

Art in Public Space, Singapore

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From sculptures to murals and other artwork, public art plays a big role in bringing our common spaces to life. It shapes how people relate to one another in these spaces, and best of all, it is easily accessible for everyone to enjoy.

For many decades, public art in Singapore has brought joy and inspiration to our city and our society. Shaped by various social, cultural, historical and economic influences, public art helps us to understand our past, present and future. Often, it reflects a unique relationship with its location, and engages the public in meaningful reflection. Public art also contributes to well-designed spaces, helping to foster distinctive place identities, and serving as focal points for communities to gather.

For example, over a hundred years ago, the Singapore River was at the heart of Singapore's trade and commercial activities, and the area has since transformed into a vibrant corridor in our Central Business District. The distinctive *People of the River* sculpture series along the Singapore River depicts how people lived, worked and played in Singapore's early days, and serves as a lasting reminder of our history and our pioneers.

Art in Public Space is a celebration of the passion, dedication and creativity of many artists, developers, building owners, as well as the arts and community groups who have actively contributed to public art in our city, across different periods of Singapore's development. The book delves into the stories and considerations behind each featured artwork, and its relationship with the community and the area where it is sited. 222 public art pieces across Singapore, created over almost seven decades, are showcased in the book – representing only a fraction of the many works of public art that you can discover in our city.

I look forward to re-exploring the many public art pieces across Singapore, and I hope that this book inspires us to continue working together, to create even more memorable and endearing spaces in our city.

Desmond Lee
Minister for National Development

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.¹

– Henri Lefebvre

The encounters of art in public space influence social, cultural, political, and economic perceptions of the space in question.² 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.³ 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.’⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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’?⁷ 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?⁸

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.



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,’⁹ 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

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

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.’¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ Traditionally, architecture tends to employ materials as ‘mere finishes, exchangeable and superficial.’¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.’¹⁷ 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.’¹⁸ 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,’¹⁹ had its roots as icons in temples or civic buildings or, later on, as commemorative monuments in city squares.²⁰ 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.’²¹ 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 square²² 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.²³ 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’²⁴ inaugurated during Singapore’s founding decade. Its national narrative of survival demanded a mentality of expediency, and a deterministic attitude guaranteeing results.²⁵ 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.

ing, infrastructure and employment. Yet, in the ensuing years, the role of art continued to be exclusively weighed in terms of its contribution towards nation-building. At best, its impact was evaluated on an ability to get up close and personal with the nation’s ‘soul.’ It was seen to inspire, particularly tasked with the cultivation of a national sense of ‘graciousness.’²⁶ The subsequent global commodification of art in the 1980s, a trend not unique only to Singapore, inevitably flooded the city with international artist brand names that accompanied the ‘star architects’ who designed the spaces for which such recognisable sculptures were commissioned, and eventually located.²⁷ During this period of global acquisition of capital, art was aggressively bought, traded and displayed not just in art galleries but outside, in urban public spaces. This development further alienated the conception that a work of art – the object *and* its makings – was integral to the city and fundamental to the expression of the people who live in it: ‘In Singapore, where art does not have a strong social presence, it is crucial for the public to engage these concerns of ‘what’ and ‘how,’ and not just accept, ready-made, generic, corporate monuments.’²⁸ If art is regarded as mere ‘icing on the materialist cake’ and consequently perceived as having no enduring value, art could easily be dispensed with, no matter how much money is invested on it:

It is said now that there is room – time, space, resources – for creativity, to promote and display it. Now, it is said, we can afford to discover and inculcate soul, and aspire towards graciousness. These are not comforting declarations. For instance, to consign artistic activity to the domain of the soul is to run the risk of mystifying it, render it ineffable, and above all remove it from the social/historical/aesthetic spheres where meaning and purposes are constructed and significance is negotiated. And to designate artistic engagement as a means of attaining graciousness is to ignore, if not devalue and stifle its full potential and place in human consciousness and creative practice.²⁹

In the preceding passage, it was not sufficient that art had occasional representation in public life and the city, ‘wheeled onto stage for momentary distraction and then put away into storage in order to make way for more productive and more worthwhile work.’³⁰ The purpose was to give art authoritative significance in Singapore’s ‘general structure of values.’³¹ Sabapathy’s tactic, if one may call his strategic positioning of art in the public sphere that, served to decouple art from its perceived flimsiness and lack. He argued that the historical premise of Singapore’s own art lineage – exemplified in 1950s’ pioneer artists like Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Gerorgette Chen, and Lim Cheng Hoe – embedded evidence of nationalist spirit, grit and tenacity; qualities of the revered ‘rugged society.’³² Indeed, artistic creativity could be said to have reached one of its peaks at the very juncture of Singapore’s political and economic uncertainty; when it transitioned from colonial rule to self-government. The precondition of economic prosperity as a means towards cultural richness was unfounded. Thus, the

‘considerable suspicion’ by which art had been regarded in Singapore, needed to be addressed. Consequently, the enabling conditions for art to exist as ‘work that really matters’ was to be put in place.³³ The notion of art as ‘work’ in the fullest senses of the term – as labour, toil, output, process, vocation, performance, expression – is central to giving it value beyond either the decorative and/or the monetary.

The three points key to Sabapathy’s thesis on public sculpture in Singapore bear reiteration. First, art (and by extension, public sculpture) must be seen as *work* with historical, social and aesthetic bearings. Second, art is a *public* expression and artists are implicitly ‘public entities.’³⁴ Art must communicate ‘a common language, a common understanding, a community of values.’³⁵ Third, public sculpture occupies, claims and demarcates *space*. It exerts a sovereignty and aura over space. Sculpture transforms, or even enables, the space that holds it.³⁶ Sabapathy’s own conviction of public sculpture sometimes crosses into the space of architecture, as evidenced by his recollection of Borobudur, a cultural site which fuses the outcomes of carving stone and carving spaces:

... when we reached the second circular terrace which is five... six... seven... eight... level seven... because altogether [there] are nine levels... level seven... and I think I just sat there and wept for about 20 minutes. This was in 1972. [I] mean, it’s quite a range of human endeavor. And it is these creations and these manifestations that have continued to reinforce and refurbish, re-fertilize my commitment to being with art and in art.³⁷

The carving and hewing of stone leads us back to Han’s *20 Tonnes*; its sense of materiality, *gravitas*, and vitality. In many ways, the tectonic quality of public sculpture, when it is provocative, is always set in a dialectical relationship to the architecture or urban space that it engages. Art relates; it transforms; it places. Significantly, the understanding of sculpture as ‘place’ was articulated between 1966-1967 by a number of prominent American artists, critics and curators. Some observations of sculpture as space bear repeating here: sculpture was ‘a specific space in which the observer is thrust, namely it is a place’ (David Antin, critic); the ‘notion of sculpture as place was manifest’ (Dennis Oppenheim); a shift towards seeing art as relational and the artwork ‘became a preoccupation with place’ (Robert Smithson).³⁸ The art-architecture theorist and historian Jane Rendell argues that while these modern declarations shifted the tenor of public sculpture from fetishised ‘object’ on a pedestal, to ‘subject’ in a field of relations, the relationship between art and space today requires more varied engagement ranging from ‘actual occupation’ to ‘active participation,’ and demands ‘intellectual and perceptual engagement.’³⁹ These demands arise in large part, because of the complexities and dynamics of the city and its evolving public(s). What are the conditions of a city which allow for art to thrive?

THE URBAN IMPERATIVE

The city is not an object produced by a group in order to be bought or even used by others. The city is an environment formed by the interaction and the integration of different practices. It is maybe in this way that the city is truly a city.⁴⁰
– Raymond Ledrut

...public art needs to be seen as a function not of art, but of urbanism. It needs to be thought of in relation to, rather than insulated from the numerous functions, activities and imperatives that condition the fabric of city life.⁴¹
– Eric Gibson

In June 1988, an experimental artist collective who called themselves The Artists Village (TAV hereafter) took over a chicken farm in Lorong Gambas, a hamlet settlement or *kampong* at Ulu Sembawang on the northern outskirts of Singapore.⁴² Unable to afford space to make art in the city, the twelve-person alliance headed by the artist Tang Da Wu converted the 1.6 hectares of semi-rural territory into their studio space. The hamlet comprised a large compound holding eight blocks, rather quaintly named after local farm produce such as Durian Block, Cauliflower Block, Banana Block, Drive Way Gallery, Aubergine Block, Geese Block, Fish Block and Egg Block.⁴³ The artists’ occupation of the semi-rural site as a collective – coalescing the often separate spheres of ‘home’ and ‘work’ as well as eschewing the normative ideas of ‘private’ versus ‘public’ – challenged not only the home-work/private-public status quo but also changed the way art was produced.



For a start, TAV was a socially driven space, in both physical and artistic terms. It demanded that art practice, including the work of making that art, become visible, collaborative and discursive, at a time when most artists in Singapore practiced in relative isolation. The idea of home as a private and professionally unproductive space was contested by this unorthodox artist colony. Its ambivalence towards the public-private divide was laid bare when public exhibitions were held on the site, ‘For the occasion, TAV in its entirety (including Hazel’s and Da Wu’s domestic space and the adjoining farming precincts) was given over to publicness, throughout the day and for the duration of the exposition.’⁴⁴

Further, the collective were pragmatic rather than nostalgic about their adopted rural settings. ‘The carefree operations of

- 4 Paintings flanking Tang Da Wu and Hazel MacIntosh’s home in The Artists’ Village, 1989.
- 5 “Selling Handicap”, Performance by Tang Da Wuat in The Artists’ Village, 1989.



the members’ daily lives ranged from the very occupation of a mosquito and mud-filled site accessible only by a ‘road twisting like a gun-metal grey ribbon,’ to the absence of a table in the living room, and making do with a zinc outhouse toilet which provided an abstemious, yet conducive environment for their artistic production.⁴⁵ They used the extended spaces for ambitious projects (including a time-based exhibition *The Time Show, a 24-hour Continuous Performance Art Show*, running from New Year’s Eve [1989] to New Year’s Day [1990]),⁴⁶ to experiment with different materials and tools, otherwise impossible in an urban studio.

Yet, TAV’s occupation of the *kampong* raised key questions about space: the space to produce and exhibit art also generated the material substance for artistic work. Thus, site specificity in the case of TAV applied directly to the artistic space of production as well as to the space(s) of engagement which generated the artwork. TAV’s history was itself firmly predicated around the dilemma of space. Its exodus to the pastoral fringes conversely critiqued the city as an assumed cultural and creative centre. TAV’s move further brought into focus the lucrative monetisation of urban space, and with that, the inevitable eviction, and loss of, communities otherwise thriving in the urban core.

