

# Weathering the monsoon: affective relations



- 1 Photograph by Ong Chan Hao.  
The south cove waterway  
at Sentosa Cove turned pink  
after days of limited sunlight  
and copious rains encouraged  
an algae bloom. The water  
subsequently took on a murky  
red hue.



*The contours of this self suggest a rich sense of connectedness,  
a kind of inevitable and mutually informing contact with  
surrounding terrain... A self that becomes part of a terrain  
rather than acting upon it. —Tamsin Lorraine<sup>1</sup>*

In the first of these photographs, a woman in Punjabi dress is seated on a rattan chair within a suburban garden (Figure 2). An enormous headgear made of what looks like fruit is covering her head. In other photographs of the same series, more people appear as similar versions of 'fruit-becoming-head.' They are distinguishable only by these luscious fruits, which increasingly seem to adorn these individuals. The 'fruit heads' are photographed in their 'natural' environments—either relaxing in the garden, enjoying beer at the coffee shop (Figure 3), hauling up a catch on the beach or resting in their living room (Figure 4). These 'fruit heads' may be read as indigenous species found in the local markets—'we seem to be left on the outside unless we are prepared to "go native" and replace our own heads with something more fruitful.'<sup>2</sup> In each instance, there is something both appealing and worrying about the self behind each of these excessive tropical fruit headgears; a self being enveloped and reformed in a strange, unknown terrain. Yet through these visual images, nascent connections holding together notions of climate, fiction, myth, history, ritual, life and decay seem more tangible, if not increasingly real.

Simryn Gill's photographs from *A small town at the turn of the century* (1999–2000) are adopted as thought-images to contemplate the



2 Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century #5*, type C photograph, 1999–2000.





- 3 Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century #26*, type C photograph, 1999–2000.



4 Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century #28*, type C photograph, 1999–2000.



proposition of self and space borne *by* climate—in particular of the self and space being the 'weather fronts' of the monsoon.<sup>3</sup> To reposition the self in a dynamic and responsive relationship to climate, activists and feminists Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker argue for a 'transcorporeal' re-worlding of ourselves as 'weather bodies.' When our bodies intersect with the weather, 'rain might extend into our arthritic joints, sun might literally colour our skin, and the chill of the wind might echo through the hidden hallways of our eardrums.'<sup>4</sup> Gill's photographs allow us to think through a transcorporeal imagination that moves between a fruit and a head: transiting between tropical monsoonal nature and its cultivated interiors/exterior, juxtaposing systems of knowledge that do not normally reside together. Thinking through the 'fruit-becoming-head',<sup>5</sup> how do we incorporate the monsoon into our cities, our architecture and ourselves?

## Monsoon fronts

The imperious monsoon results from a weather system of reversing winds—one wet, the other dry—moving between land and sea. With solar heating, contrasting terrestrial and oceanic temperatures as well as differential wind pressure occur, bringing on rain. The dry spell, however, is often marked by dust and, increasingly, pollutants in the atmosphere, resulting in a perennial and hazardous haze. While there are many monsoon systems located around the world, 'Monsoon Asia',<sup>6</sup> covering East India, South China and much of Southeast Asia, remains the most consequential. Countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Borneo, East Timor, the Philippines and western New Guinea feel its seasonal effects.<sup>7</sup> In fact, almost a quarter of the world's population<sup>8</sup> are subjected to this weather system of mild or severe drought and grand deluge.<sup>9</sup> As thunderstorms sweep through cities, suburbs and the countryside, rivers fill up and overflow; the smell of asphalt mingles with sweat; parched grass turns green, and dust becomes mud. A phenomenon that transforms landscapes and livelihoods, the word monsoon first appeared in English in the sixteenth century, likely derived from the Arabic word *mawsim* (meaning 'season').

