Artist's Favorites

By Valentina Triet

I collect images of works by and portraits of artists I admire from a distance, print them out, and paste them into notebooks, in no particular order. I return to them often, as they function as a substitute for writing. When I do, the images begin to circle around me, and over time, they form a loose structure that helps guide me elsewhere. What follows are those that have remained a long while in my orbit, alongside more recent encounters.

Alan Michael, *Opening a Keyhole to the City*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 76 x 53 cm

Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps

Alan Michael

Since the early 2000s, Alan Michael's work has leaned into the worn-out languages of photorealism and *trompe l'oeil* – mirrors, reflections, stock images, deadpan text – and, via screenprint or gluing laser prints to his canvases, pushed them toward the look of "technical images." Lately, I'm particularly taken by how he handles language in his painting: sometimes, it's built into the image; at others, it lands like a final caption, a layer slightly detached from whatever came before. The latter texts are often fragmentary: sentences miss subjects, verbs, or both, such that their meaning accumulates loosely rather than through syntax. The words feel closer to sound than to reading, as if the images are meant to be spoken or sung. That musical impulse is explicit in *Opening a Keyhole to the City* (2018), where clean typography and tweaks to its lyrics turn Oasis's "Wonderwall" (1995) into a block of motivational quips. Set against a Ben Day-style field of figures – the band, probably – it is one of several callbacks to Cool Britannia that recur across Michael's paintings.

I also discovered that he pushed language beyond the canvas: in 2013, he and fellow artist Lucy McKenzie produced *Unlawful Assembly*, a "holiday paperback" collection of crime stories conceived as a site-specific work for Volcano Extravaganza, the art and music festival held on the Sicilian island of Stromboli.

Born 1967 in Glasgow, lives in London.

Yukio Nakagawa, *Clenched Fists*, 1969, Buddha's Hand citruses, rubber tube; photographic print

Blondell Cummings

Blondell Cummings performing in *3b49*, 1988

© Beatriz Schiller; Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Photo: Beatriz Schiller

Blondell Cummings was a US modern dancer, choreographer, video artist, and teacher, as well as the founder of the Cycle Arts Foundation, a discussion and performance workshop/collective that centered family life – caregiving, everyday rituals, menopause – as material for making work. Over a career spanning more than four decades, she developed a distinctive movement vocabulary she called "moving pictures": choreographies built from crisp, halting gestures that land like a series of snapshots. One of her best-known pieces, *Chicken Soup* (1981), draws on the intimacy of Black female domesticity and childhood memories of her grandmother at work in the kitchen, and is built around minor, specific actions: swaddling a baby, scrubbing the floor, or working a frying pan, flipped and shaken until it no longer scans as cookware.

Cummings produced a film version of the piece, *Commitment: Two Portraits* (1988), shot in black and white, which makes it hard to place in time. The kitchen is all mid-century America – its set design and clothes, as much as the film's own visual grammar – yet the electronic soundtrack pulls it out of that period. It opens in an abstract space where shadows, sound, props, and movement hint at a transit station, before snapping into the kitchen's stark geometry. Cummings first appears alone, moving at fullest extension, arms outstretched, the space suddenly full, before contracting into minimal, contained motions, and other figures begin slipping in and out. Through shifting personas, pantomime, and stop-motion-like gestures, Cummings conjures a presence that, to me, slips hypnotically in and out of joint.

Born 1944 in Florence (South Carolina, US), died 2015 in New York.

Yukio Nakagawa

Yukio Nakagawa was an avant-garde ikebana artist who also worked in photography, calligraphy, and glass. He began studying flower arrangement in 1941 under his aunt, who was affiliated with Ikebana's oldest and largest school, Ikenobō, only to break away circa ten years later. His work often crossed into performance through collaborations with dancers – most notably, the *butoh* dancer Ōno Kazuo. In Nakagawa's *Karaku* works (1984), he extracted flower essence onto paper, where slow, chemical drift – dark at first, then turning purple and blue, and finally brown – became fixed as images. In earlier breaks with ikebana decorum, he swapped "proper" materials for blunt, living bulk, letting it sit in, then show, different states of transformation and decay: a whole head of Napa cabbage in *Blues* (1951), or nine hundred red carnations in *Hanabozu* (1973), packed into an inverted glass vessel so their juice would stain white washi paper laid out below.