By making art at the city’s outskirts, TAV politicised both the space of art-making and the rural-urban dichotomy. In their contestation of ‘home,’ the architectural historian Melany Sun-Min Park argues that although TAV had isolated itself from the city core, it challenged the constitution of productive labour. Could art be productive? Could the urban periphery be bountiful? For one, TAV consciously mirrored the self-sufficiency of agrarian communities in its retention of a commercial nursery and tropical fish ponds which produced enough for life in the commune.⁴⁷ For another, it created a diversified space which supported artists whose livelihoods lay outside a formalised economy – only five persons worked as full-time artists in the village while the rest had jobs outside and utilised the studios at Lorong Gambas only after-office hours or in the weekend.⁴⁸ The productivity of the city has serious implications for its creative life as theorist Elizabeth Grierson remarks,

... if the creative quotient of cities is cast as a product of the economy, and cities operate as economic hubs driven by market forces impacted by the fluid movement of capital and power on a global scale, then where does the relevance of artists and other creative workers lie in the local sphere? Is there room for aesthetic practices to intervene in dominant discourses and situate a transformative voice?⁴⁹

The Artists Village at Ulu Sembawang was, one may argue, a truly public space. In historicising TAV’s artistic trajectory, we may begin to map the relationship of a politicised art practice to the transformation of Singapore’s built environment. The creation of public space, through art – as was evident in the studios at Lorong Gambas which might be said was almost utopian in its conception and practice – should energise a space for discursive debate between people, opening up spaces to think and argue on a wide range of sociopolitical and cultural issues as these unfold-

ed in the urban realm. Through TAV’s history, art was evidently invested in urban struggle.

Indeed, the art critic and historian Rosalyn Deutsche articulates the problematics of art-making in the built environment as comparable to the politics faced by architecture, urban planning and urban design.⁵⁰ If art creates meanings, forms and new uses in the city, Deutsche challenges its capacity to question the city as an object alienated from its social construction; a city increasingly instrumentalised for its productive function. The spatial order of the city, she argues, is organised and given meaning by society, in all its shapes and forms. As such, the city is a social product which is inherently messy, diverse and contradictory in its parts. However, when it is evaluated from the ‘ideological alibis’ of functionality and beauty, the socialised city becomes objectified.⁵¹ It is fetishised as independent from, and exclusive of, the social forces which give it life and meaning. The city is detached from its histories and struggles; it is removed from its occupants and their practices.

Situating art within critical urban discourse, Deutsche’s scholarship highlights the inextricable yet largely unattended relationship between the ‘critical aesthetic issues’ discussed of the art object and the ‘critical urban problems’ marking its site.⁵² In the late 1980s, neoliberal and capitalist investment in New York City transformed urban texture in the name of public use or public good. Through its intimate relationship with the built environment, public art was appropriated to legitimise indiscriminate redevelopment, which in turn, resulted in rising property and land prices, loss of home ownership, and ultimately, mass eviction. Referencing the controversial removal of artist Richard Serra’s public sculpture *Tilted Arc* in 1989 from Manhattan’s Foley Federal Plaza, Deutsche observes how art criticism of the artwork missed the opportunities to question ‘the conditions of production of New York’s urban space.’⁵³ In effect, the removal of *Tilted Arc* was coincident with the push for a new genre of public art whose ‘usefulness’ supported the onslaught of spaces gained through successive urban redevelopment and gentrification exercises.⁵⁴ In this context, public art operated as an appendix to architecture and urban space; its function was to lend coherence and public usefulness to the space it found itself wedded to.

The conflation of ‘art’ with ‘public,’ Deutsche argues, results in an overburdened ‘figure of universal accessibility’⁵⁵ wherein it is assumed that the aesthetics of art and reciprocally, the architecture it engages, are self-evidently inclusive, open to encounter and, universally relational to its public(s). Unlike the art audience, ‘the public,’ Deutsche argues, does not and cannot exist, prior to such debates.⁵⁶ This politicised form of ‘public art’ – art which catalyses debate amongst citizenry – is actually rare although it seems, from the amount of literature produced about such works, that this form of public art is the only type which exists, and is worth writing about. Does *all* public art have to be politicised in order to be of value? Does this responsibility of making public art ‘speak’ lie only with the artwork, the artist, and the commissioning bodies? This essay began with the premise of a triad – art, the city and its public(s). My question is: what

do we, the public, do with art in our midst?

For one thing, as Rendell points out, the audience must do more than consume the artwork. If sculpture is ‘off the pedestal in relation to the viewer,’ “repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place”,⁵⁷ then, it is not just the impact of the artistic work in relation to the urban site but also the agents and modes of encounter – the readiness of the audience encountering the work, to dialogue with it. Indeed what Sabapathy and Deutsche have separately argued is that art and the city it engages are both outcomes of processes; they are both – individually and together – works-in-progress to be occupied, contemplated and challenged. To assume that an artwork is an object which will ‘complete’ a part of the city is to see both these spaces (if we take sculpture to be an urban agent) as immobile in their agencies and possibilities.

The art critic and historian Miwon Kwon argues that assumptions of public art being ‘site-specific’ and that critically conscious artmaking leads to artwork with ‘public relevance’ and ‘democratic sociopolitical ambitions’ are misplaced.⁵⁸ This is because the understanding of site specificity has changed depending on the way public art was defined in relation to the spaces it engaged and, in relation to its public(s). These evolving definitions which bind art, the city, and its public(s) are worth revisiting. There are many parallels that may be drawn between how the triad of art/the city/the public is currently being framed in Singapore, albeit without the benefit of such clear distinctions. The Singapore ‘public art’ situation remains in flux and, with exceptions, is not adequately recognised in relation to architecture and urbanism, apart from being aesthetic visual supplements. Art is still largely extraneous to the integrity of the building or the urban space. Indeed, the practices of architecture and art remain resolutely two autonomous fields which intersect mostly only through their formal vocabularies. In rethinking this impasse, the American account of site specificity and public art may offer ways of moving beyond this formalistic account.

Charting the trajectory of public art in the American context over 35 years starting from the 1960s, Kwon points out that there were three distinct models of ‘site-specificity.’ The first approach was ‘art-in-public-places,’ taking place in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, and featuring mostly monumental, abstract ‘signature pieces from internationally established male artists’ mostly exhibited in open public spaces for example, parks, civic centres, entrances to state buildings, university campuses, railway terminals and airports.⁵⁹ This first phase juxtaposed signature art with architecture and public space.

The second model, ‘art-as-public-spaces’, dominated the period between the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, and was distinguished by the shift towards creating a direct formal link between the artwork and the physical conditions of the site so as to make the work more ‘accessible,’ and by extension, ‘socially responsible, that is, more public.’⁶⁰ The public art in this second model was judged by its enhancing aesthetic and functional potentials to behave as public space, where commissioning bodies emphasised that artworks needed to fulfill ‘spatial integration and harmonious design.’⁶¹ This model coincided with the demise of

Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. There was also in this phase, as Deutsche pointed out, the conflation of ‘social good’ with space-related ‘problem solving’ and the artwork’s perceived utility.⁶²

The third perspective ‘art-in-the-public-interest’ came into being in the mid-1980s. In contrast to the second assimilative model, the third approach to public art was participatory and collaborative. It sought to include an identification with the ‘community’ and the ‘public.’ Instead of design integration expected in the second model, the third phase demanded social integration. There was the new commitment towards thinking of art as accruing meaning through its sustained relationship with the site, which was, in turn, no longer just construed as physical space but conceptualised as a social entity borne of its communities of people. However, given the conflicted nature of both these entities – who, where and what constituted a community and a public – the outcomes of what might accurately, and ethically, represent the identities of the said ‘community’ and ‘public’ proved to be susceptible to contestation and controversy.⁶³

Yet what the third model reached for was the inclusion of a third term in the formation of public art – the recognition of a ‘public’ as having agency over the art to be inserted into places which counted as open, accessible, and as such, public. The public, as Kwon eloquently states, took on multiple and simultaneous roles in this process – as ‘viewer/spectator, audience, public, and referential subject.’⁶⁴ In many of the community-based site-specific art projects, the community, or the public, were included in the labour of producing the work, with the participants investing their time and energy. Coincident with the arguments made by Deutsche and Sabapathy, Kwon also contends that ‘it seems crucial to note the need to consider the representative function of labour within the context of community-based art practice.’⁶⁵ Additionally, this sense of ‘work’ or ‘labour’ was not to be confused with a capitalist form of labour-wage exchange; artistic labour is ‘unalienated collective labour’ operating outside of capitalism’s remits.⁶⁶ What forms of public might fully engage this unalienated process of spatial-artistic making, occupying and intervening?

PUBLIC AESTHETICS

Real art has the capacity to make us nervous.⁶⁷
-- Susan Sontag

It is not the public experience of space but rather public debate that becomes the work of art.⁶⁸
-- Michael North

The public is an elusive entity. Its definitions shift according to the contexts in which they are demanded, with each definition tending to give this entity some form, which for all intents and purposes, are often couched with reference to space – public space, public realm, public sphere, public arena, public domain, public locale. It is as if space, which can be more tangible and precise, can galvanise ‘the public’ into being, and thereafter, become the evidence or trace of its existence. The anthropologists

Martha Radice and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier lay out three modalities of ‘the public’ which correlate with spatial relations. The first is the public as a pattern of concrete social relations between strangers. These relations derive from public space but are not necessarily coincident with such spaces, ‘in that private or hidden spaces can sometimes host public modes of relation, and public spaces can be appropriated for private purposes.’⁶⁹ The second is the public as a more dispersed and slow-forming sociopolitical collective wherein private individuals use public space to discuss and influence matters of mutual concern. Finally, the third is the public as audience. Here is where art addressing an audience in public space simultaneously also creates, constitutes and ‘activates’ its publics explicitly through their public mode of address.⁷⁰ These three notions of the public – as ‘spatialized realm, discursive sphere and addressed audience’ – more or less describe the constitution of ‘the public’ which is at the same time non-universal, and socially divergent.⁷¹

The art historian and critic Grant K. Kester conversely argues that the public is a ‘metaphysical dimension’ sustained by a group who are physically proximate, like-minded, and of the ‘same property-owning class’ whose limits are ‘never fully tested.’⁷² As such, the public is ‘yet an unrealized ideal, limited for now to a select few.’⁷³ This notion of the public is further enacted within the realms of the city – a space, which for all intents and purposes, galvanises common effort – through modes of governance and urban legislation – to create an urbane and ideally, civil society, deriving from ‘the Latin *civitas*, which refers to both a political subject – the citizen – and a form of collective settlement – the city.’⁷⁴ The city is also the realm of property and ownership. The ability to traverse through private and semi-private boundaries installed by property rights, creates within the city, a network of spaces with various degrees of access and limitations. The city, as a formal realisation of capital investment, demands that the ‘private’ self of the market, and the ‘public’ self of civil society⁷⁵ encounter and negotiate each other at every turn.

Kester suggests that the aesthetics that arises out of this encounter should ultimately align with a ‘cosmopolitan openness to difference,’ and that the art that works with the notion of the public as articulated above, enables us to ‘learn to approach the world as such from a less instrumentalizing and self-interested perspective,’⁷⁶ leaning instead towards other forms of alterity for which we may not yet have the capacity to describe, or to think through. In other words, the aesthetic of art in the public realm – which is not necessarily the same as ‘public art’ – is ‘a necessary counterpoint to the market system; its role is to literally instantiate the kind of ‘public’ that would be able to resist the pressure toward possessive individualism exerted by capitalism.’⁷⁷

The public, rather than a readymade audience or consumers of the market, are in this sense, ‘potential awaiting activation: a form of latent agency currently thwarted by the self-interest inculcated by the market.’⁷⁸ At the same time and contradictorily, the public is also fleshy and actual, a ‘non-metaphysical mode of authority that depends on the experientially specific interaction of bodies in space and the contingency of human deliberation.’⁷⁹ Thus, the public is a somatic dimension involving sensing and

thinking bodies with varying modes of subjectivities and agency. It is this complex, contradictory (abstract and actual) and evolving notion of the public which confounds its own construction of spaces, and by extension, the art which is ostensibly made for it.

