

The Singapore contemporary and contemporary art in Singapore

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The Singapore Contemporary and Contemporary Art in Singapore

The idea of *contemporary art* entails, as a presupposition, the existence of an idea of the *contemporary*. The contemporary is both an *idea* of the time in which we and a *goal* of reacting more effectively to the demands of the immediate present. What then is contemporary art in Singapore, and how does it relate to the sociocultural context within which it functions?

“We” in Singapore, increasingly, since the 1980s as the so-called East Asian Miracle unfolded—and despite setbacks such as the 1997 Asian economic crisis—are no longer modernisation with the paradigms of advanced economies, our erstwhile colonial master, the formerly Great Britain (now usually referred to as the post-imperial “United Kingdom”) and the United States, as we were in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Instead, we may share a coeval space and time with these entities; consequently, even cultural development must be planned with this sense of a shared contemporaneity.

The art of contemporaneity in Singapore since the 1980s, by and large, first can be loosely described as a flexible art practice that breaks with a modern art that was medium-specific and object-based to take a transmedia or perhaps trans-categorical orientation. Its flexibility comes from recognising that art is constituted by concepts, but this does *not* mean that art’s aesthetic dimensions can be eliminated. Rather, it may lead to an expanded use of

¹ World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

seemingly non-aesthetic material for art-making. Second, this art practice seems to want to examine the incomplete fragments of life in the historical present. It engages with the impact of the disciplined and rapid modernisation wrought from the 1960s. Singapore contemporary art, we can say, is the city-state's most recent modern art, but without the interest in the ruptural futurity that modernisation was trying to inaugurate and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, without the nostalgic desire seen in the lyrical scenes in paintings of the Singapore River and Chinatown.

Contemporary art in the 1980s drew upon what might be called an "alternative" or possibly suppressed tradition of modernism as seen in the legacy of Surrealism, the Dada movement and Marcel Duchamp (1887—1968). We can say that aspects from a combination of the historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, the post-war neo-avant-garde's revision of avant-garde devices and conceptualism were taken up in Singapore, in which the principles of autonomous art were contested in the name of connecting art with life, though patently interpreted for the needs of the "local" in terms of content and cultural orientations. The results (unsurprisingly) were varied. There was no direct repetition of the avant-garde, given the pre-war avant-garde's critique of art institutions: such institutions were weak in 1980s Singapore. More sophisticated art institutions only emerged from the 1990s.

It is with the above in mind that we can use "the contemporary" as a periodising term that enables some insight into where we "are" in matters of cultural identity and the modulating pattern of what being contemporary means. Recently, there have been a convergence and interactive conditioning of new state cultural institutions and art practice. Noticeable by the early 2000s, the convergence has its origins in the increasing importance of "creativity" in global business logic, as the state delivers infrastructural and monetary

resources for cultural development literally unimaginable in the 1970s—and this in spite of an ongoing regime of censorship.² While this might seem to contrast with tension in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s between emergent art and the desire to reach the economic present of the advanced West, this tension has not completely dissipated—even as the current Singapore developmental goal is to be a competitive global city with edgy contemporary art.

Arts Institutions and the Will to be Contemporary

In 1989, literary critic Koh Tai Ann examined how the People’s Action Party government—the party that has ruled Singapore since 1959, when self-rule was gained—changed their approach to cultural matters in the 1980s:

The official sign that the 1980s would see more emphasis on the development of the arts as a community activity to encourage individual creativity, and as part of a growing entertainment and leisure activity, came with the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee in 1980 by the [then-]Ministry of Culture. Not surprisingly, when the People’s Action Party (PAP) issued its election manifesto in 1984 called Agenda for Action [...] A Vision of Singapore by 1999, the catchphrase was “a cultured society” and the target “Singapore—City of Excellence.” The Agenda’s notable feature was to take Singapore beyond being a developed society in the economic sense; it is also to be “a society culturally vibrant,” “a cultured people finding fulfilment in non-material pursuits.”³

