

Divine Library:
Building an Unseen Monument
by Lilian Chee

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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Chapter Title	Creator: N.A.	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 18/52
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An email arrives with an attachment. He sends us an image of the building. It is the only one that survives. It arrives as a grainy scanned sketch from an old newspaper. There is a rectangular box elevated on columns, with a mural in the centre. The paper promised a monument worth a hundred thousand dollars, which was never made. He dreams of resurrecting the box, 49 years after it vanished, buried like a ruin in a forgotten paper archive. He systematically investigates. He talks to the architect. He is looking for answers. Paradoxically, the more persistently he digs, the less he finds. So he starts folding, cutting, creasing and slicing paper. This is not a mindless activity. He visits bookshop after bookshop in search of techniques. He stays for a long time in the children's books section. Parts of the building start to appear in paper fragments. Their fragile carcasses lie precariously on tables. Some are pinned on walls. In the meantime, the singular image of the building acquires more weight than its original role as historical evidence. It turns into a talisman. In the next three weeks, we all stay transfixed on the image. He complains of backaches and does not sleep well. It must, we imagine, occupy his dreams.

With the rise of the book as an object in its own right, nineteenth-century French novelist Victor Hugo forewarned that 'This would kill that', meaning that the book would threaten the stronghold of the building as a primary medium of experience and meaning. Hugo's premonition could not have been more prescient especially in the realm of unbuilt architecture, whose afterlife is guaranteed only insofar as it is properly preserved on the page.

Yet, paper architecture is no bad thing. Architects from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier and Rem Koolhaas have implicitly acknowledged the pulling power of the book as a corollary medium to the building. Books have also tended to outlast buildings. While operating at vastly incommensurate scales and emphasising different materialities, the building and the book nevertheless share a common desire to communicate emotion and poetry through an immersive experience, one which may be described simply, if not summarily, as enabling us to 'enter' another world. This mode of entry is however highly differentiated given that the realm of the building coheres more closely with a physical and tangible reality, while the book operates loosely through allusions, associations, imagery and imagination.

Michael Lee's *The \$100,000 gallery of art* is situated at the threshold of these two experiential dimensions. Taking Singapore architect, past city councillor and past president of the Singapore Art Society Dr Ho Kok Hoe's 1958 unbuilt sketch for the Singapore Art Gallery as its seed, Lee constructs three sets of architecturally inspired models, each

encased in an identical book format. *Plans* is based on imagined architectural plans of the gallery, *Perspectives* reflects one-point perspective views of the building's key spaces, and *Assemblages* contains a mélange of the gallery's structural framework with the interior contents spilling out of the book's tidy A4 boundaries, recalling the all-time favourite pop-up book. Lee's books explore the experiential and visual mileage of the architectural model whilst keeping this three-dimensional artifact firmly within the conventions of the bound copy.

'The construction of a model, therefore, was for him a miracle of equilibrium between principles (left in shadow) and experience (elusive), but the result should be more substantial than either'.¹

In themselves, the architectural model and the book are powerful objects, which function equally through metaphorical and metonymical means as they do in their literal forms. Albert C. Smith argues that the architectural model carries the propensity of a 'divining mechanism', that is, the model can be used 'to foretell through inspiration, intuition and reflection' what is still unseen.² Etymologically, the word 'model' may also be associated with the French word *maquette*, which means a kind of demonstration. Significantly, 'the word "demonstrate"', Smith reiterates, 'comes from the Latin *monstrum*, and means to divine, portend or warn. [and] allows a certain prophetic indication of meaning through marvel, prodigy and wonder'.³

The architectural model is also never a mere representation of the real but a barely imaginable ideal with a life of its own, in a sense, a utopia constructed. As architect Michael Graves succinctly declares, 'Once we have modeled or represented an idea, that representation, the object made, begins to have a life of its own, somewhat separate or beyond our original conception'.⁴ In striving to point towards an idealised and still invisible condition, the model is essentially, that is, necessarily, always incomplete:

... the space of the model lies on the border between representation and actuality. Like the frame of a painting, it demarcates a limit between the work and what lies beyond. And like the frame, the model is neither wholly inside nor wholly outside, neither pure representation nor transcendent object. It claims a certain autonomous object hood, yet this condition is always incomplete. The model is always a model of.⁵

While envisioning a size, which far exceeds its physical form, the richness of the model lies precisely in its minute scale. Mark Morris observes that the model captures our 'precondition' to relate to and understand miniature objects given that this skill was developed since childhood.⁶ The miniature creates an illusion of control or alienation (recall Gulliver with the Lilliputians or Alice after she ate the cake). It 'presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination'.⁷ The experience of a miniature is also enriched by what Susan Stewart astutely observes to be firstly, a rare insight into the slippery notion of time, '... an accumulation of transformations made in time; the laboriously handmade object results in a representation of *temporal* magnitude'.⁸ And secondly, the miniature restores a fleeting intimacy between consumer and maker:

... the miniature historically has emphasised a particular configuration of subjectivity: first-person experience; single-point perspective; spatial extension from the individual perceiving viewer; interiority and domesticity in opposition to ... the monumental; the diminutive, the childlike, the pastoral, and the picturesque as 'alternative' or alienated views.⁹

More poignantly, the smallness of an object emphasises the frailty of the human condition, and honours a period in one's life when greatness and elegance could still be grasped through things, which were comparatively simple and ephemeral.

