

The Trojan Ponies of Amusement and Pleasure: an interview with Deborah Kelly

by May Ee Wong



Untitled, 2003-2007, Abercrombie St. Sydney, November 2007, during Australia's federal election period.

Emblazoned across a large billboard along the streets of Sydney is an image of a boy eating food from a bowl. Like in a Norman Rockwell painting, the boy's eyes are wide and innocent as he takes up his fork. But what he stuffs into his mouth are sharp-edged nuclear bombs. Accompanying the image is the message: "Nuclear power will solve global warming and feed all the world's children".

Welcome to the world of Deborah Kelly's art, where familiar pop-cultural images and slogans are used to question the assumptions we make when we view them. Often satirical in tone, the Australian artist's work addresses political and social issues through the use of mass media in urban spaces. Her latest work is a D-I-Y Tiananmen

Square Memorial with artist Wei Lai <<http://www.forget2forget.com>>. She brings the cloud projections of *Beware of the God* to our Singaporean skies.

ME: *Beware of the God* was conceived in 2005. Could you explain the particular issues or events that inspired the work's conception?

DK: I was interested in the rise of politically motivated religious zealots around the world: Islamist, Dominionist and Zionist extremists have all been very visible and active over recent years. Look at the phenomenon of the US Christian Right, a gigantic voting bloc – it has been able to restrict or eliminate women's access to contraception, school-based sex education and civil rights for homosexuals. They've very much inspired events in Australia, not to mention individuals. When I was starting the project, the current Health Minister of Australia was an orthodox Catholic who was having a big impact on women's health issues. Art work lives in its context; it is how an art work "works", how it makes sense, and how it participates in its world. That was my context.

ME: How did you come up with the idea for the slogan *Beware of the God* and why did you choose the medium of cloud projections for it?

DK: I may deal with "significant" issues but I try to offer a small enough aperture to get through to the giant idea. For me, a little pleasure is really potent; it is the key to enter into a difficult and unwieldy concept. The pun on *Beware of the Dog* / *Beware of the God* was my key. The idea of

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Article: the Singapore Biennale Review is a single-edition newspaper dedicated to covering the Biennale. It is distributed at Biennale venues, arts institutions and galleries.

Sky Duet

by Seelan Palay

After walking through a metal detector and having my bag scanned, I made my way to the one thing I once vowed never to step into: the Singapore Flyer. If I weren't familiar with the incisively critical nature of spell#7's body of work, I might have thought that these were artists trying to take advantage of the state's desire to feature "some art for cultural credibility" in its new \$240 million tourist attraction. Experiencing the work itself, however, definitely disproves any such speculation; this work is both cunning and complex.

Sky Duet is a site specific audio artwork produced by the aforementioned Singapore-based performance company and sound artist, Evan Tan; it was newly commissioned for this year's Biennale. Presented to the listener through a pair of earphones connected to a minuscule mp3 player, the work's most tangible form is in stark contrast to its installation site: the world's largest observation wheel. After being ushered into one of the twenty-eight capsules of the massive machine and told to "enjoy my flight", I pressed the play button to listen to my audio companions for the thirty-minute revolution.

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The Singapore Flyer seen from a descending capsule with developed and developing structures seen in the background.

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The Trojan Ponies of Amusement and Pleasure
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projecting onto clouds goes back to a time when I was a religious six year old who was praying to God one night – I asked Him a question, and he waved his giant finger in the clouds for me... And maybe it has something to do with Batman?

ME: What was the reception from the Sydney public of the work when it was first launched there?

DK: One aspect of the project was a thirty-second film which was shown on forty-two billboards in the Sydney CBD train stations every ten minutes for ten weeks. Thousands of people went to the website <<http://www.bewareofthegod.com>> because of that film, and more than a thousand people wrote to me. Most of them only got to know of the cloud projections because they were documented on the website. The responses I got were diverse. Some people were angry, some were delighted, others curious because they couldn't believe that an art work like this could be part of the visual landscape of the city. Some Buddhists said they thought it was a Buddhist project. But I also know that this very Right-wing politician, the Reverend Fred Nile, said that every gate of every home should have one of the plaques which I made that had the slogan "Beware of the God".

ME: How did you become a public artist? What made you decide to work with the mass media and viral methods?

DK: My first experience of public address through culture was from being a cartoonist in the 1980s; I work as a communications director and an art director. About twelve years ago, my life as an artist and my professional life started crossing strongly into each other. In 1997, I made the *Black Armband* project with a friend by taking the words out of the Prime Minister's mouth and making them into a performance art work – an armband to show grief about the dispossession of Aboriginal people. We raised over \$100 000 to help some of the indigenous people fight for their land. Seeing how people were willing to defy the government and to appear in the landscape as agents of this particular politics of regret and sorrow totally changed my life. Part of the excitement for me is getting to participate in the culture and getting to speak, especially in those years when there was a strong sense your voice wasn't welcome. I think some of my best work, subsequently, has been about a way to give people a method of speaking up in defiance of injustice. I don't necessarily want to encourage riots, but I do want to be part of the countervailing discourse.

ME: Could you talk about the *Boat People*, the art group you work with, especially in relation to historical amnesia and cultural memory?

DK: The group <www.boat-people.org> has been working together since 2001, and we take great big important themes – history, race, borders, nation – and well, we...make light of them. For a long time, we were inspired by the history wars of the Howard government:



Beware of the God, Suntec City, for the Singapore Biennale 2008

the government's determination that the history of Australia would be told as a history of the triumph of the White Man, and not of dispossession, migration and complexity. We were so outraged by the kind of histories that the Federal Government was trying to force down our throats in trying to remake the image of the nation, but you know – there's only so long you can shout at your television before you feel impotent and silenced. Have a look at some of our work on <www.boat-people.org>. We give each other comfort and inspiration, and egg each other on to be more ambitious and less cowardly.

ME: We are inundated with advertising, and with your work being so similar to advertising, do you think of it as competing with advertising for the public's attention?

DK: I do try to sneak into the world of advertising, but also try to undermine it by not selling anything and posing hard questions rather than offering answers that you can buy. A lot of people hate advertising but I love it. I love a city full of giant pictures and flashing words and I am very willing to participate in advertising's language and its implementation. I want to approach people while they're disarmed. My work aspires to be like Trojan horses – the Trojan horses of mental pleasure, of amusement – the works are there to enable you to participate, and to make the world a little more interesting...OK, so maybe they're Trojan ponies.

With the projections beamed from a remote corner atop Suntec City, the City Hall area seemed to be indifferent to the art work. The skies didn't offer much cloud "ad space" on some nights, and the area was lit up with the floodlights from the upcoming F1 event and the Singapore Flyer in the distance, threatening to make the work inconspicuous. The cloud projections sometimes became building projections: ghostly words that slinked past the familiar buildings of Shaw Towers and Raffles City in a blink of an eye. Still, these projections were uncanny, as if they were faint

reminders of something lurking in whatever darkness was left of the night.

What is the God that Deborah asks us to beware of? How is this applicable to Singapore, a secular society which promotes racial and religious harmony? The religious extremism that Deborah targets through her artwork doesn't seem that evidently present in public life here. Our "god" is more likely to be blatant materialism or commercialism, as countless Jack Neo films can attest, and the repeated image of the Japanese Beckoning Cat in Deborah's video for the Biennale screened in Suntec City seemed to affirm that.

However, there might be some truth in a growing religious presence in the Singaporean public sphere. The attempt at repealing Article 377A in the Penal Code, which pertains to homosexual behaviour, was strongly challenged by religious groups as a matter of upholding public morality. *The Straits Times* featured an article on September 11th on the Commissioner of Charities' review of seven religious groups, which reported these groups having annual incomes of more than \$10 million each. Their wealth implicitly suggests a power that might considerably influence matters of the public sphere. Moreover, Deborah's website <<http://www.bewareofthegod.com>> features a link to a *Today* article, published on September 9th, on how religious groups might be considered a threat to national security; the article implied that this reason justified the Internal Security Act in Singapore. Religion, while not as fervently expressed here as elsewhere in the region, does seem to play a stronger role in Singaporean public life than many people usually assume.

But what was immediately affecting about Deborah's art work was that it seemed to suggest that we should *Beware*, or rather, *be aware* of something more fundamental. Perhaps we have lost our sense of the ineffable in the rush of city life. A certain power was evoked whenever the words appeared on the clouds, however briefly, seemingly conjured by the will of a supernatural force – an earnest joy in beholding the spectacle and revelling in its unexpected manifestation.



MAY EE is a graduate student currently enrolled in the Masters in Literary Studies (Research) programme at NUS; she also teaches English Literature. Her interests include: literature, film, critical theory, cultural theory, media, technology and the city.

Sky Duet
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A husky male voice followed by a melancholic tune set the mood, making me realise that I was going to have quite a different experience compared to the family sharing my capsule, who were by now taking photographs and engaging in casual chatter. As I started to get an actual sense of the escalation, a dialogue began between a man and a woman -- one which would continue for most of the ride. As the Flyer crept up and out of the boarding bay, I was bombarded by a heap of visual information, faced with a panoramic view of the city that apparently stretched up to parts of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Confronted with my first real look at what has been and is being done to this part of Singapore, I struggled to bring my attention back to the sounds being played. The couple's conversation carried on, sharing their thoughts on various experiences and observations in a way that seemed both attached and detached, leaving me a helpless listener trying to make sense of them and the estranged cityscape

The sprawling of massive construction sites, the various "places of interest" and the richer sectors of Singapore society, when paired with the reciprocal weaving of noises, made for a slow and painful but tragically beautiful ascent.

around me. The sprawling of massive construction sites, the various "places of interest" and the richer sectors of Singapore society, when paired with the reciprocal weaving of noises, made for a slow and painful but tragically beautiful ascent.

Unlike spell#7's previous audio works, which involve more movement from the audience, the siting of this work keeps the listener stuck in place – listening, watching, pondering. Especially at certain points of the soundtrack's over twenty-minute duration when there was a sudden, complete silence, and I was left alone for moments confronting the view, I came to realise how far above I was, and could let the experience really sink in.

Upon reaching the highest point of elevation, the mp3 audio stream overlapped with an announcement made through the capsule's loudspeakers. "You are now on top of the world", said the machine. It's a statement which inadvertently reveals where the Singapore state wants to be as well – on top of the world, a global city, a hub for anything and anyone (including perhaps even members of the widely despised Myanmar junta). The mp3 audio track then burst into a wall of intense sounds, one strong enough to make me imagine that I was surrounded by a raging storm in the sky, the entire facade around me crashing down.

With the work opening to the public on September the 11th and with a title like *Sky Duet*, one might assume the work is making some sort of reference to the collapse of the World Trade Centre Twin Towers seven years ago. But according to the artists, the ideas that inform this soundtrack are of "machine and the body, the body and

the landscape, of fading memories in a fading body, of life cycles and the elements". These ideas surface at various points in the work, where the listener could easily find a relation between the spoken and reproduced sounds to the surrounding physical space.

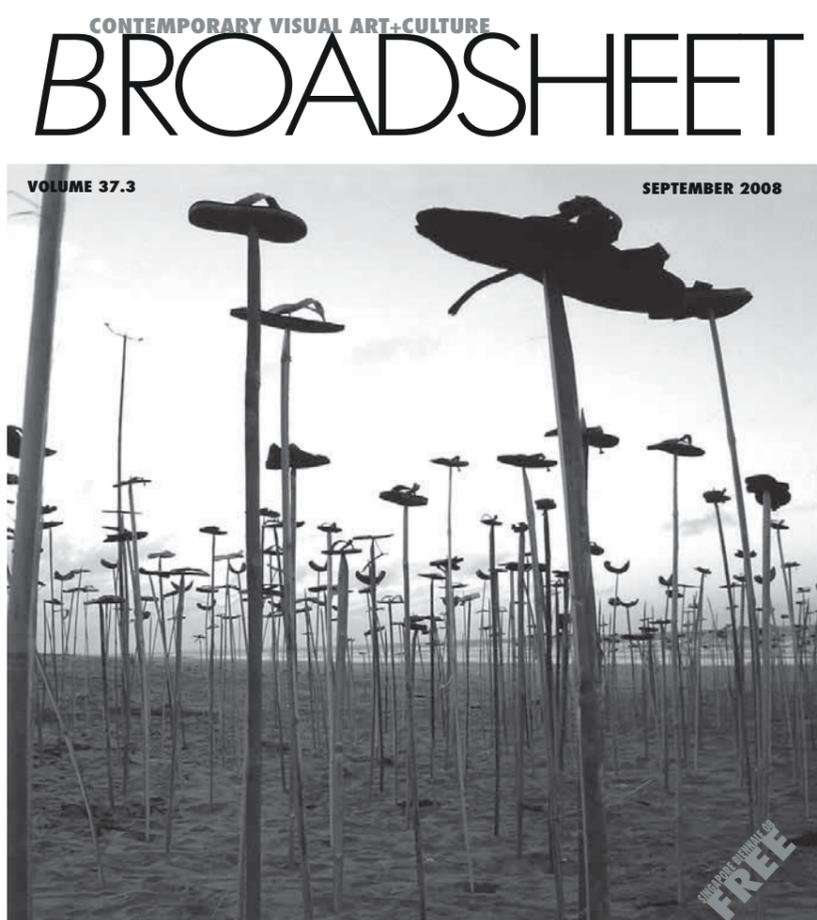
Taking many research rides, the three artists involved – Kaylene Tan, Paul Rae and Evan Tan – approached the project with individual perspectives and formed distinguishable responses that successfully amalgamate Evan Tan's synthesised melodies. A sense of acute observation and active engagement with the environment is evident throughout this collaboration.

Sky Duet is being presented at a time when the Singapore state has made obvious its desires to promote the financial prospects of contemporary art and the F1 Grand Prix race (I'm surprised they didn't coincide these events with the Great Singapore Sale as well). In spite of the risk of being co-opted within the state's designs to exploit the confluences of art and wealth, one leaves the experience of *Sky Duet* with an appreciation of its artistic integrity intact. The art work makes full use of its situated space and cultural context, and engages both space and context critically and sensitively.

The recording and its relations to the multifarious barrage of sights gives the work the capability to notably alter one's journey to the "top of the world and back". This is not quite the complimentary and "wonderful" image that Singapore is trying, quite literally, to carve out for itself. *Sky Duet* nudges the listener to address the reality of their experience and question where they, and the city around them, are really going.



SEELAN is a local visual artist and activist. He has written for the previous issue of Article and FOCAS 6.