The need for individual creativity, the wish for “a cultured people” with “non-material pursuits” were to be markers of a developed society “beyond the economic sense.” These were terms that had had less purchase in the decade before, when modernisation and economic development were the prominent watchwords. While art is a privileged cultural

² Clarissa Oon, “Time to Review Arts Regulation: There is a Need to Exempt Major Arts Bodies from Licensing Requirements, and Release More Information on Controversial Cuts,” *The Straits Times*, 8 October 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/time-to-review-arts-regulation> (accessed 1 March 2016).

³ Koh Tai Ann, “Culture and the Arts,” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. Kernial Singh Sandhu & Paul Wheatley (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 713.

conveyor of modern culture and values, as it is of contemporary cultural forms, the petit-bourgeois mores that dominated the thinking on post-independence industrial development rendered art irrelevant to economic growth.

Koh went on to note that in March 1985, the state's Sub-Committee on Services for the Economic Committee had "review[ed] the progress of the Singapore economy and [went on to] identify new areas of growth," envisaging that "a vibrant cultural and entertainment services industry would enhance our image as a tourist destination, make Singapore a better place to live in, and also help to attract professional and skilled workers in Singapore."⁴ The government had not gone soft: individualistic cultural development could support pragmatic (then a favoured adjective in PAP discourse) development. Nevertheless, this mix of goals—high cultural and creative cultivation combined with the ongoing emphases on ethnic cultural expression to maintain a harmonious multiracial national identity—indicate that the 1980s was a decade of transition for policy on culture and the arts.

Though the question of the instrumentalisation of the arts does not recede, then or now, we do witness the incremental formation of cultural policy less to do with race or ethnicity and more to do with the arts and, increasingly, with information, the media and what are now referred to as the "creative industries." These changes have intensified since the 1980s, and have transformed Singapore from being primarily a functional city of economic development in the 1970s becoming, by 2000, not only a global city, but an aspirational Global City for the Arts. The contrast between the prominence of policy on artistic culture by 2000 and the lack of it in the 1960s and 1970s is acute and, significantly, recognised officially. The current National Arts Council (NAC) chair, Chan Heng Chee, has

⁴ Cited in *Ibid.*, 715.

noted:

In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of the Government was on economic development, defence, housing, healthcare and education.

The arts were not a priority, though along the way the Government built the National Theatre on the slopes of Fort Canning Hill. Visitors to Singapore saw a successful economy but a “cultural desert.”⁵

“Cultural desert” was an expression much used to describe the city-state in decades past.

The changing prospects for culture and the arts, we could venture to say, were enabled further from the 1990s because culture gained an enhanced role in the advanced West. In 1997, British Prime Minister Tony Blair proposed that a “Cool Britannia” tagline be part of a national branding exercise in which the arts were repackaged with other more obviously profitable enterprises, such as advertising or writing computer software, into a category called “creative industries”; a Creative Industries Task Force was set up in the new Department of Culture, Media and Sport. While artists such as playwright Mark Ravenhill criticised the superficiality of this branding, in Singapore the state followed with the articulation of its own creative city policy in its 2000 *Renaissance City Report*, which reinforced the position of its 1992 *Singapore—Global City for the Arts* report:

We want to position Singapore as a key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century and a cultural centre in the globalised world. The idea is to be one of the top cities in the world to live, work and play in, where there is an environment conducive to creative and knowledge-based industries and talent.⁶

⁵ Chan Heng Chee, “The Arts Power On,” *The Straits Times*, 4 July 2015

<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-arts-power-on> (accessed 13 July 2015). Chan has been chair of the National Arts Council since September 2013; before that, she was ambassador for Singapore to the United States in 1996–2012. On being named as ambassador, she had this to say: “I’m anti-establishment and was a bit of a dissident before I was appointed ambassador. It came as something of a shock to me when I was offered the ambassadorship because I was highly critical of government in a society that is not used to being critiqued.” (“Verbatim: Singaporean Ambassador Heng Chee Chan,” *Washington Life Magazine*, December 2004 <http://www.washingtonlife.com/issues/2004-12/verbatim/> (accessed 1 February 2016)).