Sometimes, the vegetal slips into other kinds of life – a heart, a slab of flesh, a doll. What I like, though, is how his pressure on material makes form almost secondary: color and texture take over, and the arrangement turn eerie, insistently tactile.

Born 1918 in Marugame, died 2012 in Sakaide City (both Japan).

Ariani Darmawan ***Sugiharti Halim*, 2008**

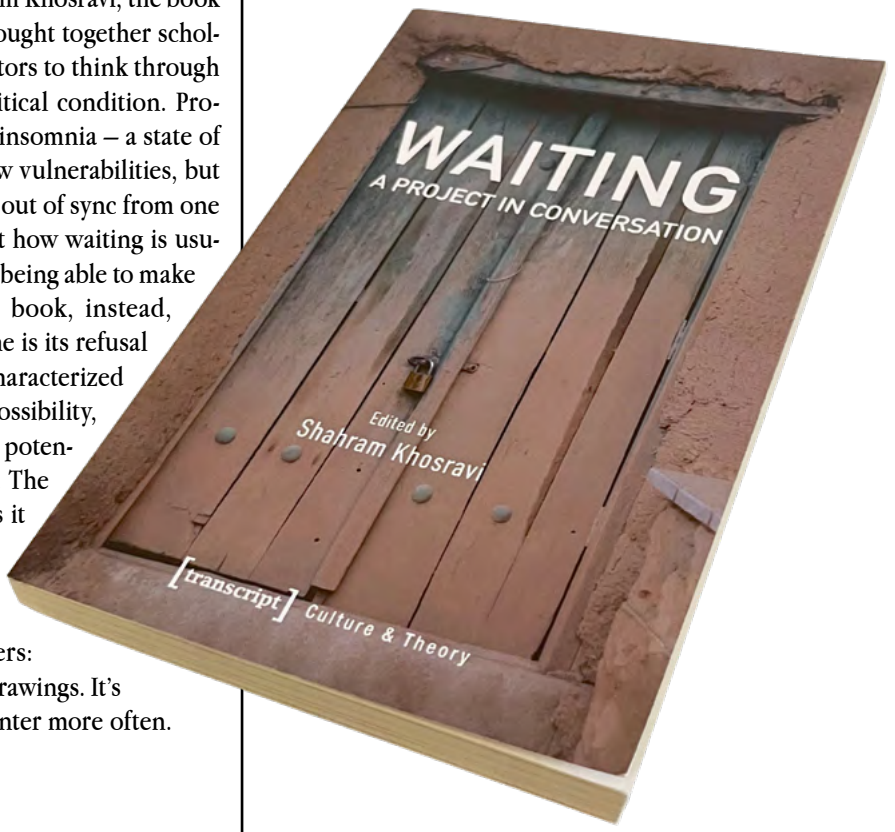
This short film, by the Indonesian video artist Ariani Darmawan, tells the story of a woman reflecting on the difficulties she has faced because of her name, until it becomes a point for her inquiry: are names necessary, can they be sold, can they be used to conceal identity. As she recollects her family's name change, as part of the forced assimilation of Chinese Indonesians following the 1965–66 military coup, something personal opens into general questions of ownership, visibility, and self-disclosure.

Darmawan works across film, video, and writing, extending into installations and multimedia theater. What stands out to me is her aesthetic approach: a minimalist and confessional style that threads in historical material at a television-like pace. The protagonist moves through moments of doubt and self-interrogation: "Every time I meet someone new … seeing my face, they'd ask: 'Is that your REAL name?' Like I should have a name that is more REAL than 'Sugiharti Halim.' Crazy, isn't it?" From there, the work playfully tests ideas of authenticity, stretching the expectations of the documentary genre. *Sugiharti Halim* unfolds mostly through ordinary gestures – googling your own name and wondering who else shares it, or sitting down to dinner on a first date, where the tentative desire to know someone better is already shaped by what a name seems to carry.

Born 1977 in Bandung, lives in Bandung.

