

BANI HAYKAL ON BARBARA LONDON CALLING

Early in 2020 as the world moved quickly into lockdown, I embarked on the podcast series, “Barbara London Calling.” My goal was to investigate artists’ innovation, and to shed light on media art’s relevance, as one of the most significant and prevalent art forms of today. From my home, I engaged in conversation with twelve media artists who were stuck in their studios. Bobbie Foshay and Independent Curators International provided support, as Bower Blue offered their production expertise, with lead producer Ryan Leahey and audio engineer Amar Ibrahim. Together we recorded, edited and posted my conversations with the artists on Apple and Spotify. With an emphasis on audio and the spoken word, podcasting shares roots with traditional radio programming, but with a contemporary distribution model, involving computer networks and stored files.

As each episode in the series moved onto Apple and Spotify, a transcript went up on my website, www.barbaralondon.net. The following text is a transcript of my conversation with Bani Haykal, recorded on June 24, 2020 for the podcast series.

BARBARA LONDON



Bani Haykal, *necropolis for those without sleep* (2015-2017), installation. Custom designed mechanical Turks, computer-programmed chess game, 3D printed chess pieces and jumpsuits; TV monitor, CCTV and texts digitally printed on A4 cardstock; cut-up A4 photo paper with frames; rubber ducks. Dimensions variable Photo: courtesy the artist.



ABOVE Bani Haykal, *The Anti-guitar or How to Save the Electric Guitar from Brainless Rock Stars of the 21st Century*, (2013), installation. Sawed off electric guitar, with additional tuning pegs and fixed bridge; violin bow; drum sticks; small wooden peg. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy the artist

RIGHT Bani Haykal, *The Recycle* (2012), installation. Used fixed gear bicycle. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy the artist



Born in 1985 and based in Singapore, Bani Haykal straddles the world of language, art and music. As a media artist and teacher, he picks apart the nuances in our technology filled lives. In Singapore, he grew up listening to American rap music, eventually finding his way to avant-garde multi-instrumentalist Anthony Braxton, architect and composer Iannis Xenakis and electronic music pioneer Daphne Oram.

Bani's interactive installation *sifrmu version 5* is featured in "Seeing Sound," an new exhibition I curated for Independent Curators International in 2021. The piece acts as an encrypted translation device. Users explore the power of commonalities across different languages, but also the deeper power of incongruencies across those same languages.

BARBARA LONDON Welcome, Bani. Thank you for joining today from Singapore.

BANI HAYKAL Yes. Hi, Barbara. Thank you for having me. It's good to be on the show.

BL Perhaps you could start by telling me about the Southeast Asian collective Media/Art Kitchen. How did it come about, and are the other members artists and/or musicians?

BH Media/Art Kitchen was a traveling show that emerged sometime in 2013, and I believe it lasted for a couple of years. It became a collective in the sense that on board this particular project, there were the same curators and the same artists that traveled together during the active years, although some changed. I think that Media/Art Kitchen was the first group exhibition I participated in and the first time I got to meet a lot of different artists and curators from around the region.

BL Were there particular issues that you all as Southeast Asian artists shared or was there a politics, as well?

BH More than anything, we gravitated towards this notion of the kitchen, what it means to play with material, and how we look at some of these ideas. I wouldn't say there was cross-pollination, because there weren't any direct collaborative efforts among artists. But in terms of the conversations and the brief residencies, or programs that happened, we had the opportunity to interact with other artists and get to know each other a lot better. If anything, the focus was very much centered around this idea of what new media art practices were.

Joining the project there was a bit of anxiety on my part, because I had never identified as a media artist—or a "new media artist," for that matter. Seeing all the other artists and the range of works that were presented, from Ryota Kuwakubo's *Tenth Sentiment*, which was a really elegant piece of work, to someone like Duto Hardono. It was a very, very exciting group, and I

felt a little bit out of place, particularly because the works that I traveled with were musical instruments that I was developing to create new music.

I think a lot of it was also that everyone, including the curators, were navigating and trying to find new orientations as to what it means to enter into this domain of new media art. A lot of my interest in notions of interactivity was reignited over there, this notion of performing with an instrument or finding your way through an instrument, which in itself is a form of interaction or interactivity.

BL When we met several years ago in Singapore, you showed me images of what you just described, your visually stunning but wacky-looking electronic instruments. You made them by repurposing and combining old guitars, old typewriters, and even old bicycles. It appeared that you were using these unusual instruments to improvise like a jazz musician or a rap musician. Was that in your mind?

BH This interest to create new musical instruments wasn't fully thought through in the beginning. I think my interest to dive into more extra-musical activity happened probably sometime in 2011 or 2012. My background at that time was mostly as a musician performing original music that I wrote together with my band. We went through a period where that wasn't going to happen for some time, so this got me going in a direction where I was interested in finding other ways that I could create music outside of my comfort zone. That's one way of putting it.

From that point on, it was just like one rabbit hole after another of figuring out what skillsets are, what harmony is, and more uncharted territories like graphical scores, and later new musical instruments. At that point one of the most pivotal composers that I came across was Harry Partch [1901-1974], who spoke a lot about his interest in new intonation systems and about how he developed instruments in order to perform or to play his pieces. A lot of that influenced my own interest in new musical activities. Because there was this desire always to create music, I thought maybe that's an interesting starting point, to create new instruments and find what are other dimensions or other means of expressing myself through what music could be.

BL Is this something particular to the music culture of Singapore?

BH I guess my opinion is that music in Singapore hasn't changed much. You have quite a wide range of different practitioners: from musicians that participate quite actively with popular music or more mainstream musical expression, to the more experimental, more left field side of activity, so it's pretty dynamic in that sense. You have a good mix. Regardless of our size, I think it's relatively healthy as well. There's a good amount [of activity] in each of these circles.

My interest was really to step outside the audience that usually listens to the kind of music that I'd been doing, interested to see what the other side was. In a sense, my introduction to making music wasn't exactly within the realm of the experimental or the [extemporaneously] improvised music. My music was still very rock and roll on some level. Then later on, this interest to step away was so that I could find a new way to explore how different sounds could be organized together.

BL I've read how you've said that your love for music brought you to a place where music became the enemy. What do you mean by that?

BH Over time, as you become close to something you start to become annoyed by it. At some point that really affected me, whereby the things that I ordinarily found pleasure in doing no longer seemed to make sense. Maybe I was also doubting what I was doing. But a lot of it came from particular reading, research I was doing about jazz music during the Cold War period.

My late father was a jazz musician. He was playing a lot of jazz at the time, Wes Montgomery and so forth. Growing up in that environment, not that I was only invested in that kind of music, but I wasn't very much exposed to other kinds of musical activity. Because of that, when I dived into this paradigm of what jazz music was like during the Cold War, the internationalization efforts and so forth, I realized the weight and the complexity of what it meant to experience a cultural product.

At that point it opened up this new head space, this new understanding of what are some of the various tentacles that thread themselves to something else, and how it's part of a wider web of politics or ideas, I suppose. At that point, it dawned on me there's actually a lot more that comes with these cultural products. Maybe it came at a rather late stage in my life or in my practice, but better late than never. Thinking about it then got me really motivated to think further about how else music plays a part in the ecology of cultural expression.

BL Over the last few years you've been learning to code as a means of understanding and connecting with technology. You've also noted that you're terrible with coding.

BH I stand by the fact that my coding skills are quite terrible. It's very clunky and awkward sometimes. It started actually sometime between 2015 and 2016, when I was given an opportunity to do a project that involved collaborating with different groups of people and was very excited by that prospect. In fact, for the first few years of my practice, all I wanted to do was to collaborate with different groups of people. For the first three or four years, I had the opportunity to collaborate and practice with theater groups, dance groups, mostly people within performing arts.

