
emancipatory desires: what do you think of ‘if the world changed’?

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It happened again, that uncanny way the Singapore political sphere bites into the cultural events in its domain, consumes the flesh and spits out the bones. In 2006 the hors d'oeuvre was the first *Singapore Biennale: 'Belief'*, which coincided with the World Bank and IMF meetings, thereby sending out a clarion call that the government had appropriated art as the new stud in its stable of means for capital production and accumulation. Again in 2011 the Singapore elections stole away the theme of ‘Open House’ (and its naturalised corollary, “home”) from the *Biennale*, as significant numbers of the Singapore electorate voted against a host of government policies. Among the controversial policies were social engineering initiatives of the previous decade to make the national ‘home’ into an ‘open house’ for foreign talent to replace local talent lost to the brain drain and low birthrates. And in 2013, following an accident when one of their countrymen was run over by a public bus, Indian laborers rioted on 8 December. Their angry response to persistent abjection¹ spilled over in Little India and into the local and global news, precisely when the *Singapore Biennale* was positing the hypothetical “If the world changed” – clearly not enough for the Indian migrant workers. In the days and weeks following the riots, the letters to the editor pages of the national press and on local blogs were flooded with blatantly racist and culturist diatribes by the Singaporean public against migrant workers in general, and Indian workers in particular, blithely ignoring the fact that since the 1950s migrant labourers had built so much of the hard infrastructure of the city-State. The question of who properly belongs in one’s home of course raises the issue of who does not. Who is allowed to build the home, serve the dinner or take care of the kids, but has no right to live there?

At the beginning of his article on the political demise of the Leftist politician Lim Chin Siong, Tim Harper in 2001 presented a picture of the intellectual life of the island during the colonial period, prior to the cleansing of pluralistic political discourse in Singapore following the rule of the People’s Action Party (PAP) post-independence.² Much of Singapore’s heterogeneous discourses on the left – the vibrant Social Realist movement in painting and woodblock printing (influenced by Lu Xun’s Shanghai-based publishing house³), activist street theatre, literature, essays, and public critical social discourse – all disappeared into the artists’ closets as the PAP followed the British lead with even greater enthusiasm, suppressing the Left and critical discourse concerning State developmental policies.

Jumpcut to the 1990s when Singapore was firmly established as the region’s primary economic, shipping and transportation hub. A new desire arose in the ruling party, to capitalise on a recently burgeoning global and regional art market. In 2001 Dr. Ow Chin Hock, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs echoed Harper’s thesis, voicing the need for Singapore to become a “talent hub”, which would draw the best minds of the world to the island.

Singapore has always been one of the main crossroads of East and West, being strategically placed on the major shipping routes. Over the years, we have built on this advantage, constructing a world-class air and sea transportation network, as well as a sound financial, physical and legal infrastructure to attract foreign investments... To become a knowledge hub, we need to further build up our intellectual capital.⁴



Ironically, Ow’s “knowledge hub” was a latter-day attempt to revive the very profile of Singapore that the PAP government had intentionally and proactively suppressed since independence, first through censorial assaults on Chinese-educated intellectuals, civil society movements, cultural productions, and then, from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, English-educated intellectuals and their cultural productions. Following the economic downturn of the late 1990s and 2001, the government sought to stimulate the economy by providing assistance to small and medium businesses and investing in infrastructure. In addition, they brought in foreign professionals to improve the international profile of Singapore’s knowledge-based industry, and to replace those Singaporeans who did not return from their educations abroad, or had left for foreign jobs. While keeping their own intellectuals on a short leash, the Singapore government “adopted a tourist[ic] cultural policy and an urban cosmetics policy which have reinforced each other”.⁵ PAP Member of Parliament Yu-Foo Yee Shoon argued in Parliament in 1990 that Singapore was well-placed to “absorb the best of Eastern and Western arts and culture for the smooth development of tourism and economic development”, so that both tourists and international investors could enjoy “a certain degree of cultural life”.⁶

