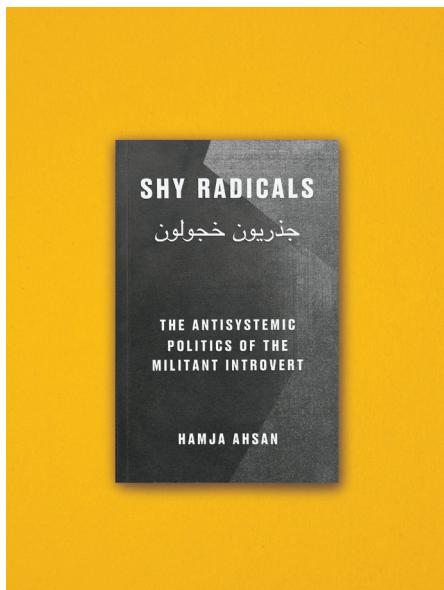


Revolutions in the Margins

See our website for
the Chinese version
of this article.
欲閱讀此文章的中文
版本請登陸我們的網站

SHY RADICALS: THE ANTISYSTEMIC POLITICS OF THE MILITANT INTROVERT
By Hamja Ahsan
Published by Book Works, London,
third edition, 2019



One of the things that Covid-19-impelled social distancing has surfaced is how impoverished our inner lives are. Why the proliferation of guides to at-home activities? Do people not know how to be in their own private domains? Why are some disgruntled spring-breakers, amid a global pandemic, willing to risk their lives "to get drunk before everything closes"? These are symptoms of the Extrovert World Order, predicated on loudly voiced but not necessarily well-reasoned Opinions, which are publicly exchanged for social (and actual) capital.

Under this Extrovert World Order, I have been pressed to show up and speak up at gatherings. My refusal to comply has cost me recognition and opportunities, while my attempts to acclimatize have compromised my mental wellbeing. I would gladly pledge my allegiance to the long-overdue revolution against this hegemony outlined in Hamja Ahsan's *Shy Radicals*.

A collection of satirical writings based on the Republic of Aspergistan—the

prospective homeland of "oppressed Shy, Introvert, and Autistic Spectrum peoples"—*Shy Radicals* is printed in a suitably tiny font, on pocket-size pages, bound tightly under nondescript gray covers such that a new copy gently resists being opened. The first of the 16 sections is Aspergistan's draft constitution, which takes "Lao Tzu's dictum 'the quieter you become, the more you are able to hear' as [its] foundational principle." I was delighted at the prospect of "private views, opening ceremonies, [and] launch parties" being abolished, as stipulated in Article 30 of Shyria Law, "which encourages the purging of the socialite-class." And while most overt displays of nationalistic pride make me cringe, I would readily listen to the Aspergistan anthem by lifting a seashell to my ear, per Article 24.

But *Shy Radicals* isn't just an introvert's utopian fantasy. It is also a trenchant critique of Extrovert Supremacism. If you have wondered what Paris Hilton, ISIS, and imperialism have in common it is their domineering ostentatiousness. In her interview with an anonymous journalist, Aspergistan citizen and political prisoner Amy Littlewood further delineates the pervasiveness of Extrovert Supremacist ideologies, calling out the authors of self-help books such as *How to Survive in an Extrovert World* as traitors. She asks: "Why do they assume in the first instance that the world belongs to Extroverts?"

Indeed, Extrovert Supremacism's grip over our imaginations of "liberation" is its real danger. The section "Allies and Coalition" problematizes Malcolm X's claim that "if you want something, you had better make some noise"; "In reality, this means accepting the existence of the order in its original stratified form: a higher authority to speak above, a perch to shout to, a rung up the ladder." Let our eight-point texts make clear: true liberation lies in quietude.

CHLOE CHU

BORING DONKEY SONGS

By Lee Wen
Edited by Jason Wee
Published by Grey Projects, Singapore, 2017



"the more i die the more i live" Lee Wen wrote in September 2014. In the time since his death, in March 2019, the Singaporean artist's life and works have accrued greater resonance. His preoccupation with exploring the tensions and contradictions of a multiracial society, embodied in his performance series *Journey of a Yellow Man* (1992–2012), was not limited to looking at the violence and forms of societal control enabled by categories of race and ethnicity but, as he said in a 1997 lecture, "expands to include class-stratification, language, religion, gender, sexual preference, politics, science, ecology." Lee saw where the field of culture could intersect with pressing political concerns in advocating for what he called "a more sophisticated openness in a straight-jacketed society."