Yet, the urban public has been, for the longest while, the site of the city’s creative energy. The resultant public aesthetic emerges from the city spaces; from its citizenry’s sociocultural leanings and practices. It may be embedded into everyday routines, or be visually arresting, and also, as recent events in Asia have demonstrated, become deeply politicised. This third outcome resonates with the idea of a public coming together to influence the decisions of mutual concern. ‘How should any collective making be viewed where it may have been produced by a citizen-as-artist, or how should any artistic creations by artist-as-citizens be considered?’⁸⁰ As the curator/academic Pei-yi Lu and culture worker/art archivist Phoebe Wong have commented, the Sunflower Movement in Taipei and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, which unfolded over the spring and fall seasons of 2014 respectively, were identifiable with the cities they occupied and aligned through the conscious application and overt visibility of specific motifs and objects which have since become the means by which these events are known. Both socially-engaged activist movements used the city as opportunistic space to stage large-scale creative expressions.

These expressions – some intentionally made in the name of art, and others defining creative ways to re-occupy the city and consequently, these visuals being co-opted as artistic – were used to foment alternative political imaginations. The visual politics of both movements were significant.⁸¹ Distinct imageability is a necessity given the movement’s viral proliferation through social media. Collective making in the streets – whether through creative occupation of a public space or by alternative representation through written declarations, drawings and paintings – resulted in ‘objects of resistance’ but also manifested in, and further realised an aesthetic force affiliated with the sociopolitical positioning of its citizen protestors.⁸²

In Taipei, students who occupied the Parliament building constructed a barrier by stacking chairs to prevent the police from entering the building. This makeshift installation was subsequently called *The Hill of Chairs*. Its recurring imagery came to stand for the aesthetics of the ground-up, student-led Sunflower Movement. Scholars have pointed out that *The Hill of Chairs* embeds the intensity, emotion, and texture of a publicly activated construction, ‘...it is a manifestation of the successful mobilisation of the politics, of the masses (i.e. the people), of the technical know-how, and of emotions. It reflects the complexity of labour relations and bodily experiences that exist between people, movement, and material.’⁸³ The symbolism of *The Hill of Chairs* relied on how its towering physical form – an accidental public sculpture – was successfully deployed. It redrew the boundaries, thresholds and limits of the Parliament building in relation to Taipei’s citizenry and gestured towards participative, deliberative democracy.

Similarly, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong produced amongst others, a large quilt made out of torn fragments of um-

brellas collected from the Admiralty site and stitched together by students of the Academy of Visual Arts at the Hong Kong Baptist University. The quilt was hung across two footbridges which led from a transit station to the government headquarters at Harcourt Road. Acting as canopy, icon and artistic statement of peaceful resistance, the quilt manifested one of the manifold variations of the umbrella, which shifted easily between a common, functional object and symbolic, affective capital. The quilt was positioned close to another piece of collective public art called the Lennon Wall, Hong Kong. The Lennon Wall gathered thousands of post-it notes holding personal messages, hopes, dreams, desires, complaints, demands and pleas. Placed *en masse*, the collective scale of the individually minute post-it notes became overwhelming in its voices, details and diversity. It was perhaps the most strident articulation of the eroded dichotomy between citizen-as-artist and artist-as-citizen, as well as a complete rejection of a single monumental gesture as adequately speaking for ‘the public.’ The diffusion of protest grounds on three sites across the city – Admiralty, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay – spoke of the citizens’ preference for more intimate, personalised and de-centred actions. Lu and Wong highlight that there was also an archival impulse of these ephemeral events. The artist-citizen vacillated between urban activist and urban archivist to enable documentary modes of ‘counter-amnesia’ after it was made clear that the movement would not succeed.⁸⁴

While the cases in Taipei and Hong Kong are atypical of spontaneous public expression found in the majority of Asian cities, the role of public, community-initiated, site-specific art in these instances are unsolicited. They remain utopian in their ambitions, and the labour to produce the work is unalienated. The questions – who owns the city, who makes it, who has rights to it – are simultaneously performed, transformed, acted upon and questioned in these spontaneous ‘art/movements.’ ‘Is belonging primarily associated with ownership, property ownership in particular, and how is this related to having power? Or does possession mean belonging to a social structure, an idea?’⁸⁵ In asking these questions, the geographer Doreen Massey reframes the question of belonging as developing an affinity with place. ‘Belonging’ changes from a capitalist definition associated with passive ‘ownership’ into a social idea of ‘finding’ one’s place, or ‘fitting’ into place. The latter necessitates agency, participation and action taking place between people and their cities. This question is particularly important for a city where citizens, migrants, people of all classes and ethnicities congregate. This is a city that approximates a socialised construct, where diverse positions and opinions can be openly and collectively contested, debated and configured.

However, the involvement of the public in the outcomes of space or art does not automatically imply socialisation. The metaphor of ‘public-as-sculpture’ as the literary and cultural theorist and historian Michael North points out, evolved from the notion of ‘sculpture-as-object.’⁸⁶ The latter was practiced widely in Europe, England and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century peaking just before the First World War, with scores of commemorative statues erected. After 1914, ‘the

emphasis shifted from statuary to great empty urban spaces in which massed crowds were to provide the aesthetic impact. Government was, therefore, several decades ahead of the avant-garde in discovering that the audience could be given the role once assigned to sculpture.’⁸⁷ The power of public-as-sculpture draws from the energy and thrill of the spectacle, and particularly of being able to utilise spectacular visibility as evidence of a majority’s acquiescence and approval. It would not be inaccurate to say that the recent East Asian art movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong used, and successfully galvanised support, with the very same strategies.

The power geometries working along the triangulation of art-/the city/its public(s) remains deeply ambiguous and volatile. It is perhaps this ambiguity which preserves the power of art to enact difference and to empower change in the public sphere. ‘Art needs to maintain its position of coming “from the outside”,’ argues the architect-artist Barbara Holub, ‘yet the artist and the urban practitioner know that no territory – neither physical nor metaphorical – can be gained from mere opposition alone.’⁸⁸ Art cannot do its critical work in, and with, public space if it is completely externalised, whether by opposition, disruption, or ornamentation.

For Holub who is one part of the artistic urbanism group *transparadiso*, the idea is to bring art into the urban sphere before either art or the urban space is objectified and fixed. In other words, she advocates the implementation of ‘artistic urbanism interventions in a process-oriented, long-term urban planning practice on an equal level of importance with, and in addition to, conventional planning strategies.’⁸⁹ This requires a reconsideration of the roles of architect, planner and artist such that the hierarchies of decision-making according to disciplines are undone, and do not rest solely on economic interests. Instead, the decisions could be made on the premise of allowing some ‘unplanned’ spaces that can tolerate spontaneous exchange, encounter, difference, conflicts, and frictions. Yet, the disjuncture between art and architecture lie in their differing attitudes towards functionality. In a 1971 article titled ‘Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition,’ the architect Peter Eisenmann attempts a definition of conceptual architecture following the parameters of conceptual art. Nevertheless, Eisenmann was particularly clear that the distinction between architecture and art lay in the former’s responsibility towards functionalism. Through its affiliation with the presence of the formalised object (of various scales ranging from city, to block, building, room, and detail), and the object’s functional capacity, architecture distinguished itself as an autonomous practice. Architecture subsequently removed itself from non-utilitarian practices, including art. The conclusion that Eisenmann made was that conceptual architecture was inconceivable ‘without the concept of pragmatic and functional objects, otherwise it is not an architectural conception.’⁹⁰

In the intervening decades however, art has entered into architecture’s territory, and appropriated its ‘methods, scopes, practices, and objects.’⁹¹ Through engaging site specificity, using architectural forms and aesthetics, inhabitable scale, and



anticipating user patterns, art has become more ambiguous and ambitious in its scope and boundaries. The question is whether architecture, the city and its spaces, can work through, and with, art which is generated from architecture and from the city, to render a desired public into existence.

CONCLUSION

Constituting a public for public art clearly requires a great deal of effort... Public art often looks like more trouble than it is worth. But I worry that abdicating from attempts to create better public art implies giving up on whatever commitment we feel to find better ways to live together.⁹²
-- Peter Schoppert

[Art] is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address, and not because of its accessibility or volume of viewers.⁹³
-- Patricia C. Phillips

Consequential to the ASEAN Sculpture Symposium in 1981, five sculptures were commissioned by the respective ASEAN member countries for exhibition at Singapore’s Fort Canning Park the following year.⁹⁴ The sculptures gained importance as a

6 Detail of the 5-metre tall sculpture *Fredesvinda*, installed as part of the original sculpture collection for the ASEAN Sculpture Garden at Fort Canning Park, 1982.



series, analogous to how each member nation stood in solidarity. These artworks incarnated the ASEAN member nation’s influence and potential within the nascent political realm of South-east Asia. The sculptures by Ariffin Mohammed Ismail/ Anthony Lau (Malaysia), Ng Eng Teng (Singapore), Napoleon Veloso Abueva (The Philippines), But Muchtar (Indonesia) and Vichai Sithiratr (Thailand) were as much abstract as they were nationalistic. Governmentality, citizenry and culture weighed heavily on them; their *gravitas* accentuated as proxies of power.

The evacuation of British imperial power left Singapore’s historic peak at Fort Canning Hill (previously Government Hill)⁹⁵ with the colonial remainders of forts and gates. Such colonial remnants are scattered here and there, and in contemporary usage, they function not unlike innocuous follies in the park. They are temporary sites for shelter from the rain and heat, or on occasion, used to commemorate an event, serving as a backdrop for a wedding photograph, or the frequent subject of an architectural student’s measured drawing assignment.

In contrast to these colonial remains, the ASEAN sculptures did not merely indicate new markers in the landscape. At approximately 5-metres high, each sculpture reached towards the scale of architecture; they aspired towards being monuments. The sculptures had the potential to redefine the spatial, tempo-

ral and symbolic boundaries associated with Fort Canning’s colonial past. In their presence, an emergent regional geopolitics was juxtaposed against the stable colonial frame of the hill and its verdant park. In this instance, through art, regional history was inserted into colonial history; the narrative space of the hill was to be imaginatively transformed and rewritten.⁹⁶

Th ASEAN sculptures, though abstract in form, were unabashedly representational in their collective significance. Imperial in size but not in mission, and aspiring towards the equilibrium valued by nation-states; the organisation of ASEAN itself was/is subject to, and created by, the very same power of representation. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson highlights three institutions that facilitated the rise of the nation-state: the census, the map and the museum.⁹⁷ These institutions do not originate in the nation-state but in their antithesis, the colonial states that preceded them.⁹⁸ The institutions mattered because they could represent a polity, whether it was the rising nation-state or its decrepit colonial forebear. In its postcolonial milieu, public sculpture, especially that of such scale and symbolism as the ASEAN ones, more than satisfy a similar criterion of representation.

