

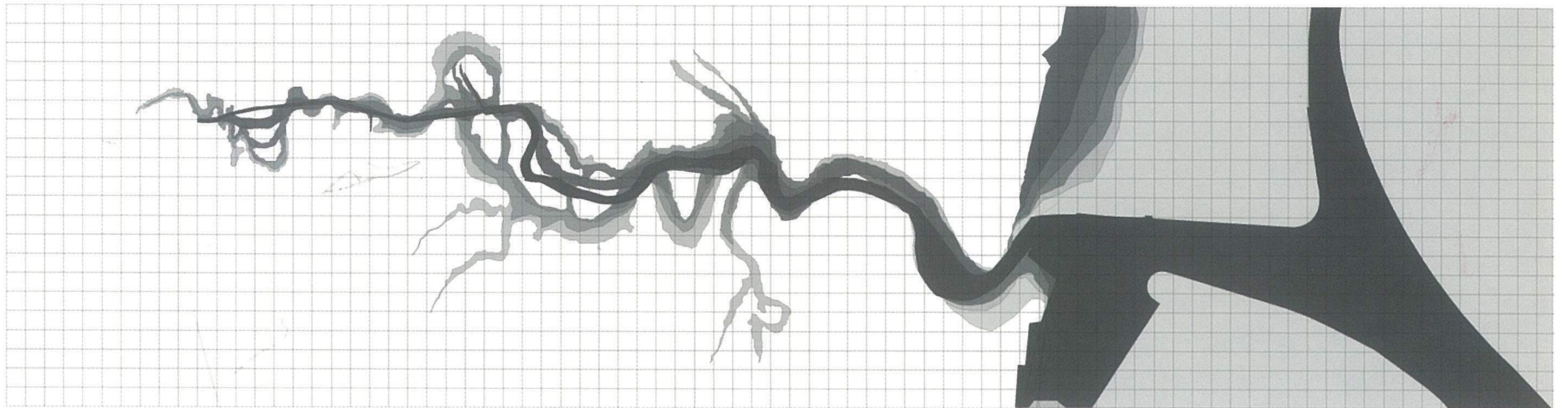
SITE  
SITUATION  
SPECTATOR

16 May -12 July 2009

**NUS** MUSEUM



# SITE SITUATION SPECTATOR



*Morphology of River Boundaries*  
Felicia Toh

digital print on paper

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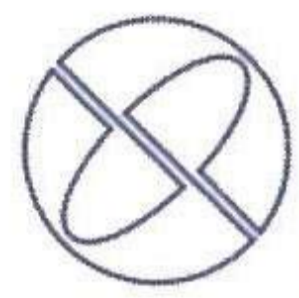
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## foreword

Ahmad Mashadi  
Head  
NUS Museum

Entering into the exhibition gallery, a visitor will encounter a seemingly non-descript tourist brochure inviting him or her for a tour of the bridges along the Singapore River. The images and information provided in the brochure are uncanny for their touristic feel – friendly colour-coded bites of perhaps well rehearsed historical facts and events. On second look, what is replicated by Kenneth Koh is a visual and linguistic structure that proposes officiousness, but conceived as a simile that made possible the introduction and reception of other facts, other events.

Here, the productiveness of the Singapore River as a site of investigation becomes apparent. The River offers itself as a monumental space upon which concepts of the collective are made palpable – as a visage of community or nation concretised through a range of affirming public and private gestures that produce and reproduce a mythic resonance combining civic and the capitalistic, personal contingency with communal imaginary. These heterotopic enclaves – private condominiums, public parks, museums, exclusive hotels, corporate offices, heritage markers – are simultaneously disjunctive and unifying to signify and accommodate declared democratic ideals, diverging concepts of self and capitalistic emancipation.

By his insistence of experience, Kenneth Koh's River is not to be read, but rather acted out and in doing so exposed to the multitude of individuations, not to correct conceptions of the past, but rather to widen its histories and significance. The contemporary import that conditions these regards is of critical importance. Sam Cho's and Lee Ling Wei's respective engagements with the competing and complimentary perspectives on the Singapore River, and originaries of public housing productively place the contemporary as sites of discursive significance. Felicia Toh's futurism, a hyper-rationalised pursuit of developmental aesthetics, point towards the contemporary as a capitalistic project of worlding Singapore and simulation of geographies. Given these instances, the various projects of these students should be seen as investigations into contemporary politics of space and their implications on our projections of the past and the future. As such too, these projects can also be productively read in relation to the Museum's current permanent exhibition featuring Singapore and Southeast Asian art, *Constructed Landscapes*, which attempts to locate and problematise transactions between urban change and contemporaneous concepts of self and community expressed through the mediatory lens of visual recording and recoding.

This exhibition, second in a series, is developed based on individual research undertaken by students for a module *Site Situation Spectator* developed by the University Scholars Programme (USP) and the School of Design and Environment (SDE). The programme is coordinated by Dr. Lilian Chee, SDE, developed to facilitate critical approaches to spaces, their contexts, significance, and modes of engagements. Individually the participating students are guided by their respective supervisors at SDE.

The NUS Museum congratulates participating students involved in the project: Sam Cho, Kenneth Koh, Lee Ling Wei and Felicia Toh. Working alongside these students is Nurul Huda Abdul Rashid, currently an MA candidate at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This exhibition provides Nurul her first curatorial undertaking, extending her past engagements with the Museum in writing projects.



The NUS Museum is grateful to the USP and the SDE for their continuing enthusiasm in developing programmes that open up exhibitionary possibilities. Our gratitude goes to A/P Peter Pang, Director of the USP, Prof. Heng Chye Kiang, Dean of the SDE, A/P Wong Yunn Chii, Head of the Department of Architecture and Dr. Lilian Chee. We also wish to thank the various supporters for the project – DP Architects, Zarch Collaboratives, FARM and others who have rendered direct or indirect assistance towards the realisation of the exhibition.



*Seven Bridges*  
Kenneth Koh Qibao  
digital print on light box



# foreword

Peter Pang

Director  
University Scholars Programme  
National University of Singapore

The *Site, Situation, Spectator* exhibition is in its second year running. This year, we are pleased again to showcase the work four Architecture+USP students have done under their USP Advanced Curriculum.

The mission of the University Scholars Programme (USP) is to offer the freedom to explore across disciplines, a wide range of extracurricular and overseas activities, and a community of exceptionally motivated and talented students. The USP Advanced Curriculum, in particular, gives students the opportunity to pursue their intellectual passion at an advanced level. Often, students engage in substantial, self-directed study. Always, they are encouraged to exercise initiative and creativity, and seek ways to create impactful learning outcomes.

