

Well-wishes to Bersih 3.0
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By Eric Loo

An abstract artwork hangs inconspicuously on the wall outside the lecture hall. Few bother to give it a second look. "Meaningless splotches of paint on canvas," says a friend. "Looks like kindergarten art," says another.

But mount the same artwork with a European baroque frame, hang it in a swanky art gallery where you have to pay to go in, the 'splotches of paint' take on a different significance.

Indeed, context matters. It changes interpretation. It changes the meanings of forms. Which reminds me of my visit to the Tate Gallery in Liverpool last December.

Spotlighted among other home collectibles on the exhibition floor was an upright men's urinal with 'R Mutt' signed on the side. My curiosity piqued, I googled for an image of the urinal. And, there it was - The Fountain, 1917 by Marcel Duchamp.

Duchamp was a French artist who lived in New York in 1917. Pricked by the elitism at that time, he pulled a prank on the art establishment by submitting to an avant-garde exhibition a common men's urinal, signed with a pseudonym 'R Mutt' - just to prove a point that modern art shouldn't take itself too seriously, that it should be amusing, provocative, inclusive and accessible to the common person.

Unsurprisingly, the Society of Independent Artists rejected the urinal because they saw it as nothing more than a vulgar piece of toilet fixture.

To justify the submission, Duchamp wrote an anonymous letter to a magazine, 'The Blind Man', in May 1917. He wrote in part: "Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view... he created a new thought for that object."

A colleague who is familiar with Duchamp's work says when we look at a piece of artwork, it's not in the painting or the objet d'art that matters as much as the artist's ideas and the creative process behind the artwork.

The interpretation and thinking that we, as the audience, bring to the artwork becomes part of the creative process. In a sense, art doesn't need a clear definition. The audience's perplexed interaction with the artwork suffices to reward the artist.

Apparel represents the people's discontent

Context and process - yes, they're as important as the outcome. Which brings me to the commonplace yellow T-shirt that's been making money for some enterprising Facebookers.

NONE Wearing a 'yellow T-shirt' was once quite uncool, gaudy in fact. But since Nov 10, 2007, 'yellow' has created a new point of view, a new thought. An everyday apparel has come to represent the people's discontent.

Although revered as the colour of royalty and the Agung's flag, 'yellow' is now seen as a colour of subversion by the men in dark blue .

NONE Then, there is 'red', Umno's corporate colour, and its red-shirted 'Patriots' seething in their hot-blooded reactionary politics at each Bersih rally.

What a picture it would paint on April 28 if the yellow and red were to blend into orange, one of the colours in Buddhism that symbolises wisdom and self-control - attributes that are completely alien to the black-shirted goons, who, in the stealth of a few hours after midnight, swooped down on the hapless college students encamped at Dataran Merdeka. From the video clips, the goons in black - signifiers of hate and ignorance - looked like lost warriors from the underworld.

Thugs attack students in Dataran MerdekaThe 'occupiers', many of them donning 'yellow', may not have achieved their objectives. But their tents have amused the public and provoked the authorities. It has sent a clear message that the votes of college students could make a significant difference in the next general election, if not, then in 2017/18. The students will by then be in their mid-20s. They'll realise their future lies beyond treading on the yellow brick road.

Indeed, the student polity may already have what it takes to bring about fundamental change in the system. They just need to look within and live by their convictions for the greater good. Like Dorothy and her friends who realised that they had, all along in their fantastical journey, the power within themselves to find their way home to Kansas, the American heartland during the Great Depression.

They didn't need the wizard who turned out to be just another fraud in the land of Oz. Just like our politicians in Putrajaya who promised so much but delivered so little to the rakyat. Remedies to the current system rest in the rakyat.

The yellow, red, black and dark blue mob will be out in force on April 28. As a matter of course, the mainstream and alternative media will run various claims of success and failure of the Bersih campaign. The government will issue its standard security warnings and the police will detain some 'trouble-makers' amidst reports of police brutality and denials. Citizen reporters will come up with different video accounts of the same event.

Contextual accuracy and verifications will fly out the window as emotions and political persuasions take over rational reporting. Indeed, it will take many more campaigns to clean up the system.

Nevertheless, we'll keep the true reformasi fire burning in the Malaysian collective intelligence as we continue to seek ways to take the country out of its slide past mediocrity. As Duchamp noted, the process is just as important as the product.

My well-wishes to the true believers back home in their sit-ins at the Dataran on April 28. I'll be joining Bersih 3.0 in Martin Place, Sydney at 2pm (12 noon in KL).

