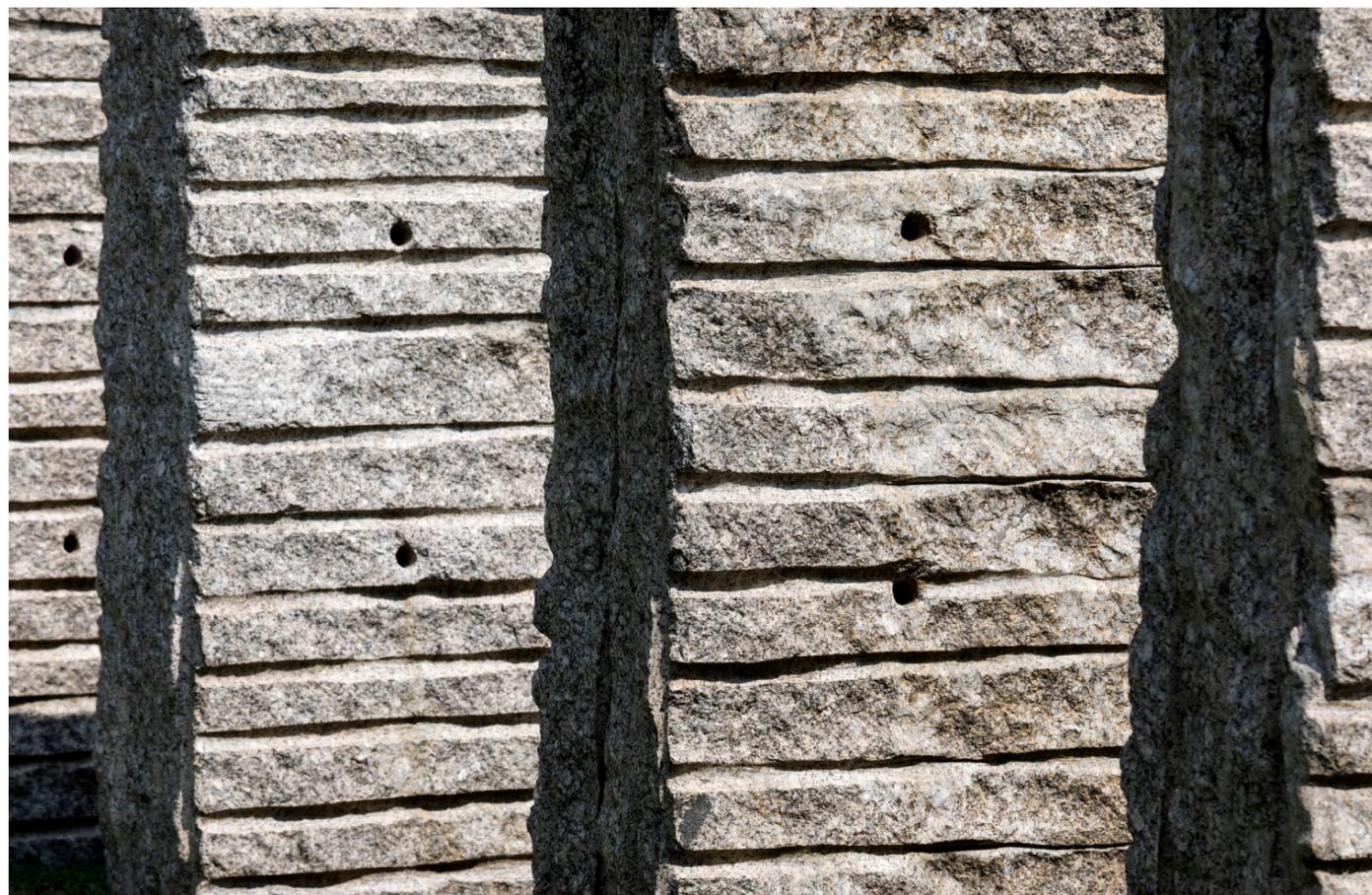


# Introduction: Art in/and Public Space

Lilian Chee

ART, THE CITY AND ITS PUBLIC(S)



Introduction: Art in/and Public Space

9

As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the *urban* becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable.<sup>1</sup>

– Henri Lefebvre

The encounters of art in public space influence social, cultural, political, and economic perceptions of the space in question.<sup>2</sup> Art as capital is symbolic and emotive. When art is placed in, and/or made for, the public sphere, the understanding and intentionality of art – from both the artist's and the commissioning body's perspectives – can be challenging. Art in the public sphere is encountered in ways unscripted by the patronage of a gallery space. Encounters with art in public space may be accidental, distracted or purposeful. Thus, the understanding of such artwork – its meaning, development, the intentions behind its commissioning and siting – can be various and divergent. At the same time, when art becomes inseparable from the urban imagination and myth-making of its site, it comes into its own.