⁶ Ministry of Information and The Arts, *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (Singapore: The Ministry, 2000), 4. Two objectives were stressed: the first, to establish Singapore as a global arts city conducive to creative, knowledge-based industries and talent; and the second, to strengthen national identity and belonging among Singaporeans by nurturing an appreciation of shared heritage. Cf. Jinna Tay, “Creative Cities,” in *Creative Industries*, ed. John Hartley (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 225.

In 2016, the cultural vision for the city-state has not changed; the NAC's website says its mission is: "To develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts."⁷

The key moment—now widely accepted—when the changes afoot in the 1980s came to a head, and when substantial new administrative structures were put in place by the government, is 1989, with the publication of the *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*.⁸ The report's weight was reinforced by the fact that the council was led by then-second deputy prime minister, Ong Teng Cheong. This report was based on the earlier work of more specialised committees, and 1988 had seen the publication of the Committee on Visual Arts' own report, which observed that thus far cultural activities had largely been left to individuals and private groups.⁹ However, as we have seen, the varied impetuses that led to the new attitude to the arts were already taking place *earlier* in the decade, making the 1980s a dynamic decade for cultural change, when the city-state increasingly turned away from philistine modernisation.

The times, they were a-changin', with the prospect of reform in arts policy, and certainly some of the political elites in leadership seemed reassured that there was less need to fret over the teleological implications of 1960s modernisation theory: History had *not* left Singapore behind. A major sign of the times for Singapore was the final "end" of the politically and economically unstable mid-1940s to the 1960s, Singapore's "post-war"

⁷ National Arts Council, "About Us," <https://www.nac.gov.sg/naccorp/naccorp/aboutus/mission-vision.html> (accessed 1 February 2016).

⁸ Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Singapore: The Council, 1989).

⁹ Committee on Visual Arts, *Committee on Visual Arts (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts) Report, November 1988* (Singapore: The Committee, 1988). Another specialised committee, chaired by the poet-academic Edwin Thumboo, undertook work on literary development, resulting in the publication: Committee on Literary Arts, *Report of the Committee on Literary Arts* (Singapore: The Committee, 1988). Visual and performing arts development has been more prominent than its literary equivalent, if for no other reason than just the simple fact that the physical infrastructure for their display is more spectacular.

period. Those unsettling years saw the decolonisation of Malaya in 1957, the formal ending of the Malayan Emergency in 1960, the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and Singapore's economic survival after it left (or was ejected from) the Federation in 1965. The challenges posed in the name of The People by the Left in Singapore (including its artistic manifestations in Chinese-language theatre and post-war social realist painting and woodblock caricatures) effectively ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the announcement of economic reforms called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" at the end of 1978 in mainland China.¹⁰ It is said that the events of 1989 brought the Cold War to a close, but for East and Southeast Asia, China's initial economic reforms mark at least the modulation of the Cold War's most difficult aspects.

The 1980s thus inaugurated the city-state's post-war as well as post-independence period. Arguably, at this juncture, the "old" phase of Singapore's recent modern history is left behind, and in place we see an emerging and strengthening *will to being contemporary*. The developmental goal then was to be a top player within the "Asian renaissance" in the much-ballyhooed "Coming Asian Century," a phrase that not accidentally first occurs in the 1980s.¹¹ This game was different from the one played during the modernising haste of the