The monsoon is ground, water, and air; it is a relation of things in its very core. It is about atmospheric conditions, sea temperatures, dust particles... It is about water in the air, water in the ground, ground in the air. It is an extraordinary planetary wide system that no one really understands and yet is experienced

very locally. It's what Timothy Morton calls a *hyperobject*—you can only know it in its local instantiations, it's about highly localised incidents and it phases in and out. The monsoon is an abstraction, except when you feel it on your head.<sup>10</sup>

*The monsoon is relational.* Architect-academic Lindsay Bremner beautifully sums up the entwined dimensionalities of the monsoon as a weather system endemic to the lived experiences, regions and spaces it influences. As a meteorological construction, it is a phenomenon driven by the mechanics of wind pressure and hot air. Yet the largest impact of the monsoon lies in its relationality—its planetary networks as well as its localised residues; particularly the way it envelops, the way the monsoon gets under one's skin. Its impact remains traceable in processes, spaces, cultures and physiologies. It is something in the background that is already enmeshed with that in the foreground. In this sense, just as it shapes us, the monsoon is co-produced by our actions in the world around us. For those of us who live in monsoonal regions and cities, the monsoon is not an abstract system. Its affects are influential and formative to who we are. Or as Bremner asks, what are the implications of shifting our knowledge of monsoons from an abstract concept to something that settles on the skin, that can be tasted, felt or sensed? In other words, can the monsoon be better understood through visual and sensorial attunements to its affects?

*The monsoon is cultural.* In Vietnam, the phrase *Sống chung với lũ*—'living with the floods'—is endemic to the Mekong Delta, fostering acceptance, adaptivity and diverse productive engagements in reaction to the inescapable annual monsoon floods.<sup>11</sup> The monsoon has shaped cities, influenced the migrations of people, recharged their lands and determined their fortunes. Rain is wished for, while its overabundance is guardedly accommodated. Myths, rituals and religions pursue the coming of rain as deities are worshipped across Asia to ensure a bountiful wet season, among them mass singing to appease the rain gods, the offering of gifts and flowers and the enactment of bodily penance are associated with the monsoon. The latter includes anthropological documentation of late nineteenth-century acts of hook-swinging, or *charak-puja*, a process of self-mutilation where a powerfully built young man would be lifted to 10–18 metres in the air, with hooks sewn into his back, or women dragging ploughs in the night across fields, stripped of their clothing, as invocation to the rain-gods.<sup>12</sup> Folk festivals like the *charak-puja*, link the coming of the wet season with prosperity, thus bestowing the monsoon a mythopoetic quality. In this way, the monsoon brings a measure of the extraordinary into everyday existence.

*The monsoon is mythical.* Throughout historical accounts of weather forecasting, speculative and mythical practices of inducing rain are embedded in a 'rich and complex cosmological system that included ancestors, ghosts and a variety of both helpful and dangerous spirits.'<sup>13</sup> These practices are taken as moral correctives to human activities and behaviours that would have resulted in the extremes of floods or droughts.<sup>14</sup> For example, the Kenyah Badeng rice farmers in Sarawak, East Malaysia rely on their observations of the natural, cultural and social phenomena and connect these patterns to a religious framework of deities, spirits and omen birds.<sup>15</sup> They believe that wrongful acts, such as trespassing in cemeteries, disrespecting the dead and mocking animals, contribute to violent thunderstorms and copious downpours.<sup>16</sup> To the same extent that spirituality has been woven into these speculative practices, ceremonial acts to worship and appease celestial beings also endure. In India, mass prayers for a good monsoon still draw thousands of devotees.<sup>17</sup> Overcoming cynicism and scepticism, ancient superstitions such as the marrying of frogs<sup>18</sup> continue to be performed to appease Indra, the Rain God.<sup>19</sup> Similarly in 2019, under the shadow of a regional haze and prolonged drought, thousands of Malaysian Muslims including the King and the Prime Minister gathered to pray in unison for rain (*solat istisqa*).<sup>20</sup>

*The monsoon is physiological.* The Kenyah Badeng predict weather through acute use of their senses. Weather patterns are intuited through bodies. The Badeng monsoon-bodies allow rice farmers to read cloud and wind patterns, sense humidity and temperature, and smell the changing winds.<sup>21</sup> Such tacit knowledge connects the body and its sensory capacities to the monsoon system. The Badeng people monitor personal symptoms such as fatigue, habitual changes and physical conditions as precursors to impending weather changes:<sup>22</sup> 'Turning inwards, changes in the internal states of human bodies may also indicate coming changes in the weather, with warm but rainy days expected when people become irritable, lethargic and suffer insomnia.'<sup>23</sup> In Chennai, leading up to the rainy season, people pray, fast and change their diets in anticipation of the monsoon's arrival. Responding with agility to 'weather, water and air,' altered eating habits 'prepare their bodies, [while] infrastructures are adapted, [and] city resources ... spent ...[on] the rains...'<sup>24</sup> Such bodily preparations are necessary to acclimatise and fortify oneself against the health perils brought about by rain including a prevalence of waterborne disease and illness, and humidity-induced skin issues.