The manifestation of ASEAN through its art aligns with Anderson’s argument that ‘political museumizing’ was openly practised by postcolonial states.⁹⁹ Through art, the ASEAN members sought to consolidate the formalised image of nationhood with the dissemination of local tradition. In tandem with the musueumising of nation and the rise of tourism, there was also a sense that these efforts were best served through the ‘monumental archaeology’¹⁰⁰ of the city and its architecture. As a result, several key culturally-focused projects in the ASEAN capital cities were equally imageable by the artworks embedded into the fabric of their architecture. At the Muzium Negara (1963) and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (1962) buildings in Kuala Lumpur; the Cultural Centre of Philippines (1969) in Manila, and the Monumen Nasional or Monas (1976) at the Medan Merdeka in Jakarta – which became the epicentre of important buildings including the Merdeka Palace and the National Museum of Indonesia – sculpture, carvings, 3-D relief panels and murals defined, or were developed in tandem with, architectural aesthetics. In each of these examples, art, craft, artistry and architecture merged.

Yet, in the intervening years, the tenor of art in public space as well as its audiences have shifted dramatically. The proliferation of social, locative and mobile media technologies question the public as an institutionalised entity sanctioned by state or society. The public of the ASEAN sculptures implied a citizen of the organisation’s member nation. Today, this public has become so multiple and varied in its constitution such that the direct address to an intended but abstract public entity seems increasingly irrelevant. Yet, this is not to say that the public today is unknowable. In fact what mobile and social media technologies have produced instead are more specific kinds of publics with particular affinities and voices. The public today is highly differentiated and embodied even as technology seems to have made the need for space and the city much more transient and ephemeral.¹⁰¹



These technologies revive the notion of public as tribally constituted – a collective of acquaintances, friends and groups with communal and common groundings. The intersection of mobile media, their tribes and public space has resulted in hybrid subject-space-media configurations which question the distinct separation between public and private spaces and agencies. Vacillating between urban and electronic spaces, these tribal publics are shaped by their shared social boundaries. They delineate what the media theorist Larissa Hjorth calls ‘intimate publics.’¹⁰² Through social and mobile media, a public, even if it is more phantasmic in location, gains positionality, personalisation, affiliation, and voice. Yet, as Hjorth argues, this notion of public is much more significant than a statistical ‘network’ of people. This ‘social public’ or what I have described as ‘tribal’ is borne from affective means – its members share emotional, social and civic horizons.¹⁰³ Thus, civic responses which stand for a collective society are immediately also interpersonal responses. What is public becomes personal because there is always something at stake for someone in the crowd, ‘The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens.’¹⁰⁴

These technological shifts have ultimately demanded a rethinking of how a public is formed, as well as the space that is to be given to it. In other words, the public has again become a conceptual entity – something to be conceived and made – rather than what is already there. If the public is a conceptual entity, and if the public is central to art made for public space – generative of the artistic content and issues – then the artworks’ durational relevance must be considered. As the art critic and curator Patricia Philips argues, public art must ‘rely on its flexibility, its adaptability to be both responsive and timely, to be both specific and temporary.’¹⁰⁵ The question of time in publicly-located art today challenges the assumed permanence of artwork such as the ASEAN sculptures on Fort Canning Hill.

No doubt influenced by global changes, and notwithstanding the restrictions posed by conservatism, over-regulation, and a use-value accounting system, art in Singapore’s public space is nonetheless evolving to meet its maturing and diverse publics. Ephemeral modes of engaging public space and the city, particularly through social media and mobile communication devices, have at the same time, given individuals and groups the tools and opportunities to occupy, appropriate, experience and socially reconstruct the city in more personalised and spontaneous ways. Two major city-wide annual art festivals – the i Light Singapore (commissioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority) and the Singapore Night Festival (commissioned by the National Heritage Board) – are evidence of state-endorsed shifts in emphases from the cult of the autonomous art object towards publicly-sited art as catalyst for city branding experience and event.¹⁰⁶ In deploying illumination, the i Light Singapore and the Singapore Night Festival inevitably defamiliarise aspects of the city and its architecture. The flexibility of these artworks mean that they can creatively engage the more permanent aspects of the city such as its buildings and infrastructure: ‘In looking at the built environment more comprehensively than usual – up, down, and



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- 7 *Ordinary Things*, Guo Yixiu, 2015.
- 8 OH! Open House outside Mr and Mrs Tan’s home.
- 9 *S.S NIMBY*, Randy Chan, Fiona Tan and Zenas Deng, 2015.

around – its multiple shapes, textures, furnishings, and infrastructural components entered the visual field.¹⁰⁷ These time-based art festivals inevitably introduce an atmosphere of the ‘nocturnal carnivalesque’ by bringing into view a geography and urban order that extends beyond the regulated night experiences of shopping, dining and entertaining.¹⁰⁸

Art has also made available alternative narratives of the nation-city-state. The OH! Open House, an independent art organisation established in 2009, curates art walks and experiences focused on domestic spaces and occupancies in Singapore.¹⁰⁹ The artwork is a collaborative outcome between the curator, the artist and the resident of the artwork’s site. In these tours, the domestic everyday gains an uncanny extraordinariness. The art walk experiences attempt to mediate the idea of collective memory with that of the personal and the intimate. At times, the artworks attempt to challenge or subvert this collective memory with contradictory and competing narratives.

Significantly, the role of public is twofold in the OH! Open House programme – the public takes on the roles of spectator and producer of the artworks.¹¹⁰ The public spectator is, problematically or not, a voyeur, since for the duration of the art walk, private domestic spaces are open to public scrutiny. Yet, for the OH! Open House programme, the passive consumption

of art is turned on its head. The intersection of public art tours with private domestic territory questions not only the status of art authorship but also what is public or private, who gets to look and interpret, and how much is knowable under such fleeting circumstances. Tour participants become acutely aware of their uncertain status as spectators/outsideers/voyeurs.¹¹¹ Contrasting the scale and budget available for art commissions in the city, the OH! artworks – located in public housing flats (at Potong Pasir, Holland Village and Marine Parade estates) and private houses (at Joo Chiat, Tiong Bahru, Niven Road and Emerald Hill heritage neighbourhoods) – create an alternative, albeit socially constructed, urban sphere. Responding to an ‘intimate public’ with common affinities and alliances, the OH! Open House programme also thrives on populism. It is accessible.

The art critic Cher Krause Knight argues that populism in art is not to be confused with art that is agreeable with an entire population.¹¹² Populist public art is defined by its ‘immersive, experiential environments...[with] enveloping settings to traverse through,’ by its ability to engage active participation rather than ‘passive viewership’ and that these works are frequently public-private ventures.¹¹³ Krause Knight cites the public art administrator Jerry Allen who asked whether an audience who are ‘substantially fewer than everybody’ might be acceptable ‘without

- 10 *HOP in the Heart of Play*, Lai Wei Min and Phoebe Zoe Ho, 2016.
- 11 *Don't ask me where I came from*, Ivan David Ng, 2017.
- 12 *Golden Staircase*, Priyageetha Dia, 2017.

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destroying the public character of the art,' and concluded that each artwork should ideally find its own 'new public' rather than assume a large and generalised entity.¹¹⁴ The public, and as such, the audiences of art in public space, are never monolithic, 'art is most truly public when it sincerely extends emotional and intellectual access to its viewers.'¹¹⁵

In March 2017, a bare concrete staircase on the 20th storey of a public housing block in the Balestier estate became the subject of various debates on vandalism, beauty, private/public, ethics, and the limits of art and architecture.¹¹⁶ The said infrastructure – eight steps of it – was covered in 400 sheets of 21-karat tissue-thin removable gold foil by a then third year fine arts student, Priyageetha Dia. The initially anonymous installation, which was also only visible to users of the staircase, sparked controversy as questions, opinions, declarations and comments began to take off after a Facebook comment forced the artist to reveal her hand.¹¹⁷ A week later, Dia, armed with a pail of soapy water and a hard brush, scrubbed off the gold leaf coverings. Her thorough exfoliation dislodged years of stubborn dirt embedded in the eight steps. She left behind eight gleaming concrete steps, and a 3x3 square inch piece of gold foil on the right hand corner of the lowest step as a memento.

Dia's intervention is significant in many ways. For one thing, the choice of material, gold foil, is surprising on the cold, grey and unloved concrete steps. Goldsmithing is in the artist's family history. Thus, the gold foil held personal and cultural meanings as much as its shine spoke of an alien aesthetics against the nondescript modernist architecture of the housing block. The steps, treated in the most utilitarian of ways, once clad in gold, took on precious object-like status that gave this interstitial public space, and all other similar interstitial public spaces in Dia's housing block, an aura of the extraordinary. Their shape and geometry, their details of construction, the spaces they connected (and disconnected), their users and uses, all came under scrutiny. For another thing, the installation's scale, location and audience, contested the understanding of art in public space, which in Singapore tends to mean that the work must be in plain sight, and must 'engage' the wider public. Dia's 'golden staircase' – the name publicly adhered itself to the work – addressed a specific public (the occupants of her block), and created an emotional and intellectual site of engagement through its material, locational intimacy, its provenance and making.

Through the golden staircase, Dia's personal story intersected with stories of others living in the same block, and those beyond her estate. The publicly-sited staircase, more than a mode of circulation, is a space that is paradoxically private for the occupants of a housing block. It is where people come to cry, talk, smoke, ventilate. It is a social space, produced through occupation and need, much the same way as this artwork was also a social production. Dia's golden staircase was a transient gift which reinvigorated an architecture borne from ambitions of sociality and egalitarianism. Art in public space works when it makes people upset, happy, confused, angry, disappointed. It has done its job when it finds an audience who care.

12



Endnotes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleanor Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (London: Blackwell, 1996), 129.
- 2 Martin Zebracki and Joni M. Palmer, *Public Art Encounters, Art Space Identity* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 5.
- 3 Carter Curtis, 'Toward an Understanding of Sculpture as Public Art,' *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* 14 (2010): 161–3; Martin Zebracki, 'Beyond Public Artopia: Public Art as Perceived by Its Publics,' *GeoJournal* 78, no. 2 (2013): 303–4.
- 4 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 187.
- 5 Another related term worth considering is 'New Genre Public Art,' an art historical term coined by American social practice artist Suzanne Lacy. Although Lacy acknowledges this concept related to public art, which refers to "sculpture and installations sited in public places," she also argues that 'New Genre Public Art' is distinct. 'New Genre Public Art' cares about engaging the public, using 'both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.' Its artists attack boundaries and 'draw on ideas from vanguard forms,' then 'add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today.' For more on "New Genre Public Art," see 'Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,' Lacy's introduction to her landmark, edited volume on the subject: Suzanne Lacy, 'Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,' in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 19–47.

6 Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis, 'Introduction,' in *The Practice of Public Art*, ed. Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–3; Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3–11.