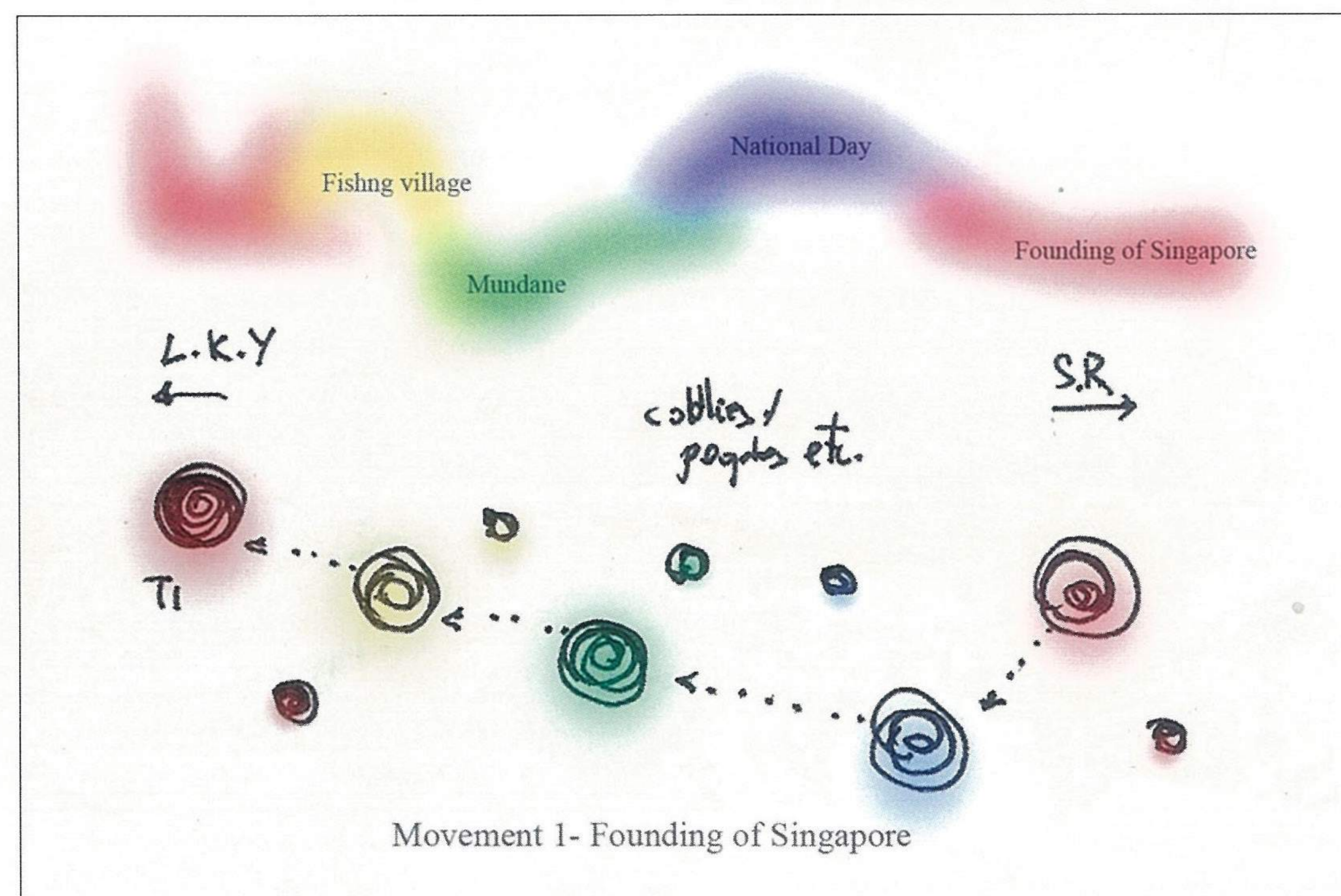
I congratulate Sam Cho, Kenneth Koh, Felicia Toh and Lee Ling Wei for demonstrating the innovation and impact envisaged of the USP Advanced Curriculum. Their passion is apparent in the exhibition—I know that some of these projects have been years in gestation—and I believe the learning experience has been deeply satisfying for them.

I am pleased to acknowledge Dr. Lilian Chee from the Department of Architecture for being such a strong faculty mentor to the students both this year and last year. Dr Chee has shown herself to be an outstanding educator who is committed to stretching students to achieve the most impactful learning outcomes. I am greatly impressed and inspired by her dedication to education. Erik L'Heureux and Patrick Janssen also put in a great deal of effort as academic supervisors.

I am also grateful to Dean Heng Chye Kiang of the NUS School of Design and Environment and Head Wong Yunn Chii of the Department of Architecture for their unstinting support, and Head Ahmad Mashadi, and curators Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Nurul Huda for their expert guidance. I believe this curriculum-exhibition project is not only an educational innovation, but also a success in collaboration among the NUS Department of Architecture, Museum and USP. I hope this collaboration can continue for years to come.

*Movement One : Visual Score*  
Sam Cho Chung Man

conceptual diagram





Wong Yunn Chii

Head

Department of Architecture  
National University of Singapore

Today's exhibition, *Site, Situation, Spectator*, is the second installation of creative and research works from our Department of Architecture under the USP. I use "creative" and "research" together to affirm our belief that these are qualities intimately connected to our design education and discourse.

In the enterprise of history-writing, we have moved from documentation to constructions to critical reviews and revisions. The story of the Singapore River, for that matter, is no exception. Its histories in official accounts, urban legends, popular media, etc. are mixed with snippets of astute observations, facile simplifications and gross misrepresentations. This is because as a "life-line" of Singapore, the Singapore River had entwined lives of many directly and otherwise - coolies, boat-men, triads, river authorities, boat-makers, stevedores, merchants, clerks, story-tellers, travelers, occasional tourists, etc. But they remain subalterns against the stage set of the river as picturesque elements of among many historical tableaux. And the fact that this exhibition happens today shows that there is "room for alternative voices," and even recovery of new ones - albeit from younger post-war generation, born also post-River-cleanup-period, for whom the river has receded away from a river of grime and production to a river of buzz and lifestyle consumption.

Of course, history is never ready made. For this reason, it should never be accepted as such. These works, as with future works - if the river (now, topographically as a life-line of our reservoir) continues to captivate our interests - will continually revise what we now proffer as new facts, renditions and interpretations. There lies the "creative" aspect of our enterprise. Historical writing is implicit in these proposals. And curiously like fiction, for it to remain "relevant" or "captivating," it will always need a creative frame with an ever-more robust scaffold of research.



*Sound Medium collection*  
Sam Cho Chung Man



# making history present

Lilian Chee

Assistant Professor

USP Coordinator and

Academic Supervisor for Architecture

... we have become unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time.<sup>1</sup>

History is not something one can simply appreciate. It remains abstract, academic and rarified until it is lived through, experienced, and more so, made available to be worked upon. Like a plant, history grows when the right conditions are able to accommodate it. In turn, one must lock horns with it, if possible, keeping it at a less than reverential distance. That said, history cannot be captured, or at least, it is not limited to the province of objects. It marks time and lineage, a past and a certain sense of rootedness. It is also prescient of a future, and can only be remembered when the historical subject – you, me, us – genuinely feel that we have a stake in it. Etymologically, to ‘re-member’ is to make something a part of the body.<sup>1</sup> Memory and history make sense only when they become visceral.

This is especially tough in a city like Singapore where two decades feels like a lifetime, and where historical traces in terms of terrain and built environment are ceaselessly manipulated, reconfigured, or erased. With this, history becomes a tenuous subject even if it is tirelessly evoked, and sometimes over-determined, as part of state, and increasingly capitalist, rhetoric. This history is slippery. It does not stick. It cannot be appropriated. It is intangible. Yet it is ironically ‘complete’ - a history which belongs to a nation.