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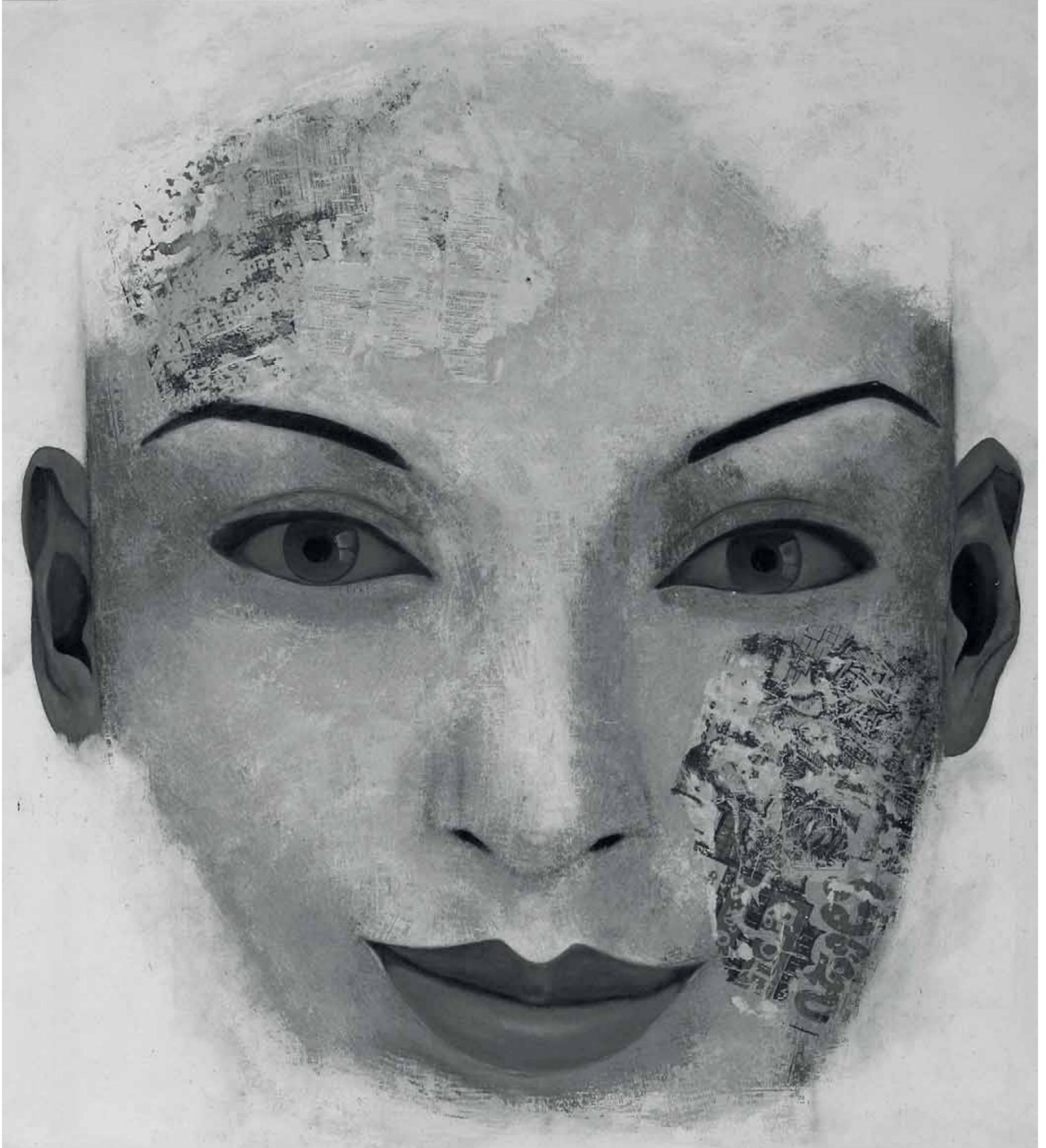
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Containers for Art and Commerce: the Biennale at the Bay

by Nick Charnley

When Shigeru Ban first came up with the idea of using shipping containers to build a temporary exhibition space for a travelling photographic exhibition, it wasn't simply the use of the shipping containers in themselves that made the structure so memorable but rather the overall effect. The *Nomadic Museum* (New York 2005, Los Angeles 2006 and Tokyo 2007) utilised well-worn containers from a variety of companies to form the shell of the museum which was then topped off with a lightweight roof supported by two rows of giant paper pillars – one of his signature materials since *Paper Church* (Kobe 1995) – running down the centre. The result, by any standards, seemed worthy of the description, “artwork”.

The success of the *Nomadic Museum* cemented Shigeru Ban's reputation as a master of beautiful structures using shipping containers and giant paper tubes. In 2006 he was commissioned to build a similar type of structure, the *Papertainer Museum*, in Seoul. While being a little more refined and perhaps slightly less poetic than its predecessors, the effect nevertheless still looked impressive.

On the basis of these past successes, and given Shigeru Ban's stunning portfolio and reputation, one has to wonder what went askew with the *Containart Pavilion* for this year's Singapore Biennale. The paper tubes, used to great effect as structural components in the *Nomadic Museum* and to some extent in the *Papertainer Museum*, have now been replaced by a very non-descript steel-truss roof. This, coupled with the dominance of NOL's corporate colours and logos, results in a very bland outcome more suited to an out-of-town retail park than a prime location in the heart of the city.

The ordinariness of the pavilion would not be such a problem if the hype around it were not so intense. In fact if the reference to a “big-box” store was played out



to any extent, its significance as a “container of art” in the new financial district at Marina Bay might offer some very interesting and fun possibilities. As it is, the “momentous sculpture”, as the Biennale's artistic director Fumio Nanjo has called it, promises a lot but delivers much less.

On a purely functional basis, the *Pavilion* does what it was intended to do. Housing three large artworks by established international artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Anthony McCall and Hans op de Beeck, it makes a bold statement – advertising Singapore as country that is now able to afford and accommodate such pieces. On one level, this is fine; and those involved should be applauded for creating a spectacle that will be well received. However for others who demand and expect more, it is necessary to go beyond the veneer in an attempt to discover some of the site's real potential.

Of the eight artists showing in and around the *Pavilion*, only two works are new and perhaps for this reason, at least one of these two deserves some closer scrutiny. Gary Carsley, from Australia, has a pair of installations in the Biennale, both of which basically consist of IKEA furniture laminated with an adhesive film printed with Carsley's *Draguerrotypes*. The results, which play with notions of decoration and dressing-up – hence the play on the word “drag” in “*Draguerrotype*” – are successful to varying degrees. (Named after its inventor, Louise Daguerre, daguerrotypes were the first commercially viable photographic process.)

Carsley has been producing his *Draguerrotypes* for a number of years. The process involves replacing the details of a digital image (usually that of a park or garden) with patterns of imitation wood. The result is a new image that from a distance looks a little like a paint-by-numbers picture, but closer inspection reveals much

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greater detail. In themselves, the *Draguerotypes* are interesting and intriguing and have led to an interesting series of work. The transfer of these prints to a laminate, which is then applied to a surface – in this case IKEA furniture – is something newly created especially for the Biennale.

The two installations are split between City Hall and the *Pavilion*. At City Hall, situated in the fourth floor foyer, several wardrobes and cabinets stand with their backs to us and their doors wide open. From the rear, *D.84* and *D.85 Little Guilin (Bukit Batok Town Park) Singapore*, appear as a barrier; it is only by traversing this “barrier” that the *Draguerotype* interiors are revealed. The contrast between the bland exterior and the richly decorated interior is powerful. As a result, one is easily drawn into the work and becomes intrigued as to how it is done and what it is all about.

In contrast, the idea, when extended to the work at the *Pavilion* is not quite as engaging. Here an assemblage of chairs and tables has been laminated in part – how the different parts of the chair were selected is not clear. From a distance, *Wonder Wrap*, looks interesting, raising the question as to why these chairs and tables are all standing in the middle of the room. But this is not the point. The focus would seem to be on the *Draguerotype* laminates. But whereas at City Hall the work appears effortless, here it starts to feel a little over-considered and laboured. As a result the piece looks fussed over and consequently loses some of its impact. This could also have something to do with the location. Dwarfed by the three giants around it, such as the exquisitely conceived and executed *Location (6)* by Hans Op de Beeck, *Wonder Wrap* at the *Pavilion* is at risk of appearing a little over-shadowed.

One of the things that left me really curious about the *Pavilion* is why only a handful of the containers are used as anything other than structural components. Did it not

(L-R)

1. The *Containart* restrooms or another installation perhaps?
2. Gary Carsley's *Wonder Wrap* in the central space of the *Pavilion*
3. Hans Op de Beeck shows how it should be done. His self-contained *Location (6)* is as exquisitely conceived and finished on the outside as it is on the in.
4. Walking to the *Pavilion* is not for the faint hearted. Bizarre as it may seem pedestrians were expected to balance on the kerb of Marina Boulevard – lose your balance and you might be fined for jaywalking!

All photos taken by Nick Charnley

occur to the organisers to exploit their extra potential? The possibilities for making use of these containers for art, or otherwise, seem limitless. Instead, what we end up with is an exhibition about t-shirt design called *Art of the T* by Club 21, a local luxury retail company and preferred sponsor of the Biennale. Another container did actually contain the work of another Biennale artist Yuan Goang-Ming; but given the lack of signage, it was not easy to find, and as a result, I missed it the first time around.

Leaving the site, I reflected on the true nature of the *Pavilion*. Just who is it aimed at? What is its purpose? Who is going to visit it? Casting a glance back as I once again gingerly edged along the kerb of Marina Boulevard (the only pedestrian access to the site), I took a final snapshot. Two solitary lopsided orange portaloos in the foreground captured my attention and framed my thoughts. The *Pavilion* is not intended for the “average Joe” like me; it is for all those arriving, or even just simply passing by, in motor-powered vehicles of all types (including helicopters and luxury yachts). In the end what could have been something truly wonderful turns out to be just about OK – and that’s only by virtue of the fact that I wasn’t paying for the privilege.

NICK is a British artist, writer and educator based in Singapore. He is also joint creative director of Little Red Dots, www.little-red-dots.com, a Singapore-based design agency he co-founded in November 2004 with American artist Nathaniel Walters.

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A Glimpse of Utopia in Marina Bay

by Gillian Nelson

Since the Venice Biennale began over a hundred years ago, there has been a proliferation of international art shows happening regularly once a year or once every two or three years. These gatherings of art, artists, curators and visitors coalesce to form clusters in the decades-long debates surrounding art and culture, “creating distinct focal points”.

As staples of the international art circuit of events, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov present one such coherent strand, and it is in Singapore’s second Biennale that we find their latest installation entitled *Manas*. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov are based in New York, though both were born and had formerly lived in Soviet Russia. Ilya originally worked as an illustrator for children’s books, bringing words to life in the style demanded by the Soviet culture. Considering the act of illustration as creating images for someone else’s words, it could be said that the Kabakovs are still illustrators, working to the stories of their fictional characters.

Their piece for this year’s exhibition was originally shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale. A model of a fictional town in Tibet, *Manas* is shown in a Total Installation space. This is a technique for installation that Ilya Kabakov pioneered and used in his first solo exhibition in the “West”, and that involves creating an entire space for the viewer to walk through. This encapsulation of the viewer by the art piece brings a sense of immediacy to the work as it enables the viewer to physically move within the piece.



caption

Upon entering the first ring of drawings, models and descriptions that comprises *Manas*, the visitor is struck by the muted atmosphere; in many ways, it is similar to entering a temple where the walls and lighting are subdued but not gloomy. There is a smell of new wood, because the outer area was newly built to enclose the central space, and brought to Singapore not from Venice but from Malaysia. Within this horseshoe-shaped outer narthex, or porch, lies the central chamber, where there is a dome above a wooden model of the town. In the centre of the dome is a glowing landscape of the model town. This is the spiritual twin of the wooden town below, and is part of the reason why *Manas* is unique: at certain points in the year, it is possible to see this vision hovering in the sky. *Manas* is also subject to cosmic energy in other ways.

Along the entrance walkway, the pictures and models explain that each of the mountaintop towers surrounding the town has some way of interacting with this energy. One example of a tower is the *House of Dreams*, in which you can lie beneath what looks like a sarcophagus to receive a preternaturally refreshing sleep and wake up totally rejuvenated. There is also the *Centre of Cosmic Energy* where you can sit facing the rays streaming in from space and be revitalised.

Ilya Kabakov has said that while growing up in Soviet Russia, he was aware that there were two parts of his mind: one that understood that life is banal, petty and grubby, and one that secretly sought to lift its soul to a greater universe, to a “Real Life” that was surely happening somewhere outside of Soviet Russia. Throughout his dual career as both Official and Unofficial Artist, he and his colleagues worked in isolation from the rest of the arts world. This led in part to a sense that a greater realm lay outside the borders of their homeland, a sentiment which found a full and evocative expression in his first solo exhibition, *10 Characters*.

I wonder if, twenty years later, *Manas* is a way of reconciling these two opposing sensibilities of daily life: that life is drab, monotonous and dull, and that



caption

there is simultaneously a prospect of something more authentic just out of reach. In *10 Characters*, first presented in 1988 in New York, an individual tries to write the story of his life, but is at a loss; instead he creates and writes about ten characters, all of whom live in a *kommunalka* or communal apartment, typical of Russia during that era.

Each of these characters is lost in his or her life and ultimately seeks oblivion/liberation through somehow vanishing in one way or another. The characters dream of moving beyond their lives and sublimating themselves, transforming themselves from subjective individuals to becoming part of an abstract realm. Hence in *The Man Who Flew Into His Painting*, we see a tiny dot in a vast white canvas as the last physical presence of a man who sought, and achieved, oblivion.

There is also *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* – a vast catapult hangs from the corners of the room, with notes all around explaining that the man never felt entirely comfortable in this world and it had become clear to him that he belonged in the streams of cosmic energy channelling through the universe. There is a pair of shoes neatly placed by the bench where he took them off before launching himself in his bubble. The shoes speak of desperate

faith and absurdity; they hint at the man’s state of mind, who while preparing to launch himself into space, was still prosaic enough to remove his unnecessary shoes.

In contrast to these earlier characters, the people in *Manas* can access that level of sublime energy and positivity within their own lives. As a community, they take advantage of the cosmic energy. They build galleries and observatories and are aware that they are not alone as they can see other civilisations in other universes. There is no need to seek isolation or oblivion to find rest. Even mimicking death by sleeping under the sarcophagi in the *House of Dreams* merely leaves the sleeper more refreshed. *Manas* is a fairy tale of a people who have stopped running away from their environment and have embraced it. By comparison, *10 Characters* is a different kind of fairy tale where escape is possible with enough grim determination, obscure focus, isolation and a lack of reasons to stay.

It is interesting to note where the curators have positioned this installation in Shigeru Ban’s *Containart Pavilion*: the aural quality of the site is most telling. Amongst the stories of a lost civilisation that attained a level of joy unheard of, we cannot help but hear the sound most common in modern Singapore, that is, the noise of construction driving us forward at a relentless pace. It is the sound of a city striving towards self-improvement, with nothing passively accepted from history or neighbours. Even the land beneath the *Containart Pavilion* is brand new.



caption

Perhaps it is fitting that this installation first shown in Venice, a city literally sinking under its history, is now brought to a city still making itself – there is a greater narrative in *Manas* of community, continuity, and of keeping an eye on one’s spiritual half that is as current now as it was twenty years ago.



GILLIAN has been in Singapore for a year now and is the founder of Thousand Leagues Arts, an arts consultancy. She has an MA in Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, and worked for four years in London galleries and museums. When not working, she can be found behind piles of wool, knitting.

Visit <www.thousandleaguesarts.com>

The Wood Between the Worlds

by Christina Chua

Gnomes, an underworld, a winged horse, a benevolent lion – reading C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles* as a kid, you'd know that lions are good thoughts and gnomes are ugly thoughts. It was that simple. Life was very simple in Narnia. The "Wood Between the Worlds" is a paradigm of Narnian simplicity, seamlessly woven into the metaphysical. It was set in the first of the series, *The Magician's Nephew*. The Wood was a portal, a sort of multiverse that could transport the willing child or unwilling witch to distant lands, if only one had the Magic and the guts. There were pools and there were trees. It was entirely still in the Wood, entirely uninhabited, and very silent. Sleepiness and a slight amnesia overcame the visitor, and one would forget time altogether, save for objects brought along to the Wood that could prompt a memory of the past.