When this [new] opportunity came around in 2015, I thought to myself, "Maybe I would like to collaborate with people who don't necessarily participate within the art scene or the art world..." It was also during the thick of this research on culture industries that I was developing a work called *necropolis, for those without sleep*. In a nutshell, the work revolves around two machines, two machines playing a game of chess. They're sort of fighting each other for very long durations. It's sort of like durational performance.

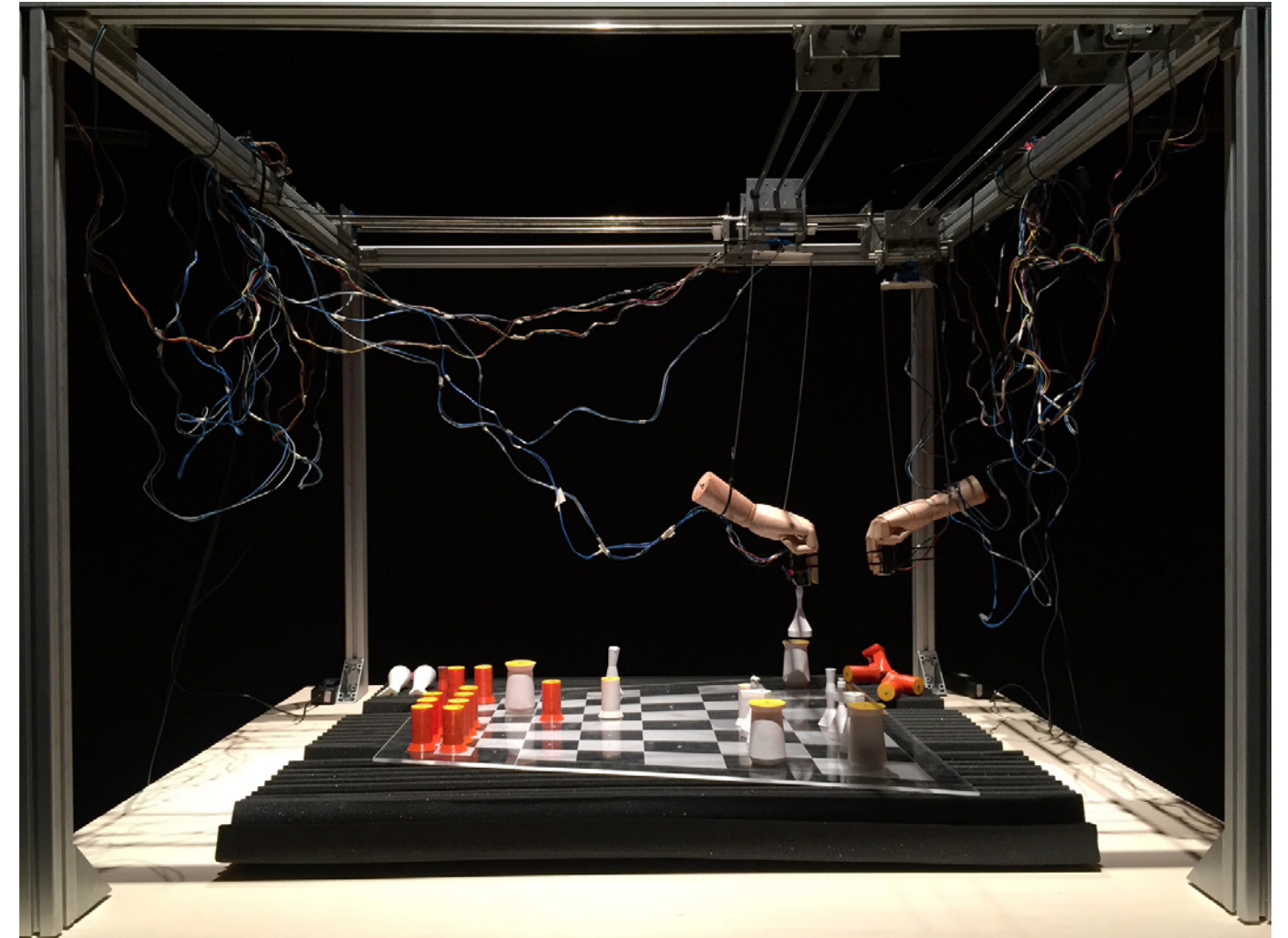
For this particular work, I worked with a robotics engineer, who is also a product designer, and worked together with a game developer and a game designer. The three of us sat together and started to put this work together. During this period of time, I was very excited by what coding and programming offered. From that point on I thought, "Maybe it's something I should study." I started picking up Pure Data (Pd), which is free software, and I struggled a lot with it. Even if it was a simple function, I just could never figure out how to get it to work. It was a very trying period. But after getting past the learning curve, I realized how powerful this particular platform or this application is, and most of our work centered around coding.

It was during this period that I also understood the thresholds of my machine, and I think it was when I got quite a lot closer to my machine, in many ways. I understood what it can do, what it can't do, how far before it tells me that, "Okay, you're pushing me too far. I have to quit now." All of these things were very exciting for me. I hope I'm not trying to humanize my machine in any way, but a relationship was established and my machine tells me when it's enough, or it says, "Okay, we can still push forth." A lot of the process of me learning about my machine happened during the process of learning how to code, as well as how many more things I could get it to run.

For the longest time, I think I never was interested in digital music or computer music, but getting into coding got me to appreciate what a machine was. At some point I was quite conflicted about this, whether it was my prosthetic or have I become the prosthetic of the machine. Through this interaction over the next few years, a lot of my work just revolved around getting the machine to do things that I think ordinarily I wouldn't be able to execute. Maybe I think I'm a terrible coder because of the way that I reason things out in my head, which is very messy. So, my machine is just as messy as my head.

BL This brings me to another area. I think you also use language as a tool or a building block, but you've said that language is a musical activity for you. Do you want to say something about how language and the spoken are incorporated into your practice?

BH One of the things that I got into, from 2011 onwards, was how I split my practice in two. On the one hand, I was focusing



Bani Haykal, *necropolis for those without sleep* (2015-2017), installation. Custom designed mechanical Turks, computer-programmed chess game, 3D printed chess pieces and jumpsuits; TV monitor, CCTV and texts digitally printed on A4 cardstock; cut-up A4 photo paper with frames; rubber ducks. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy the artist.



OPPOSITE

Bani Haykal, *This Is You Glitching My Death* (2019), Bandung, Indonesia: Hasana Editions, 32 min. Ed. 100 Photo: courtesy the artist

Bani Haykal, *Sit Quietly in the Flood* (2007), Singapore: Word Forward, 64 pp Photo: courtesy the artist

Bani Haykal, *no space for listening*//a sort of monograph on how else music could be made / experienced, a (sort of) monograph on the works & practice of Bani Haykal (2012-2019), Edition of 50.

on what else music activity could become, or could go towards; the other side was really thinking about the other component of song writing, which was text, the lyrics that come with it. It was something that I did when I was playing in the band. I wrote the music as well as the lyrics. Another part of my practice was just to focus on text, which was when I had a crossover into the literary arts and spoken word performances, where the focus was primarily on how I would deliver a set of text on stage.

It was quite liberating to think about how I could distance the two, or how I could separate the two. Because then, I felt text on its own had a musicality that I had never really thought through before. Before, words had always accompanied songs or accompanied a melody. When I stepped outside of that, when I had that chance to just focus on text, I started to write in ways that allowed me to recite text or to perform text in a more musical fashion.

