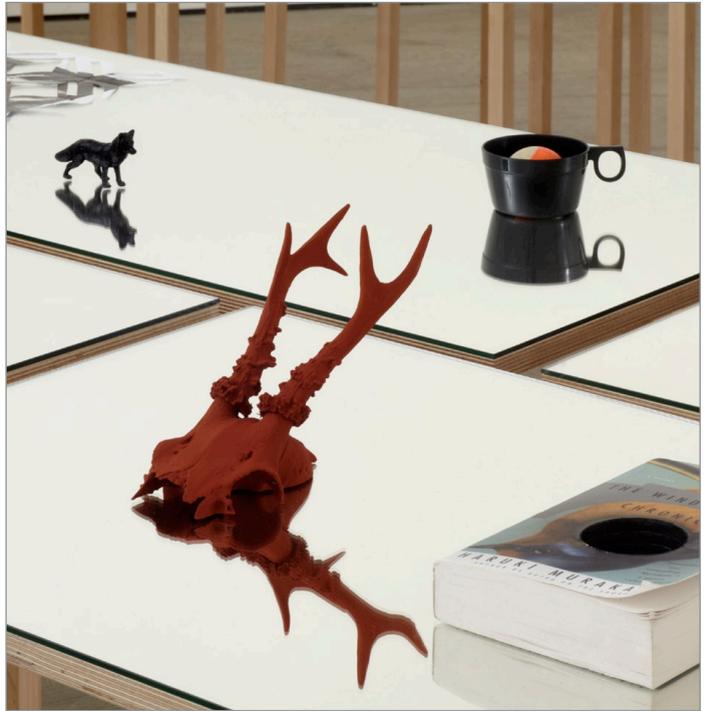
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a book as an object is. Furthermore, when it becomes a place where we can watch lectures by artists, writers or philosophers, where we can attend classes, or go to the theatre, we start to question what these experiences are. So in the sense that the internet has broken our relation-ship to certain objects and experiences, it has changed our understanding of objects. Perhaps objects become less fa-miliar and then perhaps more strange, more curious to us.

As an artist who was quite active in socially engaged practice and theory in the early 2000s, and studied in a program centred on "social practice", I think it is not simply the internet that has changed our relationship to objects but also our experience with more relational/par-ticipatory aesthetics that has significantly changed how we approach objects. Sculptures are no longer static objects, but things that can be played with and which play back. Paintings are not just wallpaper, neither is wall paper for that matter, but fields that shift and structure how we

10 Heman Chong in collaboration with Anthony Marcellini, *Interview(s)* exhibition view
Courtesy of the artists and Wilkinson Gallery, London

see the world afterwards. We have also seen a dramatic increase in the ways audiences have changed in how they relate to artworks, much more damage has been inflicted by audiences on more static artworks, sometimes deliberate, sometimes not, I think basically because they have been trained to think about these things as not static, but fluid objects or gestures. I think, in a sense, this is correct way to be, these objects are much more autonomous than art history or their authors have lead us to believe.

I suppose you could also argue that the proliferation of relational/participatory practices coincides or is influenced by the growth and aesthetics of the internet, and I would not disagree with this, one of Nicolas Bourriaud's arguments is that "Relational Aesthetics" serves to decrease alienation and the loss of social bond produced by the society of the spectacle, which the internet could be argued as an extension of, a commodity generating engine. But what I think is more clear, and perhaps much more interesting, is that they are two sides of the same systems–theory–coin which flipped in the 1960s and 70s. Mark Leckey makes similar arguments in his amazing lecture *Mark Leckey in the Long Tail* (2009), which I have only seen online. This coin likely has more than two sides; there are other advances in ways of seeing and gathering information that are also affecting how we think of things, research into the relationships between the human body, bacteria and viruses, or the body as a brain or animal–human relations and animal–vegetable relations to name a few. All these ways of understanding are making the world into a much stranger place which just simply shifts how we think about all the things that occupy it, and our relationships with and through them. **#**

'Digression(s), Entry Point(s): An Interview
with Heman Chong' by Latitudes
(Max Andrews & Mariana Cánepa Luna)

2 April 2013

Part of the research project and
e-book series *#OpenCurating*
www.LTTDS.org/projects/opencurating

Editor and design:
Latitudes www.LTTDS.org

#OpenCurating is a research project by
Latitudes produced through *La Capella.
BCN Producció 2012* of the Institut de
Cultura de Barcelona.

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