

LECTURE, THIS WAY

an installation by Loo Zihan (www.loozihan.com)

responding to Kim Donaldson's *From the Lecture - A Reminder of Life* (1996)

and objects from the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archive

Opening - 8 October, 2015 from 5 to 7 pm

Viewing hours - 9 to 13 October, 2015 from 2 to 5 pm daily

"If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions, of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can find hope in what goes astray.

Looking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray. We look back, we go behind; we conjure what is missing from the face. This backward glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us."

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*

Lecture Notes

Kim Donaldson first presented *From the Lecture - A Reminder of Life* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in March 1996. The installation consists of rows of empty chairs facing a screen on which a sequence of 81 slides were projected from a Kodak Carousel slide projector.

Kim rigged the lighting and timed it with the projection so that the entire experience was automated - the lights go off, the slides advance, and the lights come back on again at the end of the sequence. An empty lectern with a reading light was placed near the front corner of the gallery facing the audience. A text titled 'Preliminary Reading' was provided for visitors to read and take away with them.

The installation travelled on to the Perth Institute for Contemporary Art in 1997, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as part of a group show titled *Personal Effects: The Collective Unconscious* (1998) and the Castlemaine Post Office as part of the 15th Castlemaine State Festival (2005).

This was Kim Donaldson's introduction in the exhibition catalogue:

"Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than any one of its instants."

Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*

When watching the television set, at the age of eight, I saw a girl about my age walking to a birthday party. She seemed very happy. A speeding car came around the corner and ran up onto the footpath. I heard a terrible thud. The gift she was carrying rolled into the gutter, then became still.

Last year, I witnessed my younger brother die of AIDS. It was slow and painful. I watched helplessly as his world got smaller and smaller. Then there was a silence. A silence so great and final, yet nothing much had really changed. His things were still all around me. He was just gone. His body lay empty and still.

I was left with his things.

I was left with his memory.

Kim Donaldson

Melbourne

January 1996

Artist Statement

I started my two-month residency at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in August 2015. Before I arrived, the previous Singaporean Asialink artist-in-residence told me about the VCA college flat, raving about its location and size. Coming from land-scarce Singapore, it took me some time to get used to this large flat. I moved everything into the bedroom during the first few weeks and hardly utilized the rest of the space.

What intrigued me over these past weeks was the fact that only a few VCA students and staff knew about the existence and location of this college flat. Most commuters to the school would have to pass by my window everyday enroute to school, but seldom do people stop to investigate the function of this nondescript brick building.

Towards the end of this residency, I heard from various sources that the college is looking to redevelop this building for other purposes. The building will be conserved as it is part of the group of buildings that used to house the old police hospital and morgue but from what I understand, it is unlikely that it will remain in use as a residence.

In January 2015, I embarked on a project to restage a monologue from 1999 delivered by the first person to come out publicly with HIV in Singapore. His name was Paddy Chew and the title of the production is *Completely With/Out Character*. Together with a Singaporean theatre company The Necessary Stage, Paddy devised the play and shared his experiences at a time when Singaporean society had little understanding and tolerance towards the queer community.

Paddy went off medication to maintain his lucidity in order to perform the production, and this took a severe toll on his health. He was admitted to the hospital shortly after the conclusion of the production and passed away a couple of months later.

I shared this project in the second week after I arrived in Melbourne as part of my artist presentation at VCA. When Kim heard about my project, she mentioned that she too had an installation that touches on the experience of the caregiver to a person living with HIV. That was how I first got to know about *From the Lecture - A Reminder of Life*.

Over the next few weeks, we started to have regular weekly meetings and Kim gradually shared more information and materials which I started to digitise and archive. I tabled the possibility of working with these materials for my residency presentation and Kim was generous enough to permit me to do so.

I had lunch with Kim and Alyson Campbell and Alyson mentioned the possibility of visiting the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives (ALGA) located at South Yarra. In Singapore, where queer societies are not legally recognised or permitted to be registered, an organization like ALGA was something that resides illegitimately and in informal fragments. Part of the reason I was keen to visit was to take notes for an Singaporean organization like ALGA that will need to exist in the imminent future.

Nick Henderson, who worked as an art historian before becoming an archivist, was my main contact point at ALGA. His dedication and patience in addressing my questions and requests made this exhibition possible within this short timeframe.

ALGA is a volunteer-run organization. This means that there is less institutional bureaucracy, and I was allowed to access the objects in the collection and document them with relative ease. I wanted to make a work that would not be too disruptive to the daily workflow of the archive, and would be able to contribute to the organization.