*'... it is worth remembering how very strange a thing a book actually is.'*¹⁰

Books are not only used for reading. As Alec Finlay convincingly argues, 'a new proprioception of the book' has emerged, that is to say, our relationship to books and how they are used has evolved given that books are valued 'not only in reading but in the reassuring and inspiring presence that they have'.¹¹ In her sophisticated discourse on the miniature, Stewart includes the book as part of an exclusive inventory of physically small yet psychologically immense objects. The book, according to Stewart, has a metaphorical structure, 'The metaphors of the book are metaphors of containment, of exteriority and interiority, of surface and depth, of covering and exposure, of taking apart and putting together'.¹² In Stewart's description, the book is explored in its own right as a space, which can be occupied.

Similarly, Gérard Genette suggests that one's ability to read a book hinges on the book's formal conventions or what he calls 'paratext', that is, the banal materiality of often taken-for-granted elements such as 'the title, the frontispiece, the author's name, the publisher's colophon, the binding, format or dimension, the fact of a bookmark, etc.'. ¹³ Genette observes that the 'paratext' is actually a 'threshold' or a 'vestibule', which offers the reader 'the possibility of stepping inside or turning back', and thus, may be also seen as 'a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction'.¹⁴ Thus, books, in the sense of their unique objecthood and in their capacity to transport the reader to somewhere else, may be also seen as spatially orientated objects. Consequently, the confluence of the architectural model and the book, as we find here in the case of Lee's *The \$100,000 gallery of art*, produces an uncanny third space, which is at once alluring in its familiarity of forms, yet also demanding in this hybrid object's foreignness.

Lee's book-models are meant to be tactile, intimate and wondrous. They are miniatures of a utopian moment. They seek out the lone reader. They strive to materialise the unseen monument. While emphasising the labour and ephemerality of the handcut and handmade, Lee's technique is significantly modelled after architectural drawing conventions, albeit by transposing hermetic architectural drawing codifications into more tangible forms. For example, in *Plans*, the strategy is to cut through voids, literally hollowing out the page while simultaneously using the thickness of the book to burrow, as it were, into the vertical depths of the imagined building. Similarly, each page of *Perspectives* captures a void, which initially appears on its own like a misplaced hole but effectively represents a discrete space contained within one's single frame of vision as one journeys through the gallery. Consequently, only when the pages of *Perspectives* are turned do the fragmented voids merge to form a legible space: a room, a corridor, a doorway takes shape as the book-model is read.

Assemblages explores the architectural section, which technically means a 'cut' through the building. Here, Lee's desire to manifest the 'magical' takes hold. The genre of the pop-up book is an inverse of the experiences provided by the other two books, which respectively demonstrate space as a quantity to be excavated or an element, which envelops. A 'cut' through the building unfurls its unpredictable contents, which promptly spill out of the neat box frame structure, and subsequently also outside the formal boundaries of the bound book. Unless disciplined under the covers of the book, the section is a slice through the box, which demonstrates the excessive and alchemical assembly of hidden forms, furtive movement and secret desires. By literally opening the book, the reader liberates the section of the gallery, that is, its innermost potential, a dream space vast and familiar in the

manner of childhood afternoons spent with magnificent castles, beautiful maidens and monstrous creatures, all summoned or dismissed by the flip of a page.

Beyond the pleasure of the page, the book and the model all rolled into one, the three model-books and an accompanying volume of texts (compiling a list of historical documents and a transcribed interview with the architect of the gallery) serves an archival function. They open a cultural window into a historical event, which has largely been forgotten. The reading of these model-books bring to life the makers, in this instance, both Ho the architect and Lee the artist, in almost equal collaboration, and thus cast, on a larger scale, architecture and art as rich interdisciplinary counterpoints. Most importantly, the book-models give us, its readers, a way into the Singapore Art Gallery, from which we are at liberty to proceed or detour, accept or contest. Here is a threshold space, which we can inhabit alone in private, or collectively in reverie.

Recalling that the model is a divining mechanism, which can inspire and reveal the invisible, then, we may perceive these books as to form a divine library, that simultaneously portends, unearths, remembers and mourns a monument, which never would be.

*'I never... searched for nests... never looked for plants or threw stones at birds. But books were my birds and nests, my pets, my stable and my countryside; the library was the world trapped in a mirror; it had its infinite breadth, its variety and unpredictability...'*¹⁵

Notes:

- ¹ Italo Calvino, 'The model of models', in *Mr Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (London: Minerva, 1994), pp.97-100; here p.98.
- ² Albert C. Smith, 'Define/Divine/Design', in *Architectural Model as Machine: A New View of Models from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2004), pp.1-37; here p.2.
- ³ Smith, 'Define/Divine/Design', p.2.
- ⁴ Michael Graves, 'The Wagenman House and the Crooks House', in Kenneth Frampton and Silvia Kolbowski (eds.), *Idea as Model* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), p.38 [catalogue for architectural model exhibition in New York (1977), curated by Peter Eisenman]. See also Karen Moon, *Modeling Messages: The Architect and the Model* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005), pp.11-32; Marian Macken, 'Supermodels', review of an exhibition of *Supermodels: An Exhibition of Space and Form of Architectural Models* at St Margaret's Complex, Sydney (2006), curated by Sam Marshall <http://www.archmedia.com.au/aa/aissue.php?issueid=200611&article=4&typeon=1> (accessed on 19 July 2007); Mark Morris, *Architecture and the Miniature* (West Sussex: Wiley Academy, 2006), pp.117-8.
- ⁵ Christian Hubert, 'The Ruins of Representation' (1981), original essay in exhibition catalogue for *Idea as Model*, republished online <http://www.christianhubert.com/writings/index.htm> (accessed 19 July 2007).
- ⁶ Morris, *Architecture and the Miniature*, p.117.
- ⁷ Susan Stewart, 'The Miniature', in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp.37-69; here p.69.
- ⁸ Susan Stewart, 'On the Threshold of the Visible', in *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp.159-65; here p.162.
- ⁹ Stewart, 'On the Threshold of the Visible', p.164.
- ¹⁰ Shepherd Steiner and Rodney Graham, 'Book Things', in Alec Finlay (ed.), *The Libraries of Thought and Imagination: An Anthology of Books and Bookshelves* (Edinburgh: Pocket Books, 2001), pp.155-9, here p.158.
- ¹¹ Alec Finlay, 'And so books entered our lives...', in Finlay (ed.), *The Libraries of Thought and Imagination*, pp.13-20, here p.15.
- ¹² Stewart, 'The Miniature', p.37.
- ¹³ Steiner and Graham, 'Book Things', p.157.
- ¹⁴ Gérard Genette cited by Steiner and Graham, 'Book Things', p.157.
- ¹⁵ From Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, cited by Finlay, 'And so books entered our lives...', p.13.

Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Divine Library; Building an Unseen Monument	Creator: Dr Lillian Chee	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 21/52
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Govt. backs art gallery idea

**BUT NO MONEY TO
CARRY OUT
PROJECT NOW,
SAYS MINISTER**

By Free Press Staff Reporter

THE Minister for Culture, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, yesterday gave his blessing to the proposal for a public art gallery in Singapore, but doubted the Government could launch the project immediately because of financial stringency.

He told the Free Press: "The idea is good, but we must consider the Government's financial position. I am not prepared to say anything more until I have studied the suggestion further."

The Minister said the suggestion made by Mr. Lok Wan Tho, the cinema magnate, that the Government should buy works by Malayan artists and hang them up in public buildings was also being considered.

Contributions

When told of the Minister's approval of the proposal for a public gallery, patrons of art in Singapore said that it might not be necessary for the Government to foot the whole bill.

If the Government sponsored the project, many people in the State would be glad to contribute towards the cost.

They emphasised, however, that the lead must come from the Government.

The Government is also understood to be considering a suggestion that it build open air theatres or performing stages in King George V Park and the Botanic Gardens.

Supporters of the idea said the various communities were carrying on various cultural activities. It was not always that one section knew what the others were doing.

Patronage

If the various cultural groups put up performances in the proposed open-air theatres or platforms, all sections of the public could see for themselves and benefit from the shows.

Official patronage would bring these cultural groups together. It would represent a big cultural advance for Singapore.

FOOTNOTE: The suggestion to build an art gallery was first made in 1918. There is a trust fund of \$75,000. Mr. Loke Wan Tho has promised a further \$25,000.

<u>Project:</u> The \$100,000 gallery of art	<u>Book:</u> Documents 	<u>Title:</u> Govt. backs art gallery idea	<u>Creator:</u> Singapore Free Press © Singapore Press Holdings	<u>Dimensions:</u> 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	<u>Date:</u> 11/5/1959	<u>Page:</u> 22/52
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And still no Art Gallery

IN March 1918 the Government of the time appointed a committee to draw up plans to commemorate the forthcoming Centenary of Singapore.

One of the suggestions put forward by that committee was that there should be an Art Gallery.

That was forty-one years ago, and Singapore is still without its Art Gallery despite the fact that the need for one has been stressed time and time again.



We have a Singapore Arts Society; we have a number of brilliant artists, and we have a multitude of art lovers. It is incredible that in a city such as ours we have no gallery where works of arts can be exhibited to the public.

Starting on Friday next week the Arts Society is staging a series of one man exhibitions which will be held in the Hollywood Room of the Odgon Theatre.

Mr. Ho Kok Hoe, the president of the Singapore Arts Society, has made the point that with the rapid growth of the population and the ample existence of talent the need for an art gallery is more pressing than ever.



There is a trust fund which holds \$75,000 for this particular project and Mr. Loke Wan Tho has promised a further \$25,000. These figures alone give a clear indication of the desire for such a building.

It is perhaps a little early for our newly-elected Government to interest itself in this matter but this is a facet of culture which cannot be ignored.

The demand is there and Mr. Ho Kok Hoe and his associates should be given every encouragement and every art lover should play his part to ensure that the plan to provide an art gallery does not suffer the same fate as that plan envisaged in March 1918.