Paolo Tamburella's work, *Fei Zao*, has been assembled with the same intrinsic simplicity. The artist describes the set-up: "There is a man, a tree, several thousand soap bars, a chair, a plastic basin with some water inside, a situation of complete stillness, and nothing else. Nothing is going to happen." Like the somnambulant experience in the Wood Between the Worlds, the visitor to Tamburella's tree forgets time.

Almost. There are some indicators of time: objects scattered on the ground encircling the man, a vast array of used soap bars and soap powder. A faint, sweet smell lingers and reminds one of the bath taken in the morning, or of washing grubby hands yesterday, of rinsing a load of dirty dishes the day before that, and so on. Time is vaguely specific to these objects, as not all situations can be recalled because of our frequent disregard of the banal.

Certainly, Tamburella's unorthodox choice of a hanyu pinyin title, the Mandarin word for "soap", further imbues these references with modesty and homeliness recognisable in the Singaporean cultural context. This heart-lander's simplicity also correlates with 59-year-old Michael Lee, a wanton mee seller whom the artist has placed at the centre of the scene, adorned only by a white singlet and shorts.

His age may denote the passage of time, but as he sits absolutely still under the tree, save for the occasional wash and a smoke, time is indeterminate. In spite of the commonplace associations and the "unrefined" aspect of Mr. Lee, there is a meditative, almost transcendent quality about this setting.

Noticeably, the art work's paradox of being at once ordinary and extraordinary does not evoke the sort of shock tactics that contemporary artists have been known to employ. Instead of banking on the vicarious and the bizarre, Tamburella opts for a different strategy, one that is more subtle and more palatable. Besides the play of both the metaphysical and the common, the serene atmosphere is



Mr. Lee seated in the installation *Fei Zao*.

entirely incongruous with the bustling city that surrounds it. Through this unexpected situation, the artist questions the possibility of perfect stillness in the midst of the urban landscape, and perhaps it does not jolt the senses because the answer is, after all, that it's quite natural for humans to long for such moments.

Indeed, Tamburella admits that his work includes an underlying existential tone, but fortunately, not one that is pessimistic or nihilistic. As he probes into the nature of big city life, he delves more profoundly into the nature of life itself. The pause that the artist affords his audience reveals much. Existence is reduced to an accumulation of quotidian objects, the leftovers from a consumerist lifestyle, the remains of a daily routine. It is a dissatisfying conclusion, but Tamburella does not leave us there. In the midst of this contemplative setting, he proceeds to beg the question if life is perhaps more than this objectification, more than these mediocre bits of soap that represent every other commodity bought, used and discarded.

Often, when visiting exhibitions or galleries, viewers will speak to each other in hushed tones, given that it is the convention to look at art in silence, but it's questionable whether we ever truly confront stillness in art spaces. By attempting to induce a compelling silence, Tamburella provides the conditions for this fleeting and, dare I say, almost sacred moment.

Of course, it's ironic that the thing inspiring such awe and silence is a mere bath. Tamburella manoeuvres a knowing audience's predisposed tendency to assume art is esoteric, and that it regularly elevates dull objects to a higher status as works of art. But Tamburella does not concern himself with the "metamorphosis of readymades", and perhaps his appeal lies in his turn away from the obscurities of art theory. Instead, he prefers a "literal kind of work" and concentrates on the easily grasped aspects of simplicity and exposure.

"I like the idea that the man is exposed in a public space", Tamburella said. Every ten minutes or so, Mr. Lee dips his wash cloth into the basin of water, swabs his neck, arms, and stomach in a motion typically confined to the privacy of a bathroom. Once more, it is not discomfiting to watch this happen, as it is only a basic and essential part of a daily routine. The repetition of these same movements render, on a broader scale, the idea of human existence and its constituent routines. In this sense, not only are Mr. Lee's personal habits laid bare to the public eye, more significantly, his life span, his entire existence as a human being is exposed.

This deliberate exposure is overtly observed when the element of nature is included in the scene. Arguably, the centre of focus is the man, but his gaze and positioning leads the viewer toward the tall tree, and when the viewer takes this in, the work becomes complete. The fact that this scattering of soap encircles both the tree and the man suggests an obtrusive but discreet clash between the natural and the artificial. Man-made products, although carrying the same homely associations as Mr. Lee's outward aspect, constitute the circumference that detaches man and nature spatially.

In the work, one can see the two aspects of that homespun quality called "down-to-earth". While *Fei Zao* is unpretentious, presenting a life lived on basic means, it also implies a life reduced to residual objects. On the other hand, the work considers a return to nature, taking "down-to-earth" more literally than what we usually mean by the phrase. Paolo Tamburella lures his audience into his own version of Lewis' Wood Between the Worlds, where time is meditatively slowed down, if not quite halted, and the viewer can ponder upon her own state of existence.



CHRISTINA is a student. She likes looking at people, especially the weird ones and the old ones. She also likes trees, not so much in the tree-hugger sense, but in a general admiring sense.

In medias res: Taking to the dead in Hans Op de Beeck and Sherman Ong

by Adele Tan

“Wonder”, as this year’s biennale theme, comes to us as a blithe proposition. It proposes to probe our curiosity and inquiry, and imbue us with enchantment – an antidote to our urban jadedness.

But in the midst of the exhibition is an uncanny preoccupation with catastrophe and death. Or at least this is the case with the following two artists: Sherman Ong and Hans Op de Beeck. Both artists are aesthetically invested in rather different media: film for Ong and sculptural installation for Op de Beeck. Both are similarly driven by narrative, or rather an urge to dispel narrative by taking apart the conventional flow of storytelling in order to insert us right in the middle of life’s inchoate and sometimes absurd activity. Ong’s and Op de Beeck’s works for the Biennale maintain at their centre an unshakeable sense of disquiet. One thus “wonders” if these two may yet be prophets of unsettling, but necessary stories, which we hesitate to tell ourselves.

For Ong, a Malaysian-born but Singapore-based photographer and filmmaker, his latest offering speculates on the very real possibility of impending climatic disaster that would devastate the country. Perhaps a knowing nod to Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Ong’s two-part film is also aptly though contrarily entitled *Flooding in the Time of Drought (Banjir Kemarau)*, conveying the horrific collision of antinomies. Where “love” in the former can be said to counteract the plight of pestilence, in the latter, flooding and drought are the two inhospitable extremes of too much and too little.



Ong puts to us a dystopic situation in the proximate future when Singapore suddenly runs out of water and no information is forthcoming from the government. The issues propounded here are deeply familiar: we are surrounded by water but little of it is available for domestic consumption, thereby jeopardising Singapore’s long-term survival. Newater is a stopgap measure that cannot hold at bay the rising sea-levels engulfing our shorelines in the era of global warming. Images of the tsunami-battered Bandar Aceh still chasten our imagination with destruction.

But shot almost entirely in serene domestic settings – rooms in HDB flats which form the film’s separate but connected bubble-cell structure – it betrays very little of the distress caused. Instead, we are shown people and families quietly coping with the daily banalities of cooking, drinking, washing and cleaning, or as we like to say, “Life goes on.” The “drought” is but a minor distraction because “lack” in Singapore gets quickly ameliorated by money and imports, as is with foreign labour. The film’s actor-participants of migrant PRs give it a polyphony of regional languages, but more than that, their own life stories are scripted in to become unusual grist to the Singaporean mill. It is through these voices that rational decisions of common survival get dispersed and mitigated by yet more uncommon voices of divided national or cultural loyalties and imbricated histories.

Reminding us how our island-state is imperilled by its size and lack of natural resources is the easy sober message, given the effective political inculcation of a siege mentality, but more difficult is the enterprise to entertain the problem in a poetic formulation. One gathers that Ong wishes to pursue through his filmic medium the human dimension, or rather the human cost in desires of such epic devastation. This is no Hollywood disaster blockbuster that parries the contradictions with ever more spectacular explosions. The structural weaknesses of the country instead get translated into human fallibilities.

Ong intimates that survival is to be found in the harmony of the yin-yang forces, but the film impresses upon us the shift towards the impossible situation as captured in the proverbial “between the devil and the deep blue sea”. Flood is not counterbalanced by drought. If anything, the film, like a good piece of art, throws us momentarily into an abyss. Key to this is the surreptitious interspersing of deathly moments throughout – the Indonesian man on the bus in the film might well be justified in his lament that Singaporean commuters in general look as unfriendly as death. The film begins with a woman’s menstrual blood dripping onto her stool and does not let up in its other references to killing and dying: an Indian security guard is murdered in a break-in; a boy is dressed as female according to Thai folklore to prevent the sudden death syndrome; and an Indonesian girl who donates her kidney to her male relative’s mother in exchange for academic funds recounts the rape and murder of a girlfriend in the Indonesian riots ten years ago to that same relative, who continues playing his first-person-shooter video game.

In such circumstances of desperation, decisions are made on a quantum of unknowingness, where everything is a tangential movement. Ong has previously plumbed this line of inquiry in his photographic series *Monsoon – The Mechanics of Rain, Mobility and Intervention* (2006), circulating around the expected seasonal change at work but also the incalculable disruptions caused to physical and social landscapes. *Monsoon* took the streets of Hanoi as its object, representing it as a sequence of blurred, drenched image surfaces, the photographs taken through the glass window of a moving van in the middle of a squall. But where *Monsoon* pursues the dogged persistence of life, *Flooding in the Time of Drought* chases us into a dead-end suspense that is the dreamed up nightmare of Singapore.

This is not dissimilar to one’s encounter with Op de Beeck’s installation *Location (6)* within Shigeru Ban’s *Containart Pavilion*. We are led through a long corridor into a lofty igloo-like dome



Banjir kemarau (Flooding in the time of Drought). Sherman Ong. Photo Courtesy of Tan Hai Han.

with reveals itself as a small observatory for a fictive panoramic vista of a desolate snowed-out modelled landscape enhanced through artificial fog and bright white lights. Even in its supposed immateriality, this is an experience taken to be authentic and credible. Yet we aren't quite sure if the forest scene is an enchanting *trompe l'oeil* for there is no palpable sense of the living, only a bleak arctic soul that gently harbours the mordancy of life. The Belgian artist's penchant for stagey, filmic settings co-opts us into becoming his actors, sometimes close to becoming his inhuman props. His intentions are laudable for he wishes to provide us city dwellers with silenced, emptied out spaces to reflect and contemplate our "great ineptitude ... to deal with time, space and each other". His gift of imaginary privation is therefore moral.

The narrative drive of the installation comes largely from the multidisciplinary working modes of Op de Beeck, derived from his earlier short stories and from which it gets parsed or parlayed in diverse directions. *Location (6)* has spawned *Possible Panoramas*, a series of five large-scale landscape prints created first in watercolour and ink; and *Constructions*, three monochrome white scale sculptures of imaginary panoramas made out of wood, metal, cardboard and polystyrene constructed during the R&D phase of the installation. The artist wants us to move between inside-looking out and outside-looking in, to be in spaces where not everything is in place, even when we are tricked into illusionistic fineries. Op de Beeck's earlier video projection *Loss* (2004) possibly shares even more affinities with Ong's film for the



Close up of the sculptural installation by Hans Op de Beeck.

Biennale – the viewer was let into a cold dark space with a hauntingly sound-tracked filmic sequence of images of late nineteenth-century city architecture and parks, gradually turning into spectres of a ruined and muddy terrain, just as the Belgian coastal region was, right after the First World War. But where Op de Beeck gravitates towards the lyrical memory of historical trauma, Ong has no such "consolations" from the past. Instead, Ong seeks a disruption in the ideological promise of tomorrow which has been sold to us with historical traces held as ransom.

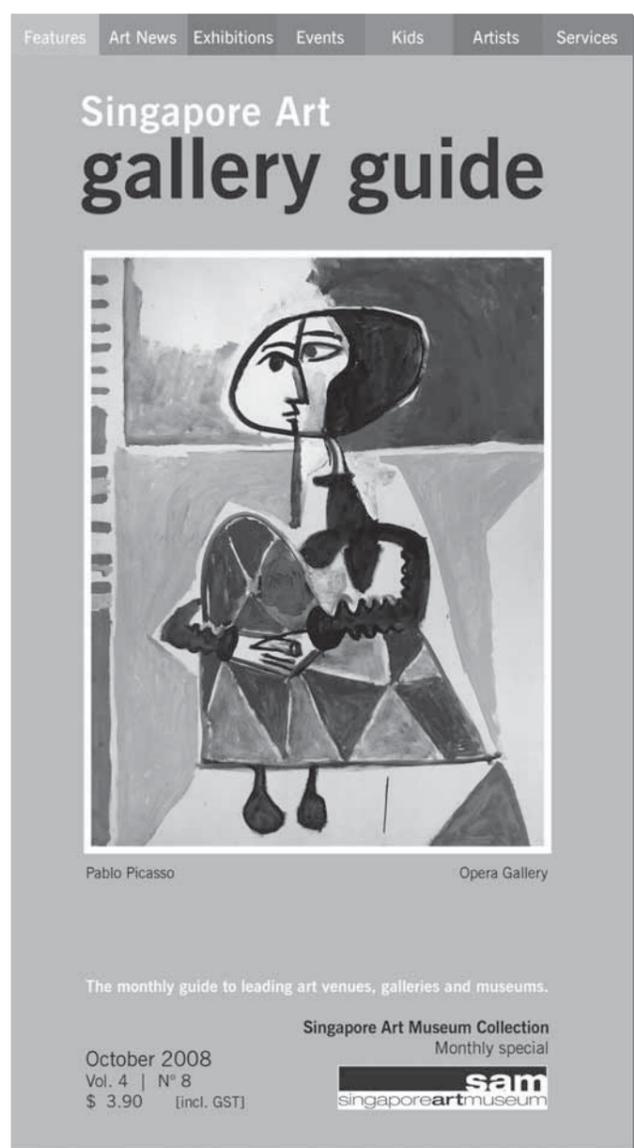
It must be mentioned that *Location (6)* was not entirely meant for us, having been co-produced by the Holland Festival in Amsterdam and having premiered there in June 2008. The melancholic vision of Op de Beeck's landscape is therefore decidedly European. When transposed to Singapore's tropical climes, to be as ridiculous as it is serious, it's hard not for it to be tinged with novelty.

But this does not mean that the work does not speak to our location. As with Ong, its apocalyptic musings offer metaphors that allow us to suture a morsel of mortality into our banal activities. Death is not an endpoint, a forbidden territory by law and commemorated by ritual. It is perhaps the one nasty vector that propels creation. To think with death is not a perverse condition but a privilege which we must not cede to the authorities. Art is only one way to begin such thinking and biennales can be wonderful places to examine where we have all gone dead.

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The art of compromise

by Ng Yi-Sheng

“Censorship is such a misunderstood word”, says Low Kee Hong, General Manager of the Singapore Biennale. “It’s about negotiation. At the end of the day, when you put up anything in Singapore, it is really about relevance”.

I’m interviewing Low about the independence awarded to artists involved in the Biennale. I’d attended and loved the first one in 2006, which managed to exhibit works on issues often seen as taboo in Singapore – religious extremism, political detention and the death penalty. Yet I’d heard from inside sources that last-minute changes had been demanded of certain works.

Twelve seconds of footage had been cut from Aida Makoto’s *The video of man calling himself Binladen staying in Japan*. The video showed the artist dressed as Osama bin Laden, explaining tipsily why he had settled in Japan. The excised footage involved rants against then-Prime Minister Koizumi.

More subtly, Jane Alexander had been asked to change the name of her installation, *Verity, Faith and Justice*, which presented a former courtroom populated by bizarre, half-human beasts. The title had originally mentioned the name of a then serving judge.