THE ARTISTS' GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1993-1994

Despite the rhetoric about 'brain power' and 'cosmopolitan air', a few years later in January 1994, the Minister of Information and the Arts, George Yeo, led an attack against a small group of young performance and theatre artists. Two arrests were made following the Artists' General Assembly, a weeklong arts event at the 5th Passage Art Space that included performance art, which had become the most vital genre of art production in the country. The government saw an opportunity to suppress two non-commercial art forms: performance art and the Marxist Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre – "concerned that new art forms, such as 'performance art' and 'forum theatre' which have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation pose dangers to public order, security and decency, and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority. The performances may be exploited to *agitate the audience* on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of *subversion*" (emphasis added).⁷ Such artistic works could be openly critical of government policy, could help develop an independent civil society, and foment the ideals of direct democracy.

The prosecution of the artists indicated a clear division between the top-down design of 'cosmopolitan air' for tourists, "foreign talent" and economically privileged Singaporeans on the one hand, and the homegrown cultural initiatives generated by and for the younger generation of Singaporean cultural works and intellectuals on the other. It was a common assumption of the time that the government was aware that new immigrants and knowledge workers on renewable work visas could be kept on a shorter leash than young Singaporean nationals. The revoking of the permanent residency permit of Sharaad Kuttan, a Malaysian intellectual who had lived for many years with his parents in Singapore, and had been part of the editorial team of a National University of Singapore Alumni Association journal that carried articles analysing the Artists' General Assembly and Forum Theatre crackdown, indicated just how short those leashes were. A year after this last major clampdown on the local postmodern artists, Director of Corporate Affairs at MITA Tong Min Way in 1995 declared the government's intention to develop "cultural tourism" as a "distinct industry". At the same time, Minister George Yeo's rhetoric revealed a nostalgic desire to return to Singapore's pre-independence history as an intellectual crossroads:

*We want to make Singapore a centre for the arts partly for its own sake and partly because we need the arts to help make us a centre for brain services. We want talent from all over the world to meet here, to work here and to live here. They must enjoy being here – the people, the food, the music, the cosmopolitan air. We cannot work the magic without the arts. This is why we will be spending quite a lot of money – about a billion dollars – over the next five to ten years building new cultural facilities and expanding existing ones. [emphasis mine].*⁸

These positions were underscored by the 2000 Singapore Renaissance City Plan I (subsequently followed by II and III).⁹ The overall intent was to engineer a new Singaporean citizenry as a "gracious and knowledgeable people"¹⁰ while attracting financial and human capital by investing in cultural products and hosting major international art exhibitions, such as the biennales. The first of these was mounted in 2006, with the title of *Belief*. The second in 2008 was entitled *Wonder*. The third was *Open House*, and the fourth was this year's *If the World Changed*. In her short reflection on the *Biennale*, Mayee Wong asks,

*...is the SB2013 an attempt at regional introspection, or a strategic consolidation of Singapore's metropolitan influence as Southeast Asia's contemporary art capital? It is quite clear that the Singapore Biennale has always been staged to complement Singapore's promotion of itself as a global city-State.*¹¹

The possibilities are not mutually exclusive. The "experiment", as it was referred to by the curators and administrators themselves, involved eliminating the role of the *Biennale* Director and contracting regional curators.¹² It could have opened a new kind of artistic discourse in the region by engaging with the cultural, theoretical and aesthetic issues brought to bear by the art works. But, unfortunately many of the curators did not take up the challenge and revealed very little about their process and ideas after making their selections. The thin-stapled Short Guide provided for the public to carry around the exhibition contained most of the information about the individual art works that the large *Biennale* catalogue contained. And it was not much. The publications taken together gave the impression that the curators simply did not know much about the art works and artists they selected, and, perhaps not wanting to bite the hand that feeds, they shied away from grappling seriously with the larger contextual questions that Mayee Wong touched on concerning the State's desires for regional leadership.

