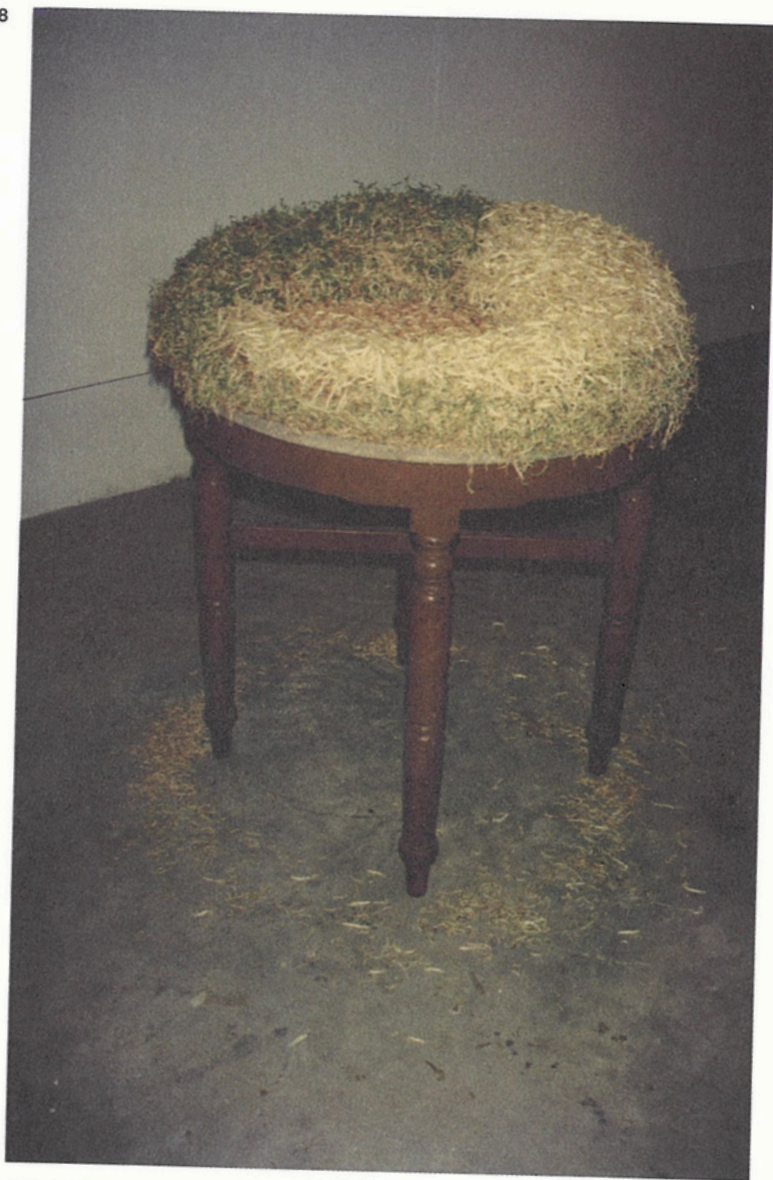




Let's Chat, 1996

The Significance of Plucking Bean Sprouts and Other Matters

LILIAN CHEE

Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark—
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch,
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.¹

A small group of people sit around a kopitiam table. They pluck the tails off a mound of bean sprouts laid out on used newspaper. They chat, drink tea, sometimes stop for a small snack, while their hands are kept busy removing the delicate bean sprout tails. It is a task that requires a kind of flow state, it cannot be done en masse, and like all vegetable prep work, takes as long as it takes.

Growing up in the 1970s, this was a familiar practice in households all over Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia. It was one of the many forgettable jobs done by mothers, grandmothers, and domestic helpers while their children, grandchildren, and charges were taking naps, away at school, at playdates, or attending tuition. Plucking the tails off bean sprouts or peeling the fibrous edges off the stems of leafy green vegetables is repetitive, menial, time-consuming work. To someone of my generation this task is more or less inconsequential. My own grandmother insisted that vegetables treated in this manner would improve the taste and texture of our home-cooked dishes. For my mother who actually did most of the plucking and peeling, it was a form of meditation that she quietly welcomed after a mind-numbing day at the office. Sometimes my mother, aunt, and grandmother would sit in silence working together. Sometimes they would banter. Sometimes they would be joined by the aunt from next door. It was not something I thought much about as a child nor fully understood as an adult.

Amanda Heng writes about how her collaborative performance piece, titled *Let's Chat* (1996–ongoing), first performed over seven days at The Substation, was inspired by her mother's practice of doing the same.² At The Substation, a table borrowed from a nearby kopitiam and some chairs resembling a domestic setup became the setting in which Heng invited the public to sit, converse, drink tea, and pass time in communion while cleaning bean sprouts together.

Heng's mother (also the subject of the artist's photographic series *Another Woman*, 1996–97) engaged in this activity in tandem with other women in the same neighbourhood.³ They would meet under one of their public housing blocks, occupying the columned void deck, a space on the ground floor which had neither fixed function nor programme and whose appropriate usage was left to the interpretation of the block's denizens.

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Forced to relocate from the village to their new Housing and Development Board (HDB) flat in the early 1980s, Heng describes this displacement as “drastic and disorientating” for her mother. The way of life in the Singaporean villages of Hougang and Punggol was lived in an “open and spacious” environment where neighbours could freely and frequently chat and socialise. Moving into the HDB home signalled the loss of the village’s lively informal spaces. Heng then observed how her mother would meet other women every morning at the void deck of her new estate, after visiting the market. Many stayed on until lunchtime. There, they would “have tea, chat, and share their chores like the old days.”⁴ She recounted how the women felt at ease in the void deck, which they perceived as an extension of their own kitchens or living rooms. The self-organised network of neighbours at the void deck was important for Heng’s mother and her new acquaintances. Many of these women were illiterate. A majority remained homebound, saddled with heavy care responsibilities for their families. While their husbands were defined by their professional work, these women were compelled to refashion themselves or risk becoming invisible. *Let’s Chat* re-enacts the practices through which these women installed informal networks, and recalls the transient semi-domestic and semi-public spaces that allowed for these networks to flourish. Heng recounts that she grew to understand the value of these simple and “unpretentious [domestic] activities.”⁵ They allowed the women of her mother’s generation to adjust to their new surroundings, to “seek continuity,” and “find meaning,” to experience pleasure and ease in their lives.⁶

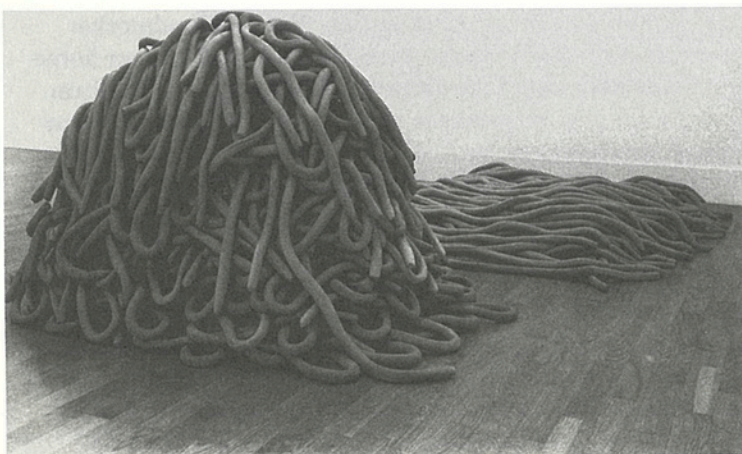
Let’s Chat contains three politicised elements that recur in Heng’s oeuvre: the expectations levied on women in Singaporean society, the intersection between slower domestic cycles and faster public capitalist space-times, and the ageing body coping in a place that is forever changing. This essay connects *Let’s Chat* with two other works: iterations of *Another Woman* and *Singirl* (2000–present), focusing on how Heng situates the ageing female body—namely her own alongside her mother’s. Staging her artworks in various public and private spaces, Heng’s artistic output continues to be significant to understanding the politics of space in Singapore’s urban landscape, and its implications to class, gender, and our subsequent knowledge of such spaces.

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81, 106, 235

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Anna Maria Maiolino, *Ainda Mais Estes* [More Than These], 1996

Occupying the Void Deck

The void deck is a critical backdrop in Heng's *Let's Chat*, foregrounding a collective social landscape of Singaporean public housing. In their essay, Stephen Cairns et al. remark that the void deck was "an aspiration on the part of the HDB—Singapore's state housing authority—for a locally scaled accessible space that could be used by residents," one that was meant to encourage "a sense of locality and community identity."⁷

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Architecturally, the void deck is one of the most distinctive features of the HDB's ubiquitous slab block typology—a long and narrow corridor block which was introduced in the early 1960s, popularised in the 1970s, and last erected in 1985. The slab block stretches over fifty metres in length and typically adjoins twelve to sixteen flats. The void deck constitutes the ground floor of the slab block. It exists as an expansive and largely unobstructed open plan area, a porous space usually furnished with smooth concrete flooring and unadorned rectangular columns arranged in a grid configuration. This column grid extends upwards into the interiors of the high-rise dwelling.⁸ Thus, the openness of the void deck is a mirror to the controlled private boundaries of the dwellings above it. The void deck's formal lineage is modernist in origin, traceable to Le Corbusier's pilotis and free plan designs. It also shares the functional aims of being used by the residents to encourage integration and social mixing. Lastly, it is a device to create an open, healthy, and hygienic environment with good ventilation, fresh air, and plentiful sunlight. Programmatically, the void deck is a space of fluidity, where people move into and out of the housing block. It hosts the block's shared infrastructure of staircases, lifts, mailboxes, rubbish chutes, and wastepipes. Without boundary walls, the void deck's relationship to its outside is somewhat ambiguous, defined provisionally by the building's tenuous concrete apron and its neat perimeter surface drains. It is "a space suspended between these circulatory modes of people and their discards. It has a vague sense of both belonging to, and not of, the block of flats. The void deck's 'public' character is ambiguously domestic and 'other' at the same time."⁹

