

Floating in the Sea of Togetherness in a Perpetual State of Translation
A conversation between Lap-See Lam, Kholod Hawash, and Tze Yeung Ho,
moderated by Maya Abdullah*

A ship. Seemingly lost at sea. A collective journey towards the unknown. Linking past and present. Repurposing generational loss and trauma, displacement, orientalism, and misinterpretations. Three artists bringing together the visual, auditory, and tactile expressions of art to create a fantastical, multilingual world of myths, haunted by both ancient and contemporary history.

The Altersea Opera, is a magical drama partly inspired by Cantonese opera that takes place aboard a dragon ship and floating restaurant with a very specific, complicated history, now sailing through time and space. It is in a dimension where things are not always what they seem, where drowning ghosts are not swimming towards death but towards freedom, and where the language of the “civilized” is unintelligible. In disrupting dominant narratives and interrogating deep-rooted perceptions, art and fiction have the power to convey truths and realities that are otherwise hidden from us in plain sight.

I have been following these artists’ and composer’s work closely since the start when I, upon an invitation from the curator Asrin Haidari, started interpreting and connecting their different languages in this project, so I sat down to talk to Lap-See Lam, Kholod Hawash, and Tze Yeung Ho about translation and their working process. As I found myself not just instrumentally translating their words but also having to convey ideas about art across languages and artistic expressions, I soon realized I had to surrender to this multifaceted role and accepting being more involved in the process of making art. This highlights the way the multilayered themes of this collaborative artwork are so intertwined with both its pluralistic form and the work process itself, and with every single person working on this project, leading to the blurring of lines and the tearing down of barriers.

This conversation mainly took place in Helsinki on 24 August 2023, and extended into the autumn. It was conducted in English, which is the second or even third language for us, and in Arabic, which is the first language (or the first language pushed back, becoming almost a second language) for some of us—with the occasional Swedish and Norwegian word thrown in whenever the English language failed us. In order to make sure everyone was included during the conversation, I translated the exchanges in English between Lap-See, Tze Yeung, and myself, into Arabic—and vice versa, I translated exchanges in Arabic between Kholod and me into English. The conversation has been edited and condensed for the sake of clarity.

* Maya Abdullah is a journalist, cultural writer, and poet, born in Algeria in 1978 to Syrian parents. She grew up mainly in Syria and Sweden. She originally joined this art project as a translator in Arabic between Kholod Hawash and the rest of the collective of artists and contributors. This assignment soon grew into a multifaceted role stretching from an interpreter and intermediary in the broad sense, to singing the Arabic lullaby that is featured in the artwork.

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Maya Abdullah

Lap-See, how would you describe the collaborative artwork that will be presented at the Biennale?

Lap-See Lam

At this point, I want to avoid defining the work as we're in the midst of finding things out, both as a group and individually. But to sketch out my starting points: The Floating Restaurant Sea Palace, a dragon-shaped floating restaurant with a peculiar history, is the central motif in this project. Another element involves researching the history of Cantonese opera, particularly the Red Boat Opera Company¹ and their use of temporary bamboo stages. By merging these elements, I've begun to think of not only us three – me, Kholod and Tze Yeung – but also of everyone else involved in this project – as a kind of ensemble aboard this ship, setting sail on a journey into sea, one that becomes the artwork itself, or to put it differently: the process becomes the actual work.

Maya Abdullah

In the story, on this journey across the seas, there are two protagonists, which are one and the same, yet not. They are the two Lo Tings, Past and Future, which draw inspiration from a Cantonese mythological, boundary-crossing fishlike human creature, the Lo Ting. Both Lo Tings are rich characters, but if Past Lo Ting provides us with a lot of background and many possible keys to unlocking the past and understanding Lo Ting's agonizing journey, Future Lo Ting leaves things – at least for me – much more open. What are your thoughts on Future Lo Ting?

Lap-See Lam

When I started to read about the mythologies surrounding Lo Ting, I learned about its significance within the contemporary art scene among Hong Kong artists and scholars. Here, it serves as a symbol representing various aspects, whether social narratives or the current political climate. This pushed me to try to think of Lo Ting beyond a reference in this work, and through my own interpretation of it, make it relevant in this context. Future Lo Ting is a character that has a unique storytelling style and is, as the last of his kind, determined to change the fate of the Lo Tings. He narrates an opera about himself,

hoping to reshape the future of their entire lineage. To shape the character of Future Lo Ting, I invited artist Ivan Cheng to help mould him, co-write his lines, and develop the performative language that is uniquely part of his artistic expression. I shared my script with him, and something special happened during a 3-day workshop in Stockholm. Ivan flew in, met Bruno Hibombo, we listened to Tze Yeung's sketches, and then Ivan began writing Future Lo Ting's lines – a mix of his language and the character's background. Bruno Hibombo, a friend and pop musician, was also part of the collaboration early on. A year ago, we worked on the voice for the Lo Ting character in "Tales of the Altersea." It made sense to continue developing this, bringing in his musical melancholy and depth into the opera. Ivan and Bruno bring such different expressions to the table, adding a dynamic layer to our understanding of this imagined, two-part, Lo Ting.