Since a number of the curators were artists in their own right, they apparently saw the opportunity to promote their own work in the catalogue as a perk of the job¹³. This resulted in some degree of disengagement from the job at hand – professionally curating the region. For whatever reason, this curatorial pantomime resulted in an exhibition largely devoid of an articulated discursive ground for the public. What we might call the "curatorial mind" was out to lunch. For example, as a conclusion to the catalogue, the Singapore Art Museum editors asked the curators about their curatorial process. The results were revealing. "There are many kinds of curators and therefore, many approaches to curating. In coming on board as one of the co-curators for the *Singapore Biennale 2013*, what was important to you, and what did you try to do?"¹⁴

Some, including Tan Siuli from Indonesia, Misouda Heangsoukhoun from Laos and Kawayan de Guia from The Philippines took on the question seriously, speaking of new representations of vernacular works, and correcting misunderstandings of local practices by international audiences. Indeed, the question should have at least elicited some interesting information concerning curatorial methodologies, strategies, priorities and prejudices. But a surprising number of the curators offered responses that were flippant, coy or inarticulate. The Singapore curator, David Chew, wrote the single word "Representation". Not to be outdone, Tamares Goh took the opportunity to mix her metaphors: "I approached a burning flame so as to connect"; Erin Gleeson simply wanted "To Learn"; Fairuz Iman Ismail hoped he would "Keep a straight face when encounter any problems"; Khairuddin Hori provided a mute drawing of a smiling face. Not a teaspoon of methodology, or strategy or polemics or theory or historicisation or critical analysis in these sadly severed rhetorical limbs? Perhaps they were intended to function as rhetorical prophylactics, meant to shield the curators from having to justify their methodologies.

Or, perhaps they were signifiers of an earlier disenfranchisement for some? Pointing out just such a disenfranchisement that otherwise would not have been apparent to the public, one of the Malaysian curators, Yee I-Lann revealed that the theme of the exhibition '*If the World Changed*' was selected by administrative fiat by the former Director of the Museum Tan Boon Hui and the Singapore Art Museum team¹⁵ before the regional curators were invited to participate. Coincidentally, the Singapore team made up one third of all the curators (twenty-seven) in the *Biennale*. This exhibition was not built from the ground-up with a commitment to egalitarianism, but engineered to appear so. There seemed to be a ghost in the machine pulling levers behind the curtain.

Recalling the artist Sol Lewitt's famous dictum concerning the methodologies underlying Conceptual Art: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art", I wondered whether there was an unfulfilled desire for the *Biennale* to be structured as a conceptual *gesamtkunstwerk* in itself? But, alas, this ghost in the machine could not itself manifest knowledge production and circulation across cultural boundaries without strong

curatorial agency, and an intellectual *communitas* that was missing in the exhibition. In place of a rigorous yet playful conceptualism, this same condition that provided the pithy curatorial insights also infected many of the art works, the wall labels and the catalogue entries about the artists. A number of countries seemed to lack any form of coherent curatorial concept or critical dialogue between curators and artists. In some of these instances, there seemed to be discernible curator anxiety over their selections that manifested in the form of an over-determined political slant to the exhibition's hermeneutics for even the most formalist works. The descriptions on the wall labels and in the catalogue essays often functioned as idiomatic performatives, determining how the public should understand the works. This included works that the curators buttressed with didactic re-packaging to translate a particular vernacular milieu into an imagined global audience. In other cases, formalist concerns of artists appear to have been deemed insufficient justification for inclusion. This curatorial strategy of emphasising social theory, political alterity and resistance to hegemony is somewhat ironic in what has historically been one of the most resolutely apolitical nations of the world. But perhaps it was precisely this ubiquitous phobic response toward political events in Singapore (a condition that has been gradually changing in recent years as the opposition parties and civil society groups have been gaining support) that stimulated this regional curatorial reaction. But a number of the works weren't designed for the theoretical or political roles the curators wanted them to play.