Why were such changes made? My source claimed it was due to government pressure, intensified by the fact that dignitaries from the concurrently held IMF/World Bank meetings would be viewing the exhibition. (The Biennale office functions as part of the civil service, and is thus arguably susceptible to such pressures.)

According to Low, however, the cuts to Makoto’s work were motivated solely by concerns of relevance – the artwork had been created originally for Japanese audiences, so Singaporeans might not get the proper context of the critique. And Alexander had ultimately decided she preferred the shorter, unembellished title of the work that the Biennale suggested.

On one count, however, there is agreement. The artists agreed to the negotiated changes without noisy, embarrassing protest. They neither withdrew their works nor publicised the adjustments.

Choosing sides

This bugs me. I’m of a generation who came of age reading Alfian Sa’at’s *A Censorship Manifesto*, which detailed violent, ignorant acts of censorship in Singapore, and described how artists were able to claim the moral high ground over authorities by highlighting their bans. I’ve been maintaining an online archive of local censorship cases (google “Censational!”), and imagine myself as part of a grand war, with us idealist artists on one side and an army of civil servants on the other, determined to silence us.

Low doesn’t think much of this position. “Freedom of speech is such a sacred cow”, he says. “Confrontation and direct aggression is always not the best strategy. You put up these roadblocks. It’s already a very antagonistic position”.

As much as I hate to admit it, he’s got a point. Angry artwork is cathartic, but it doesn’t necessarily communicate very well to the unconverted. It’s also a matter of choosing your battles: in the case of Alexander and Makoto, minor acts of criticism (of Koizumi, Singaporean justice) might have distracted from the greater concerns of the work (fundamentalism, justice worldwide). Compromise isn’t necessarily the same as censorship.

The Biennale’s curators are independent, Low assures me. The final decision for content lies with them, and

no government bodies have the authority to alter the works. They don’t avoid controversy; they desire it. Why else would they invite artists who deal with such sensitive issues?

I guess I’m instinctively suspicious of the Biennale because of its links with the civil service. After all, our government is infamous for its disrespect for free speech, demonstrated over the years through numerous interventions in the arts, media and politics. Yet when I ask Low if any artists expressed similar reservations, he categorically tells me, none whatsoever.

“If you’re a real artist, this is the last thing on your mind”, he says. “If your starting point is ‘Will this get approved or not?’, then you are not an artist we want to consider. Focus first on the power of the work”.

No protest

There is one case, however, where last year’s negotiations seem to have undermined the power of a work. Daniel Malone’s *Steal This Smile!* involved volunteers linking hands around the City Hall building and trying to levitate it through the sheer force of belief. The work paid homage to Abbie Hoffman’s 1967 anti-Vietnam War demonstration, where 50,000 people attempted to psychically lift the Pentagon 300 feet in the air.

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“The first thing that really caught my attention when I started to think about SB2006 was its relationship to the presence of the IMF and World Bank meetings”, Malone said. “Ideally I saw the Biennale as a potential opportunity to sneak an otherwise ‘illegal’ protest under the radar as an artwork”.

He says the idea was initially welcomed with open arms: the proposal was chosen by curators over several others he’d put forward, even touted as an ideal event for the opening ceremony.

Shortly afterwards, however, things got fishy. Concerns were raised that the volunteers would be indistinguishable from the spectators, so Malone designed a bib as a standard uniform, displaying an image of an emoticon smile, :) , using the stars and crescent of the Singapore flag.

“There was much to-ing and fro-ing around this design, mostly based on ‘practical concerns’, that dragged out for months. I stuck strongly to my original intention and provided solutions to all of the ‘design problems’ I was presented with. In the end they went ahead with the bibs but printed them with a standard emoticon, sidestepping the relationship to the national flag – citing potential offence to the Muslim community”.

Moreover, Malone was not able to get the turnout he’d wanted. Although the performance was still listed as an opening event, it was slotted for the morning after the opening party – the worst time to schedule things, he said. (Looking at the full schedule, this may simply have been logistically expedient.)

Though he’d designed posters and flyers to recruit participants, he’d relied on the Biennale for publicity. The event wasn’t advertised widely within the artist/activist community, and on the day itself curators used their “emergency plan” of bussing in schoolchildren to participate. Even then, there weren’t enough people to encircle the building. (Low’s take on the story is that the event was never a secret, and if activists had cared enough, they would have turned up.)

Malone isn’t crying foul; he sees the situation caused in part by limited resources and awkward communication. He believes he should take responsibility for the outcome of this collaborative work, and notes how he was able to emphasise his intended themes in the video documentation later exhibited.

Still, he’s not thrilled about what happened. “It seems certain to me that some of the more direct changes were due to at least unconscious conservative responses that pushed my requests beyond plausibility. In hindsight I wonder if I wasn’t too conservative myself in not wanting to rock the boat too much”.

Moving forward

Low doesn’t feel it’s productive to record every single, iffy instance of potential censorship in Singapore. “I know it’s sexy and everyone wants to talk about it. But think about the larger arts community. Are you really doing them a service?”

My answer is yes. Articles such as this one can’t hurt the Biennale – there are too many people (myself included) who believe it’s too good a thing to be shut down. Not just because it raises our standards of art, but also because it sets precedents for what’s permissible in the art world.

By holding the Singapore Biennale to high standards for free speech and artistic independence, I’m insisting it does better in the future: that its curators and organisers have courage to resist conservative temptations to modify artists’ work. The Biennale is in a prime position to shift the status quo. It shouldn’t waste that chance to make a difference.

Following the preparations for this year’s exhibition, I haven’t heard of any showdowns between artists, curators and authorities. Maybe everything’s harmonious. Or perhaps once again, art works have been altered without noisy protest by artists. It’s up to the critics, then, to raise a little hell.



YI-SHENG is a poet, playwright, critic, journalist and copywriter. His books include the poetry collection *last boy* and *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century*. He blogs at <<http://lastboy.blogspot.com>>.

States of Security

by Jeannine Tang

As an exhibition genre, biennales pivot on their recurrence and the promise of differentiation in each new manifestation. Hence the nervous quip, repeated ad nauseum at the festivities of Singapore's first show two year's ago, that there might not be a second biennale after the IMF and World Bank decamped. A biennale inaugurated, but not maintained, by an occasion of global finance. However, here we are again, in 2008, and the sceptics, including yours truly, must swallow their words.

Although decoupled from the IMF and World Bank annual meetings, this year's edition isn't unlinked to global economic ambition. Rather, its connections to economic enterprise are in the register of a more diffuse, continuous state of the everyday – less a singular event than the security of ordinary desire and desirability. The first exhibition was offered as the advance guard of Singapore's new economic carrots, and this year's version continues in that vein: the use of fine art as cultural publicity, rotating around the axis of the “creative industries”.

Wedding creativity to enterprise, here in Singapore, is an attempt to both forge an economy that is creative (populated by creative people), and develop the economy of contemporary art. Parallel to this 2008 biennale, and marketed on the official website, is Showcase Singapore, a “premium boutique art fair” targeting “high networth individuals” and “upper middle class collectors” as the purchasing points of the contemporary art world's “darlings”.

These quotations shouldn't be mistaken for a blanket market cynicism, from one exhaling the rarified air of a musty university library (from where I admittedly write). On the contrary. Historically, art's umbilical cord has frequently been plated with gold; the historical European avant-garde, with its pretensions of distance from the market, was also fed on its largess. Since the 1960s, the global growth of commercial galleries have produced some organisations dedicated to advancing experimental practice, while for-profit art spaces have sustained critical modes of operation well after non-profits have closed. There are numerous artists whose works I would never have encountered, if not for the dual mechanisms of market and scholarship propelling them into visibility. Galleries and the way they play the market can, and do, cultivate alternative desires.

However, Showcase Singapore's rhetoric clumsily betrays an ambition to produce a dream demagogy of collectors as nouveau riche upper-middle class denizens, hankering after exclusivity and retreating from public and social responsibility. This is a false opposition: for-profit economic models are not always opposed to critical practice, as they are often assumed to be.

One might expect, even encourage, a little more from a collecting demographic. I note Daniel Buren's inclusion in this biennale, a (likely accidental) comedic pairing of the artist of the *Avertissement*, with the country's agenda to hothouse art collecting. From the onset of their interest, collectors of Buren's work are confronted with the responsibility of their proprietary impulses, which are wedded to the artist's political right to oversee the legacy of his work.

Developed and used since 1969, Buren's *Avertissement*, or certification of authentication, extends the artist's rights beyond the temporality of production and display to the vagaries of its ownership. Upon purchasing a work by Buren, initial collectors or re-sale buyers all must ratify the terms of the *Avertissement*. Its strict



The Farmers and Helicopters. 2006. Three channel video installation. Dinh Q. Le with LE, Van Danh, TRAN, Quoc Hai.

terms and conditions include Buren's right to the documentation and control of the work's provenance (the history of ownership of an art object), and his right to deny authentication of the work in event of its deformation. Only upon his receipt of the *Avertissement* will Buren discharge a certificate to the would-be collector, as a gesture of authentication. Here, authentication begins with the promise of the collector to enter an agreement of difficulty, to open him or herself towards the ethical demands of the artist. This is repeated for every collector aspiring to have his purchase authenticated as a Buren. Once a Buren, not always a Buren.

The problem with market forecasting or economic predeterminations of art is that one can't really know the destiny of a work of art. Its price value, prior and subsequent encodings of cognitive, affective, cultural and social values, necessarily mutate and remain stubbornly open to dispute and discussion, in spite of market indices.

And before conjoining artistic creativity into light-footed lockstep with economic competition, one might pause, and consider those who've engaged these issues well before Singapore jumped on the bandwagon. To paraphrase Jaime Stapleton, the difference between the “rhetoric of creativity” and “creative production” is often marked; a policy of creativity does not, and cannot, produce exact results.

The global thrust of the latest nationalist tagline, “World Singapore”, calls out to the family, friends, and fans of the island city state. But to demand fans is to seek security while smelling fairly strongly of its opposite. In micromanaging the urgency of contemporary art out of contemporary art, Singapore's hamfisted attempts at inching upwards might well endanger its own cause. If art is subjected to the empirical criteria of economic judgement, success and quantification, its will lose precisely the qualities that the upper-middle classes of the creative-economy want to consume: fantasies of risk, contingency, passion, subversion, mobility, agency, zones of freedom ... the frisson that well-travelled, global urbanites crave in their financial maturity and social aspirations.

Creative economies are also likelier to flourish within societies that are supportive of differences of religion, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality and opinion, and which exhibit an open-mindedness in the evolution of their laws, policies and administrative practices. Without a foundation for, not merely the economics of creativity, but the creativity of creativity, a brain drain of the desirable class of creative labourers may ensue.

Rhetoric, for radicals, is insufficient. There is the danger that an oversecured economic organisation of culture might just find itself missing the point – and possibly its targets.

Born and bred in Singapore, JEANNINE is presently a doctoral candidate at the Courtauld Institute of Art, a fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and a feminist everywhere. As an art historian and critic, she has published widely. She is a member of AICA, Singapore.



Article

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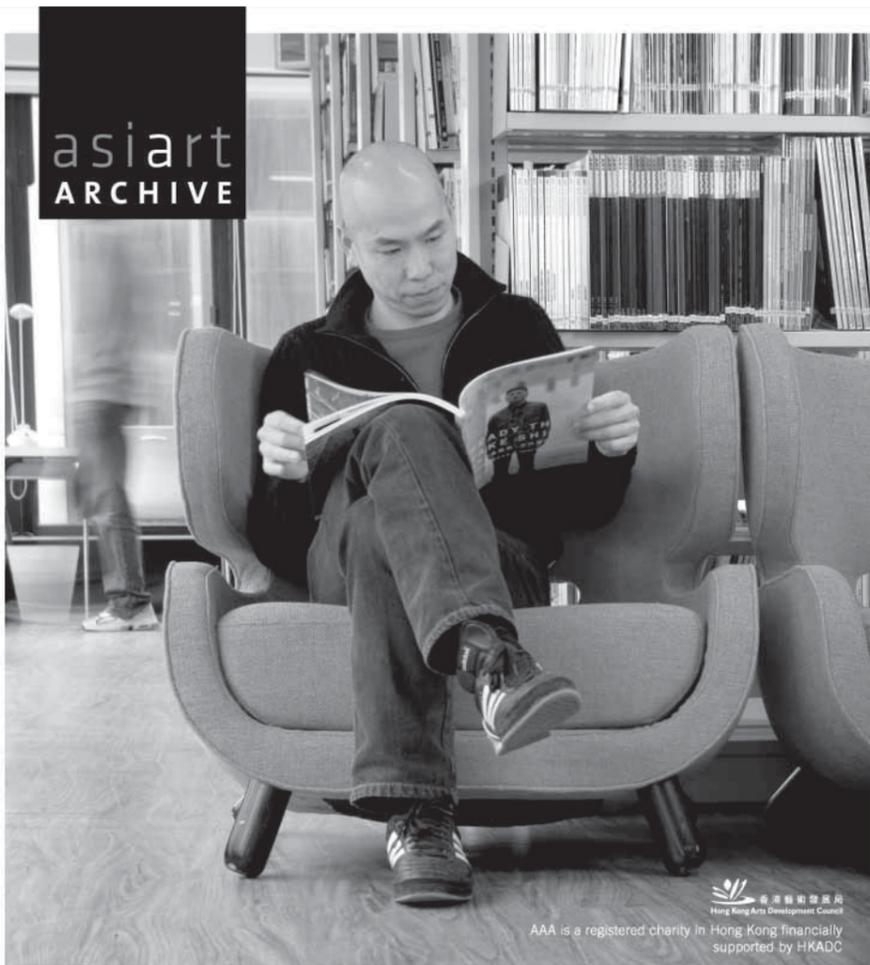


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Upper : Yi Hwan Kwon, *Family Ties - Boy & Girl* (2008), fiberglass reinforced plastic, ed. 2/5, boy : 113 x 76 x 76 cm, girl : 102 x 70 x 80 cm
 Lower : I Nyoman Masriadi, *The Target* (2006), acrylic on canvas, 140 x 190 cm
 Upper Left : Lee Yong-Deok, *Standing 0701* (2007), oil on canvas, 95 x 215 x 15 cm
 Lower Left : R. E. Hartanto, *Post North Korea Nuclear Test #1* (2007), oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm



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Black Holes and Event Horizons: notes on Boredom

by Eliza Tan

Here's something to consider as you contemplate this year's Singapore Biennale: Marvin the Paranoid Android, that melancholic, wonder-bereft, "electronic sulking machine" from Douglas Adam's cult classic *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (also the namesake of the Radiohead song, from their album *OK Computer*).

In one scene, a profoundly bored Marvin attempts to talk to a police craftship's computer system; it malfunctions when he explains his view of the universe to it. Marvin rejects the idea that being occupied with any form of activity can distract him from his boredom because of his seemingly unlimited intelligence. He languishes in his misery, in a museless existence that seems transparent and ultimately banal – that holds no mystery or means to spark his interest or curiosity.

The paranoid android – albeit a post-Romantic character prototype, what with his deeply melancholic but unwittingly comic disposition – is a metaphor for the modern subject in a state of perpetual crises. Marvin's boredom is really all too human. It's symptomatic of a problem, not of the distant future, but of our very present: we live in a speed-obsessed age awash in information and images, and under such conditions, qualitative experience has been too quickly overtaken by quantitative knowledge. Ours is a paradoxical existence: we may be over-stimulated, but are we really engaged? We may not constantly sulk with his mechanical consistency, and although we may not know nearly as much, we're a lot like Marvin.