The expressive and constructive nature of art mirrors the energy, unpredictability and risks embedded in a thriving urban environment. The critic of urban culture Henri Lefebvre espouses that urban practices are driven by desire. Art as a practice borne of urban public space, thus, constitutes the traces of our humanity. In this essay, three terms – 'the public,' 'the city' and 'art' – are key. The complexities of what constitutes the city and its public(s), as well as its aesthetics, spaces and ideologies, will function as the epistemological and methodological lens through which art in the city is explored in this volume.

The term 'public art' – though specifically not used in the context of this book – refers to the creation of sculptures and murals for public spaces such as urban squares, parks, plazas, and transport nodes amongst others, through art patronage enabled by municipal, state, and occasionally private, funding. In this sense, public art is linked to the history of architecture and urban planning as well as to the antiquated traditions of commemorative sculpture and mural painting associated with urban beautification.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, the term 'public art' came into being in the 1960s with a largely state-sponsored view of the way art could balance out the 'social costs imposed by ongoing expansion of industrial, and postindustrial, capitalism.'<sup>4</sup> In other words, the genesis of public art in the American context was to ensure that everyone could benefit from the cultural good that art could potentially deliver, to ensure that this delivery was made to the largest possible public, and in the most ideal circumstances, that such art could also be experienced within the realms of everyday existence.

The use of the term 'art' rather than 'public art' is purposeful for this volume.<sup>5</sup> While many of the works documented in the subsequent chapters approximate the habitual size and scale of 'public art,' their conception, development, materialisation and roles in the Singaporean public sphere tend to divert from public art's rambunctious tussle between artist, public(s), site(s) and commissioning bodies.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the multi-agential

complexities of the still nascent art commissioning process in Singapore, questions of how such art is made, their intentions, and their expected audiences and experiences, remain less an exercise requiring public participation rather than questions of how the said artworks might inform and/or augment architectural and urban space agendas.

While one does not demur that art in Singapore's public space still has a way to go before approximating the contentious politics of 'public art,' it is not to say that the artworks should not be also critically evaluated. Thus, this essay provides a framework to discuss the reciprocity of art to the city, and vice versa. The essay is written not without a consciousness of the dense and combative discourse surrounding controversies and debates of the aforementioned genre of 'public art.' Nevertheless, in this limited capacity, I ask if art located in the public sphere, and not merely those of the contentious genre, can raise awareness of the widespread 'instrumentalized economization of urban space'?<sup>7</sup> In doing so, this essay also probes the differences in the city's publics, and consequently, their varied forms of access and rights to public space. Or, to rephrase a question previously asked of Singapore's publicly sited art: Can we expect anything out of the art located in this city?<sup>8</sup>

This essay is composed following the triadic constitution of the city, its public(s) and art. Its examination of art in the public domain is specifically approached from a spatially grounded perspective; specifically from architecture, urbanism and urban planning. Instead of an art historical method, this essay (and the book as a whole) situates art and the city as relational entities – one is part of the other. Thus, the subject of the book might be restated more accurately as 'art *in/and* public space.' In researching for this volume, it became obvious how discourse about art outside Singapore's gallery spaces were sparse, if not, rare. This state of affairs prompted immediate questions: Were the quality of works not good enough to mount a discourse? Was it because there was not much that could be said of how the artworks have impacted the public spaces in which they were located? Was it a problem of an interdisciplinary no-man's-land – neither art nor urbanism but a slightly awkward double act such that one could not say something about the art without saying something about the city, and reciprocally so? The conclusion is that, barring the first question, these are all issues which first encroach, and subsequently overwhelm, art in public space. The lack of discourse and documentation of this species of art in Singapore needs urgent address. The larger impetus for this essay is simply to think through why art is critical to the city.

