HO TZU NYEN Time & the Tiger

REFLECTIONS ON ASIA BY CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED SINGAPOREAN ARTIST HO TZU NYEN

24 NOV 2023 — 3 MAR 2024
TANJONG PAGAR DISTRIPARK

Welcome to *Time & the Tiger*, a mid-career survey showcasing Ho Tzu Nyen's influential works developed since 2003.

As you wander through the two galleries, you will find yourself entangled in the thematic threads that are defining motifs in Tzu's body of work. The tiger, for instance, is more than a recurring image—it is an enduring companion in his artistic journey.
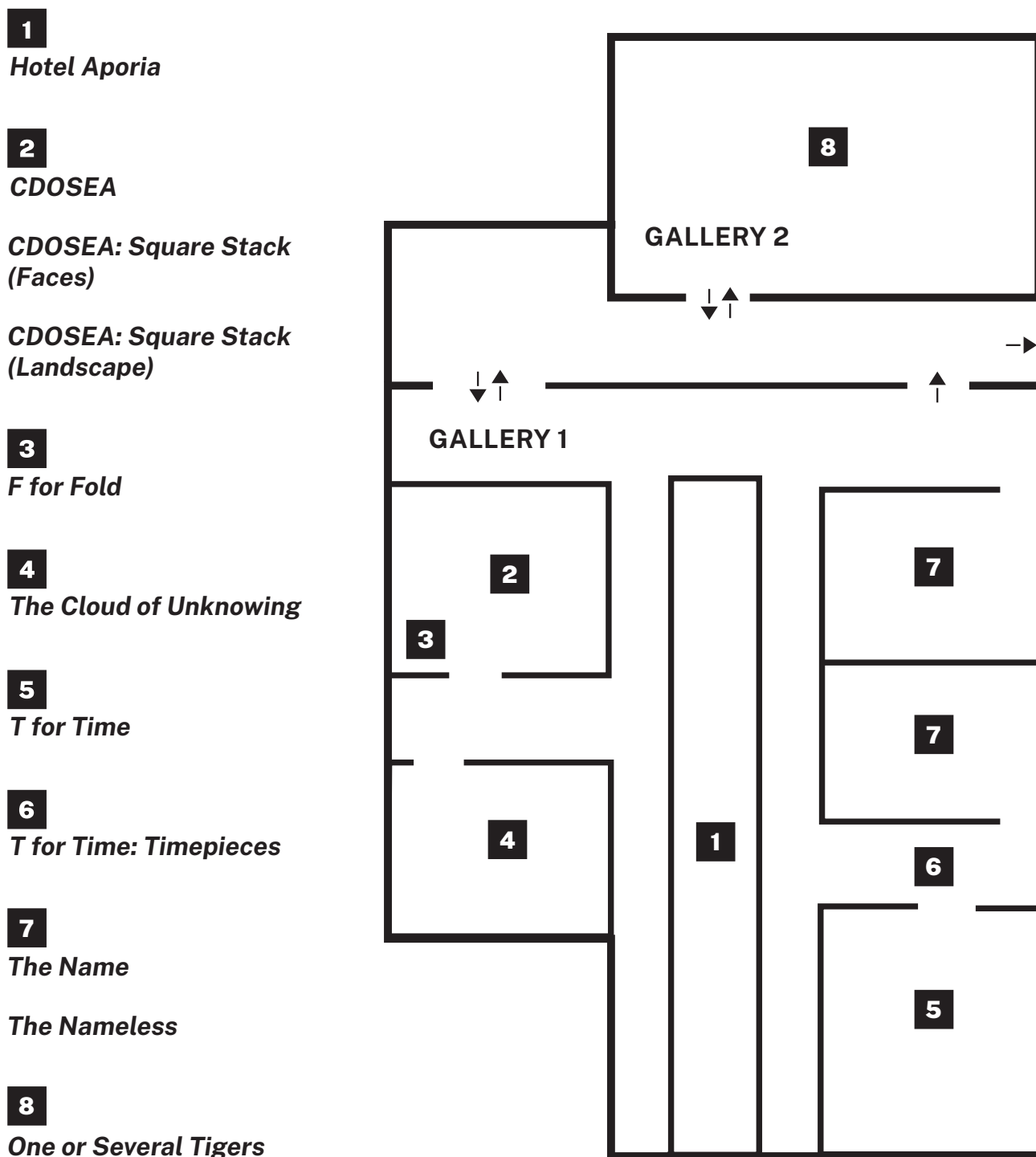
At the entryway of each artwork, you will find annotations—based almost entirely on my conversations with Tzu and the curators—to enhance your understanding. Here, you will discover the fascinating narratives of characters that have captured Tzu's imagination. From Saṅg Nīla Utama, the pre-colonial founder of Singapore who is known by myriad names; to Lai Teck, a man of over 30 aliases who led the Malayan Communist Party while secretly serving multiple foreign secret services; and Gene Z. Hanrahan—a name that has stirred whispers of CIA involvement in Southeast Asia. Each of these enigmatic figures, like the artworks they inspire, contributes a piece to the ever-shifting puzzle that is Ho Tzu Nyen's world.

