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Impossible but necessary: reflections on Wulia's things-in-common and the work of memory

Karen Strassler

In 2012, Tintin Wulia mused. 'Time, as Cummings has written, is what keeps everything from happening all at once. My time, however, keeps everything happening all at once.'[1] Whereas 'history' is made up of chronologies, dates, facts, and documents forming linear narratives of cause and effect, memory is a more elusive, jumbled material, where time refuses to stay still. Events pile up and blend into each other, and sometimes everything happens all at once. If history's time is the time of clocks and calendars, a steady march divided into standardised, uniform units, memory's time is messy and heterogeneous: it can be dreamlike and foggy, it can emerge in a vivid flash, it can repeat in a traumatic loop, it can haunt and produce feelings of uncanny dread. In his famous discussion of 'screen memories,' Freud argued that our memories rarely correspond to reality as it actually happened.[2] Instead, desire and fantasy mix with fragmented traces of past impressions, and, as with dreams, elements drawn from disparate moments appear together, having undergone a process of symbolic condensation. Far from haphazard or random, these processes of compression and convergence across divergent times and spaces operate through an associative logic, a logic of resemblance or resonance, revealing connections otherwise obscured in more conventional spatial and temporal orderings.

Memory—a personal and a collective activity of bringing the past into the present—provides not merely the *content* but also the *form* of much of Wulia's corpus. In her work, understandings of the past emerge when the ordinary regularities of linear chronology are abandoned in favour of the more convulsive and recursive, thickened and patchy, affective time of memory. Likewise, as in our memories, which leap from place to place with no respect for borders and fixed identities, Wulia's work offers new spatial maps by which to see unseen connections and relations linking people and events. Both the potentials and the challenges of memory's form become more pronounced in a context of repression and fear, such as in Indonesia during the 32 years of dictatorship following the mass killings of 1965. When history is monopolised by the state, memory becomes fugitive, shaky, full of holes—and urgently

needed. When pasts have been forcibly erased, silenced by fear, or distorted beyond recognition, the task of memory calls for creativity and imagination. It requires art.

Born in 1972, just seven years into the dictatorship of General Suharto, Wulia grew up in the repressive atmosphere of the New Order regime. As a member of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community, a minority community subjected to both official and popular forms of discrimination, Wulia sensed that her belonging was always uncertain, that there was something about her that people did not like. She also sensed that certain questions could not be asked and certain stories could not be spoken aloud. A shroud of secrecy surrounded the story of her own grandfather, who was forcibly disappeared during the anti-communist purges that killed an estimated half a million to one million people. She writes, 'My family never talked much about 1965, but I knew that their house was looted and burnt down. I was born seven years later and therefore had no memory of the facts. Yet however well the facts were hidden, the memory of feelings kept lingering within my family. I grew up with these memories, of which the most subtle yet perhaps strongest was the memory of fear.'[3] It was only in 1998, when she witnessed the violence against ethnic Chinese communities that erupted at the end of Suharto's regime, that she began to better understand the roots of the fear and secrecy that had pervaded her childhood. 'I thought perhaps what happened to many families in 1998 was similar to what happened to my family in 1965.' The affective resonance between 1998 and 1965 allowed Wulia to gain new insight into experiences that had happened to her family seven years before her birth. Momentarily collapsing the distance between then and now, 1998 allowed Wulia to remember what she felt but could not recall.

Potent convergences—here, across space—also animate Wulia's 2019 work *Subtext—After Kawara's Title, 1965* [see p. 53, this book], making geopolitical connections between the Vietnam War and the '1965' killings in Indonesia visible while also commenting critically on the ways these relations have remained obscured. The date '1965' becomes a compressed symbol—a thing-in-common—that evokes shared experiences of Cold War violence. These experiences have been kept apart by nationalist historical narratives that treat Indonesia's killings as a discrete, internal affair (and by official secrets that, until recently, kept the United States' imperialist involvement in them out of the picture). Kawara's original tryptic consists of three square canvases, painted red, on which appear white letters spelling out, 'One Thing', '1965', and 'Viet-Nam'. Wulia's restaging of the work comments on the uneven distributions of attention that have largely occluded the Indonesian experience on the world stage. It also inserts personal memories into global conflicts. She writes, 'Most Americans might remember 1965 as the year the US combat troops were first deployed into Vietnam. I remember 1965 as the year my grandfather was forcibly disappeared in the "paradise island" of Bali, Indonesia, as part of the US-backed mass killings led by General Suharto.'[4] Fracturing the singularity of Kawara's 'One Thing', she creates a

