

# BANDWAGON TO BUCHAREST

A year ago, Tiong Ang was invited by curator Henk Slager to realize a so-called keynote project for the Bucharest Biennale. Under the title *The Second Hands*, Tiong Ang & Company is organizing an extensive project, consisting of three films made in the Netherlands, and a trip with used cars and caravans from the Netherlands to Bucharest, from which the fourth film, a road movie, follows. Eventually there will be a collective happening in an architectural structure on a square behind the former People's Palace, the symbol of Ceausescu's dictatorship. That gathering - Tiong Ang calls it a *congregation* - will be the fifth film.

Mark Kremer: Good morning Tiong! Do you actually have time for this conversation? I can imagine that you can use all your time for the project now, how to proceed?

Tiong Ang: 'I really want to do this project! It has been postponed, not cancelled. The consideration is to extend the biennial. So instead of opening an entire manifestation in one go, creating a tiered sequence of events. This biennial has a different set-up anyway. Henk Slager didn't want to make a large exhibition, he thinks that format is outdated. He prefers to make a small exhibition, with four keynote projects, as he calls it, which in turn provide the material for reflection, seminars and free speculations. In the meantime, things continue. Robert [Wittendorp -MK], one of the artists with whom we are developing this, called me yesterday: "I have just bought the second caravan in Limburg." We were also tracking down used cars, an old Mercedes and an old Volvo - to drive to Romania in May.'

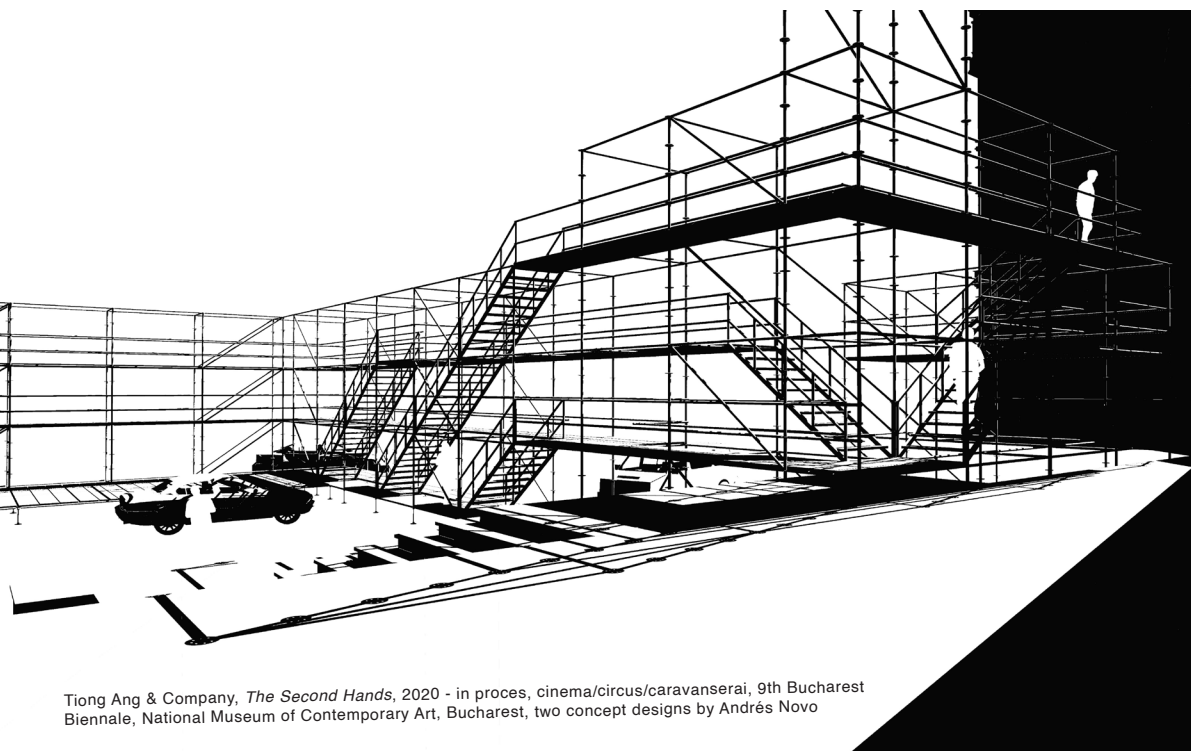
In the past twenty years you have participated in several biennials, festivals and exhibitions abroad, especially in Asia. How do these experiences recur in this project?