7 Elizabeth M. Grierson, *Transformations: Art and the City* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 1.

8 Peter Schoppert, 'More Trouble Than It Is Worth: What Can We Expect from Public Art in Singapore?' (paper presented at the conference Our Modernities: Positioning Asian Art Now, Singapore, March 3, 2004).

9 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art and Art History in Singapore, Malaysia and Southeast Asia 1973-2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 270.

10 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Thoughts on Carving Stone,' in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art and Art History in Singapore, Malaysia and Southeast Asia 1973-2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 212.

11 Lim Sin Thai, 'Weighty Issue,' *Straits Times*, 13 March 2002, Life! section, 3.

12 Cheah Ui-Hoon, 'Rocked by Monumental Work.' *Business Times*, March 16, 2002. What's In Style section, 15.

13 Katie Lloyd Thomas, 'Introduction: Architecture and Material Practice,' in *Material Matters: Architecture and Material Practice*, ed. Katie Lloyd Thomas, trans. Adrian Jackson (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 3.

14 Thomas, 4.

15 Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 10, cited in Thomas, 6.

16 Sabapathy, 'Carving Stone,' 213.

17 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Art in the Built Environment: Some Preliminary Observations,' *Singapore Institute of Architects Journal* 136 (May–June 1986): 3.

18 Sabapathy, 'Art in the Built Environment,' 5.

19 Sabapathy, 'Art in the Built Environment,' 3.

20 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction,' in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 202–3. Examples discussed in the Singapore context include the *gopuram* (tower gateway) of the Sri Mariamman Temple and Rodolfo Nolli's Malayan Railway Building and Supreme Court Building.

21 Sabapathy, 'Art in the Built Environment,' 3.

22 For a local example, consider the story of the Nantah Arch. The original arch stands at Jurong West Street 93, and once marked the road leading to old Nanyang University. A replica now graces the Yunnan Garden of Nanyang Technological University. For more on these arches, see: Remember Singapore, Jurong West Nantah Arch, 11 November 2011, available at <https://remembersingapore.org/jurong-west-nantah-arch/> (accessed 6 December 2020); *Straits Times*, "Nantah's Historical Structures," 18 August, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nantahs-historical-structures>.

23 Lily Kong, 'Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas,' *Geoforum* 31, no. 4 (2000): 409–24; T.C. Chang, 'Renaissance Revisited: Singapore as a "Global City for the Arts",' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 4 (2000): 818–31; Terence Chong, 'Singapore's Cultural Policy and Its Consequences: From Global To Local,' *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2005): 553–68; T. C. Chang, 'Art and Soul: Powerful and Powerless Art in Singapore,' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 40, no. 8 (2008): 1921–43; Terence Chong, 'The State and the New Society: The Role of the Arts in Singapore Nation-Building,' *Asian Studies Review* 34, no. 2 (2010): 131–49; Terence Chong, 'Manufacturing Authenticity: The Cultural Production of National Identities in Singapore,' *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2011): 877–97; Lily Kong, 'Ambitions of a Global City: Arts, Culture and Creative Economy in "Post-Crisis" Singapore,' *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18, no. 3 (2012): 279–94.no. 8 (August 2008

24 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 269.

25 C. J. W. -L. Wee, 'Creating High Culture in the Globalized "Cultural Desert" of Singapore,' *TDR (1988-)* 47, no. 4 (2003): 84–97.

26 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 269.

27 Peter Schoppert discusses this phenomenon in his paper, 'More Trouble Than It Is Worth: What Can We Expect from Public Art in Singapore?'. In the mid-1980s, John Portman and Pontiac Land commissioned foreign artists for Marina Square, and I. M. Pei did the same for Raffles City. See: Schoppert, 'More Trouble Than It Is Worth,' 8.

28 Lee Weng Choy, 'Unrealised Publics,' *Singapore Architect* 202:99 (1999): 128.

29 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 269.

30 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 270.

31 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 272.

32 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 270.

33 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 270.

34 Sabapathy, 'Sculptors and Sculpture,' 194. Sabapathy is paraphrasing: Donald Brook, 'Flight from the Object,' in *Concerning Contemporary Art: The Power Lectures 1968-1973*, ed. Bernard Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 31.

35 Sabapathy, 'Reflections,' 271.

36 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Provocative Things,' in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 78.

37 Susie Lingham, 'A Mind for Method, and an Eye for Medium, Material and Form: Editorial Overview,' in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art and Art History in Singapore, Malaysia and Southeast Asia 1973-2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 137. Lingham is citing Sabapathy in a video interview with Joyce Toh and Louis Ho.

38 Cited in: Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 49.

39 Rendell, 50.

40 Raymond Ledrut, 'Speech and the Silence of the City,' in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, ed. M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 122, cited in Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,' *October* 47 (1988): 6.

41 Eric Gibson, 'Public Art and the Public Realm,' *Sculpture* 7, no. 1 (1988), 32, cited in Deutsche, 'Uneven Development,' 16.

42 Kian Woon Kwok and Wen Lee, eds., *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (Singapore: The Singapore Art Museum and The Artists Village, 2009).

43 Melany Sun-Min Park, 'Contesting, Transferring and Translating "Home": Production and Practice of the Artists Village (1988-2000),' in *Home+Bound: Narratives of Home and Beyond*, ed. Lilian Chee and Melany Sun-Min Park (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies in Architecture, NUS, 2013), 91.

44 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Artists' Colony in Ulu Sembawang,' *Straits Times*, February 10, 1989, Arts & Leisure section, 4. Hazel McIntosh is Tang Da Wu's English illustrator wife, who lived with Tang and their then five-year-old son, Ben Zai on the Lorong Gambas site.

45 Park, 93.

46 TAV presented a series of site- and time-specific performances including *Dancing by the Pond* (9am) by Tang Da Wu, *Fighting Birds* (4pm) by Tang Mun Kit and Wong Shih Yaw, *Living with Nature* (5pm) by Han Sai Por with Amanda Heng, and *Sunrise at Vegetable Farm* (6.30am) by Tang Da Wu.

47 Park, 97.

48 Park, 98.

49 Grierson, 6.

50 Deutsche, 'Uneven Development,' 10.

51 Deutsche, 'Uneven Development,' 8; 6–9.

52 Deutsche, 'Uneven Development,' 15.

53 Deutsche, 'Uneven Development,' 16.

54 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 259–60.

55 Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy,' *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 37.

56 Deutsche, 'Art and Public Space,' 39.

57 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 38, cited in Rendell, *Art and Architecture*, 50.

58 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 57.

59 Kwon, 60.

60 Kwon, 66.

61 Kwon, 67.

62 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 65, cited in Kwon, 69.

63 Kwon, 83–94. Here, Kwon describes in detail the work of John Ahearn in South Bronx, New York City under the Percent for Art Commission between the mid- to the late 1980s.

64 Kwon, 95.

65 Kwon, 97.

66 Kwon, 97.

67 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 8.

68 Michael North, 'The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament,' in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 28.

69 Martha Radice and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, 'Introduction: Encounters with Art in the Urban Public,' in *Urban Encounters: Art and the Public*, ed. Martha Radice and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 7.

70 Radice and Boudreault-Fournier, 8.

71 Radice and Boudreault-Fournier, 8.

72 Kester, 176.

73 Kester, 176.
74 Kester, 175.
75 Kester, 176.
76 Kester, 176.
77 Kester, 177.
78 Kester, 178.
79 Kester, 173.
80 Lu Pei-Yi and Phoebe Wong, ‘Art/Movement as a Public Platform: Artistic Creations in the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella Movement,’ in *Art and the City: Worlding the Discussion through a Critical Artscape*, ed. Jason Luger and Julie Ren (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 48.
81 Significantly, approximately 16 percent of student protestors involved in the Sunflower Movement were enrolled in the disciplines of fine arts, design, architecture or urban planning.
82 Lu and Wong, 51.
83 Wong Ying-Dah, ‘Zhe bushi dangdai yishu, zhe shi dadao dangdai de yishu shouge [This Is Not Contemporary Art. This Is the Art Harvest That Makes Contemporary Down] [sic],’ Taishin Arts Award ARTalks., 12 April, 2014, <https://talks.taishinart.org.tw/event/talks/2014041201>, cited in Lu and Wong, 51.
84 Lu and Wong, 54.
85 Andrea Phillips, ‘Residualization of the Social: Doreen Massey Interviewed by Andrea Phillips,’ in *Social Housing – Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice, Actors, Agents and Attendants*, ed. Andrea Phillips and Fulya Erdemci (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 51–63, cited in Barbara Holub, ‘Planning Unplanned: Towards a New Positioning of Art in the Context of Urban Development,’ in *Planning Unplanned: Towards a New Function of Art in Society*, ed. Barbara Holub and Christine Hohenbüchler (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2014), 27.
86 North, 17.
87 North, 17. North is referencing the comments made by the historian Eric Hobsbawm in: Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Mass Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,’ in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 304.
88 Holub, 46.
89 Holub, 32.
90 Peter Eisenman, ‘Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition,’ *Casabella* 359–360 (1971): 51.
91 Nana Last, ‘Function and Field: Demarcating Conceptual Practices,’ in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 318.

92 Schoppert, ‘More Trouble Than It Is Worth,’ 16.
93 Patricia C. Phillips, ‘Temporality and Public Art,’ in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, ed. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (New York: IconEditions, HarperCollins, 1992), 298.
94 ASEAN refers to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, an intergovernmental association made up of ten countries in Southeast Asia. ASEAN’s five original member countries – Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand – each contributed one sculpture to the first-ever ASEAN Sculpture symposium in 1981. Each sculpture at this symposium reflected on the idea of ‘ASEAN unity and identity.’ Indonesia’s But Muchtar provided *Unity*, a ‘steel underframe covered entirely by copper plates and meticulously welded together to embody “the ASEAN man”.’ Singapore contributed Ng Eng Teng’s *Balance*, a ciment fondu work reflecting on the ASEAN body. Malaysia’s Ariffin Mohammed Ismail presented *Taminseri*, a plastic sculpture named for and evoking Malay hero Hang Tuah’s legendary keris. *Taminseri*’s fibreglass body gave way in Singapore’s tropical weather, and was replaced with Anthony Lau’s *Augury*, a work showing ‘a spider web lacing together... six grass stems.’ Napoleon Veloso Abueva contributed Philippines’ ‘takes the form of the curving frame of a ship’s prow,’ while Thailand provided Vichai Sithiratr’s *Concentration* embodying Buddhism’s contemplative principles. After Brunei joined ASEAN in 1984, it added Osman bin Mohammad’s *Together* to the original five sculptures in 1988. The ASEAN sculpture programme continued over the next few years, each time located in a different member country and with a different theme. The second symposium took place in Bangkok (1983), Jakarta (1984), Brunei (1986), Kuala Lumpur (1987), and the Philippines (1989). For more on the series, see: Jerry M. Reyes, Arnold Molina-Azurin, and Rafael L. Chee Kee, *The ASEAN Sculptures: A Photographic Folio* (Manila: ASEAN Committee on Sculpture and Information, 1991), 8–23.
95 When the British arrived in 1819, they found evidence of brick Buddhist temples (candis) on the hill. John Crawford, Singapore’s last British Resident, observed good-quality bricks on the north and east sides of the hill, and 14 square sandstone blocks that marked out a ruin. Events of significance to Singapore history all marked the hill. Raffles builds himself a bungalow atop the hill to escape the tropical heat, and George Collyer, Chief Engineer of the Straits Settlement, levels the top of the hill to build the fort from which Fort Canning derives its name. The defence of Singapore during WWII was coordinated from a Fort Canning bunker now known as the Battle Box. Fort Canning Green today still contains ruins and