¹⁰ Chinese-language theatre is represented, for example, by the 1960s and 1970s productions by Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002); see Quah Sy Ren & Pan Cheng Lui eds., *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun, Vol. One: Plays in Chinese—The 1960s and the 1970s* (Singapore: Practice Performing Arts School and Global Publishing, 2005). In terms of the visual arts, the post-war Nanyang School has received much more attention than post-war social realist painting and woodblock caricatures. This is partially due to the more politically sensitive nature of some of the artworks produced by the Social Realists. (Or, alternatively, it might be said that the project to represent Nanyang—the South Seas, or broadly speaking Southeast Asia—was less sensitive than the social realist project to represent ordinary Singapore life.) Social realist painting attempted to capture the truth of everyday life and had, at the very least, a left-leaning, egalitarian bent. For more on such visual work, see Singapore Art Museum, *From Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007).

¹¹ The phrase "Asian renaissance" was first used in 1996 by then-deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim; he wrote that the Asian rebirth in the wake of economic progress should concern itself with "the revival of the arts and the sciences under the influence of classical models based on strong moral and religious foundations; a cultural resurgence dominated by a re-flowering of art and literature, architecture and music and advancements in science and technology." (Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance* (Singapore: Times

1970s. The very title of Lee Kuan Yew's second volume of memoirs, *From Third World to First*, plainly shows the teleology of progress that was at stake.¹² With "the end of an essentially modernist field of political struggle in which the great ideologies [such as nationalism] still had the force and the great authority of the great religions," and less-modernised states like Singapore consequently seem less the past of modern states in the West, it might seem time to proclaim the "disappearance of History as the fundamental element in which human beings exist."¹³ However, such proclamations seem premature, yet the attention that international media paid to the collective economic success that the four Asian mini-dragons of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea had attained by the 1980s, suggested that Singapore and some parts of East Asia were inhabiting at least *more* of an equally shared present with the advanced economies.

The above in itself does not mean that economic insecurity was left behind—as becoming modern, even in this newest version of the new, is a race run on a treadmill. The island-state now had to be *more* of a transnational space than when it was an early beneficiary of outsourcing during the immediate, postcolonial nation-building phase of the late 1960s and 1970s. Capitalism had penetrated social forms ("national communities," "societies," "cultures") and consequently, global and regional economic interdependence was a reality, meaning that the older modern idea of self-sufficient nation-states went out the window—this was the cost of existing in the same time zone, as it were, with the

Books International, 1996), 18.). This was an articulation with a stronger humanistic element than in Singapore. Singapore certainly seems to have won a reputation as a cross-cultural facilitator which could help others to navigate this "century"; see, for example, Gabriele Giovannini and Emanuele Schibotto, "Singapore and the Asian Century: The City-State Has a Potentially Vital Role to Play in the West's Engagement with Asia," *The Diplomat*, 19 February 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/singapore-and-the-asian-century/> (accessed 2 February 2016).

¹² Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Media Pte. Ltd. & Singapore Press Holdings Ltd., 2000).

¹³ Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson & Masao Miyoshi (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), 55.

market-oriented Anglo-American West. The game was upped such that economies should not just make things for export, using other people's technology and business models (which had worked in the 1970s), but had to be creative and innovative. And here art had a role: its very uselessness and perceived autonomy became component parts of a model of creativity, and in keeping with what was transpiring in the cutting-edge metropolitan centres, state policy and rationality no longer negated autonomy but employed a "new systemic functionalization of autonomy itself," as the philosopher Peter Osborne puts it.¹⁴ During the phase of industrialised modernity in the advanced West, the "principle of idealistic aesthetics [regarding the work of art]—purposefulness without a purpose"—was "replaced by exchange value," which itself was part-and-parcel of the "commercial system."¹⁵ Now, in post-industrial contexts, creativity and autonomy are actually taken to *drive* new commercial innovation.