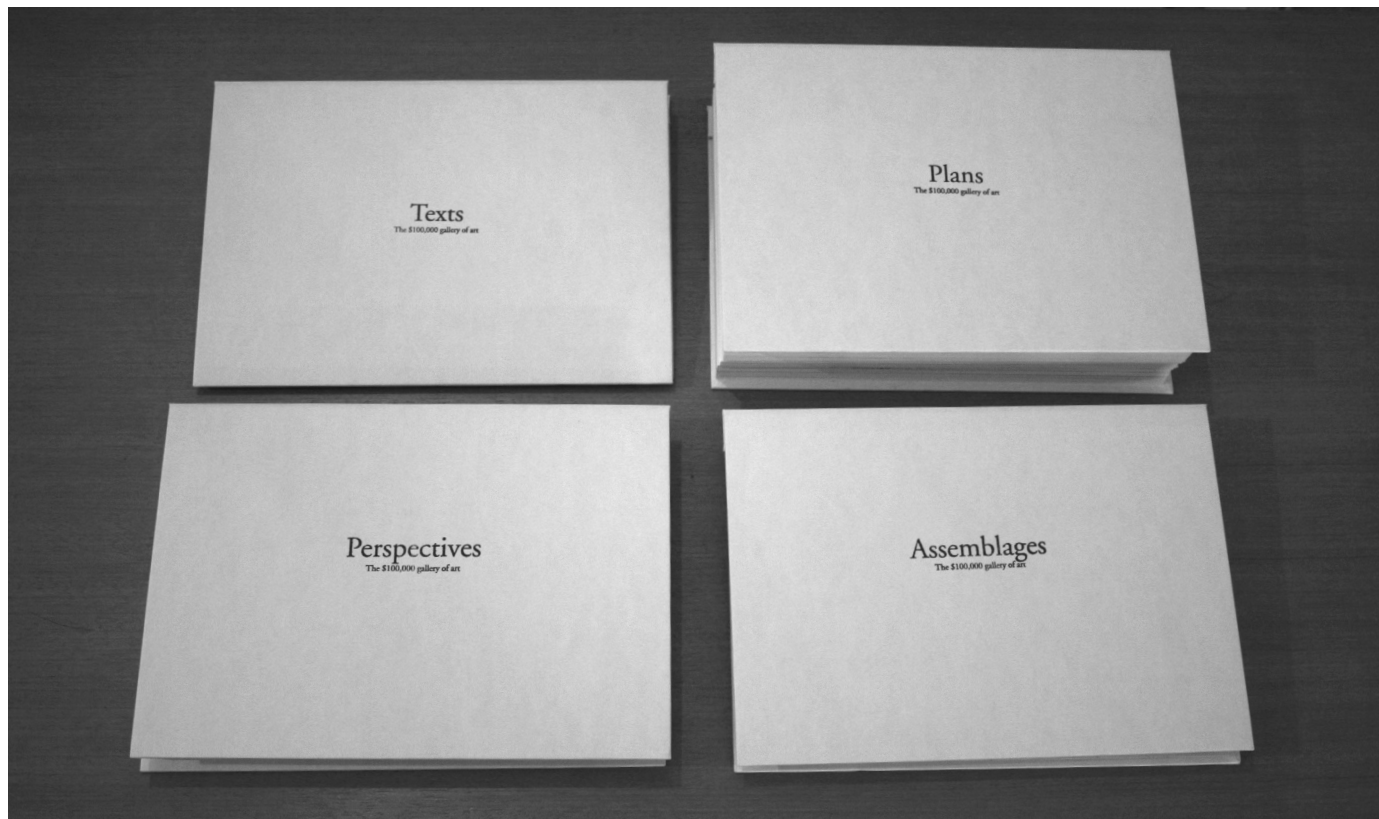
Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: And still no Art Gallery	Creator: Singapore Free Press © Singapore Press Holdings	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 18/6/1959	Page: 23/52
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Documentation of *The \$100,000 gallery of art*
by Michael Lee Hong Hwee and Chun Kai Feng