For one thing, the importance of art in the urban sphere is because it is a strong indicator of how robust the city is in social, cultural and economic terms. For art to matter, it needs

1 Peephole and stone cut detail.  
20 Tonnes, Han Sai Por, 2002.

2 The monolith juxtaposed against a Neoclassical dome. *20 Tonnes*, Han Sai Por, 2002.



2

to do more than enhance the urban environment. Indeed, thinking of the city, architecture and urbanism *not* through the developmentalist lenses of art as decoration, but of art as 'discrimination, conviction, expressivity and humanity,'<sup>9</sup> is critical for historicising the formations of the 'public' and 'public space' in Singapore. For if we choose to discuss the city and architecture through their critical intersections with economic, political, social and cultural matters, then the conditions of art in the city already begin to broach these intersections, and to reveal surrounding issues.

The subsequent sections and appendices which follow in the second part of this volume (*Artworks*) provide in-depth informa-

tion on the various artworks and spaces in which these works are located, as well as policies that motivate decisions and transformations in art commissioning/production/reception and their roles in architectural spaces/areas in the city. In turn, this essay offers a conceptual framing for thinking through the relationality of art, the city and its public(s). It will look at the making of art in public space through the politics of space. This, it will do, from afar, and also by moving closer towards Asia. It will raise arguments and case studies which are relevant to the overall framing, some even peculiar to an Asian milieu. In particular, the trajectory of the essay does not seek closure about what is art in public space. Instead, it offers provocations for mulling over

future trajectories of art in/and public space, especially those which prove compelling within a context particular to, or similar with, the Singaporean one.

#### PUBLIC SCULPTURE

In her original conception of *20 Tonnes* in 2002, the artist and Cultural Medallion winner Han Sai Por placed six granite blocks in a room. The room was specially built to enclose the slabs. It was erected in the middle of the open atrium of the former MICA (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts) building. There was one point of entry into the room, and a separate point of exit. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, the art historian T.K. Sabapathy described the composition and one's encounter with the stones as 'enshrined,' 'monolith(ic),' 'primordial' and 'numinous.'<sup>10</sup> The monumental slabs were hand-hewn from a single granite rock measuring 2m in height, 1.5m in width and 3.2m in length, hauled over from a granite quarry in Tampin, a small town near Malacca in the Malaysian peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Cut up into six parts, and then discreetly carved along each surface to create almost evenly spaced striations, the blocks also bore precisely located peep holes drilled such that these holes lined up perfectly when the slabs were placed in a straight row.<sup>12</sup> The stones' dimensions relate too closely and thus, also rather awkwardly, to the anthropomorphic measurements of the human body. The size of the individual slabs are uncanny in that they recall the proportions of a queen-sized mattress. Packed into a confined room, they would have been oppressive, weighing heavily in form as well as in matter.

Not uncoincidentally, the questions of matter and material are often disregarded in architecture. Form is privileged above materiality, which is rendered in service to form, or otherwise conceived as inert, invisible and undifferentiated.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, architecture tends to employ materials as 'mere finishes, exchangeable and superficial.'<sup>14</sup> In his influential account of the making of a table by a woodworker, the philosopher Brian Massumi emphasises that the qualities and characteristics of wood as a material are non-passive. The outcome is not only affected by how the woodworker practices his craft. The material presence can also produce transformative relations, both cultural and natural, in its interaction with agents and environments:

There is substance on both sides: wood; woodworking body and tools. And there is form on both sides: both raw material and object produced have determinate forms, as do the body and tools. The encounter is between two substance/form complexes, one of which overpowers the other.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Massumi is arguing that the woodworker is perceived as an active agent only because of normative power

relations which consider the material he is working with mute. Instead, we can also see that the table (form) is born out of the substance (matter/material), and that the more experienced the woodworker, the more attuned s/he is to the potentialities of the material. The material is to be worked *with* rather than worked on. As a subtitle to *20 Tonnes*, Han chose to describe the piece as *Physical Consequences*; a nod to the chain of actions which can alter the way we perceive the six stone slabs, and the spaces created through the presence of the artwork. Beyond the attention to gross materiality, there is also an imposed ordering – the lining up of the slabs and their peep holes, their almost consistent modules, and the geometric, rhythmic order of the striations made on each one – which interpellates the natural vivifying quality of stone, the oldest material known to civilisation, into the constructed urban environment. *20 Tonnes* compels us to consider it as relational – as part of a milieu, an environment in which things are interconnected, which also includes us and the actions we take:

To quarry is to separate stone from its geological strata or bed by digging, drilling and blasting (with explosives); to quarry is to violate. In seeing *20 Tonnes*, we cannot avoid encountering an act of violation. ... The marks on the surfaces also remind us of the violence entailed in extracting the monolith from its geological habitat; it appears as though it has been hacked, chipped and mutilated. Sai Por calls attention to the incipient violence in human actions. For this reason, in encountering *20 Tonnes*, we also mourn.<sup>16</sup>

After the exhibition at the MITA Building, *20 Tonnes* was relocated to the front lawn at the National Museum of Singapore, a colonial building erected in 1887, in the Neoclassical style. Yet, another juxtaposition happens here, perhaps unintended by the artist. The artwork sets up a visual and rhythmical association with the historical building, and so, brings a perspective of the contemporary in conversation with the monument. The striated slabs appear to repeat the Museum's fluted lines on its portico and pilasters set into the façade. The lines on the granite slabs demonstrate a deliberate effort of making marks on the hard stone. The fluting on the columns and pilasters however appear superficial, skin-deep and cutting into plaster, which looks comparatively soft. While the sculpture is in the round, there is an exceptional sense of interiority and enclosure given the artwork's relationship to the human scale. In comparison, because of its perceptual flatness, the colonial monument in the background reads almost completely like a façade with little depth. The rough-hewn nature of granite is stark against the smoothness of paint and plaster, which feels in turn, to be hiding something, to be deceptive in its insistent application of a flat surface.

Through this pairing of art and architecture, there are oblique

reference to materials (where did all these materials come from?), labour and craft (who built this building?) and colonial 'violence' (who was given access into this enclosure and who was denied entry?). These are spontaneous material questions that arise from being in the space, with and amidst, 'public sculpture' – a term which sounds anachronistic but also pertinent to the development of art in Singapore's public sphere.

In his 1986 essay on art in the built environment, published in the *Singapore Institute of Architects Journal*, Sabapathy categorised 'art' in the Singaporean built context as largely referring to 'public sculpture'.<sup>17</sup> The term 'public sculpture' acknowledges its audience as undifferentiated, one that is 'unknown and untouched by the conditioning reinforcement that the "art audience" usually receives'.<sup>18</sup> Its challenge therefore lies in its reception: public sculpture is shaped from the onset by interests of, and intentions towards, an unseen public. This conundrum, Sabapathy argues, was less an issue historically since sculpture had been primarily propagandistic and, as a 'public, proselytizing art',<sup>19</sup> had its roots as icons in temples or civic buildings or, later on, as commemorative monuments in city squares.<sup>20</sup> Yet in the twentieth-century, sculpture's evolving modernist aesthetics and form removed certainty of meaning associated with symbolic iconography. It simultaneously also displaced the 'public, structured environment for its function and viewing'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, public sculpture's location as well as its habitual iconographies (the subjects which normally served as inspiration) were destabilised. Questions thus arose about public sculpture's relationship and responsibility to its public(s) and the public sphere in which it was sited. Further, the general Singaporean perception towards public sculpture found it elitist, extraneous, and excessive, to what was immediate to need, function and circumstance.

For Sabapathy, such biases constituted matters central not just to legitimise the role of public sculpture in the built environment, but also germane to its arc of artistic development. Thus, just as the statues in a temple or the hero(ine) on a horse in the town square<sup>22</sup> are viewed as central to the experience and composition of these architectural spaces, he has persistently argued that public sculpture should be normalised *within* the vocabulary and conceptualisation of modern architectural space and urban planning in Singapore. This argument arises from the local historical context of artistic endeavor and prominence, seen to be at odds with national economic priorities in the 1960s and the 1970s, and thus, made secondary if not subservient.<sup>23</sup> The hierarchical relationship de-emphasised the value of art and artistic practice whose imaginative, risky, uncertain and open-ended process was antithetical to the 'rugged society'<sup>24</sup> inaugurated during Singapore's founding decade. Its national narrative of survival demanded a mentality of expediency, and a deterministic attitude guaranteeing results.<sup>25</sup> In the newly independent Singapore, pliable outcomes of culture were considered extraneous to fiscal objectives. Even architecture, often regarded the epitome of culture, was quickly instrumentalised, very often for functional needs, and only at times, adopted as national symbols.

