



The Chan-Davies Art Prize 2021

syn-

13 January - 2 February 2022

Danial Shafiq Bin Mohd Fauzi  
Victoria Hertel

## syn-

Bridging the mechanical with the organic, the activated with the inert, and systems with chance, syn- presents the prize-winning works for academic excellence in research and practice of LASALLE Alumni Danial Shafiq (BA) and Victoria Hertel (MA). Both artists explore new materialities through a shared interest in the vitality of objects encountered in space. Victoria has been invested in the de- and refamiliarization of materials as functions of disruption to our routinized perception of objects, addressing ideas of unsettlement as perspective shifting happenstance. Danial delves into the interaction between humans and objects by studying their form and function, and displacing technology as a means for improvisation and accentuation of the inconspicuous in this network. Together, their works respond to the site and architecture of the gallery in ways that are both sensorial and interconnected.

An initiative by Angie Chan and Nick Davies, the Chan-Davies Art Prize was launched exclusively for all final year students of LASALLE's BA(Hons) Fine Arts Programme. In 2016, the prize expanded to include MA Fine Arts students. The prize aims to encourage artists in their early career with financial support and exposure.

Starch is an artist-run space located in Tagore Lane. Currently managed by Moses Tan, the space offers artists and creatives use of the space to ruminate, experiment and re-orientate.



Above: Danial Shafiq Bin Mohd Fauzi, *Transcending the Auricular*, 2021

Below: Victoria Hertel, *Bell*, 2021

All images courtesy of artists & Jonathan Tan

## **The Uncanniness of Objects and The Energetic Interconnection of Everything:**

A roundtable conversation with the artists on G-Docs

**Jeremy Sharma:** Hello Danial and Victoria! I am happy to facilitate this conversation as I am fairly familiar with your practice. What strikes me overall in both your recent works are certain affinities of an object-oriented approach. I wouldn't put this to just mere coincidence but also to forces and dynamics of a renewed and contemporary interest in the ecology of things.

As a way of introduction, can you talk us through the elements of the 'machine' or the 'mechanized' in your work, elements that do not deal with representation but a real production of space or networks? (you could refer to specific works you are making). Again, by machine, they need not just be about objects. I use the term loosely to also mean intuition, for example, Sol LeWitt's 'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art' or the curator Anthony Huberman's description of the machine—an abstract set of mechanisms to include infrastructure, protocols, logistics or standards. You can think of them as tools for us to think and behave. Or if you may, what do these things do? Thoughts?

**Danial Shafiq:** Generally I see my body of work as a network of objects that can come together through sound and visuals. Objects that do not conventionally work together, working together through a system of mapping (visual) or through the sounds that these machines make, interacting with the space. Looking at the space as organic—ever changing in presence, the machines interact differently or rather resonate differently with each audience in the space based on their experience with the objects. This is referring to the printers, the 'soul' of a printer when it moves, the familiar sound that it makes, presented in an unfamiliar format.

In my recent work, *Transcending the Auricular*, it was really to consume the space with a network of found machines/objects confronting audiences with the uncanny placements of the everyday. I think what I would like to explore now as an extension to *Transcending the Auricular*, is to blend some of my works with the existing space but of course making the work act a certain way visually and aurally. Perhaps it is an attempt at creating a very unfamiliar output.

**Victoria Hertel:** In my mind the semantics of 'machine' or the 'mechanized' form a strong association with uniformity, repetitive motion or a synonymous experience, process and outcome. With chance and change constituting elemental components of my work and process I would therefore intuitively lean away from the use of the word machine as a defining term. I understand my works as organic inter-reactive networks in which the materiality of objects in tandem with that of more abstract elements such as space, light, time, sound, presence, trace or energy all contribute to this system.

In the more recent body of work, presence in particular has become a major form of activation. This is especially the case with motion sensor-based works such as *Bell* (2021) in which a pulling mechanism is activated by stepping into the work's sensorial radius, causing a partially corroded metal bell attached to a stainless steel wire to jump upwards and emanate a sonorous jingle. With the sound only persisting in space for a few seconds

the surprise effect in addition to the uncertainty of how one's body triggered the work contributes to a puzzling experience of the materialities involved. The bell with its support materials of wires, cables, codes and electricity; its sensorial effects and addendums in the form of shadows in motion cast onto the walls and floor; its sound projected across the room; as well as the perceivers physical presence all form a momentary reverberating unit in time and space in that organic system.

