

Kang Ouw 《侠客行》

Throughout the multifarious practice of Boedi Widjaja, long-running projects frequently intersect through the artist's constantly evolving, layered and astute examinations of language, cultural identity, home, diaspora and longing, often informed by his autobiographical immigrant experiences. This childhood that witnessed Widjaja's move from his hometown in Solo, Indonesia to Singapore at the age of nine continues to inform and shape his understanding of cultural hybridity and invention. Moreover, his initial encounter of life in Singapore speaking only Bahasa Indonesia and a Javanese dialect continues to be one of many contributing factors that have moulded his current perspectives on language: as a complicated material, which evolves and intertwines with the contours of people, time and place.



Installation view of *Kang Ouw 《侠客行》*, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

Examined in the context of his exhibition at the Esplanade Tunnel, Widjaja's indelible connections with language are perhaps best explored by zeroing in on the exhibition's two-part title. A transliteration from the Chinese Hokkien dialect into Bahasa Indonesia and spelt in Dutch phonology, *kang ouw* literally means "rivers and lakes" or *jianghu* (江湖) in Mandarin. In *wuxia* films and novels, *jianghu* refers to an impermanent and imagined space set in dynastic China for the wandering swordsmen, with plots frequently viewed as running parallel to or tangentially with society. Gaining

popularity in the 1960s, *wuxia* films and their fantastical action-filled scenes with storylines driven by notions of justice circulated among overseas Chinese communities. They often produced alternative subjectivities of traditional Chinese culture by indulging the nostalgia of this diasporic community, fuelling their constructions of Chinese identity from the periphery. For Widjaja, the *Kang Ouw* series (2018 – ongoing) draw upon the memory of watching *wuxia* films as an adolescent to connect with his Chinese ethnicity. Deliberately choosing to title this series of works *Kang Ouw* rather than its Mandarin Chinese equivalent, he emphasises the significance of hybridity, translation and transliteration. In his practice, this movement of words and meaning entails creating circuits that run between language, script and other visual or aural forms to evoke visceral sensations backgrounded on Widjaja's ever-evolving ways of artistic expression.



Kang Ouw, 侠客行, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

Proceeding to examine 《侠客行》 (*Xia Ke Xing*, Ode to Gallantry)—the second part of the exhibition title—this shift across languages and scripts encroaches into graphical forms, inspired by the climactic scene in the titular Chinese *wuxia* fiction by Jin Yong. This pivotal episode sees the novel's main protagonist decode poems inscribed in a labyrinth of caves. Being illiterate, he saw the writings as images, responded to their graphical form and inadvertently attained mastery in the ultimate martial arts technique that eluded his lettered counterparts and predecessors. Evoking the indecipherable characters engraved in those caves, observed in two works—*Kang Ouw, 侠客行* and *Kang Ouw, Ninefold* (both 2022)—are different

configurations of an architectonic-numerical script that the artist devised. Emblazoned on suspended banners that alter our perception of the Tunnel space by enclosing upon the viewer, these cryptic pictorial forms encode Chinese characters through the language's telegraphic code system. For example, in *Kang Ouw*, 侠客行, seven blue and red banners line the glass-tiled wall of the Esplanade Tunnel and systematically reference the four-digit Chinese telegraphic code assigned to the characters “侠”, “客” and “行” (0204, 1356 and 5887, respectively). Employing a similar methodology, the six blue and white banners on the concrete wall encode the eponymous poem by Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai that greatly influenced Jin Yong's *Ode to Gallantry*. Consistent with Widjaja's long-term fascination with the act of tracing, in these banners of Li Bai's poem, the artistic gesture of transference moves beyond the conventions of the drawn image or written word to also include other modes of transmission that adapt a source material in a variety of ways. Further building upon this, Widjaja also encoded Li Bai's 《侠客行》 in the haunting sounds and reverberations of the gamelan that envelop the Esplanade Tunnel, furthering multisensorial encounters with its primary source.