Maya Abdullah

Kholod, you are a visual artist working with textile and your role in this artwork is to paint this universe through your *jodaleia*² and *tatreez*³ that you bring into your art practices from traditional Middle Eastern and Iraqi quilt making and embroidery. The costumes for the different characters, and a part of the installation itself, will consist of your textile work. Could you describe the process of imagining the visual translation of the story?

Kholod Hawash

My language is the visual. In fact, it is the universe through which I think and operate. The story [of *The Altersea Opera*] takes me on a journey to new places in the imaginary world where I create the shapes and characters and their worlds in my own special way, with a mix of references: old mythologies, childhood stories, the primitive, and the contemporary. Then I let these take shape through the techniques I use, having the threads themselves paint a world of their own. Through the fabrics and threads that I like and find beautiful, I try to surprise myself into creating a universe cradled between my world and the world of the story. It's intriguing to be able to read these images beyond what first meets the eye, to create a greater presence and appeal. I do surprise myself by putting images in new spaces and

1. The Red Boat Opera Company is a group of travelling Cantonese opera singers who toured China in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The red boats carried the performers throughout

the Guangzhou region and served as sleeping quarters and training grounds. The Red Boat Opera troupes traversed the Pearl River, performing at different temple festivals and rituals.

2. *جودلية* in Iraqi Arabic, dialect is the craft of making traditional quilts in Iraq.

3. *تطريز* in Arabic which means embroidery.

I find it exciting to do so through the tactile nature of fabrics, how it feels, and through the softness of the threads. Suddenly you see it coming to life, turning into a costume that gives it human shape.

Maya Abdullah

Speaking of references, you draw inspiration from ancient Mesopotamian myths and cultural artefacts both in your previous work and in this one. Could you tell us more about that?

Kholod Hawash

Of course, many cultures have a lot in common through their old mythologies. I searched for parallels between this story and its characters, and Mesopotamian culture and art, which is one of the oldest in the world. The main character, Lo Ting, is reminiscent of the god of the waters and wisdom in Mesopotamian mythology. The Babylonian priest and astronomer Berossus described this god, Oannes, as a fishman – half fish, half human. The myth goes that Oannes would come up to the shore of the Persian Gulf during daytime and remind mankind of the importance of writing, hence the symbolism of wisdom. So, you see, there is a lot to draw from in terms of symbols and characters that are connected to the world of water, and to traveling, pain, and homeland. I am drawn to the world of myths because it is so rich in fantasy, it can be illogical and unexpected, which stimulates the imagination. This is important because art cannot always be realistic. These stories have the power to create new worlds, to make you engage in new and different ways of thinking.

Maya Abdullah

Tze Yeung, I find the music you've composed is as boundary-breaking as everything else in this artwork. It is both classical and contemporary, even with club-music-like elements, giving it both an ancient and completely fresh feel. And I find it both very haunting and deeply soothing, for instance with voices seamlessly going from angelic to threatening and then to being both of those things simultaneously. It is mesmerizing. How did you go about creating this specific sound for the opera? I mean, what kind of inspiration or references drive you, and how do your own imaginary powers interact with all of that?

Tze Yeung Ho

When Lap-See graciously invited me to be part of this project, she pointed out a particular sound in an old piece I had written which she listened to and liked very much. It was a mass for countertenor, electronics, and brass quintet. Naturally, one moment in an old piece does not really constitute the sound universe I work in these days. But I think a lot of the work following that initial conversation with Lap-See was built on how I could possibly inject my current working processes and compositional style into this new work. This meant a lot of my current interests were discussed in the planning process together with Lap-See. These include Estonian poetry, Chinese language politics in the 20th century, retrospective Cantonese pop culture in Hong Kong, Naam-yam (which is the Cantonese traditional singing that our collaborators, The Gong Strikes One, are experts in), and other things that pertain to my identity and upbringing. Of course, the best part is seeing how they interact. Even the most basic meeting between these cultural artefacts can make the most fascinating content.