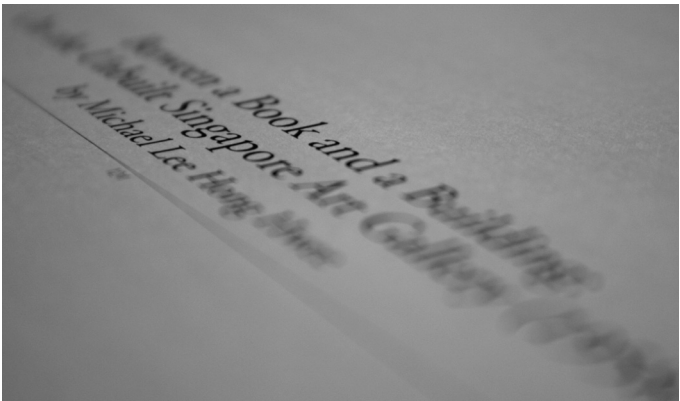
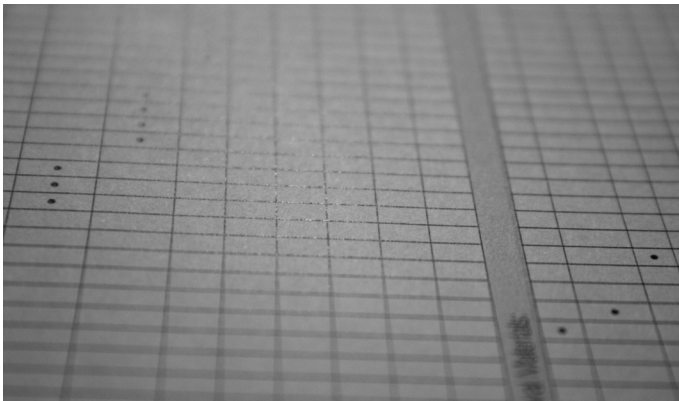
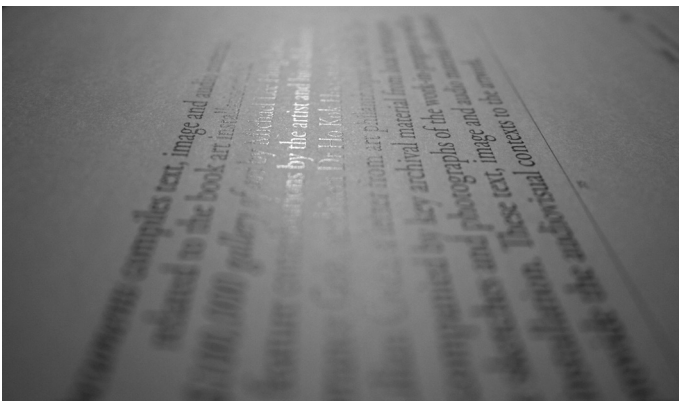
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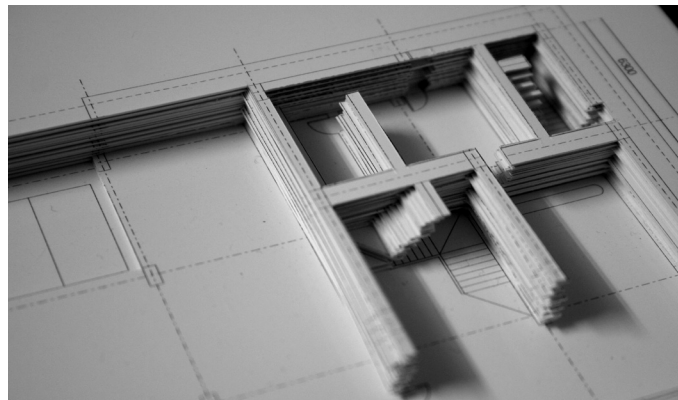
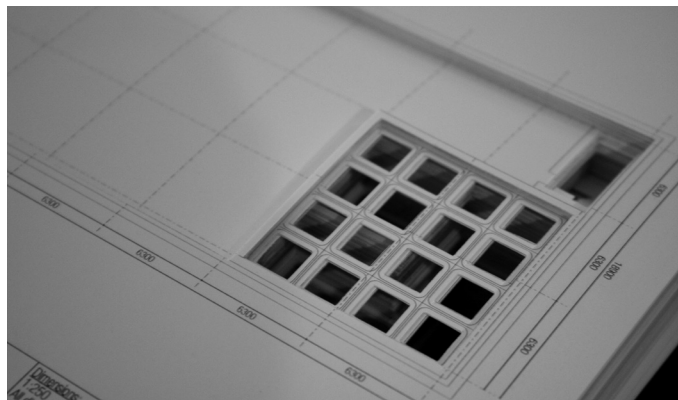
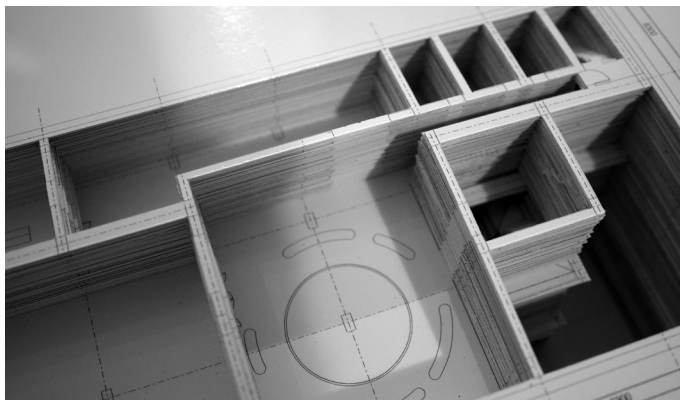
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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Documentation of <i>The \$100,000 gallery of art.</i> Details of Book One <i>Texts</i>	Creators: Michael Lee Hong Hwee & Chun Kai Feng	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 27/52
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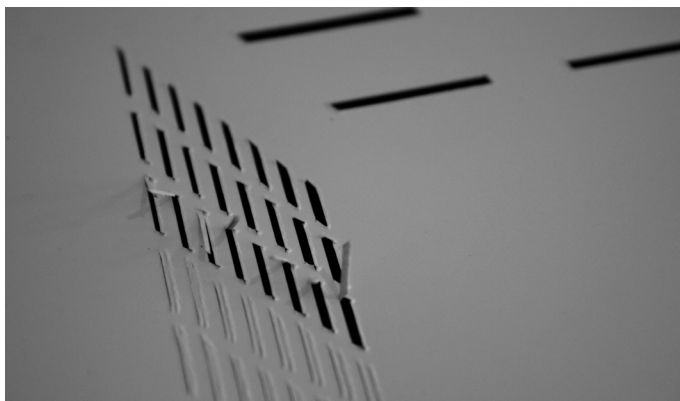
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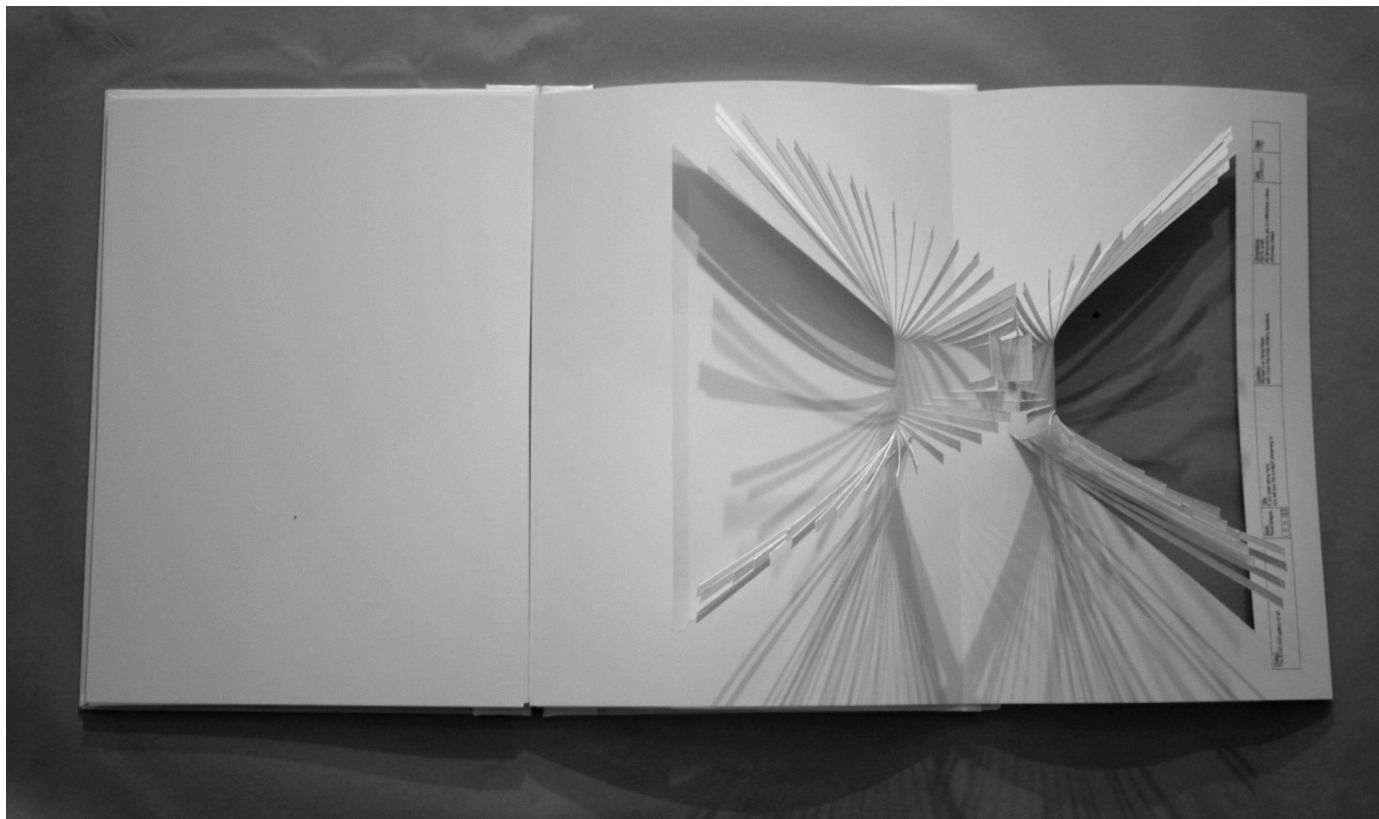
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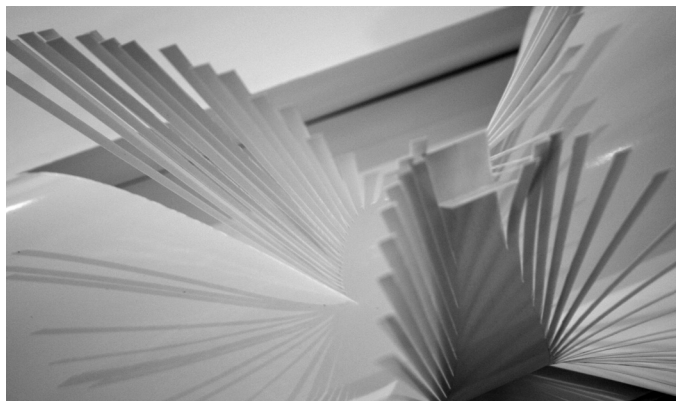
