A Simple Poem Cast in Clay
Altair Roelants encounters a power-filled project linking Rwanda and Australia

Within one of the more intimate galleries at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) dark, young faces captured on video spoke out against a backdrop of handmade ceramic pots. Both the rough clay and the screen telling the stories of 13 Rwandan orphans who have lost their families as a result of the horrific genocide of 1994. This arresting mixed media installation *The Living are Few but the Dead are Many* (2012) - is the work of Thai artist Arin Rungjang that he conceived for the 18th Biennale of Sydney: All our relations (27 June – 16 September 2012). For this first-time ceramics project Rungjang travelled to the Rwandan capital, Kigali, to collaborate with teenage orphans in pottery workshops at a local ceramics studio with the aim of creating pots representative of their experiences, alongside filming each participant in their home. The exhibited work produced a touching trans-cultural message about racial discrimination and value systems, individual versus collective memory and our perceptions of humanitarian catastrophes.

A stranger to the ceramics world, Rungjang is an unassuming artist with an interest in real people and their stories. Rungjang studied at Bangkok’s Silpakorn University’s Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts (2002) and at École Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris (2000) and has participated in numerous prestigious international shows including this year’s 55th Venice Biennale. The artist’s works are conceptual and often utilise video, installation and commonplace objects, alongside relational processes such as collaboration and interacting with real life situations. A recurring thread, to tell the individual narratives of those overlooked and, in doing so, expose the contrasting ideologies and social realities that define people’s lives. Rungjang describes his practice as ‘simple’. He does not like to theorise his actions, rather as he explains, he does ‘different things combined together’. And it is precisely this outlook that enables his work to straddle the world or art and the everyday.
so effectively. A fabulous example was his installation for the Singapore Biennale 2011 Unequal Exchange / No Exchange Can be Equal (2011) for which Rungjang filled an area in the Old Kallang Airport with IKEA furniture. After connecting with local Thai migrant workers, he invited them to swap their belongings for items on display to highlight the conflict between their lives and generic global consumerism.3

As with Rungjang’s overall practice, what gives The Living are Few but the Dead are Many its depth are the personal histories and processes that shape it. The impetus behind this particular project was set in motion during his 2011 residency4 in London, where Rungjang spent time with an Ethiopian man. The artist became interested in African culture through this first hand account of migration and dispossession and the residue left by collective and personal memory. The artist discussed this exchange with Sydney Biennale co-curator5 Catherine de Zegher who suggested creating a work about Africa and potentially Rwanda, due to its history and the curator’s family connections there. And (like many of us) Rungjang realised he understood the genocide through the media coverage that framed it, rather than the individual lives that it so brutally marked or destroyed. Highlighting these stories began to take on personal significance as Rungjang’s late father was subjected to extreme racial violence in 1976 when beaten by Neo-Nazis in Germany, dying the following year from cancer.6 In response to his own experience of loss and inspired by his three nieces who are also orphans, Rungjang started considering the children who lost their parents as a result of the genocide as an important point of entry. Turning to the choice of material for such an emotive project, I wondered why Rungjang chose to work with video and clay. As he explains, “for me video is the most valuable technique and tool that will deliver this current story” to “be more present” but “it needs to be translated”. So “I was thinking what kind of object, human creation, does not have any spectacle meaning?” “I wanted to present something that did not have to represent any form

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Above: Children’s Pots. Inset: Loading the Kiln at Dancing Pots.
of reality... clay is connected to humans, it is part of us, part of our planet”... “the ceramic pot is a ‘pure object’ – we do not have to say much about symbolism or popular culture”... “it has human content, life and clay is part of everything and we all live in this cycle”.

On the ground in Kigali the project was well received as de Zegher’s family approached local church run schools, establishing a group of 13 boys and girls aged between 14 and 17 years. While Rwanda has a long history of pottery, finding a ceramics studio proved a harder task as traditional factories are being phased out due to commercial production and government restrictions. They eventually located The Dancing Pots (a ceramic filter factory) just outside of the capital and one of the last remaining studios in the area producing the traditional pottery of the Batwa tribe. Now a minority group, the Batwa (or Tw’a) people were the first tribe to settle this region. The 1994 genocide destroyed 30 percent of their population as they sat perilously between the Hutu and Tutsi. Pottery is traditionally their main source of income but sadly, mass-produced metal and plastic containers are superseding their craft. The majority of the ceramics produced at The Dancing Pots are the large vessels used to store water or cook, alongside smaller decorative pieces.

While the potters were bemused by Rungjang’s strange plans, they were delighted to be involved. In fact, an initial decision to work with four to five crafts people resulted in the majority of the community taking part. It is also an insightful partnership as both the city dwelling youth and rural potter show the breadth of this country’s violent history.

Rungjang arrived in Kigali on the 7th December 2011, which would be his base for an intensive two weeks. The artist met the children for the first time and, with the aid of a translator, introduced the project by talking to them about his own experiences. As he explains “I told them I understood that their lives might be harder than mine but we share the same misunderstanding and tragedy. But that is only one reality” and “I wished they could live their lives past this confusion”. He explained how the pots they would make were to be “ideas from their memory” the aim being to “show their creation to the other side of the world” and, as he recalls with a smile, “they were excited by this idea”. After these introductions, Rungjang and the children attended The Dancing Pots daily for five days. None of the youth (or Rungjang) had potted before and worked under the direction of the potters learning traditional techniques such as hand modelling, throwing on a kick wheel and surface design. The communal nature of this process created an informal space of talking, socialising, friendship and story telling between the
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All photos by Arin Rungjang.