One’s concept of history may be linked to one’s concept of space. Teleological, progressive and linear histories have been the stock narratives of imperialists and colonialists. So it is disturbing when postcolonial history too may be seen running along the same routes of time, substituting new facts, faces and figures from the margins, and from below, systematically rebuilding a new centre in the mold of the old. Using similar methods and frameworks but operating from an oppositional perspective, postcolonial history runs the risk of appearing only adversarial for the sake of ‘getting even’. ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’.<sup>2</sup> We need new tools for history. What is required may well be a fresh concept of time, which could make history an embodied experience again.

This is not a new argument. Let us rehearse similar perspectives following the theses’ of Walter Benjamin, and latterly, Gilles Deleuze. For Benjamin:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. ... In every era, the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin’s notion of history is radical. He sees history already in a state of advanced decay, suspended in ‘a moment of danger’, and thus, needs to be wrested away to avoid a degenerative status quo, which will only relinquish history to an abstract relic or useless commodity. In all this, Benjamin’s sense of time is not of the past but crucially grounded in the present moment. History must be brought into the present, and understood in a context relevant to us now, today. To do this, Benjamin offers an almost architectural solution:



The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). ... The same method applies, in essence, to the consideration of great things from the past – the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum – when, that is, a favourable prospect presents itself: the method of receiving the things into our space. We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, history is always only ever in the 'now'. Architecture as a spatial endeavour, unlike historical work, is privileged since multiple histories and multiple pasts, reside and are thickly condensed within any one given space. Through space, the past and the present are made contiguous, existing side-by-side. This idea is given another conceptual form by Deleuze through his notion of 'time-out-of-joint'.<sup>5</sup> Time, or for our purpose here, historical time, does not exist as neutral nor equal but surges as differently assembled 'compositions' and 'intensities' so we may say that a particular point in history may be more resonant or more 'present' for one person compared to the next. In this scheme, spaces may aid such 'compositions' by resounding with different intensities of historical time, depending on the configuration of their contexts, objects and traces. In a situation where time is 'out-of-joint', history is always wrested away from conformity since history becomes personal, internalised, bodily, visceral. Through space, academic history defined by national consensus, monumental figures and glorious victories may be investigated, contested and given different, cacophonous voices.

The four works in this exhibition set out to interrogate space, taking as their subjects the Singapore River and the sites of bygone kampongs (Malay for 'village'), long replaced by omnipresent public housing. Along the way, four architecture students discover history. Not the history of the textbooks but something much messier, risky and latent. Consequently these histories, as they exist always in the plural, needed to be politicised, or to borrow Benjamin's words, to be wrested away from the risk of conformity.

The devices and strategies used to convey such politics inevitably spring from present practices. In these projects, large scale photographs, monumental line drawings, glossy images, seductive models and absorbing soundscapes have been re-appropriated to communicate what is essentially visceral history, something lived, and re-membered. Techniques of representation are crucial here. The capacity of architectural representation through its conventional use of photographic images, line drawings and scale models are tested, stretched and in some cases, abandoned. Yet, this is not to say that the other techniques used here are alien to architecture. The principles of spatial imagination remain constant in these works as they do for the discipline. In all four projects, attention to the exigencies of site include a consideration for its physicality, that is, as it exists today. Thus, each site has been carefully staged to allow the past and the present to be placed side-by-side, using photographic images, drawings, texts, models and sounds.

Each project aims, in its own way, to render the complete and nostalgic notions of history questionable, if not obsolete. Each work strives to enable our entry into these sites and their histories from within our present terms of engagement. For this to happen, the interventions operate through minor but persistent fragments, or scraps of unrelenting material wrested



from the past – oral accounts, urban myths, anecdotes, miscellany – the detritus of history brought into the present. The intention is not about subversion per se. It is about understanding how other evidences may lead to narratives, which may have been unwittingly obscured by history itself. It also investigates whether chasing this evidence to its conclusion may make history stick. That is, a history which is bodily, and which could matter for the future, and the present.

LEFT:  
*Bukit Ban Kee, 2009*  
Lee Ling Wei

digital print on photographic paper  
photograph: Najeeb Rahmat

RIGHT:  
*Pulau Minyak, 2009*  
Lee Ling Wei

photograph: Najeeb Rahmat

digital print on photographic paper  
photograph: Najeeb Rahmat



- 1 Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, New York: Random House, 1984, p.91.
- 2 Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden (eds.) *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 53-55.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Harry Zohn (trans.) *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 246.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'The Collector' in Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaugh (trans.) *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 206.
- 5 John Rajchman. 'Constructions' in *Constructions*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998, pp. 1-9.



## The Ambiguous 'Alternative': a Method to Narrative *Others*

Nurul Huda Binte

Abdul Rashid

M.A Candidate

Department of Sociology

National University of Singapore

Ambiguity may be the clue: there is the material, and there I am intruding my private intent. I know the imminence of the world and experience with full sensuality; at the same time I am involved with the projection of myself as idea. Strong tensions are inevitable, pleasurable and disturbing. Is not the aesthetic optimum order with the tensions continuing?<sup>1</sup>

The bombardment of theories and ideas revolving globalisation, cosmopolitanism, modernity, and the post-structural onto our 'life world' have rendered our various world scapes volatile: edged out of its conventional mode as structured forms that dictate and direct the way we, as a community of selves, react and understand each of the entities. We have since been confronted by a surge of narratives originating from the worlds of the subaltern, the post-modern, and the everyday life, mediated through interactions that deconstruct the subject-object relationship - for there exists a diverse range of subjects and objects. Our narratives are thus no longer singular as we are continuously plunged into a dialogic space that rattles the foundation of what we believe to be 'official', the 'truth'. Mediated through a reading of our different scapes, we enter a dimension of the ambiguous as a necessary (alternative) perspective to *how* we can understand life through the many existing realities that span across time and space.

*Site, Situation, Spectator* is an exhibition that displays not merely content but primarily, a method to how we can begin to undertake a re-reading of our surroundings and the plural narratives within. 'Site' exists not just in its physical form but also as an embodiment of the intangible aspects of everyday life. It becomes mnemonic, as it possesses fragments of history and memory - a *lieu de mémoire*<sup>2</sup> that allows the existence of the past within the realm of today. It is the 'traditionalising instrument' that through its preservation sustains the existence of the past, which is often strategically positioned or remembered for specific purposes. This is embodied through landscapes, ruins, places, non-places, monuments, and urban architecture that are inscribed symbolic associations to fragments of the past. The concept of 'situation' ensues in encapsulating events, celebrations, incidents - documented or otherwise - and even the mundane, as part of what is termed by Cohen as "masquerade politics"<sup>3</sup> as every action, every situation, serves a function that champions the agenda of a particular group of people, bringing in the role of the spectator. Encompassing both the 'self' and 'other', the spectator includes the individual as well as communities of people who - whether they choose to or not - become part of the discourse, an audience. Each spectator, upon their entry or involvement with a site or situation, projects their own ideas about it. As a result, we are constantly re-reading and re-writing our relationship to that of the past, the stories, the myths, the politics that linger within these three entities, inadvertently becoming agents that facilitate a method of the 'alternative'.



## Brewing the 'Alternative': A Methodology

Narratives are everywhere. Every *thing* has a story. However, in order to acknowledge the existence of the narrative, the story has to firstly be sought out, and told. In this exhibition, we enter the space of four different storytellers, each a mouthpiece for different stories and perspectives that remain ambiguous within the realms of Singapore's history and memory. Three of these narratives are positioned within the 'site' of the Singapore River, the other spanned across different sites that narrate the 'situation' of the great fires in Singapore's urban history. The 'spectators' encompass a diverse people and range of media, including even the audience the moment they step into the inter-relational dynamics of the museum space.

