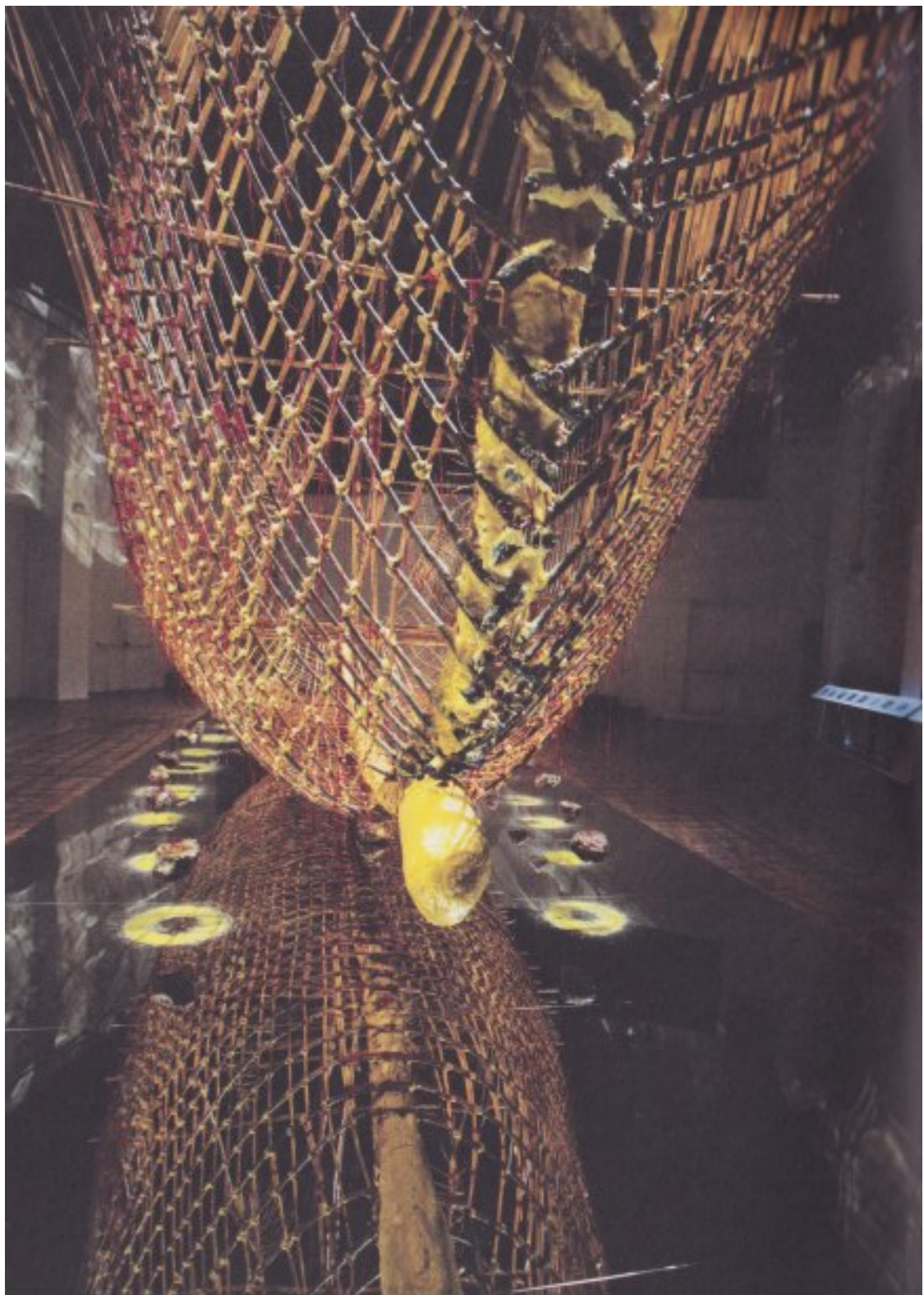


Theatreworks
ARTISTIC DIRECTION ONG KENG SEN

72-13

DAPUNTA HYANG:
TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE
ZAI KUNING

12 APRIL – 13 MAY 2018



We at TheatreWorks have very much followed Zai's artistic journey since the late 1990s and *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* is a culmination and in a manner, a celebration of the many years of his research related to uncovering the pre-colonial histories of the Riau Archipelago and its people. It is a work that began with a 2001 residency with TheatreWorks and lasted 18 years. In these years, Zai compulsively delved deeply into the *orang laut* community as well as the Mak Yong (nomadic Malay opera).

Not only does the work surface questions of identity, culture and history amongst the Malays in Southeast Asia, it also speaks of displacement where original peoples are displaced from lands that they once belonged. It reminds us of the ever-changing nature and the volatility of the geo-politics of the region that we live in. At the same time, it urges the viewer to look past the obvious, the documented and the prevailing histories. A timely reminder that our own history began more than 200 years ago.

Undoubtedly, the work celebrates the human, the marks people make on the world. When I was in Venice last May, I was inspired and determined to bring the work back to Singapore and to 72-13. It is not only about delivering a good work to our Singapore-based audiences; but also a testament that research and processes for the arts must be supported; even if it takes 18 years to come into fruition. An artist's journey often begins with no pre-determined outcome.