The three key art institutions of note to emerge since the 1989 Advisory Council report are the Singapore Art Museum (SAM; 1996), the Singapore Biennale (2006) and, the most recent, the National Gallery Singapore (2015), brought into existence at the cost of an astonishing S\$532 million. The first and third institutions showcase historical modern and recent contemporary art from Singapore and Southeast Asia, and the second—the premier globalised exhibition form—offers themed exhibitions that bring in the newest of emerging experimental art from the immediate region.¹⁶ Collectively, the three institutions interpret and present the inter-regional diversity of social experience as embodied by art within novel cultural spaces committed to the exploration of multicultural similarities and differences.

¹⁴ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 21.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 158, 161.

¹⁶ *Art and Globalization*, eds. James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska & Alice Kim (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

Such forms of social experience, from where some still consider the semi-periphery of the advanced capitalist world, have been presented within the framework of a common world only recently.¹⁷ Thus, the three institutions are at least partially de-bordered or post-national spaces that present the complex and even disjunctive, multicultural contemporaneity of Southeast Asia.¹⁸ They are poster children of the city-state's will to contemporaneity even while they simultaneously serve to articulate non-metropolitan representations of "our" own modernist and contemporary art.

The presentation of contemporary art necessarily entails the possession of a domestic contemporary art to showcase as well – or else it may seem that the cultural desert still exists. In a curious way, if contemporary artists such as the near-iconic Tang Da Wu (b. 1943) and those who were part of the artists' colony he was so involved with in 1988, The Artists Village (TAV), said to embody "alterity" in art, had not existed, arts policy would have had to invent them.

While contemporary art has benefited from increased state funding, the interactive conditioning of state-linked cultural institutions and artwork becomes more pronounced only from perhaps 2002, the year that the arts complex, Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, was opened. The signature arts centre, now a literal and symbolic centre of the arts in the city-state, was constructed at the cost of S\$600 million and had to be defended by Tommy Koh, then chair of the NAC.

However, the presence of a centre did not mark the arrival of a contemporary art. The issue was and remains whether the creative tension between centre and margin can be

¹⁷ *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, eds. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddenseig & Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2013); and C. J. W.-L. Wee, "We Asians?": Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, and East Asia," *boundary 2* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 91–126.

¹⁸ As has been observed, "Transnationality is the putative socio-spatial form of the current temporal unity of historical experience." Osborne, *op. cit.*, 26.

maintained or whether the emerging centre would diminish the margin's dynamism. As Janadas Devan observed in 1993, the year after the plan for what will become the Esplanade was proposed: "It is not a matter of overthrowing the centre, but of re-establishing the notion of a centre that is more inclusive."¹⁹ To return to the 1980s, though, the gradual appearance of contemporary art then was more directly concerned with life under the conditions of stern modernisation and less with art institutions; Singapore is in the position of having had artistic margins with avant-garde inclinations that presumably wanted to question artistic authority and conventions ahead of the authoritative arts-institutional centre that could sanction and canonise art.²⁰

Contemporary Art's "Arrival" and Postconceptual Art

In approaching the question of contemporary art in Singapore, we might reflect upon the "arrival" of contemporary art in the late 1970s and its gradual yet pronounced presence by the late 1980s. How was it like or unlike that larger arrival of contemporary visual-artistic forms in the city-state's immediate neighbourhood? Comparison will clarify the specificity of Singapore contemporary art's link with the close-to-radical imperatives of intense modernisation.

¹⁹ Janadas Devan, "Is Art Necessary?," in *Art vs. Art: Conflict and Convergence: The Substation Conference 1993*, ed. Lee Weng Choy (Singapore: The Substation, 1995), 66. (Devan, a former editor at *The Straits Times*, has been the Singapore government's Chief of Communications at the Ministry of Communications and Information since 2012.) While it is reasonable to contend that "inter-nodal negotiations between the [contemporary] artists, state, public and commerce are entangled and most importantly, not necessarily adversarial[,] as TAV had shown [the] willingness to use funds from the state and corporations to gain a wider audience for their art," this does not lead to the writer's conclusion that artists in the 1960s and 1970s were more independent than contemporary artists (Seng Yu Jin, "Re-Visiting the Emergence of The Artists Village," in *The Artists Village: 20 Years On*, eds. Kwok Kian Woon & Lee Wen, exhibition booklet [Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009], 14.). (For a related and more detailed argument, see Yvonne Low, "Positioning Singapore's Contemporary Art," *Journal of Maritime Geopolitics and Culture* 2, nos. 1 & 2 (2011): 115–37.) The expectations of public financial support only reveals how artists, given their own (post)colonial backgrounds, expect the arts to be subsidised as a public good, as is the case in Britain and Western Europe in general; this is unlikely to be out of step with the assumptions of a large part of the citizenry.