Void decks are used, formally and informally, in a number of ways: for Malay weddings and Chinese funerals; for ball games, chess games, and card games; for bike washing, for carpool

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A group of elderly residents playing chess at the void deck of Blk 337, Ang Mo Kio, 2012

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Roof podium, People's Park Centre, Singapore, 2019

and as the kids' and their carers' school bus waiting zone; occasionally it is a spot for lovers' trysts, used for smoking, for loitering and sleeping, often a place to feed cats in the cover of night, and more frequently, for communal "creative placemaking" endeavours, such as resident-sponsored on-site cooked meals, self-organised exercise spaces, senior citizens' corners, a makeshift meet-the-people MP corner, and more.¹⁰ Thus, as Cairns et al. observe, what is so striking about the void deck is how it is the first (and only) sanctioned free space within a structured public housing programme, where liberal use is implied although the range of permissible activities seem much more restricted.¹¹ Further, as myself and others have separately argued, the void deck is distinct because it is where the differentiated individual domestic activities of the units above intersect with collective expectations of an open semi-public space. Viewed through a calculus of functionality, the void deck's porosity creates its own risks and problems. In time, these spaces would slowly fill up with more useful communal spaces such as crèches, kindergartens, and shared meeting rooms, so as "to minimise unauthorised usage as harmless as football and washing one's motorbike, to more intolerable gambling and uncontrolled gathering of non-Singaporean residents."¹²

At the void deck, we find ourselves at the junction of two spaces and two speeds: reproductive domestic space versus the productive public realm; cyclical slow time versus fast capitalist time. It is simultaneously planned and ad hoc, both slow and fast. In the hyper-managed island nation city-state, it is a site where self-initiation is still possible, and where one might be compelled to gather one's own tribe as Heng's mother and her mates did. *Let's Chat* plants the seeds of void deck-found activities—those alluding to the importance of companionship, camaraderie, and care; the joy of unplanned, spontaneous actions, and the ability to create other modes of being, within the limits of a highly ordered capitalist city.

Thus, the limit between public and private, which appears to be the founding structure of the neighbourhood for the practice of a dweller is not only a separation, but constitutes a separation that unites: the public and private are not both disregarded as two exogenous,

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Live performance study (face), 1994

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Singapore Airlines postcard, c. 1990s

though coexisting, elements; they are much more, constantly interdependent because, in the neighbourhood, one has no meaning without the other.¹³

In the passage above, Michel de Certeau, describes how a neighbourhood only harbours a fiction of separate spheres—domestic private space versus shared public space. In fact, the public and the private in neighbourhoods are ultimately interdependent, one bleeding into the other, such that everyday life is meaningful and possible, only if such porosity and ground-up exchange is not just tolerated but systematically sustained. In this regard, Heng's *Let's Chat* is strategic; it performs beyond its socially-engaged function. The persistent re-enactment of *Let's Chat* in various cultural venues, in various cosmopolitan cities, critiques how we are conditioned to accept the fracture between reproductive and productive spaces. Plucking bean sprouts is a task usually assigned to women at home. Transposed into the public housing void deck in the 1970s by resourceful women who were displaced from their villages and then repeated in art galleries from the 1990s onwards through Heng's collaborative performance, the artwork reclaims a spatiotemporal "void" lost to the city's capitalist hustle. The unthreatening domestic setting coupled with the homely and benign act of cleaning bean sprouts entices participation and loosens inhibitions, a characteristic strategy through Heng's work. Ultimately, *Let's Chat* achieves the impossible: it recreates a space that persuades complete strangers to set aside time to chat with, and to listen to each other.

The Mesopolitics of Locality

While *Let's Chat* renders domestic labour publicly perceptible through slowness and sociability, *Singirl* (2000–ongoing) and particularly *Singirl Revisits* (2011) extend this inquiry into the city's visual and symbolic economies. The photographic series *Singirl Revisits* shows Heng attired in the Singapore Airline (SIA) stewardess' iconic form-fitting dress, designed by Parisian couturier Pierre Balmain in 1972. Balmain presents "an image of a gentle, smiling and [mysterious] Singapore girl [dressed] in her exotic sarong *kebaya* [hailing] from [a] tropical island in Asia."¹⁴

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Singapore "Instant Asia"
brochure, c. 1990s

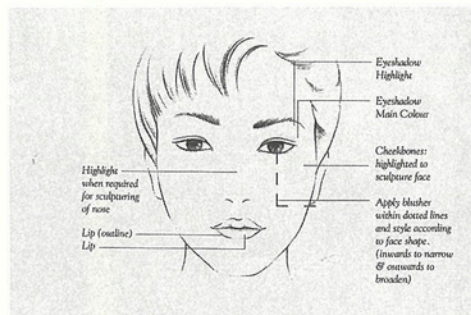
The composition resembles postcards once distributed as souvenirs to SIA passengers where the Singapore Girl poses with global architectural icons and landmarks, coeval to Singapore's "instant Asia" tourist campaigns. In her version, Heng transforms the girl in her uniform, a garment which precedes and defines its wearer. *Singirl* smiles broadly and waves at us. She poses in front of local sites that are not named but obviously important, comparable of course, to the significance and logic of plucking bean sprouts. We are, as it were, encountering our immediate past, confronting endangered destinations which remain oblivious to us if not for *Singirl*. Notably, *Singirl* is not Singapore Girl; her neat black bob turns eventually into relaxed silver-white braids. The fact that *Singirl* herself ages is unthinkable, especially for a body living in the figure-hugging blue batik kebaya. The female body shape and its upkeep were implicit criteria for the job.

But let us review the sites *Singirl Revisits* brings to our attention, and it is important to note them here for the record. They include: Kampong Lorong Buangkok (the last unurbanised village in Singapore); Long Fu Coffee Shop (at the junction of the largely low-rise Telok Kurau Road and Joo Chiat Place neighbourhood, near to where the artist's own studio was once located); Chang Cheow Ser Provision Shop (also at the Telok Kurau Road/Joo Chiat Place junction); Hamid Mama Store (690A North Bridge Road/ Arab Street); Bukit Timah Railway Station (King Albert Park); Bukit Brown Cemetery (at the Lornie/Sime Road vicinity), notably Singapore's oldest Chinese cemetery cleared for a highway and future housing; Ta Chuan He Chinese Medical Shop (951 Upper Serangoon Road); Sungei Road Flea Market (the "thieves market" at Pitt Road), which is also the oldest market in Singapore's central Rochor area; Carnival Beauty Salon (a hairdresser at 6 Ceylon Road), and at one of the *kelongs*, informal self-built stilt housing on the water, once a familiar sight off Singapore's shores.

The immediate reading of this work is a gendered parody of how Singapore is strategically branded and consumed by the world: the tropical Singapore Girl, "a great way to fly."¹⁵ Yet there are many layers of interpretation possible here, just as Heng tells us her wave welcomes as much as it bids *adieu*. In relocating the Singapore Girl to places that fall outside the city's global imaginary,



Simryn Gill, *How to Eat a Typical Singapore Dish*, 1988



Detail from Singapore Airlines manual on appearance and makeup application for air stewardesses, c. 1990s

the work exposes the measure that controls the invisibility of feminine labour, and the associated suburbs and neighbourhoods that are devalued in the translation of international identity.

In *Singirl Revisits*, Heng sharpens a spatial and gendered critique through her choice of non-heroic sites—spaces that are neither fully private nor officially monumental, yet redolent with everyday use and collective memory. The locations are not Singapore's postcard landmarks, nor sites of explicit deprivation. Instead, they include neighbourhood streets, older housing estates, peripheral urban edges, transit-adjacent zones, and mundane civic backdrops that most residents would recognise but rarely photograph. These are places we pass through rather than linger in, whose value lies in their functionality rather than their visibility. By placing herself—dressed unmistakably as a variant of the Singapore Airlines stewardess—within these settings, Heng compels an encounter between two spatial regimes that normally remain separate: the globally mobile, affectively disciplined body of service capital and the slow, locally sedimented spaces of everyday life.

Notably, the Singapore Girl herself is a persona designed to circulate effortlessly through transnational space, embodying youth, service, and affective labour which are globally legible and exportable. Her body is calibrated to speed, efficiency, and seamless mobility—qualities that mirror the aspirational temporalities of the global city itself. What is striking in these images is not only where Heng stands, but how she stands. The Singapore Girl is trained for seamless movement through regulated interiors—airports, aircraft cabins, lounges—spaces optimised for circulation, efficiency, and the suppression of friction. Yet when this figure is placed in localised places projecting enthusiasm rather than sophistication, the fantasy of frictionless movement falters. Heng's choice of such locations is deliberate. A local coffeeshop, a newsagent, a sundry shop, a hair salon, a traditional medicine hall—these are spaces for inhabitation, people linger in them, and their meanings accumulate slowly through routine, familiarity, and care. They resist smooth passage.