TheatreWorks and I are grateful to be part of this journey and 72-13 is but a sojourn for the work. There are many who have contributed to make it possible. On behalf of TheatreWorks, I would like to thank the many, while special thanks goes to Zai, Shiyun, T. K. Sabapathy, Tamares, the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

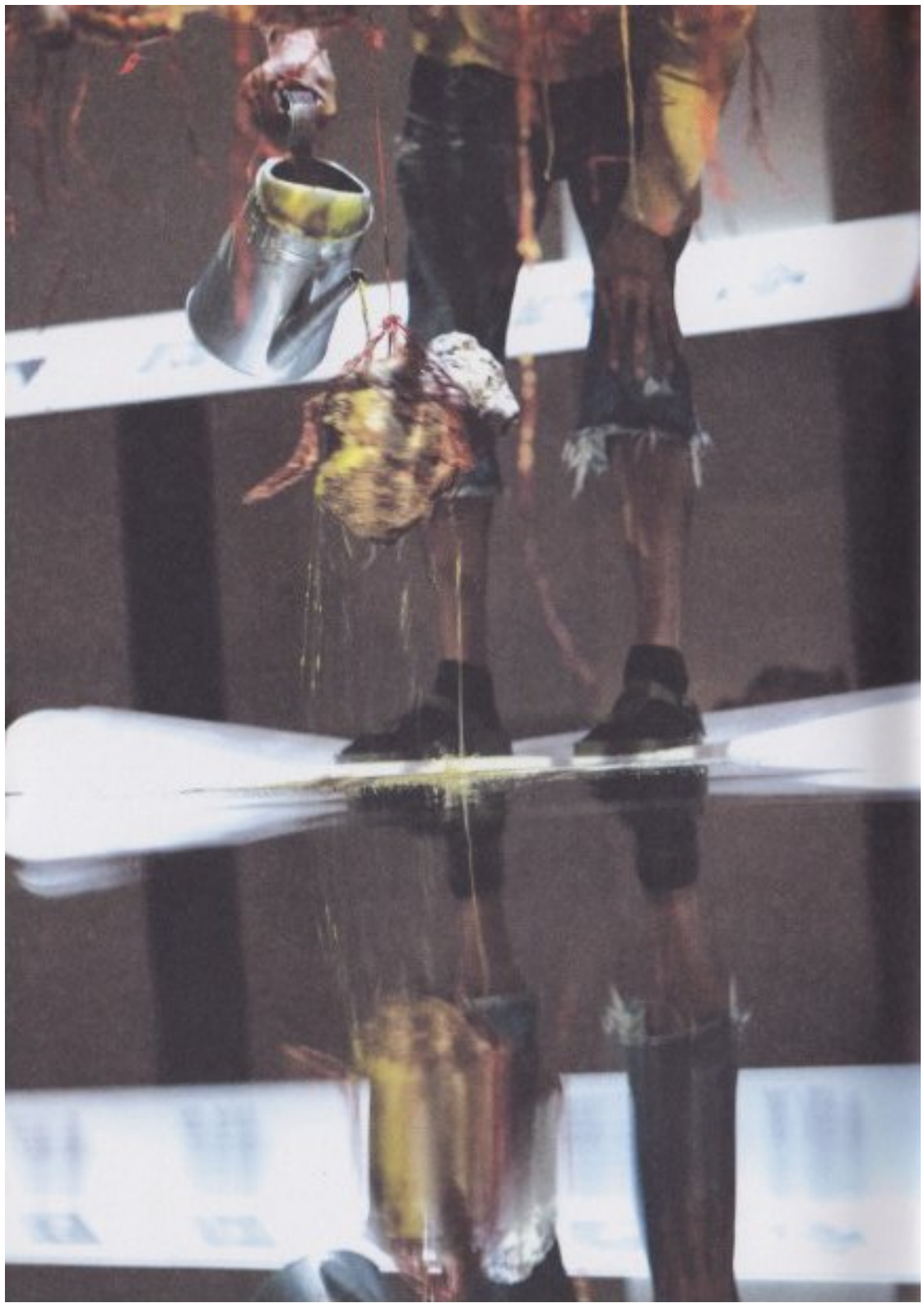
Tay Tong
Managing Director, TheatreWorks (Singapore)

Is it enough to know or believe that the Malay or
Singapore history begins from the 14th century,
just a few hundred years ago?
How is that possible?

How could we have forgotten that our ancestors
came from a much older time?

What exactly is my interest here, I ask myself?

– Zai Kuning



That which always was: resurfaced and reimagined

TAMARES GOH

The skeleton of a ship that traverses the exhibition hall is at once imposing and fragile. This imagined ship recalls a heroic past, one of leading an invincible fleet of 20,000 men. It is steered by a prominent Malay king, Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa of the Srivijayan Empire. Residing here, it is more than a vessel. It is an important symbol of a world that has dissipated. It represents a traditional form of movement and migration, both of the physical and also of the communication of knowledge. It is a pre-modern mode of human transport, both a home unto itself and a conduit that connects people across conventional territories. Where the land presents unknown beasts and uncharted terrain, the sea is vast and wide, a seemingly more natural body to navigate than the land, where paths and roads need to be built. This fluid expanse is the glue that connects different lands. Metaphorically, the vessel bears witness to the peoples' narratives of memory and experience, from as far back as the 7th century.