total of 68 red panels that spill outward in intensifying red color from the pivotal date 1965, linking Indonesia and Vietnam in a shared context of global geopolitical conflict. It is not just the date, 1965, but the colour red—red for blood, red for Communism—that forms a sensorial and symbolic link between distant places (the pigment she uses, Quinacridone magenta, carries its own history of violence; it was invented in 1859 and named after the Battle of Magenta). The 'deep, blood red' colour, she writes, conjures up the memories of 1965 recounted within her own family. As the killings swept through East Java and Bali, her father's uncle warned him to stay in the safer city in which he was studying: 'Are you mad? Don't go home—stay where you are. The river in Surabaya is red with blood already!'[5] Indeed, during the Indonesian dictatorship, this image of 'rivers clogged with bodies and red with blood' was the most commonly spoken—or whispered—memory of the massacres. Like the focal date '1965', the shared image of the red river suggests a condensed, even ossified, traumatic memory that, because to recount more of what one saw or heard or experienced was too dangerous, often had to stand in for all that could not be said.

The science of memory tells us that remembering is never a simple act of recovery; even when we have a sensation that we are calling to mind a perfect record of a past scene, we are in fact engaged in

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a form of imaginative reconstruction. Far from fixed contents stored in our minds, our memories are remade and reworked every time we recall them. By its very nature, then, memory confounds any search for authentic origins or singular truths. Wulia's video installation from 2018, *Dos Cachuchas* [p. 36], dramatises this process of continual reworking. The piece is a meditation on hybrid identities in the context of histories of migration, and on art-making as a continual, layered process of creative appropriation and translation that foils notions of authorial originality or cultural authenticity. In the piece, dance is a 'thing-in-common' that traverses and forges links across disparate times and places. In 1836, the Austrian dancer Fanny Elssler translated a Cuban-Spanish folkdance, La Cachucha, into the form of a ballet. The resulting dance, which Elssler toured around Europe and the Americas to great acclaim, was a scandalously thrilling refashioning of the (perceived) exotic, savage, racial-cultural Other within an elevated, courtly, Christian-European form of dance. Of course, no recording of Elssler's dance exists, but by using texts and visual illustrations of Elssler's famous dance, a British authority on dance notation reconstructed it in 1967, allowing the dance to be performed again. In her restaging of the dance, Wulia juxtaposes a British ballet dancer's performance of the reconstructed La Cachucha from 1981 with her own translation of the ballet into the style of Balinese dance. By using her body to

perform this encounter with Balinese dance, Wulia brings the piece into an intimate, personal register as a commentary on identity in the context of migration. Just as audiences experienced Elssler's dance as an unsettling melding of apparently distinct things, so too, the movements of Wulia's body as she performs Balinese dance are—for those raised in Indonesia's racialised social order—jarringly at odds with the 'Chinese' appearance of her face. She writes, 'I began dancing Balinese as early as I started to walk, making Balinese dance a kind of a "native language" to me. During the legal ban of Chinese culture in Indonesia, however, I often had to assert my Balinese dance skills ... to avoid Othering and stereotyping based on my so-called "Chinese looks".'[6] The body is itself a hybrid medium of memory, conveying both genetic inheritance and the embodied learning of culture, place, and time. Mimicking the ongoing reconstructive work of memory, extending the dance's reverberation across space and time, *Dos Cachuchas* suggests the futility of searching for singular origins in both art and identity.