I gave a soft copy of the photographs of 81 objects collected by the archive in this exhibition to ALGA and I hope they will be able to utilize these images in the future.

For clarity, the objects and materials in this exhibition have been assigned a colour code wherever possible.

The colour blue refers to materials by Kim Donaldson. These includes the 1996 installation, documentation of the installation, personal family photos, archive materials from the installation and the belongings of Mark Donaldson that Kim has kept with her.

The colour red refers to objects collected by the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives and photos taken at the archive by Loo Zihan.

The colour green indicates personal belongings of the artist. These are objects, clothes and documents that he has brought to Melbourne from Singapore, and collected during his time here. His residency will end on the final day of the exhibition, and he will return to Singapore on 14 October, 2015.

Preliminary Reading

The following text was transcribed and edited by Kim Donaldson from conversations with her father, John Donaldson. This text was made available for visitors to From the Lecture - A Reminder of Life as a stack of A4 photocopied print-outs placed on a table outside the installation. Visitors to the exhibition could take a copy of the text with them.

I

16/8/95

My daughter, Kim and I went for a walk down to the shopping complex to get some vegetables or fruit. I can't remember which. Time seemed not to matter. We went the long way, calling into a church. Kim lit a candle just to the left of the altar. We didn't sit and kneel, just stood and looked around. It was like being in another time or place. From the church we walked to a lovely old pub. We sat outside under the verandah and talked for a while.

II

I think about the Christmas we had in Sydney.

Mark said he wanted the full trappings, roast dinner, pudding, cake, tree, presents, the lot. We decorated the well worn, fold up Christmas tree that I hang a cork on for every year since my heart surgery. There was the tattered old angel that always sits right at the top of the tree, all the new toys for the cat to play with and the blinking lights.

The meal was no different from any other like it. There was more food than you could jump over and enough bubbly wine to make you pleasantly uncomfortable.

It all became too much for Mark and he had to go and lie down. Unfortunately this became a pattern. Later on when he would go out for dinner or have people around for a meal he would have to leave the table to lie down. This upset him because it was yet another pleasure he had lost.

III

16/8/95

When we got back to Unit 121 the words "Mark has gone" came from my wife, Beverley. At that moment so many thoughts rushed through my brain, like "What comes next?", "What should I do?", "Who should I ring?". I don't know what I did.

Rachelle and Erica, nurses from Albion Street Clinic had dropped in to see Mark. They seemed to be pointing me in the right direction.

IV

Mark wanted to go to the New Year's Eve Celebration at "Gilligans".¹

When you are in Sydney you have never seen so many taxis, but come New Year's Eve we spent three quarters of an hour trying to get past the engaged signal on the phone. Mark was all set to give up. Not often did he get impatient but he was a bit apprehensive about going out in his wheelchair. So would I have been if I had known it was an upstairs bar with badly lit, steep stairs.

The Bouncer on the door carried the wheelchair up one-handed. Other people helped me to get Mark up. I thanked the solidly constructed door minder for his help. Mark said, "Dad, he is a she".

V

16/8/95

That afternoon I had gone down to "My Retreat" or as I called it "My Church" at Clovelly. The car park looks out over sea, rocks and cliffs for about 180 degrees and most times there was nobody much around. It gave me an inner peace and strength to keep going.

VI

One night I was in the lounge room and heard a yell from the bedroom. I rushed in. Mark had fallen out of bed. "How did that happen," I asked. He had been smoking, started coughing and finished up on the floor. I got him back into bed then started laughing and said "I'm sorry but I think it's funny." He started to laugh.

¹ Gilligan's - now defunct gay pub located at the Oxford Hotel, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, NSW.

I was worried about him smoking in bed so I talked to the District Nurses about it. They never came up with any real solutions, only said to hide his cigarettes. I didn't reckon that was the way to go. So when he burnt a hole in the sheets I painted a terrible picture of a blazing inferno in an apartment block in Randwick.

After this we agreed on a rule. He could smoke in bed as long as someone was in the bedroom with him. As we would say "You know the rules" and he stuck by them.

VII

By using the laundry at the units I became friendly with John the caretaker and Dave the cleaner. I would go down to their workshop (hide-away) for a chat. Dave was a Scot and would always ask how my "Lad" was going.

VIII

16/8/95

Mark's regular doctor was on holidays so we had to find another doctor who had seen Mark. When she finally came we had to remember times and dates of his illnesses for the Death Certificate.