*The monsoon is matter; the monsoon is milieu.* If these responsive monsoon-bodies reside primarily on the city periphery, how can the urban dweller recuperate their natural sensibilities to measure and



understand the monsoon? The relationship between the built environment and the monsoon is tenuous, sometimes antagonistic. In the tropical monsoon city, architecture must respond equally to the scorching heat and the persistent rain. Office towers are still regressive in accommodating the monsoon, while bungalows and resorts have aestheticised the climatic need for deep-pitched roofs and broad verandahs.

Being alienating and aestheticising, there is a phenomenon particular to buildings in the monsoonal tropics. The architectures of monsoon cities offer instances of architecture-as-matter, or transcorporeal architecture—rain-slivered plywood, insect gossamers on metal frames and sun-burnt brick. The monsoon can make architecture rugged and well-worn, or it can make architecture vulnerable and brittle. In both cases, architecture becomes region-specific: there is a need to consider details, materials, labour and skill that prevail in such milieux or localities. Such architecture acknowledges its making as inevitably entangled with 'the social and material practices ... and [that] the forces at work in the realisation of [architecture's] objects ...range from the conceptual, to the practical and technical, to the institutional.'<sup>25</sup>

Architecture that derives from—and resides in—amorphous matter evolves from within economies, events, processes and histories that continue to weather the monsoon. In shifting its emphasis towards actions and materiality, the architecture of monsoon cities may be rethought as 'a formless phenomenon.'<sup>26</sup>

The concept of formlessness coincides with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *milieu*, simply and complexly translated to being in the 'middle,' or as architectural historian Andrew Ballantyne elucidates, constituting an inseparable part of an 'environment.'<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari give the example of the tick as an organism that survives on the precondition that its environment (or *milieu*), which is a part of the tick's body, is sufficiently protected. The radical significance of the Deleuzian figuration of architecture-as-*milieux* is how the boundary as an idea fundamental to architectural thinking, and especially pervasive in urban design practice, becomes multiply populated and subsequently ambiguous. If '*milieux*—environments—are formless,'<sup>28</sup> this does not mean spaces lack shape but rather that form is only one aspect in a constellation of forces that defines a space. An architectural *milieu* is constructed through social and political dimensions and exists as a self-organising network encompassing 'geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particularities.'<sup>29</sup> In a monsoonal milieu, like the fasting bodies of Chennai or the intuiting bodies of the Badeng farmers, architecture must learn to adapt and to speculate. It needs to return to engaging directly with ground, water and air.

## Monsoonal milieu

Urban water systems are invisible until they malfunction. In June 2010, after two days of continuous rains, a freak flash flood swept through Orchard Road, Singapore's premier shopping precinct. Orchard Road had always been prone to flooding, exacerbated by its basin-like profile into which water from surrounding higher terrain flowed.<sup>30</sup> The June 2010 downpours measured a high volume of rainfall—101 millimetres, or the equivalent of 60 % of accumulated rainfall in the entire month, occurring within two hours.<sup>31</sup> The knee-to-waist-high deluge led to SGD 10 million in estimated damages.<sup>32</sup> Birkin bags, boxes of new iPhones, vials of expensive perfume, plastic fashion mannequins and branded merchandise were carried aloft from shop interiors by the surge of water streaming down in furious torrents, filling the ground floors and open semi-basements along Orchard Road. Photographs showed shopping centres marooned in moats of muddy water, their exterior pavements and semi-basements completely submerged.<sup>33</sup>

The flood lasted six hours. After the rain stopped, it took another three hours for the fetid water to be pumped away. During this time, the shop interiors went into accelerated decay—wooden floors became warped by damp, laminates peeled and curled, waterlogged carpets turned mouldy. An inquiry levelled blame at a maintenance fault in a choked underground drain culvert beneath Orchard Road. The culvert measured a massive cross section, large enough to accommodate a single-decker bus.<sup>34</sup> The size of the obstruction, caused by organic and inorganic waste including tree branches, leaf litter, paper cups, plastic bottles and aluminium cans, is hard to fathom. A waterlogged image of Singapore remains antithetical to the city's orderly reputation.