Still the focus on materialistic outcomes is not unexpected of a developing nation preoccupied with pressing issues of hous-



3 At the front lawn of the National Museum of Singapore. *20 Tonnes*, Han Sai Por, 2002.

# Art & Their Publics: An Interview with T. K. Sabapathy

T. K. Sabapathy & Lilian Chee

T.K. Sabapathy, Singapore's art historian, curator and critic, is a prolific writer whose scholarship on the evolving historiography of Southeast Asian art is definitive. He has given intelligibility and depth to the region's art discourse by developing area-specific art historical methods, and insisting on a systematised documentation of artworks and exhibitions where there were none. A respected academic and teacher, Sabapathy teaches at the National University of Singapore (since 1981) and the Nanyang Technological University (since 2006). Sabapathy has written extensively on Singapore's pioneer generation sculptors including Ng Eng Teng, Tan Teng Kee and Han Sai Por. This interview (Lilian Chee, 24 January 2019 @ National University of Singapore) revisits the ruminations on public sculpture and art in Singapore's public realm which were detailed in Sabapathy's two early essays: 'Art in the Built Environment: Some Preliminary Observations' (1986)<sup>1</sup> and 'New Lamps for Old!: Public Sculpture and the Public' (1984).<sup>2</sup> It also references later texts included in *Writing the Modern* (2017), a collection of Sabapathy's writings which exist as newspaper articles, journal papers, exhibition catalogues, artist monographs, and books.

LC: In your essay 'New Lamps for Old!,' you made the observation that '... in order for sculpture to be authentically public, the absence of shared iconographies has to be overcome. Decisions can no longer be sustained to solely satisfy private visions and locked away from the en-

vironment.' It has been pointed out by other academics that in the early decades post-independence, arts and culture were employed as instruments for nation-building purposes, especially in instilling appropriate values in the citizenry. Public artworks within this category tended to feature themes such as 'progress,' 'advancement,' or 'pioneers of Singapore,' extolling desirable morals or values. In your opinion, how have the formal qualities of public sculpture and its symbolic accessibility been affected by national narratives and public art incentive guidelines?

TKS: It is difficult to say how that has affected the formal technology in the making of things, in the shaping of things. From the point of view of artists or sculptors, there has not been any and it is very difficult to make a direct translation from such attributes that you have listed – like patriotism, social good, and all of these things – of the social or cultural interface with the making of art. One of way of doing that is to interpret art to be overtly propagandist. That

Art & Their Publics: An Interview with T.K. Sabapathy

31

is possible and perhaps desirable in certain instances. But I would not advocate that. That would be one way of seeing a direct one-to-one transfer and translation of the internal and external messaging and what you encounter.

From the artist's point of view, it is difficult to grapple with and that's why these works did not last very long. They were dismantled easily and disposed of easily without any sense of loss on the part of the commissioners. Because there was not enough of public, corporate or collective identification with the artwork to say that, if we were to move this, it would radically alter the entire purpose of this work for the building it was built for. This is symptomatic of the gap between the two, and although I wrote that, I must also say that it is with great difficulty that there can be an absolute rapport between the two. So if that is case, then one will have to be able to understand why this gap exists and how this gap can be dealt with from both ends – the commissioners and the recipient, the maker. Unless it is totally propagandist or totally illustrative. And one can be persuaded to do that, one can be coerced to do that, and you can produce things that are illustrative in that sense. The graphic, the technological capacities are in the hands of the makers of these things. But is this what you want? So when there is to be a discussion and a debate, I think the discussion and the debate should be conducted with a clear understanding that one may not arrive at a totally seamless transfer of the intention on the part of the commissioners and the products. This has been the nature of public sculpture in public areas, from the very beginning, all the time, everywhere. But this does not mean that they are any less worthy as art, but it is propagandistic.

In a way, the origins of such the very terms used is like when the secular became increasingly prominent, because the beginnings of what could be considered public art are those found in largely religious buildings. And if you were a wealthy mer-

chant, you had art in your fancy garden but nobody had access to that. So terms that were used then were really about graciousness, relief, beautification, elevating the populace to different levels of being. So it is all spot on. What you said earlier about commissioned works in public housing estates, that in Singapore, this came out of the HDB, the heartlands, because it was about generating civic consciousness, public consciousness.