It took me a while to develop this particular way of delivering text. At some point the texts that I'd been writing focused more on rhythm, as opposed to melodic or harmonic content. That for me was quite exciting, because rhythm is a bit of a kryptonite for me. I am not a very rhythmic, very well coordinated person in that way. Getting into text as rhythm was a very exciting exercise.

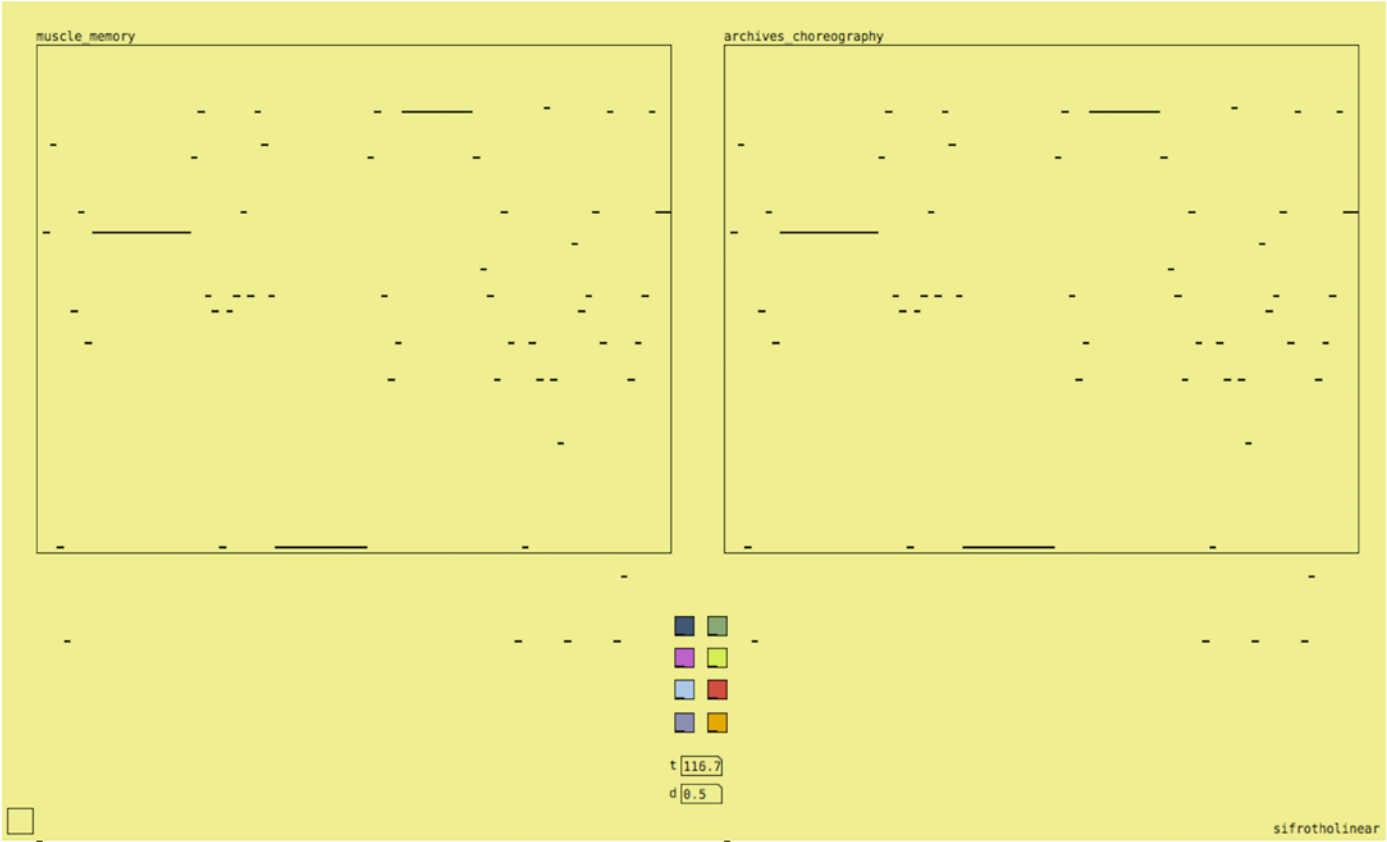
It was exciting because suddenly I'm not performing like a beatboxer, where I'm producing all these progressive sounds or different textures with my voice, but using words and texts

specifically to be able to do just that. That for me was a direction that I was consciously trying to work towards. How could I just write text, or how could I utilize text and make it musical on its own without having to supplement or accompany it with anything else? Everything became a rhythmic exercise.

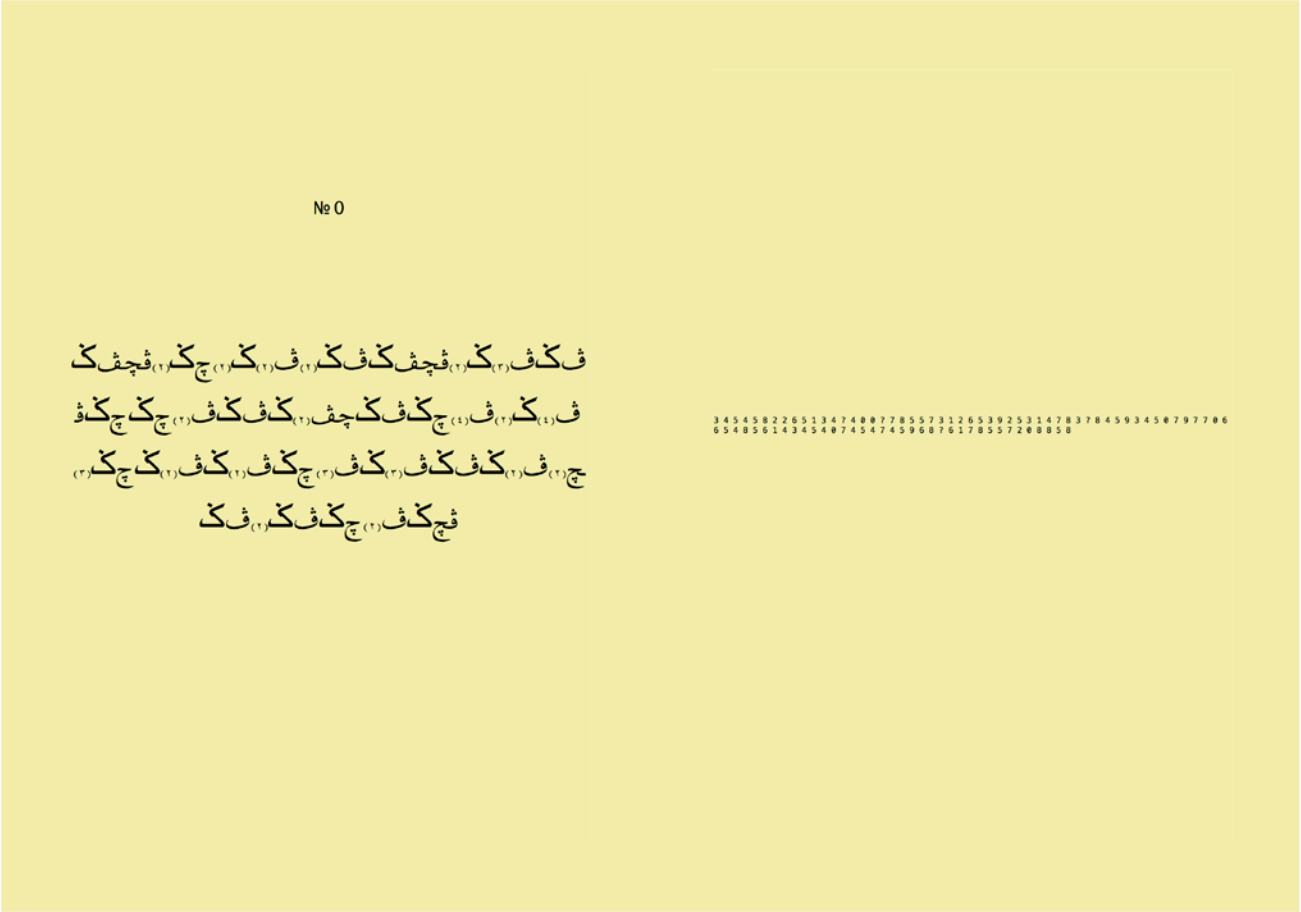
I suppose there are a lot of strengths that attach themselves to this line of thinking, from talking drums, for instance, and this idea of coded transmission. I think a lot of these ideas manifested themselves into the way I think about language as not just sonic activity, but as musical activity, as well.