Boring Donkey Songs, a compilation of Lee's poems from 2013 to 2016, is a portrait of the artist's way of being. The book's editor, Jason Wee, asserts that although Lee was not principally a writer,

his poems—in their “lyrical anarchy and frequent absurdity”—embody his “extensive hospitality which welcomes and values those who make strong claims to political and artistic independence.” Informal, diaristic, and repetitive, Lee’s “anti-poetry” often sounds like it was meant for his guitar, as in the lyrical “moonlight on my shoulders / i got 22 degrees of loneliness / we got a history filled with lies / and i got 22 degrees of loneliness.” As Wee notes, the artist did put words to song, sharing his recordings for his music project Anyhow Blues online.

Lee’s poems are marked by melancholy and personal struggle, such as coping with Parkinson’s disease. A poem from July 2015 begins with “Every day I wake up to pain / And tears in my eyes / I struggle to get up reaching for my medicine, official drugs.” Others read like mini essays, including one from October 2014 decrying the centralization of power, nuclear energy, and militarization. Elsewhere, Lee pays tribute to the influential performance artists who came before him, including his mentor Tang Da Wu; Tehching Hsieh; and the infamous Josef Ng, who was prosecuted in Singapore for trimming his pubic hair in his 1994 performance protesting the arrest of 12 gay men. One poem consists of the single line: “I will swap my poetry for your propaganda so i won’t have to be at your papa’s agenda.” Lee wrote constantly about the intertwining of art, death, love, and freedom, with all the raw emotions that come with the perspective of “a dreamer with dreams unfulfilled.” As he states in “Pledge”: “My heart fought daily in search of beauty.”

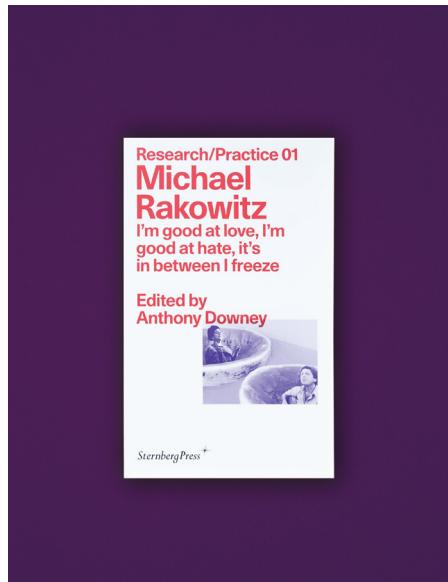
HG MASTERS

I'M GOOD AT LOVE, I'M GOOD AT HATE, IT'S IN BETWEEN I FREEZE

By Michael Rakowitz

Edited by Anthony Downey

Published by Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2019



“Much of my work makes use of the absence of things lost along the way,” Michael Rakowitz states in his latest book. *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze* documents the artist’s eponymous long-term project on Leonard Cohen, or rather Rakowitz’s speculative interpretation of the late musician’s opaque stances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. True to Rakowitz’s characterization of his practice, the body of work centers on two non-occurrences: Cohen’s canceled 2009 concert in Ramallah (it had been announced following a boycott of his Tel Aviv show, prompting accusations of pandering), and Rakowitz’s stymied efforts at staging his own performance of Cohen’s music in the West Bank.

The book unpacks the project’s manifold influences—the artist’s personal relationship to Cohen’s music; his discovery that the singer played for Israeli troops during the 1973 Yom Kippur War—and the way that Rakowitz’s retelling of the story is refracted through “various positions”

(a nod to Cohen’s 1984 album). In a reproduced letter to the songwriter from 2015, Rakowitz considers the ethical quandary of supporting Zionism at the “cost” of Palestinian dispossession, which is thrown into sharper relief by the artist’s own background as an Arab Jew (“Now it sounds like an oxymoron”). The unanswered letter sketches out a work about Cohen’s sojourn in Sinai as a “warrior poet”; stills from a film shot two years later—in Ramallah’s Alhambra Palace Hotel, a pit stop for midcentury stars that becomes an abstracted imaginary for re-enacting Cohen’s journey—show Rakowitz’s friend Marc Joseph Berg as the musician, merging with life-size projections of photographs from Cohen’s time in the desert.

The superimposing of image and voice entailed in the project’s many facets is an alienating form of authorial disclosure, delineating the contours of archive and speculation. The book is marked by lacunae: an abandoned film script is excerpted *in media res*; photographs decontextualize research materials, from ticket stubs to an old record sleeve on a tiled floor. There are hints of Rakowitz’s other series, notably the scraps of Arabic food packaging used for his sculptural replicas of lost artifacts in *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–), on which the artist remarks in the book: “What I’m making is not a reconstruction, it is actually a reappearance—and it will disappear again.” Indeed, Cohen is spectral in the project; his reproduced visages and material traces fail to elucidate his original intentions. But as with Rakowitz’s most poignant bodies of work, this impossibility is integral to appreciating the radical spaces of potential simultaneously created. Cohen is a cipher for a far more complex exploration of legacy, memory, and the politics of boycotting, forged in the hope of reconciling what today seems irreconcilable.

OPHELIA LAI