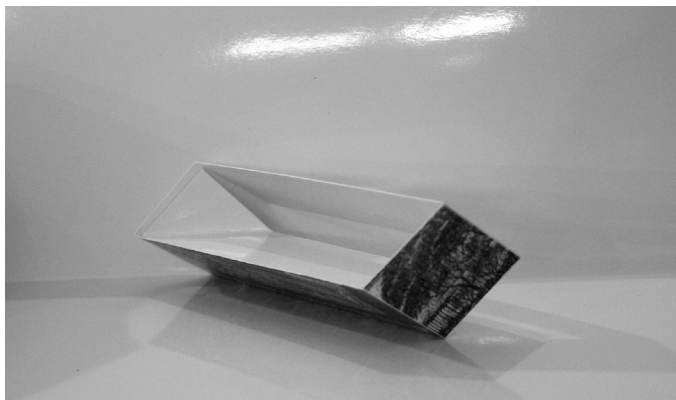
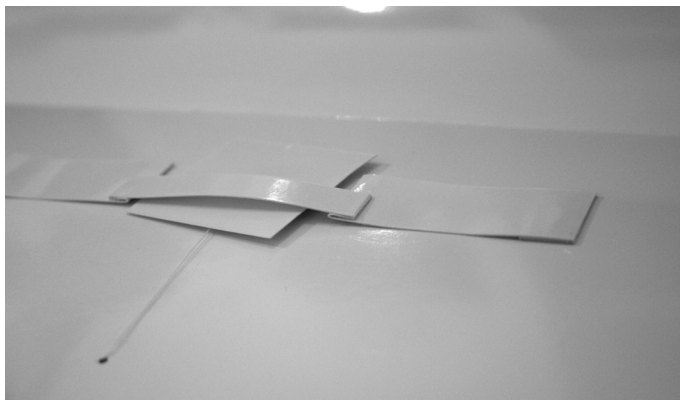
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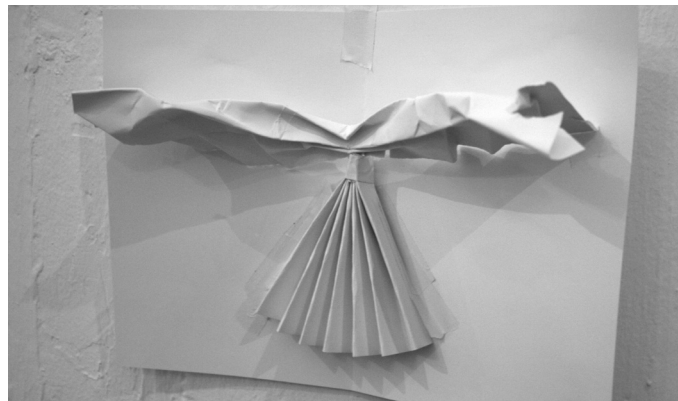
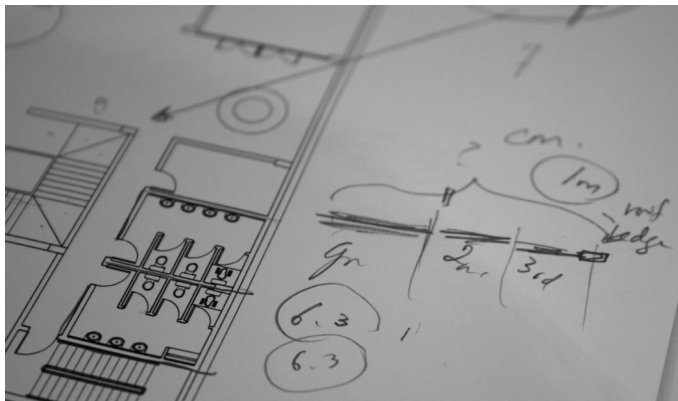
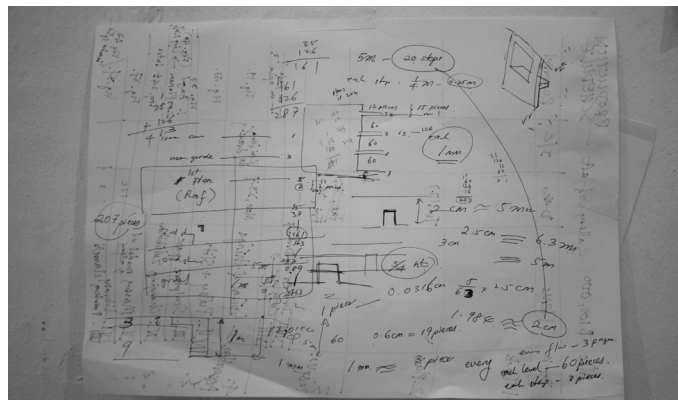
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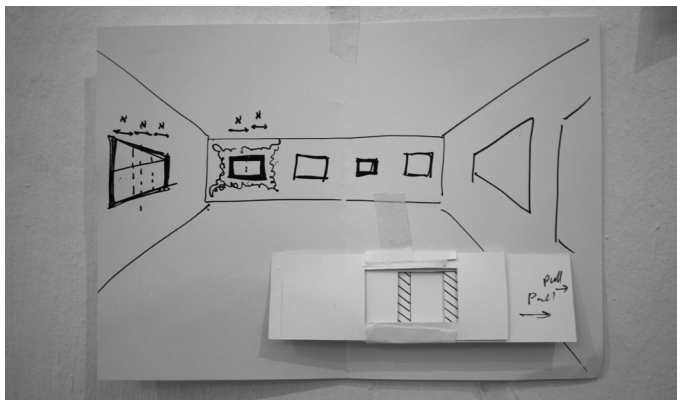
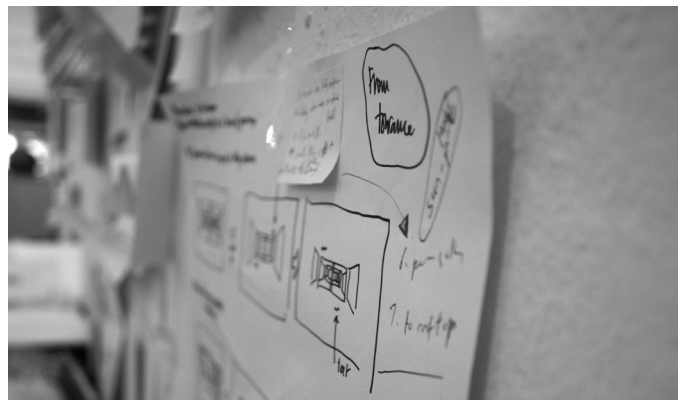
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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Documentation of <i>The \$100,000 gallery of art</i>. Details of Book Four <i>Assemblages</i>	Creators: Michael Lee Hong Hwee & Chun Kai Feng	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 33/52
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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Documentation of <i>The \$100,000 gallery of art</i> . Work-in-progress	Creators: Michael Lee Hong Hwee & Chun Kai Feng	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 34/52
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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents	Title: Documentation of <i>The \$100,000 gallery of art</i>. Work-in-progress	Creators: Michael Lee Hong Hwee & Chun Kai Feng	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 35/52
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Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents	Title: Documentation of <i>The \$100,000 gallery of art</i> . Photo of Dr Ho Kok Hoe with Michael Lee	Creator: Seng Yü Jin	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 23/8/2007	Page: 36/52
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爲建立美術館效勞
聯合舉辦美術義展