²⁰ Janadas, op. cit.

The flexible art practices of the 1980s employed a number of post-formalist strategies in art-making. Drawing upon the practice of conceptual art, broadly taken, the strategies used were based on the understanding that art derived its critical meaning not from external aesthetic dimensions of the artwork, but from its internal structure. However, the understanding that art need not be aesthetic unexpectedly freed up the thought parameters of what constituted “artistic material,” resulting in what has been described as the “postmedium condition” of art.²¹ In Singapore (and around the region) medium-specific and object-based art are reincorporated as component parts of an expansive artistic practice that, following Peter Osborne, can be called postconceptual art. Singapore art thus went beyond the thoroughgoing anti-aesthetic of a purist notion of conceptualism, towards being an expanded art that featured, in particular, performance and installation sculpture blended (or co-existing) with painting and drawing—within which, in both genres, figuration might appear; and the blended art practices facilitated engagements with the contemporary fragments of life that were part of the Singapore condition of rapid modernisation.

The Contemporary Arrives—and Takes Off

How art travels and is reshaped is not a predictable business. Historical contexts are different in various locales, and the lineaments of a Euro-American art history—often an art history seen from the point of view of US institutions that have been dominant since 1945—unsurprisingly do not apply in any neat way to Southeast Asian contexts. Further, even the geopolitical term “Southeast Asia” cannot be invoked easily as a destination for art, given the cultural differences between the Malay Archipelago or maritime Southeast Asia (e.g. Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines) and mainland Southeast Asia or Indochina (e.g. Laos,

²¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter, 1999): 296.

Cambodia, Vietnam).

If we stay with West Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, we might generalise that the 1970s witnessed the near-simultaneous appearance of:

two broad approaches [in art-making]—conceptualism and statement-making [, ...] as well as realism [in more established medium-based art] and forms of activism. However, these approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but instead as trajectories founded upon shared contextual concerns.²²

That is to say, conceptually oriented work coexisted or even combined with realism to give rise to plural or even eclectic practice of contemporary art that may not be easily recognised as such in the metropolitan centres. The overarching historical-contextual concerns for the 1970s were the Cold War that framed the results of decolonisation from the 1940s to the mid-1960s and the question of how national identity and culture should be expressed in a tumultuous region. Artistic experiments had to ascertain what the “post” in “postcolonial” implied for artistic processes. This was the crucial factor that mediated the post-war regional practices of both modern and contemporary art. The quasi-authoritarian governments that arose after the colonialists left, and were tolerated by the USA because of their anti-communism, complicated artistic-cultural thinking.²³ Two brief examples illustrate the regional “art world’s overlapping—because combined and uneven—modes of production,” as art historian Patrick Flores phrases it.²⁴

On 8 September 1969, the Cultural Center for the Philippines (CCP), constructed with financial support from the USA, was opened. As the nation lurched towards the declaration of martial law in 1972, the CCP was taken by some to be a cultural expression of the Marcos

²² Ahmad Mashadi, “Framing the 1970s,” *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (July 2011): 410.

²³ The art that came out of this Cold War period from the Malay Archipelago was featured in a Special Programme of the inaugural 2006 Singapore Biennale, *Telah Terbit (Out Now)*, held at SAM. See Ahmad Mashadi, *Telah Terbit (Out Now): Southeast Asian Contemporary Art Practices during the 1970s*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006).