Reflecting on this exhibition, I have come to a paradoxical realisation: Tzu's art has evolved considerably over the last two decades, yet it has also remained astonishingly constant. I remember Tzu once telling me, "Time isn't a one-way street, shooting forward like an arrow. It can circle back, bend, and spiral through seasons, eras and fleeting moments. Sometimes it returns to its origins, and at other times, it charts an entirely new path." As you walk through this maze-like space, I invite you to carry Tzu's words with you.

A note on navigation:

You are currently in Gallery 1, just across the hallway in Gallery 2, you will find an artwork — *One or Several Tigers* — that delves deeper into the histories of the tiger in Southeast Asia.

Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to approach our friendly staff. They're here to help.

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1 *Hotel Aporia*

2019
Video, automated fan, transducers, show control system
Video: six-channel projections, 4:3, colour and 24-channel sound, 84 min 1 sec
The Waves: 12 min; The Wind: 24 min; The Children: 24 min; The Void 24 min 1 sec

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Imagine walking into a room and finding a squadron of kamikaze pilots chatting with filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, animator Ryuichi Yokoyama, and Kyoto School philosophers. Developed by Tzu in 2019, *Hotel Aporia* is an imagined space where various Japanese figures who lived through World War II gather.

Tzu has often asked me: "Why did the Japanese call it 'The Pacific War,' while back at home in Singapore we call it 'World War II' following the British and the Americans? Could we comprehend the Japanese viewpoint without endorsing their wartime ideology? Trying to learn about what happened in the 1940s, feels like trying to read two different books about the same historical event, each in its own language."

Hotel Aporia repurposes scenes from Ozu's iconic films from the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, there's a twist — the faces of the actors are obscured through a meticulous process called roto-scoping, in which each frame is manually altered. The absence of faces serves as a canvas, inviting you to consider the powerful performances and characters that populated Ozu's filmic masterpieces.

For Tzu, these faceless figures become shapeshifters, at once everyone and no one.

In 1943, at the height of World War II, Ozu was sent to Singapore to make a propaganda film for the Japanese Imperial Army, while Yokoyama was sent to Indonesia for a similar purpose. Ozu never finished his film, perhaps out of quiet disobedience; but Yokoyama completed his mission and later made Fuku-chan's *Submarine* (1944). Both Tzu and I have wondered: Why did Ozu never make the film he was told to? Was he resisting the Japanese Imperial Army, or was he just lazy? In Yokoyama's film, his iconic character Fuku-chan, a young student, is placed on a submarine headed for war. You will encounter Fuku-chan in the third room, wearing a sailor's hat.

Once, while we were binge-watching 1980s Japanese anime, Tzu made an interesting observation. He explained that anime, like Fuku-chan, was made using a technique called "compositing," which involves breaking images into separate layers and then animating them by shifting these layers over each other. In this way, compositing animates movement by creating a dynamic interplay of layers.

In *Hotel Aporia*, Tzu delves into the art of compositing, but with a twist. Instead of sticking to just one screen, he has videos running on several screens, offering different perspectives — those of Ozu and Yokoyama — during the Pacific War. By layering these stories together, Tzu not only shows us the contrasting experiences of both filmmakers but also asks us to develop a deeper and multidimensional perspective on this turbulent period in our history.

In that sense, compositing is much more than just an animation technique. It is a metaphor, a way to understand the layered complexities of life and history. After all, isn't our perception of the world — and history — a composite of various sources, experiences and viewpoints? Sometimes we layer new insights, and at other times, we actively peel away long-standing assumptions to reveal a different perspective of the past.

2 *CDOSEA*

2017–ongoing
Video, mini PC, algorithmic editing system, LED lights
Video: single-channel projection, 16:9, colour, 5-channel sound, infinite duration

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

At its heart, Tzu's longest-running project, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–) centres on a question: "What makes Southeast Asia a unified region when it has never been bound by a single religion, language or political system?" To say the question is complicated is an understatement.