If boredom's denotative as well as connotative usage is often intrinsically more nebulous and approximate rather than specific, the word's coinage in English during the 18th century in association with the Romantic movement was preceded by its German expression *langeweile*. Beyond characterising monotony and an anxiety that arises due to the absence of external stimulus, *langeweile* relates to passive frustration, apathy and depersonalisation as much as to a retained desire for activity and intense experience. As a pathological state, *langeweile* expresses the constructed boundaries of one's perception of time and space. Time slows to an unsatisfactory grind while one's experience of space becomes flattened.

Is boredom entirely or always a negative assumption? The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once postulated boredom as a "windless calm" of the soul, which "precedes a happy voyage and cheerful wings". And the poet Joseph Brodsky, who wrote *In Praise of Boredom*, described the feeling as "time's invasion of your world system". Could boredom be that doubting space, loaded with transportive potentiality, especially if it were charged with an opaque longing for its seeming opposites – the discovery of wonder? the possibility of sensorous rapture?

"But when all you want is the new and newer, what you get is a formula guaranteed to encourage lazy cultural consumption. If it's not new, it's boring, but even when it's new, it still is boring."

Brodsky's description suggests that boredom activates the relative bending of time and space. If we may approximate the language of *Hitchhiker's Guide*, the sci-fi cliché of blackholes as a portal for time travel functions in connection with the theoretical constructs of blackholes and event horizons. We cannot see beyond the event horizon, a boundary in space-time and an area surrounding a blackhole. A blackhole, like boredom, is a region in which matter collapses to an infinite density and exerts a destructive force on approaching objects. However, it is this dense interiority which potentially results in the radical curvature of space-time, allowing lateral movement to happen.

Getting back to earth, and things biennale ... These international exhibitions of contemporary visual culture are like a global franchise, it's as if every city is hankering to host one. But unlike McDonald's, which repeats the representation of the same everywhere around the planet, these events are expected to always give us something different; every occasion is measured by its offering of "the new". We've straightjacketed time and experience into a linear arrangement, and seem only able to see biennales as unfolding in consecutive, comparative sequence – we march from this city (before), to that city (after), to the next (to come). But when all you want is the new and newer, what you get is a formula guaranteed to encourage lazy cultural consumption. If it's not new, it's boring, but even when it's new, it still is boring.

Such a disposition stymies the possibilities of seeing degrees of differentiation that might play out through repetition. For those viewers who do get to see the same or similar art works in different locations, one gets the chance to consider more carefully the particularities of site and reception, the historical relevance of artworks, and even a work's adaptive possibilities – its detouring of specificities like nationality and identity.

How, for instance, does one interpret and respond to variations of Donna Ong's *Chrysalis* which was commissioned for the first edition of the Singapore Biennale in 2006, and then shown in Moscow the following year? Or Jordan Wolfson's *The Great Dictator*, which was showcased in distinctly different contexts – first at the Whitney Biennale in 2006, then again at the 2007 Moscow show? In each instance, another viewing of the work entails a re-navigation and mental reconfiguration of its generative meanings.

Boredom can be demanding. John Cage said: "if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually, one discovers that it is not boring at all."

Indeed, a slow, forceful encounter with boredom entails a creative act of revisitation. Case in point: Manon De Boer's *Two Times 4'33"*, which was on show at this year's Berlin Biennale. The piece makes reference to Cage's iconic silent piece *4'33"*, first performed by the pianist David Tudor at Woodstock in 1952. Tudor sat at his piano and "played" nothing at all for the entire duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

In Berlin, De Boer's rendition comprised of a text and a video of audience responses to *4'33"*. The text activated a silent, visual consumption of the verbal; it was placed on a pedestal at the entrance of a screening room, where the viewer could watch a video of a recent re-performance of Cage's piece in Brussels.

There is the movement of wind in the rushes which you never actually hear but can only imagine. Then the sound of a clapping audience breaks at the end of round one of the performance. An encore takes place in total silence. If I was bored between the film's fade-outs, and if I still question the appropriative effect and affect of the piece – watching it with perhaps a necessary measure of disinterest – nonetheless, I left the screening room speechless, wondering and moved.

To pursue this stasis of sound and silence further, let's turn to Ana Prvacki's *Music Derived Pain-Killer*, which was shown at this year's Sydney Biennale. In her earlier work, *Leap of Faith*, from the first Singapore Biennale,

Prvacki got audiences to don a metal jacket, so as to get pulled up against a magnetic wall. Couched in playful absurdity, *Leap of Faith* summoned the simultaneous assertion of will as well as the surrender of mind and matter in the face of aesthetic experience.

Music Derived Pain-Killer presents the artist playing a flute solo, followed by her gathering the saliva generated from the playing. It was then produced as a healing salve for an otherwise inexpressible experience – pain's mute emotional matter. While I was unable to witness her performance, the point I want to emphasise here is the process of the work's conceptualisation. It came about when she was practising her flute for several hours, got a little bored, looked around, noticed a puddle of water that had mysteriously gathered on the floor. And turning her gaze to the ceiling, she wondered why.

Quotidian (in)activity offers up a window for observation and insight. While boredom might not altogether be emancipatory – it is to a large extent a form of social anaesthesia as much as it is also a self-imposed form of personal anaesthesia, even solipsism – boredom can translate into a process of creativity. It's a stretch, admittedly, but I imagine the sound of boredom as the rumbling within a blackhole – according to NASA at least, it's a cosmic performance inaudible to the human ear, because the note resounds 57 octaves below a middle-C.

There's a passage of text from De Boer's *Two Times 4'33"*: "When someone or somewhere offers me silence, I take it. Silence is where there are no words. Where there are no words, a performance begins."

To sit in silence, to sit with the "nothingness" of boredom – so as to envisage its possibilities – is to anticipate the experience of wonder.

Hush now, let us listen.

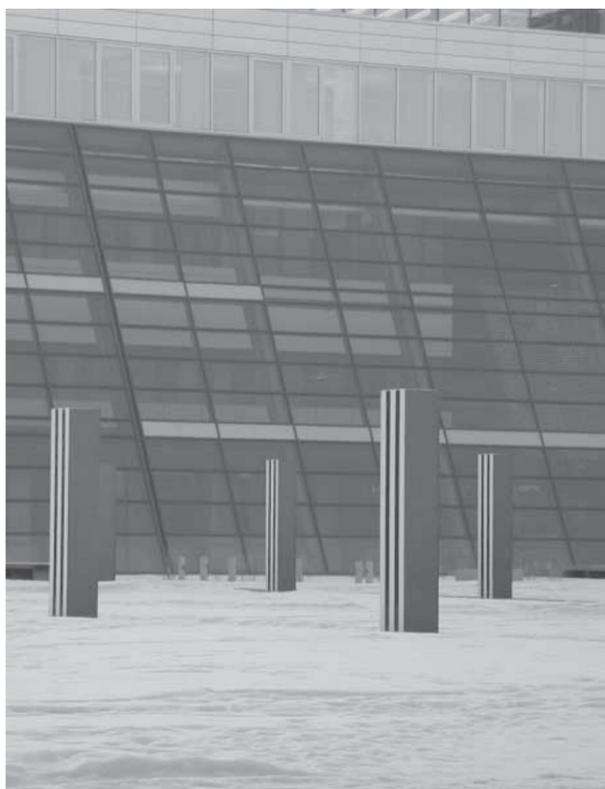


ELIZA is a writer currently based in London. She is a regular contributor to *Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art*, and her creative work has been featured in collections such as *No Other City*. She has worked with the Singapore Art Museum, the National Arts Council and Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York.

The Public for Public Art

by Ong Puay Khim

In a recent article in the *Business Times*, Low Kee Hong, General Manager of the Singapore Biennale, states: “the Singapore Biennale committee is banking on the event to boost the city’s public art scene in a way that people can still enjoy the works of some of the Biennale artists long after the event is over. That is why they are working to match artists with prospective ‘clients’ such as property developers to commission artworks for new buildings that the public can enjoy”. The result of this matchmaking effort is the commissioning of works by Daniel Buren and Jeppe Hein by The Fullerton Heritage. Unfortunately, these works were not installed in time for the Biennale’s opening, due to delays in the building development. Delays do invariably happen in many large scale international exhibitions and are sometimes inevitable. But what is particularly disturbing is that this highlights the high dependence of art upon private and corporate sponsorship in our society today. This further leads to questions about the extent to which these sponsors determine the location of the commissioned public works, which, in my view, are poorly matched to their site.



Daniel Buren. *Fondation Surgissante*, 2000-2002. Photographs of permanent work *in situ*, Telenor, Oslo.



Pimkanchanapong, Wit *Singapore*, 2008. Installation

Since 1990s, Daniel Buren has been involved in many public art projects, several of which are permanently installed. In an interview with Jerome Sans, published four years ago, he stated that “My work does not consist of positioning an object somewhere but in unveiling a place, questioning it, repositioning it”. Thus for Buren, urban spaces and the human relationships that develop out of, and within them, are his main interest. Positioning his works in a redeveloped site such as The Fullerton Heritage removes the work’s engagement with a *place* and as a result, its ability to provoke a re-examination of the urban space we live and interact in is diminished. Commissioning Buren to work with the Esplanade Park, or better yet, with the open space at Raffles Place, with its high lunchtime office traffic, would surely have been more interesting.

Another work intended for The Fullerton Heritage is Jeppe Hein’s *Modified Social Benches*, which are essentially functional benches modified in a way that changes the way you utilise and engage with them. Whether one adapts to the benches’ odd structure or rejects using them altogether, Hein’s benches allow us to witness our neighbours’ interaction with them and, in turn, makes us re-examine the space we find ourselves occupying. As with Buren’s proposed work, why not install these benches at a different location, one that is actually used, as opposed to the “touristy” Fullerton Heritage site? If the purpose of public art, according to the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts’ *Renaissance City Report 2.0*, is to “widen people’s exposure to, and appreciation of arts and its relevance to everyday life”, should they not be infused into the spaces we operate in everyday?

Buren’s and Hein’s works are among six artworks categorised as “public art” in the Biennale, the other four being temporary installations which are currently on view. “Public art” has always been a problematic term. In examining what constitutes public art, curator and critic Lucy Lippard defines it as “accessible work of any kind that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment”. If we take Lippard’s definition as one possible ideal, how then do the public works in the Biennale measure up?

High up on the façade of Raffles City Shopping Centre hangs Isaac Montoya’s *Fantasmas (Phantoms)*, a photographic print of a woman in electric colours. To passers-by unaware of its art status, the print appears as another advertising poster, perhaps a teaser – announcing a new exciting fashion label whose name will only be revealed as part of a subsequent campaign. Two structures, one red and the other blue, stand on the ground just below the print. These are filters through which the work takes on a different meaning and experience. Seen through these filters, Montoya’s print reveals images of violence and unrest – images we are endlessly exposed to through media reports – disturbing yet strangely alienating. Watching as people passed by the structures, most seem unaware of its existence and significance, indifferent to the hidden tragedies. Returning to the same site a few days later was a different experience, this time round, crowds were taking turns to look through the filter, busily taking pictures with their cameras. However, it was difficult to tell if those images disturbed them as much as they affected me.

Deborah Kelly’s *Beware of the God* is a video and light projection of the words “Beware of the God”, which was “performed” at Suntec City for the first few nights of the vernissage and public opening; Hans Peter Kuhn’s *Lightlines* is a light installation on the Esplanade Bridge; Fujiko Nakaya’s *Fog Sculpture #48687 “Noontide”* is also sited by the Esplanade Bridge – these, and the art works already mentioned, have all been situated in busy public spaces, supposedly in order to engage the public. In each instance, however, after observing viewer responses to the art works, I am still sceptical about their success as “public” art works. But rather than accuse Singapore audiences of a lack of sensitivity toward the experience of art – which would be too easy – perhaps part of the problem lays in the wrong fit between the public and the way the works are presented. For instance, one should ask, to what extent do these works “speak” the local languages – that is, how do they refer to, engage or involve local communities, places, and histories? I don’t mean to dismiss these works by saying that they don’t engage the local adequately. Certainly they bring to local audiences broader, no less important global issues that our own society perhaps fails to grasp.

If local engagement is not to be found in the Biennale’s designated “public art”, should we look elsewhere? In the City Hall Surrender Chamber, groups of people can be seen crouching, bending over one another, their attention fixed on an enlarged image map of Singapore covering the entire floor area of the chamber. This is Wit Pimkanchanapong’s installation *Singapore*. For this piece, visitors are provided with a small slip of sticker paper which they can write on and stick to any part of the map. Many looked for their homes and upon finding it, triumphantly write their names and victory statements. Others looked for their favourite malls, schools and some others claimed the sea and neighbouring islands as their own. Wit’s simple, endearing work apart from being just delightful, provides an avenue for public interaction. Each participant, in finding their special place, in turn, also finds others. Being a “direction idiot”, I never found my neighbourhood, so I stuck my sticker on an island at a far end, leaving it blank. Moments later, someone wrote the following on my sticker – “I’m Lost” – thereby, ironically, finding me.

KHIM is the programme co-ordinator for the MA in Contemporary Art at Sotheby’s Institute of Art, Singapore.



The (extra)ordinary Object of Wonder and The Curious Onlooker

by Zarina Muhammad

How potent, unsettling, or even dangerous, is art? At 6pm on September 9, 2008 – an hour before the official launch of the Singapore Biennale – artist Shubigi Rao received news that part of her work, an installation located at South Beach Development, had been tampered with, dismantled, scrutinised and was in a state of malfunction. It wasn't thugs or vandals who were responsible, but the authorities, in the form of crisp, dark uniforms, grim, crunching boots and purposeful glares. The bomb squad had been summoned. The object that had exerted such weight on this panic button, simply by being there, was an unobtrusive metal box found at the corner of the room of Rao's installation.

The machine in question, Rao explains, is intended to "measure brain damage caused by art" or, in a less sardonic register, to investigate "brain activity that occurs when an unwary viewer is confronted by art". By attaching electrodes to one's temples, it ostensibly measures brainwaves and translates them into sound, which can be detected through a pair of headphones. Rao's work, *The Tuning Fork of the Mind*, is part of a larger body of work that

books and elegantly rendered etchings, prints and drawings, the "dirty, huge, aluminium box", as Rao refers to it, could easily be ignored for its "ordinariness" or, worse, mistaken as an instrument of terror because it does not appear to belong in an art exhibition. Either response reveals how art often plays havoc with our visual expectations.

As one of the curators of the biennale, Matthew Ngui, asks, "Are these things for real? Do we take for granted what we see and read as truth? Do we believe because of the thing itself or the way it is convincingly displayed?" Such questions address some of the fundamental concerns of Rao's work.

The curious incident of a bomb squad storming into an exhibition to hastily pull out all the wires attached to a metal box reveals how seriously Singapore takes its national security. It also reinforces the extent to which art continues to elicit significant and forceful responses – in this case without even intending to do so – which open up the art work to greater questioning and, to put it quite simply, wonder. Whether it is the security personnel or the curious onlooker, it is the supposed autonomy of the object to construct its own volatile or capricious narratives that make it so potentially unsettling.

The common, everyday and unassuming "object" has successfully weaved its way into the visual vocabulary of art for almost a century now. Showing no sign of its demise, the indefatigable

trivialise the context and experience of these forms and objects of art, it must be argued that contemporary art consistently demands from its viewers persistent curiosity, patience and the willingness to travel on imaginative and intellectual grounds that may not, at first sight, necessarily yield instant gratification and visual pleasure. Yet, it remains not unheard of for the mainstream media and the public today to be continually befuddled, irked or offended by these contingent objects of art – and on the basis that their "beauty" is not made accessible to them. We do not have to like everything that we see, but we should not assume that art has a univocal quality that is easily translatable.