Maya Abdullah

Lap-See, what does the inspiration you draw from Cantonese opera bring to this project that you felt was important?

Lap-See Lam

I've always had a kind of distant curiosity about this old tradition of storytelling. As a child, I often heard it on cassette tapes in my grandmother's car or saw it briefly on Hong Kong TV channels, like a background noise that I never really delved into. When I was invited to shape the idea and framework to this year's Nordic Countries Pavilion, the art form of Cantonese Opera immediately came to mind. The interconnectedness of various art forms within it – singing, dancing, martial arts, acrobatics, set design, and costumes – where each role contributes significantly to the whole, resonated with my usual creative approach and the potential for the collaborative form for this project. What particularly interests me is the Cantonese language, and its central role in shaping the music. It is intriguing, given my limited knowledge in Cantonese (I speak and understand it on a very basic level). The contrast

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between such a language-driven expression and my limited understanding forces me to approach it differently. Our opera's expression will need to take another form due to this contrast, allowing us to use this idea of information loss in a productive way.

Maya Abdullah

How about you, Tze Yeung? What is your relationship is to Cantonese opera?

Tze Yeung Ho

Since I did not grow up in Hong Kong or Asia, I didn't have a direct relation to Cantonese opera. But when I do visit Hong Kong, I go see a Cantonese opera show with my grandparents from time to time, and there is that sort of nostalgic element which is both mine and not mine. I grew up in the West, so I am always observing as an outsider, but at the same time it is something that is deeply rooted in my family.

Maya Abdullah

Lap-See, what was your thought process in coming up with this idea?

Lap-See Lam

This idea evolved through conversations with curators Asrin Haidari and Hendrik Folkerts at Moderna Museet. When I start a project, the point of arrival is always unknown to me. I often begin by looking into places with a spatial history. The Sea Palace is a site I've used in several projects before. Now, it feels like a return to the original site: the actual Sea Palace itself. Thinking about its history, transformed from a restaurant into a haunted house, and how its symbolism changed as it moved from the East to the Western world intrigued me. The ship's history holds potential portals to talking about topics like displacement, migration over the seas, and the ocean as both a passage to freedom and a border. The ship also became a spectacle of exoticism and orientalism, so I saw a potential to dive even deeper into many layers of complex history. At the same time, I started thinking about Cantonese opera and became fascinated by the Red Boat Opera troupes, not just as part of the story but as a guiding force in our creative process. Our journey on this ship parallels the story we're

creating about it – it's like a story within a story, a meta-narrative, if that makes sense.

Maya Abdullah

Yes, absolutely. What were your initial thoughts about what was presented to you, Tze Yeung?

Tze Yeung Ho

I have always wanted to explore the idea of heritage and how I relate to this art form. We see Cantonese opera from another perspective than what is usually the case, and that is important to underline. There is also the question of translation: we say "Cantonese opera" in English, but in Cantonese it is called "Cantonese theatre".⁴ This is interesting from a translation point of view, what it is that we are actually looking into. Obviously, there is a lot of music, there is a lot of spectacle in this form, but at the same time, Lap-See and I are working in this middle space, thinking about what can be translated and what cannot be translated between different understandings of the world. And I have always been interested in the idea of multilingualism in music, because I think speech is music in many ways. Every language has its musicality, and so when Lap-See invited me to come into this conversation of the meeting of different cultures, different languages, I was immediately just taken by the whole idea.

Maya Abdullah

Kholod, what drew you to this project?

Kholod Hawash

What I love about this project is that it revolves around migration and homeland, between past and present, contemporaneity, waiting, and shared life.

Maya Abdullah

Lap-See, you have worked extensively with themes such as mythologies, cultural heritage, and a fantastical, fairy-tale world. What inspires and drives you?

Lap-See Lam

My process is driven by intuition. From my very first work, I've seen this world-building universe grow in different directions. It's not a linear progression – more like an expanding entity branching out in multiple directions. Within my works I naturally

1. In Cantonese language, the character for Cantonese opera, or rather theatre, is: 劇

blur the lines between historical, fantastical, and documentary elements; there's no clear distinction. I've always aimed to carve out my own space, a language that feels sincere to me. I find it challenging to describe this process verbally in this interview; for me it's more natural to convey through the different aspects of my work and the spaces I create. There it's more like creating a language within its own universe with my own set of rules

Maya Abdullah

I think you are touching on a central point in this work and in all of your artistic works. It is a question of inventing another language and of what that is composed, and of how we can describe it and talk about it in linguistic terms. Tze Yeung, you said that you've always been interested in the idea of multi-lingualism in music and that speech is music in many ways. And you are very much into Norse and Baltic mythologies. How does all that come together in this work?