After all, the term "Southeast Asia" didn't even originate from within its own diverse communities. Instead, the concept was conjured and popularised around the time of World War II through the formation of the South East Asia Command (SEAC), an Allied organisation whose aim was to liberate the region from Japanese control.

Fast forward to the 1950s, and you will find that the concept of "Southeast Asia" had gained traction, particularly within American academic circles. Various departments of "Southeast Asian Studies" sprung up in universities, and it's been suggested that some of these initiatives might have been funded by the CIA. The goal? To understand the region better, particularly in the context of combating the spread of communism during the Cold War era.

Tzu's efforts went beyond studying the region; he aspired to capture its ineffable essence. In 2017, he achieved this through *CDOSEA* (named so after The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia). CDOSEA is firstly a database of video clips, sounds and subtitles relating to the histories of Southeast Asia, but it is also programmed with an algorithm that constantly generates randomised sequences out of this database collection. This creates a ceaseless, ever-changing tapestry of visuals and sounds — a living, breathing entity that defies stagnation.

Every time *CDOSEA* generates a new version or sequence, it's just that — a version, one interpretation among infinite possibilities. *CDOSEA* serves as a model, a lens through which we can glimpse the fluid complexity of a region too varied and dynamic for any single narrative to contain.

So, when we talk about Tzu's work, we are really diving into a creative process that seeks to reconcile the ungraspable nuances of a region as diverse as Southeast Asia. It reminds us that some things, no matter how hard we try, can't be entirely captured — they can only be endlessly explored.

CDOSEA: Square Stack (Faces)

2019
Lenticular print, LED light box, metal frame
180 × 80 × 10 cm

Collection of the artist

CDOSEA: Square Stack (Landscape)

2019
Lenticular print, LED light box, metal frame
180 × 180 × 10 cm

Collection of the artist

3 *F for Fold*

2021
Coloured print on paper
Configurations variable; 12.4 × 18 × 5 cm (closed)
Collection of the artist

Commissioned by Goethe-Institut Indonesia

4 *The Cloud of Unknowing*

2011
Video, smoke machine, lights, show control system
Video: single-channel HD projection, 16:9, colour, and 13-channel sound, 28 min

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

In 2011, Tzu represented Singapore at the Venice Biennale with this installation, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In it, he explores the ever-changing motif of the cloud as its meanders through the history of art and somehow, in a cosmic turn, comes to connect a diverse group of characters living solitary lives in their Housing & Development Board (HDB) apartments.

In Italian Renaissance art, the cloud is typically rendered by applying paint on canvas, often symbolising ecstasy and the divine. In contrast, classical Chinese landscape painting captures the essence of the cloud not by applying paint, but by leaving the surface untouched, highlighting its intangible quality. Many of these Chinese painters were driven by the Taoist ideal that blankness or "originary emptiness" isn't absence. Instead, it is fullness, a vibrant space teeming with life.

I've always felt that the blank or empty screens in Tzu's art speak volumes. Not just in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but also in Hotel Aporia where faces are obscured, and even in CDOSEA (located in the adjacent room) when the screen goes blank from time to time due to the flashing LED lights behind it.

The premise, in effect, is that just because something isn't seen doesn't mean it isn't there. With every blank screen Tzu presents, I feel he is offering us a space, not of emptiness, but of endless possibility, nudging our imagination to fill the void. Can we envision blankness as a gateway to an unpredictable future?

The opening image in *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a blank screen, quickly followed by a character staring into it. Intriguingly, this character could be a stand-in for you, the viewer. Set in an HDB block on the eve of its demolition, the emptied public housing units serve as stages for otherwise isolated characters who embody artists famously enamoured with clouds: Correggio from the Italian Renaissance, who saw clouds as a path to divine closeness; surrealist painter René Magritte, renowned for his cloud-laden skies; and Chinese ink painter Mi Fu, celebrated for his cloud-wrapped mountains that hint at our fleeting existence within the vast cosmos.

The cloud, in its ever-changing form, subtly reminds us that reality is not always as it seems. In this fleeting world, it becomes a challenge to distinguish between mere emptiness, the latent potential of an unpainted surface, and the quiet drift of clouds across the landscape.

The Cloud of Unknowing ends with you, the viewer, enveloped in a dream-like fog.