In parallel, other living mechanisms and their ecosystems attest to this ancient history's narrative. Where the rivers and the salt-waters meet, robust and unique ecological communities such as the mangrove swamps thrive. The dwellers of the mangrove swamps form a complex self-leveraging organisation: microbes, insects, flora, fauna, and humans — the *orang laut* (sea people). The *orang laut* were the first people who navigated these seas and rivers for sustenance, who established their homes on the brackish waters and lived amongst these mangrove swamps. They have a symbiotic relationship with the sea and the living beings at the coastal shorelines. Cohabiting, the *orang laut* and organisms in the swamp-lands have proven to be resilient to the agitation of Nature, as they relied on the local ecosystems and became integral to such ecosystems. Generation after generation, together they bore witness to a shifting landscape, encroached by humans' obsession with exploiting the resources offered by the land. One of the *orang laut* elders once told Zai Kuning, "All of them talk about progress, but we tell ourselves that this is a curse which has fallen upon us and it is the end of us. We do not die immediately, but slowly."¹

Today, no one knows what the historical ship, the swamp-lands and their natural vegetation, or the generations of *orang laut* have seen. We can only guess from the remains of the stories told via oral tradition and the fragments of historical residues and accounts. The craft of a historian is piecing these together diligently, with evidence such as artefacts, found inscriptions or discovered sites, while the artist expands on this world through observations and imaginations, retelling a story through his art. It is the artist who acts as a catalyst, bringing into existence a physical space for imagination to take hold.





An artist's journey, led by his imagination and possibilities, usually begins without a known outcome. It is the artist who often gives forth the day's tasks and determines what constitutes his reap at the end of the day. The artist's exploration is provoked by the spirit of intuitive investigation, and typically has no predetermined agenda or set destination. Because of the unforeseen nature of such investigations, the risk of disappointment is ever-present. For an artist like Zai Kuning, the genesis of this project began without a known outcome. It was prompted by a faraway childhood memory made manifest into a dream, of the *orang laut*, propelling him to search for these people. Holding on to this vision, he began a single-minded, even obsessive, search for them. From his first encounter with the *orang laut* in 1999, Zai developed a residency proposal for TheatreWorks in 2001, initially thinking that he would be a temporary sojourner while he developed this work.² Unbeknownst to him at the time, this project would last more than two decades, as he delved deep within the *orang laut* community and, for the last 13 years, into the Mak Yong (nomadic Malay opera) community where he was called 'a son'. These explorations were prompted by a symbol or a vision, little discoveries or findings that provided a creative impetus beyond the bounds of a conventional rationale.



For the artist explores certain truths via the imagination: an intuitive search to discover and to uncover. Stemming from his humble longing and personal pledge to come close to the natives of the land, to living with islanders and later on, reviving a latent Malay operatic group, Zai's journeys could only be vested in hope and optimism. Yet, it was not without periods of disappointment. While the sea may appear calm, one cannot be certain of its true depths, where perils may lurk. Sometimes the distant horizon may seem to be one's only guide. Often led by dreams of a symbol, Zai responds with an innate knowledge. Waiting was the key deterrent or determinant for his vision. The gestation period for a project such as *Dapunta Hyang* was long and many a time, prolonged. Many a time, there was a dull aching in the not-knowing and waiting. Along the way, he had to be patient.

The exhibition features portraits of Mak Yong performers, accompanied by a faint aural recording of a Mak Yong master speaking in an old Malay language, a language that is not widely spoken today. Mak Yong is an ancient form of Malay opera, rooted in animist and Hindu beliefs, that was once popular across Dapunta Hyang's empire. Because the roots are so distant from the Islamic iconography of today — deemed too obscure and difficult, sacrilegious even — in appropriating it for a wider audience in Malaysia and Indonesia, modern and shorter versions have been derived by the state.³ The authentic version has become endangered, sustained by only a few remaining masters. The portraits were made based on Zai's instructions and taken by his long-time collaborator, documentarian Wichai Juntavaro. The series of portraits focuses on the faces of individuals from the Mak Yong community, all varied features across the generations. In the older generation, the textured skin and almost-blind murky eyes are stark descriptors of the islanders' daily encounters with the open sea and the harsh sunlight. Some Mak Yong performers who have settled on the island of Mantang have very similar features to the orang laut who live among the mangrove swamps nearby, an indication that they could be direct descendants of the original people in the region. Viewed together, the portraits and audio recordings are living proof of an older Malay world made up of different customs, practices and beliefs.





Any material an artist chooses would need ample pertinence, not only because of the material quality itself; the materials would carry inherent meanings, forming natural dialogues, associations and readings. In material terms, *Dapunta Hyang* resonates with meaning. The ship is made entirely of rattan, bound by red strings and beeswax. There are no nails, nor any permanent fixtures in the construction. Its muscular structure and mighty persona is made plausible, on tighter scrutiny, by the choice of tensile pliability and soft materials — a poetic contradiction. Zai admires the quality of tenacity in rattan, an old-world climbing palm that is characterised by its soft and flexible woody stem, and that is found almost exclusively in Southeast Asia. Natural beeswax, on the other hand, is a medium that the artist has been using since 1995. It was used in the ancient world for embalming. Enveloped in wax, the rattan ship and the books resemble relics, ossified and lifted from the depths of the ocean perhaps, or preserved for centuries and only recently uncovered. The strings that tie all the objects together are not only a representation of rudimentary binding techniques, but also symbolise an indelible bloodline that connects all descendants of Dapunta Hyang, or indeed all humans.