BL Code and language have a symbiotic relationship in your 2019 work, *sifrmu version 5*, which is featured in the exhibition I organized, "Seeing Sound." There are many questions to ask you about this work. How does the project serve as a kind of encrypted translation device? The viewer or user walks up and is able to type a sentence. If I type an English sentence, your code and your device gobbles this up and out comes Malay as a text on an adjacent screen. There's also a sonic element. It's not a meat grinder, but a sentence has gone through a translation device

BH One way that I could start talking about this is maybe through the title itself. The title of the work is *sifrmu*, sifr, well, sifar. The reason I omitted the vowel between the F and the R has to do with the relationship that Malay has with the Arabic language.



Bani Haykal, *sifrmu—small gestures* (2020), installation. *sifrmu* patch, 2-channel audio, custom 75% ortholinear keyboard Dimensions variable Photo: courtesy the artist



Bani Haykal, *Verses for a Future—Sleep* (2020), Digital Print, 21cm x 29cm, Ed. 10 Photo: courtesy the artist.

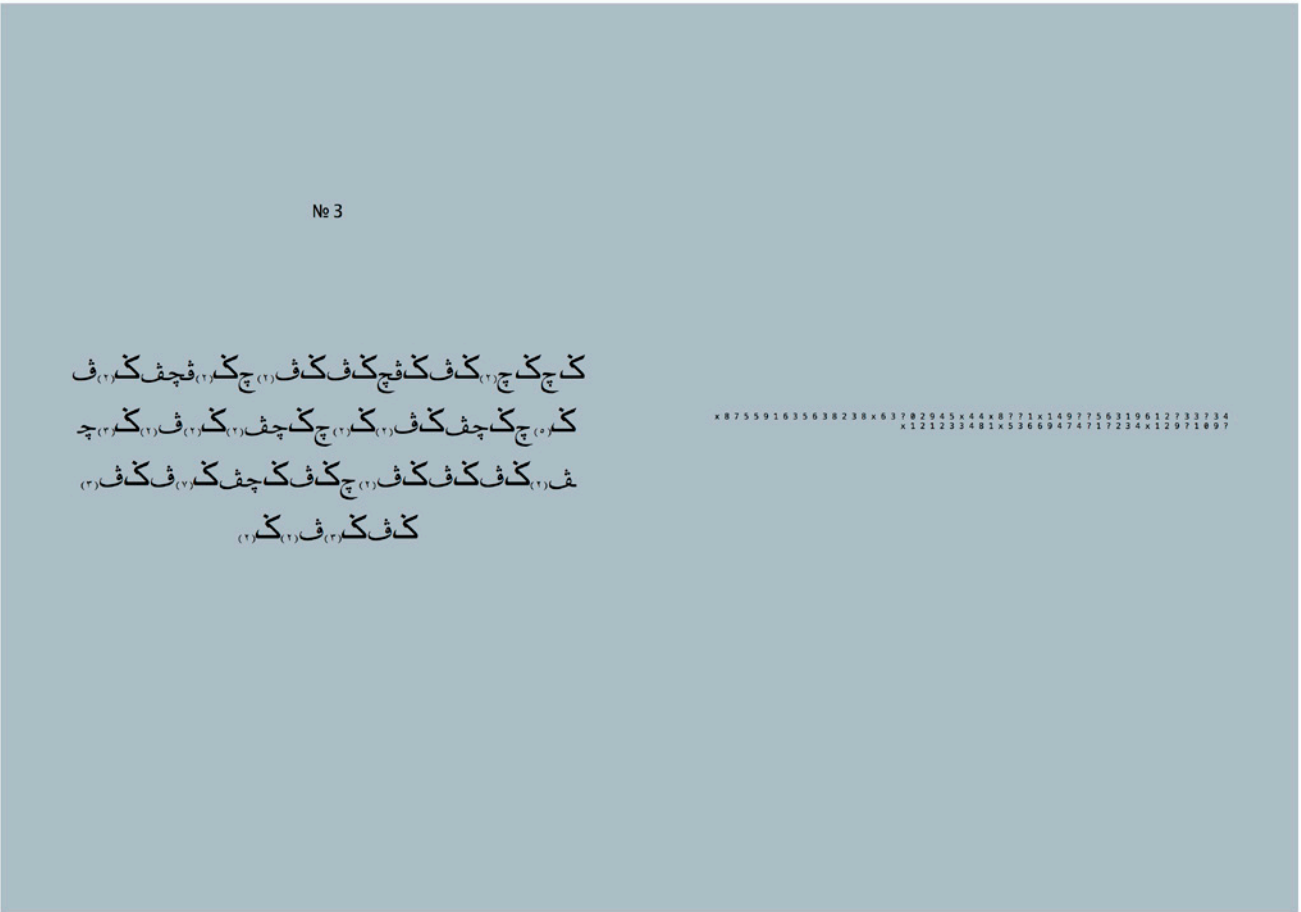
There are some borrowed words from Arabic that Malay utilizes. Sifar in Malay or sifr in Arabic mean the same thing. They both represent the numeral zero. Sifar is zero. And Mu means you or yours. In a sense, the title loosely translates to “your cipher.”

For this particular work, I think in many ways it’s an amalgamation of all these different strands of interest and research coming together—playing with language, playing with sound, thinking about the organization of sounds. But more specifically it stemmed from the relationship I have with my machine. I’m more interested in thinking through what human machine relationships or human machine kinships and intimacies are like. That’s the starting point of this particular work—what are the gestures that we share, how do we become intimate with each other, and so forth.

With *sifrmu*, one of the reflections that I have about this work is quite typical of a lot of Muslim families in Singapore, be

it Malay Muslims, Indian Muslims, and even Chinese Muslims. One of the things you grow up doing is recite the Koran. What’s fascinating and also intriguing for me about growing up doing just that, is that I can definitely recite the Koran, but I have no idea what I’m saying because I don’t speak Arabic. It’s not a language I’m familiar with, but I can definitely recite it. Recitation is not a problem, but reading it is a completely different thing. I don’t think I ever read the Koran, I only recited it.

That kind of experience from childhood is something you carry with you for a long time. I was reflecting on how that is, in a sense, a very musical experience or a musical gesture where you’re reciting, you’re interpreting scores and you’re just expressing them. For me, it’s very similar. I can’t read musical notations, but if I look at a score and I want to interpret it, it’s the same encounter I have with reading the Koran. I could definitely recite it no problem.



