Sriwhana Spong's Ida-Ida

by Leah Reynolds

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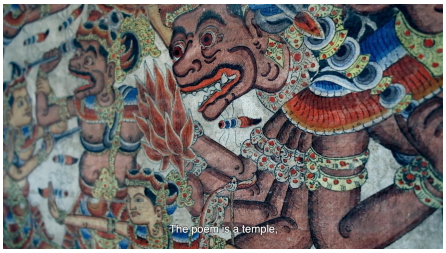

Sriwhana Spong, *The painter-tailor*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett

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Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

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Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Performance still, dancer Benjamin Ord, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

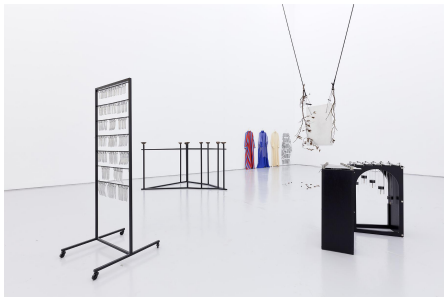
Sriwhana Spong *Instrument E (Tina)* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong *Mother* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong's recent *Ida-Ida* at Spike Island, Bristol was thought-provoking through the displacement of materials and ideas which together forged the exhibition. Spong is a multidisciplinary artist who skillfully tailors an initial idea to an appropriate medium. The exhibition, curated by Elisa Kay, presented some new work, including the short film *The painter-tailor* (2019), alongside works in performance, musical instruments, sculpture and installation. The materials Spong utilises are vast, portraying something of an emboldened practice undeterred by a variety of disciplines, such as analogue and digital film; the ephemera of live performance; both permanent and impermanent materials, from bronze and steel to decaying tree

branches and cloth dyed in Coca-Cola; and an abundant use of honey as glue. The underlying significance and concepts of these forms are equally expansive, from the artist's personal relationship with her ancestral home of Bali and its post-colonial status, to the reimagining of profane objects and activities into the space of the sacred. And there is also the operations of language explored in the work of medieval mystic and polymath Hildegard von Bingen and a Javanese mythic poem, to name a few.

An in-depth discussion of each piece would require a far longer essay, and I am reluctant to 'explain' the various historical or factual avenues that *Ida-Ida* explores (as if there is a concrete answer to a question that refuses easy formation). However, I wish to pick up from Spong's playful lead in the realm of ideas, where she decidedly operates within an abounding process of signification. That is, where ideas spark off one another outside of divisive rubrics of history-proper, myth, or specific time periods. By this nature, Spong's action of *displacing* ideas – and the objects that furnish them – sets a new path of thinking in motion, and it is this quality that, arguably, leaves the most lasting impression upon exiting the gallery space.



Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

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The title *Ida-Ida* demonstrates and signifies something of the exhibition's essence. Ida is a disobedient word, perhaps selected by Spong for its multiple semantics that sweep from the creaturely bat, to the reality of everyday labour, up to a metaphysical holiness. As the exhibition guide outlines, the title refers to:

> 'Ida' (pronounced 'eeda' in Balinese) is used to denote someone from the Balinese Brahmana priestly caste and means ‘highness’. It is also the name used to refer to the bats from the temple near the artist’s ancestral home in Bali, which feature in [the artist’s film] *The painter-tailor*. 'Ida', as in the Western name, comes from the Germanic word 'id', meaning ‘work’ or ‘labour’.

Furthermore, ‘Ida’ instead becomes *Ida-Ida*, doubling and extending itself into a paradigm akin to chainmail. The use of the hyphen across various symbols and wording of Spong’s work demonstrates her penchant for this conceptual structure that subtly underlines the show. The title of Spong’s short film, *The painter-tailor*, also makes use of the hyphen’s function in language to draw what is separate into compound, rhizomatic relationships. And just as the hyphen sets up a reciprocal action, its function is also to level any hierarchy between the two or more elements. You can have ‘painter-tailor’ or tailor-painter’; their ordering does not allude to rank.

Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

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To focus on this aspect of the exhibition borders on the pedantic, rather than dutifully delving into the many stories, histories and narratives that Spong mediates across a host of materials. However, it is clear that Spong takes great pleasure in the *idea* behi nd a work, and the references she draws upon are indeed fascinating. For instance, *Ida-Ida* is also the name given to the expansive silk cloth hand-dyed in tea and Coca-Cola that hangs and divides the main gallery space. Its scale brings an air of elegance and drama to the exhibition, like that of a theatre curtain. Its inspiration came out of a pithy, punk-style essay by Ian Svenonius which likens colonialism to an imperial vampirism that consumes, and later mass-produces, the beverages of traditional cultures which fall under its empire.[01] Hence the silk cloth soaking up the tannins of tea and fizz of Coca-Cola is perhaps one of the more literal and pleasing leaps from idea to form that comes about from Spong's thinking. There is a satisfaction in the unity of the piece with its idea, but to fall into a descriptive mode that equates each piece with an analogy in text would be disloyal to the exhibition, as if to attain a sense of wholeness from a concept coming full circle with its object. How Spong reconfigures her ideas for her audience is more interestingly framed as a call toward the logic of their choosing. I see it as a way to open up space for thinking rather than shutting it down the moment a work is 'understood', as what is easily explained quickly loses its movement in thought.

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Anne Carson, the contemporary classicist who gave ancient Greek myth a postmodern makeover, said this of what it is to validate your own interests:

> Individuality resides in the way links are made... You know, I could list things I saw but that's not why I put them together, that would be an afterthought. I put them together by accident. [W]hat's interesting to me is once the accident has happened, once I happen to have Simonides and Paul Celan on my desk together, what do I do with the link? What I do with it depends on all the thoughts I've had in my life up to that point and who I am at that point. It could be Simonides and celery, it doesn't

> matter; it only matters insofar as I'm going to make a work of art out of it. It seems totally arbitrary on the one hand and on the other, totally particular about who I am as a thinker.[02]

The last sentence by Carson, I find, particularly resonates with Spong's method because she is either doing something very broad or very specific. The intrinsic logic that underpins the show, that is, Spong's specific mode of working, is somewhat arbitrary and not readily available to the viewer. We could have each piece explained to us, or we could read the essay on cultural vampirism, but accumulating this knowledge doesn't necessarily add up to a greater depth of understanding. I find the personal itinerary in Spong's work more interesting – and I don't mean autobiographical, although of course these strands exist within the show. Rather, Spong has the confidence to ride with her ideas and leave them semi-veiled. It is a slice of her own 'constellation' to which we are given insight, and it is left ripe for realigning, offering something of a playground for thought.

Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Performance still, Uniform art collective, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong *Instrument C (Claire)* (2017). Courtesy Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland. Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Performance still, dancer Benjamin Ord, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong *Ida-Ida* (2019). Performance still, Uniform art collective, Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Only after digesting the multiple avenues of thought invested in each piece of *Ida-Ida* can the viewer benefit from an alternative rationale of experiential knowledge. Conventional formats for symbolising the world are taken down from hierarchical and oppositional thinking and levelled with the personal: language, art, religion, and so on. Instead of religion versus myth, or experience versus history-proper, there is a fluid exchange from one to the other. Histories both ancient and recent intertwine with the artist's own – Spong's own history is made most explicit in the film *The painter-tailor*. Here, Spong interviews her father about a painting by her grandfather – all existing non-linearly and bobbing up and down in a swarming constellation of ideas and narratives. A postmodern moment indeed, or *knowledge-as-mist* as I sometimes came to think of it. In my naive, abstract moment of knowledge-as-mist, I imagine the factual dissolving into an entanglement of impulses and sensations descending upon the viewer like a cloud. Suitably, Spong previously exhibited with artist Maria Taniguchi in an exhibition entitled *Oceanic Feeling (2016)* [03]; another majestic (if not Freudian) analogy to stack up against a sensation that refuses easy definition in language.

There is yet another context for this approach to knowledge, particularly in 20th-century literature, which has come to formulate something of a symbolic order in women's experiences. This has been most passionately elucidated in Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* [04] (literally women's writing), and embodied in the writing of Clarice Lispector and Marguerite Duras. Cixous argues for an alternative to the binary nature of language that fixes male and female into opposites, permanently relegating the woman as passive or *other*. The summoning of 'women's writing' by Cixous is to reclaim the separation of language from the body and undermine the illusion of an unwavering masculine viewpoint, or a stable, authoritative subject in general. All this is to propel the female writer into a kind of chaos, where, freed from the socially-constrained subject, a divergent reality in language is imagined and new knowledge is (ideally) created.

Sriwhana Spong, *The painter-tailor*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett.