On exploring Zai's process and palette, we observe a personal voyage and desire to establish a sense of belonging and cultural identity. There is an associated emotional charge, grafted onto an existing material narrative as an extension of a personal and specific vocabulary; both conditions co-exist, allowing a personal and collective reading to take place simultaneously.

Framed within this expression is a series of interconnected fundamental forms: the sampan (boat); the grave; the leaf; the shape of the eyes; cusped palms of the people; and prominently so, the structure of the ship — all sharing a rhomboid anatomy. The grave's lozenge shape also carries a notion of birth (or rebirth) with its echoes of the vulva, effectively linking life with death. On Zai's recent journey⁴, he discovered many Buddhist motifs in Sumatra and, most significantly, the motif of a rhombus engraved in the tombs of royalty at Bukit Seguntang in Palembang. This particular form, now strongly etched in his mind, has been used prior to the trip repeatedly in his sculptures and drawings. These new sightings affirmed and reconnected Zai's perception. Another incidental discovery was the curious use of incense sticks that are not associated with the modern Malay world today. Zai observed that they were still used as instruments for worship at one's ancestral grave on Bukit Seguntang. The sightings of other forms of relics and rituals have piqued the artist's curiosity and imagination, about a world that has not been well documented, or rather, a once-firm belief system eroded over time.

The first Maharaja of Srivijaya's historical account; the cultural traditions of Mak Yong; the natural way of life of the *orang laut* — they all have a fragile existence. Running alongside each other, in their tender plight, an abysmal sense of displacement occurs: Dapunta Hyang is now only a distant myth, the Mak Yong, a precarious and brittle tradition with no certain future, and the indigenous people of the Southeast Asian lands are ostracised and seen as outsiders. Zai communicates a poignant need to resurface questions of identity, culture and history amongst Malays in Southeast Asia. Questions are now possible, as we move toward new revelations and dialogues made plausible by the stimulant of this recapitulation. This personal calling reminds us that history is not just documentation but it is lived, often painfully, where original peoples are now perceived as aliens or outlaws in the modern territories where they once belonged.



With the metaphor of the voyage, both imagined and witnessed, *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* repositions an old, submerged history through a personal narrative. Importantly, it is the awakening of a certain consciousness in all of us, one that would otherwise be overlooked or buried by louder, more strident political agendas in the wider world. One can only hope that the more knowledge we gather, the more truths we can reveal. Naturally here, Zai becomes the fluid extension of this oral tradition. This artwork can be viewed as an ongoing phase, between the oral tradition and its eventual transposition into the artwork. An elixir for stimulation for the artist is that possibilities through connections, the sighting of symbols that allude to vision, chance and fateful encounters, all can and must exist. Furthermore, as the dream and journey of the artist continues, we must recognise that this is ongoing and would be only true of the work itself.

BIOGRAPHY

Tamara Goh is an artist who currently heads the Curatorial Programme at the National Gallery Singapore. She was the appointed Producer of *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* presented at Singapore Pavilion in the 57th Venice Biennale. She teaches the Cultural and Creative Industries module as a part-time lecturer at the School of Art Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University. As the former Head of Visual Arts at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, she curated exhibitions at the arts centre since 2003. She was also the co-curator of the Singapore Biennale in 2013. She has been working alongside Zai Kuning in many of his exhibitions/productions since 1995. In 2004, on Mantang island, she was amongst the first to witness and support Zai's efforts in putting together the Mak Yong troupe to perform for their local islanders, after 20 years of non-appearance.