The suspected object of terror – Rao's "brainwave measuring machine" – may not have been discerned by the unsuspecting security officer as requiring an aesthetic interpretation. But what the object did procure was a response that exemplified the extent to which "wonder" as a noun, verb, presence, absence, process, impression and site may be read in multi-directional ways. How else does "wonder", and the connotative functions within and beyond the parameters of this Biennale, address these perennial questions of: What is art? What is the use of art? Is there a need to, and how may we, bridge the gap between art and life? Who is even looking? Why bother?

Rubber thong slippers, laundry detergent, IKEA cupboards, bell jars,

parallel events are also being held, to accommodate the varied categories of art viewership – the Kids' Biennale, ARTSingapore, and numerous other exhibitions that work in tandem with the Biennale, such as "Confabulation" at Collectors Contemporary Gallery and "No Wonder" at the LaSalle College of the Arts.

As an abstract word, "wonder" is necessarily equivocal and restless. As highlighted by Jeanette Winterson in her book *Art Objects*, "Art is conscious and its effect on the world is to stimulate consciousness". Contemporary art is "conscious", and to wonder or be in wonder negotiates with that very consciousness and with the strands of knowledge and meaning that are inextricably tied to it. How, then, do we, as a nation, society, a community, or as an individual, gaze in and at wonder and perceive or address the intersections and gaps between art and life? As Rao eloquently remarks, "It isn't really my job to teach anyone how to feel 'wonder'; that would be presumptuous and arrogant of me. I feel wonder because I'm always humbled by the tremendous breadth of human knowledge".

"Wonder", the theme for this year's Biennale, does correspond with the increasing need to provide a counterpoint to the frenetic, information-saturated world that does not always show that it believes greatly in art. Wonder emerges from both ends of the spectrum – from wide-eyed awe, creative questioning and also from curdled cynicism and raised-browed scepticism. Through wonder, the exclamation and the question mark meet. Wonder is not always derived from the spectacle, or the hyperreality that's beamed out from our television sets, or of products that are packaged and emblazoned with shiny labels like "Bigger, Better and Faster". While big-scale events like biennales may not always provide the best conditions for viewing contemporary art, the negotiation of "wonder", in all its multifaceted ways, in this year's exhibition offers the expanding space that art may occupy to facilitate discovery, contemplation, connection, and exchange of ideas.

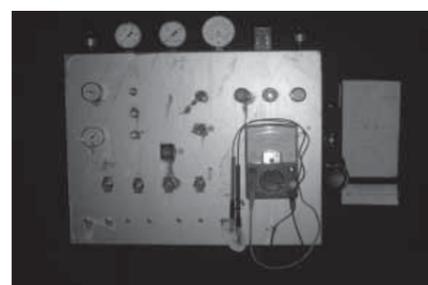
For the onlooker of art, amidst all the (extra)ordinary objects that collide with our vision, it remains a challenge in the way art, self and object are viewed as subjects and, in turn, treated and read as texts, narratives or simply something to be deciphered. Wherever the starting point may be, it is this curiosity that spurs us on.



Spectator viewing Jane Lee's *Raw Canvas*, 2008, Painting, Mixed Media



Scene from *Alice in Wonderland* exhibited as part of the Kids' Biennale



Shubigi Rao, 'The Brainwave Measuring Machine' From *The Tuning Fork of the Mind*, 2008, Installation

explores the veracity of our forms of knowledge and its dissemination. The museological set-up of the work plays with our perceptions of what constitutes authenticity, particularly in relation to the "artifacts" on display, and our encounter with what we assume, or may read as, (in)tangible objects of art.

Situated in the corner of a room filled with delicate objects, hand-made

"found object" or "readymade" has spurred and goaded debates and quarrels. The iconography of the readymade has shifted from Marcel Duchamp's urinal to Andy Warhol's soup can and, now, to the cliché-ridden Damien Hirst shark in formaldehyde and its other shock and horror inducing counterparts. Looking at art has never been something straightforward. The exchanges involved far supersede the act. While it is easier to dismiss or

sugar, chocolate bars and maggots are just some of the items that the layperson would not normally associate with art. Their appearance in the Singapore Biennale, however, points out that familiar forms of the everyday need not always be steeped in banality and devoid of any discursive or narrative quality. In this sense, the audience reception or, rather, the complicit involvement with each individual viewer plays an important role. Moreover,

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It's little wonder: an interview with three local artists from the Singapore Biennale

by Hazel Lim

Three artists in their thirties: Shubigi Rao, born in India, now living in Singapore, is a recent MFA graduate from the LaSalle College of the Arts. In addition to her artistic practice, Rachel Goh has been working as an advertising copywriter for ten years. Malaysian-born Joshua Yang worked as a civil engineer before turning to art, and is currently teaching art history at NUS high school. Rao and Yang have works in the South Beach Development, while Goh is presented in City Hall. The focus of the interview was on the Biennale's theme.

Hazel: My first impression of the inaugural Biennale's theme, "Belief", was that it was too generic – that many works of art can easily be associated with the notions of belief and faith. The current theme of "Wonder" again evokes that same feeling – that it's too broad. What are your thoughts?

Shubigi: What you say is true, but I don't think that should be a problem – after all, discovering wonder in art (or simply wondering "at" it) are individual reactions that say as much about the viewer as they do about the work. If art can be regarded as being subject to a wide range of interpretations, it doesn't matter what title, category, or taxonomy is applied to it. It can exist quite happily in its own little puddle (or piddle). Simply put, I don't think a title really matters. It's all too often merely an honorific or an indicator rather than a meaning.

Rachel: I wouldn't describe the themes as generic. I've always felt that they are very powerful because they contain the fundamentals of what a makes a person decide to become an artist and to make art. These notions are also the fundamentals to feeling alive and connected in this world.

Joshua: Maybe, biennales shouldn't have themes. For this current exhibition, I am trying not to let the theme dictate how I work. Themes can be limiting and constraining. In fact, when I submitted my proposal to the Biennale, I don't think I indicated anything about the theme. Perhaps I simply don't see the need for my work to fit into this particular framework. It's not that themes should be seen in a negative light, but that audiences might have preconceptions about the work – and that does not allow any sort of openness in their encounters. Might I suggest that maybe the theme of the biennale be kept secret, and only unveiled at the end of the exhibition?

Hazel: The idea of "Wonder" could also connote a sense of monumentality, for instance, if we think about the wonders of the world. In what ways do you think size matters in this Biennale, or in the arts industry as a whole?

Shubigi: Yes, I do agree about the monumentality – or is it simply that the word "Biennale" confers that? Size, tragically, does seem to matter. For

people like me who revel in the intimate, the private, the tiny, the delights secreted between the layers of a small but complex work (as opposed to a large, schlocky blockbuster), there is more wonder in creating gentle confusion and a side-slippage of meaning, where there was previously only inflexible perception. To create an elaborate, meaningless lie is a wonderful thing.

Rachel: Sometimes a sense of monumentality can be felt in the smallest and most common of things. In the context of this Biennale, the large number of works and the size of audiences play a part in communicating that expression. But a piece of work does not need to be monumental in scale for a monumental expression to be made. So size is inconsequential if the work has achieved a monumentality of its own.

Joshua: I remembered that the two curators, Matthew Ngui and Joselina Cruz, spoke about the idea of "wonder" as one that connotes the notion of scale and beauty. I suppose these ideas are not too far off from what you call a sense of monumentality. For me, "wonder" can also cast doubt in the viewer, so that he or she takes a closer view at things and issues. Size is a matter of relativity – the viewer is drawn to the work from a macro scale to a micro scale. By catching their attention, the finer details are now important. If I may use this analogy, drawing the audiences' attention is akin to catching butterflies, it's about pulling the audiences in, for a closer survey, and altering their sensory experiences.

Hazel: So, how did or didn't you prepare your works in accordance to the theme?

Shubigi: I didn't want to be pigeon-holed with the theme, as I think my working process has always been highly personal. My work always undergoes a series of mutations that tend to be something like this: Wild, unfeasible idea in an alien field ... complete immersion in the academia of said alien field ... exuberant, self indulgent ingestion of useless knowledge ... realisation that original idea is irrelevant, and alien field is still alien ... panic ... gathering clutter (mental and physical) as a bulwark against looming deadlines ... turning that clutter into something that might hopefully look like art.

As far as I'm concerned, I've had my share of wonder in the delightfully antiquated books I immersed myself in. It isn't really my job to teach anyone how to feel "wonder"; that would be presumptuous and arrogant. I feel wonder because I'm always humbled by the tremendous breadth of human knowledge. I would never presume to tell viewers what to do, feel or experience. I can only hope they might get a glimpse of some of the glee I experienced in the making of the piece. That's all I can ask for. The rest is really, just up to the viewers' ability

to slow down and just drift, and allow themselves to feel the surprise that is all too often buried under concerns of a more prosaic and pecuniary nature. It may just be a bit too much to ask for, what with the screaming exhortations of the bloody F1 next door yelling "Go Faster! Noisier! Glitzier!"

Rachel: I didn't have to do anything in particular for this theme. All my works start with wondering why I feel the way I do about myself, or a situation. Even the act of submitting my work to the Biennale was in wonderment of what it would be like to see my work exhibited and how it would be like to be viewed as an artist.

Joshua: As mentioned, I didn't consciously work in accordance with the theme. However, in preparation for the Biennale, I reflected on my previous individual and collaborative projects, which helped me shape what I intended for this exhibition. You can say that in my previous projects, I've tended to work with certain dogmas, where I purposefully set up guidelines and rules. For instance in *Vertical Submarine*, we worked with certain deprivations of the senses, so as to impose discomfort and the sense of unfamiliarity in the viewers. As for my own drawings, I also construct these rules, such as how the breaking of lines suggests time and the overlapping of lines are not allowed. In the end, these simple lines are a narrative of time.

Hazel: Last question. Could you talk about how your works are sited and how the values of the space or architecture where your work is located affects the way it is experienced.

Shubigi: My work is tucked away in a room on the top floor of a block in the South Beach, a lovely ramshackle building, which I think is quite the ugly stepsister to the more glamorous venues, which is exactly how I view my work in the context of "cutting edge" (yuck, what a phrase) contemporary art. I love the unfashionable, the tumbled-down, the ramshackle, and the unwieldy. I love making work that has no idea of how ungainly it is, and is so annoyingly cluttered with ideas, thoughts, messages, secrets and trivia that it doesn't seem worthy of the effort required to unravel its tangled skeins. The site has been a real challenge, and it constantly attempts to suffocate the work, sort of like an evil twin. I like to pretend that the building and the work were made for each other in a very prickly, uncomfortable kind of way.

Rachel: I chose a storeroom at the old Supreme Court. In a building where the most intimate of family relationships are played out in front of an audience, and a storeroom where objects that are no longer in use are kept away from the public eye, my contradictory feelings about exhibiting a private family video of a portrait-taking session were resolved.



caption



caption

Joshua: I'm exhibiting on the ground floor of South Beach. The space that I am using was formerly the canteen, where you can find various stains and marks on the walls where I plan to draw. I decided to start from one end of the space, like an ant crawling up the walls and exploring the crevices and cracks. I didn't want to erase these already found marks and traces of yesteryears, but instead, plan to incorporate them and let them interfere with my work. To me, this wall is an imperfect canvas with texture that I have inherited, re-primed in some areas and reworked as a new "painting".



HAZEL is an artist who teaches at the LaSalle College of the Arts. She has participated in several group exhibitions and international exchange programmes. Her writing can be found in *The Substation* online magazine, as well as the *Praxis Press* (the LaSalle Faculty of Fine Arts publication).

“Location, location, location!” – Venues of the Singapore Biennale

by Syed Muhd Hafiz

In recent years, the upsurge of properties being sold en-bloc for redevelopment has dominated the real estate industry. It's not uncommon for buildings to disappear, levelled almost overnight to make way for new constructions. Now, what has this got to do with the Singapore Biennale? For starters, it is a known fact that location is vital in the real estate industry. Location also plays a crucial role in the success of a Biennale. The inaugural Biennale boasted 19 venues, spread across the city centre and outside of it too. And a common complaint had been that negotiating through the various exhibition sites was a challenge even for the locals, not to mention the international visitors. With just three main venues this year, all located within walking distance of each other this concern seems to be taken care of. But this has also resulted in a significant, concerted effort to maximise the usage of the city centre. A choice that seems to be too convenient for comfort.

While there were some critics of the 2006 Singapore Biennale who considered it mostly a “tourism exercise” – which was not helped by the promotion of the IMF/World Bank meetings that year – the curatorial concept of Artistic Director, Fumio Nanjo, somehow had found the right balance with its theme, “Belief”. By exhibiting artworks in various religious sites (such as mosques, temples and churches) across the city, a host of different communities came into the venues, and the exhibition allowed audiences to enter into a “social contract without having to get into arts discourse, which is more effective because it is experiential”, or so contends Low Kee Hong, the General Manager of the Biennale.

While multiple meanings were extracted from the theme “Belief” – religion (places of worship), belief in national defence (former military barracks, Tanglin Camp) and belief in the judicial system (City Hall) – the challenge remains to be seen for this year's “Wonder”. Operating on a smaller budget compared to the last show, “Wonder” promises to be a “tighter” affair – not to suggest that there will be less on offer, but that it will focus on creating a “journey of wonder through three large indoor spaces and a connecting outdoor area”.

The choice of the three main venues this year nevertheless poses many questions. While one has to consider the fact that the dynamics that go into balancing the aesthetic and practical needs of both the artists and organisers can be a daunting task, the underlying principle guiding this process should be one in which every avenue possible has been explored such that the final selection of venues is not dictated by convenience or compromise.

The main venues are: the “grand old dame” City Hall, which makes a repeat



The returning venue for this year's Biennale- City Hall.

appearance, joined by the newcomers, the South Beach Development and the Marina Bay Central Promontory.

Perhaps, the first instinctive reaction (given the familiarity with public art undertakings in Singapore) is to regard choices as “the easy way out” and accuse the Biennale committee of employing the “tourism tactic” to rake in the crowds. This is perhaps an argument worth considering, given that all three chosen venues are soon to transition into capital-intensive “redevelopment” endeavours aimed at raking in the big business bucks. Yet, one might have to contend with the many aspects that go into the decision-making process of choosing the venues. Finalising the venues involves many parties, besides the curators, such as the Singapore Land Authority and various property owners. There is also the timing issue, whether alternative venues were available during the period of the Biennale. And last but not least, there are logistical issues. With the employment of old, historical buildings, extra care needs to be taken, for example, with this year's South Beach Development which was given conservation status in 2002.

Moreover, one also needs to account for the significant absence of the national museums in the venues recruited for the Biennale, including the newly inaugurated contemporary art-space, 8Q at the Singapore Art Museum, which is conveniently located near the three main venues. A probable but not so possible explanation for this is that the Biennale committee might be aiming its efforts to “clear space” for contemporary art through the use of newer art-spaces as venues and with its many outdoor works.

On a closer look, the inclusion of the key venue, City Hall, seems significant. By 2013, City Hall will be transformed into the National Art Gallery. For the longest



Containart Pavilion located in the heart of the business district.