For example, Jainal Amambing's *My Longhouse Story* painting series from North Sabah was described by Khairuddin Hori in the catalogue only in terms of outmoded sociological and anthropological theory. They were presented as examples of Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage, disregarding any distinction between liminal ritual states and normal daily life events. The painting of a boy walking to school with his dog, or learning traditional music, was described by the curator as Sabahan rites of passage that in some uncanny way were supposed to be similar to liminal female rites amongst the Ashanti tribe in Ghana! The curator's cut-and-paste text then launched into a description of longhouse life that could have been culled from the pages of a *Lonely Planet* guide. Nothing was offered about the artist's style that was developed for children's book illustrations, or how they fit into the lineages of that genre, or the surfaces, tropes or patterning in the works. The text is almost completely divorced from the work. Questions accumulate here concerning the impact of the *Biennale* on the artist's intentions and skill set. When imagined as book illustrations these works make much more sense than in their present form as canvases measured in metres rather than centimetres. Why should everything be scaled up to 'biennale scale' so as to be received as 'high art' rather than popular illustrations? Why not show the actual children's books? There seemed to be a rupture of conflicting desires in the dialogue between curator and artist. What was hidden from view overwhelms the works displayed.

Another example was *Long Live Food* by the Malaysian artist Poodien, a digital collage of Chinese Socialist-Realist posters and paintings from the period of the Great Leap Forward, commissioned by urban interior designers Nani Kashar and Peter Kiernan for the Chinese Food Court at the Publika Mall in Kuala Lumpur. In another example of semiotic fogging, the exhibition Short Guide declared that "Poodien's manipulation of the propaganda images points to the nostalgia and blatant commercialisation that attend to these images today, which all too easily ignore or abandon recent meanings and histories."¹⁶ But in fact the artist did not indexically "point to the nostalgia and blatant commercialisation", rather he himself blatantly commercialised the images. What is brilliant about the work is that it sells Chinese food in Kuala Lumpur with exactly the same body of lies that the original propaganda images in China were disseminating; namely that there were no famines during the Great Leap



Forward and the Cultural Revolution and Mao's disastrous agrarian policies were actually successful and produced abundant food for the populace. So in a classic Socialist Realist inversion, fat babies, fatter pigs and the plethora of food function as signifier of the commodities on sale in the food court, and as a *memento mori*—a contrapuntal reminder of death. Lastly Poodien's work is made through a process of plucking and pilfering from the Chinese propaganda artists of the past, literally foraging their product, flattening into digital bits, twice removing from their context, then forcing them into cultural contexts and purposes unimaginable to their original creators: to sell food in a Malaysian Chinese foodcourt and as a high-end commodity in a biennale in Singapore. This what, how and why is exactly what should have been provided in the catalogue by the curators.

There were though several bona fide politically engaged works. The extraordinarily intelligent and skillful social-magic-realist *Detritus* depicting an infamous Manila landfill by Leslie De Chavez carried forward a historically politicised lineage of Philippine monumental and mural painting that does not shy away from abjection, poverty, and despair. Vietnamese Nguyen Huy An's *The Great Puddle*, a brilliant, captivating and difficult installation of Chinese ink transmuted the political sphere through a stripped down minimalist aesthetics, providing an anamorphic projection of the desk of an official or bureaucrat. The musky smell of Chinese ink, denoting the shadow and scent of corruption, permeated the room. The viewer is led forward by the desire to see, forced to find the anamorphic projection (the signifier of corruption) from the single perspective point from which it is totally resolved as a three-dimensional bureaucrat's desk. No other work in the *Biennale* so effectively engineered a psychogeographic experience with such economy of means, producing an irresolvable and oscillation between the architectonics, the medium and the work's topic. The work functioned precisely like the viciously circular paradox: "This sentence is false." Unfortunately, the uncanny stillness of the pool of light-defying liquid ink was annihilated by the Museum's extraordinary decision to appease public complaints by placing a very loud industrial exhaust fan in the gallery. Yet, all was not lost, as the decision to ameliorate the stink of corruption through a technical fix indexed quintessential PAP behavior.¹⁷

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF 'IF SINGAPORE CHANGED'?