Shahram Khosravi (Ed.) ***Waiting – A Project in Conversation*, 2021**

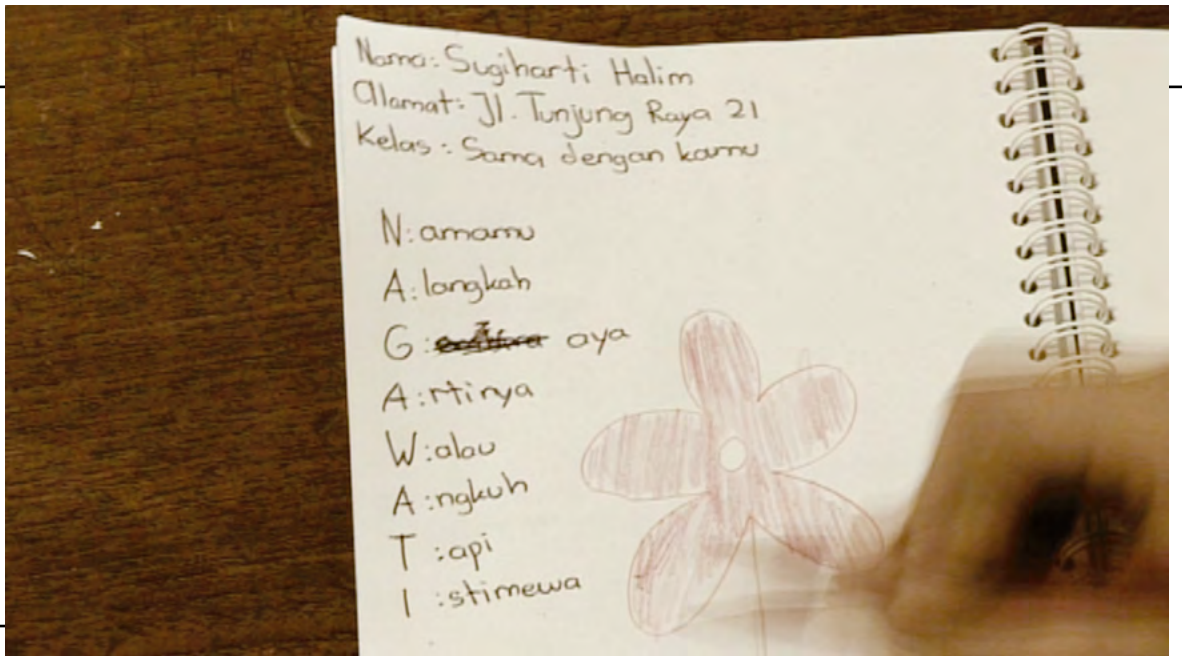
Edited by Iranian anthropologist Shahram Khosravi, the book *Waiting – A Project in Conversation* brought together scholars, artists, writers, architects, and curators to think through waiting as both an emotional and political condition. Prolonged waiting, Khosravi writes, is like insomnia – a state of wakefulness that not only produces new vulnerabilities, but intensifies extant ones, pushing people out of sync from one another. In an interview, he talks about how waiting is usually framed from a position of power, by being able to make others live on one's own terms; this book, instead, addresses it from below. What strikes me is its refusal to treat waiting as passive. Instead, it's characterized as a bodily experience charged with possibility, as with the daily commute, which holds potential for interaction and the unexpected. The book's form itself is also compelling, as it depicts the aesthetics, visual aspects, and architectures of waiting, like the choreography of the queue, in alignments with its many different registers: comics, essays, fiction, interviews, and drawings. It's a pluralistic space that I'd like to encounter more often.



As told to Spike editor Isabella Zamboni.

VALENTINA TRIET

(born 1991, Winterthur, lives between Vienna and Zurich) makes moving-image installations that treat mediation as subtraction, like collapsing found footage into coarse, pixelated color grids. By stripping spectacle down to gesture, rhythm, and affect, her videos frame absence not as loss, but as a condition of the image itself. She has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Winterthur; Marble, Brussels (both 2024); OxfordBerlin, Berlin (2023); Neuer Essener Kunstverein, Essen; and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna (both 2022). Recent group shows include "It would storm," Galerie Neu, Berlin (2024); "Viel Vitamin A–Z," Sweetwater, Berlin (2023); "Group Show November 2022," Alienze, Vienna; "DRIVE LANGUAGE CRAZY," The Wig, Berlin (all 2022).



Stills from Ariani Darmawan, *Sugiharti Halim*, 2008, color, sound, 10:00 min.