Conventionally, our idea of the 'alternative' is one that is thought of as held in juxtaposition to an 'other', as a subversion, or as a dichotomy to the official, the formal, the State-owned. This is however, no longer a viable approach, as narratives do not exist as a duality. It is no longer one *or* the other, but one *or* the many others. Experiences of a singular event, entity, or moment in history can be multiplied manifold, sparking the existence of a multifarious range of stories, narratives. Water, for example, is no longer seen as merely an essential for living (drinking, agriculture), or as nature (in relation to man), but it was also once thought of as symbolic of conquest, discovery and freedom (travel, Colonisation), and in more contemporary times, disaster and death (tsunami). To merely engage in the process of subverting 'official' narratives would deem the content produced inadequate in representing the diverse narratives that exist. Instead, we are forced to engage in a more nuanced approach to the 'alternative'.

We have to firstly recognise the form of the 'official' and in doing so, enable us to demarcate the other forms that exist, but are not recognised as part of the 'official' discourse. We have to begin addressing the viability of Popular Culture, life histories, interviews, everyday objects and archives, recitations of 'feelings', and even the senses as potent and necessary materials in this quest to re-conceptualise our narratives. The lines between what is the 'objective' or the 'subjective' need to be reassessed, as we are no longer interested in operating alongside equations of what is 'reality' as narrated by bodies such as the State or institutionalised history and doctrines. Our relationship with narratives of history and memory must not exist as a dictation whereby we take on roles as the passive audience who merely consume – without a mental or emotional gatekeeper that sieves through what we consume – but it has to incorporate tensions that constantly require questioning and re-telling. It should never have a definite conclusion, or consensus, but should be suspended in a state of constant evolution. There is no one equation, hence, poetry matters. Being able to engage with poetic elements to how we read a site or situation allows us to recognise the different media that can be utilised for this 'alternative' methodology.



## Poetry Matters: Concepts for the 'Alternative'

Poetry resides within everything, even the banal. It requires the clever reconfiguration of materials that lends itself a voice. The telling of the 'alternative' does not need to remain regulated merely by textual documentations. This concept of the 'text' can now be embodied through different artistic media, weaving poetry into the way we relate to it. This exhibition achieves this by displaying a spectacle of not just the visual and sentient, but also that of imagination, allowing us a space to consider these 'alternative' faculties in our re-reading and re-understanding of the narratives.

Despite its position within an architectural dimension, this exhibition harnesses an interdisciplinary conceptual approach to its making. Upon entry into the exhibition space, the audience will be confronted with a form recognisable as an instrument of history and memory making, tourism. This is however quickly dispelled when we begin to recognise the subtle play to what constitutes our idea of stories about the Singapore River. This 'alternative' method engages upon the use of the mimetic faculty, one detailed by Taussig as:

...the nature that culture uses to create *second nature*, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.<sup>4</sup> (2005: xiii, *emphasis added*)

*The Seven Bridges* is a narrative that takes the form of a tourist brochure, highly mimetic of the 'official' document that narrates the history of the river. Instead, this exhibition employs the use of the mimetic faculty by offering us narratives to the Singapore River that have been dismissed as part of 'official' history- a "second nature" narrative. Mediating through stories and myths, we are offered picturesque accounts that bend the linearity of the River's history. Through this poetic concept of mimicry, *The Seven Bridges* cleverly replaces the mundane colonial discourse with vivid stories of crocodiles and gardens. We are thus forced to reconsider this fragment of history, not just with these mythic stories, but at times, with humour- one often absent in the 'official'.

Ensuing this concept of mimicry, we are confronted with the flaws in history. What makes up history? What is being remembered and what is thus forgotten? Our study of history and memory conventionally revolves around the remembering. We often forget about the forgetting.

Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory just as the writing of a historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain elements.<sup>5</sup>

In *Reconstructing the Fragments*, we are confronted with a display of the forgotten, reconfigured and embodied within an interplay of anecdotes and archival headlines, with staged scripts represented through photographs that not only symbolise the omission of these fragments in memory, but also as a mockery of our forgetting. As a result, the dynamics



of how we construct our historical narratives changes. The photographs and anecdotes, tells us about fragments of the undocumented in history, forcing us to reassess what we know as history, and possibly the hidden agendas to those which are forgotten.

The next narrative in the exhibition is a shift in media normally used for memory and history. *Sounds of my River* blinds us to visual accounts as it transports us along the stories about the river, as mediated through sounds. The sensory, or the sentient approach, is gaining attention in studies in relation to history and memory. Diverting away from the heavily textual, the senses have proven to become a medium that allows for the triggering of communal memory, one that is more personal, more mundane, and often deemed as trivial to formal accounts of what constitutes memory of a site or situation.

The polarity between the sensational and the mundane is also the dichotomy between the sensational and the sensory in which the latter is left unmarked, unvoiced and unattended to, as a banal element of the everyday.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Seremetakis isolates the difference between the 'sensational' and the 'sensory' as it is viewed and placed in relation to *how* history is being historicised. The 'sensational' is "eruptive" - depicted through events such as elections, performances, accidents, and disasters - whilst the 'sensory' is relegated to the "naturalised" structure of the everyday-experience "as a seamless continuum, an ongoing flow of ahistorical time."<sup>7</sup> This sound installation embodies just that - an ahistorical flow and experience of what makes up the different sounds across time and space, congregated via categories that defy the official discourse. The audience is thus forced to undertake the position of historian in re-mapping their understanding of what is history and memory, led only by sound, and their feeling and reception of it.

And perhaps, it is thus apt that we move from the beautifully orchestrated sensory experience, into that of the intangibly imagined. The final display, *Projections*, represents a stark departure from the past. Nostalgia, the forgotten, and the remembered all become unnecessary as we are faced with a futuristic vision of the Singapore River. Etched via the use of paintings and models, the audience is invited to imagine the impossible. If official history derives its power by controlling what is remembered as the past, can we break this mould, its power and authority by discarding it, by moving into the future? Perhaps. We then become our own historians, our own storytellers as we take control over how and what we narrate as part of our social script, our social 'realities'.

Our approach to this exhibition, this collective yet personal narrative, is thus one that is driven by an agenda to not merely deconstruct, but to also reconstruct and re-posit our role as individuals and communities as playing vital roles in scripting how we relate to entities of 'site', 'situation', and the 'spectator'. These entities are volatile and exist as forms that can be constantly transformed and retransformed to embody different meanings, different stories. This exhibition thus offers us various methods to 're-experiencing' and is testament to the potential of using various means of art, poetry, and concepts, in weaving discourses about otherwise often deemed 'sterile' narratives of history. All one requires is the appropriate method of thinking, and medium of representation. The rest, as they say, is history.