As if to demonstrate that things have indeed changed, the opening essay in the catalogue is by Susie Lingham, a former co-founder of the 5th Passage, the artists' organisation that hosted the 1993-94 Artists' General Assembly and was dismembered during the government crackdown on Performance Art (and Forum Theatre) immediately

following that event. Now she is undergoing what must be a confusing rebirth, as the Director of the Singapore Art Museum. Similarly, the entire generation of the 1980s and 1990s (including such artists as Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, Vincent Leow, and Suzann Victor) have over the past few years received National Medallions and retrospective exhibitions in the very Art Museum and by the national arts establishment that had spurned them and their work two decades earlier. So Lingham's rise can perhaps be seen as a component of the government's continued commitment to establish Singapore as a regional art centre in synch with their economic pragmatism.

But this tectonic shift, from suppressing local postmodern art to promoting it does not tell the whole story. There remains active suppression of cultural writing, films, theatre, performances and other works of art when they are critical of government or its policies, past, present and future, with intellectuals still losing positions and being persecuted when their view of Singapore history conflicts with the ruling Party.

Elsewhere in the city was another exhibition, appropriately entitled *Ghost: The Body at the Turn of the Century* at the Sculpture Square galleries, curated by Alan Oei. The exhibition ran parallel to the *Biennale*, although it was not formally adopted as a parallel event. *Ghost* included works by Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, Loo Zihan and others and closed on New Years eve in the middle of the 2013 *Biennale*. Loo presented *Artists' General Assembly-The Langenbach Archive*, photos, videos, correspondence, official university and court documents that together coagulate to form a picture of the 1993/94 event. The whole evening had an uncanny *Night of the Living Dead* feel, infused with a combination of nostalgia and anger. Naturally the group present began to discuss the meaning of the gathering. Following Loo's tour of his installation, we turned to the question of what exactly had changed or not changed in the past twenty years. We acknowledged again that the government ban on the licensing of the performances of Josef Ng and Shannon Tham had never been lifted, and the censorship regulations were for the most part still in place, as described by Loo in a paper he recently delivered in Hong Kong and Helsinki.

All video content shown in exhibitions is subjected to classification, and this classification should be displayed clearly alongside the work. You are required as an arts manager to secure a couple of licenses to show video work as part of an independent art exhibition. The first is the Arts Entertainment License which will permit you to stage an exhibition, the second is the Film Certification which will provide a rating for the video. Should you intend to show any work which is rated NC 16 and above, you would require an additional Film Exhibition License which will allow you to screen the video in public, provided you are able to fork out a deposit of S\$20,000, which will be confiscated if you are unable to prove that you have performed due diligence in verifying the age of every member of the public who will encounter this video.¹⁸ Several days later, the performance artist Lee Wen issued a long public New Year's resolution, entitled "I am license... Or why I think licensing performance art is not necessary" of which this is a (verbatim) excerpt:

*I made 2014 New Year Resolution that I will not present performance art in Singapore under the compulsory need to apply for a license. And no I don't blame the government. I don't blame the PAP and don't mention my mother but I blame my country. Yes I am still ashamed of my country. And this country includes you and me. A country who put good art and artists on trial and make them criminals. And now after twenty years say let's move on, the world has changed! Not yet changed as it should if you ask me! But it should.*¹⁹

It would be a good idea.