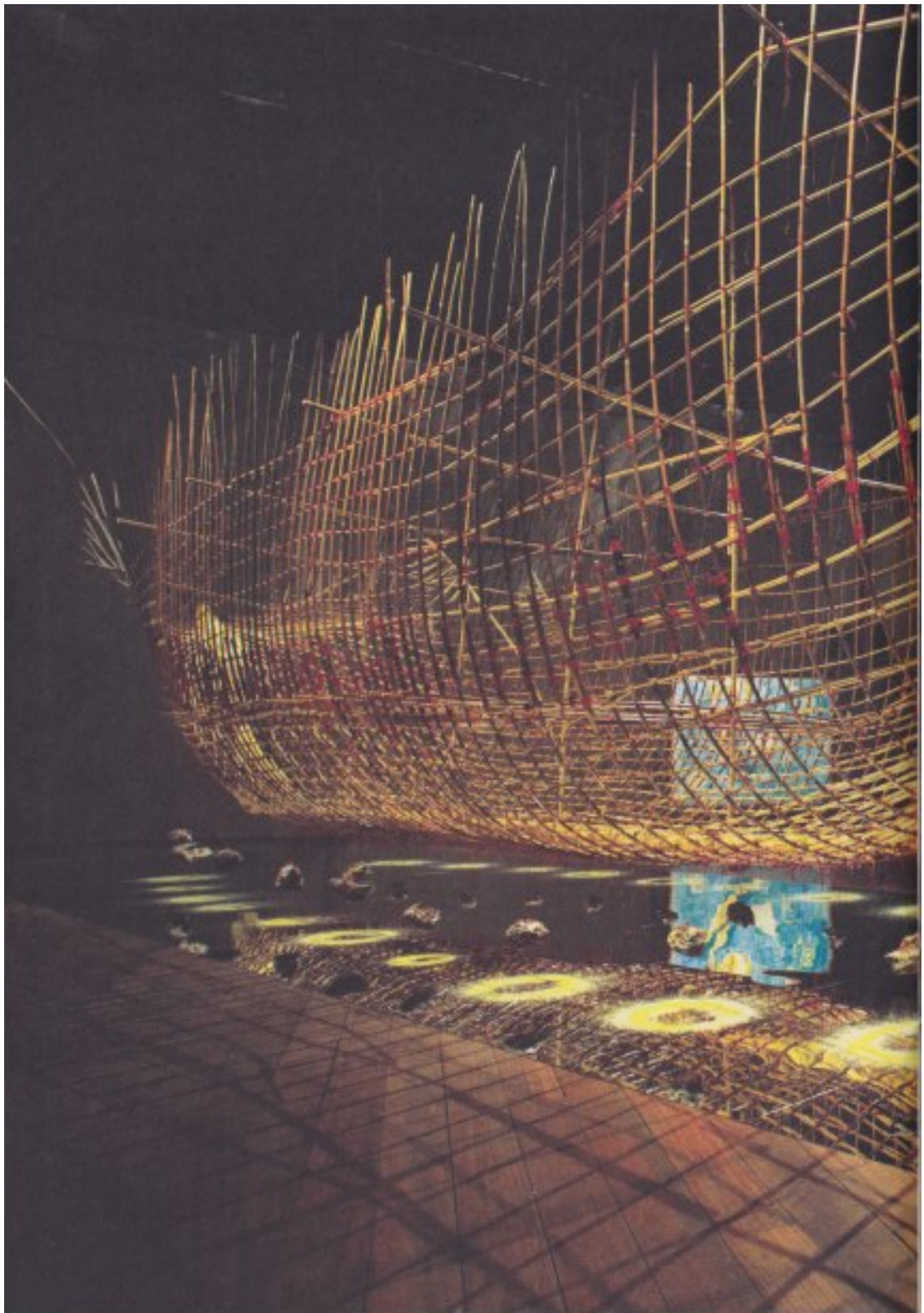
Endnotes

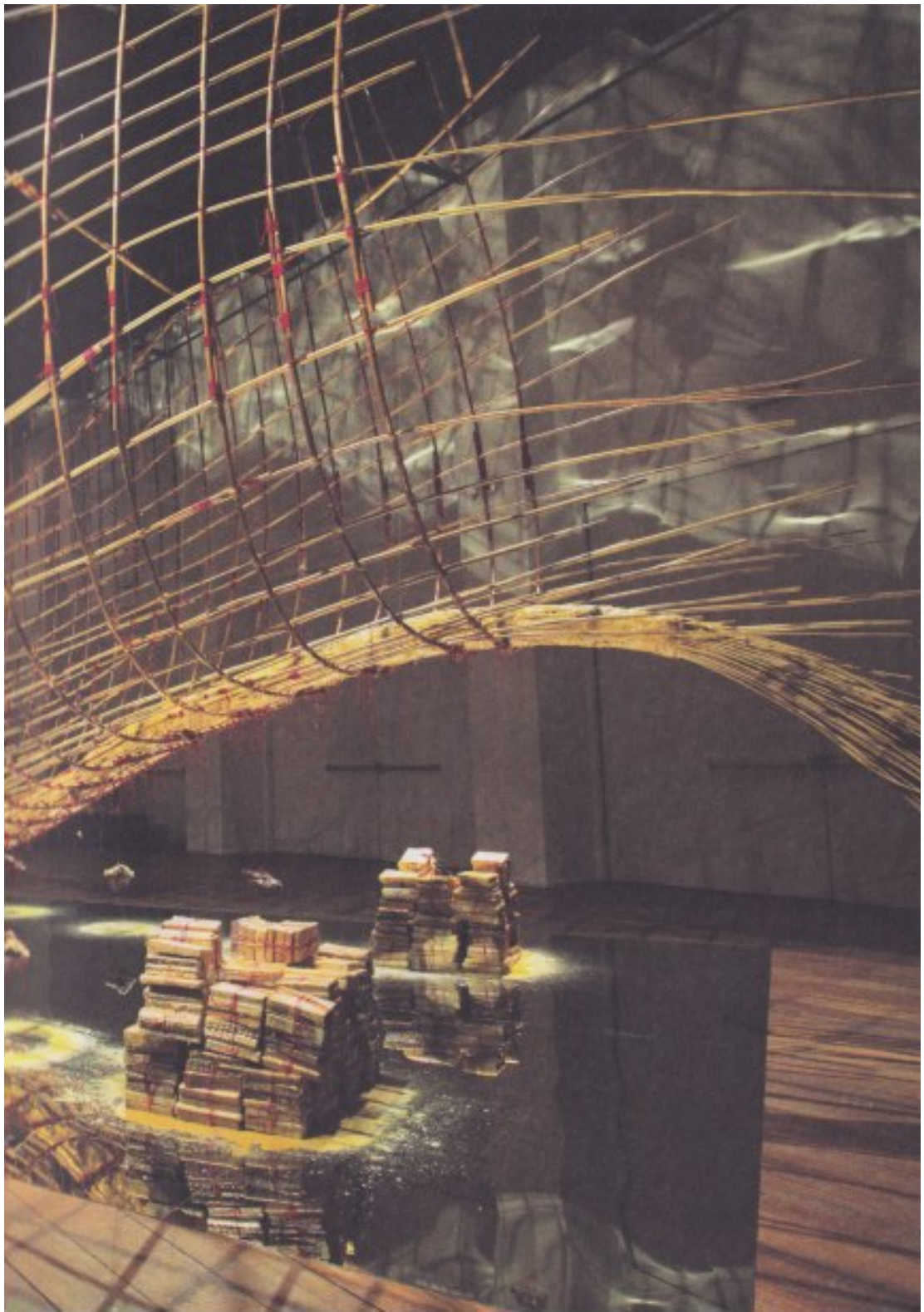
¹ Kuning, Zai 2017 "Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk". *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, p. 30.