Bani Haykal, *Verses for a Future—Future* (2020), Digital Print, 21cm x 29cm, Ed. 10 Photo: courtesy the artist

The meaning itself is something that is absent in that process of reading or reciting the Koran. That memory, I would probably say, is the earliest memory of musical performance I made to parents and to God. I’m just performing a musical expression at that point in time. I think that’s definitely something that circles this work. What is this musical component to recitation, to just reciting text, which in many ways is detached from meaning by the person reciting it?

With *sifrmu*, I was thinking a lot about this gap: this absence of meaning between machine and end user, human and machine, the things that we understand and the machine may not necessarily. These gaps happen, but at the same time, they are also evolving. The [machines] are also performing these commands that we’re telling it. Most of *sifrmu* revolves around this premise that encryption, or the way that we encrypt information across bodies, is more a process of intimacy or the process of knowing

the other. This is where I hit my first obstacle in terms of trying to understand what this notion of intimacy is. What is intimacy? I think that’s one of the bigger questions that I’ve been struggling with, and that’s where I return back to the Malay language, which helped clarify this particular question or this particular position.

In Malay, we have an anglicized version of the word intimacy, which is *intim*. And *intim* means or represents exactly what you understand or perceive intimacy to be. But we also use a different word, which is *mesra*, M-E-S-R-A, a formal pronunciation. *Mesra* could be used in the context where you say, “Oh, these two people are very joyous or they’re very intimate with one another.” You could use the word *mesra* there, but one of its more prominent usages is in cooking. When I’m preparing a meal, let’s say I’m making pancakes. When you mix different ingredients together, your flour, your baking powder, and so

forth, to create the pancake batter itself, we use the word *mesra* to describe a consistency, a kind of state that these ingredients would then become.

That for me was quite interesting, or very useful in thinking about what it means to be intimate or what it means to have intimacy with someone or something. It is to arrive at a transformed state, to transform with the other in order to become a new body or to arrive at a new state of together like pancake batter, having mixed all of the ingredients. This lends itself to I guess a more [Donna] Haraway notion of cyborgs, where in this interaction, in this transformation that we have with the machine, we ultimately become cyborgs, or we've arrived at a different dimension altogether. It goes back to the idea, which of us is the prosthetic? Are we running the machine or is the machine running us?

A lot of *sifrmu* has been helping me clarify some of these positions, or these ideas as to what this relationship is like and how we've not just grown close, but how we've merged, how we've become one with our machines. The process of this work, what you mentioned earlier on, what it does is when the user comes to the mechanical keyboard, they hear this click clack. The user approaches the mechanical keyboard and types in plain text in English, or in any language that uses the Roman alphabet. What my machine does or what the program does is that it encrypts these messages into a unique cipher text, a unique cipher.

I resist the word cipher text because, in *sifrmu*, the cipher is in essence a combination of midi values, Jawi characters. Here's another rabbit hole. Jawi was a written form that was used for Malay in the early 1900s and long before. It was stopped sometime in the early 1900s.

You can access archives written in Jawi of that period. What's interesting for me is that whilst I do have training in reciting or reading Arabic script, I'm unable to understand Arabic. On the other hand, if I were to look at it in Jawi script, it's not an issue. It's almost like I'm reading Malay. It's quite easy to understand for me.

BL Because the exhibition Seeing Sound will travel to venues in the U.S. and perhaps other parts of the world, how important would it be for the user operating your work to really think about the language or the script that you're using?

BH One thing that I was quite conscious of is that the interface is how someone looks at or receives the work. There is an immediacy to what one gets upon the encounter. You would actually see the script as patterns more than you would see characters that are appearing, because I'm only using three letters. And these three letters would repeat themselves constantly.

It becomes an exercise of looking at an image, as opposed to looking at a written language that's unfolding. It's very imagistic, much like desktop icons. You recognize what a file icon is, you

OPPOSITE, TOP Bani Haykal, *sifrmu WYSIWYNTK* (2022), installation. *sifrmu* patch v22, stereo channel audio, custom 65% mechanical keyboard, dimensions variable.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Bani Haykal, *sifrmu v15* (2020), installation. *sifrmu* patch, 4-channel audio, custom 75% mechanical keyboard Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy the artist

recognize what the hard disk icon is. They're just images for me. These three characters that I play with become just images, although they do represent something.

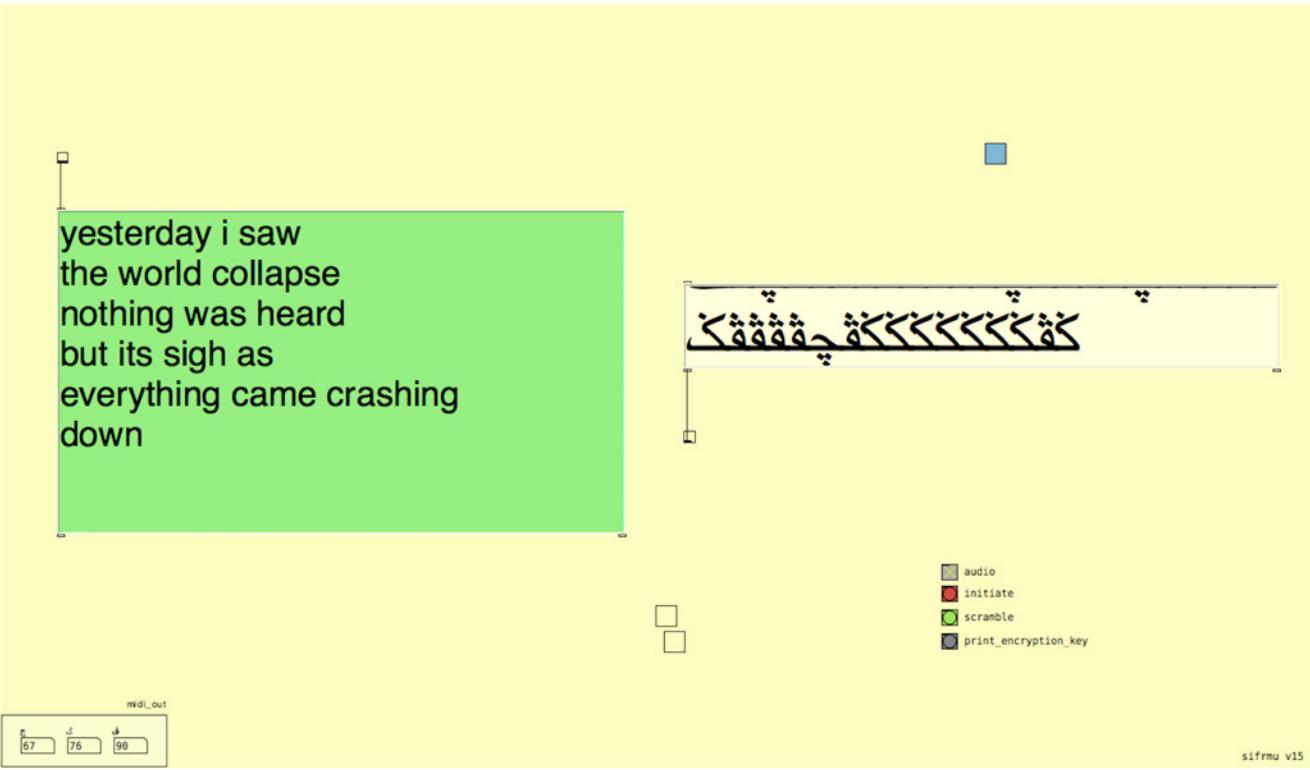
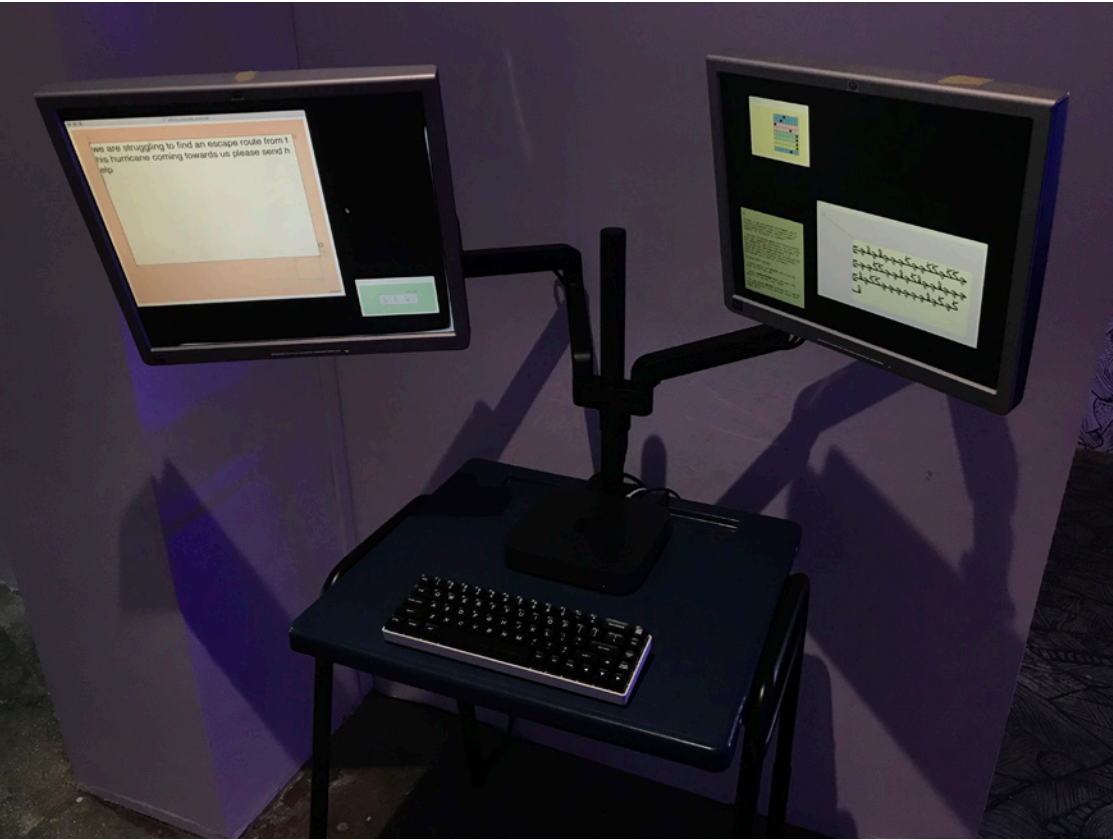
Jawi has six unique characters [Its other characters are borrowed from Arabic]. I've chosen three of them, which are ca ga and pa. These three consonants are present in Jawi script but not in Arabic script. In *sifrmu* the letters ca, ga, pa constantly make an appearance on screen. In a sense, all of these histories of what I just mentioned is my personal story. Ultimately the way that we understand our machines, as well, is through these icons or these symbols through which we enter into the machine's world.