LC: But do you think that in Singapore, at least in the 1960-70s when our commissioning structures were very top-down and not really centralised, that this resulted in a limitation of themes explored by artists creating art for public spaces, such that these tended to be overtly national in nature? Do you think this differentiated the way our artists worked compared to those practising art in other cities?

TKS: Well, this does not mean that they are any less worthy as art, but it is propagandistic. I think these kinds of overtly national themes have never come directly from the state in many places except for very centralised societies, or when in times of utter or complete emergency or war. In these instances, certain logos, icons, insignias would have been part of the work. I mean, one could say that Singapore is permanently in an emergent state as part of the psyche we have developed. But coming back to the question, whether it is top-down or bottom-up, the point is to seek ways of transforming these rather blunt-edged terms which are deliberately blunt-edged in order for them to have the impact. Otherwise they will not have the impact but for the kind of dogged clarity to then be able to be effectively or interestingly be given a visual representation. And in this instance, we would like to think that all these visual representations are also artistic, because there would then be some obligation on the part of those that are desiring this, and there is immense desire to try and give or keep that possibility. And to use not just language but temperaments, and for-

mations, that allow for the shaping of these into visual form. And understanding this in such a way that the shaping of the visual form may not exactly fit the intention.

By temperament, I mean a kind of psychological makeup, for one to be able to enter into the other empathetically, without losing one's own purpose completely of course. Neither side wants that, nor should it be the case. But there has to be some kind of melding which unavoidably recognises it is not desirable to have an undesirable match. If it is undesirable, then you would not have anything that is interesting. And that whole purpose is lost. If one creates art to put it in the void deck or on the face of the building with such enormous visual capacity and impact potentially, then why not make sure that the impact will be engaging? Why not give room for that? And give thought to that because that is the whole purpose and you are putting all these up there not just temporarily, but it will be there for a long-ish period of time. And presumably if you feel it is worthwhile, you are going to take care of it and you are going to make sure that it lasts conjointly with the life of the people for whom it is put there and the edifices that are there to house these people. So, it has to have that kind of intimacy. And you can only do that if you have a sense of cherishment, if you value it not just as a real estate property, but something that is realistically part of people's lives.

So yes, the value is wide-reaching rather than immediately measurable. If you read the contracts of all earlier representations, wherever these things have taken place, there have always been situations where there have been mismatches, misunderstandings, things falling off, incomplete commissions or commissions that started there and ended up somewhere else, because they did not quite fit into the situation that they were intended for, and so on and so forth. Even in hallowed, sanctified situations like temples and monasteries for which imagery was needed, sometimes the imagery that was pro-

duced did not quite fit and continued to not quite fit. But there is still a place there for these works because they do enough. But do we want to be able to say that it does enough and that we can live with that?

LC: This reminds me of Anthony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, the controversy over the commission when the design was revealed – its scale, its 'ugliness,' how it could distract motorists on the highway.<sup>3</sup> Like what you said, the mismatched expectations caused friction but through time, because it has endured, it is now something different to the people and people identify with it in ways that were not conceivable at the start. I think in some ways, you could see it as a problem with our incessant need for development, where we view things as disposable.<sup>4</sup> Thus we seem unable to create that kind of relationship where we can foster some kind of temperament on both sides. The public is not given the chance to develop a foothold because buildings, spaces, and consequently, the things and lives in these spaces do not endure. Legacy is not pursued through the built environment as much as it could, and should be.

TKS: Yes. So one has to decide in the midst of this fluidity, the permanent state of flux and we sometimes hear this, both rhetorically and I think profoundly, that there are certain things we should hold on to and abide by, if that is really believable. I think it is, and I think it should then not be too far-fetched to say that things that are fabricated and built could also qualify and should be esteemed along these criteria as being not only physical markers but as signalling and propagating who and what we are at certain times. And that the perpetuation of those times is essential to the continuance of who and where we are. But as to who will decide these criteria is also a good question to ask. But this is not a question to be asked fearfully, in the sense that therefore no one can make a decision so we will ask a million people and have a million answers and be no

closer to a point of decision. There is a tendency, I think, in certain spheres where opinion is cast deliberately and so widely in order to dissipate, and in my view, disseminate any possible decision. Especially in the so-called non-essential areas. And if this is something that is non-essential, why is there a need to write a book about it? Because to write a book is to commit it to memory. I'm not saying this cynically, but there is a complexity to the issue and that is the fascinating part of the putting things into the public. The public is a very complicated thing, which you cannot predict and that does not mean you cannot do something about it. Also, one needs to do things to create a particular public. You need to give it time. Don't balk at the first note of regret or first note of dissent and say that oh, we received complaints, so we will remove this work.