Singirl Revisits, postcards, 2012

Location: Yishun St. 81

Work: Vacuuming, mopping and ironing

Time taken: 1 hour

Negotiated fee: \$15



Location: Yishun Ring Road

Work: Meal preparation and dish washing

Time taken: 3 hours

Negotiated fee: \$30



Location: Gullin View

Work: Cleaning glass doors and ironing

Time taken: 1hr 30 minutes

Negotiated fee: \$15

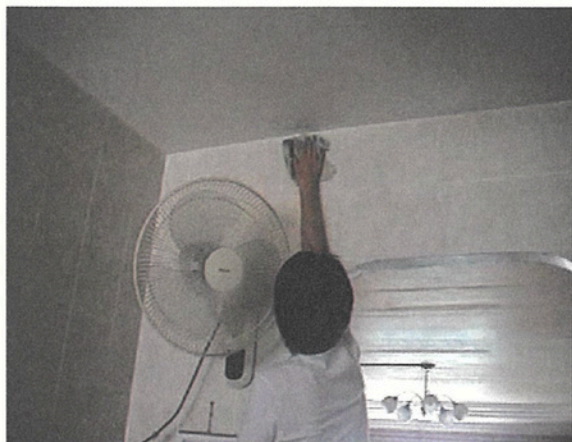


Location: Yishun St.11

Work: Cleaning kitchen walls

Time taken: 45 minutes

Negotiated fee: \$60



Location: Jurong East Ave 1

Work: Sweeping, mopping, window
cleaning, toilet washing, dusting,
painting, interior decorating

Time taken: 3hrs 30 minutes

Negotiated fee: \$100 / priceless



Location: Seletar West

Work: Steam vacuuming, dusting, wiping
and tidying the living-room

Time taken: 1hr

Negotiated fee: \$7.50



Location: Simon Place

Work: Weeding

Time taken: 1hr

Negotiated fee: \$20



The sites are places where time pools rather than accelerates, where waiting, repetition, and minor social interactions dominate. There is a lot of detail in the background of each image: clutter, weeds, overgrown nature, ruins, paraphernalia, a mass of everyday objects, informal self-constructed architectures. In these photographs we are made to sense that the collision is temporal as much as it is spatial: the speed of global service capitalism meets the durational rhythms of neighbourhood life.

What is at stake is therefore not mere parody but the convergence of two spatial regimes at two speeds. In *Singirl Revisits*, this contrast of acceleration versus deceleration becomes even more pronounced as the uniform itself acquires a temporal dissonance, encountering spaces marked by ageing infrastructure, incremental change, and uneven renewal; and a wearer whose ageing body defies the Balmainian silhouette. The work stages a misalignment between the forward-looking rhetoric of global capital and the durational realities of local life.

The unexpected convergence unsettles the viewer. We are not given a stable interpretive frame—neither the glamour of global mobility nor the veracity of documentary reality. Are we meant to see these locations through the Singapore Girl's evaluative gaze, trained to assess destinations according to desirability and recognition? Or are we asked by *Singirl* to recalibrate our own value systems through the quiet insistence of places that matter not because they circulate internationally, but because they sustain everyday life? Heng does not resolve this tension. By staging encounters between incompatible speeds and values, she creates the conditions for thinking-with a situation where friction and hesitation raise the possibility that there are indeed other ways of inhabiting the city.

Isabelle Stengers' "mesopolitics" offers another insight to *Singirl*. Stengers' research, particularly in *Cosmopolitics I* (2010) and *In Catastrophic Times* (2015), develops a philosophy of "nested speeds."¹⁶ She contrasts the "History of Economic Growth"—a globalised, frictionless speed governed by the capitalist entrepreneur—with a slower, more localised "History of Struggle":¹⁷

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Singirl Added Value, 2000

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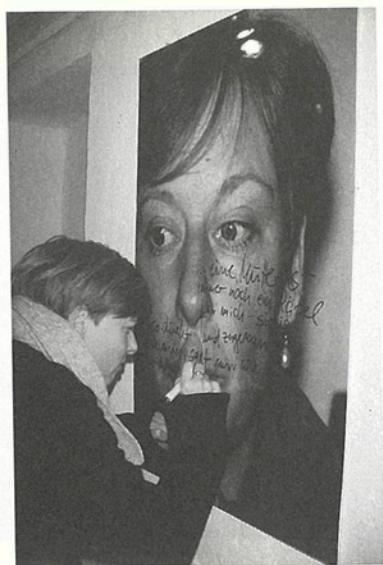
Between Women, 1999–2000

We live in strange times, a little as if we were suspended between two histories, both of which speak of a world become "global." One of them is familiar to us. It has the rhythm of news from the front in the great worldwide competition and has economic growth for its arrow of time. It has the clarity of evidence with regard to what it requires and promotes, but it is marked by a remarkable confusion as to its consequences. The other, by contrast, could be called distinct with regard to what is in the process of happening, but it is obscure with regard to what it requires, the response to give to what is in the process of happening.¹⁸

In trying to attend to what is in the process of happening, Stengers suggests a conceptual intermediary space she calls "mesopolitics." Mesopolitics is the art of inhabiting the "middle" (meso) space between these two histories.¹⁹ Stengers describes capitalist space as a machine that "fabricates its own necessity" and "destroys those who haven't been able to saddle up for the new opportunities."²⁰ The symptoms faced by these mundane spaces is what I call frictionless disappearance: a landscape where specificities of local practices, habits, and temporalities are smoothed over to allow for the rapid circulation of capital.

Writing against grand oppositional gestures that reproduce the logics they seek to resist, Stengers proposes mesopolitics as a mode of engagement that operates neither at the scale of total revolution nor at the level of individual withdrawal. Instead, mesopolitics works in the "thickness" of situations—by creating spaces held within moments of hesitation, care, and attentiveness that interrupt what presents itself as inevitable.²¹ It slows down capitalist superstructures, complicates them, and render their taken-for-granted values negotiable.

Heng's *Singirl* operates at this scale. The work does not parody the Singapore Girl through caricature or denunciation; it preserves the uniform, the posture, the smile, the makeup. Nor does it romanticise the local sites she visits. What it does instead is to insert the stewardess' globalised body of labour into spaces that do not recognise its usual function. The result is a subtle but persistent disruption. The Singapore Girl can no longer perform her intended role, and the



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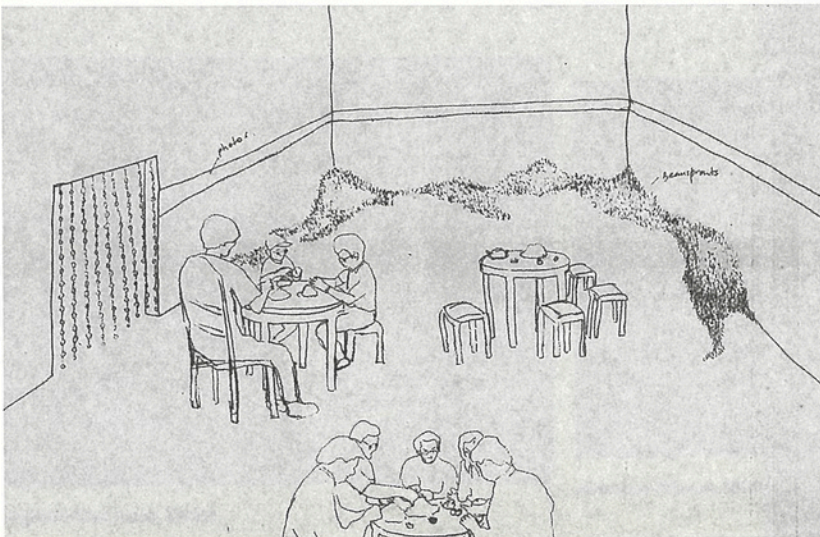
Between Women, 1999–2000

spaces she occupies are momentarily released from their habitual invisibility. This interstitial encounter—working in the cracks between global image and local reality—holds a space for reflection rather than reaction.

In this sense, *Singirl Revisits* does not oppose capitalist space so much as it misaligns it. The work reveals how value is unevenly distributed across bodies, places, and temporalities, and how that distribution is sustained by speed: the speed at which images circulate, services are delivered, and cities rebrand themselves. Heng's strategy is to slow this circulation just enough to make it perceptible. The still photograph, the posed body, the unremarkable backdrop all conspire to hold time open, inviting the viewer to pause where they would normally pass by.

This mesopolitical slowing aligns closely with Heng's broader practice, including iterations of *Let's Chat* and *Another Woman*, where transformation occurs not through confrontation but through sustained, and often disarming presence. In these works, Heng cultivates situations that ask participants and viewers to reorient their attention: to notice who waits, who cares, who ages-in-place, and whose labour allows the city to appear efficient and modern. Rather than offering a counter-image to the capitalist city, Heng offers a counter-temporality—one that values duration, repetition, and relationality over speed and spectacle.

In another sense, *Singirl* does not simply critique representation; it exposes how speed itself functions as a mechanism of spatial exclusion—privileging forms of life that move smoothly through the city while marginalising those that linger, wait, or endure. At the same time, the tactical stance of mesopolitics produces a newer, more agile, more tactical even (dare we say?) gentler feminist framework. Heng's *Singirl* incorporates humour, familiarity, scepticism, and the uncanny as a roadmap to a mode of resistance, operating at the scale of lived experiences and lived spaces. This meso-feminism seeks to be constructive. It seeks to build up, to protect what is important rather than to stridently oppose and dismantle everything in its path. It shows a middle way to move nimbly through capital's roadblocks and negotiate our own journeys.



Proposal drawing for *Let's Chat*, 1999



Situated knowledges in the cycles of domestic space

Let's Chat makes perceptible not just an alternative social encounter but a distinct epistemology of space—one that emerges from the rhythms of domestic labour and the ageing female body. The work insists that what appears slow, repetitive, and unproductive within the dominant temporalities of the capitalist city is not residual but infrastructural: the very condition that allows social life to cohere. In this sense, Heng's practice does not merely illustrate feminist critiques of space, it also activates them.