A frequent target of Wulia's irreverent and critical interventions is the nation-state's effort to thwart or deny such processes of continual reworking, hybridisation, and movement across borders. She invites people to take into their own hands the tools by which the state seeks to fix origins, impose identities, and enforce boundaries. Passports figure prominently in her corpus as material 'things-in-common' that she defamiliarises in playful, participatory experiences. By enabling people to manipulate these state fetishes, she demystifies their power and provokes people to question ways of ordering that have become naturalised within the global nation-state system. In *Lure* (2009) [pp. 6-7], for example, national identity becomes an arbitrary game; which passport one receives (and whether one receives one at all) is mostly a matter of chance. In *Study for Wanton* (2008) [p. 56], Wulia attempts to sing the four national anthems (Chinese, Dutch, Japanese, and Indonesian) that mark her own familial history of migration and shifting state sovereignty. In a blog post, she writes, 'even though I, my mother, and my grandmother were all born in the geographical area known as Indonesia—my birth certificate was issued by the Indonesian government, my mother's was by the then-current Japanese government … and my grandmother's was by the then-current Dutch government …'[7] The continuities of family lineage—materialised in Wulia's face and voice—counter the discontinuous histories of state sovereignty embodied in the anthems. In the piece *(Re)Collection of Togetherness* (2007-2024) [p. 29] the mosquito—an insect that traverses borders with ease, carrying human blood in its body—becomes a counter-symbol to the passport, representing the ease of movement and fluid intermingling of bodies that for millennia characterised most of life on earth. While attempts to stop mosquitoes, human, and viruses from crossing borders are ultimately futile, the squashed mosquito in the passport represents the nation-state system's violent attempts to restrict this natural mobility. Like mosquitoes, fugitive memories can pass through the mesh of state-imposed stories; but like mosquitoes, they are vulnerable.

If these works are subversively ludic, other pieces poignantly ask: Can documents issued by the state—artifacts that were themselves instruments of state violence—be made to tell other stories? Wulia describes *Invasion* (2008) [p. 46] as a commentary on the forced rootlessness of Chinese Indonesians, what she calls their 'floating identity'. In the installation, Wulia attaches copies of her family's various identification documents to fragile white paper kites. One of the most important ways that people in Indonesia became marked as 'Chinese' was through official bureaucratic documents that identified them as Indonesians of foreign ancestry. These documents, which were required to 'prove' that ethnic Chinese had become citizens of the Indonesian nation, were carefully stored for safekeeping even as they were often objects of shame and secrecy. Surrounded by official stamps, signatures, and lines of text, the faces staring out from the identity documents on the kites appear both trapped and isolated, buffeted by the winds of shifting regimes. They are neither flying free nor grounded. Suspended from the ceiling, the paper kites are moored to earth by red threads that pass through a hole in the wall and are anchored in pots filled with red sand on the other side. Delicately balanced and dangerously close to the threads tethering the kites, razor blades suspended on other threads and held in place by magnets reinforce a sense of precarity. The work suggests that far from affirming ethnic Chinese belonging in Indonesia, identity documents actually enact an un-rooting by continually reinforcing the tenuousness of their position. The nation-state system renders impossible a cosmopolitan dream of borderless global citizenship. At the same time, it is precisely its insistent documentation of ethnic origins that prevents a more settled grounding, continually reminding Chinese-Indonesians that their place in the nation is dependent on official bureaucratic recognition, and that this connection can be severed at will.

In *Invasion*, Tintin manipulates and transforms bureaucratic tools of state violence, making them do new work in and for the present. Documents provide the 'thing-in-common', a material link between past and present, between state intentions and individual lives, between artist's expression and viewer's aesthetic experience. But what happens when there is no 'thing' that can be retrieved and reworked, when the past is marked not only by silence but by intentional erasure? One strategy is to make something where there is nothing, to create a tangible, visible artwork out of silence itself. This is the path Wulia pursues in *Absence in Substantia: Density* (2023) [p. 67], part of her Protocols of Killing project examining the archive of 35,642 communications to and from the US Embassy in Jakarta in the period surrounding the 1965 killings. The documents were made public in response to a Freedom of Information Act request, but before releasing them, the US government withdrew almost 800 documents whose public exposure, it claimed, would threaten national security. Analysing the dates of the 798 withdrawn documents, Wulia created graphs revealing a pattern of intensifying secrecy peaking around the pivotal date of October 1, 1965. Evoking documents passed through a shredder, the piece makes the denial of disclosure speak eloquently of US government complicity in the massacres. Wulia

links this recognition of the substance of absence to her own family memories: 'Here I co-opt the act of closure into disclosure. I know this cooptation quite well. My grandfather's liminal death left an unfiled lacuna, a particular

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hole right in the heart of my family, so to say. But we knew that there is no point filling this hole with anything else, because without this hole in its heart, my family's heart is never whole.'[8] It is the gaps and silences, as much as what is known, that give form to our memories of the past.