During the flood, common architectural features such as automatic sliding doors, staircases and escalators transformed into gushing waterways; basements and atria became temporary urban pools, albeit filled with putrid liquids. Amidst such confusion, a temporarily ludic atmosphere prevailed—passers-by helped themselves to the floating goods which drifted free from the boundaries of their shop owners, out into public space. Public space itself became temporarily undefined as property lines, street fronts and pavements were obscured in rank, muddy waters:

Like puddles, mud often signifies a type of failed engineering, but it also takes on a larger metaphorical dimension in architecture. As an aspect of primitive architecture, mud was once associated with a lack of cultivation—a type of degenerate architecture. As a viscous substance, it operates against modern concepts of circulation; it slows the city down, like slush.<sup>35</sup>

Mud, an after-effect of a monsoonal deluge, is what architectural historian David Gissen calls 'subnatural matter,' a hybrid, denigrated form of nature made by and through our practices, industries and built forms in our urban environments. Gissen writes that urban water in undesirable states—stagnant pools, muddy puddles, slow trickles, gushing leaks, urban flooding—are forms of displaced subnatural matter, representative of imminent disorder.<sup>36</sup> Dirty water signals a malfunctioning city, portraying ruination, destruction, disease, backwardness and vulnerability. Eighteenth-century architects Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Robert Adam both utilised forms of denigrated water to depict the downfall of civilisation: Piranesi depicted the ruination of the Roman town of Albano, where stagnant contaminated pools of water were found inside underground drainage works; Adam portrayed aqueducts and once-grand fountains of the Roman palatial city of Split repurposed as bath pans for farm animals, where pure drinking water became mud-filled washing water.<sup>37</sup> In time, cross-sectional drawings of underground water and sewerage infrastructure became synonymous with the image of the progressive city, serving as evidence of the efficient system which functioned to protect urban dwellers. Yet, as a departure from these celebrated underground urban networks whose orderly states were directly linked to the health of the city's operational interiors, Gissen points out that from the mid-twentieth century onwards, a more tenuous image of the modern street emerged of the 'undrainable city' where 'waters inundating the modern city rained from above and surged from below.'<sup>38</sup>

Burst water mains, urban flash floods and overflowing drains further emphasised 'the fragile nature of modern architecture as it interacted with the environment over time.'<sup>39</sup> The city's 'natural' reaction to the torrential monsoonal downpour is one of resistance. Is there another way to think about deluge that salvages imminent urban disaster? Writing about the 1955 Paris flood, Roland Barthes describes the displacing power of the urban flood, 'thereby refreshing the perception of the world by introducing into it unaccustomed and yet explicable points of view,' radically altering the perception of normative urban boundaries, practices and possibilities.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding urban floods being precursors of climate change, Barthes' narrative of the Parisian flood illustrates a climatic event that defines a momentary re-enchantment with the city. Such a narrative forces a new way of seeing, feeling and behaving which takes seriously the value of observation, personal responsibility, spontaneity and intuition, reinvigorating the importance of feeling one's way through the city:



... the rising waters not only selected and displaced certain objects, they upset the very coenesthesia of the landscape, ... that angular stability which so well prepares the shapes of property, all that was erased, extended from angle to plane; no more roads or riverbanks, no more directions; a level surface going nowhere, thereby suspending human becoming, detaching it from any right decision, from a utility of sites.<sup>41</sup>