**JS:** Both of you mention change/chance as either constitutional elements of your work (Victoria) or of space (Danial). Either way this system or network does not separate space from object and vice versa but depend on the viewer to activate its/their presence in space. How important then, is this encounter with the audience? For Danial, in presenting the visual and the aural, I am really interested in what you mentioned: the 'soul' of the machines as they move. How does one perceive this as uncanny? Words like 'soul' and 'uncanny' certainly touch on the metaphysical plane I suppose! Or some strange agency that these machines might possess. Perhaps you can talk us through what you think about in creating this network.

For Victoria, there seems to be a phenomenological interest in the materialities of these objects with abstract immaterialities that form the same system, activated by human bodies making these (im)materialities present or 'activating' presence even through delay and inter-reactivity. What I mean to say is that also 'presence' activated by a past action and hence an 'absence', the puzzle of a 'momentary reverberating unit in time and space'—my moving body a split-second ago triggering the mechanism that causes the bell to jump, ring and move, and then I notice its cast shadow on the floor. Do you think formal causes or causality is important in your work?

**VH:** Causality plays a role in my practice to the extent that the majority of my works are considered and constructed on an action-reaction basis, with movement or presence activating the piece. However the formal cause does not need to be immediately, or at all, apparent. It is the moment of discovery or encounter that is essential. The inter-reaction with the work shifts attention to establish a more acute connection between oneself and one's surroundings. Heightening the awareness of one's body, its sensory faculties as well as its spatial context.

To integrate chance into this causal system, I adjust elements in my work to behave slightly differently with every activation. This can take on the form of randomized code, physical components that adapt distinctly or the happenstantial unfolding of chemical processes. This interception brings divergence and rupture into an otherwise controlled or repetitive behaviour; continuously redirecting itself as a process of change and becoming.

Returning to the original question of causality. Though it is a component of the work, its essence revolves around the energetic interconnection of everything. How we form part of a greater network. The cause, glitch or reaction serve to draw attention to this connection. How the digital, the physical, the organic etc are in a constant interwoven visible and invisible flux.

**DS:** Starting with the 'soul' of objects, it has always been an important part in my studies

and practice, I have always seen objects as something that is alive and co-existing with us humans beyond their function and the soul of these objects lies in the sound (voice) that they make. I guess what interests me is the fact that the sounds they make can be familiar to us. And its familiarity is the identity of the objects, the 'soul' is when there is only the pure motion of objects with no function (the function that they are built for). The pure essence of objects.

Moving on to the 'uncanniness', here it is referring to the motion and activities of the objects. Yes you can say it is almost metaphysical. It's something that has also caught my attention in objects, how we only 'recognise' it when we are in need of its functions. For example, how we instinctively know to switch on a light when it's dark; the light is present when we want them to be present. In my body of works, I want it to be the opposite of it, the presence of the audience in the space, not the presence of the space to the audience. How would objects function on their own as a reaction to the audience almost?

To conclude this experiential encounter with my work, I think the presence of the audience here is important, for them to not look at the objects and to only experience it but also to reflect at how these common objects function - the pureness of the moving, flickering reflection of the objects and the unconventional orientation that they are placed in, stripped of their function of their intended purpose.

**JS:** Your responses were certainly elucidating in understanding your art or the drive and processes that create these fascinating works, and they are quite different from my assumption and understanding of your works. Even though there is seemingly an overlap of interests in both your works, your intentions are quite different. Where Victoria is invested in some form of unexpectedness and indeterminacy in a system, Danial is looking for purity, essence and autonomy in these objects, stripped of their original function. In one instance, a programme becomes unpredictable through variables in physical reality but is on the contrary unravelling 'the energetic interconnection of everything', yet in another a network comes 'alive' through sound, light and motion, their stirred 'souls' making their audience present. Perhaps they are one and the same or maybe your intentions are driven by certain values and priorities in your making or in these materials manifested in the objects. To end this roundtable on a tangential note, I wanted to ask both of you a combo question: What is an artwork you have encountered that inspired you to go into this direction? Next, if you did not choose art, what would you have pursued in life?