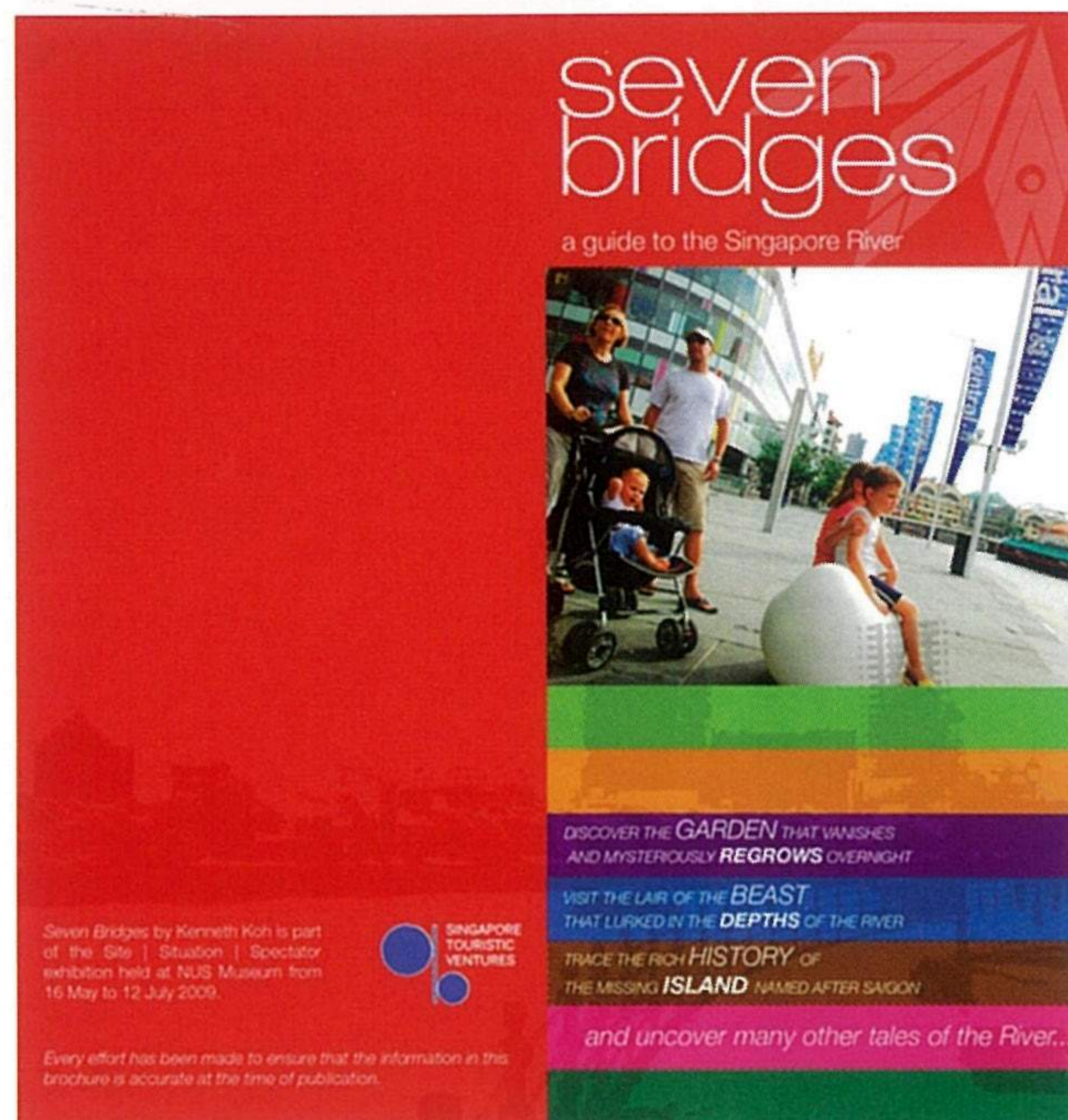




- 1 Aaron Siskind, quoted in Jonathan Williams, *Harry Callahan : Masters in Photography*, New York: Aperture, 2005.
- 2 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- 3 Abner Cohen, *Masquerade Politics: Explorations in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- 4 Micheal Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York: Routledge, 1993.
- 5 Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003, p.15.
- 6 Nadia Serementakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, p.19.
- 7 Ibid.



# THE SEVEN BRIDGES - A GUIDE TO THE SINGAPORE RIVER



LEFT:  
Kenneth Koh Qibao

LEFT:  
Map of Tour Trail  
Kenneth Koh Qibao

cover of tourist brochure



RIGHT:  
Elgin Bridge  
Kenneth Koh Qibao

page spread of tourist brochure

Tourism is a fascinating phenomenon: it is a distortional filter, which alters, exaggerates and censors the realities and myths of a site, presenting a caricatured impression of flattened dimensionality. As a result, an “official history” emerges, suppressing other tales and events that also took place. The Singapore River does not escape this process. The development of tours and touristic media over the years has crystallised a canon of must-see landmarks along the River, which are sites of importance in shaping Singapore’s history.

What then, constitutes *importance* in history?

*The Seven Bridges* is an investigation into the history of miscellany and unexpectedness, delving into subverted stories and information about the Singapore River. Taking the form of a tourist brochure that is to be inconspicuously inserted into the site of the Singapore River, *The Seven Bridges* challenges the assumptions that the spectator has of touristic media along with its symbols and language. This parodic brochure inherits the glossy aesthetics and hyperbolic voice that defines the anticipated experience of the commercial tour, easing the viewer into a set of expectations. While initially being led into what seems to be a typical touristic experience, the viewer soon realises that this tour is far from *ordinary*.

The tour takes the viewer to several bridges along the River, most of which are named after British officers. The names of these bridges reference their historical past in a strictly colonial framework, which ignores the multiple perspectives and histories embedded in the site - a historical account of the bridges in touristic material would simply constitute facts on the bridge’s British namesake, its date of completion and its designer or engineer.

Like these bridges, other celebrated sites and structures along the River like the Merlion and the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles are often physical expressions of glorified events in history. They are celebrated in the touristic experience to reify experience, giving these historical moments a narrative outline or a tangible visual shape,<sup>1</sup> which visitors can identify with. Standing along the River like badges of recognition to the masses of tourists, they become collectible “sights” which the tourist accrues like souvenirs<sup>2</sup> and quickly become a touristic



canon of sites.

A form of inversion takes place when quirky and sometimes ludicrous tales of miscellany are offered as an alternative to the monotony of these validated, official sites of tourism, taking the tourist (or the unsuspecting local) on an alternative account of the river's landmarks.

The tour is strung together with tales that challenge the 'official' perspective of the River: the multiple fables of how a sacred stone arrived on and eventually disappeared from a rocky promontory at the mouth of the Singapore River, the account of the incompetent engineer that built a bridge that was too low, the tale of the Guardian of the River, the nomadic Gardens of Peace, and more. The quasi-mythical yarns that are spun read like fiction, while based entirely on an alternative past that has never quite surfaced.

Many of the protagonists and objects that come into play in these inflated anecdotal tales become eccentric counterpoints to the characters that are commonly mentioned in the popular history of the River. We often hear of the dark-skinned coolie with muscles straining under the weight of rice sacks, the British men of authority that shaped the land around the River, the bright-eyed government officials who sought to clean the malodorous river. Instead, we are presented with the man who thought that he owned the Singapore River, the avid gardener who wanted to spread his message of "world peace" through his riverside installations, a traitor to his kingdom who was turned to stone, and wonder if there are more underlying stories and colourful personalities that belie the Singapore River.

Much like a river with many tributaries and meanders, history is never linear. We can always ask: where exactly does a river begin from? Smaller streams and rivulets skip over the land and join to form larger channels of water; these are the little histories that join to make a whole. It is the streams that have dug deeper tracks into the land that sustain and grow.