The completed work, The Living are Few but the Dead are Many, opened to the public on 27 June 2012 at the 18th Sydney Biennale. The exhibition included 36 of the children’s vessels displayed on found shelving units and low slung tables taken from the MCA storeroom. The pots range in size and shape. Some have handles and spouts, surface designs or names and motifs reflecting personal memories. The ceramics were mirrored by a curved wall of six screens presenting video portraits of the children, as if talking to their creations. The children’s stories were punctuated by text detailing Rwanda’s history (pre and post genocide) and myths, local music and scenes from the streets of Kigali and the pottery workshops. The latter captures close-ups of hands shaping the clay, faces smiling but intent and bowed into their work, the potters guiding actions and the spinning of the wheel. In contrast to the naïve simplicity of the pots and the obvious enjoyment and pride taken in their construction, their young voices recall in sharp detail realities such as depression, lack of food, 

The pots were dried in the sun for a further five days before being finished in a woodfired kiln. The children then returned to the factory to put the final touches to their pieces, before the pots would be shipped to Sydney. Rungjang spent his remaining three days in Kigali visiting the children in their homes, recording their stories for the video component of the artwork. As the artist remembers “this part of the project was tough, it was intense” due to “the sad and unacceptable stories” of these young people that are of loss and hardship. He talks with admiration about one girl in particular, Naomi, who lives with a family of four in a room of just 12 m² and with no toilet. As Rungjang explains, despite these setbacks she “wanted to be someone important because she wanted to tell her mother that she was a good person and was successful in raising her and that she would not be held back by this tragedy”.

Above: Installation of the Children’s Pots in Sydney, Australia.
Facing page: Visitors to the Exhibition.
not being able to afford schoolbooks or fees and absent loved ones. The screens were positioned at eye level as if to involve you in conversation and individual headphones invite the viewer to spend time with their stories, to respect and connect with them on an equal level. This degree of engagement is further evoked by the display of the ceramic pieces that are placed at arms length with chairs dotted around them, as if (just this once) it is okay to touch. This is not a work about aesthetics or art objects but, as Rungjang explains, he wanted the viewer to “see them individually to engage with the reality” to “share” it . . . “if it was a poem, it would be a simple one”. And this approach worked, as the non-hierarchical installation made it a place for reflection and on my numerous visits, there were always people sitting, or talking, quietly amongst the pots.

While many of us can not comprehend the enormity of genocide or the ramifications these children and communities will struggle with for the rest of their lives, Rungjang is successful in fostering a realistic and unromanticised dialogue with the audience. He does this by drawing on the universal language of clay and the screen and by giving the youth an honest platform for expression that occupies the gallery space with us. Similarly, the collective and gradual nature of learning a craft and familiarity of a common object strengthen this exchange. Within this dynamic, the ceramic vessels become imbued with biography and are representative of a shared human “commonality not difference”. They also act as a metaphor for production and commodity in the globalised world – in this case, the exchange of an idea, an experience and a place. When I asked Rungjang what he learned from this process, he said it “taught me a lot about whom to respect” and he was struck by the bravery of the Rwandan people. And how did he think it was for the children? While the artist wishes he could proclaim that it was an ‘amazing project’ with effect, he reasons it “was valuable to their lives as they made contact with other people”. Rungjang continues to stay in touch with them and he hopes that audiences “will somehow find them through the work” by shining a spotlight on their situation within an international art event a “connection that can bond from this world, the art world to their world”. And in light of artistic practice, such projects show how the partnership of ceramics with other mediums and conceptual models can act as a unique and accessible tool of communication. Finally, when I ask Arin Rungjang if he thinks he will return to work with ceramics, he answers simply, yet confidently and with another smile “yes, I think I will do something with clay again”.

ENDNOTES
1. Arin Rungjang (b 1975) born and lives in Bangkok.
3. To learn more about Arin Rungjang’s work please visit http://arin-rungjang.tumblr.com.
4. The residency was part of the Difference Exchange project at ACAVA Artists’ Studios, London. http://www.differenceexchange.com
5. The 18th Biennale of Sydney: All our relations was co-curated by Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster.
6. His father was an engineer on a cargo ship and so travelled overseas often for work – he was in Germany during this incident. This is discussed in more detail in Moira Roth’s Gleaning, Gleanings #10, Part 2: Arin Rungjang and Catherine de Zegher. http://moirarothersgleanings.tumblr.com.
7. Arin Rungjang’s nieces were also part of the inspiration behind the work. Rungjang felt that the Rwandan children “had similar but worse experiences” than his family and it was this in part that inspired the artist to create a work that would act as a ‘lesson’ to his nieces, an act of ‘support’ to help them realise ‘success’ in their lives.
8. The Dancing Pots sources all its clay and wood from the surrounding area. They sell much of their wares on the city’s outskirts and they are also supported by a number of charities including UNICEF.
9. The artist was in Kigali from 7-22 December 2011.
10. There were many spontaneous moments not included in the final video footage such as a boy rapping and taking photographs together.
11. Each child made three pots.
12. All the furniture sourced from the MCA storeroom were generic wooden and plastic items and a deliberate reference to Rungjang’s work Unequal Exchange / No Exchange Can be Equal (2011) at the Singapore Biennale 2011.
13. The footage was edited as part of Rungjang’s Air Antwerpen Residency in 2012. The final videos were approximately 10–15 minutes each in duration.
14. Quote taken from 18th Biennale of Sydney wall text to accompany the The Living are Few but the Dead are Many exhibition in the MCA.
15. Including sending them footage of their work in the 18th Biennale of Sydney exhibition at the MCA and staying in touch with two of the children via Facebook.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes taken during an interview with Arin Rungjang and the author in January 2013.