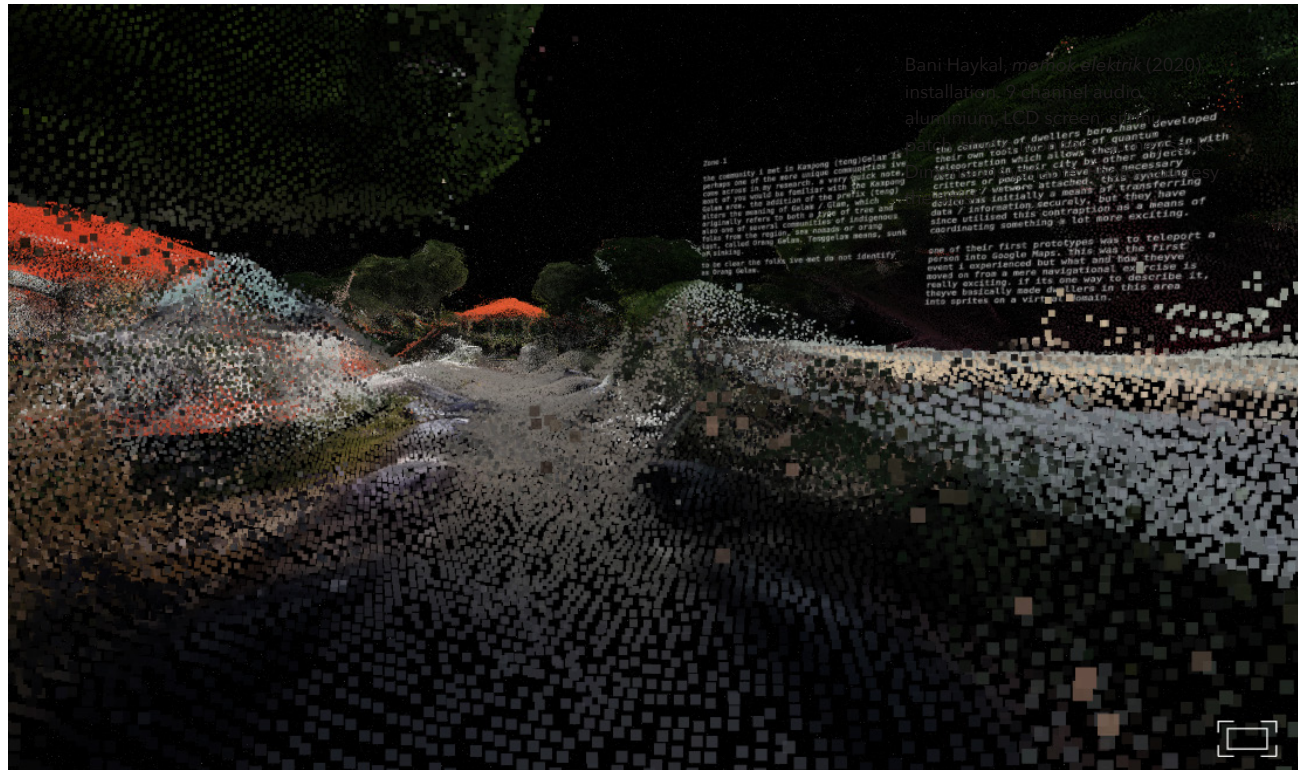
BL You've said that Singapore is a suppressed and angered present. How is that for you, and is there something that music and culture can accomplish that nothing else can?

BH Yes, Singapore is a very, very strange place. In this strangeness, we find ways to communicate, find different tongues, find different orientations, and find new ways of encrypting ideas and getting thoughts across. The way that we engage and negotiate with one another has a lot of dynamism. If you go to my Twitter feed, you would see that I switch a lot between a range of subjects. It could be the simplest of ideas to the most complex political blah blah.

For some of us, I think it's a way that we found to be able to address both human rights issues and also cultural issues, a way that allows for wider conversations. But at the same time, maybe there are more questions than there are answers. I don't know. Maybe it's a generational thing. Maybe if it isn't resolved, if it's an answer that doesn't come in this generation, maybe it comes in the next. That is the environment that I feel I'm navigating through in Singapore.