Perhaps it is possible then, to uncover the hidden streams of history that have lost their *raison d'être*, in the milieu of a capitalistic environment that has shaped the River, with the forces of tourism, into a single line that cuts across the land.

*Part of this project is also exhibited at The Arts House, Singapore.*

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- 1 Y. F. Tuan, 'The Significance of the Artifact', *The Geographical Review* 70, no. 4, (1980): pp.262-272.
  - 2 T. C. Chang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, 'The Rise of the Merlion' in Robbie B. H. Goh and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (eds.) *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2003, pp. 36-37.



# RECONSTRUCTING THE FRAGMENTS



Lee Ling Wei

My brother, stark naked from the bath with soap bubbles still clinging onto his skin, charged out of the billowing black smoke with us, and continued running in this state of affairs for the next five hundred meters till we reached a friend's house.<sup>1</sup>

My mother was a four-year-old girl when the kampong she was living in caught fire. While she fled the fire scene immediately with her six siblings, my four-month pregnant grandmother stayed back to gather some of the family's belongings. Luckily, the only other thing that my grandmother saved besides their personal identification documents was a basket of clothes, which came in really handy for my uncle. However, these were also the only worldly possessions they had to set up home in their new Housing Development Board (HDB) flat.

The personal account above from my mother reflects a similar predicament shared by many families living in Singapore between 1958-64. During this period, an estimated 42,600 people were displaced from their kampongs due to fires which razed various parts of Singapore.<sup>2</sup> These kampong fires caused much devastation on both the human and economic scale, and engendered the transformation of our urban landscape. Despite the significant impact of the kampong fires, they have seldom been wholly represented in historical accounts.

Similarly, there is scarce documentation on the urban transition from kampongs to modern public housing in our historical narratives, which are largely focused on the success story of the nation's urban reinvention – from a territory infested with overcrowded squatter settlements (the official term for kampongs) to a terrain of smart, modern, high-rise housing. The transition phase has been largely absent from this narrative due to the speed of development of the urban landscape. This rapid transformation of the landscape has, in many instances, resulted in the obliteration of all physical traces of former sites and events before they were properly documented. Thus, historical discourse has been able to capture and represent this period only with great difficulty.

LEFT:  
*Kampong Khoo Chye, 2009*  
Lee Lingwei

digital print on photographic paper  
photograph: Najeeb Rahmat

RIGHT:  
*Bukit Ho Swee, 2009*

digital print on photographic paper  
Photograph: Najeeb Rahmat



The sites of the kampong fires mapped out in *Reconstructing the Fragments* exemplify the above condition. After the fires, rapid development of low cost housing on the fire sites to re-house the displaced resulted in the erasure of all traces of the fires. This phenomena is illustrated by the Kampong Koo Chai (Chye) Fire in April 1958, the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire in February 1959, the Bukit Ban Kee Fire in March 1963, the Pulau Minyak Fire in November 1964, the Bukit Ho Swee Fire in May 1961 respectively. In these instances, new blocks of flats sprung up from the fire sites within a few months, removing every remnant of the kampongs scarred by fire.

*Reconstructing the Fragments* is thus an illusory play of image and context, site and situation; a re-deployment of events that seemingly belie the spectators' expectation of what constitutes the 'true' circumstances leading up to and following the kampong fires. The word fragment is used to describe historical sources that present "a contrary [to] the limits of scientific history and the scientific historian's search for truth."<sup>3</sup> These fragments are minute trajectories which embody the fractures and divisions that have been excluded from historical narratives. They take the form of anecdotes, folktales and personal narratives. *Fragment* also refers to the incomplete physical traces of the past, which still remain in the present.

The most tangible fragments that exist today of the kampong fires are the physical sites on which they occurred. Each of the photographs in the series is embedded with a "detail," which is the manifestation of a second set of fragments - the anecdote.<sup>4</sup> The "detail" serves to defamiliarize the image and unsettle the spectator. In doing so, the "detail" enables the photograph to "take the spectator outside its frame" and evokes "a kind of subtle beyond ... as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see."<sup>5</sup> It triggers in the spectator a whole imagination external to the content of the photograph, which is animated in the spectator's mind beyond the scene captured on film.

The discursive function of the "detail" is accentuated by another set of fragments - a collection of texts which are employed as part of the artwork to emphasize the contextual meaning of the photographs. The texts presented are facts extracted from various sources. With the insertion of these texts, the photographs are situated as part of a social discourse which enrich the photographic sequence.

*Reconstructing the Fragments*, then, presents lived experience as inspiration. It operates as alternative documentation of context-driven pasts; it provokes the audience, teasing almost, engaging the margins seemingly repressed from regimented truths of nation and memory.

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1 Interview with informant. Singapore, 5 February 2009.

2 Estimate is author's own. For further reference please see: 'Blaze Death Toll Up', *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1958, p.1; 'Three Hour Blaze Destroys Kampong Tiong Bahru: 12,000 Lose Homes', *The Straits Times*, February 14 1959, p.1; 'Premier Lee Assures Fire Victims: Homes For All of You Soon', *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1961, p.1; 'Huts of 3,000 Go Up in Flames', *The Straits Times*, 9 March 1963, p.1; 'Attap Colony in Kallang Basin Totally Wiped Out', *The Straits Times*, 5 November 1964, p.1.