In a similar register, cultural anthropologist Stephanie Kane suggests in her ficto-critical account of the Orchard Road flood that an ancient river once flowed under this highly altered and engineered terrain.<sup>42</sup> Kane traces the alluvial conditions of Orchard Road's 'marine-sediment' rich geology, piecing this fragment together with the historical premise of once-thriving orchards in an originally hilly terrain.<sup>43</sup> Kane's 'ghost river' exposes the susceptibility of Orchard Road's now dry, insulated, impervious surfaces to flooding risks. She writes that 'flash floods can assume the force and form of the lost river and challenge the existential premise that the geological deep is fixed in our past.'<sup>44</sup> Kane's reading of Orchard Road carries both the past and the future in its imagination. It provokes questions about how the city might act to reclaim its historical geology while also embracing its monsoonal milieu. Against fertile orchards laden with tropical fruit, overlooking a river flowing in a valley fed by monsoon rains, Kane's speculation juxtaposes several spatio-temporal milieux: monsoon rains, a ghost river, historical fruit orchards and the present consumerist landscape. This vision comes from a position of accommodating and living with the monsoon. It is a particularly challenging stance in an urban environment where enclosures and interiors turn inwards, and where architecture's function is to keep the weather elements firmly outside and apart from our spaces within.

## In the afternoon light

This essay closes with another work by the artist Simryn Gill, whose head-becoming-fruit photographs opened the chapter. *My Own Private Angkor* (2007–2009) is an elegiac tribute to the ravaging effects of the tropical monsoon on architecture (Figure 5).<sup>45</sup> Shot in Gill's natal seaside town of Port Dickson, located near the Strait of Malacca in Malaysia, the photographs are documents of a boom and bust cycle involving a housing estate which never fully materialised. In *My Own Private Angkor* #35, a piece of glass leans precariously against two neoclassical columns. The columns are bathed in velvety, late-afternoon light; the sunlight bends

and distorts the angle of the leaning glass. The tiled floor is strewn with crinkled leaves, adding to its perceived filth. In the background are slender trees, with their branches dangling down as well as growing upwards and diagonally. In time, this garden-turned-jungle will engulf the columns; perhaps they will shatter the glass. The glass is burnished with a milky patina inked in by damp air, rain and heat. *My Own Private Angkor* simulates portraits of time and weather fronted by a half-built environment; itself slowly becoming ruin, becoming jungle, eventually dematerialising much like the light which passes languidly through the glass.

Not unlike *A small town at the turn of the century*, these photographs are thought-images, but maybe here, they go a step further. They provide evidence of what a monsoonal milieu could become, or could otherwise be. There is beauty and poetry but also regret and despair. The monsoon can be devastating; it can take lives, and cause irreversible damage and decay. Deeply affected by climate change, the seasonal rains are now more and more erratic in timing and volume, while hazy dry weather is increasingly prevalent. Yet it is easy to forget these transient changes. Gill's photographs offer clues for remembering. They are attuned<sup>46</sup> to decipher the monsoon affectively, unravelling this weather system into its elemental forms of rain, light, heat and wind. The photographs also capture a monsoonal milieu: a place and a time with specific meanings, stories and ambitions, and where its subject, architecture—here, represented in pieces of milky glass or neoclassical columns in semi-ruin—is always held in precarious balance.

5 Simryn Gill, *My own private Angkor* #35, silver gelatin print, 2007–2009.







Monsoon Journal: Singapore  
Photographs by Ong Chan Hao





6/7 Left: Another afternoon of unexpected heavy rainfall. Caught unaware, pedestrians without umbrellas avoid being splashed by passing cars; a woman removes her shoes when the water reaches her ankles.



8/9 Right: The convenience store sells the much-needed umbrella, often purchased in the heat of a storm. Umbrellas are involuntarily amassed at home after many such thunderstorms. Some choose not to spend the money, finding instead a route with the least exposure to rain.



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10/11 Left: Some storms are fleeting. They stop quickly. A bus stop is a popular place to take cover but provides limited protection.

12/13 Right: To dry off his feet, a commuter puts up his legs on the seat in front of him.



14 Next page:  
A secret garden thrives in the concrete gaps of a monsoon drain.











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- 5 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 323. 'A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or the line of flight....'
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- 16 Ibid.
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- 44** *Ibid.*
- 45** Anders Kreuger, 'O, outside, show me your innermost!': Simryn Gill's *My own private Angkor*, 'Afterall — a journal of art, context and enquiry', 33 (2013): 88–97.
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