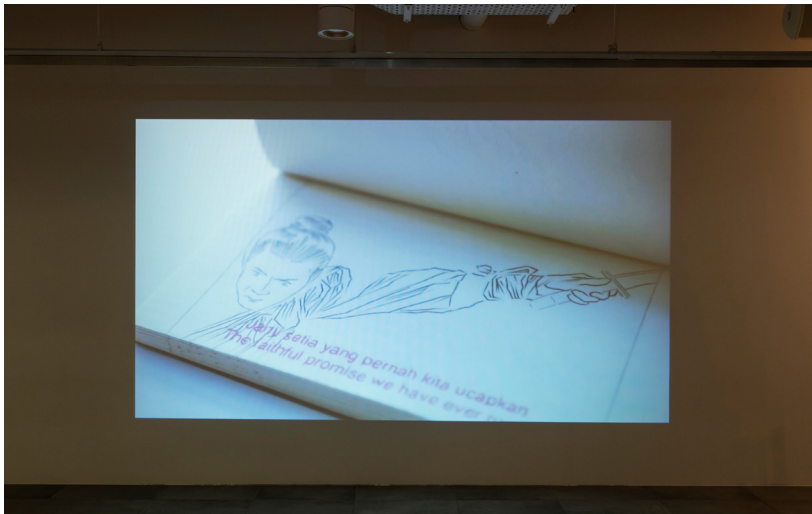


Kang Ouw, Ninefold, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

In addition to the banners, in the exhibition *Kang Ouw* 《侠客行》, scenes and episodes from *wuxia* films are distilled and reproduced into drawings, a single-channel video, and a four-channel algorithmic generated video. While the *xia* (侠, knight-errant figures) are dislocated from the lawless and imagined space of the *jianghu* and organised into new forms, Widjaja's conscious selection of particular scenes and episodes are also motivated by the narratives of their



Detail of *Kang Ouw*, 残刀, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.



Tanpa Bayangan Mu (Shadowless), Boedi Widjaja, 2020.

celluloid antecedents. For instance, the 99 nonidentical drawings in *Kang Ouw*, 残刀 (*can dao*, broken sword) (2022) and *Tanpa Bayangan Mu (Shadowless)* (2020) depict the titular character in the 1967 *wuxia* film *One-Armed Swordsman*. Losing his arm in a moment of violence, the one-armed swordsman later went on to master an unorthodox sword technique from a half-torn manual and wielded a broken sword inherited from his late father. For Widjaja, repeated

scenes from the film of the one-armed swordsman raising his sole arm before he struck represented a physical, transformative gesture that embodies the memory of rupture and absence. In *Kang Ouw*, 残刀, these complex and layered emotional states are captured in the way the work is created and presented. Rendered in delicate red strokes on canvas, the stillness of the one-armed swordsman when presented linearly is unnerving. However, as the drawings rotate and cascade to fill the entire wall space, our attention is shifted from his frontal gaze and is recast into a spatial encounter. In 24 of 99 drawings, the presence of language and translation recurs through Widjaja's tracing of the poem *Rivers and lakes/ Tanah dan air/ Land and water/ Sungai sejarah* handwritten by his father and re-ordered in 24 permutations.



Kang Ouw, 江湖水土, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

Encircling back to the four-channel channel algorithmic generated video *Kang Ouw*, 江湖水土 (*jianghu shuitu*, rivers and lakes, water and land) (2022), Widjaja assembles and distorts film stills of figures, landscapes and texts from the critically acclaimed 1967 *wuxia* film *Dragon Inn* and its 1992 remake *New Dragon Gate Inn*. Dislocated from the *jianghu*, Widjaja constructs an abstracted space in the Esplanade Tunnel for these wandering knight-errant figures and the peripheral surroundings that they inhabit. Projected as disk-like or soft-edged moving vignettes, the figures, landscapes and texts selected by Widjaja lie suspended between voids of negative space and are further put out of place from their original contexts and departing from the source material. Experienced in its totality, *Kang Ouw* 《侠客行》 Widjaja embraces the gaps of the *jianghu* and the spirit of the knight-errant figure to produce this liminal space in the Esplanade Tunnel drawn from his own multicultural imagination.

In Conversation with the Artist

LYNDA TAY (LT) The work at the Esplanade Tunnel draws largely upon a scene in the Chinese *wuxia* novel 《侠客行》 (*Xia Ke Xing, Ode to Gallantry*) by Jin Yong. While this story has since been adapted into several *wuxia* films and television series, your encounter with this episode was primarily through Jin Yong's writing in Mandarin. In my search, to date, there is no published translation of the text, except for informal translations on the internet. Could you share how you came across this episode and elaborate on how your understanding/translation of this episode in the story could be likened to the imaginary line that cuts across the languages that you know, and to a larger extent, your diasporic experience?

BOEDI WIDJAJA (BW) My initial impulse to draw reference from the story *Ode to Gallantry* came from an unexpected amnesia. Whenever I thought of *Ode to Gallantry*, I would see a still from the titular 1989 TV series starring Tony Leung Chiu-Wai and hear a narrator say the title, without knowing where or when I saw it. Having not watched the series, I was intrigued by the unlocated video memory and went to find out more. Similar to your online experience, I was not able to find much on *Ode to Gallantry* at first, but that changed when I started Googling in Chinese; the internet transformed dramatically into a kaleidoscopic resource. While I had been reluctant to read the novel due to my poor command of Chinese, however, my encounter with the language and cultural specificity that surrounded *Ode to Gallantry* on the internet changed my mind—I knew I had to read the text. In the climactic chapter in Jin Yong's *Ode to Gallantry*, the protagonist (who was amnesiac) wandered through crowded underground caves that had Li Bai's poem, which shares the same Chinese title as the novel, engraved on the walls. The Tang dynasty poet's ode to the gallantry of swordsmen held the secret to a supreme martial arts technique and had attracted many to come and study it. In a plot twist, the protagonist, in his illiteracy, "misread" the poem and mastered the technique. The gap between language and meaning in the story was fascinating to me. Not having a mother tongue as a result of my childhood migration to Singapore, I see the gap as



Detail of *Kang Ouw, Ninefold*, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

productive, a liminal space where “misreadings” happen to produce unexpected energy.