5 *T for Time*

2023–ongoing
Video, voile screen, scrim walls, real-time algorithmic editing and compositing system
Video: two-channel synchronised HD video, 16:9 format, colour, and eight-channel sound,
60 min

Co-commissioned by Singapore Art Museum and Art Sonje Centre with M+,
in collaboration with Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and Sharjah Art Foundation

6 *T for Time: Timepieces*

2023–ongoing
38 flatscreens (various dimensions), apps and videos, various durations (1 sec to infinite)

Co-commissioned by Singapore Art Museum and Art Sonje Centre with M+,
in collaboration with Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and Sharjah Art Foundation

Tzu once remarked, "Time is the chief protagonist in my works." For him, it's not merely about the ticking of clocks or passing of days. He dives deep into the concept of time at the atomic level and then zooms out into its vastness on a cosmic scale, contemplating its elusive nature. He muses, "What, after all, is time? We seem to be able only to describe it through metaphors — time flies or time flows. If time is a river, what are its banks? Is there only a single time? And, if so, is it a master clock that controls or enslaves other clocks? Or are there different temporalities, each with its own sovereignty?" As we assembled this exhibition, we pondered whether these diverse manifestations of time can coexist and be appreciated together.

T for Time is a collection of Tzu's notes and speculations on time. This work encompasses a variety of themes, from symbols and concepts of time to the histories of time-keeping traditions in Asia and the West. It also includes intimate anecdotes, such as childhood photographs and home movies belonging to Tzu's friend and collaborator Arai Tomoyuki, as well as a visit to Victoria Theatre's clocktower with Mr P. K. Chan. At 79 years old, Mr Chan is not only the manager of the building housing Tzu's studio but was also the caretaker of the Theatre's clock for over three decades.

These notes are re-animated through 2D animation and then input into an algorithmic system that shuffles and re-assembles them into a "film" consisting of 42 chapters. The sequence and contents vary with each randomised shuffling, yet each iteration is underscored by a 60-minute improvised solo by Soon Kim — a Korean-Japanese free-jazz saxophonist. Despite the changes, every cycle retains elements of both repetition and differentiation.

T for Time is accompanied by 39 *Timepieces*, each functioning as an emblem of time. These range from short video loops of 15 seconds to apps that operate in cycles ranging from 24 hours to 165.8 earth years (a year on Neptune); some also vary in real-time. Collectively, *T for Time* and *Timepieces* represent Tzu's model for a prospective machine that continuously generates new stories, speculations and hallucinations of time — in real-time.

7 *The Name*

2015–2017
Video, 16 books
Video: single-channel HD projection, 16:9 format, colour, and six-channel sound,
16 min 51 sec (English); 16 min 52 sec (Chinese)

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

The Nameless

2015
Video
Video: synchronised double-channel HD projections, 16:9 format, colour,
and six-channel sound, 21 min 15 sec

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

In 2015, Tzu created two video works titled *The Name* and *The Nameless*, which emerged from his longest-running project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*. The dictionary uses the English alphabet as an index to think about the manifold realities of Southeast Asia.

The Name derives from letter G: G for "Ghostwriter" and "Gene Z. Hanrahan."

Gene Z. Hanrahan is the purported author and editor of several books, including The Communist Struggle in Malaya, 50 Great Oriental Stories and Pre-Service Course in Shop Practice. At one time there was speculation that Hanrahan was not a real person but was a front for the CIA. Over the years, Tzu has purchased nearly all of Hanrahan's known books from online booksellers.

The Name is inspired by the possibility that Hanrahan is an alias for multiple identities. To me, he is a conduit for the repressed histories of communism in Southeast Asia, but also a versatile vessel for Tzu to approach this complex subject from multiple points of view.

What's truly compelling is that two versions of *The Name* are on display. The first features an English voiceover suggesting that Hanrahan was just a pseudonym, a fictitious identity. The second, with a Chinese voiceover, posits the opposite: that Hanrahan was indeed a real individual.

When viewed together, these versions create palpable tension, each contradicting the other. The viewer — you, in this case — is left to reconcile these conflicting narratives. This approach reminds me of the children's game of Broken Telephone, where a story is altered with each telling, no matter how hard one tries to maintain its original form.

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The Nameless derives from the letter L: L for "Lai Teck."

Lai Teck, who ascended to the role of General Secretary of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947, remains an enigmatic figure shrouded in mystery. Known by over 30 aliases, his true identity is still not known. Born in Vietnam, he arrived in Singapore in the 1930s and quickly rose through the party's ranks to become its leader. It is known today that he was also a triple agent, working clandestinely for the French, British and Japanese secret police.