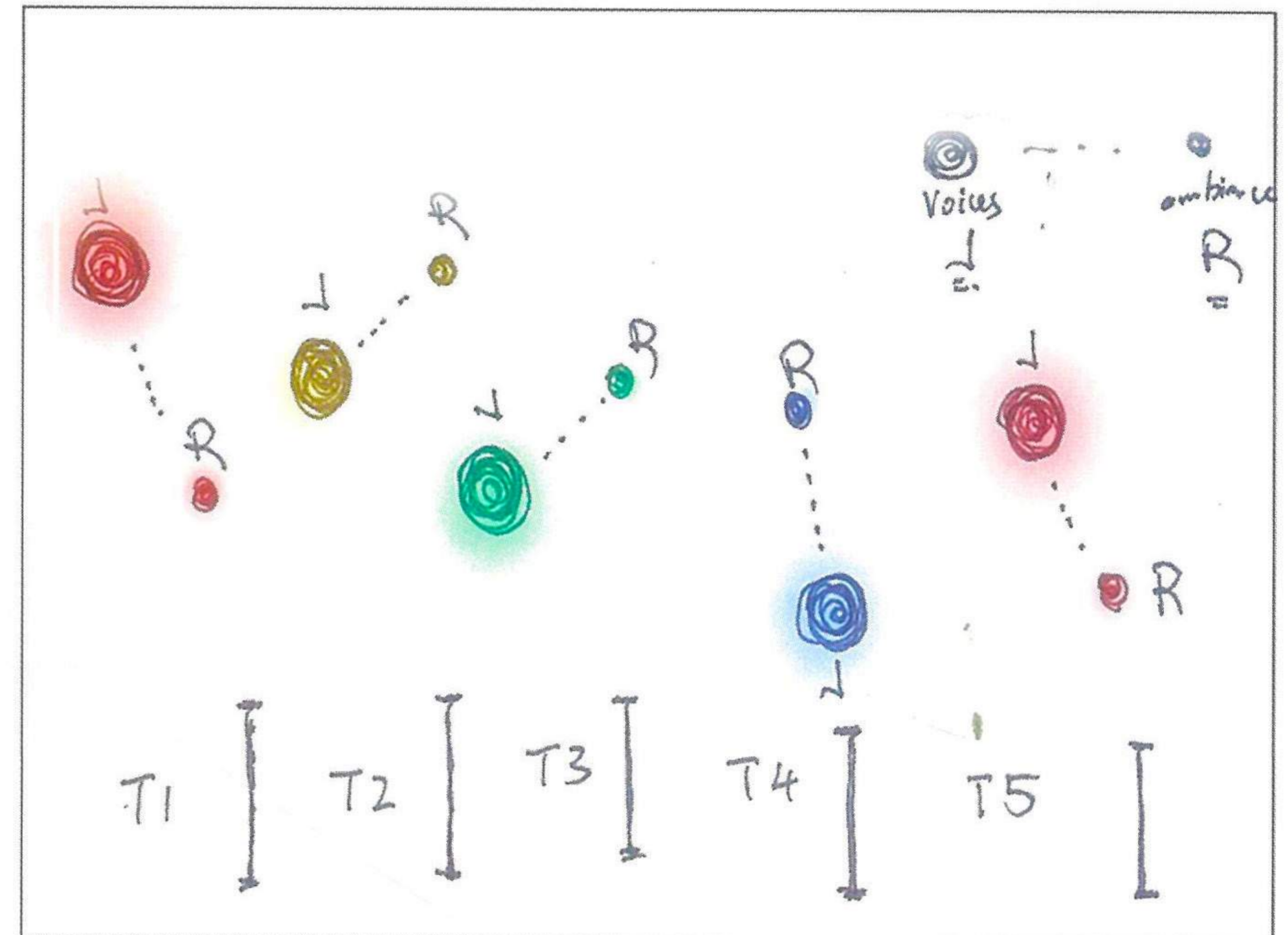
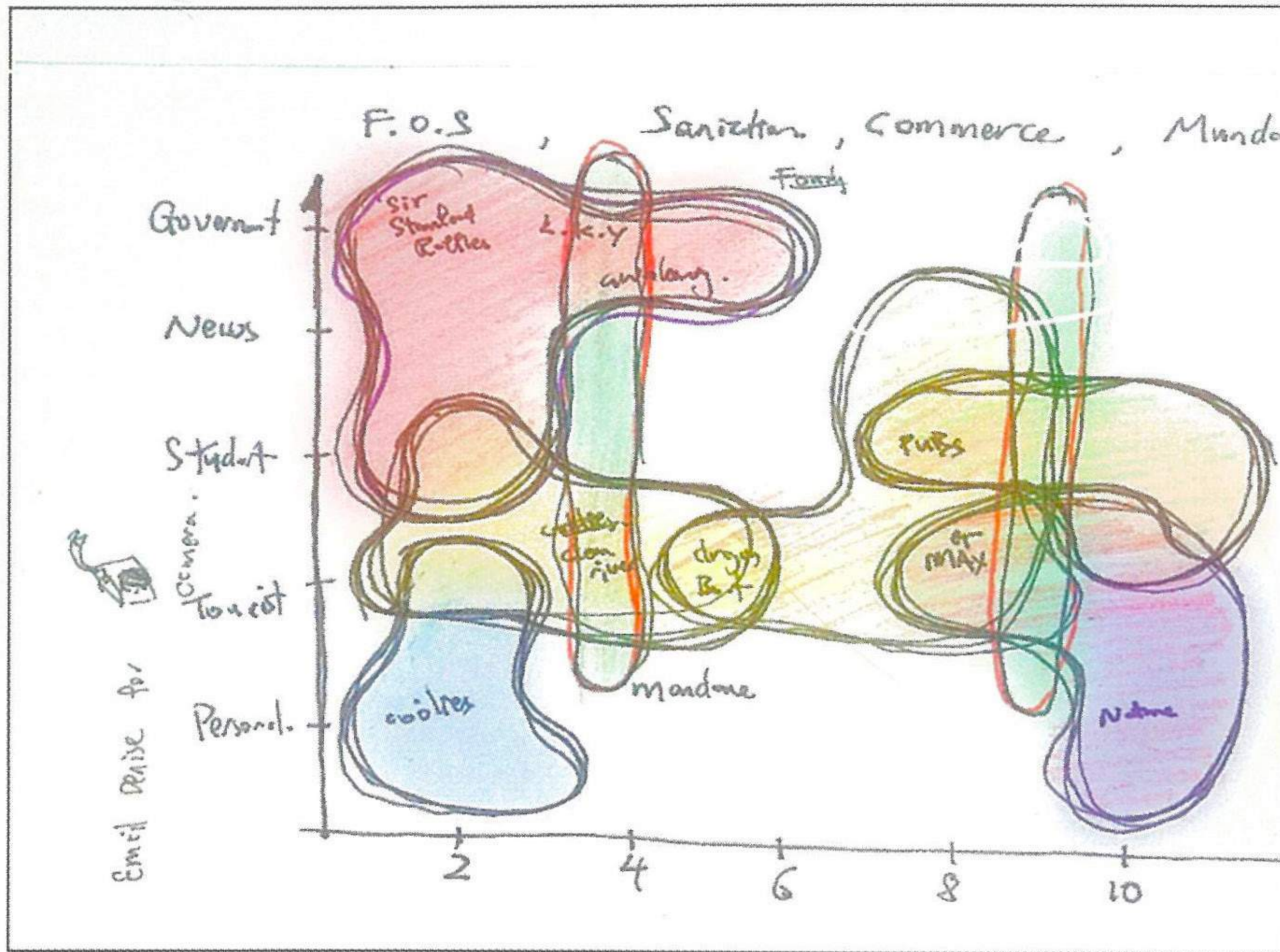
3 Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, p.39.

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hall and Wang, 1981, p. 42. Barthes defines the "detail" as the punctum, the presence of which "pricks" him and changes his reading of the photograph. The photograph is then marked in his eyes with a higher value.

5 *Ibid.*, p.59.



# SOUND OF MY RIVER



Sam Cho Chung Man

Sound is a medium with the potential of linking spaces, objects and events. Experiential and spatial in nature, the continuous sensation of sounds exists as a three dimensional expansion of an object into space, filling up the space with content and at the same time, giving a context back onto the object. In terms of meaning, sound is a 'flexible' medium, as the process of listening requires a constant reinterpretation of the actual meaning or representation, rendering the content subjective in nature in comparison to the media of texts, sculptures or paintings. This continuous process of listening and reinterpretation renders sound as personal and specific to the listener, building a more intimate experience.

Using the Museum as site, the sound installation, *Sound of My River*, is a reconstruction of the memory and history of the Singapore River presented through the medium of sound. The intention of the sound installation is to illustrate and present a diverse, multi-layered perspective of the Singapore River across different walks of life. Conceptually, the installation exists as an 'antidote' to formal or official history, which is often presented as a single, linear, unbiased and even logical view of the River, offering a multi-perspective and individualistic view. Returning the power and authority of reinterpretation of history back to the audience, the collection of sounds from online videos, live site recordings, re-enactment of situation and audio archive captures a diverse and wide variety of viewpoints, experience and narrations of the River. This 'bottom-up' approach to sound allows the story of the Singapore River to be retold according to the experiences of the individual, portraying a more holistic narration of the River. Although some of the sounds may not be obvious or meaningful to everyone, it may provoke and impact particular individuals who share a similar experience of the River. As the sound is played and transmitted through the gallery space, the sharing of experience from one individual to another creates a temporal intimate relationship between the audiences, the sound and the River.