²⁴ Patrick D. Flores, “Missing Links, Burned Bridges: The Art of the ’70s,” in *Pananaw 2: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1998), 53.

regime. Artists such as Pablo Baen Santos (b. 1943), one of the founders of the Kaisahan (Solidarity) Group of realist painters, were committed to the urban poor; for him and those likeminded, “[r]ealism was deployed in order to critique the state’s patronage of the arts through such institutions as the CCP, which tended to favour abstraction and conceptual practices that for many appeared artificial, mannerist and overly indexical of international movements.”²⁵ In this case, modernist abstraction and contemporary conceptual practices, though considered incommensurate as visual arts practices, are yoked together as parts of an international culture some saw as antithetical to Filipino national culture. In contrast, we can take the artists linked with the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB; New Art Movement) in Indonesia. After the fall of Sukarno and the suppression of communism, with Suharto’s New Order set up, art and cultural expression were depoliticised. In this environment, abstraction, combined with work that referenced spiritual expression and decorative local motifs and patterns, flourished. In 1975, the GSRB was established by FX Harsono (b. 1949) and others, and championed a pluralism of artistic expression that influenced younger artists such as Dede Eri Supria (b. 1956), with the result that the use of ready-mades, found objects and site-specific installations spread, becoming an art that was executed with local sociopolitical concerns and historical contexts kept in view.²⁶

In both instances of national artistic development discussed above, art is politicised. The geopolitical realities that avant-garde and conceptualism elsewhere understood to concern itself with questions of autonomous art and the expressive artist—or also “the oppressive values of modernism as reflected in the policies of art institutions,” as the

²⁵ Ahmad, “Framing the 1970s,” 413.

²⁶ Agung Hujatnikajennong, “The Contemporary Turns: About the Indonesian Art World and the Aftermath of ‘the 80s’,” in *Beyond the Dutch: Indonesia, the Netherlands and the Visual Arts from 1900 Until Now*, eds. Meta Knol, Remco Raben & Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2010)

Indonesian critic–curator–artist Jim Supangkat puts it—are transplanted into different cultural and political registers.²⁷ Arguably, the sociopolitical complexities of 1970s Southeast Asian contemporary art *act out*, in unexpected combinations of forms and styles, the possibilities inherent within “the more socially and politically complex perspectives of the historical avant-gardes”—but we might observe that such “perspectives” were “also *revived* in the 1960s and 1970s by a range of work [in the advanced West], which was either directly political in character, had strong anti-art elements, or embodied art-institutional and social critique.”²⁸ If contemporary art with realist dimensions in Southeast Asia cannot be understood as truly sharing a contemporaneous moment with some of the neo-avant-gardes in the metropolitan West in the 1970s, the difference would seem to lie in Southeast Asian societies’ apparently laggard positions in modernisation’s *telos*. As happens when thinking of non-metropolitan modern and contemporary art, the issue of their “belatedness” arises (or their “particularity,” versus the “universal” art of the Euro-American centres). The art historian James Elkins acknowledges that: “Belatedness is a prickly concept: it forecloses sympathy and prohibits dialogue by offering a value judgement as a description. It trails a string of problematic concepts with normative implications, including the avant-garde, influence, originality, and precedence.”²⁹

To proceed to the comparative, we can ask: how different was Singapore from its surrounding environs? The expression of contemporary art in Singapore was rare in the

²⁷ Jim Supangkat, “Multiculturalism/Multimodernism,” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 80. Supangkat offers a timely warning that contemporary artwork from “developing societies” should not be pigeonholed as consistently being about “sociopolitical content”; the danger would be a stereotype “that developing nations are repressive states in which democracy cannot develop or expand. [...] Whereas there was once a [colonial-era] distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies, using progress as the measure, now the division is between ‘developed’ and ‘not-yet-developed’ societies, using democracy as the measure.” (Ibid.).