Tze Yeung Ho

Finnish mythology is interesting in the sense that it's very rhythmic. It is more or less based on Elias Lönnrot's collection of the Kalevala and is traditionally sung to the same melody even though the stories and texts are about many different things, from the creation of the world and the mysterious wealth-bearing object, Sampo, to marriage rituals. The melody has been passed down for centuries and still hasn't changed! So, fitting all the texts into this melody makes it rather square and rhythmic.

But the more I worked with these materials, the more I realized that elements of the mythology are pigeon-holed into certain musical styles. Norse and Baltic mythology are very much tied to metal music. I felt like, well, I'm not specifically working in that genre, so I want to reinvent an identity for certain things that I come in contact with on a daily basis and connect it to Cantonese mythology. All mythologies have so much in common when they come into conversation, so it's a bonus for me to put them all on the table and see how they can play together. I think that the thing that brings all of the world's mythologies together is humans' connection to nature. There is always something about water, trees, plants, and the unknown. Mythology seems

to be a way to claim the land in metaphors, where even the most "absurd" or unlikely stories will have an impact on how its inhabitants see a rock, a hill, a tree, or a river. I think there's also an element of finding reasons to fall in love with the land, even if forests, rocks, and rivers can be mundane.

Maya Abdullah

Kholod, your artistic language is both visual and tactile, and it comes from a specific life experience. Could you tell us about it?

Kholod Hawash

I was crazy about drawing from an early age. I continued drawing, even though I did not receive much encouragement at home. When I came to Amman around ten years ago, we applied for asylum in Jordan. This is where my love for this work flourished. I first started with drawing, then an idea was born out of necessity, as the weather was cold and my husband was working in his studio, which was, of course, a room in the house, and I could not afford to buy anything. I had some old clothes, so I started cutting them up and working with them. My mother used to do the same thing during the blockade [in Iraq]. We were a big family. She used to make simple things for us from very ordinary textiles such as covers or carpets. She was always reworking old garments. She did not throw anything away. So, I remembered my mother, and I felt I was now like her. I had my notebook next to me and I was drawing... Since I love fabric, the touch of textile and embroidery, the idea of working on these things and mixing them together occurred to me. I made my first work, experimentally, and the result was very beautiful but simple. After that, I started to develop my work and my skills little by little.

Maya Abdullah

So, your artistic expression was born out of necessity. Thinking about this and about what Lap-See said earlier – that she doesn't differentiate between historical facts and fantasy, reality and fiction, in the sense that they're both integral to her art – what is art to you, Kholod?

Kholod Hawash

Through art you can express what's inside, your

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lived experience. I fell in love with textile art and quilting. For me it reflects the suffering of women and there is an element of patience to it because it is work done by hand. It is primitive and simple, and at the same time I wanted to make an intervention, to add something to it. In my art I almost always focus on the condition of women. For me, a woman is a beautiful ideal or model to work on.

Tze Yeung Ho

The idea of embodying the lived experience is so fascinating, because I think this stands in contrast to Lap-See and me, who are second-generation immigrants. The diasporic experience of being of the first generation versus the second is quite different. There is somehow a very autofictive aspect to how we [Lap-See and I] think about our parents' ways of being. Whereas, coming into contact with Kholod and working together with her, makes us realize that there is the actual quilt on top of yourself. This is a very different feeling, which I think we need in this project.

Lap-See Lam

I want to come back to the idea of having a distance to what we make art about and what that actually means. As bodies that are being othered and subjected to a certain dominant gaze, it's interesting to think about how one can turn this myth against itself, to turn it into something productive for ourselves, reshaping the narratives within dominant perceptions. In my work, I strive to avoid that gaze, reclaim control, and create meaning and agency in these spaces that were made for others.

Maya Abdullah

I was actually wondering about exactly that. My reading of the story that you are working on is that it is melancholic and painful because it's about loss, it's about exile, about a disconnect and alienation, about the fragmentation of the self and losing one's language, one's homeland, looking for it in vain. Being stuck in limbo. These themes could easily play into the orientaling stereotypes about immigrants and refugees and the Other. We are almost always reduced to witnesses, to bearers of sad stories and miserable lives, reduced to just being our bodies and stripped of the agency to tell our own stories of our

three-dimensional worlds, both intellectually and artistically. These are common tropes not just in news media but also in art, literature, and fiction. But one thing I also find in this work is a kind of manifestation of resistance that stands in contrast to that pain-ridden story—and that is the story-telling itself. The passengers' stories physically drive them forward and help them to survive. I find this agency-reclaiming factor subversive, where the passengers can reflect on so many things, and give the story a multi-layered meaning while literally keeping themselves afloat. So, I am curious: when reappropriating the myth as you describe it, how do you avoid accidentally reproducing the stereotypes when you are actually trying to do the exact opposite, to dismantle or deconstruct the myth?