Tzu first told the story of Lai Teck through *The Nameless*, which is made up of repurposed clips from Hong Kong cinema featuring the legendary actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai. Interestingly, in Leung's distinguished career, he has often been cast as a double agent, an informer and a traitor.

Perhaps, the mysteries surrounding Lai Teck can be seen as a microcosm of Southeast Asia's tumultuous history — where the various masters he served were the same foreign powers vying for control over the region. With each viewing of *The Nameless*, Lai Teck's story gains another layer, bridging the past and the present, fact and fiction.
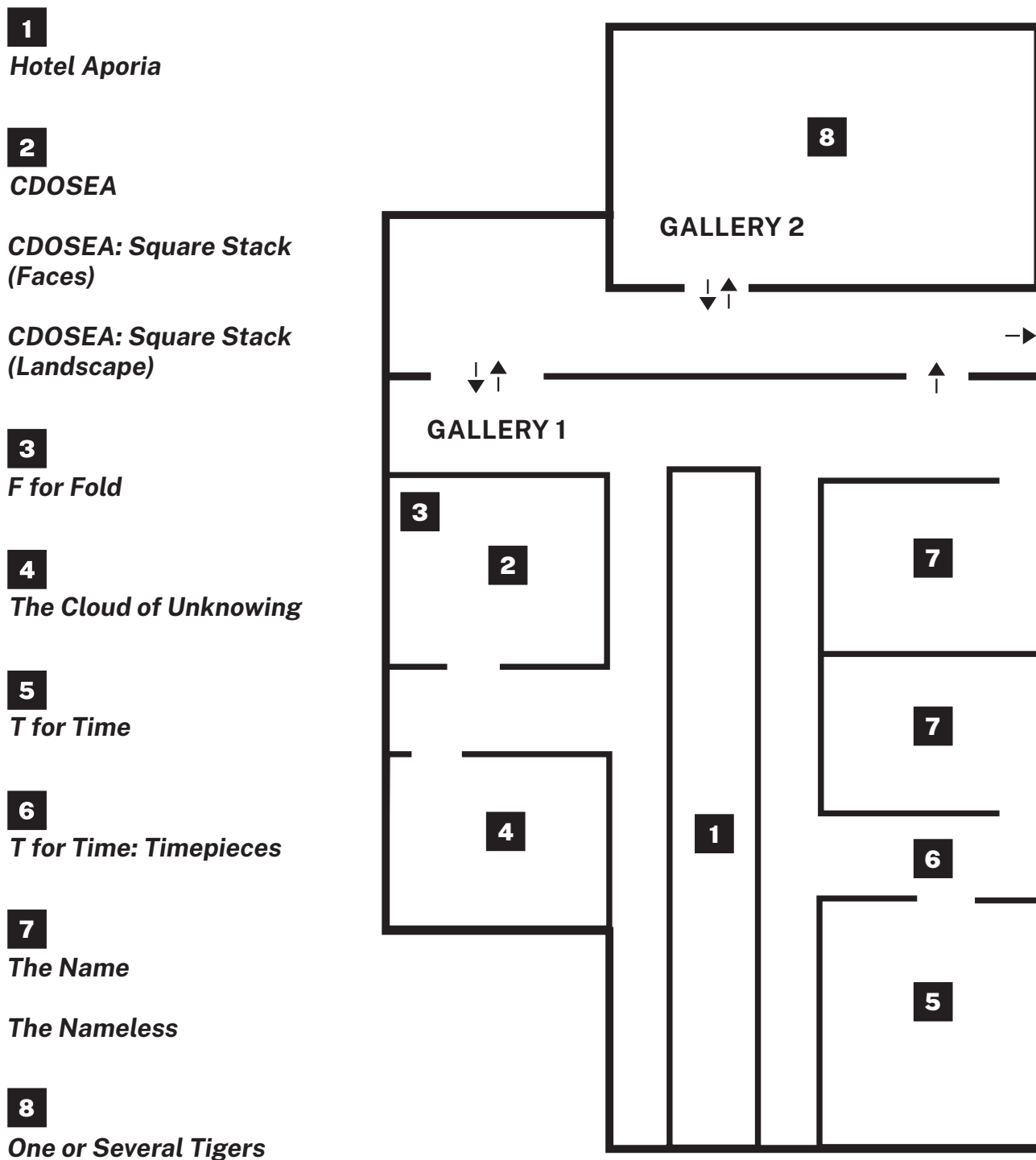
It is customary for us to judge traitors from a moral standpoint, as if there is something deficient in their personalities or something lacking in their character. Their disobedience and lack of singularity of purpose unsettles us. However, I think it is more interesting to consider traitors from a historical perspective, viewing them as characters caught in the complex wheels of geopolitical intrigue.