Page 60: Vu Hong Ninh, *Little Soap Boy*, 2009
Photo courtesy the artist
Opposite: Loo Zihan
installation view of Artists General Assembly archives
Photo courtesy the author

Notes

- ¹ Editorial Board of *The New York Times*, 'Singapore's Angry Migrant Workers', 27.12.2013; see <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/28/opinion/singapore-angry-migrant-workers.html>. Accessed 27 January, 2014. The Singapore government objected to the conclusions that the workers were exploited and angry. *Singapore Sunday Times*, 'Singapore objects to New York Times' editorial on riot in Little India', 14 January, 2014; <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/singapore-objects-new-york-times-editorial-riot-little-india-20140114>. Accessed 27 January 2014
- ² Thelma Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', *Comet In Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History*, Tan Jin Quee and K.S. Jomo eds, Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001
- ³ Koh Nguang How and Joyce Fan, *History Through Prints: Woodblock Prints In Singapore*, National Art Gallery, Singapore, 1998-99. Wall label texts and personal communication (1998)
- ⁴ Ow Chin Hock, Graduation Speech, MDIS-University Of Bradford Graduation Ceremony, Mita News; 5 November, 2001
- ⁵ Lily Kong, 'Cultural policy in Singapore: negotiating economic and socio-cultural agendas', *Geoforum* 31, 2001: 409-24
- ⁶ Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Parliamentary Debates, 23 March 1990
- ⁷ *The Straits Times*, 21 January, 1994
- ⁸ George Yeo, 'Developing the Arts: How Asia Can Promote the Coming Renaissance', *Asiaweek* vol. 7, July 1995
- ⁹ MICA Portal: <http://give2arts.sg/advocacy.aspx?i=r> Plan
- ¹⁰ The website of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts; <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=20>
- ¹¹ Mayee Wong, 'Would the World Change? Worlding Southeast Asia in the Singapore Biennale 2013', *Article: The Singapore Biennale Review*, December 2013; Singapore: 5
- ¹² In an interview the Cambodian-based curator, Erin Gleeson profiled the regional curatorial process—it began with a shortlist of artists by three curators (two from SAM and one other local), and followed by a visit by the SAM curators they then reviewed the Open Call proposals from Cambodia. The curatorial decisions were then organised into a "region within region" of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Finally the choices of the local team were presented to the entire 27 curatorial team for final approval. Viviana Majia, 'An Interview with Erin Gleeson', *Article: The Singapore Biennale Review*, 10, 2013, a publication of The International Association of Art Critics, Singapore, Lee Weng Choy and Kathy Rowland eds: Singapore: 2014
- ¹³ For example, in his essay in the 'Reflections' section of the catalogue, the Myanmar curator, Aye Ko promoted his own gallery and art collective, in a nation with many competing artist collectives and spaces struggling for recognition. Charlie Co, Faizal Sidik, Kharuddin Hori, and Yee I-Lann presented either their gallery, collective or their own work
- ¹⁴ Catalogue of the *Singapore Biennale 2013: If the World Changed*, Joyce Toh (ed.), Singapore Art Museum, 2014: 190
- ¹⁵ Sharaad Kuttan, 'An Interview with Yee-I-Lann', *Article: The Singapore Biennale Review*, op cit.
- ¹⁶ Khairuddin Hori authored the short text on Poodien in the Short Guide, *Singapore Biennale*, Singapore Art Museum, 2013:24
- ¹⁷ The Peoples' Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling party in Singapore since 1959
- ¹⁸ Loo Zihan, 'Fetishising Censorship: Queer Bodies and Pub(l)ic Desires', paper delivered at the conference *Shifting Dialogues II: Objects of Desire: Sexual Artifice in Asian Art and Performance*, Asian Art and Performance Consortium, Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki, 2013
- ¹⁹ Lee Wen, *Dead Art Daydream Action No.1*, posted on January 7, 2014 by Concrete Dreamer; <http://republicofdaydreams.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/dead-art-daydream-action-no-1/>: Posted 7 January, 2014. Accessed 8 January, 2014