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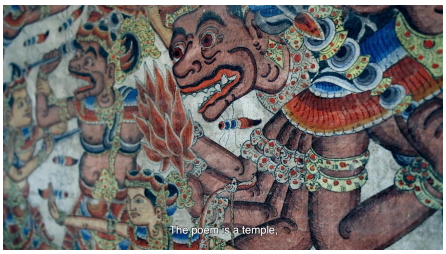
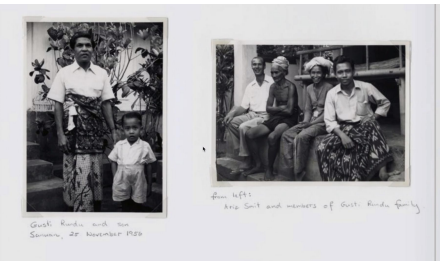


Sriwhana Spong, *The painter-tailor*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett.



Sriwhana Spong, *The painter-tailor*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett.

The recent revival of interest in the 12th-century mystic and polymath Hildegard von Bingen plays into this contemporary desire for women to find their own language that speaks independently of a patriarchal order. Spong, whose research into Hildegard has been ongoing for some time, aptly touches upon this desire to explore the limits of language in the series of sculptural pieces *Mother* (2019). In a recent interview, Spong discussed Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* (unknown language) which inspired the series:

> Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* survives as a glossary of nouns that she inserted into Latin, the latter providing verbs, adjectives, and grammatical structure. What drew me to the *Lingua Ignota* is that it renames the things around Hildegard—things that were part of her daily experience. Hildegard was therefore inserting her perspective into the official, high language of the period—the language of liturgical ceremony and of science, law, and administration, which women were excluded from. I see Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* as both a subversive and celebratory gesture where the excluded body inserts itself into the very space it is denied entry, and in doing so creates a new form.[05]

In the four sculptures that make up *Mother* (2019), an upper layer of (initially) wet porcelain coats a wooden support mimicking a serpentine shape. The exhibition guide indicates that "as the porcelain slowly dries out during the exhibition, it shrinks and pulls away from the structure that supports it. The clay thus both resists and relies on its base, a movement much like the way we experience our mother tongue—as something that writes us and through which we find our own ways of speaking."

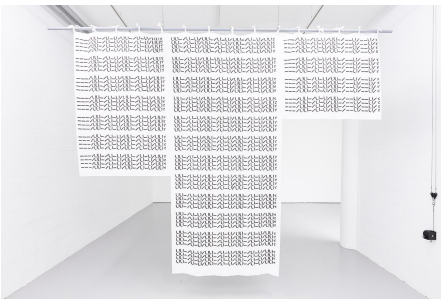
Sriwhana Spong, *Mother* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

Sriwhana Spong, *Mother* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

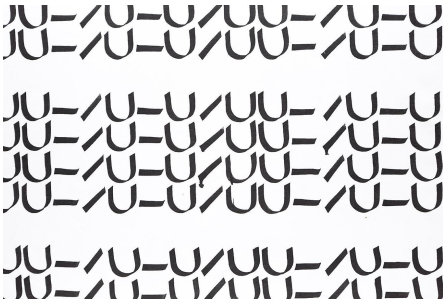
The wet clay relies upon its wooden support but, necessarily, it retreats from its base as it dries, a strategy Spong employs to mimic Hildegard inserting her *Lingua Ignota* – or more broadly, a woman's writing – into the wider lexicon. If it is to become 'itself', or its intended form, it cannot remain faithful to the rigid structure. Thus a gap opens up, a space of expression. And just as letters are empty units awaiting their configuration into words, the four sculptures of *Mother* are aligned along the same wall and appear as discrete entities resting in a state of pre-signification. If language is the subtext of these sculptures, then they are also a sequence of squiggles in nascent form, a body mid-gesture, or a primordial tongue.

Furthermore, the phrase 'mother-tongue' binds language to the body of the mother as a place of birth or provenance. *Mother* speaks to the gap identified by Hildegard as a kind of brooding silence at the very site of language itself: the body, the tongue. These links in the chain of *language-body-tongue* are a nod toward the sensuous, a reminder that all concepts are born in a state of sensation.

Our current era of doubt that arose post-Enlightenment saw a scrambling to reveal the mythic structures still at play in language. Language, as we see it now, is not something purely rational or neutral, sitting neatly outside influences of the subjective and personal. Rather, it is fallible, at times falling mute in the separation it creates with the body, or where it is experienced as incommensurate with thought. The strategies of Hildegard and Cixous contributed to this 'undoing', and were, in part, an attempt to lessen the fidelity to logocentrism and return language to the body – a strategy also rendered deliciously tactile in Spong's piece *Cum vox sanguinis* (2017-ongoing), where she fixes a copy of Hildegard's score to the wall with honey. The malleability with which Cixous and Hildegard approach language not only returns agency to the individual, but also unveils the mythic operations that are intrinsic to language's origins.