As for those who have seen the original films by Leung, your memories will undoubtedly colour your experience of *The Nameless* in unique ways. Each of the repurposed clips continues to carry a seed of the original stories that the films were meant to tell.

A note on navigation:

You are currently in Gallery 2, just across the hallway in Gallery 1, you will find two artworks — *The Name and The Nameless* — that delve deeper into the histories of the Malayan Communist Party. In the same gallery, don't miss *Hotel Aporia*, which explores Japan's war efforts.

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GALLERY 2

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8 *One or Several Tigers*

Video, smoke machine, automated screen, show control system,
14 wayang kulit puppets in aluminium frames
Video: two-channel HD video projections, 16:9 format, colour and 10-channel sound,
33 min 33 sec

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

In 2017, Tzu embarked on an extraordinary journey, one that had been years in the making — in search of the enigmatic and elusive Malayan tiger.

His pursuit culminated in *One or Several Tigers*, an installation unfolding across two facing screens featuring a surreal duet between a Malayan tiger and George Drumgoole Coleman, the Irish architect and road surveyor who helped shape modern Singapore.

Why Coleman? Well, he arrived in Singapore in 1822, just three years after Stamford Raffles had turned this island into a trading port for the British East India Company. Coleman was the mastermind behind the island's first urban blueprint and was responsible for designing several iconic buildings, including Raffles' own residence on Fort Canning Hill. Raffles, who often daydreamed of becoming an English Rajah, wanted his house designed in local atap and wood, strategically situated near the tombs of Singapore's Malay kings. A colonial dream brushing up against local history.

The song between Coleman and the Malayan tiger unfolds like an epic poem, telling the deep-rooted story of humans and tigers in the Malay world — a saga that goes back more than a million years. A time when tigers roamed freely across what is now Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, back when these places were all part of a single landmass known as the Sundaland.

In the Malay world, tigers aren't merely predators; they are kin. There is an old saying that humans and tigers share a bloodline, a mystical connection rooted in a shared ancestral past. Tigers are often viewed as mediums for ancestral spirits, making them more than just animals — they are a part of Southeast Asia's spiritual tapestry.

Yet, as Tzu reminds us, this cosmology was disrupted, unsettled by the winds of European colonisation. Through this dream-like dialogue between Coleman and a Malayan tiger, he beckons us to question how history, colonialism, nature and spirituality intersect.

Along with the films, *One or Several Tigers* also incorporates moving screens and Javanese wayang kulit, or shadow puppets, so that we experience more than just sight — we feel and understand a tale that is both ancient and urgently relevant today.

Heinrich Leutemann (1824–1905)
Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore
(Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore)

c. 1865
Wood engraving, facsimile
20.8 × 29.4 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore / Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore

One or Several Tigers was borne from Tzu's encounter with a wood engraving titled *Road Surveying Interrupted*, created by German illustrator Heinrich Leutemann around 1865. The engraving depicts a bizarre incident from 1835 when Coleman's road surveying was suddenly halted by the appearance of a Malayan tiger. Interestingly, the tiger did not lay a paw on any of the humans, including the convict labour from the Indian subcontinent whom Coleman had enlisted for his surveys. Instead, it went straight for the theodolite, the surveying instrument at the centre of the image.

Shortly after this event, the British colonial government initiated a war against the Malayan tiger and they were hunted to extinction in Singapore by the early 20th century.

Yet this physical annihilation of tigers set the stage for their symbolic return. In 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Singapore. The retreating British attributed their shock and capitulation to the speed, ferocity, cunning and amphibiousness of the Japanese forces — qualities the British had once attributed to the Malayan tiger. General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who led the Japanese campaign, became widely known as the "Tiger of Malaya."

In the years following World War II, the Malayan tiger would symbolically return, this time embodied by the guerrilla forces of the Malayan Communist Party. These forces tormented the British across Singapore and the Malaysian peninsula through unconventional disruption tactics. Depending on who you ask, this tumultuous period in the 1950s is either the Malayan Emergency or the Anti-British National Liberation War.