Inside South Beach, the disused art deco building.

time, the public's only encounter with this building had been in including it as one of its outdoor shoot venues in wedding photography packages, or as a backdrop to witnessing the National Day celebrations march-pass. Then the inaugural Singapore Biennale happened in 2006 inside the premises of this grand colonial construction, followed by the Singapore Design Festival in 2007. It would seem the authorities want to persuade us of the potential of the venue to be turned into an exciting arts venue.

But then again, in the spirit of this year's theme, some might be wondering, why a different venue was not used. When interviewed, Low Kee Hong mentioned the lengthy discussions this year's curatorial team had about venues, and they rightfully concluded that with emerging Biennales, “it was important to have some kind of relationship with the previous Biennale”. City Hall therefore provided this link: it will welcome visitors who had already formed a memory of the venue.

The venue choice that is more open to debate is the pavilion erected on Marina Bay. With the upcoming financial district within sight, the Singapore Flyer a stone's throw away and the upcoming integrated resort *Marina Bay Sands* slated to open by 2009, this location is situated on some highly lucrative property. It's inclusion will definitely be seen as no small coincidence as it seems almost too much of an opportunistic move to bring contemporary art to the sacred ground of finance and capital. On the flipside, however, the debate on a Biennale being a “governmental vehicle” to bring in the tourist dollars is fast becoming a self-evident truth.

Most biennales in major cities are organised by governmental bodies, as the sheer proportion of organising one can be handled efficiently only with significant financial intervention.

The debate therefore should centre on how the curatorial team manages the whole event with governmental support, rather than lamenting on the obvious trajectories of a government-supported event.

The *Containart Pavilion* at Marina Bay is designed by renowned Japanese architect Shigeru Ban; consisting of 150 twenty-foot long shipping containers and 34 ten-metre recyclable paper tubes, it is a massive undertaking in scale and ambition. It is touted to be a centrepiece of sorts of this contemporary art extravaganza. And yet the final structure fails to conjure up the impact that Shigeru Ban's earlier structures are known for.

Lastly, in the local tradition of converting old venues into art spaces, we come to the South Beach Development. From what I have seen so far, this promises to be the most exciting venue. Located along Beach Road and comprising the former Beach Road Camp, the NCO Club Building and the former Beach Road Police Station building, this cluster of Art Deco style blocks has been something of a mysterious entity, closed off to the public as it has been. The site will be eventually redeveloped into premium offices, retail spaces, complete with exclusive city residencies by 2012 – no surprises there. But for now, roaming around the dilapidated blocks, one can still see the intricate mosaic tiles and paraphernalia of the past, like the chandeliers lining the halls and the wooden bar counter of the military clubhouse. Though a logistical nightmare for some artists and the curators, and although its overwhelming aura threatening to submerge the art works, the venue also provides an interesting challenge for creative work. Perhaps, this is the reason why most of the local artists are slated to exhibit here.



Currently an Arts Management student, HAFIZ is more interested in the “dry” and boring aspect of the arts – history and cultural policy. Also, he wishes he can go back in time to the sixties and seventies when The Beatles and Led Zeppelin were ruling the music charts.

Little Red Shop (ad)

2ND INTERNATIONAL ART EXPO MALAYSIA 2008



Bringing the Diversity and Trends of World Arts to Asia

ASIA'S fast emerging art fair, the 2nd International Art Expo Malaysia 2008, can only get BIGGER and BETTER this November. Only in its second year, the art fair will once again be held at the Matrade Exhibition and Convention Centre (MECC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on November 26 to 30. A gala VIP Night for specially invited guests on November 25 will add to the gaiety and celebrations of the biggest art event of the year.

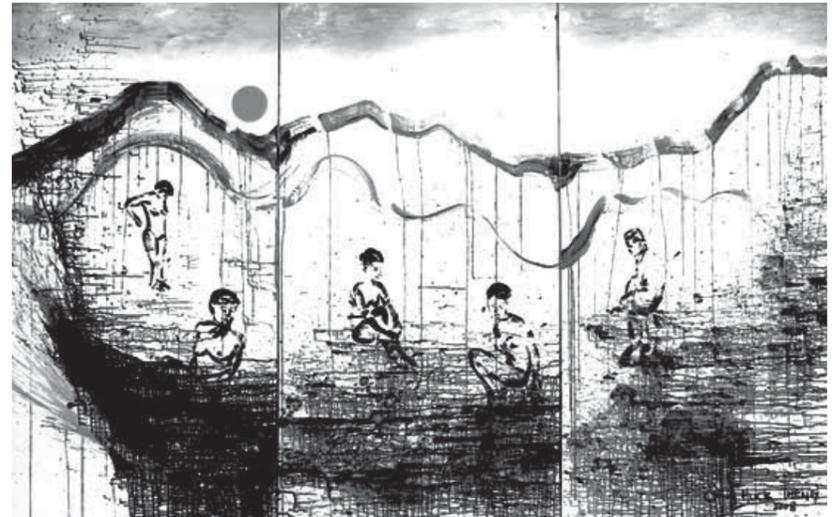
This year, a big seal of approval can be seen by the rush of reputable Malaysian art galleries supporting Art Expo Malaysia. The international field this year is astonishing. There are many, many new players coming into the market, sensing Kuala Lumpur's strategic hub for art commerce and networking, and as a mirror of changing trends and tastes in the art market.

Many who made history by making the 1st International Art Expo Malaysia 2007 an unqualified success last year, are BACK - with more works, more artists and more excitement.

Malaysian galleries are led by the Yahong Art Gallery, the House of Teng named after batik doyen Datuk Chuah Thean Teng, where three generations of works will go on show -- his, his sons Siew Teng, Seow Keng, Siew Kek and grandsons Seong Hooi and Seong Leng. The other Malaysian galleries include the international-linked Galeri Tangsi Contemporary Art, the StarHill art hub duo of artseni Gallery and EDI.A Art Gallery, Raja Azhar Idris's ArtCase Galleries, Kai Boon Art Gallery, Pelita Hati Art Gallery, The Art Commune boasting of its precocious boy wonder talent, the long-standing City Art Gallery, Gallery Nayantara, G&G Arts, CHT Network, Miao Da Art Centre and The Art Room. Peter Liew Atelier will be unveiling in grand fashion the artist Peter Liew's latest Heritage Building Series of Penang and Malacca.

Other galleries include Myanmar's ACD Gallery, the Philippines' Galerie Joaquin, Cambodia's Stef Happy Painting Gallery and from Singapore — Tembusu Art Gallery, Gallery of Gnani Arts, Lukisan Art Gallery, Ode To Art and Oviato Art Gallery. Thailand's quartet of Asian Fine Arts, Tusk Gallery, Gallery Beyond and Number 1 Gallery will be making their debut. China sees early standard-bearers in the Yunnan University of Economics and Finance and Yun Hai Ge, while Hong Kong's Chit Fung Art has also pencilled in their name.

Confirmations have also been made by galleries from Cuba, Venezuela, Macedonia and Spain. Spain's highly professional Art To Rent Gallery, known for its marvellous selections including the highly sought-after sculptures of Jesus Curia last year, are keeping the KL dates again, while exciting young Vietnamese talent Ngo Van Sac whose booth was emptied with good sales last year, is also back. There is also Mai Gallery from Vietnam.



Ch'ng Huck Theng, Raw Beauty, Acrylic on canvas, 152 x 122 cm, CHT Network, Malaysia.

The biggest 'foreign' participation, International Art Cooperative Organization (IACO), will again be another exciting explosion of contemporary 'kimchi' art. There are also galleries from Korea like Na Gallery, Gallery MIZ and Gasan Gallery.

It's still early days, but it can be confirmed that one of the special tribute pavilions to honour living-legend artists for their extraordinary lifetime achievements will be given to Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, 79, Malaysia's Seniman Negara (National Cultural Hero) who is an eminent artist, sculptor, art-administrator cum academician and activist. There will be the usual host of events like talks and demonstrations and charity booths for needy causes and special-needs children with creative talents.

Last year, more than 6,000 visitors visited the 1st International Art Expo Malaysia 2007, involving artists and art galleries from a total of 19 countries taking up some 105 booths. A handsome 304-page full-colour souvenir book accompanying the Expo is now a souvenir item. This year, Art Expo Malaysia Sdn Bhd got some 500 people including more than 250 artists to paint on a banner measuring 888-Feet to mark Beijing's hosting of the Olympic Games, and the completed banner was presented to China's Mr Olympic, Mr He Zhenliang, in Beijing, followed by an exhibition back home by the Malaysian delegation of artists.

As Art Expo Malaysia grows and grows, it can only get better by those making up the prestigious list of participants, that is the GALLERIES and ARTISTS all over the world who matter, and who can make the different.

Art Expo Malaysia is YOUR art fair, your showcase and springboard to the world!



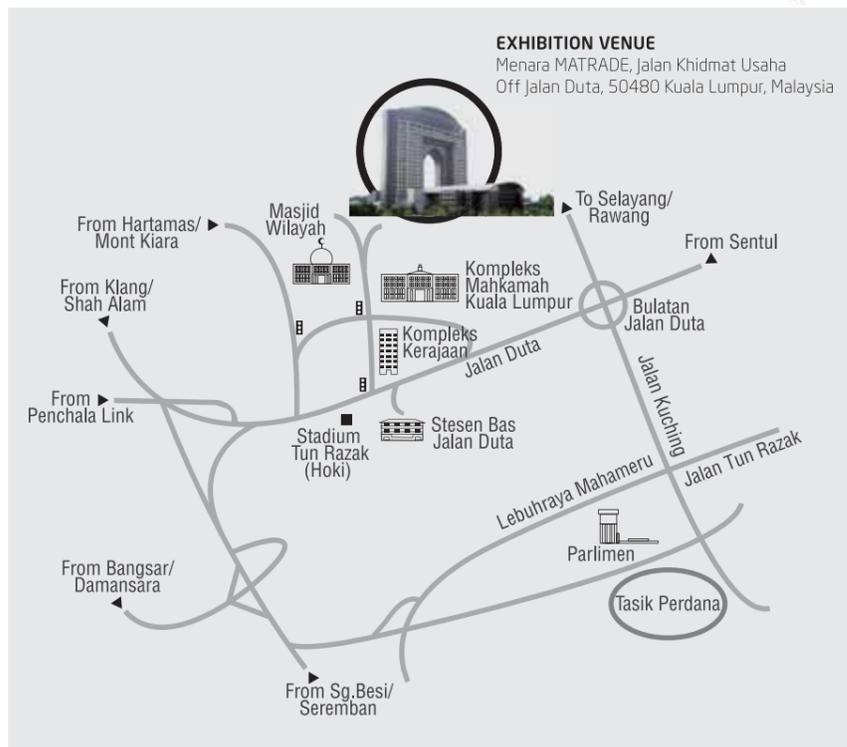
Dominic Rubio, Malay Couple (Old Asia Series), Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inch, Galerie Joaquin, Philippines.



P. Gnana, Eternal Companion - 114, Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, The Gallery of Gnani Arts, Singapore.



Lim Leong Seng, Imagination, Bronze, 50cm (H), Tembusu Art Gallery, Singapore



AE

ART EXPO MALAYSIA



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A Haunting Sweetness

by Abhishek Mehrotra



The sugar pagoda decaying over time. Pictures were taken in one week intervals.

In my understanding, politics and art make for very unlikely bedfellows. In utopian conditions, they would probably never meet, let alone get under the sheets together. But in an innately flawed world, they do meet and often jolt us with the result of their union. *September Sweetness* by Rich Streitmatter-Tran from Vietnam, and Chaw Ei Thien and Aung Ko, both from Burma, is one such work in this year's Biennale where art and politics inescapably intersect.

However, I'd argue that it would be unfair to the art work itself to jump straight into a discussion of the political undercurrents that course through the installation – without at first stopping to admire the concept and execution of this work of art, which has left an indelible mark in my mind.

September Sweetness is a life-size Burmese pagoda. Pagodas are Buddhist places of worship ubiquitous in Burma (although the military junta renamed it “Myanmar”, the country's democracy movement prefers “Burma” and this article will adhere to the latter). What is notable is that this particular pagoda has been made using five and a half tons of sugar. The imagination boggles at the structural and material considerations in this massive and somewhat unusual undertaking. The fact that the structure can support its own weight under a hot tropical sun is an incredible achievement.

When I first saw the installation, it was shimmering in the late afternoon light that lent an almost ethereal quality to it, almost as though it would disappear with a touch. The organisers and curators deserve a word of praise for the location of this work. Standing a fair distance away from the other exhibits, *September Sweetness* exudes a calm that would have been impossible to experience if it were placed in other, more crowded areas. Here it is easy to understand why pagodas are held in such high esteem by the Burmese. They take away material worries and replace them with a spiritual peace. Such an experience has become a rarity in our world today.

While pagodas are central to the entire culture in Burma, they have begun to erode gradually. Traditionally, pagodas were cared for by the Buddhist clergy, but they have been in a state of neglect since September last year, when many members of the clergy were jailed for taking part in a peaceful protest against the ruling military. Rich says that this has left “a conspicuous absence in the temples and in public life”. Villagers with very little or no knowledge of the structure have been forced to carry out patchwork repairs which might actually hasten the deterioration process in the long run. This deterioration is very apparent in *September Sweetness* as well, since it provides a veritable feast for bees, ants and insects.

When I visited the installation a second time, parts of it had crumbled and what remained was being eaten away by insects. It was impossible not to draw parallels with the situation in Burma. The country itself is a state of disarray. Ruled by a tyrannical military that has been eating away at the spirit of the people for 46 years, it has spiralled into chaos and depression. *September Sweetness* highlights this erosion of spirit and optimism in a nation for which the future once looked bright after it gained independence 60 years ago from the British.

Oppression is rife in the country. Artistic or any other freedom is negligible. “You have no right to express what you see, what you feel, what you think”, says Chaw Ei. She is not sure what her residential status in Burma is. The authorities come up with “arbitrary restrictions” and there is no saying who they will target next, and for what reason. Aung Ko, who will soon return to Burma, is avoiding all interviews with the media and his friends back home email him almost every day not to let anything slip. He could be in trouble just for the name of his artwork – for it was in September last year that Buddhist monks took to the streets in protest against the government. Ever since that protest was violently suppressed there is a growing unease amongst observers that the Burmese might eventually resign themselves to their subjugated fate.

Thankfully, that time has not arrived yet. According to Chaw Ei, there is definitely an underground art movement that survives and perhaps even thrives in her country. At the risk of being sentenced, artists do continue to try and inspire the people. Chaw Ei herself hopes that the visitor to *September Sweetness* will pay more attention to the references to Burma. “As a Burmese I have to do something”, she exclaims. Rich, on the other hand believes that, “mental real estate is always at a premium. And if someone can remember our image then we have done something quite remarkable. If they connect that image with an issue, then it's everything that can be done within our power”. Personally, neither the images nor the issues are going to be forgotten in a hurry.

Come November, the Biennale will draw to a close. By then *September Sweetness* would have all but disappeared. Still, its socio-political message will continue to resonate with some of us who would have spent time reflecting upon it.

Having said that, *September Sweetness* can be considered exemplary, simply because it allows you engage with it on more than one level. One could enjoy the aesthetic aspects of it or you could revel in the sheer audacity of the whole undertaking and the expertise with which it has been achieved. Symbolism, as indicated, is rife throughout the work and again one can choose to interpret a whole range of meanings. Bees and ants can be seen as agents of nature, symbolising the impermanence of this world by gradually destroying the structure. Or they can be seen in a more sinister light, as analogous to the military in Burma that is corroding the beauty and innocence of a country and its peoples. But perhaps what makes *September Sweetness* so powerful is the fact that it nudges but never pushes, flirts but never leers, peeps out from the shadows and then withdraws, giving us the choice to chase after it and find out more, or just stay back and smile at what we just saw.