LT Lining both ends of the Esplanade Tunnel are two series of banners, *Kang Ouw, 侠客行* and *Kang Ouw, Ninefold* (both 2022), that feature the architectonic-numerical script you developed for the exhibition in various configurations. What was the process of creating this script?

BW The process was diffused over several months as I did not set out to develop a script. I was fascinated by the Ninefold Seal Script prevalent during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), and its probable connection to the Square Kufic inscribed on the architectural monuments of the Mongol-ruled Ilkhanid period (1256–1335) in present-day Iran. I started to experiment with typographical forms referencing the Ninefold Seal Script and the three numeral systems that I know—the universal Arabic, my hometown’s *hanacaraka* (Javanese) and traditional Mandarin. For *Kang Ouw, 侠客行* and *Kang Ouw, Ninefold*, I focused on the Chinese numerals. There were several rounds of refinement, and two typefaces of dashes and dots emerged, respectively, which I then converted into digital fonts.

LT Using Chinese telegraphic code, the 13 banners of *Kang Ouw, 侠客行* encode the characters “侠”, “客” and “行” and a poem by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai of the same title. In conceiving *Kang Ouw, Ninefold*, you adapted the dots and dashes characteristic of Morse

code. These strands surface the notion of long-distance that undergird many of your works. While the script on the banners is indecipherable to the viewer (much like the cave engravings in Jin Yong's *Ode to Gallantry*), there remains this unstable relationship to modes of communication. Could you share your thoughts on this relationship between distance, communication and language in the context of this exploration of self-identity that underpins your practice?

BW The distance that my practice contemplates carries within it separation and longing, borne from personal and familial experiences. Analogous to my background, I decided that my art-making will seek out generative possibilities, and sense the networks—historical, cultural, biological and cosmological—from this gap.

Since the start of my practice, I have been researching language, particularly the hovering between words and images, sounds and meanings. This line of exploration cuts through several works such as *Asemic Lines* (2012), a word-glyphic public transit artwork, where I took inspiration from multilingual Singapore to visualise a creole word-image form. I am also keen on working with scripts in expanded, intermedia frameworks enabled through collaborations. For example, geneticist Dr Eric Yap, currently Associate Professor at NTU Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, was a key partner for *In A Tree+++* (2019-ongoing). The work centres around a synthesised hybrid DNA which encoded the parallel



Detail of *Kang Ouw, 江湖水土*, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

migration stories of my grandfather and mine. As for *Path. 9))))))* (2019), I had the honour of working with Chinese orchestra instrumentalist and composer Tong Wei Jie and Ng Wei Xuan, a *dizi* (Chinese flute) specialist to imagine a personal geological music score and to extend a surprise live performance for an audience across a river.

In *Path. 12, River Origin* (2021), the gaze extended to deep space and deep time. I performed for the camera with a muon tracker (muons are extra-terrestrial and invisible subatomic particles) in an act of “listening” to the cosmos to “recite” a Tang dynasty poem encoded in morse code. I see these projects, including *Kang Ouw* 《侠客行》, as explorations into an imaginary diasporic visual-sensory-language, informed by the intercultural liminality of the migrant experience.

LT In *Kang Ouw*, 江湖水土 (*jianghu shuitu*, rivers and lakes, water and land) (2022) you assembled film stills of figures, landscapes and texts extracted from *Dragon Inn* (1967) and its 1992 remake *New Dragon Gate Inn* through a process of distortion and generated through an algorithm. Why did you choose film stills of the three aforementioned categories? Could you also elaborate on what fascinated you about these two films and your thoughts on the idea of the film remake in relation to tracing?

BW *Jianghu* or *kang ouw* (in Hokkien) refers to a realm where the swordsmen in *wuxia* stories roam and fight in the name of honour. It is a territory marked not by geographical lines but within the minds of its actors. *Kang Ouw*, 江湖水土 explores the relationship between the invisible mindscape of *kang ouw* with its manifestation in *wuxia* films—a psychological, action-packed cinematic space concerning the adventures of itinerant martial arts warriors in ancient China. The four-channel generative video contemplates language specificity, non-specific geographies and transculturality of action and drama in the film genre by focusing on texts, landscapes and figures, respectively.