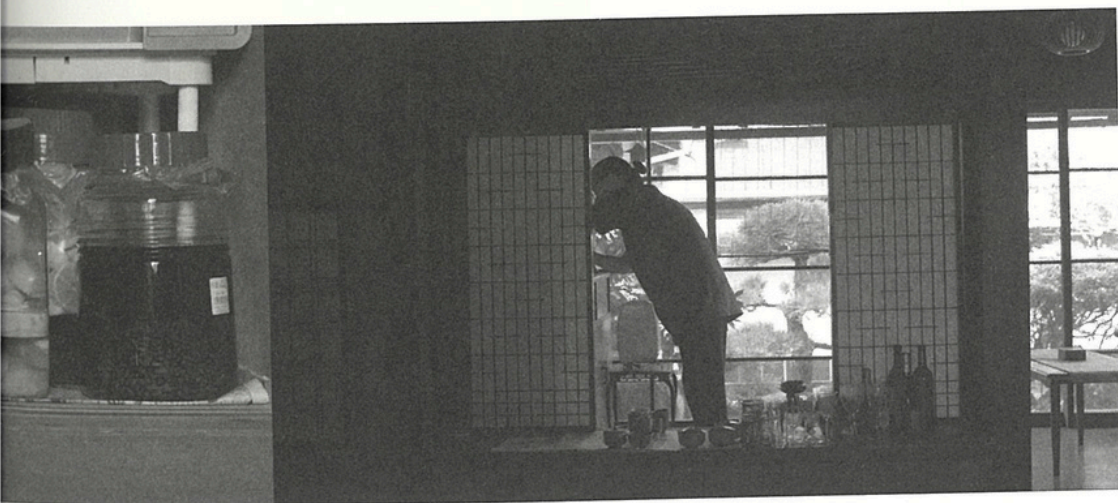
[...] we know that the working day for capital does not necessarily produce a paycheck, it does not begin and end at the factory gates, and we rediscover the nature and extent of housework itself. [...] both in the "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, housework and the family are the pillars of capitalist production.²²

As Silvia Federici has argued, reproductive and care labour are foundational to capitalist economies precisely because they are structurally rendered invisible—naturalised as love, duty, or femininity rather than recognised as labour that reproduces labour-power itself through cyclical acts of maintenance such as cleaning, cooking, nurturing, and household management.²³

Indeed, Heng's repeated staging of domestic gestures in public—cleaning, sitting, chatting, waiting—can be easily dismissed as recuperating nostalgia. I urge you to see otherwise. These stagings, restore the political weight of mundane reproductive work and their agents by situating them in spaces where they are not meant to belong. They expose how the city's apparent efficiency and supply of productive labour ultimately depend on the reproductive forms of labour it simultaneously disavows.

Cleaning, cooking, caring, waiting

The concern with reproductive labour and its uneven valuation extends across different works by Heng, most powerfully and durationally in *Another Woman*, a project spanning nearly three



decades and one which traces the evolving relationship between the artist and her mother. If *Let's Chat* foregrounds reproductive labour as a collective and social condition, and *Singirl* highlights the nesting of incongruent speeds and spaces, *Another Woman* turns inward to the intergenerational intimacy and the labour it demands, sustained across the cyclical durations of an unremarked domestic sphere.

As Singapore's landscape undergoes continual renewal—demolition, upgrading, erasure—the maternal body—a figure strongly anchored to the artist's own mother's experience of displacement and relocation from her village to a high-rise apartment—registers this accelerated time and frictionless space with hesitation and quiet resistance. Bearing the cumulative effects of communication, friendship, and communality, the ageing female body strives to exist and must continue to endure even as the spaces she reclaims and depends on are forever at risk of disappearing. Her body is neither abstracted nor aestheticised. Against a tenuous urban environment, this body is shown as situated, contingent, sometimes resilient and other times fragile. This nation city-state is lauded for its speed of development, its shiny buildings, its sparkling streets, the productivity of its youthful work force, and the desirability of its wealth. Does this city, Heng repeatedly asks, acknowledge other kinds of bodies with their specific strengths and particular vulnerabilities?

Beginning in 1996 and 1997 as a collaboration staged through the visual grammar of family portraiture, Heng produced large-format photographs in which mother and daughter hold each other in quiet embrace, or stand facing one another with arms folded and bodies subtly angled away, as if intimacy must be negotiated rather than assumed. Across the series, she rehearses proximity and distance as positions in space—sometimes tender, sometimes obstinate, sometimes stripped back to the body itself—refusing the sentimental script of the “good” mother-daughter relationship in favour of a more difficult truth: that kinship is made (and remade) through time, misunderstanding, and uneven recognition. This tense proximity is borne out of the tight confines of the public housing flat, where privacy also means being open to family and communal surveillance.

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Keep your workplace clean & tidy,
1983, poster

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Minoru Hirata, Hi Red Center's
"Cleaning Event" (Officially known
as "Be Clean!" and "Campaign to
Promote Cleanliness and Order in
the Metropolitan Area"), 1963

The mother-daughter portraits register the difficulty and necessity of this kind of spatial and relational co-presence. The work emerged from a fractured relationship shaped by linguistic and generational distance—Heng's mother spoke only Teochew, a dialect marginalised by Singapore's language policies of modernisation, which began on 7 September 1979, with the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.²⁴ Heng's art-making process with her mother thus became a form of communication that bypassed the verbal, using bodily proximity and touch to negotiate both estrangement and connection. From the outset, *Another Woman* positioned the maternal body as a site where national development, patriarchal family structures, and the devaluation of women's labour intersect. It also situated this body within the simultaneous security and scrutinizing gaze of the family home, particularly aligning such homes with the nation state's success story of making every citizen a home-owning stakeholder.²⁵

Heng's mother represents a generation of women whose social identities were marginalised by the rapid "nation-building" efforts of post-independence Singapore.²⁶ As the city transitioned from a rural, village-based landscape to a high-rise urbanised hub, women like her experienced a profound sense of linguistic and social estrangement. The state's emphasis on English and Mandarin silenced dialect-speaking elders, making them "another woman"—strangers in their own country, whose folk knowledge was deemed irrelevant to the modern economy. In moving these families from informal village settings to the highly organized infrastructure of public housing, Heng's mother's generation experienced displacement that was not only spatial but also sensory. As she moved into the high-rise housing block and the use of Mandarin displaced the popularity of dialect, she lost her favourite local opera on the radio and her social networks in the village, rendering her world silent and alien.²⁷

Read through the space of home, these portraits are less a private memoir than an inquiry into how women, especially of Heng's mother's generation, are trained to inhabit domestic interiors as duty, not selfhood. Heng has spoken of a large Chinese household governed by patriarchal ethics, where her mother's overwork and devotion to husband and sons produced estrangement rather than closeness; the photographs become a method of communication when

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Washing Exercise, 1997

ordinary speech cannot hold what needs to be said.²⁸ In this sense, “home” is not an intimate refuge but a contested architecture of roles—caregiver, daughter, dutiful woman—whose boundaries are continually policed by social perception: what should remain discreet, what can be shown, what counts as respectable femininity, what is dismissed as mere “women’s issues.” The later iterations of the series (revisited in 2014 and again in 2023) make explicit that these negotiations do not resolve with adulthood; they persist across generations, as each woman learns to read the other not only as “mother” or “daughter,” but as a person formed by a gendered life.

By the time Heng made *Dear Mother* (2009), the artist’s intimacy with her mother is distilled as fragments: hands placed on a back, arms folded across a chest, gestures of touch isolated and enlarged. Care appears here not as narrative but as affect—as something felt and enacted. These hands are the instruments of reproductive labour, historically associated with cleaning, feeding, and maintenance; yet in these images, they are refigured as sites of tenderness and mutual recognition. Through these photographs, the domestic sphere is no longer a backdrop but a tactile field structured by care:

For women, the body, the home, and the street have all been arenas of conflict. Examining them as political territories—bounded spaces with some form of enforcement of the boundaries—helps us to analyze the spatial dimensions of “woman’s sphere” at any given time. And just as gender can be mapped as a struggle over social reproduction that occurs at various scales of space, the same is true of race, class, and many other social issues.²⁹

Dolores Hayden’s feminist critique of the ideology of separate spheres argues that domestic labour produces space just as surely as architecture or planning, yet disappears from urban knowledge because it is framed as private, natural, and unproductive.³⁰ Cleaning, cooking, caring, waiting—these practices organise interiors, structure daily rhythms, and sustain bodies, but leave little trace in official spatial histories. In the fragmented and affective parts of *Dear Mother*, Heng reclaims the missing spaces and agents which undergird the making of productive public space.

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Walking the Stool, 1999

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Singirl Added Value, 2000

In *Twenty Years Later* (2014), time asserts itself more forcefully. The bodies of both women bear visible change. Ageing becomes spatial: movement slows, postures alter, and the domestic interior is reorganised around vulnerability and frailty. Care now carries asymmetry. The daughter's mobility is increasingly constrained by responsibility; the mother's body demands accommodation. What emerges is a form of spatial knowledge produced not through expansion or circulation, but through staying-with—through the recalibration of daily life around dependency. Here, Heng makes visible what Doreen Massey describes as space constituted through unequal relations stretched out over time.³¹ Massey's insistence that space is socially produced and shot through with power relations is useful here, not as an abstract framework but as a way of understanding how Heng's works disclose the gendering of spatial experience. Spaces are not neutral containers; they are structured through expectations about who belongs, who moves freely, who waits, and who labours. The ageing female body, in this context, becomes increasingly "out of place"—too slow, too demanding of care, too resistant to the smooth functioning of capitalist time. This body is also paradoxical: indispensable to social reproduction, yet increasingly "out of place" within an urban order that privileges speed, independence, and renewal. Massey's relational understanding of space further clarifies what is at stake.³² If space is constituted through social relations stretched out over time, then the practices of care depicted in the many iterations of *Another Woman* are not marginal to spatial production—they are central to it. Domestic space emerges not as a retreat from public life, but acts as a critical interface where housing policy, gender norms, affective labour, and urban change converge.