'By all means it's an attempt to summarize my work, all my working methods. And also many things that not have been picked up yet. Almost all previous projects are relevant. I can go deeper into the work produced in Indonesia in 2016, *A Year of Living Dangerously*. This is an adaptation of the only Hollywood film, made in 1982, in which Indonesia was shown in 1965, the year in which all those turbulent political events took place. It was one year before my family and I left the country. [Tiong Ang was born in Surabaya in 1961-MK] Mel Gibson plays a Western journalist who is looking for someone to make images, and that will be a Chinese dwarf, a photographer/ cameraman played by a white woman, Linda Hunt. This fact has always haunted me, it's such a strange position, such

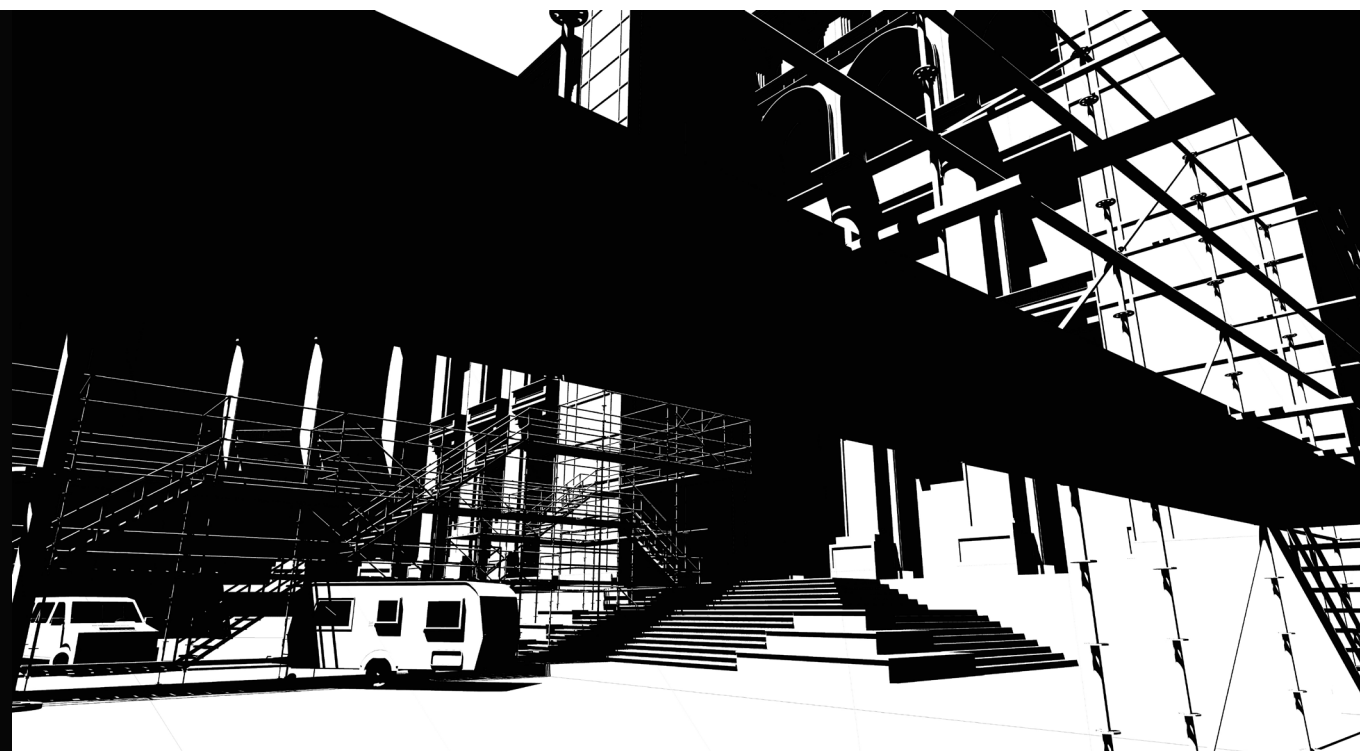
## A conversation with Tiong Ang about *The Second Hands*

By Mark Kremer





Tiong Ang & Company, *The Second Hands*, 2020 - in proces, cinema/circus/caravanserai, 9th Bucharest Biennale, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, two concept designs by Andrés Novo



a crazy starting point! Because we are talking about western journalists, western observers of a situation, a western perspective. When I saw the film on television I was in my early 20s. I realized that I didn't know my own history, although it is about the period in which we had to leave Indonesia. I was ashamed of it. My desire as an artist was to return to Indonesia through that film, not via the archive or memory, but by way of that fiction. I wanted to reconstruct one scene from the film, viz. the large Communist demonstration at the American Embassy in Jakarta. When I explained this to people in Indonesia, they said: "Yes, that's exactly our criticism, it's a Western image. We don't want that, we have our own perspective." But I said, "It's different for me, I'm actually a Westerner. I don't understand what really happened, but I understand the movie." Via that construction, by ways of such reasoning, I found an entrance so that we could re-stage that demonstration.'