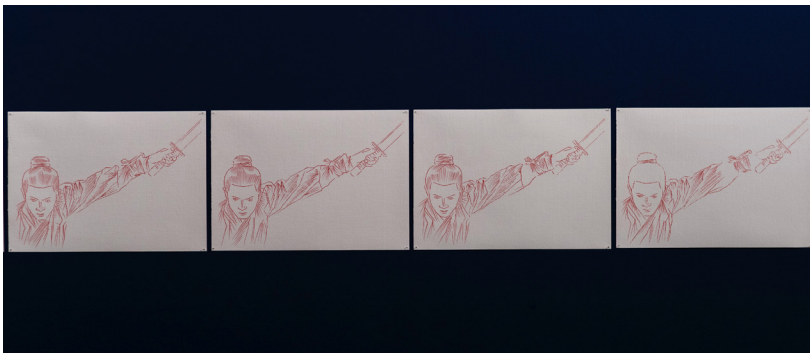
I chose to work with *Dragon Inn* because it is a classic King Hu film, and also, I am a fan of dramas set against the backdrop of political contestations. The spatial narratives in *Dragon Inn* and *New Dragon Gate Inn* (the inn’s interior that cuts into vast mountainous landscapes in the former,

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and the inn's windows that look out to an endless desert in the latter) encapsulates, for me, the dramatic, undulating psychological terrains of *wuxia*. Remaking a film, much like tracing, always references the original regardless of the degree of faithfulness in adapting the source. In a way, the film remake, or the act of tracing, reflects the desire to acknowledge the root but not be confined into its frame, mirroring how the Chinese diaspora reclaim their specific identities even as they look at their imaginary centre from outside, and from afar.

LT Returning to *Kang Ouw*, 江湖水土, the accompanying sound—acquired from an open source library—is of a 100-year-old gamelan originally in the Surakarta Palace and later acquired by the now-defunct Museum Nusantara in Delft, the Netherlands. The score cryptically encodes the eponymous poem by Li Bai through Chinese telegraphic code and Morse code and can be heard throughout the Esplanade Tunnel. Why did you decide to encode Li Bai's poem into this work?

BW My practice approaches text, image and sound as enmeshed; sensorial elements are corporeally absorbed in a specific environmental context and refracted through our prismatic memories. As I was making the works for the Esplanade Tunnel, the decision to translate Li Bai's poem into sound felt inevitable, akin to a somatic reaction. In Jin Yong's *Ode to Gallantry*, the protagonist Shi Potian was illiterate. While other swordsmen were cognitively interpreting the cave wall text for martial arts secrets, Shi could only see lines and



Detail of *Kang Ouw*, 残刀, Boedi Widjaja, 2022.

dots. His eyes followed the strokes of the characters, which led his body to respond in movement, and directed the invisible flow in his meridian lines; Shi decoded the text.

I would also like to add that the crisscrossing cultural and contextual resonance in the sound for *Kang Ouw*, 江湖水土 is very important for me. The metallophone gamelan of my hometown Java; the instrument played and recorded in the Netherlands; and the disassembled, disembodied gamelan vibrations evoking the bells and chimes that ring in the soundscape of *wuxia* films.

IT Both the flipbook video *Tanpa Bayangan Mu (Shadowless)* (2020) and *Kang Ouw*, 残刀 (*can dao*, broken sword) (2022) which comprises 99 drawings, feature a *One-Armed Swordsman* from the titular 1967 *wuxia* film. Looking at these two works alongside each other in the exhibition, how do you situate the relationship between drawing and moving image works in your practice?

BW In the spirit of copies and echoes, I shall trace to my text in a 2018 interview with curator Pey Chuan Tan on the occasion of my solo presentation *Imaginary Homeland: Kang Ouw (一)* at the experimental platform, I_S_L_A_N_D_S Peninsula:

“Interestingly, the Chinese phrase for video (录影, luying) comprises of two words that could mean “copy/record” and “image/film” respectively. What I did in *Imaginary Homeland: Kang Ouw (一)* was to transpose (and transcribe), back-and-forth, my experience of *wuxia* in video and the printed book. In an abstract sense, the entire process could be seen as something that hovered between writing and filming. The tracing process was a tactile process that enabled me to viscerally connect with the flat, cinematic space of the stills.

By tracing only the images' primary contours, the intent was to extract the action, movement and space of the film stills. In contrast, scanography and photocopy—flatbed photo techniques that responded to the flatness of the page—were used to place the book and the traces it contained, back into the floating world of images. While its pages were being scanned, the book was also at times physically shifted to introduce moments of disrupted space-time (akin to video edits) before the images were projected at a large-scale using photocopy!”