**VH:** I wouldn't be able to pinpoint one specific artwork that influenced me to go into this direction, but there are definitely artistic movements and bodies of work that changed how I think about and make my work. The Japanese Mono-ha movement was a major influence in shaping how I perceive and relate to materials. Exploring the encounter between materials and their surrounding space, Mono-ha advocates a presence of materials uninterrupted by human manipulation and imposed meaning. The resulting confrontation with these constellations, constitutes a form of confirming or reaffirming one's position and existence in the world. In learning about deliberate placement, communicative presence and charged space, I shifted my work to encompass moments that address these notions of permeability, ephemerality and connection.

The large-scale immersive environments created by Olafur Eliasson's collaborative studio



have also impacted my thinking in regards to cross-disciplinary artmaking and synergistic networks of coexistence. From the merging of art, architecture and engineering, to the considerations regarding sensory immersion, perception and the body's involvement in experiencing, it made me reevaluate how to translate my ideas with the support of people from different fields of expertise, such as ceramics or engineering. It was also in one of Eliasson's writings that I first encountered the term phenomenology, which then led me to a deeper investigation of the connection between the body, materiality and space. Using indexicality or trace as a bridging element between these three, I started to become invested in the experiencing of an absence/presence that is suggestive of occurring temporal, spatial or gestural interventions. It is in this interconnection that I feel the tidal entanglement of existence.

Regarding your last question on what I would have pursued in life instead of art, I quite often wonder what could have captured and held my attention, drive and enthusiasm as much as being an artist. A tentative answer would be the study of psychology. I find the human mind and its behaviours are a fascinating paradoxon and acquiring a deeper understanding of it still interests me. How we perceive, relate to, and navigate life from a conscious and subconscious, mental, emotional and physical level is perplexingly strange and sometimes wonderful. However art offers the possibility to expand into a multitude of research areas and disciplines. It encompasses an openness, both in the thinking and making, that allows to constantly reflect, evolve and shift. So even without taking that path I am able to explore these considerations, just from a different perspective.

**DS:** To answer the first question, it's really not an artwork that inspired me to delve into this direction of my practice but rather the process of it. Also what got me further interested was when I saw sculptures of dead bug electronics (also known as free form electronics), while researching about electronics and how to 'hack everyday objects'. What dead bug electronics essentially is: they are electronic parts connected but just wires, commonly thin copper rods to create a form without an exoskeleton. Engineer/Sculptor Mohit Bhoite has definitely influenced the early stages of my work, which later developed into my practice today. We already know most of the day to day objects but we may not exactly know how they actually function. That has enticed me to relearn objects out of their already familiar context, retaining their insides and reconfiguring how they function in my process and presenting them to the audience. My interest in art and technology has definitely propelled me to learn new ways of creating art, expanding my mediums using different hardwares to aid my practice.

To answer your second question honestly, I almost signed on the dotted lines to be a Military Officer in the SAF, after my two years in National Service. But halfway in the second year while training in Officer Cadet School, I gave it a second thought and told myself that I wanted to continue pursuing Fine Arts back in LASALLE. I think through National Service, it has given me ample time to think through and decide what I really wanted to pursue and I have never regretted not signing on ever since.

*Jeremy Sharma is an educator, artist and a musician. His recent forays and experiments look into scenes and places through the effects of modernity while working with elements of the voice, light, atmosphere, film, music, movement and architecture. He also teaches with the McNally School of Fine Arts at the LASALLE College of the Arts.*



**Danial Shafiq** (b.1994, Singapore) challenges methods of creating by exploring non-traditional media to produce three-dimensional works in his practice. Formally trained as a painter, he carries his sense of aesthetics and translates it into compositions of found objects, highlighting their materiality. Using different techniques, his research delves into the interaction between humans and objects, looking at the form and functions of objects. He uses technology as a means for improvising to accentuate the inconspicuous characteristics of these objects.