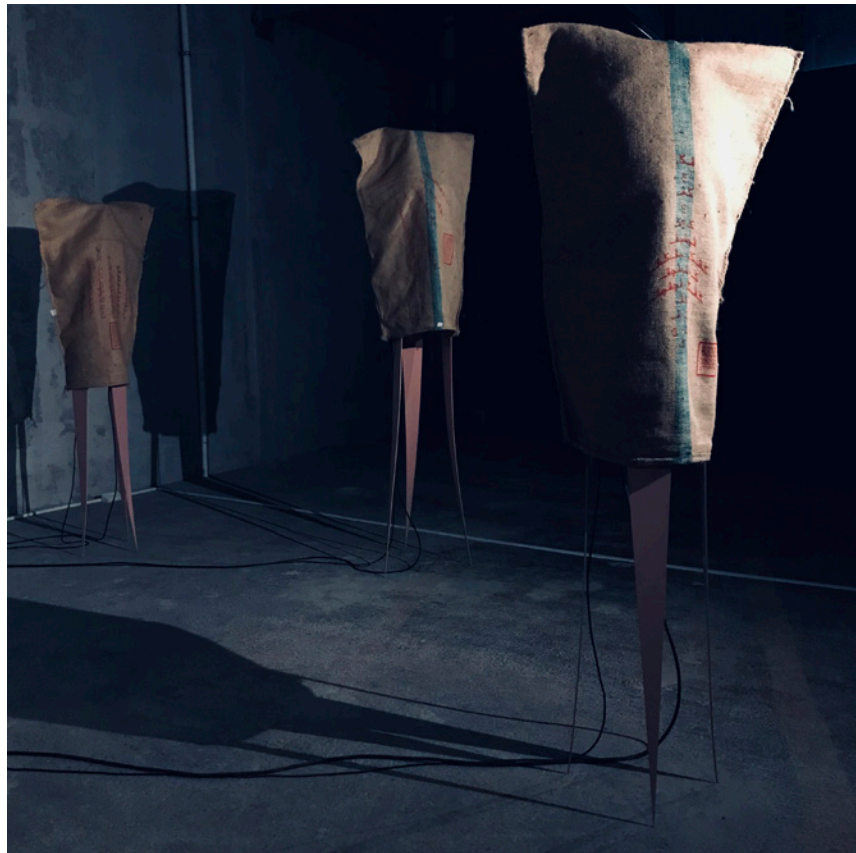
BL Now, my next to last question. You've said craziness is a requirement to dream a better future. How does that mindset fit with today's craziness?





ABOVE Bani Haykal, *kampong (teng) gelam* (2020) (in collaboration with Ong Kian Peng), VR, 3D scans, ambisonic sound. Photo: courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Bani Haykal, *momok elektrik* (2020), installation. 9 channel audio, aluminum, LCD screen, sifrmu patch, studio monitors, gurney sacks. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy the artist.



BH This is a cultural joke. There was a film made in 2004. It's called the *Day after Tomorrow* [by Roland Emmerich.] I never watched the film, but it looked terrible. When the *Day after Tomorrow* was screened in Singapore, the title given for it in Malay was just *Lusa*, L-U-S-A. *Lusa* is a Malay word. It's a specific term that means the day after tomorrow.

In Malay, we have a word for tomorrow which is *besok* or *esok*, and we also have a very specific word for the day after tomorrow, which is *lusa*. But we don't have a word for future. We have a phrase for it. We call it *masa depan*, the time ahead. But we don't have this concept of what the future is. Or rather, the concept of future is different, at least, through the Malay language itself.

In many ways, this desire is to think about what time ahead is or what this future is. A lot of my recent activity goes through the Malay language, to unpack and investigate how we think about time and how we think about some of these very dominant horrors that we live in today. Even notions of intimacy, this idea of transformation made more sense for me in the Malay language than it did in English. Intimacy is such a vague concept. But in Malay, I understand it to be a means of transformation.

A lot of this messiness and a lot of glitches that happen across languages, I feel are exciting. It's just exciting for me to exist in these gaps and with these glitches, and find different ways to pull out of the present moment and think about the time ahead of what happens next. How else can we dream of different futures in the time ahead? If nothing else, I'm just very, very mindful that I don't think that the future should be a singular monophonic environment for everyone. I think it has to be polyphonic.

There have to be multiple voices in the way that the future is envisioned, or in the way the future unravels itself for all of us. Across gaps, across glitches, your mind goes through so many different code-switches and meanderings through these complexities and the greyiness of language, the bluntness of language as a tool. You need to remain very optimistic to reside in the space to move forward, I suppose.

BL That's beautiful. The last question I'm asking everybody who's part of this conversation series, do you consider yourself a media artist? What does that mean anyway?

BH I don't know. I don't know what it means. I don't want to get into this whole "let's unpack what media is." All these interfaces and all these devices, they're all media in one form or another. My 2013 experience taught me that even an instrument is media, or a medium. I don't know how to answer this question, Barbara, I am so sorry. But I would say that as someone that works with various media, or various mediums, sometimes maybe these things are using me. Like maybe I'm being puppeteered via these various interfaces and these different media to create something. So, I'm not sure how to answer this question. I guess maybe I'm using them, and maybe they're using me.

BL Well to me, you're an artist, and that's most important.

BH Thank you.

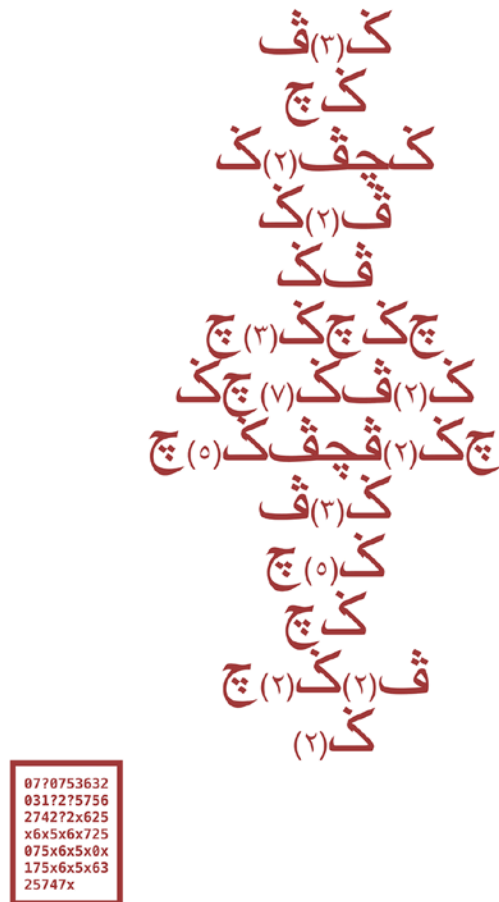
BL Thank you so much. Thanks so much for sharing your ideas, you're very eloquent and wonderful.

BH Thank you. Thanks for having me.

BL. On behalf of Bani Haykal, thanks for joining us for this episode of Barbara London Calling. Support for Barbara London Calling is generously provided by Bobbie Foshay and Independent Curators International in conjunction with their upcoming exhibition Seeing Sound, which I curated.

Follow us on Instagram at Barbara London Calling and check out barbaralondon.net for transcripts of each episode and links to the works discussed. Barbara London Calling, is produced by Blue Medium, with lead producer, Ryan Leahy and audio engineer, Amar Ibrahim. Special thanks to Le Tigre for graciously providing our music. Thanks again for joining us. We'll see you next time.