LC: Examples of art in the public realm of the early decades in post-independence Singapore were charged with moral aestheticism and the responsibility to narrate certain messages, to the extent that site sometimes became secondary. Yet there was also a contradictory relationship with site – being a part of the built environment simultaneously increased its symbolic accessibility and reduced its function as an object. In many of these instances, public art was seen as a mere decorative element in the built environment and not accorded the necessary dignity of an art object. There have been numerous examples of artwork being destroyed or moved without prior notice when its original site was renovated or needed repair work done. You brought up this issue with Tan Teng Kee very briefly in your interview with him in the *Sculpture in Singapore* catalogue.<sup>5</sup> Could you perhaps speak a little about this: about how public art's relationship with site affects its perception as an art object versus a decoration or appendage of the built environment and hence treated less preciously?

TKS: I think it is useful to distinguish site-specific works which

from the onset are designed, thought of and desired in order to vivify a particular site – in all its permutations – whether the site is a kind of unbuilt area, a relatively less built area, say for example, a park or a garden; or a site proximate to densely built areas. If it is site-specific, then the content of the work, the design, the material in which it was made are all relevant to where it is. The other kind of work is that which is commissioned, and then put in onto a site. I suspect that many of the works that are in public areas now are of the latter. There will be exceptions of course, and I'm not completely discounting works that are built onto or grafted onto buildings either embedded on to walls and pillars or adjacent to doorways and so on and so forth. They are enmeshed in the fabric of the built area in the case of the first, which is site specific. Then immense thought is given by both the commissioners and the artist to ensure that, to maximise the possibilities of a close, intimate relationship between the two – how the environment, the space in which it is going to be placed is going to be altered by the insertion of this work. This is not discounting that all these spaces are also habitats, meaning there is human presence which will ultimately determine these things. How often it is seen, who sees it, even if these sightings are not specifically recorded and told, but they become part of that community's memories, that community's psyche and that community's orientation. It is like saying, suddenly something like a tree that has been there magnificently for 30-40 years is removed. It is a loss to be mourned. And then we move on. But it's that sense of identification that happens. And presumably site-specific works take all of these into consideration. Even if not the entire populace is consulted, there should be enough known about the community. It is important to have sufficiently knowledgeable representatives, to be able to affect the making and the conveyance to the significance of the work.

In first kind of work, impact is expected from the work. In the second kind, impact is a little more ambivalent and is accrued subsequently, thus making it a bit more challenging and vulnerable for all parties involved. If we refer to the Tan's *Musical Fountain* project as you have in your question, it is site specific. It was made specifically for that site and then it got uprooted. And not only uprooted, but it has today completely disappeared – there is not a trace of it. Of course, the owners could say it is theirs, and thus, it is theirs to trash. And it is difficult to argue against that, except on, if you like, transcendent values. And there is patience. Is there sufficient currency to talk about values that are transcendent in Singapore? I will withhold the answer to the question for the moment but I will certainly uphold the question. For another of Tan's work, *Endless Flow*, it was uprooted from the OCBC Centre for which it was commissioned in the first place. This was to make way for the Henry Moore sculpture which was part of the deal with the architect I.M. Pei, who approached the Henry Moore Foundation and chose this work. I know the piece well – it was developed from a maquette dating from 1936. It was to be manufactured to the scale it needed to be and then plonked onto the site, where this vertical phallic tower meets the plaza where the volatile, receptive, recumbent female figure lies. And here is the question of whether the person intended that or not, but in terms of interpretive dynamics, and I am offering my own now, it will be a basis for continued conversation. Or it will be dismissed as a cranky notion of a failing academic and therefore of utter and complete irrelevance which is possible. I have lived long enough to cancel myself out. You may put that in as footnote number 13. (*Laughs*)



*Musical Fountain*, Tan Teng Kee, 1974. Taken when it was located at Marina City Park.

