

On establishing the grounds for cruising

By Alfian Sa'at

You cruise through the space. Is “cruising” the word? What to call this activity, of traversing this—public? semi-public?—space in search of an encounter? There is layout, a form of pageantry, but this merely serves as a sketched guide, not a pre-planned route. You are still free to wander, to browse, the eye landing on a random shape, colour, form, the eye tracing the texture of skin, the colour of flesh, the optic as haptic. Or else, what you are looking at is where a needle pierces, and on to the next, another piercing, a thread running from one thing to another, until they are like trinkets on a chain, and later in your memory you will pull the thread so that the things collapse into each other, the velocity of a purse string, the force of a sphincter...was there not a similar fantasy once, of bodies colliding in a heap, a scrapbook of stolen glances, all those faces distinct yet indistinguishable in their shuddering?

You cruise through the space. There are other bodies in the space too, looking with polite curiosity, perhaps registering your presence as you are registering theirs. Like cruising, you are slowing down. Like cruising, you look at them with other parts of your body, other than your eyes: the cusp of your shoulder, the nape of your neck, the fringe of your hair. Like cruising, there is psychogeography, choreography, proxemics, erotics. But here, additionally, there should be the absence of shadows, the banishment of shadow behaviour. Recall: in August 2022, the Prime Minister during his National Day Rally, announcing the impending repeal of 377a, a law which had criminalised sexual intercourse between men for 84 long years. He was wearing a maroon shirt, dispensing with his favourite pink one, which would have been too semiotically charged. And yet what issued from his lips was for some—not you, obviously, but for others, surely—like uttering the password on the keypad that unlocked the gates of hell. *Let there be light, from the inferno*. So: cruising in broad daylight. It stands to follow that there should be nothing furtive anymore, nothing shameful. Why blush when it is now possible to drool openly? Why clutch at pearl necklaces when they can now drip from your own neck? You can now stand to be followed.

You cruise through the space. There are a series of photos, taken in Delhi, of queer individuals, posing in the neighbourhoods where they lived or worked. They have the formal quality of studio photos, the city as actual backdrop. And yet they are also street photographs, whose subjects seem to have been randomly plucked from the daily throng. What gives them away? It is this tension that fascinates you, between self-presentation and representation. They are doubly out—in public, and as queer persons. But their hands tell another story—often folded, or resting against the body, as if to insist on the existence of that which can never be given away. You see neon signs on the wall, spelling out “love and kindness” in Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and Wiradjuri. You recall that time in the 70s when flashing neon lights were banned in Singapore. In the 50s and 60s, they once adorned the facades of cabarets, trade expos and amusement parks. No official explanation was spelled out, but some guessed the dimming was due to the global oil crisis, while others speculated that they were a hazard to motorists, who might confuse them with traffic lights. The latter explanation appealed to you—of course the jazzy syncopation of neon lights should never interfere with the clockwork chiming of traffic lights. At least not in this city. Neon was vice, neon meant a city that never sleeps, and that kind of city was a natural host to mesmerised moths.

You cruise through the space. There are two paintings: one by a Singaporean, another by a Taiwanese. In the former, a man in an apron—which could also be a negligee—is pounding chilies with a stone pestle and mortar. His pecs are so massive that he has developed cleavage. Chili seeds burst volcanically from the point of his culinary focus. Again, the tension—feminine strength, masculine domesticity, the diaphanous curtains at a loss as to whether to hide or to titillate. In the latter, a catalogue of objects both queer and queered, suggesting that queerness has always been a default setting in Singapore, only made invisible through wilful self-deception and hypocrisy. What looks like the cover of a gay magazine appears among the pages of a jotter book. The back cover of a book carries the headline “377A Singapore to end ban on gay sex”, as if it was vandalised. Or the headline could very well be the title of a book meant to be read from back to front—the literature of the invert. A sliced, sticky *ang ku kueh* rhymes guilelessly with a crow’s beak picking at a sex toy. Some of these queer codes are so overdetermined that it is possible to mistake the green hair of the figure on the left as the cap of someone serving in the military.

You cruise through the space. There are pillows, but one is carved out of wood, while another is cast in plaster. Not only have they undergone re-materialisation, but they also seem to bear witness to violence: pock marks like bullet holes, an underside of rubble. Another object: this time a gilded book, a pedestal for numbered fragments. The fragments form the shape of a body—either sleeping under a blanket or covered with a post-mortem shroud. How has the law inscribed itself on queer bodies? And at which point did the inscriptions turn to incisions? Elsewhere, a railing has some of its spokes sawn off. It is an image of jailbreak, yet the sawn-off edges glint like fangs. Thrust into this debate between liberation and danger is a pole sheathed in bright red knitted material, an excess apparition that giddily refuses the terms of the debate. A golden panel hangs like a gigantic shard on the wall. It resembles a full-length mirror, but one where the viewer’s reflection is plunged into a fever dream—or nightmare—where sex rustling in the bushes is unable to hide from the long fingers of the law. Streaks of blue, like trails of light from police beacons, impose themselves onto the scene.

You cruise through the space. As you cruise through this essay. You observe that none of the artists have so far been named. You wonder if this is an attempt to map onto the text the contours of cruising, its indifferent scan across a landscape of bodies, its grazing against sleeves and zippers and buckles and anonymous flesh. And perhaps there is something forensic in matching images to their descriptions, the evidence of an artist’s style as incriminating as fingerprints. But how far can you stretch this metaphor? Cruising was sly, illicit, shifty, clandestine. Now that queers are no longer criminals, what does it mean to look at queerness and for it to look back at you? What glances can now be exchanged—glances that were once marked by fear, desire, and the delicious recognition of belonging to the same depraved caste, the same perverted tribe? How much of the transgressiveness of queer art depended on its status as a form of legal transgression? Is it still cruising, if in broad daylight?

You cruise through the space. One threshold melts away. Others remain. Repeal happened, but it was followed by a conservative reassertion of marriage as between man and a woman, as well as institutions pledging stubborn allegiance to a homophobic status quo. The Ministry of Education insists that its policies and curriculums will “remain anchored on Singapore’s prevailing family values and social norms”. The Ministry of Communication and Information underlines that “LGBT media content will continue to warrant higher age ratings”. None of them remarked on the injustice of removing a touchstone while retaining all the policies and regulations whose very existence depended on that touchstone. Yet perhaps there is liberation

after all—from that low bar that once marked a queer work as transgressive by virtue of it being identified as queer. Leave behind, then, transgression as a hermeneutic framework. Take away what you think the works are pushing against, and think instead of them pushing against the conceptual premises of their reception. Say the words “post-repeal” six times, one for each artist featured in this exhibition, or until the phrase itself becomes meaningless.

You cruise through the space. You keep your faith in cruising. Because you will pick up. Because you will be picked up.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Alfian Sa'at is the Resident Playwright of Wild Rice. His published works include three collections of poetry, *One Fierce Hour*, *A History of Amnesia* and *The Invisible Manuscript*, a collection of short stories, *Corridor*, a collection of flash fiction, *Malay Sketches*, three collections of plays as well as the published play *Cooling Off Day*. In 2001, Alfian won the Golden Point Award for Poetry as well as the National Arts Council Young Artist Award for Literature. His plays and short stories have been translated into German, Swedish, Polish, Mandarin, Korean and Japanese.