You stayed with your intention.

'I had to admit, I had to stand up for it: the perspective of the one who leaves and looks back, that's my point of view. And I grew up with Hollywood movies on Dutch TV rather than Indonesian documentaries. That is my legacy, I feel accountable for it. As if you're always looking through a layer of lenses, not one but several. I'm constantly aware of that. Multiple perspectives taken together become one perspective, and they are all in me. The question is, how can I

capture this in an image? From this point of view it's almost necessary to operate as a collective. I tend to ask the question where my perspective, my subjectivity falls short. That's why I want to come to decisions, images, and situations, through exchanges. In the project for Bucharest, this started quite organically.'

You now lead a team of over fifteen people. How do you work with them?

'I should actually introduce everyone, but at the moment the architect, the choreographer, the driver, and the political advisor are important: Andrés Novo, Esther Arribas, Robert Wittendorp, and Ola Hassanain. They form the house of this project, the construction. Later on, I will add or insert others, literally in the performance in Bucharest. Most of my initial work is with Andrés, a young architect from Madrid. He is interested in theatre forms and performance, has supported good artists as an architect. He designs the construction that will stand next to the museum, he draws, calculates, and researches the site down to the last centimeter. He understands how architecture can be used concretely and critically, and can resist its surroundings.'

How do you bring it all together?

'It's one event, and it's one work. The project is set up as a film production in which five scenes are shot. These are not connected to each other at first, except

that I'm commissioning five people to make them. In this whole, I'm the control room, directing five separate productions. I determine the conditions and work with some rules. For example: there has to be a car in it, that's the connecting motive. Everyone is free to interpret this. The car is a great vehicle for projections. Really a film theme! And I was very curious how those five films - number five will be from the congregation on the scaffolding construction near the square behind the People's Palace, which would also be shot by a professional Romanian film crew - would work together. After all, they are not directly connected. Of course I'm not a Godard, but I was curious what the creative outcome would be of that kind of canned chance.'

Do I get it right, one crew doesn't know what the other one's doing?

'Yes, and that's crucial. I don't believe in deliberation here. Or compromise.'

The title of your project is layered. *The Second Hands* refers to the used cars and caravans that you want to drive to Bucharest. Furthermore to your big group of assistants, you actually say:

I need others! But there's something else going on as well. You already mentioned the tilt of perspective on artistic authorship that we've witnessed in the Netherlands over the last two decades, the public and political scepticism regarding the relevance of that figure. The title also has personal meaning to you.

'I grew up as a Zeeland boy in Middelburg, with friends named Tonny and Hans and Jos. When I was young, my father once said, interrupting his own silence: "Well, we have to adapt, we're second-hand after all". As if he said: in this reality, we Indo-Chinese, post-colonial migrants, have to settle for some kind of second-class citizenship. Was that just irony? We wore secondhand clothes, always drove old cars, but that wasn't an issue. That's why I'm using that title now, as a badge of honour.'

You call your collective happening a 'freedom movement'. It takes place around a scaffolding structure, which is a caravanserai made up of two layers, where cars and caravans stand, a place to spend the night and meet. The construction and what takes place is inspired by the last scene in Fellini's film *Otto e mezzo* (1963).

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Tong Arng, *A Year of Living Dangerously*, 2016, performance in installation, exhibition, *Rethinking Home*, Nieuw Dakota, Amsterdam



‘The intention was to show the film of the happening in the museum, as a live broadcast, while we produce it outside. There we shoot our last scene, just as Fellini did, not as part of his film, but as a publicity stunt afterward, a kind of trailer. The scripted ending, Fellini was told, was far too gloomy. Now he was in trouble! In the meantime, his producer said: we have to make a publicity trailer. They decided to ask the whole cast back - a few weeks later - on location, which was a kind of launch base for a space rocket; in the film the director wants to make a science fiction film. The structure was still there, that’s where they improvised the trailer, and it became the ending in the final montage. Everybody is wearing white clothes and then, you know what, they start dancing around the launch pad! That construction is a genius invention, in the film it never gets finished, it’s a sham structure, it serves no purpose. But in that last scene, it really makes a mark.’