Sriwhana Spong *Death of Bhoma* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.



Sriwhana Spong *Death of Bhoma* (2019). Installation view, *Ida-Ida* (2019) Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph by Max McClure.

In *The Death of Bhoma* (2019), Spong interprets the Javanese 12th-century mythic tale Bhomāntaka across a large hanging canvas inscribed with phonetic-like symbols. Its totemic, cross shape evokes the spiritual, mimicking the mythmaking consciousness that sees the spirit as wholly commensurate with the thing itself. That is, the object contains the spirit or higher power it looks to worship. The symbols inscribed across three 'stanzas' represent the original poem's rhythmic meter. Long and short sounds are represented as (U) and (-) respectively, and a third symbol (/) functions as a gap or pause between bars. Thus Spong participates in an elementary language-making of long and short phonemes represented by rudimentary symbols. The piece also doubles as a score for a one-off live performance, but, most notably, her

interpretation further extends the poem into mystification. There are many trajectories an interpretation of this piece can take, but in the spirit of Spong's own intuitive method, I draw the links with my own itinerary. I'm picking up some leads and dropping others, and there is a thematic mirroring of the large white sheet connecting *The Death of Bhoma* with Spong's recent film work, *The painter-tailor*, which I feel compelled to look at more closely.

The original poem of *Bhomāntaka* links up with another strand of the exhibition: Spong's grandfather's painting, as featured in *The painter-tailor*. The artist's grandfather, I Gusti Made Rundi, was a relatively successful painter in his time, interchanging his painterly skills with tailoring when financial circumstances were more comfortable, or dwindled, under the Japanaese occupation of Bali. His last surviving painting, which is still in the possession of the family, becomes a talking point in the film.

Set in Spong's father's home in Bali, in *The painter-tailor* we see two family members carry the large painting outside to a communal space, where they remain holding it for some time. Shots of the balmy domestic setting are interspliced with that of the propped-up painting. At one point however, the camera returns to the men who no longer hold the painting and instead hold up a similarly-sized white sheet. This shot is repeated several times, each time a white sheet is held behind a different plant or tree in reference to a technique adopted by Dutch plantation owners to better delineate crops for photographic record. The resurrection of this historic technique as a visual trope reminds me of certain redundant gestures which have been carried over from a previous time and have since lost their function, such as tapping a modern-day cigarette on a surface as if to settle the already tightly-packed tobacco. It is an act of mythmaking in itself, where a gap is created and what is signified becomes further removed from its origin.

A white square is itself symbolic of anything one wishes it to be; however, in all the broken allegories that come together in Spong's playbook, I understand the substitution of the painting with a white sheet as a kind of falling into silence, or a collapse of narratives. This is the cumulative affective quality of *Ida-Ida*, leaving one a little unsure of what to say next, but creating the space to do so.

Footnotes

01. Ian Svenonius, 'The Bloody Latte: Vampirism as a Mass Movement', in *The Psychic Soviet*, (Drag City Press, 2006).

02. Anne Carson quoted in 'Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88, Interviewed by Will Aitken', *Paris Review,* Fall 2004. www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5420/the-art-of-poetry-no-88-anne-carson (Accessed 24th July 2019).

03. *Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic Feeling*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 20th August-16th October 2016.

04. Hélène Cixous first coined the term 'écriture féminine' in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1975.

05. 'Ocula Conversation: Sriwhana Spong in Conversation', *Ocula Magazine*, July 2018, www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sriwhana-spong/ (Accessed 24th July 2019).

Biographies

Sriwhana Spong's practice moves between film, painting, performance and sculpture. Born in Aotearoa and of Indonesian and Pākehā descent, Spong often works with everyday materials and offers installations that encompass sculptural, musical and performative dimensions that inspire moments of gathering, listening and transformation. Her recent work has focused on the relationship between the body, language and sound, as inspired by the practices of medieval female mystics.

Leah Reynolds is a freelance art writer based in Bristol. She completed her MA in Modern and Contemporary Art History, Theory and Criticism in 2015 from University College Cork, Ireland. Her research interests revolve around modernist women artists and writers. In 2018, she helped found a writing group at Spike Island, Bristol, that explores writing at the intersection of art, subjectivity, and the body.

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