This durational logic reaches its most acute articulation in *Always By My Side* (2023), produced as a continuation of *Another Woman* in the context of palliative care. By 2023, images accrued over roughly thirty years are gathered and re-framed in the shadow of mortality, with Heng continuing to provide palliative care for her mother even as she enters her own later life. Care here is continuous rather than episodic; accompaniment replaces encounter. Heng does not monumentalise her devotion, nor does she frame it as sacrifice. Instead, she insists on the ordinariness of care work. The title signals endurance—care as something that happens day after

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Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/ Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (detail), 1973













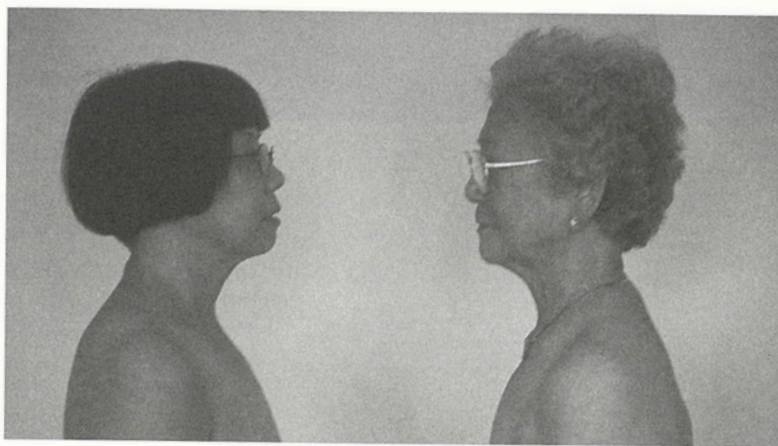
153-158 *Another Woman* (HDB studies), 19

day, beyond recognition, reward, and performance. What makes this ordinariness so charged however is that care becomes a modality that she repeatedly returns to—after almost three decades of trying to understand what being with a mother and what being a daughter might mean.

Here, the question of women's roles is sharpened by finitude. The three-decade-long work records not a single important moment, but the long middle of caregiving—the repetitive, undignified, bodily labour through which “private” life is sustained, and through which mother and daughter come to recognise one another anew. If the early photographs test the distance imposed by patriarchal family structure, the later work shows another, equally demanding negotiation: how to inhabit the home as a space of end-of-life care without allowing care to erase the carer; how to let the intimate remain intimate, while acknowledging that the social scripts governing women's labour, ageing, and devotion are always pressing at the threshold between private and public.

Through its iterations, *Another Woman* sharpens Federici's critique by showing that reproductive labour is not only economically foundational but spatially generative.³³ Care reorganises interiors, dictates rhythms, constrains and enables movement, and produces forms of attachment that sit uneasily with the city's developmental narratives. Once again, Heng does not resolve this contradiction. She refuses to redeem ageing through productivity or visibility. She allows vulnerability and dependency to remain present. In doing so, the work resists symbolic closure and insists on lived contradiction as a spatial condition.

Heng's insistence aligns with forms of understanding that are partial, embodied, and accountable to their conditions of production.³⁴ She does not claim a neutral or elevated vantage point; knowledge in *Another Woman* is generated through bodily co-presence, through care enacted over time, through remaining with another body as it changes. The mother is neither metaphor nor object; she is a co-constitutive subject through whom spatial knowledge, particularly that of the Singaporean home with its proximate intergenerational norms played out in a single shared space, is slowly made. The body, here, is not illustrative but epistemic. Heng speaks from the positions of daughter, woman, worker, and citizen, using performance to make



Another Woman, 1996

visible the partial perspectives through which space is lived and understood. The body, in her art, is not merely represented; it is the medium through which lived and embodied modes of spatial knowledge are generated.

Conclusion: Non-heroic bodies, minor gestures, minor places, durational practices

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope?—
You yourself must change it.—
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing?—
You yourself must change it.—
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?³⁵

By insisting on the significance of non-heroic bodies, minor places and gestures, and durational practices, Heng's work asks us to reconsider whose lives and labours are allowed to count as spatial knowledge—and what kinds of cities might emerge if we took those bodies seriously. This intervention can be further understood through Gillian Rose's feminist critique of "time-geography," which is particularly attentive to how accounts of everyday life continue to privilege a masculinist conception of time and space even when they claim to centre the ordinary.³⁶ While time-geography tracks daily routines and constraints, Rose argues that its abstract, diagrammatic representations ultimately flatten lived experience, reducing time to movement, productivity, and coordination. In doing so, it struggles to account for the affective, embodied, and relational



Another Woman, 1996

dimensions of reproductive labour—waiting, caring, lingering, worrying—which do not normally register as events or trajectories, but nonetheless continue to structure, and guarantee, everyday life.³⁷

Heng's work can be read as a quiet refusal of this abstraction. Her counter-temporality does not map time as a sequence of tasks or paths but inhabits it through experiences and contradictions. In *Let's Chat*, time unfolds through sitting together, repeating a domestic gesture, and allowing conversation to meander without an outcome. In *Another Woman*, time accumulates in the body itself—through ageing, dependency, and the gradual reorientation of care between mother and daughter. These are temporalities that cannot be captured by linear progression or efficiency metrics; they are felt rather than plotted. By foregrounding such durations, Heng exposes what Rose identifies as the gendered blind spot of spatiotemporal frameworks: the tendency to value time and space only when these are economically and visibly productive. Her practice aligns with Rose's insistence that feminist spatial knowledge must attend not only to where and when people move, but to how bodies remain, endure, and attend to others.³⁸ Heng's durational pieces reappraise different notions of time and space that make life possible, yet rarely count as valuable to urban life or carry a national impact. Where *Singirl* misaligns the smooth circulation of global femininity, and *Let's Chat* opens a collective pause within public space, *Another Woman* insists that the most profound spatial critique may lie in cyclical domestic duration itself—in the time it takes to care, to stay, to try, and to endure, at home.

I have chosen to discuss works that articulate a critique of the capitalist city, in a mode of criticism that does not rely on spectacle or overt opposition. Heng speaks through the slow and persistent reassertion of domestic and care-based temporalities into public spaces, showing that what appears marginal—women's work, ageing bodies, everyday spaces—is in fact structurally central to how the city functions and social lives. In this sense, Heng's performances do more than represent gendered space; they actively remake the terms through which space can be knowable and known. By centring embodied, situated, and relational forms of knowledge, Heng challenges the hierarchies that separate private from public, reproduction from production, and memory from redevelopment.



I Can Speak Mandarin! Mandarin's in, dialect's out, 1983, poster

I would like to end with a small detour into a little discussed work. *Walking the Stool* (1999), also known as *Taking My Stool for a Walk*, is a playful coda to Heng's examination of urban space, gender, and embodied agency. Emerging in the wake of Singapore's decade-long funding restriction on performance art, the work operates as a minor gesture in Erin Manning's sense: a low-frequency intervention that expresses dissent, without frontal opposition.³⁹ By walking a wooden stool attached with wheels and a leash through the main shopping districts of Bugis and Orchard Road as if it were a pet, Heng exploits a loophole in the urban order. Here the stool as an object has not become a challenge to art (à la Duchamp) but a form of political critique. She transforms a domestic object into a mobile claim on public space. Heng's walk with her stool addresses the demands of the modern city, where urban space is coded into zones of coordination, containment, and productivity. In this highly regulated landscape, the female body is subjected to hyper-vigilance and patriarchal standards. *Walking the Stool* upsets this teleological structure by claiming bodily autonomy within the public sphere. By moving through the city with a useless and indeed completely absurd object, Heng's body becomes a site where rituals and lived experience converge to challenge the ideologies of progressive state narratives. Mobilising ordinary acts—talking, waiting, walking, posing—to unsettle the gendered logics that organise both domestic and civic life, the (female) body in Heng's works, is a situated site of memory, labour, and resistance. Whether confronting patriarchal distance within the home, state regulation in the street, or the commodified femininity of the Singapore Girl, Heng insists on presence as a mode of refusal, as a symptom of hesitation. These works reclaim space not through spectacle but by way of intimacy and embodied deviance—foregrounding how the gendered body can quietly re-script the spatial imaginaries of a capitalist city.

In this sense, Amanda Heng's art does more than represent gendered space; she actively and subtly remakes the terms through which Singapore—her city, her birthplace, where she grew up, and where she continues to live—can be known. By prioritising embodied, situated, and relational forms of knowledge, her work challenges the epistemic hierarchies that separate private from public, reproduction from production, and memory from development. She asks us to reconsider whose bodies and whose labours are allowed to count as spatial knowledge—and what a city might become when we seriously account for, accommodate, and value all types of bodies and subjectivities. This change begins from, and returns to, the banal, the freedom of the daily, as we sit around and pluck bean sprouts together.



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The author thanks Simryn Gill and Tom Melick for their generous conversations and careful edits; Selene Yap and her team for providing materials on the artist, and Wan Theng Tan whose research and assistance enabled the writing of this essay.

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- 6 Heng, "The Art of Engagement in Everyday Life," p. 14.
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Let's Chat, The Substation Singapore, 1996



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Let's Chat, Bandung, 1998

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Let's Chat, Fukuoka, 1999



Let's Chat, Singapore Art Museum, 2000



Let's Chat, Tropical Lab, LaSalle College of the Arts, Singapore, 2011



成为艺术的关键是什么?

行万里路

寻找回家的路

路是自己走的

一直享受一直在路上的感觉

Walk

一步一脚印

寻找艺术意义

自己的人生道路

Research project

Walk to visit

Case studies.