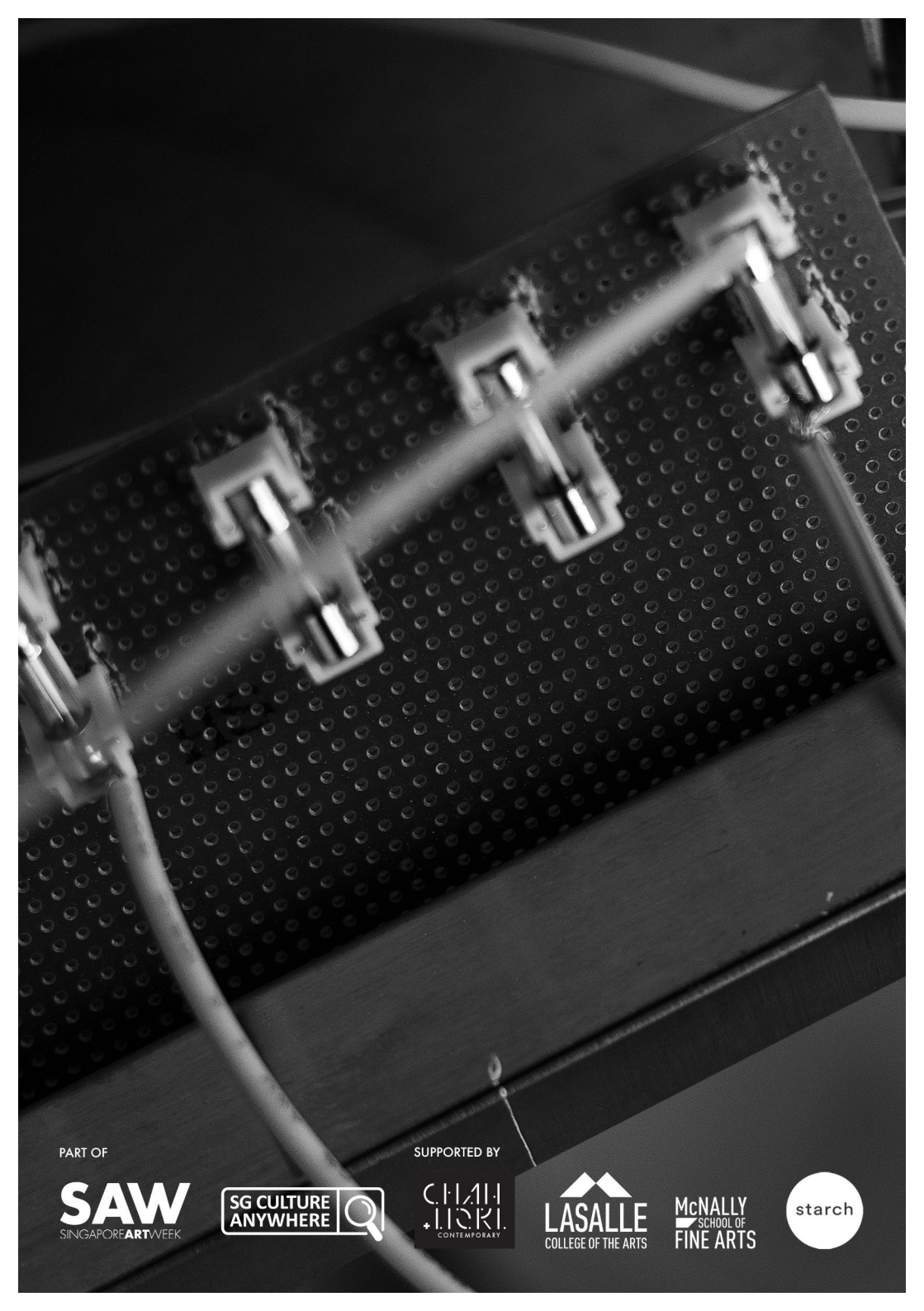
Danial is a recent graduate from LASALLE College of the Arts with a BA(Hons) in Fine Arts. He has participated in group exhibitions in Singapore and led the student curatorial team for faculty exhibitions, including 'Prologue', a graduation showcase. He is also a recipient of the Chan Davies award 2021.



**Victoria Hertel** is a German-Venezuelan artist whose practice merges site-specific painting and installation to create immersive experiences. Exploring the entanglement of the body, materiality and space, her work focuses on constructing distilled sensory encounters to heighten and alter our awareness of our surroundings.

Hertel received her BFA from the University of Barcelona and her MA in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts Singapore in partnership with Goldsmiths University of London. She has been awarded the Chan-Davies Art Prize for academic excellence in her MA research and practice of Trace as energy in materialities.

Her work has been exhibited in solo shows, group exhibitions as well as residencies in Germany, Spain, Austria, Poland, China and Singapore.



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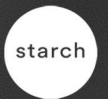
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