Lap-See Lam

I try to do this on different levels. One is who I choose to collaborate with. Another is to embrace a multifaceted narrative devoid of definitive answers. I somehow want to transform the viewer's passive observation into active engagement. I try to break the barriers between who the viewer versus who the protagonist of the work is. It is also something that we are working with in the installation with the placing of the audience and how the music and the emotions and themes can captivate the viewer, not only as a voyeur, but also as a participant in the work.

Tze Yeung Ho

The whole idea of avoiding the so-called "stereotype" is actually hard to do musically, because we are working with associations. One of my teachers in Norway used to say that music is really just memory. So, you have heard something before and this something you hear reminds you of that, meaning it's referential with respect to something. And actually, music is about finding things that are referential. I think our process is quite interesting, since we talk a lot about references to different kinds of music and different songs, and we always have to refer to them, but at the same time not take them at face value.

Kholod Hawash

For me what's important is to focus on what I love doing, so I don't necessarily worry about this issue. But I do agree with Lap-See on how to avoid the

orientalist gaze. Art actually makes it easier to do that. Of course, the symbols and old myths are still there, but I try to play with them. I feel that the way my work is concerned with women is removed from the pitfalls of orientalism.

Tze Yeung Ho

I think Kholod is bravely working in a way which breaks free from any outside gaze, whether orientaling or critical of orientalism.

Lap-See Lam

What is also reflected in this work is that, in mine and Tze Yeung's upbringing, we had this experience with a very specific place: with the Chinese restaurant as a commodification of a certain culture, made for a certain gaze. I think that seeing our parents working in this space has also given us the tools to kind of walk in and out of it, and navigate through that gaze, which both gives us the freedom to step out of it but also places a burden upon us, the burden of always thinking about it. I believe I always carry this line of thinking in my work. I try not to think about it in a way that inhibits my creativity, because you could think about it endlessly back and forth. You could end up not doing anything because of the fear of it being defined by someone else's view.

Tze Yeung Ho

Yes! Yes!

Maya Abdullah

I can very much relate to this, the sense of burden and the freedom of walking in and out of experiences and spaces.

Tze Yeung Ho

And actually, I want to turn the question back to you, Maya. Because in a way you are actually, in this moment, taking on the burden of translating for us. As children who have grown up in other places, we usually work as translators, and we have to do it for both our families and the people around us. Somehow what is not talked about very much in homogenous spaces is the fact that we are always turning our minds into a mode of examining what to say to fit in to this or that situation, and how to translate this or that etiquette to others.

Maya Abdullah

Yes, I feel that this is our constant state of being. I think that, whether in our private lives or as professionals, even in this situation, we are always in that mode. But I do feel more comfortable with people who share that experience, because I know that you know, both when it comes to being in a constant mode of translation, but also, for instance, with regard to the question of the commodification and stereotyping of growing up in a Chinese or Cantonese family with a restaurant. This experience is translatable to many other immigrant communities. I can really relate to that too. It's like, you want to own it and be able to tell stories about it, but not to reproduce the stereotyping. I was thinking of something you, Lap-See, said in an interview I read once, that captures this so well. You said that your family is not that nostalgic. They are just looking ahead, like, "we are here now, this is our new life, let's move forward". I relate to that very much with my own parents. It's as if Lap-See, Tze Yeung, and I are in a space I described the other day as "phantom nostalgia". We are always processing things from a distance, one step removed from the space and time of our parents' past experiences or from our cultural heritage. What does this condition do to us, apart from the question of burden and freedom?

Tze Yeung Ho

I think in a way it is sometimes also a huge privilege, because having knowledge of these spaces is actually very enriching as well. We also have to think about how this really helps push the world into a greater understanding. We are the intermediaries of this perspective. We advocate for this space, which is growing, as more people are moving abroad, being mobile. This is a way for us to take our experiences and knowledge and give it to the future.