Women finding new ways
— feminism in Asia

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 生活事物所蕴涵的意义。

在创作与真实之间寻找

与对城市的反思。

咀嚼着居住与文化

城市与人

人与文化

总是
 脱离

不少
 是
 的
 表现

做
想 走

别人没有做过时。

做别人没有做过时

走别人没有走过的路

道路虽然崎岖，未来却是
光明。

SP: I've been looking at your notes. "Book and walk. Ghost and walk. Found and walk. Plant and walk."

AH: Wow.

SP: "Walk-based meetings." I know. Wow.

AH: I can't even remember writing that.

SP: One reads: "Serendipity is the luck some people have in finding or creating interesting and valuable/meaningful things by chance." I would like to leave this in the book if you would.

AH: I know. Yeah, okay, okay, but still, let me look through everything first. ... I think it was after the pandemic, when everything reopened... They [The Necessary Stage] said that they wanted to focus on one particular work by a local artist. And then, you know, people nominated my work, this walk thing. So then I said that, okay, I can still do that, I can do Let's Walk, but then I wanted to do another kind of walk. So that's how I decided to walk from one end of Singapore to the other.

SP: From the south to the north. But you did that alone. You didn't invite people to join you like the other walking works.

AH: That's my condition. I said that I will do this walk all by myself, and I don't want any documentation. I know they followed me, sent someone to follow me, you know, just to make sure that I am still alive or whatever, because I didn't know how bad, how difficult it would be. But I told them it's just my personal walk.

SP: And that route marked in red on the maps I saw, that was made before the walk or after you finished?

AH: Usually I prepare.

SP: So you had a rough idea which way you would go?

AH: I have no idea exactly the actual route. Because there might be main streets, or, you know, smaller roads, whatever ways that I don't know until I start. So as I walk, I asked people along the way. I know that I wanted to start from the south, which is the harbour, the old harbour in... besides the Merlion.

SP: Clifford Pier.

AH: Clifford Pier, yeah, yeah. Of course, it's different now, it's a hotel. So, I started from there, and then you have to go through, actually, all these shopping malls, because they are the bridges across main roads.

1/9/2017

route map.

- ① Clifford Pier. 9am
 Raffles Place stn
 Battery Road
 south canal Rd
 North Canal Rd
 Merchant Rd
 Clemenceau Ave.
 Penang Rd
 Orchard Rd stn
 Scotts Rd,
 Newton Circle stn
 Bt Timah Road stn sixth Ave
 upp. Bt. Timah Rd. stn Bt. panjang
 woodlands Rd. Kranji stn. (10 mile junction)
 woodlands checkpoint

SP: So you have to walk through them.

AH: Yeah, I had to go through these overhead bridges... these are things that I don't know until I begin, because these are changes that have happened. So I am no longer able to walk just on the ground. That means you go up the escalator, go through the shopping malls and overhead paths. And then you land up in some shopping mall or office building, and then you find your road outside. So you need to figure out how to get down, how to continue the walk and all that. Yeah, certain parts of the walk were clear to me, like Orchard Road. You know, where you go. So I have a rough idea, Orchard Road, Newton, but then probably after Newton, I'm not sure. But I continue walking until I find all those industrial areas almost to the north already. Kranji, Woodlands. I have all these names in my mind. And then I check out the map a little bit like, "Okay, roughly like this."

SP: How long did that take? Is that a day's walk?

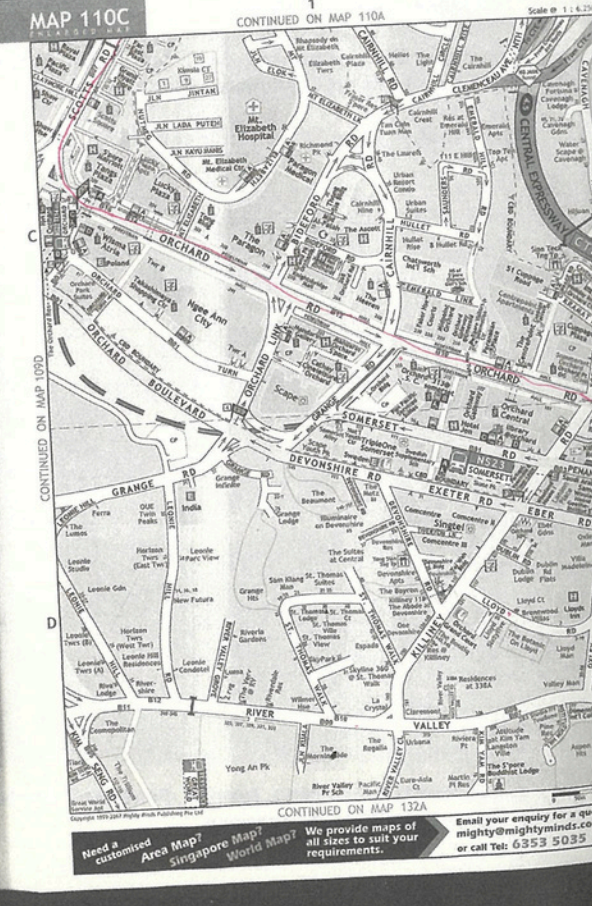
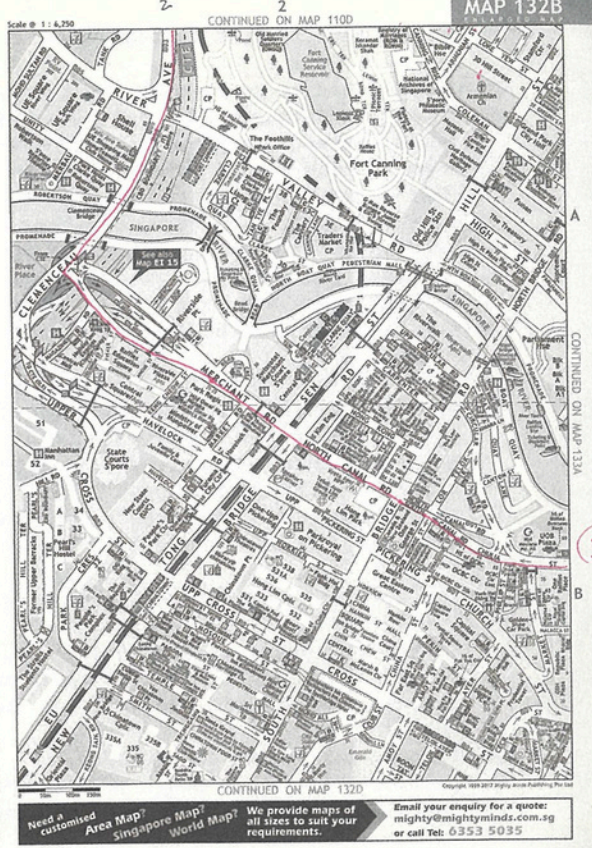
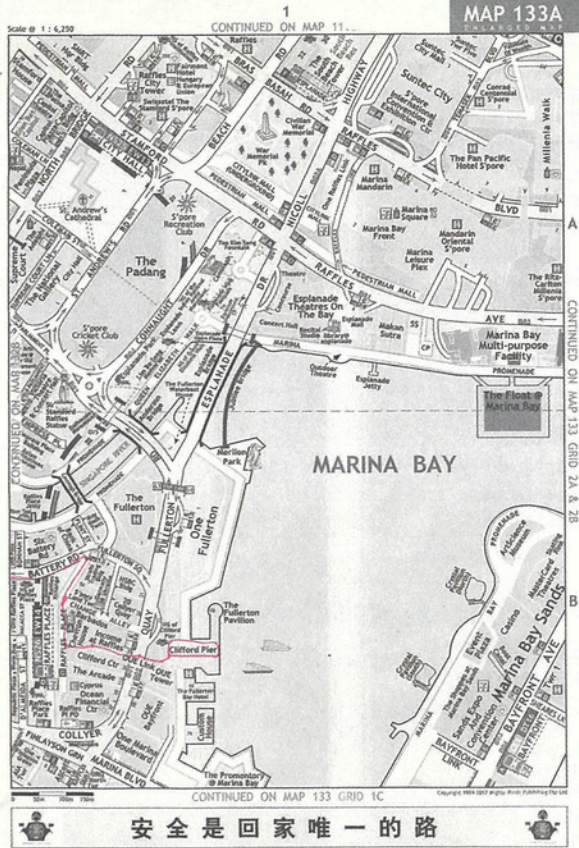
AH: I thought I could finish in one day, but no. Because I needed to follow a route where I can find toilets, yeah, along the way, and then lunch.

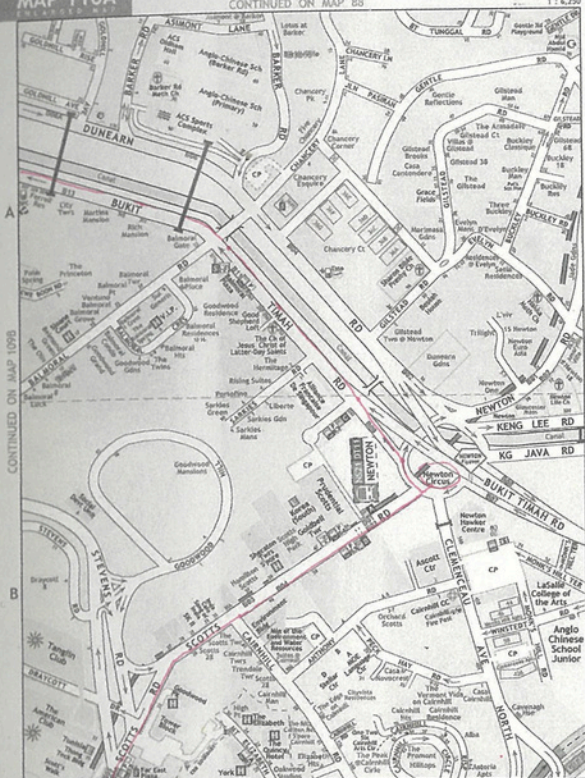
SP: I mean, talk about being older, the older, particularly female body, you literally choose your route according to where you can find loos.