在明年初博覽會期間舉行美展及義賣
所有收入充為藝術學院及美術館基金

聯合舉辦美術義展

在明年初博覽會期間舉行美展及義賣
所有收入充為藝術學院及美術館基

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賣的人家他們作人講人藝備術延力
作士們應人給士民持長工到
的品畫，畫員予這話吳藝活這好作李劉
成，成辦了以書次，是畫動種的作李劉
功義辦附捐至委的，他星水的藉的者若國
。實讓其獻大會的說醫準推神爐燭希望
，附他作的產烈：生效動，結望層
確款美品裁小晴美接勞，為並一透去風
保他術的舞慈應畫着。提協必致次。氣
我們學，工，界也高協助還是美。

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MOVE FOR S'PORE ART GALLERY

Deputation to see Mr. Lee

THE Singapore Art Society plans to send a delegation to call on the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, and present its case for an art gallery.

The society's president, Mr. Ho Kok Hoe, said today it was calling a meeting on Wednesday to select the members of the delegation.

They would ask Mr. Lee for help in connection with the project, such as getting a site and the money needed to build the proposed art gallery.

The society would need at least \$250,000 from the government for the building.

Members of the society hope that the new culture-conscious Government will help them to achieve their long-cherished aim.

They feel that budding artists would feel discouraged if their paintings could not find a home, especially since their Federation counterparts already have an art gallery in Kuala Lumpur.

Malayan paintings have created a favourable impression in London, and to encourage local talent an art gallery is essential.

Footnote: At present there is \$75,000 in a trust fund for the building of the Singapore art gallery. Cinema magnate, Mr. Loke Wan Tho, has promised to donate \$25,000.

Project: The \$100,000 gallery of art	Book: Documents 	Title: Move for S'pore Art Gallery	Creator: Singapore Free Press © Singapore Press Holdings	Dimensions: 1:2 All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.	Date: 22/6/1959	Page: 38/52
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THE NEXT CULTURAL GOAL: A NATIONAL ART GALLERY

SINGAPORE, Thurs.

THE Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Toh Chin Chye, today called for the establishment of a national art gallery, where paintings, sculptures and ceramics could be exhibited permanently and where exhibitions could also be held.

Dr. Toh was speaking at the opening of the one-man art exhibition by Mr. Yeo Chew Hong, a 23-year-old school teacher, at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. "The number of artists in Singapore," Dr. Toh said, "is now large enough for them to form a school of their own."

The people of Singapore had responded enthusiastically

to the idea of a national theatre.

This showed that there was a great genuine desire in them to express their feelings through art, he said.

Dr. Toh continued: "We should, therefore, seek also to mobilise the people to help in establishing a national art gallery worthy of this city."

A deficiency

Dr. Toh said: "We have a museum which is visited daily by hundreds of visitors and school-children, but we do not have an art gallery. Let us not be considered lacking on culture because of this deficiency."

Dr. Toh said the artist, Mr. Yeo, was "a happy combination of English and Chinese education," as he had been educated both in English and Chinese schools.

He said: "Let us hope that this combination of virtues will lead him to produce a style of painting which is a synthesis of the training he has received in different

schools, and which will be typical of Singapore, the meeting place of the cultures of Asia and Europe."

The art exhibition was sponsored by the Singapore Art Society, the Society of Chinese Artists and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

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