² After his residency at TheatreWorks, he continued with the project, documenting the orang laut community. In 2005, Zai completed the short film *Riau* about the plight of the community. In the same year, the film was screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Busan International Film Festival and at The 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. The work is now part of the permanent collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Singapore Art Museum and M+ Museum (Hong Kong).

³ Over 13 years, Zai has witnessed the journey of a Mak Yong troupe in Mantang island near Tanjung Pinang in the Riau Archipelago, Indonesia. The troupe struggles to upkeep their tradition as they are faced with financial difficulties, having no audience to sustain their performance. To encourage their hard work and to find an audience that does not perceive Mak Yong as a mere cultural showcase, Zai has invited the troupe several times to perform, first, on their own island and subsequently, the neighbouring islands. Of note recently: the troupe passed the baton on to a younger generation of performers who took the initiative to stage this traditional opera on the New Year's eve of 2017. Kuning, Zai 2017 "Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk". *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, p. 88 — 91 [Fig. 31 - 36]

⁴ For this edition of the work at the 57th Venice Biennale, Zai commissioned photographer Wichai Juntavaro to document some existing sites and remaining relics in Phatthalung and Chaiys (Thailand), as well as Palembang and Jambi (Sumatra, Indonesia), to discover the history, vast landscape and influence of Srivijaya. After visiting Bukit Seguntang in Palembang where Dapunta Hyang and his descendants once lived, Zai, in his interview with the author of this essay (Feb 2017), said he felt he had made an important pilgrimage.





About Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge

The genesis of *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* began in 2001, when Zai Kuning went in search of the *orang laut* (sea people), one of the oldest inhabitants of the Riau Archipelago, as part of TheatreWorks (Singapore) artist residency programme. 3 years later, he encountered a troupe which performs a form of the ancient Malay opera, Mak Yong, and has been working with the troupe to keep the art form alive.

Zai's encounters with the *orang laut* and Mak Yong performers as bearers of old traditions who are marginalised and discriminated prompted him to delve deeper into Malay history, thus evoking the name of the first Malay King, Dapunta Hyang Jayanasa, as the central figure of a series of installation works. The first of the series, *Dapunta Mapping the Melayu*, was presented at Ota Fine Arts (Singapore) in 2014. In the same year, *Fleeting World of Dapunta Hyang* was shown at Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Singapore. *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* was then presented at Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore (2015), Art Basel Hong Kong (2015), Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2015), and the 57th Venice Biennale (2017).

The current siting of the work at TheatreWorks (Singapore) / 72-13 attempts to give audiences a purview of the larger context from which *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* emerges from, including the film *RIAU* (2004), a video compilation of site visits to the old capitals of the Srivijayan Empire, and previous publications that relate the artist's pursuit in resurfacing questions on identity, culture and history.

<https://dapuntahyang2018.wordpress.com/>

Exhibition Venue

72-13, Mohamed Sultan Road

Opening Hours

13 April to 13 May 2018 (except Mondays), 12pm to 7pm

Opening hours are extended to 10pm on 19 April, 26 April, 4 & 5 May 2018

PUBLIC PROGRAMMES**Three Mountains in Malay History**

Public lecture by John N. Mksic

19 April 2018, Thu, 7.30pm

Symbolic Content in Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge

Public lecture by T. K. Sabapathy

26 April 2018, Thu, 7.30pm

Chronicles of Amnesia

Film Screening with live music by Zai Kuning (Singapore), Mike Cooper (UK)

4 & 5 May 2018, Fri & Sat, 8pm

Guided Tours

14 April, 21 April, 28 April, 5 May, 12 May 2018, Sat, 3pm

To attend these programmes, please register at

<https://dapuntahyangtalkseventbrite.sg>

Artist Biography



ZAI KUNING was born in 1964 and lives and works in Singapore. Having worked with an array of sculpture, installation, painting and drawing, experimental sound and music, video, film, performance art, dance and theatre for more than 2 decades, Zai resists convenient categorial claims in his art-making. Multi-disciplinary and improvisational art practices have always been important to him.




Today he is considered one of the most versatile artists working in the region, and is at the forefront of avant-garde practice in Singapore.

Zai is currently represented by Ota Fine Arts, Singapore/Tokyo.