AH: Exactly! Like a dog, you know. You leave your scent behind. So that you can trace your journey, you know, yeah. [laughter]

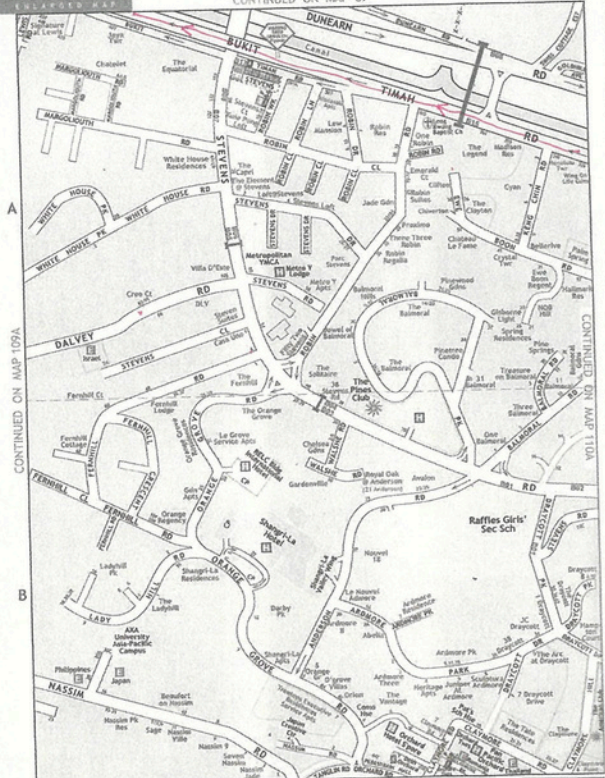
SP: And then the next day, you took a train or a taxi to where you stopped and continued?

AH: Yeah, yeah. Then I continued...