Lap-See Lam

I absolutely agree, Tze Yeung. And for me, it's also about giving back to preceding generations – to expand the world for them too. This might be why I involve my father as an actor in my work, or why I interviewed my aunt in Hong Kong about two generations back of family history that I didn't know about. It's like bringing back all that which was lost, and reflecting on the fact that they needed to lose

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the nostalgia in order to move forward. It's me attempting to bridge that generational gap.

Maya Abdullah

That is such a beautiful thought. It connects to the question I had about what art is or what the function of art is. I also wanted to hear Kholod's thoughts on bridging that gap – or is it a wound?

Kholod Hawash

Yes, art can heal this wound, or, we could say, stitch the wound. [laughter] But also, I just truly enjoy working on my art. I always feel I have this tremendous energy that I have to channel into my art.

Maya Abdullah

What is the source of this energy? The other day you told me about the time you were working on the piece with the woman with the iron shield... She was like a knight. How does that kind of imagery – where fragility and softness are intertwined with a sense of power – come to you?

Kholod Hawash

I sometimes get it from the experiences I've had. It might reflect the concerns of all women in Iraq and their struggles, like mine. At the same time, women are expected to be strong, which can add to your burden, to the point of being pushed beyond your capacity. I love being able to work with the mixture of the old and the contemporary. There are many memories that are stuck with me and that refuse to leave me, that I have lived with for years. There's a lot of trauma and anxiety and fear. I still have nightmares about Iraq, and I wake up terrified. I hope I will be able to move past this soon. [laughter]

Maya Abdullah

At the same time, your choice of vivid colours, which is very distinctive to your art, stands in contrast to any heaviness in the themes and motifs of your work...

Kholod Hawash

My choice of colours is part of my artistic technique and is connected to whatever shapes and representations there are in the artwork. And it is something that stems from aesthetic experience rather than strict intentionality, which can be damaging to one's artistic work. As an artist I blindly follow my feelings and intuition, because that experience resides deep within me and I have to trust it.

Maya Abdullah

I tried to convey to Kholod what we were talking about earlier, which I think is more specific for the second generation. But I see an overlap between the two. Lap-See, you said something very central about trying to fill in the intergenerational gap or what is lost from our heritage, our existence. That maybe a way of doing it is through art – not necessarily reconstructing but constructing something new in its place.

Lap-See Lam and Tze Yeung Ho

Yes, exactly! [in excited unison]

Maya Abdullah

I want to go back to the concept of referencing that we mentioned earlier, since this whole project and all of your individual works are filled with references, whether to historical facts, other works of art and literature, or to different languages and experiences. How do you use references in your work without risking not giving credit where credit is due, or being accused of plagiarizing or appropriating something the wrong way? First of all, how do you do that with music, Tze Yeung?

Tze Yeung Ho

This is a constant legal battle, actually. What is a quote? What is a parody? These and similar questions are constantly discussed behind closed doors in legal firms. It is indeed quite difficult to concretize what they are, because every situation, every tune, every melody, every harmony borrowed is a reference to something. Because our hearing ability is limited, there are only so many sounds that we can generate. With the idea of referencing, I think it's just about showcasing that one is aware of the context. There is no way around it: every music comes from other music, because that's just how humans have always interacted and shared soundscapes. Of course, some music is tied to certain aspects of humanity that are more spiritual, perhaps, or more personal, and so forth – and we must look at the context and say, is it appropriate to borrow or contextualize in this way? But it's also important to realize that there is no wrong way of doing it. It's really about how one feels comfortable in having that conversation with the audience.

Maya Abdullah

Tze Yeung and Lap-See, you approached me with

the idea of singing a folkloric Arabic lullaby that has been popularized in the eastern part of the Arab-speaking world by the iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz. We had talked about it earlier and listened to it. In this work, there will be other lullabies and poems both from Cantonese and Baltic cultures. Why did you want to include this lullaby and my singing in your work?

Tze Yeung Ho

I feel that translation is a major subtext in the piece. Not only in the sense that you, Maya, are a translator for Kholod in the project, but the idea of filling the Nordic Countries Pavilion with Lap-See, Kholod, and my own experiences in a third-culture perspective is very much about how and where we find each other in different elements presented in the work. The communication of these ideas lies in the domain of translation. Naturally, the concept of lullabies from different cultures meeting suits the project's theme in many ways, as it is fundamentally human. Even visitors a little attuned to music and sound environments who walk into the pavilion will understand that there is an element of translation between the lullabies. And not to mention the meta-layer of you, Maya, being with child in the process of the making of this work!