ABHISHEK is a journalist based in Singapore. His main areas of interests are sports and current affairs.



Night and Fog from Japan

by Prashant Ashoka

Nothing encompasses and evokes “Wonder”, the theme of this year’s biennale, better than Fujiko Nakaya’s visible yet impalpable medium – fog. Along with music and a light display, Nakaya has created a giant lingering cloud of fog, which has engulfed the Esplanade Bridge, as part of her work for the Singapore Biennale entitled, *Noontide*. In so doing, she takes the idea of artistic immersion to a literal level, as audiences find themselves enshrouded within her art. The walk-through installation presents rolling clouds that take on different shapes in the play of light. The underpass of this bridge, in the heart of the city, a space that sees hundreds of people walk beneath it everyday without much thought, is transformed in her work into a totally foreign and otherworldly entity.

Nakaya’s love affair with her curious medium has spanned nearly four decades. Her ideas had their genesis back in 1970 when she created her debut fog sculpture at the Osaka International Fair, aimed at raising awareness about the environment. Thirty-six years later, at the Nuit Blanche Contemporary Art Festival in Toronto in 2006, her fog sculpture was one of the most talked about installations in the event.

This mysterious fog has intriguing beginnings. The artist’s father, Dr. Ukichiro Nakaya, a renowned Japanese physicist, spent years researching snow and ice and became the first person ever to create artificial snow crystals. Playing both artist and engineer, Nakaya uses the elements of science that inspired her father’s lifework in her own art. The device that creates her fog sculptures is something she has designed and patented herself. Raised by an ingenious father whose love for science was inspired by the sheer beauty of nature, Nakaya has developed a lifelong fascination with this relationship, allowing science to draw out nature through the beauty of her art.

Although her work has been well documented, recognised and showcased around the world, little is known about the reclusive and press-shy Nakaya. She remains an embodiment of the mystery and wonder that is at the centre of her art.

Within the realm of her spectral fog that has surrounded the Esplanade Bridge, Nakaya opens a number of delicate windows of thought. Her art challenges our perceptions of existence and calls into question nebulous concepts of reality and illusion. At the same time, she returns her audience, who are typically inextricably bound to the regimen of big city life, back to nature. With the Singapore River and our burgeoning business district as a backdrop, the Esplanade Bridge sits at the very hub of the city. Amidst a corporate jungle where offices have become temples and capitalism a religion, Nakaya’s mysteriously displaced fog silently but purposefully beseeches its audience to stop and reconnect with the self and nature.

She releases a dense fog that permeates the space but it then takes on a life of its own. The artist allows it to be shaped, stretched and swept by the weather conditions and the interposition of the bridges features. It allows audiences, if only for a short while, to escape into a mysterious other world. The fog becomes a misty requiem for nature that once flourished on the land now urbanised and paved to make way for a civilisation of excess. And Nakaya presents the idea that this brief “escape” back into nature is indeed imperative. It reminds us that we too as creatures of nature possess great fluidity even though we often forget this while becoming entrapped in the mechanisms and rigid scaffoldings of society.

Another consequence of her work is that it challenges the audience to see through different perspectives. Though we are usually reliant on vision to make sense of the world, we are now forced to use other means to manoeuvre through the haze. The fog that at first seems like a sequestering veil actually becomes a stimulus that triggers one’s intuition along with all other senses. By partially obscuring



our consciousness of physical reality, Nakaya provides an avenue for the audience to open other portals of consciousness in their minds.

She insists on proving that these realities we then construct can be just as clear and true as the physical realities that we see around us everyday, or perhaps the boundaries between these two are not so clear. Nakaya calls into question our ability as human beings to shift between the layers of our beliefs and feelings to create our own personal realities, which can be just as “real” as the physical manifestations of spatial bounds. The idea is presented that reality and illusion are not polar opposites but merely states of mind that one can shift between, create and destroy.

Furthermore, the normative state of “sculpture” is challenged by the transformative element of Nakaya’s fog as time plays an important role in her sculpture, creating a fourth dimension. Most people would imagine a sculpture to be a tangible, solid and static art form, while critics would judge a sculpture by its form, value and interaction with space. But Nakaya has literally dissolved these distinctive features of traditional sculpture and created an immersive experience out of it. Her sculpture is anything but static. Her art lies in a realm that occupies both space and time. As the natural environment shapes and plays with her fog, it is constantly in motion.

At the same time, Nakaya’s work does not attempt to galvanise it’s audience towards profound realisations. *Noontide* simply exists as a cloud of fog in the night, drawing us into its midst like children curious to explore. As you walk through an ordinary setting that has been turned into an ethereal wonderland, you find yourself marvelling at the denuded physicality of the space within the fog. It engages your senses pulling you deeper into a calming mist and leaves you wondering about the latent secrets of nature suspended like promises in a fog, a fog that lingers in the indistinguishable place between the material and immaterial, mind and being, the explicable and the phenomenal.

Einstein once said, “most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead”.



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The Take Away Box: art, food and the white cube

by Charmaine Oon

I'm standing in the middle of Soren Dahlgaard's *The Breathing Room*, engulfed and momentarily dazed by a blanket of whiteness. It is almost too white to see the walls sigh. I tucked myself in a corner with my arms outstretched, allowing the walls to lift me as they inflate. It feels like I have entered into the recesses of a larger, friendly, living entity ... which breathes slowly. The smooth mechanical hum in the background belies the tedium of the breath. We have become one, as my breathing is increasingly paced by the room's. Its minimalist aesthetic makes it clean, structured and dry unlike the human orifice of breathing – which is wet and sticky, in a state of confusion, the boundary between inside and outside blurred in a cycle of absorption and expulsion.

Much of Dahlgaard's practice revolves around the juxtaposition of impossible and almost absurd ideas used to create new relations. In this case, architecture has become alive, mimicking the rise and fall of a pair of lungs. We are drawn into this total immersive experience.

The philosopher Hegel separated the senses: there are the "sensible", subjective lower senses of taste, touch, and smell, and there are the "intelligible", objective higher senses of sight and hearing. Nietzsche furthered this line of thinking by suggesting that throughout the course of history, the visual has increasingly taken precedence – and to the point that the senses of smell, taste and touch have almost completely been annexed and absorbed by sight.

With walls that gently bear in on us, the traditional impassive white cube has come to life. I trail my hand across the wall, soiling it with my grubby prints. In a different circumstance, we would skirt around the walls and stand behind the authoritative line on the floor, which exerts itself more so as a psychological barrier than a physical one.

Sight and hearing are regarded as distal senses. Detached from the body, they allow us to make objective observations without entering into an intimate relation with the work. In today's image saturated world, in which we constantly fight a losing war, there is a sense of ennui and helplessness in seeing. Recalling the childish playground chorus of "see no touch, touch no see, see and touch pay money!", the gallery experience threatens to be a "see only" experience. My other senses have atrophied, the body useless as I wander easily across the floor. Even when there's no line on the floor, and no glass separating, I touch, but apprehensively and furtively.

In contrast, food is experienced through the different senses, and absorbed into the body. Through the use of food in art, artists have tried to "reawaken" and harness different senses. For instance, Dahlgaard's *Dough Portraits* feature portrait photographs of people with



Soren Dahlgaard in *The Breathing Room* (2008). This picture was taken during the interview with the artist.



Tanja, 32 from *Dough Portraits* (2008). Soren Dahlgaard. Picture provided by the artist.



Layla Juma Rashid's chewing gum sculpture *Beauty and the Beast*.

their heads covered with dough. As dough is a heavy viscous material, it stays on for only about five seconds, just enough for Dahlgaard to quickly document by taking a snapshot. To him, these photographs take on a monumental quality as they are frozen in time, as sculptures that appear unfinished and unshaped.

In *12 Second Sculpture*, Dahlgaard through video documentation shows a lump of dough falling off from a chair. The video borne out of necessity due to the transient nature of dough also evokes the idea of video as sculpture. Such documentation allows the work to fulfil romantic immortal notions of art as resisting decay and transcending time. Dahlgaard lets on that he is looking to infuse his dough with a special enzyme developed by a Danish company to resist the fragility of his sculpture by slowing down the spoiling process.

Working with food also imbues Dahlgaard's work with an "understated slapstick" quality. Food in its commonness, its everyday familiarity makes it unworthy of further consideration, or dignity. Kenneth Bendiner once said: "Deer are fine, but venison steaks do not inspire allegiance". Bendiner further suggests that the insignificance of food in art can be advantageous, "like doodling for a Freudian, food for the art historian can be the one area where conscious rules and dignified ideas need not hold sway".

Through Dahlgaard's alter-ego the Dough Warrior, he explores the historical struggle of painting and the impossibility of creating the perfect art work. Dahlgaard fashions baguettes to form a ridiculous armour – one that crumbles easily and scratches him. As food and eating is a commonplace pedestrian experience, art with food can be easily understood, have greater resonance without requiring a cultivated understanding.

Eating as a sculptural method is also pursued in Layla Juma A. Rashid's *Beauty and the Beast*, a series of chewing gum sculptures. The sculptures riddled with teeth marks are lingering horrors of mastication, twists and folds from being played around by the tongue. Bestial, food highlights the mortal part of existence, an endless cycle of chewing and swallowing to satiate hunger. Somehow the title seems to refer to this process, a creation of "beauty" through the beast, the irony of eating – destructive yet nourishing. As in the fairy tale, the beauty is threatened by the impending monstrosity of consumption, but the complete act of eating can never be fulfilled here, for if the gum has been swallowed, it would still pass out whole – a new way to invasively capture the imprint of our digestive tract? Rashid invites us to visually interpret the sculptures, just like cloud watching and "visual" food (gummi bears, animal shaped biscuits, and so on).

Food's greater symbolic and representational meaning hinges upon cultural, social, personal histories and habits. Although bread is prevalent across most cultures, their nuanced difference in appearance allow us to identify Dahlgaard's bread armour from a particular region. They invariably evoke the ubiquitous Danish wheat fields, and have a quaint handmade quality about them. Dahlgaard specifically chose a bakery that produced irregularly shaped baguettes so that the Dough Warrior would appear rural and primitive, "like a cave man".

In contrast, chewing gum, made famous by the Wrigley brothers of United States, has become a "global cuisine", divorced from the local conditions of eating and growing. A quick background check on chewing gum reveals a decidedly sinister history, distinct from the gum popping coolness portrayed in movies. Michael Redclift, who has written a history of gum, maintains that gum manufacturers, in hiring Mayans to

harvest chicle (a necessary ingredient before the invention of synthetic gum), inadvertently funded their revolution against the Mexican government. Mai Ghossoub has written about an incident sparked off by chewing gum – an Egyptian Arab-nationalist paper reported the discovery of a plot by Israelis, who had created a magical chewing gum which could unleash sexual desires at the same time as bring impotence to its male consumers. Ghossoub speculates if the fear of the chewing gum effect is actually a fear of women, because women are its main consumers.

Had Rashid's spent piece of gum not been on top of a plinth, enshrined by a clear but dusty box, I would have passed it by, oblivious to the potential beauty it might possess. Instead I spent quite a bit of time staring at the miniature sculpture, feeling increasingly ungainly and cumbersome with my size (to go straight from *The Breathing Room* to this was a dizzying polarity in scale). The touch of the artist and her absence is all the more emphatic here. Before I can enter an intimate relation with the artist – easily offered through half eaten food – as I examine the sensual handiwork of her mouth, I am reminded of modern society's hilarious glorification of superstar detritus. The incongruence is played out in its man-made durability, organic yet plastic form. A further nod to contemporary society's flagrantly disposable culture and uncertain food practices: chewing gum is non-biodegradable. We derive pleasure from chewing on plastics. How weird.

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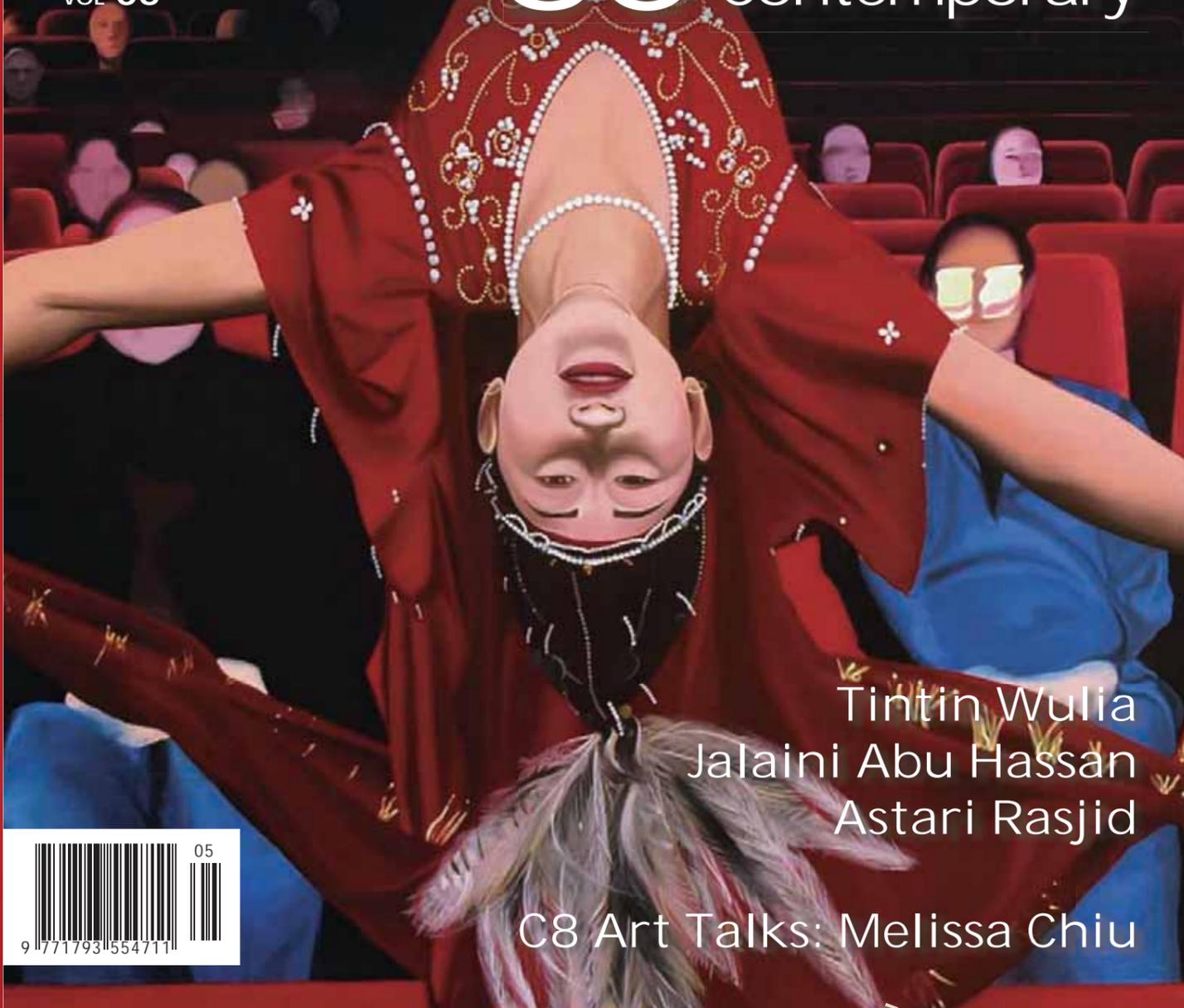
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