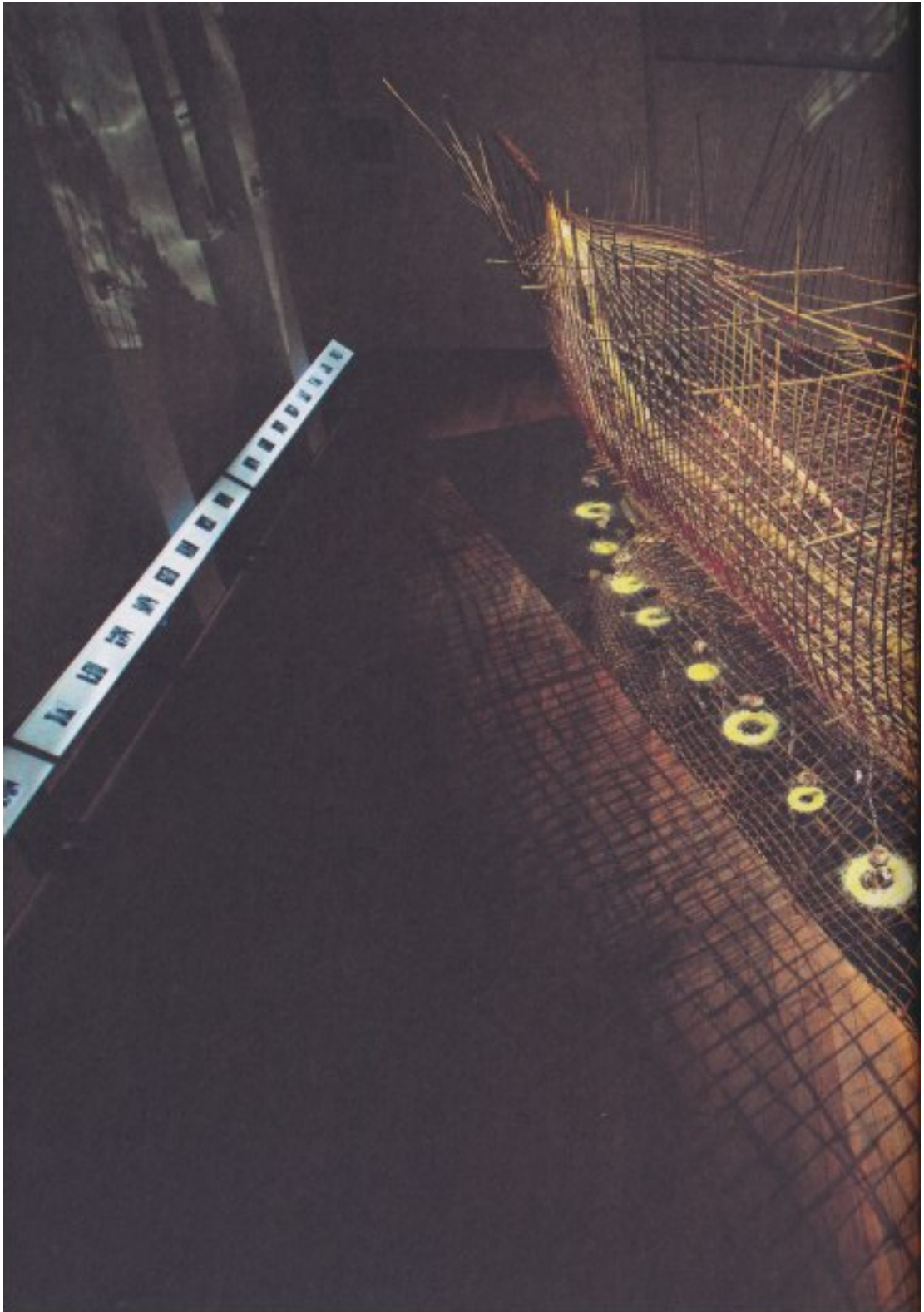
About TheatreWorks

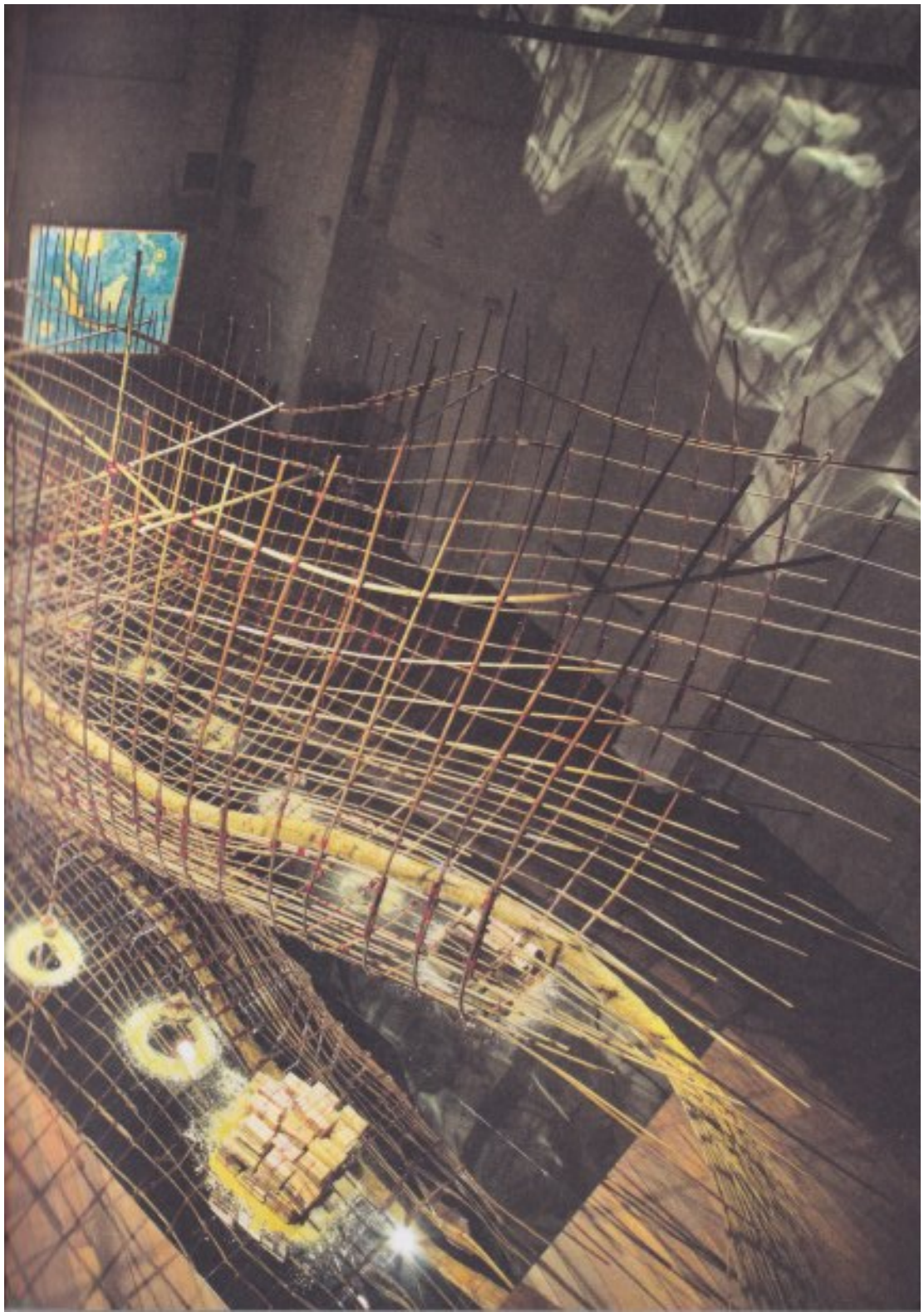
TheatreWorks, established in 1985, is an independent and international performance company based in Singapore and is unique for its reinvention of traditional performances through a juxtaposition of aesthetics. TheatreWorks has two main red lines in its work: the first is the creation and presentation of inter-disciplinary and intercultural programmes, and the second being documentary performances. TheatreWorks reflects a concern with negotiation, synergy, and artistic sharing between individuals and societies. TheatreWorks has consciously created its home, 72-13, to have more diverse and inclusive dialogues. TheatreWorks intends to share the transcendental potential of art through innovative contemporary performances engaging audiences with uncommon alternatives.

www.theatreworks.org.sg | www.72-13.com

 Theatreworks Singapore   [theatreworkssg](https://www.facebook.com/theatreworkssg)

TheatreWorks (Singapore) Ltd is supported by the National Arts Council under the Major Company Scheme for the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019.





Acknowledgements

TheatreWorks expresses our thanks and appreciation to the following for their belief in the work and for their contribution.

Dr T. K. Sabapathy

Ms Lin Shiyun
Ms Tamares Goh

Dr John N. Mksic
Mr Mike Cooper

The National Arts Council & Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