Lap-See Lam

In the opera, the sea represents the shift between what's familiar and what lies deeper within us. The lullaby serves as a bridge between these transitions. Maya, your rendition of the lullaby happens in the sea bottom, helping Past Lo Ting in remembering his mother's voice. Your voice adds so much depth to that moment, where it concludes with a major change, reconnecting Past Lo Ting to the sea and his past.

Maya Abdullah

It is truly touching for me to be part of this magical canvas of art, singing a lullaby I have sung countless times to my daughter, and also expecting a child. And I remember a parallel that you drew, Tze Yeung: that Lap-See's father is singing in his daughter's artwork. I find it resonates beautifully with the themes of the story. During this process we've had very interesting exchanges via email, both regarding my interpretation of this lullaby with my voice – not being a professional singer – and regarding my interpretation of the lyrics that I've altered. What are

your thoughts, Tze Yeung, regarding this process, about this particular way of making art, blurring the boundaries between artists and non-artists? For Lap-See, having family being a part of an artwork, for instance, is nothing new.

Tze Yeung Ho

I think the divide between what is professional and amateur is an imaginary barrier. A large percentage of the world that enjoys and creates art is not "trained". I believe that meaning is created through the meeting of different people working on different practices, finding that spark which is unique to them. I am saying this not to be diplomatic, but because I believe that it is merely a fact that every constellation of people, artists, and creators who meet will create a different story, a different understanding. Values and aesthetics are found by reflecting on these constellations.

Lap-See Lam

Incorporating people from diverse backgrounds and with different experiences and expertise into my projects is natural to me, something I've done since my earliest works. It's an experience that continually trains me as an artist, reminding me not to limit my works to art world perspectives but to larger audiences – it makes the work better, beyond conventional measures of "quality".

Maya Abdullah

Kholod, your work is collage-like, combining fragments from different stories or imaginative worlds. I find it similar to your practices, Lap-See and Tze Yeung. I guess it says something about being human and the human condition that we, per definition, don't create anything from nothing. It's always coming from somewhere. And you, Kholod, literally repurpose second-hand materials and mix them into your art...

Kholod Hawash

Of course, we have the ability to create art from simple things. Sometimes I find used things I like, or I like the colours, or a specific design. It feels wonderful to find a beautiful piece and start working on it, even if it is old.

Lap-See Lam

For me, the diasporic experience is referential in itself. Moving between different cultural expressions,

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whether Cantonese or Swedish, for instance, I often feel a sense of detachment or non-ownership in the sense that I feel a certain distance to them, and that I don't actually own any of them. Thus, using images, references, and music freely feels natural, as I don't feel they come with an inherent ownership. And I'm open about it, because I think it's important to let this openness reflect in one's work.

Maya Abdullah

The working process itself has been such an interesting journey – so much fun, very enriching on multiple levels, intense, complicated... We've been communicating through many different platforms and have taken several trips together. Between the physical meetings we've shared updates on the script and your work-in-progress, suggestions, misinterpretations, and "accidental" ideas born out of this non-linear working process. And when we've met in Helsinki or Venice, for instance, the work has been very hands-on: listening to Tze Yeung's compositions, physically trying on and playing with Kholod's textile art and fabrics, listening to songs and lullabies, talking about everybody's different backgrounds, sharing stories about our Hong Kong, Iraq, and Syria... I'm curious: when you come home after these trips, how do you process your impressions? Do you do it consciously, turning it into art, or does it happen more organically?

Tze Yeung Ho

Being invited into the visual arts realm has really shocked me into thinking about different things. There are still earthquakes going on in my mind every day while I work on this project, questions like the sheer reach of the Venice Biennale: who is this piece even for?! The expectations, or lack thereof. The idea of displacing a culture or a work of art that is housed in Venice, although it's a Nordic project. These trips have always given me the feeling that people are more connected than we can ever imagine. A lot of these meetings with different people subconsciously seep into my work without my entirely realizing until I reflect on them in hindsight. I am also in the process of becoming a Finnish citizen as we pursue the next steps of this project, so this idea of "home" has only become more complicated. I feel that I am at the verge of abandoning the concept altogether, as it no longer goes hand in hand with the idea of "belonging".

Maya Abdullah

Lap-See, inspired by the format of Cantonese opera (which truly breaks boundaries between genres), you have created an almost larger-than-life magical world of fantastical stories, much as with your previous works. You've described to us how non-linear your working process is and I've had quite an insight into it when working on this project with you. This collaborative work is not just about other artists and participants realizing and executing your work. It's about them creating art from their own interpretations that in turn inspires and influences your art...