gravestones from Government Hill cemetery, which also occupied part of the hill. The sculptures from the 1981 ASEAN Sculpture symposium are also located on Fort Canning, and performances as varied as rock concerts and ‘Shakespeare in the Park’ still take place here. For more on Fort Canning Hill, see: Melissa Diagana and Jyoti Angresh, *Fort Canning Hill: Exploring Singapore’s Heritage and Nature* (Singapore: ORO editions, 2013).
96 This critical re-imagination actually does not manifest until much later through the drawings of Singapore artist Jimmy Ong. Farquhar Descends Forbidden Hill (2008) and Farquhar at the Foot of Forbidden Hill (2008) depict Fort Canning, also known as or Government Hill or Bukit Larangan, as an imagined territory. Ong portrays William Farquhar, Singapore’s first British Resident, as an almost-comic figure unable to cope with the tropical weather. He cannot navigate Southeast Asia’s thick vegetation without a turbaned local’s help. Through these images, Ong subverts the aura of glory and domination conventionally associated with the British colonial project. For more on Ong’s drawings, see: T. K. Sabapathy, *From Bukit Larangan to Borobudur: Recent Drawings by Jimmy Ong, 2000–2015* (Singapore: FOST Gallery, 2016).
97 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed., (London: Verso, 2006), 163.
98 Anderson, 163.
99 Anderson, 181, 183.
100 Anderson, 181, 183.
101 Consider the revolutionary changes made possible by social media technology, embodied in historic events like the Arab Spring (2010–12) or the global Occupy Movement, which began with Occupy Wall Street. For more, see: Lin Noueihed, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak and Christopher Malone, *Occupying Political Science: The Occupy Wall Street Movement from New York to the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
102 Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King and Mami Kataoka, ‘Intimate Publics: The Place of Art and Media Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region,’ in *Art in the Asia-Pacific: Intimate Publics*, ed. Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King and Mami Kataoka, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–20.
103 Hjorth, King and Kataoka, 10–11.
104 Patricia Phillips, 304.
105 Patricia Phillips, 303.
106 Singapore joins other global art-design illuminated festivals located in Lyon, Sydney, Prague, Montreal, Kobe, Melbourne and Berlin,

and more modest events held in Durham, York, Eindhoven, Ghent, and Helsinki, among many other locations. For writings on the festivalisation of the city through art, see: Greg Richards and Robert Palmer, *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Revitalisation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2010); Marjana Johansson and Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, ‘City Festivals: Creativity and Control in Staged Urban Experiences,’ *European Urban and Regional Studies* 18, no. 4 (2011): 392–405; Waldemar Cudny, *Festivalisation of Urban Spaces - Factors, Processes and Effects* (Switzerland: Springer International, 2016).
107 Tim Edensor and Shanti Sumartojo, ‘Reconfiguring Familiar Worlds with Light Projection: The Gertrude Street Projection Festival, 2017,’ *GeoHumanities* 4 (2018): 6.
108 Edensor and Sumartojo, 17.
109 OH! Open House, ‘Who Are We? What Do We Do?,’ accessed 31 August, 2019, <https://ohopenhouse.org/About>.
110 Gary Lim, ‘OH! Open House Sees Singapore Artists Turning Strangers’ Homes into Art Spaces This March,’ City Nomads, March 7, 2019, Arts & Culture section, Arts section, <https://www.citynomads.com/oh-open-house-sees-singapore-artists-turning-strangers-homes-into-art-spaces-this-march/>.
111 OH! Open House, *Potong Pasir | Now You See It. Now You Don’t* (Singapore: Oh! Open House, 2016), 1.
112 Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
113 Knight, x.
114 Jerry Allen, ‘How Art Becomes Public,’ in *Going Public: A Field Guide to the Developments in Art in Public Spaces*, ed. Jeffrey L. Cruikshank and Pam Korza (Amherst: Art Extension Service, 1988), 246–7; 250–1, cited in Knight, *Public Art*, xiii–ix.
115 Knight, 23.
116 Audrey Tan, ‘Golden Staircase: Is It Art – or Not?,’ *Straits Times*, 12 March, 2017, Singapore section, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/its-art>; Wong Pei Ting, ‘“Golden Staircase” No More as Art Student Removes Hotly Debated Project,’ *TODAYonline*, March 12, 2017, Singapore section, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/jalan-rajah-golden-staircase-no-more>.
117 Adeline Chia, *A Public Square*, Discipline the City (Singapore: The Substation, 2017), 7–8.

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

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)¹ and ‘New Lamps for Old!: Public Sculpture and the Public’ (1984).² 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-

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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

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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-

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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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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*)

LC: Your essay 'Art in the Built Environment' (1986)⁶ 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-



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-

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 expositions 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.'⁷ 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?

LC: At the start, the reading of the public was that this was of the citizen or society as an abstract entity, and art was perhaps an instrument to think of how this society may emerge. Non-essential, as you pointed out. By the 1980s, it was valued as commodity. Art was purchased, along with architecture, as a brand for Singapore, the global city. This carried on into the 1990s with the prevalence of all these new incentive schemes which created an infrastructure of patronage. It was very much about art as an instrument, to be used for something larger than itself. The position of the artist has been difficult and cynical. The position of the public perhaps has become more accepting. But the notion of a public for art is still nebulous. Is a public to be generated or is there a public that would already have engaged art in the first place? The position of art depends on how we read it, and this reading is often malleable, mobile and even vague. It depends on who is reading. It depends on their worldview, education, upbringing. Nevertheless, there is still a narrowness to how one views art here in Singapore. It is seen largely as elitist, non-essential, an extra which we can do without.

TKS: I largely agree with what you have said, especially if we want to use the term contemporary as the marker for it. And not just in the world of art, but also in describing people. That one could conceive the public in relatively monolithic terms in the 1970–80s... that because of the size, you could identify with the kind of public whom you could speak with or speak to. That has become, I wouldn't say difficult but increasingly amorphous now. There are numerous publics. And they may not necessarily converge in any one particular site such that you would be able to discern what the temperament is. And this is even more so in the sphere of cultural practices – who is doing what, how things are assessed, and who is assessing them no longer comes from one original source. We have huge institutions which we never did prior to

Balance, Ng Eng Teng (Singapore), 1982.



Augury, Antony Lau (Malaysia), 1988.

Unity, But Muchtar, (Indonesia), 1982.



Concentration, Vichai Sithiratr (Thailand), 1982.



Together, Osman Bin Mohammad (Brunei Darussalam), 1988.

the contemporary, like the National Gallery Singapore. Even so, people may not be going to visit the museums and the concert halls. But their view of music and art is not necessarily determined by what they see in there, or not even how things are presented in those institutions. And I think this is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary anyway – in its looseness and in its deliberate incoherence – if I may use the term in that way. They do not necessarily cohere in an obvious and apparent way.

As to the kind of art that is permissible in the public arena, there is still sometimes, in my opinion, even increased anxiety and therefore increased fear. And in some instances, this anxiety and fear is palpable in the reactions and responses to what is said, what is thought to be said, how things are said and the repercussions meted out to those who make these views known. In the name of the public, in the name of public order, in the name of safeguarding who and what we are. And in between all these, the biennale comes into being.

The biennale is outside, but not completely outside or public because the biennale is commissioned by the National Arts Council. And there are all kinds of committees upon committees that shape its tenor for any single biennale. And so there always is an antenna that is maintained to ensure that things are not overtly insulting, transgressive or unacceptable. And indeed, if there are, then meticulous and insidious attempts are made to clear these works by checking with various guardian figures. Is it okay, send it there, ask them, is it okay...and only if you get permission from say three out of six guardian agencies of the state then you feel secure enough to show it. From time to time, there are projects that seem to slip under this radar largely because of the spectacular magnification of what they are. They are so huge, they are so encompassing, they are all over, so to speak, that a single message may not be detectable because of their allure. They are so impressive and good-looking,

and it is these qualities about them that seems to be able to absorb like a punching bag any anxiety you cannot sort out. Not exactly a form of escape, but you can always find some legitimising excuse for it being there.

And you can say that that is good and that is bad, or you could say that it is a kind of an incorrigible ambivalence that should not be the case. You are playing the devil’s advocate all the time without declaring where you are. So on a moral stance you may find yourself in very deep waters on these matters. It is very difficult on the whole and it is not just here. The public is one that can be invoked and there is a quick public response to everything now. It is instant and everywhere. The response is public too. It is publicly made known even if you individually care not to look at it, there are many others who do. So it accumulates. The impact accumulates so I can imagine those who are tasked with the possibility of dealing with these having a nightmarish scene to deal with.

But at the same time, one applauds the availability of such capacities. And we also applaud that everyone should have a voice and all voices should be heard. You cannot then go back and say the voices are too numerous and to placate all voices, we don’t do anything. What I think we have to learn and we haven’t learnt enough – we have to learn how to deal with these voices and still be able to make certain decisions and not only make those decisions but hold by those decisions with conviction, with clarity and with the willingness to talk about it until you drop dead. Endurance is important. Yes we may disagree but you know this is important. That kind of conviction perhaps exists in certain spheres that are politically and militarily regarded as absolutely essential for the well-being of a state. But anything outside that may not be seen may not qualify with the same kind of essential significance and therefore can be equivocated. You can set it aside, push it aside, postpone it, not deal with it, say okay we will remove it and by removing it, we close the chap-

ter on it. To say that this is enough and we shall not talk about it anymore... as if that ends the whole matter. And it does end the matter because all those in charge of it turn it off. The energies put into the matter are switched off, it becomes inoperable and that is how it ends.

Maybe it does not just apply to creative practices, but creative practitioners would claim that they are at the forefront of such things. But many forms of expression are also at the forefront of such things. We need to not only think about what is being said and how it is being said but how to make sense of this, in order to say that there is a purpose for us to do this. That there is still a destination to be fulfilled by continuing to do this and that the outcomes are desirable. Somebody has to make these decisions because that is how they have been decided upon. There will be shifts in how the arts is managed, which ministry is in charge of which agency, demographic shifts. But these are more than indicators, these are the realities along which one has to then steer oneself in terms of being professional and engaged in one’s livelihood and practice. Sometimes with some skill and ability, and other times not. It is a constant state of unsureness.