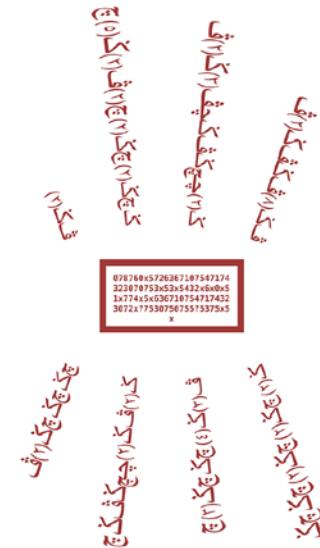
nusantara pessimism¹ / a not-so mani(s)festo²
bani haykal



1. translation: archipelagic pessimism
2. the word manis is Malay for "sweet"

salam sejahtera³

the F word that has everyone
talking is more than just a
trend. from ads, films and
policymaking, the Future is
here to stay. but what
exactly is the Future? experts
have posited and plotted
out numerous trajectories
of the Future, from speculating
on the Singularity to the spuriously
SMART paradigms of technologies,
nations and cities, the Future
is an endless regurgitation of
the same oppression we see
today, the future is an endless
regurgitation of the same violence
we encounter today



with many obscured details that
seem conveniently discarded at
the interest of security, prosperity
and hegemony, it is exhausting to be
told to look beyond the present, that
our realities will be defined by how
we yearn for this so-called
Future, but what is the point
of dreaming, thinking, hoping about
the future when all your dreams are
colonised by those with power?

gostan sikit gostan sikit⁴

3. translation: greetings

and so what is this Future? from
 mainstream news to conferences to
 exhibitions, strategies and conversations
 surrounding the Future revolves around
 the romantic idea of dreaming, to dream
 about a better future, but this implies
 that we're all sleeping, sleepwalking
 snoring through the horrors of the present, to
 be tasked to dream of the future is to
 be sleep induced and defer attention from
 what's before us right now, to avert
 our eyes from the violence of today, the
 atrocities we are told to drift to bed
 with, the lies we drool over, constantly
 being told not to fear the monsters
 hiding underneath our bed

when we think of the binaries,
 utopian and dystopian versions of
 the Future, a fair amount of optics
 is at hand. for even the present presently
 happens to be utopian for the 1%
 and dystopian for the rest of us.
 optimism would not bring us closer
 towards utopianism granted the very
 small percentage of people that orchestrated
 the machine and paradigm we presently
 live in are nestled in their private
 utopias, yet for the rest of us
 mired and bogged by the wastes
 and residues of this cultivated haven
 built on exploitation by the elites

if optimism is the basis of sheer terror,
 we need indeed a new paradigm that helps
 us re-orientate our strategies, means of
 navigating an ever apocalyptic tragedy in
 this so-called Future. the counterpoint
 to this aharmonic paradigm is pessimism
 and i am a reluctant pessimist. i am
 a reluctant pessimist because of intelligence
 with some semblance of resignation because
 people never cease to plunder the vulnerable,
 the only thing i can offer and propose is
 for us to laugh at the atrocity and pray
 we don't disappear in our sleep
 dreaming of the Future.

tapi kalau dah takdir
 nasib badan⁵

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5. translation: but if it's fated, it is just our luck

the word future does not exist
in the Malay language, the word future
does not exist, in the Malay language
the word future does not exist, and i want
to say this is good. this is good
because the future is often peddled
by billionaires, governments, elites,
scholars, ivory tower solehs and solehahs⁶ that
berdakwah⁷ to so many of us to dream, imagine
and speculate about the future of our
own liking, to be optimistic about
it, where we are tasked to dream for
the sort of joys we don't encounter today
dream for a habitable tomorrow, think positive dreams
for an inclusive tomorrow, dreams plundered by
bureaucrats, privileged poets who cosplay
as curators, insensitive, sterile
assemblages of futurity harvested,
domesticated and scrapbooked for portfolios,
CVs and inflated egos of authority, sila
pulang ke rahmatullah⁸

astaghfirullah astaghfirullah⁹

but truly, who benefits
from these dreams that the underprivileged
maps out, unknowingly, plotting
out pathways for generational
wealth to remain undistributed, the
future has replaced freedom in the race
against time to determine which superpower
defines what lies ahead. we're all on
borrowed time by those who decided
they own it. the future is banana money
printed by colonisers and we are
made to buy our dreams with it

and so i am glad that the word future does not exist
because i can stop pretending, dreaming that
the present is habitable, welcoming,
an all inclusive dwelling even
for those who don't have a decent roof over their head
there is nothing to be optimistic
about, the room is burning, it isn't
fine and billionaire sickos.jpg
are looking in with a rocket
headed to Mars, really who
gets to live in this Future?

6. translation: good & obedient people
7. translation: preach
8. translation: please return back to your maker
9. translation: I seek forgiveness in God

the word future does not exist
in the Malay language but
there is a phrase conceived to illustrate
it, masa depan, or time ahead,
where the concept of "ahead" does
not necessarily mean "forward",
as in relation to time, moving
forward or backwards as time
travellers often do, no, "ahead"
translated from "depan", shortened
from the word "hadapan" also
implies what we are facing,
encountering, regardless
of linearity, masa depan is
about the time we will be facing, and so
the question about the future
is never about when, it is about
what and where, time
ahead or the future is
about what we will inevitably face. yet
in the Malay language we
have a specific word conceived for
the day after tomorrow, which
is the word "lusa", literally
indicating the day after tomorrow
and quite often when you make plans
for lusa one must always say

insyallah, insyallah¹⁰

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10. translation: God willing

sadly that's all the small
unexpected joys you're getting gang,
for every atom holding together
this statement is forged by the fires
of pessimism, i am tired of being
optimistic, planting sights and
ambitions towards a future already
built for the privileged, freeports
consisting of dank memes LARPing
as artworks, money laundering accelerated
in the name of crypto, decentralisation
the new veil for Libertarian-style democracy, this
is capitalism undead, the invisible zombie
hand is looking to be bitten, to infect
to disrupt, to decay the present
into a cesspool of financialisation
on steroids, to be optimistic
of time ahead at the rate
we live in is foolish unless
you want the world to burn

in Nusantara Pessimism, it tells
us that there is no such thing as
the future, only a prolonged, extended horror
of the present, that to be optimistic
is only of what comes after today, nothing
beyond. and here we find the bleakness, the
pessimists' reality of tomorrow summed
up only by what we can manage for
the day after, what we can afford to
face. where that will bring us is an
unknown, uncertain of what we will face,
where we will be facing, pessimism here
is to deny a manifestation of "the future"
but living & unraveling in the extended
and untimed present, to also find ways
to dismantle what we would potentially
face. if anything nusantara pessimism
is about the slow process of disarming,
demolishing, internally and externally
the processes of a future being constructed
in "other time", an other language thats
set to colonise those that willingly
or unwillingly refrain from participation
a currency we are forced to use, with
questions remaining unanswered; what are we
facing in time ahead? how do we refuse
and ensure noncompliance / nonparticipation
doesn't further marginalise? what is
the value of our dreams? do we really
need hope for time ahead? what are we
accelerating towards and can
pessimism slow it down?

entahlah but insyallah¹¹

the word future does not exist
in the Malay language, and i want
to say this is good. this is good that
the word future does not exist
in the Malay language, it
does not exist, it needed to be
conjured, the future needed to be
conjured, in the Malay language, the
future needed to be conjured,
it is made up, it is fake

it is fabricated, it is spell
casted into existence, the future is fiction
for colonisers, elites, those who
can afford the means to plot out
the biggest scam in the history of
humanity, the future is a construct
for submission, the future is
a construct for subservience, the
future is a construct for control,
the future is a construct for order
the future is a construct for dreams
to be plundered, the future is a lie
the future needs to die, in nusantara
pessimism the future is dead

salam mesra¹²



11. translation: who knows, but God willing

12. translation: warmest regards