Lap-See Lam

It's been important to remind ourselves in our conversations that, whatever direction I give, I am equally intrigued by the answers given back to me. So, ideas should bounce back and forth between us. I am more interested in ripple effects, for example with Kholod's work, and how you can relate to the specific characters from Cantonese mythology, which in turn can inspire me or your music, Tze Yeung. It's not a work that has a set of rules and hierarchies about which direction the work should go. Instead, the aim is to keep floating, not fully knowing how it should sound, what it should look like, and how the opera will take shape.

Maya Abdullah

I think this is connected to something I've been reflecting on a lot when following your collaborative work. About how Western thought tradition, whether in art or literature or in any other field, is based on individuality and the myth of the lone genius. I feel that what you are doing is a direct intervention into that. Is it something that you feel you do actively, or more intuitively, or both?

Lap-See Lam

I've always followed my intuition when making my work, and it's when I get hands-on and start doing that I truly understand what and why I do it. Only now, a few projects later and with your insight, I'm seeing that this might be my way of doing art. Thanks for noticing it in my work.

Also, in my experience through art school, conforming to existing theories felt like the key to gaining acceptance in the art world. But as I've progressed and made more works, I've actively sought to liberate myself from this constrained thinking. Now I try to unlearn, and I try to frame

my work without the confines of traditional “art language”, and I feel much more free in the references I use and the people I collaborate with. My vision, when making these works, extends beyond the confines of the art world; I aspire for those generations before and after me, to be able to connect with my work. Whether it’s my grandmother’s generation or my nieces into the future, I want my art to resonate universally.

Maya Abdullah

Kholod, in contrast to the collaborative nature of this artwork, you really are an individual artist, and this is your first collaborative work. What has this process been like for you? I have the feeling that, when you create your art, you retreat into your own world and cocoon yourself there. I think you even mentioned once that your work requires you to be cut off from the outside world in order to be able to exist in the imaginative space.

Kholod Hawash

Yes, absolutely. The nature of my work and my techniques is one of contemplation. I submerge myself in images and details, almost engaging with art on a microscopic level, and letting my thoughts dive into the depth of the images, colours, and materials, isolating myself from the world to create another, parallel world. It’s a kind of aesthetic prayer or meditation. I move away from the real world in order to affirm the world of the imaginary, of adventure and mischief, away from the rationality of world and into the courage of the arts.

Of course, I’ve been able to develop as an artist through the dialogue with the others in our project, and differences of opinion and friction can be generative, especially since I don’t want to be selfish in what I produce here, because everybody is attached to their contribution feeling it is simultaneously part of one’s own work. So, I want to be considerate of other perspectives. Art is at its core personal and selfish, and it hasn’t been an easy journey for me, being an artist who usually works alone. I have my own vision of things. However, working together has been an exciting experience. It’s like being part of a flock of birds flying in beautiful formations in the sky, but that doesn’t stop you from chirping as you wish...

Maya Abdullah

And speaking of sharing personal stories about our

lives whenever we meet, stories about our lives both in the West and the Nordic countries where we all live, and most of us grew up, but also about our countries of origin and other places, we have, of course, talked about the history of these regions, about colonialism, racism, wars, migration, forced displacement, about heritage, language, about collectiveness and shared experiences. And I feel that we’ve talked about those things – and not only in the negative, by the way – kind of outside the framework of a certain dominant gaze, with a great sense of ease, even. In addition, throughout this whole process I have felt that there has been so much generosity and a challenge to or push back against hierarchies... Kholod and Lap-See, you have described for us what this process has been like for you.

What about you, Tze Yeung? How have you perceived our conversations and the process of making collaborative art in this way?

Tze Yeung Ho

It is about going forward with the people in our community. In our times, it is especially important to find each other and cherish the positive synergy between us. Our spaces together, in the state of things, are once again at risk of being divided and segregated. Of course, friction between different parts of the piece in a collaboration is inevitable. However, one must never see it as something divisive. The end goal of any collaboration is the same: achieving something together and becoming better together as a result. In collaborations, it is something which helps us find ways to recognize, appreciate, and cultivate differences which, in my opinion, can be a harmonious and beautiful thing which I feel the generations currently alive on this Earth have forgotten.

Maya Abdullah

The story and this whole artwork both deal with so many layers of serious and heavy topics and themes, yet there is so much playfulness in it, even a childlike innocence, like telling children’s stories. I am thinking that it is not a coincidence that you’ve chosen to incorporate lullabies...

Tze Yeung Ho

Even in the darkest hour, there must be some playfulness, for our sake, for the sake of surviving and having something to look forward to.