Endnotes

- 1 T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Art in the Built Environment: Some Preliminary Observations,’ *Singapore Institute of Architects Journal* 136 (May–June 1986): 3–6.
- 2 T. K. Sabapathy, ‘New Lamps for Old!: Public Sculpture and the Public,’ *School of Architecture NUS Architecture Journal* (1984): 1–9.
- 3 *Angel of the North* (1988), a striking memorial for Britain’s declining heritage, was commissioned by Gateshead Council, northeast England, and sited on the remains of a destroyed and closed colliery. See further: Antony Gormley, ‘Angel of the North, 1998,’ Antony Gormley, accessed 2 October, 2020, <https://www.antonygormley.com/projects/item-view/id/211>; Williams, Francesca. ‘Angel of the North: The Icon That Was Nearly Never Built.’ *BBC*, 11 February 2018. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-42426028>.
- 4 Art too might also be treated as disposable, and widely publicised cases where civic opposition has not allowed works to endure include the dramatic examples of US artist Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), a 120-foot wall of corten steel placed across Federal Plaza, New York (see Lilian Chee’s introduction to this book: Lilian Chee, ‘Introduction: Art in/and Public Space; Art, the City and Its Public(s),’ in *Art in Public Space* (Singapore: URA, 2020), <final page range>), and Rachel Whiteread’s *House* (1993), a temporary work – a cast of the interior of the last standing Victorian terraced house (after the resident was evicted) in an area due for redevelopment – in Mile End, East London, which ultimately won the Turner Prize. Both were removed after petitions: *Tilted Arc* after eight years, and *House* a mere ten days short of the agreed three-month duration of the work.
- 5 Tan Teng Kee’s *Musical Fountain* was the winning entry in an open sculpture competition held for a commission for the forecourt of Plaza Singapura but was donated by the developers, DBS (benefiting from the Public Sculpture incentive scheme), to the National Parks Board for the Marina South City Park Sculpture Garden. In conversation with Tan about the relocation, Tan had expressed ambivalence about the decision: ‘As sculptors we have no choice: those who own property in Singapore don’t know the value of sculpture and when they want to develop their property, something has to give way.’ For this quote from Sabapathy’s interview with Tan, see: T. K. Sabapathy, ‘6 Dialogues: In Conversation with T. K. Sabapathy’ in *Sculpture in Singapore* (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991), 51.
- 6 The essay considered the sculptures produced for the 1981 ASEAN Sculpture Symposium against questions about art and public spaces – both the historiography of related terms and the contradictions introduced over time with realignments of the art/public relationship.
- 7 Sabapathy, ‘Art in the Built Environment,’ 3.

At the fringe of Orchard Road overlooking the Bras Basah thoroughfare, the National Museum of Singapore is at the heart the Bras Basah Bugis Precinct – an arts, culture, heritage and entertainment district. Distinguished by its prominent colonial façade and dome, the museum has been a civic landmark for over a century. Once known as the Raffles Library and Museum (1887-1960), a repository for natural history and anthropological artefacts, the National Museum’s long history and prime location accords it an iconic status. Every August, the museum’s façade features in the Singapore Night Festival, an urban celebration of art exhibitions, street performances, and interactive light installations set in a nocturnal landscape. For the festival’s 12th edition in 2019, the French art collective Spectaculaires’ *Keep Dreaming* (2019) alternately enveloped the museum in a verdant garden with a towering treehouse and lush flowering vines, and in a blue-hued underwater environment with luminous coloured sea creatures and giant-sized coral reefs that moved and swayed across the building’s louvred windows. The artwork incorporated the museum’s windows, roofs, arches, columns, beams and other distinctive features while emplacing alternative interpretations and possibilities on them.

In contrast to this fluctuating public display, at the nearby Cathay Green (previously known as Bras Basah Park) just opposite the museum, one finds Tan Teng Kee’s *Endless Flow* (1980). This 6.4-meter-high sculpture was commissioned by the Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) in 1980 for its headquarters in Chulia Street found in Singapore’s Central Business District. The sculpture was subsequently moved to Cathay Green after OCBC replaced the work in 1988, with an imported commission by renowned English sculptor, Henry Moore. The

physical re-siting of the sculpture, previously designed to suggest financial flux and economic mobility, has taken on the role of a visual marker around which pedestrians and traffic circulate.

These two overlooking sites – the National Museum of Singapore and Cathay Green – gesture to the evolving criteria by which art in public space and its urban image-making capacities have developed in the last three decades. Changes in the political economy of cities have led to an increasingly close and mutually beneficial relationship between urban policies, economic, and cultural decisions. As cities seek to increase their symbolic capital to attract businesses and broaden audiences, the rise of the urban cultural economy marked the blurring of high and popular cultures,¹ and translated these to further complement the city’s commercial, income-generating potential.² The inception of the Public Sculptures Masterplan in 2002 and Art in the City programme in 2005 by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) bolstered the role of art in public spaces by attracting investments and visitors, while at the same time creating place identities and promoting civic pride. By charting the trajectory of art as a sociocultural dimension of the urban environment, *Gazing* appraises artworks as aesthetic object *interventions* which connect the complex art practices of commissioning and making (process), with the changing dynamics of location in which these artworks are installed (site). This ambition signals to art in public space that seeks to address its location or site ‘as another *medium*, an “other language”.’³ In other words, the artwork is seen to co-produce the space in which it is located. Such thinking stands in contrast to the general view of art in public spaces and especially public commissions as urban embellishments. Thus, art commissioned, made and seen in this dimen-

- 1 *Endless Flow*, Tan Teng Kee, 1980. At its current location on Cathay Green.

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2 *Progress and Advancement*,
Yuyu Yang, 1988.

3 *Harmony*, Yuyu Yang, 1993.

sion, might enhance or question the urban environment and its architecture, while also gaining autonomous standing, having comparable significance and status with other urban edifices. This section considers commissioned 'branded' artworks which hold importance in the image-making of urban architecture and art. It focuses on the financial district, the reclaimed cityscape at Marina Centre, the Art-in-Transit initiatives, and the festivalisation of art in Singapore's urban public space.

RAFFLES PLACE

The earliest manifestations of art in public spaces occurring in tandem with the city's rapid economic development can be traced to the commercial heart of Singapore – Raffles Place. Located at the south of the mouth of the Singapore River and forming the auspicious 'belly of the carp',⁴ Raffles Place has been at the centre of the nation for almost the entirety of Singapore's modern history.⁵ Previously displaced by Shenton Way in the 1970s, the traditional commercial district regained its standing in the 1980s as the 'Wall Street of Singapore'.⁶ Driven by a search for newer, more modern facilities and buildings, Raffles Place became home to at least 75 per cent of Singapore's major banking institutions between 1982 and 1983. The area's thriving developments are mirrored in the public commissioning of works by overseas-trained Chinese artists such as Tan Teng Kee, Aw Tee Hong and Yuyu Yang, who were pre-eminent artists of their time.⁷ Commissioned by Singapore corporations, their sculptures occupied an in-between space that sampled international formalism while incorporating visual and symbolic expressions located in the local idiom – both desirable attributes in the construction of a city centre seeding the emergence of a Singapore-



based, global economy. Tan, Aw and Yang's harnessing of the actual and imagined attributes of the city's local-global economic aspirations into sculptural forms at Raffles Place can be seen as an inauguration of the site and a ceremonial breaking of ground for the heart of the city's global financial centre.

Situated respectively at the north and south ends of Raffles Place Park,⁸ sculptures by Yang and Aw are prominent markers amidst the largely uniform architectural aesthetics of skyscrapers in the financial centre. Yang's work showcases both his earlier realist style and subsequent move towards more abstract forms. *Progress and Advancement* (1988) commissioned by the Singaporean banker, entrepreneur and philanthropist Lien Ying Chow⁹ for the Overseas Union Bank Centre¹⁰ features elaborate bas-relief work of Chinese junks, olden-day streetscapes and skyscrapers flanking the facade of a sweeping bronze arc. The work, situated at the junction of Battery Road and Bonham Street, responds to the proliferating landscape of Singapore's commercial and financial core by combining representations of both the past and present, with the surge towards the new landscape indicated by its nestling within the ebullient rising enclosure of the curved sculpture. Smaller and more integrated into the landscape, *Harmony* (1993) commissioned by City Developments Limited (CDL) and later placed at Republic Plaza in 2001 illustrates Yang's later preference for the use of stainless steel as medium and a paring down of details to reveal essential, profoundly symbolic shapes.¹¹ His sculptures often converted Chinese symbols of contrasts in nature into fluid abstract forms to display an interaction between opposing elements. In *Harmony*, the use of abstract motifs is seen through the smooth and elegant semi-circular shapes representing the Chinese character for Man '人' (rén) linked with a spherical globe below to form the character for Unity '合' (hé). The image of mutual reliance between man and earth to form a single whole or unit is further extended through its mirror-like surface, which, in reflecting the sculpture's surroundings, seamlessly assimilates it to the Plaza's façade. In expressing their support for the sculptural art form, CDL states that 'architecture and art [should] complement each other to create a desired expression and enhance the ambience of a property.' Yang's work thus fulfils the developer's intention for publicly-sited artworks that takes into consideration the context and design elements of its surroundings, and enmeshes the worlds of physical experience and of the imagination.

The expression of attributes and aspirations of a changing landscape is furthered in the work of China-born artist, Aw Tee Hong. *Struggle for Survival* (1988) and *Pioneering Spirit* (1988) both commissioned for the inauguration of the Raffles Place Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) train station, are formally similar works that appealed to the 'from fishing village to bustling port and modern metropolis' narrative of the Singapore Story.¹² Constructed from large welded sections of brass, copper and iron, the curvilinear compositions uses the vessel as an allegory for the struggles of early Singapore migrants on their journey here. Its location above the bustle of the Raffles Place Park is particularly significant when read against the history of the place under the 1822 Raffles Town Plan where the Singapore River was the

key geographical feature around which the economic and urban functions of a principal town was first established. Aw's sculptures which resemble sailing ships can be said to refer to the south bank of the river dedicated for commercial and financial use. There, the Commercial Square functioned as a main square around which a grid of financial institutions and business houses were arranged. Between 1920 to 1965, the area was referred to as Raffles Square, serving as an open-air carpark and later transformed into a lush landscaped square flanked by decorative water fountains on both ends.¹³ The square remained to be the heart of Raffles Place with the pedestrianisation of the square by the Public Works Department in 1972 and the opening of the Raffles Place MRT train station in 1987 under the site.¹⁴ The sculptures' specific placement on the site suitably commemorates the development trajectory of Raffles Place and its extended history in the establishment of Singapore as a cosmopolitan port city.

Nearby at Chulia Street, on the spot where Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* rests, used to feature Malaysian-born artist, Tan Teng Kee's second public commission *Endless Flow* (1980).



Endnotes

1

T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore: An Introduction,’ in *Sculpture in Singapore* (Singapore: National Museum, 1991), 22.

2

Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore,’ 12.

3

T. K. Sabapathy and Eng Teng Ng, *Vital images of life: Sculpture Ng Eng Teng* (Singapore: E. T. Ng, 1989), 5.

4

Su Ling Foo, ‘Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection,’ in *Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008), 18.

5

Constance Sheares, ‘Ng Eng Teng, Interview,’ in *Change: 20 Singapore Artists: A Decade of Their Work*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: P. Mowe, 1991), 27.

6

Richard Lim, ‘Embodied...Spirit of ASEAN,’ *The Straits Times*, 27 June, 1981.