LEFT:  
Working Sketch 1:  
Graphical Composition of Sound  
Sam Cho Chung Man

Conceptual Diagram

RIGHT:  
Working Sketch 2:  
Location of Speakers and Sound Track  
Sam Cho Chung Man

Conceptual Diagram



certain issue would emerge as the 'topic of discussion' between the five 'voices'; these issues are general concepts, progressions or ideas of the Singapore River, termed 'movements' in the duration of the piece. These movements range from commercialisation, sanitisation, founding of Singapore, etc, offering a guideline for the 'voices' to relate. At the same time, each movement's focus is brought out through the playing of ambient sound and arranged music. Within the movement, the 'voices' are arranged in a way to create dialogue or references which link people, events and places in a rather unusual and interesting manner. Partly because of the nature of sound and its potential to link completely random events and make it believable, the sound arrangement attempts to create moments of 'disbelief' and 'shock' so as to bring out unusual connection between objects, events or places- for instance linking coolies and pubs which both shares the same places in different times.

In conclusion, the sound installation, *Sound of My River*, offers an unorthodox presentation of the Singapore River, linking events, places, people and histories through arrangement and editing of categorised sound. It is an attempt to reject the singularity of history and embody the diversified identities of the river, and at the same time, giving individuals space to 'voice' out their points of view through reinterpretations offered through the medium of sound.



# PROJECTIONS: SINGAPORE RIVER



Felicia Toh

Conventional portrayals of the Singapore River today depict it as a mere tourist attraction, zoning the river into three overtly simplistic parts: Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, and Robertson Quay. The River of yesterday is often contrasted with the contemporary image of itself only in economic terms, recalling how entrepot trade has given way to a new surge of touristic sustenance. However, while all these may be true, the simplification of our discourse on the history of Singapore River has shorn off much of the knowledge, richness and complexity embedded in our national emblem. Precious knowledge of how the River was a body of water that connected pockets of land, weaved together fresh migrants of many ethnicities, and brought together nascent economic communities has been lost or forgotten.

The Singapore River has been significant in the genesis of our nation state, not only because of the function of its waters, but also because of its layered relationships with places and communities strung along its line. Multi-ethnic communities, which first migrated into Singapore, were classified by colonial powers and cast into separate groups, each assigned their commensurate plot of marsh-land adjacent to the Singapore River. The British themselves occupied the highest and driest point in the island - at Fort Canning, which is located north of the Singapore River - as a confirmation of their social privilege and power. Land around the Singapore River was a politically charged object; space was representative of power, the ability to demarcate boundaries was representative of power, and these boundaries, whether artificial or justifiable, have been replicated and embedded in our nation's consciousness up to this day.

The Singapore River today is not the river it used to be. Topographical complexity has been rigorously shorn off, while the fabric of urban order, precision and flatness is imposed on the river. The river has been continually tamed, reclaimed, and straightened out to address questions of economy and efficiency. Boundary lines were frequently redrawn, while activities along those boundaries were forcefully phased out or relocated in light of our nation's rapid development. What used to be a dynamic and convoluted river encompassing Pulau Saigon, an internal island, which snaked through and connected pockets of our island has been reduced and abstracted into a line - demarcating what is on its left and right. Pulau Saigon

*Wall: Projection of Singapore River*  
Felicia Toh

Digital print on paper



was the last of three internal islands to be reclaimed to the southern bank of the river. A luxurious riverfront condominium now sits squarely on the land it once occupied. All lighterage activities, farms, squatters and hawkers were rapidly dissolved in 1981, with the envisioning of a pristine and clutter-free recreational waterbody. Most recently, the river became a reservoir, a closed water body which avails itself as a reservoir to serve Singapore's dire need for potable water. In a society where nature is constantly edited and re-created to achieve the demands of economic growth and chronic cleanliness, the dividing line of artifice and reality, fantasy and fact is an ambiguous entity.

This however raises the question of man's authorial control over nature. From 1819 up to the present, the trends of change have been to purge, simplify and reduce the Singapore River to a third of its original length. What drives these changes? If the Singapore River continues to be mutely subjected to the desires of our society – while human's mastery and manipulation over nature is assumed to be absolute – what would be its fantastical yet logical eventuality? Thus, this project asks the theoretical question: what will the river be like, a hundred years into the future?

The drawing was never intended to be a window through which the world of tomorrow could be viewed but rather as a representation of a hypothetical physical environment made manifest simultaneously with its two-dimensional paper proxy. This is how things would look if only planners, governments and architects were magically able to discard the mental impedimenta of the previous age and embrace the newly developed technologies and their attendant attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Drawings have the power to articulate our visions and imaginations with palpable immediacy. Stripped of the 'mental impedimenta of the previous age', the Singapore River of the future is one that perfectly and brilliantly conforms to the attitudes and desires of modern society. It readily ingests the various technologies harvested to manipulate its boundaries. It is completely subservient to immaculate authorial control, with no reservations towards drastic change. It is a highly efficient tool, which placates society's desires for lucrative tourism and breathtaking scenic views. It provides generously for necessities of modern living: desirable river-fronting apartments in mixed use, vibrant and high-density neighbourhoods, and abundant reservoirs gushing with potable water supply. Water-scaped rooftop reservoirs and lucky, prosperous waterfall features shall surely become the familiar fetish of progress, made possible by our agreeable and malleable River. The fantastical manipulations of this river offer endless possibilities of re-experiencing the river. Could the river not dilate and fragment into multiple streams to allow every private apartment a coveted riverfront view? Could we not be fascinated by walking beneath an elevated river with the scenic views we used to enjoy now multiplied through space, allowing us to enjoy views from under the river? In the same vein and train of thought as planners who have pumped and regulated our river-reservoir with barrages, could not the flow of water be directed to rooftops so that nature is enjoyed in mid-air, divorced from the claims of gravity?

While these extrapolations may seem fantastical, the drawings graphically reveal the extent to which similar manipulations have already taken place, right under our very noses, yet virtually



without resistance or even our realisation. Through a series of drawings and display of models, this project traces the evolution of our body of water since 1819 and contrasts that with a projection of the River of the future. Viewing these ever-shifting, malleable boundaries, we are confronted with the question of whether the constructed river is an enticing product of our fantasies, or a disturbing artifice - a utopian ideal, or a dystopian farce.

*Future River*  
Felicia Toh  
digital print on paper



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1 Mike Webb, 'Boys at Heart' in Peter Cook (ed.) *Archigram*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p.2.



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Assistant Professor Patrick Janssen  
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Assistant Professor Erik G. L'Heureux  
Supervisor

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NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The **Lee Kong Chian Collection** consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the **South and Southeast Asian Collection** holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the **Ng Eng Teng Collection** is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the **Straits Chinese Collection**, is located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

## NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre  
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, National University of Singapore  
Singapore 119279  
Tel: (65) 6516 8817  
Website: [www.nus.edu.sg/museum](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum)  
Email: [museum@nus.edu.sg](mailto:museum@nus.edu.sg)

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