TKS: The first ASEAN

tors. In this regard, what were some motivating factors behind the increased attention and appetite for art in the public realm in the late 1980s into the 1990s?

Sculpture Symposium [convened in Singapore in 1981] which partly prompted the two essays mentioned, was deliberately formulated to bring together a number of different things. These included a desire for greater interaction between the public and works of art, to give works of art requisite spaces outside the museums and galleries and to recover a sense of grandness of sculpture. On the last point, we are talking about the grandness of sculpture in all of Asia and Southeast Asia and hence existing sculptural traditions in China, India and Southeast Asia. Correspondingly, the modern sculptors in Southeast Asia were producing work which were capable of being translated, reiterated or created for these kinds of purposes. So when Singapore was nominated as the inaugural organiser for this symposium, there was great jubilation amongst the artists. And I think this was the point too when the urban structure of Singapore began to take on a different turn between projects that were primarily run by the state and private or corporate enterprises. And, with the emergence of the latter – and therefore new pos-

LC: Your essay 'Art in the Built Environment' (1986)<sup>6</sup> and also the older piece 'New Lamps for Old!' (1984), were published before any formalised art patronage schemes were borne from cultural policy push fac-

sibilities between the two – things in public such as sculpture, which had its own genealogy as a public enterprise, began to be featured in greater prominence.

I think this led to what happened in places like Raffles Place, the PSA building and Orchard Road, where mega building structures such as Wisma Atria were being constructed. And the architects and the owners began to include art as a defining aspect of how their building would look, how their building would have an appeal to not only prospective owners but to the plurality of users and visitors to these buildings. I think all these sorts of emerging dynamics produced a sufficient confluence to bring about an efflorescence of built forms.

This was also the moment when Singapore Art Museum (SAM) was being thought about and designed. The infrastructural development of the visual arts in Singapore was being hoisted onto a visibly higher level. And while I may be wrong, you can look at the conception of Singapore as the Renaissance City. Think about all these seemingly diverse ambitions, visions of what Singapore is to be. And I think increasingly, art was talked about and this was not just visual art but the arts across the board which were seen as instrumental and having an impact on the wellbeing of a city. Not only for its own citizenry but also for the world, where the world is brought into Singapore and Singapore out to the world. There are these qualities of interchangeability, mobility around the concept of the 'world city,' the 'global city.'

One could say that to skew art directly toward this, or simply to give it such an orientation, is not altogether healthy. But we are talking about the impetus for this. I'm not saying that therefore this is commendable in all instances and in all particulars. No. There are repercussions when it is all driven in this mandated way: there are outcomes to that. But for sculptural productions, three-dimensional productions that are plonked into, around buildings, spaces in between buildings, these

could act as markers – as nodes for distinctiveness and perhaps even as qualitatively identifying – in particular precincts. And I am arguing for the most advantageous way of looking at these. It may well explain the proliferation and increase in the number of exhibitions dealing with three-dimensional art in Singapore in the same period. If I recall correctly, there was one such exposition that wanted to convert the whole of Singapore into a sculpture park for the duration of the exhibition. It had a very brief life. Maybe deservedly so. But as a result of all these projects, enterprises, ambitions and visions coming together at the same time, the three-dimensional visual form was uplifted to an elevated plane.

LC: '... is art that is destined for public spaces a special kind of art, generating distinct expectations and associations? What is the relationship between this kind of art and the public?' – quoting from your essay 'Art in the Built Environment,' where you also make 'a plea for a renewed partnership between the artist and the public, entered on the grounds of mutual regard in creating aesthetic forms suitable for the built environment.'<sup>7</sup> Art in public space shares that space with the public, yet in many cases, the commissioning process negates public participation and makes assumptions about the audience based on the intentions of the patron. If public art's existence requires a social contract with the public, in your opinion, what then are the responsibilities of art in Singapore's public realm today?

TKS: Responsibilities... That is a powerful word. Perhaps you can help me a little here – in developing the material for the brief, and you mention that chronology is important, what do you think is the thinking on art and the public in the last 15-20 years that is different? Is there still some of the nervousness or anxiety of some of the issues that have come up or is there a kind of nonchalance, acceptance or tolerance of things in the contemporary sphere?