We all went into Mark's bedroom to say our own, last good byes. We did this with tears, a kiss, a touch or just by sitting in silence and watching the cat, who was saying her own goodbyes, sitting on Mark's knees.

The funeral people came with the appropriate words and did their job like any of the other care workers we had over the time. Yet this seemed so final. There was no writing of their next visit in the diary.

IX

The walking frame was a great "Symbol of Hope" and long after he couldn't use it anymore we still kept it in its usual position. he worked so hard at the gym and in the swimming pool to be independent with his walking. It didn't matter how long it took.

He went to the Mardi Gras party, by himself, and danced all night with the walking frame. He even went to the "Recovery" next day.

X

The telephone was Mark's greatest friend. It kept him up with all the gossip and helped him laugh with his friends, but most of all it kept him in charge of his life.

XI

Often I would come into Mark's room and see tears running down his face as he sobbed. He was listening to his CD player and playing *My Hero*² by Mariah Carey. I asked, "What's wrong?" He said it was just that the words of the song meant so much to him.

After a while he didn't play his music.

XII

Sheba, Mark's cat, would sleep for hours on his legs.

Mark was worried that the cat would "bond to Dad" but I told him it was "cupboard love." I fed it.

Sheba gave us lots of love and helped Mark to think about another life he was responsible for. He was so excited when he picked her out and brought her home.

The cat understood many things. It played rough with me but never with Mark.

XIII

17/8/95

My daughter, Michelle arrived from Perth. I felt she had missed out on Mark dying. I thought of her helplessness in being so far away. The long distance phone calls had to be kept brief and often conveyed fear and despair.

XIV

How do you measure kindness and caring?

Some of our friends, even though they didn't know Mark, wrote lovely messages in letters, knitted socks to keep his feet warm or helped us keep going with a phone call. People's ability to listen was amazing. Often, the only thing I could talk about was my worry, my tiredness, that Mark wasn't getting any better or my heartbreak over this disease where I knew the end result.

² Carey, Mariah. *Hero*, *Music Box*. Columbia Records, 1993. CD.

I have learnt that people can listen. It will be my turn to listen when all they want to do is talk.

XV

Sometimes we would have our quiet times. I would ask Mark if he wanted to talk. He said no. So we didn't.

XVI

Mark felt he had to make decisions and not feel useless. He said I gave him that freedom. I always told him he was responsible for his health. It was up to him to choose what treatment he took and whether he took his medication. I treated him like a smart person (somebody who took after his Dad).

XVII

Mark and I went to the candlelight vigil. I was sent off to buy candles then we started walking towards The Domain. The endless rows of candles flickered down Oxford Street.

I started hearing a list of names, mainly young men. Just ordinary people's names. Just like I would soon be hearing Mark's name. He was going to die too and he wouldn't be here next year.

Then Mark asked me to wheel him closer to another Mark. He was standing quietly alone. Mark reached out and held his hand. There were no words. At the same time a hand reached out and held mine. It was a mother's hand. Tears quietly filled my eyes.

When we got home Mark told me that the other Mark had just lost his partner.

XVIII

17/8/95

I went for a walk, just to get some space around me. When I came back I looked in at Mark's empty bed, a hospital bed from St. Vincent's. My mind seemed to have shut down. I couldn't see Mark, I couldn't cry. I had come to the end of "Caring for Mark" which had occupied my every moment for over eight months.

XIX

I have read Louise Hay's book on AIDS over and over again. It's helped me a lot.

At first Mark talked about an "assisted passage" but then his attitude changed. He could see we were learning something about somebody living with AIDS and was going to show us what he already knew. Death has a beautiful side to it. He had learnt his lessons.

Mark taught me so much but I still had some lessons to learn.

How was I going to tell people my son had died and that he died of AIDS?

It wasn't so hard to do. I now don't feel any hostility and most people are supportive of us. They just don't ask about AIDS.

John Donaldson

Maryborough, Victoria

January 1996

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kim Donaldson for being a dedicated host and generously allowing me to interpret her installation and archive her materials.

I would also like to thank Nick Henderson and the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives for giving me permission to document their collection.

Special thanks to the staff at the Victorian College of the Arts, Asialink Arts, Arts Incubator (Singapore) and the support from Creative Victoria for making this residency experience possible.

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Mark Donaldson, and the caregivers of individuals who have passed away from HIV/AIDS related illnesses.

Thank you for sharing these things.

Thank you for sharing these memories.

Loo Zihan

Melbourne

October 2015