In contexts of state violence and repression, popular memories of violent pasts sometimes congeal into potent, shared images, such as the river red with blood, while the state supplies its own singular narrative that seeks to overwhelm and supplant other stories. In Indonesia, the official narrative of the 1965 killings found its ultimate expression in the 1984 film, *The Treason of September 30, 1965/Communist Party*, a gory, pseudo-documentary that al school children were required to watch each year on television. Between potent but unelaborated images, heavy-handed state propaganda, official silencing, and self-censorship, what memories persist? What form do they take? Forming itself around the negative spaces of secrets and erasures, memory fails to cohere; it is shot through with holes. A sense of the past must be cobbled together from scraps culled from different sources. This is in fact how our memories always work. Fashioned from fragmentary traces of our own experiences and impressions, they are scaffolded by narratives and images drawn from media and from the stories of those around us, and fleshed out by our imaginations; even the personal memories of which we are most certain often prove to have been inaccurate or to have belonged to someone else. But these characteristics of *all* remembering are heightened in contexts of state repression. Wulia's ambitious installation, *Memory is Frail (and Truth Brittle)* (2019) [p. 60] mimics the fragmentary, non-linear, and associative form of memory. The installation features 115 black and white drawings, reproductions of images drawn from films, family photographs, art, scientific illustrations and so on, interspersed with handwritten texts. These images and texts are drawn from an array of events and sources that are loosely linked by resonance and association (including, 9/11, Orson Welles' 1938 *The War of the Worlds* radio drama, the Indonesian state's 1984 propaganda film about 1965, her grandfather's killing in 1965, the 1972 coup in Chile, NASA and the Cold War Space Race, the experiences of Indonesian political prisoners, St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*, news reports, scientific treatises, and personal recollections). Redrawn and rewritten in Wulia's own hand, each of these elements appears as a reworked copy. There is no original truth to grasp, no clear storyline to follow. Arranged as an unfolding constellation, the images and texts

suggest convergences and echoes across time and space, the uncertain evidence of our senses, and the mediated nature of remembering.

Of her efforts to recuperate the lives of young enslaved women from archives in which they appear only as disposable property, Saidiya Hartman observes, 'The task of writing the impossible ... has as its prerequisite the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished, and provisional character of this effort, especially when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue.'[9] Wulia's engagement with memory's form suggests the critical role of art in this ongoing and unfinished work of remembering the past. Elsewhere, I have suggested that we think of images not as static things but as events that unfold across time and space as people recirculate and rework them, generating affective and discursive engagements in the process.[10] Similarly, Wulia's artworks are not objects of contemplation that refer back to a closed past. They are image-events that gather people together in common experiences of affective responsivity, engaging them in the impossible but necessary work of memory. While these encounters may take place within a museum gallery, they linger and ramify in the imaginations of their participants. They reverberate beyond the walls of the museum and towards futures yet to be made.

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[1] T. Wulia, 'Timekeeping' (blog post), 11 November 2012. https://tintinwulia.com/blog/?p=2258
[2] S. Freud, 'Screen Memories' (1899) in James Strachey, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Paychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 3, London: Hogarth Press, 1962, pp. 303-322.
[3] T. Wulia, 'The Name Game', *Inside Indonesia*, October 12, 2008.
[4] T. Wulia, 'Subtext-After Kawara's Title, 1965', Gothenburg University Publications Electronic Archive (GUPEA), 2019, https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/63665, 10.
[5] T. Wulla, Instagram, November 5, 2019.
[6] T. Wulla, 'Dos Cachucahan', Gothenburg University Publications Electronic Archive (GUPEA), 2018, https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/58548.
[7] T. Wulla, 'Weight' (biog post), October 28, 2007, https://tintinwulia.com/blog/?p=174
[8] T. Wulia, 'Absence In Substantia: Density', Gothenburg University Publications (GUP), 2023, https://gup.ub.gu.se/publication/334231.
[9] S. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe 26*, Vol 12 (no. 2) June 2008, pp. 1-14, p. 14.
[10] K. Strassler, *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*. (Duke Uni. Press, 2020).