7

T. K. Sabapathy and Eng Teng Ng, *Vital images of life: Sculpture Ng Eng Teng* (Singapore: E. T. Ng, 1989), 8.

8

Use of the casting method allows for Ng’s sculptures to kept hollow. The reduced weight is a significant factor as it eases the maintenance and transportation of publicly-sited art. For more on sculpting techniques used by Ng, see: Foo, ‘Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection,’ 24.

9

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11

Poh, ‘In Public View,’ 141.

12

Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore,’ 13.

13

Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore,’ 13.

14

Su Ling Foo, ‘Introduction: Gates and Journeying,’ in *Textures, Tones & Timbres: Art of Chong Fah Cheong* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2013), 5.

15

Eng-Beng Lim, ‘Future Island,’ *Third Text* 28, nos. 4-5 (2014): 450, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2014.929879>.

16

Gardens by the Bay, ‘Moongate,’ Art Sculptures, accessed 1 August, 2020, <https://www.gardensbythebay.com.sg/en/attractions/art-sculptures.html>.

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Public Art Trust, ‘About the Public Art Trust,’ Public Art Walking Trail – Civic District (Jubilee Walk and Esplanade), accessed 1 August, 2020, <https://www.publicarttrust.sg/NACPAT/media/Latest/PAT-Civic-District-Art-Trail-Handout.pdf>.

18

Bridget Tracy Tan, ‘Han Sai Por – A Modern Sculptor,’ in *Han Sai Por: Modern Sculpture* (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2013), 16.

19

The term is derived from Herbert Read’s ‘vitalist ideal’ of sculpture as possessing three key attributes: tactile quality, sensation of volume and ponderability of object. See: Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore,’ 11.

20

Sabapathy, ‘Sculptors and Sculpture in Singapore,’ 9–17.

21

T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Art in the Built Environment: Some Preliminary Observations,’ *Singapore Institute of Architects Journal*, no. 136.

The Multiple Narratives behind the People Of The River¹

In Yeoh Jo-Ann’s *Impractical Uses of Cake*, the main character, jaded Literature teacher Sukhin, takes his students on a post-examination outing for ‘a tour of the sculptures in the Central Business District and along the river.’² His students find the two sculptures on the Singapore River’s south bank both uninspiring and ridiculous:

He takes the students first to see Salvador Dali’s *Homage to Newton* at UOB Plaza – he assumes they will all have heard of Dalí, so it’s an easy start. But Sukhin is irredeemably dull – pointing out key features of the five-metre abstract piece that looks to him like a distorted human skeleton, he goes on about gravity and surrealism until Dennis catches his eye and, grimacing, draws a hand repeatedly across his throat. He stops talking. Off they go to Fernando Botero’s *Bird*, just a short walk away. The students like this one better.

‘It’s so *fat*,’ one girl says to another.

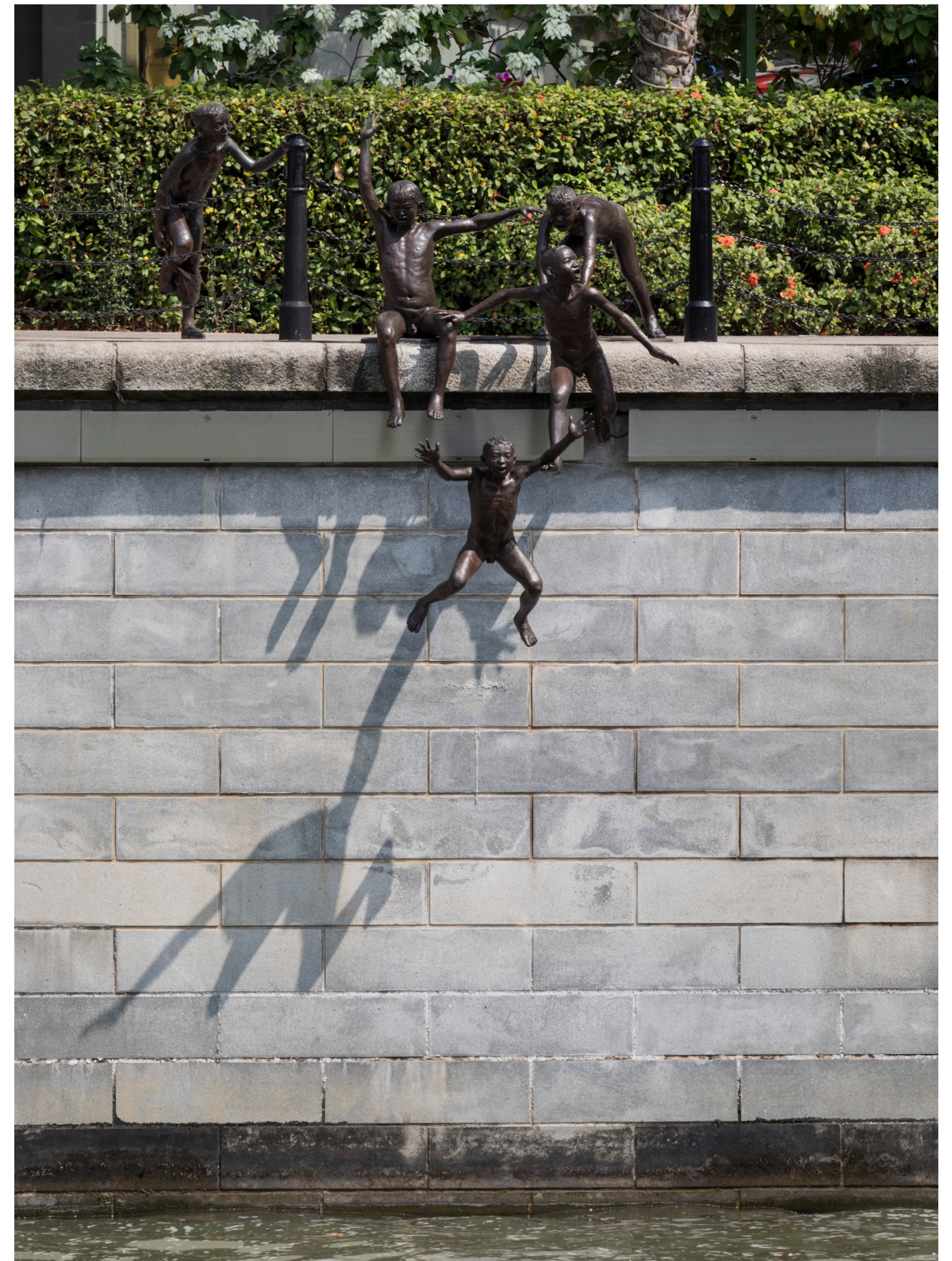
It is indeed, like all of Botero’s creatures – great, fat neck; massive, puffed-out chest; thighs the circumference of its head; bulbous, monstrous toes.

Dennis pronounces judgement: 'Far too many carbs.'

Even Sukhin laughs (119-120).

Dali's piece graces the UOB Plaza in 1985, and Botero's in 1990,³ two works aligned with sculptural trends of 1980s Singapore. Writing in NUS' *Architecture Journal 1984*, the Singaporean art historian TK Sabapathy describes such modern public sculpture thus: 'generalised forms conveying personal obsessions, indifferent to specific situations, and carefully avoiding public involvement and participation.'⁴ Lilian Chee, who reflects on Sabapathy's text in the present volume, rightly reiterates that public audiences cannot easily interpret, and so engage with, such abstract sculptures.⁵ Sukhin's students might concur. Prior to gravity, surrealism and fat monumentality, argues Sabapathy, is traditional sculpture. Unlike modern sculpture, traditional sculpture was shaped by the socio-cultural elite, and consequently possessed a 'public' and 'patently propagandistic' character.⁶

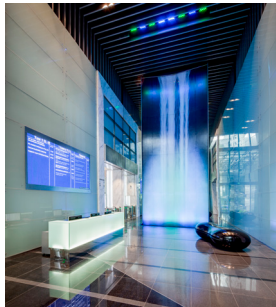
If we accept Sabapathy's genealogy, what then can we make of the sculptures conspicuously absent from Sukhin's tour: the *People Of The River* series, completed in the early 2000s and long after the period of 'generalised forms'? No Ng Eng Tengs here. The four sculptures in the series, all figural, script 'historical scenes of people who lived and worked' along the Singapore River.⁷ If anything, they are like *The Impractical Uses of Cake*, a *narrative* – albeit one about Singapore's 1819 founding myth. Yet, despite presenting a conventional founding story at first glance, a closer reading of *People Of The River* encourages the viewer to contest its surface narrative; to reveal multiple, even competing, narratives, concealed at the mouth of the Singapore River.



Art Incentive Scheme

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The Art Incentive Scheme was launched in 2005 with the aim of encouraging the provision and integration of art works into developments within the key activity corridors and commercial centres of the Central Area. Under the Scheme, developers and building owners could apply for additional Gross Floor Area (over and above the prescribed Gross Plot Ratio for the site) in return for incorporating art works within the publicly accessible areas of their developments. The Scheme ceased in 2012 as it had achieved its objective of establishing a critical mass of public art works which had contributed to the identity of the City Centre and developers and building owners had begun to see the value of including public art within their developments, without the need for it to be incentivised.



Waterfall
Hiroshi Senju
2011
One Raffles Place



Seed
Han Sai Por
2011
One Raffles Place



Ascendi
Anna Chiara Spellini
2011
One Raffles Place



Points of View Series
Anthony Cragg
2011
One Raffles Place



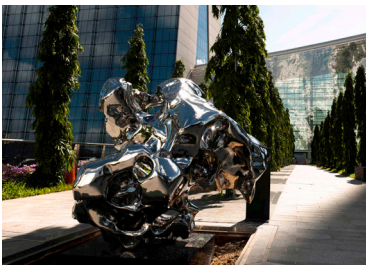
Drift
Antony Gormley
2010
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Blue Reflection Façade with Light Entry Passage
James Carpenter
2010
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Drawing #917
Sol LeWitt
1999
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Artificial Rock #71 & #86
Zhan Wang
2010
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort

Public Art Index — Art Incentive Scheme

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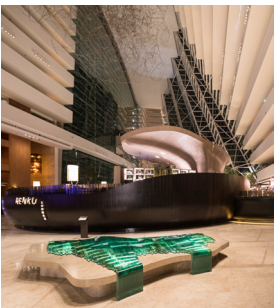
Wind Arbor
Ned Kahn
2011
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Tipping Wall
Ned Kahn
2011
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Rain Oculus
Ned Kahn
2011
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Motion
Israel Hadany
2012
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Rising Forest
Zheng Chongbin
2010
Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort



Tall Tree in the Eye
Anish Kapoor
2013
Ocean Financial Centre



Soul
Jaime Plensa
2011
Ocean Financial Centre



A School of Fish
Jae Cowie
2014



Socially Modified Bench
Jeppe Hein
2005
The Fullerton Heritage precinct



Quaystone Heritage
The Fullerton Bay Hotel Singapore
Paul-Alexandre Bouriseau
2010
The Fullerton Bay Hotel Singapore

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