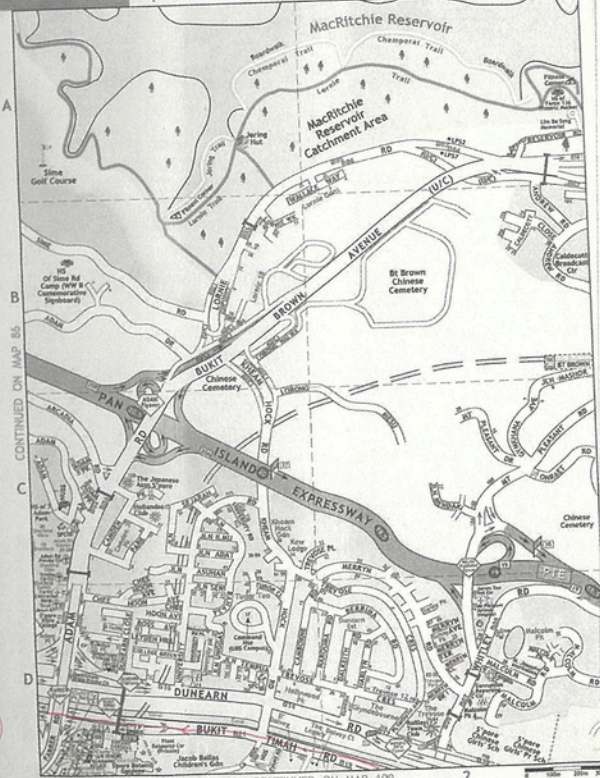




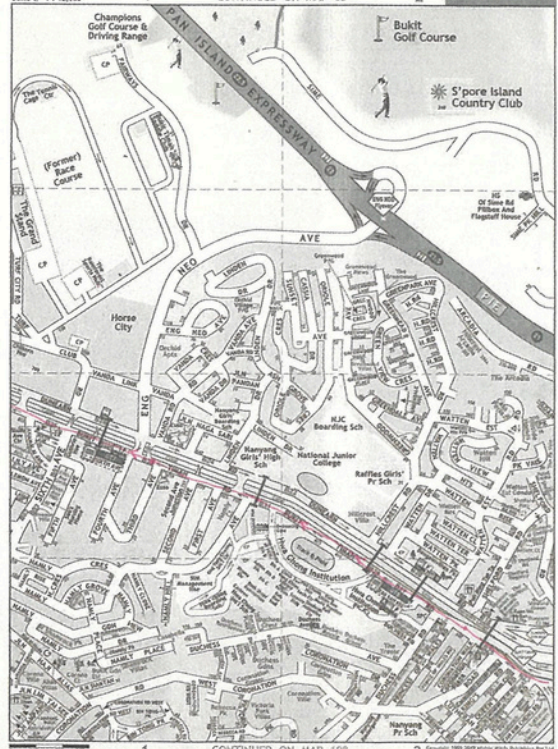
安全是回家唯一的路



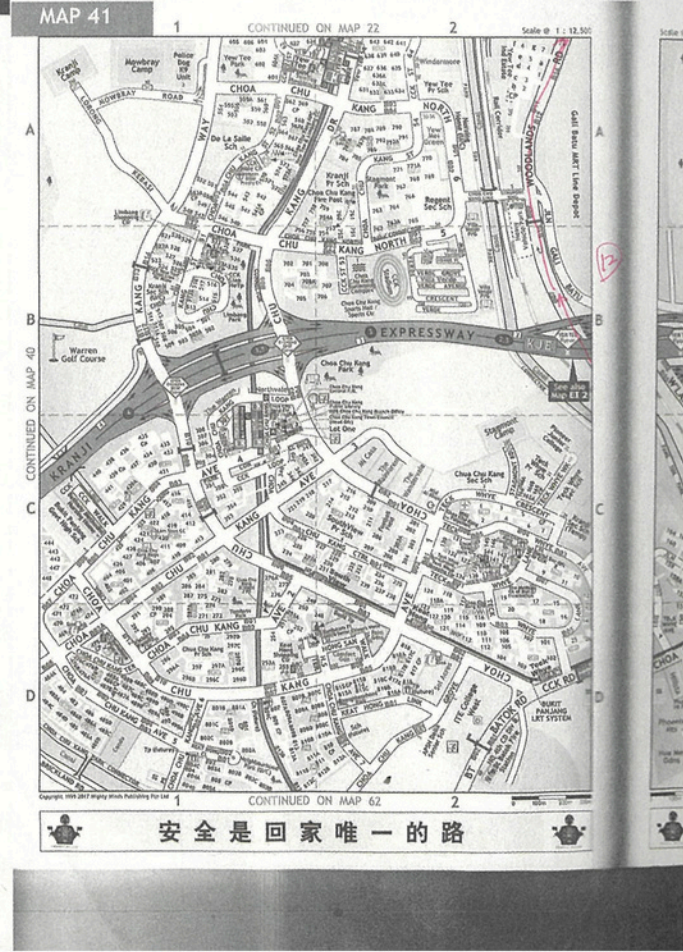
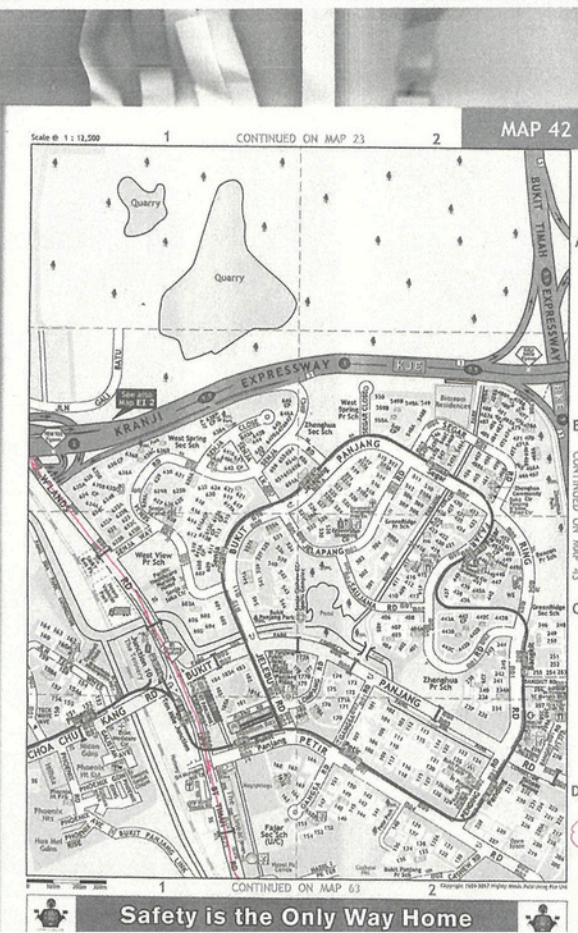
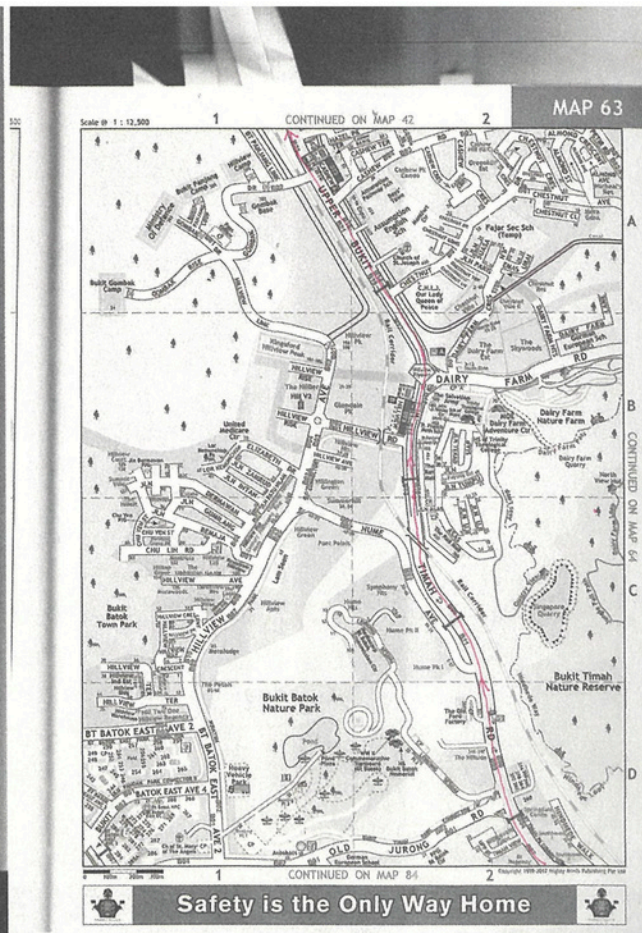
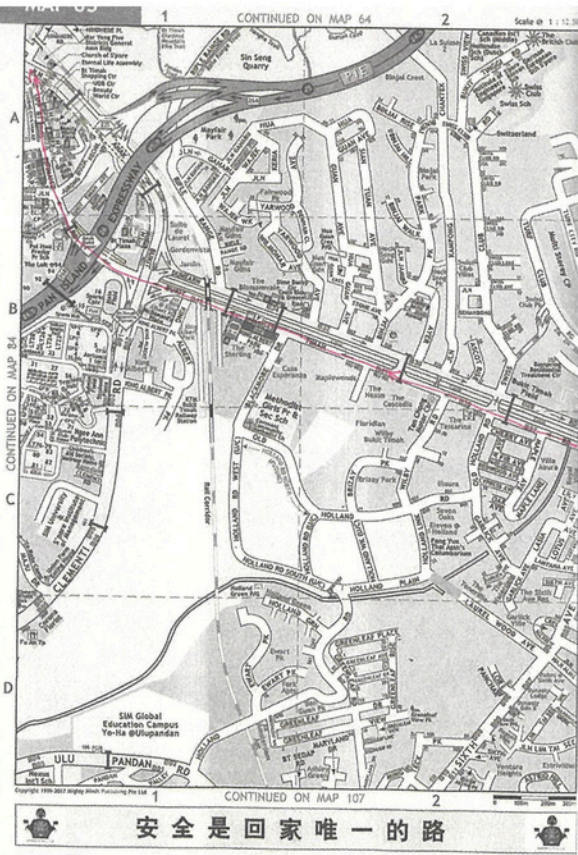
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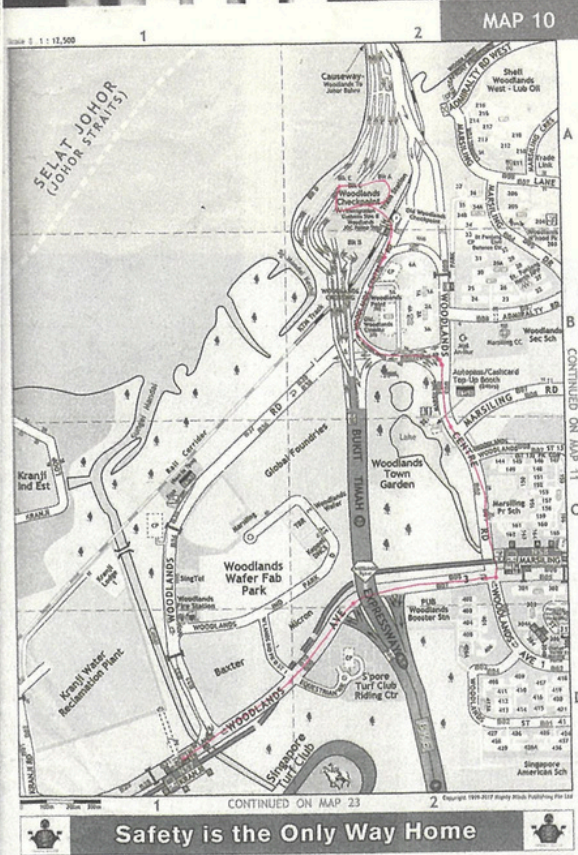
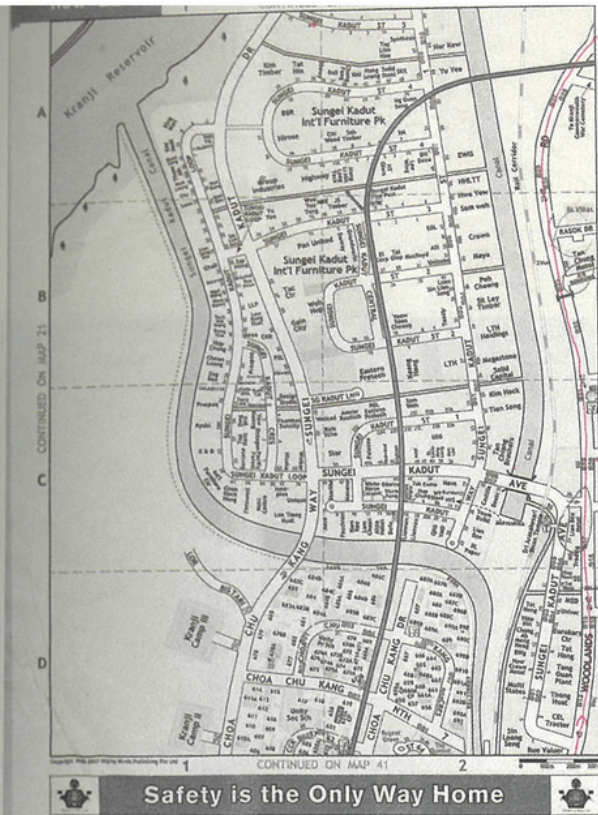


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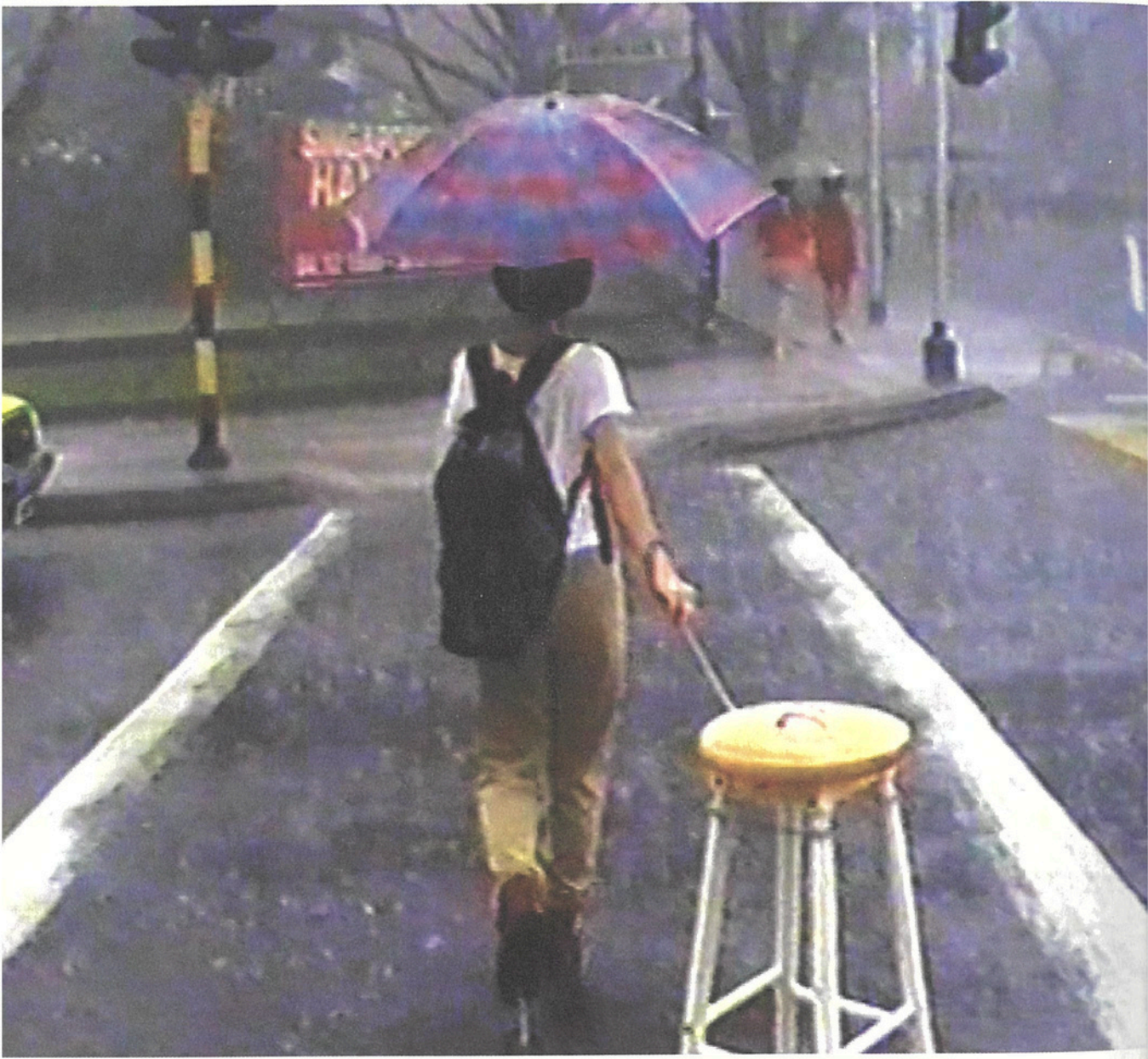
Safety is the Only Way Home















Walking with Ananda



195-200 *Walking the Stool* with Hew Soo Hun and Luanne Tay, 1999