

# Championing the 'rights of things'

By Cheah Ui-Hoon

IN 1917, a 20th-century artist, Marcel Duchamp, laid a standard urinal flat on its back and called it "Fountain". His provocative move is said to be the invention of conceptual art, and one of its readings was that art was something you p\*\*\*ed on. Seventy-seven years later, in 1994, two artists relieved themselves on a replica of Duchamp's Fountain in order to "restore" the urinal to its right function.

From there, Chinese artist Wu Shanzhuan and his collaborator, Inga Svala Thorsdottir from Iceland, developed their signature *Things Rights*, patterned after the Human Rights Charter, which contains 30 articles about the rights of things.

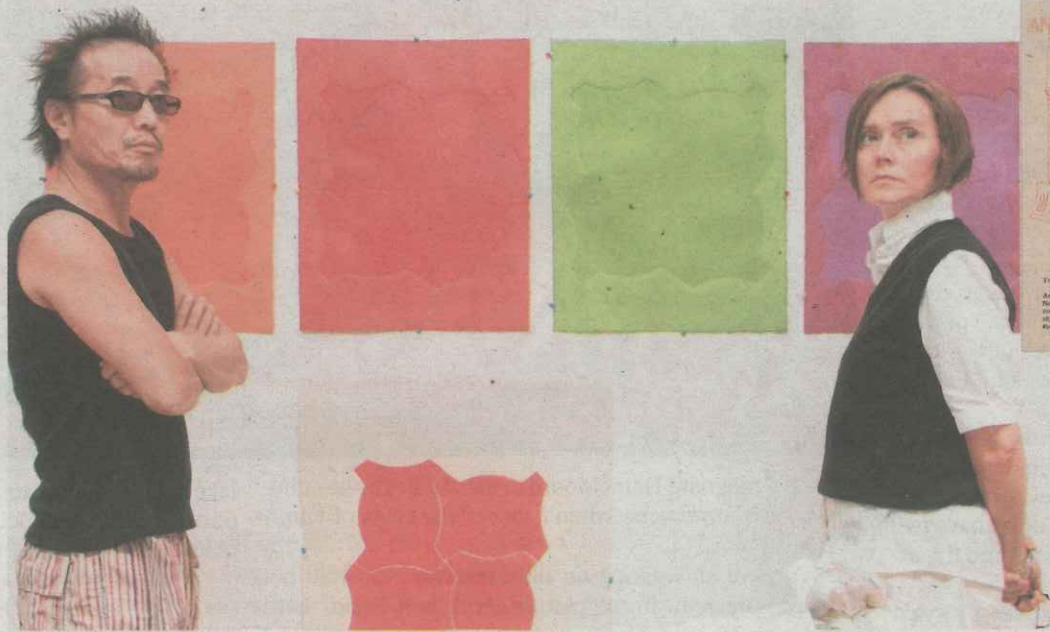
Wu, 54, is one of the leading figures of the 1980's pre-Tiananmen Square generation of Chinese Conceptualists, and Inga Svala Thorsdottir, 48, started Thor's Daughter Pulverizing Service in 1993, reducing all things back to its powder form.

Since the 1990s, the duo have been known for their intense, research-driven practice, and a peculiar brand of logic and language which challenges the status quo and questions our belief systems.

They've merged their language-based, historically informed practices, and created such works as *To Buy is To Create* (1992-2005), a lightbox printed with the titular slogan and a bar code, foregrounding the link between art and consumption and the long tradition of artists transforming everyday objects into works of art.

Although Wu was initially reluctant to attend the residency at STPI, he was eventually won over by Thorsdottir's persuasion that they could now investigate a new way and format to present their work. "We had to think of how we could profit from being here... and finally realised that we could explore the layering of our works since the 1990s," explains Wu.

Working like an archaeologist, but in reverse, the artists decided to layer all the different concepts of their body of work in the past 20 years onto prints so they all merged into one. In this exhibition, viewers need to



## RIGHT TRACK

Chinese artist Wu Shanzhuan (far left) and collaborator, Inga Svala Thorsdottir, from Iceland, developed their *Things Rights*, after the Human Rights Charter, even for urinals (above). PHOTOS: STPI

know, like archaeologists, what they are looking for to best appreciate the duo's works.

The 30 new works present the artists' evolving humanist ideology in print and paper. They started with the artists' foundational symbol, the *Perfect Bracket*, as defined by the overlap of both arcs and subversion of common thought for brackets to include or exclude anything.

This central motif is the basis of their work that continues to evolve into complex geometrical formations and new philosophical insights – as is evident in the polygonal shapes of *Seven Circles Little Fat Flesh*, *What A Form*, *Little Fat Flesh* and infinite tessellations in the *Perimeter of Little Fat Flesh* series.

From there, other symbols of their works have been layered in: the enigmatic arctic fox that embodies the artists' concern of human impact on nature, shopping naked in a supermarket for "forbidden" fruit impersonating Durer's *Adam & Eve*, an obsessive pursuit of *Mono-Sex Butterfrogs*, and so on. Underpinning the art are the 30 articles derived from *Thing's Right(s)*.

It's a maze of strange ideas and a peculiar language that have become powerful concepts in their art-making, to open new attitudes.

In layering the symbols onto printed paper, Wu and Thorsdottir say that they never once thought about how it would come out aesthetically. "We just knew they would come out fine."

The other thing that pushed their practice was the quality of the facilities at STPI, says Thorsdottir, which gave them the chance to demonstrate their ideas through another medium. She refers to the single colour prints with the *Perfect Bracket* embossed on them. "This has been the result of our investigation of the geometric form in the last 20 years," she says.

The artists met in 1991, studied for their master's in Hamburg, Germany together, and have collaborated since. They live and work in Hamburg, Shanghai and Reykjavik. *The Thing's Right(s)* pocket manifesto is now available in over 10 different languages – with the second Mandarin version, the Tamil and the Malay versions created at STPI.

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📄 **The Printer/The Paper/The Layer/The Thing's Right(s)/The Little Fat Flesh opens tomorrow April 19 and runs until May 17 at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 41 Robertson Quay. There will be an Artist Talk on April 19 at 2.30pm. Call 6336 3663 for enquiries**