Mr Paul Tan
Mr Low Eng Teong

Ota Fine Arts, Mr Hidenori Ota, Ms Yasuko Kaneko and Mr Yohsuke Ishizuka

Mr Tan Puay Hin
Mr William Lim & Mrs Lena Lim
Dr C.J. W.-L. Wee

Mantang Mak Yong troupe, Pak Gani Bin Yahya and Pak Dormat Bin Muhamad

Project and editorial teams of Singapore Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale

Ms Pattree Chimnok

All Press & Media

Supported by



Credits

Advisors

T. K. Sabapathy
Tamara Goh

Executive Producer

Tay Tong

Producer

Lin Shiyun

Production & Technical Management

Exhibition Lighting
ARTFACTORY

Exhibition Technicians

Corrado Battorti
Enrico Fabris
Enrico Seno (Jobs)
Jed Lim
Zamier Abu Bakar

Mak Yong Performers' Portraiture

Wichai Juntavaro

Map Illustration

Foo Kwee Horng

Sound Recording and Mastering

Zai Tang

Sound Engineer (Live Performance)

Shah Tahir

Moderator (Public Lectures)

Alvin Lim Eng Hui

Art Assistant / Documentation

Jevon Chandra

Gallery Sitters

Teo Swee Leng
Regina Foo
Zee Wong

Documentation

Tan Ngiap Heng
Tracy Chin
Ben Tanaka

Graphic Design

Chang Sheau Ling

Engagement

Ahmad Ezzat Alkaff

Administration

Mervyn Quek
Ong Soo Mei

This exhibition guide is published on
the occasion of the exhibition:

Zai Kuning
Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge
72-13 Mohamed Sultan Road
12 April – 13 May 2018

Published by: TheatreWorks (Singapore)
Images by: Tan Ngiap Heng

All rights reserved.
Publication ©2018 TheatreWorks (Singapore)