This brings me to two tropes from art history. The “Tower of Babel” which is always under construction, and the “Ship of Fools” in which a cheerful company sets out on a journey in a rickety boat. In your project I detect a tension between the small connection – a band, circus troupe (Fellini) or film crew - and the big connection - the masses or society. I have the impression that you want to hold up a mirror to the biennial and its superstructure, its ‘dispositif’.

‘The Bucharest Biennale is an alternative biennial, discursive in nature, and directed against the establishment. It was set up by two critical philosophers, active in art education, who run a magazine: *Pavilion, Journal for Politics & Culture* - the word “art” is not even in the title. Here I find space to go about in a different way and do stuff that is more relevant. There are few resources but their commitment is deep and they operate in an informed way. When Henk Slager approached me, I was immediately intrigued. But to return to the beginning of the question, essential in this project is the imperfect, the unfinished. We are under construction! That image from the Fellini film, the whole idea of creating a caravanserai c.q. stage c.q. hangout in Bucharest in the form of a strange scaffolding structure, they only gain in actuality.”

Recently, in Shanghai in 2018, you made a performative installation, *Misconceptions of the Lyrical Cube*, for the exhibition *Heteroglossia*, at the HOW Art Museum. You called that work a ‘social sculpture’. I found that striking. Doesn’t that term also apply to your project now?

‘Good thing you mention it. It’s important. The term ‘social sculpture’ is related to Joseph Beuys.

I was able to use it in Shanghai because the HOW Art Museum, which is a private museum, recently acquired a large Joseph Beuys collection through their Korean director. Almost as their *pièce de résistance*, an entire floor was reserved for it. It’s not that I started with performances because of Joseph Beuys. Although I find his solo actions, such as *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* (1965) with the hare, or with the coyote, later in New York, very charismatic. They have shamanistic elements, he brings the West and the East together. But I do have my reservations with regard to didactic elements and art. I don’t care much for what Beuys does on those blackboards. I did see that performances with groups, groups of people, always have a kind of pedagogical character.’

In the art context?

‘Yes. People often ask me why I perform with former students. A legacy of education quickly comes into play. That mentor-student relationship continues to play a role. But I wanted to make a performance where I was part of their presence, being with the younger people together, stand between them. I didn’t want to play the teacher. I wanted to learn from them. Not even so much from their art, more from how they arrange their lives and develop themselves as human beings. For example, how they battle to build a life in the Netherlands, coming from Korea. And the motives why. Beuys also did crazy things, for example the rock song *Sonne statt Reagan* (1982). With all his feats of mythmaking, he understood popular culture. I, too, am into myth making, I find that much more interesting. Something inexpressible must remain. I use all kinds of working models, draw inspiration from film, circus and music, but I keep looking for forms in which the unspeakable can emerge.’

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FAREWELL TO RESEARCH  
9TH BUCHAREST BIENNALE

Various locations in Europe  
Symposia 23.06.2020 and 27.06 - 29.06.2020  
Keynote presentations Spring 2021

*The Second Hands: Tiong Ang & Company, Robert Wittendorp, Andrés Novo, Esther Arribas, Karime Salame, Ola Hassanain, Fey Lehiane, Bart van Dam, Heekyung Ryu, Ingrid Sanghee Edwards, Jan Yongdeok Lim, Edna van Duyn, Marius Hofstede, Zwaan Kraijer, Sinta Wullur, Stefan Schneider, Dan Stancu, Alfred Schupler, Andreea David, Tudor Chirila, and others*

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#### BUCHAREST BIENNALE

*Farewell to Research*, the ninth Biennial of Bucharest was originally planned for the period 28 May to 4 July, but will now take place from June over a period of several months at various locations in Europe. The Biennial was compiled

by Henk Slager, who, with reference to Paul Feyerabend’s *Farewell to Reason* (1987) and his farewell to rational knowledge, opts for an exhibition-in-process, in which he examines how art and artistic research can provide an answer to the declining interest in academic research. On the basis of three conceptual spaces (‘creative practice’, ‘artistic thinking’,

‘curatorial strategies’), an experimental, process-related trajectory will be set up, including several keynote projects by Tiong Ang & Company, Claudia Braileanu, Gustafsson & Haapoja and participants in the PhD in Practice programme of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, research laboratories, performative events, symposiums and publications.



Tiong Ang & Company, *The Second Hands*, 2020/21  
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