²⁸ Osborne, *op. cit.*, 21.

²⁹ James Elkins, “Afterword,” in *Art and Globalization*, 264.

1970s, becoming more pronounced by the late 1980s. Despite this, the city-state shared artistic orientations in common with the region, and it is the PAP government's success in engineering rapid growth that accounts for artistic differences. The commitment to rapid growth was not separate from the Cold War, as it represented a choice of capitalist development with revised (and attenuated) social-democratic forms over even a "hard" leftism. Sociopolitical discipline and social engineering would create the culture to transform society.³⁰ These choices made the city-state stand out in relief against the other national-cultural ideals that surrounded them.

The upshot of the above leads us to the broad proposition that contemporary art arises, erratically and symptomatically through the 1970s, in varying degrees of reaction to the push for a wrenching catch-up modernisation—which also entailed intense urbanisation, with the entire island losing the inherited division between town and country from colonial times—and to the search for new artistic means not only in the visual arts, but also in theatre and literature, that allowed sharper engagements with such developments.³¹ Artistic changes in the metropolitan centres from the 1950s–1970s, when many artists seemed determined "to locate their art as closely as possible to the boundaries between art's traditional domain of imaginative perception and the base materiality of one's means of signification," then offered options by which artists could adapt to create an art that foregrounded the present's incomplete fragments.³²

Such matters formed the thematic core of an exhibition in 1990, *Urban Artists: 25*

³⁰ C. J. W.-L. Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 33–52.

³¹ Cf. Rem Koolhaas, "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa," in Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, ed. Jennifer Sigler (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995); Rodolphe de Koninck, Julie Drolet & Marc Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); and Wee, *Asian Modern*, 77–98.

³² Thomas Crow, "Afterword," in his *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (London: Lawrence King Publishing Ltd., 2004), 185.

Years of Singapore Art, curated by Susie Koay, then a curator at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), and, later, the deputy director of SAM. The NMAG, established in 1976, was a cultural institution that exceeded the historical and ethnological orientation of its parent National Museum (with origins in 1849) in its commitment to visual art, until the opening of SAM in 1996 as a full-blown art museum.³³ The exhibition is valuable as an authentic representative voice from the end of the 1980s that captures artistic transitions in both aesthetic media and content.

In the exhibition booklet, Koay writes that the pre-independence environment of Singapore was ineluctably transformed after independence on 9 August 1965, and that the art changed with it. Already, in 1960, the PAP started “a drive towards industrialization and rapid urbanization,” and because of “its sustained and oftentimes [*sic*] ruthless urbanization programme, by the year 1988, a total of 86% of the population lived in these subsidized skyscraper towns.”³⁴ The exhibition offers four categories of artists in examining the relationship between art and “the current culture”: first, artists who directly transcribe the environment into their work; second, artists who indirectly or unselfconsciously utilise elements from their environment; third, artists who “isolate themselves to create an inner world within the urban setting”; and finally, those whose work is

in touch with the current environment [... in which] utility services compare favourably with those elsewhere [in the more advanced world]; [and] where the URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority] attempts to preserve [...] the old Singapore with as much earnestness [the] HDB [Housing and Development Board] had earlier displayed in demolishing and rebuilding.³⁵

That is, in a Singapore more caught up with the metropolitan norms, the aim to wipe the

³³ National Museum of Singapore, “About Us,” <http://nationalmuseum.sg/about-nms/history> (accessed 19 February 2016).

³⁴ Susie Koay, “Urban Artists: 25 Years of Singapore Art: Some Observations,” in National Museum Art Gallery, *Urban Artists: 25 Years of Singapore Art*, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1990), 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 10.

slate clean of all history and cultural forms inimical to modernisation has been weakened and a will to be contemporary, in the sense discussed at the beginning of this essay, has emerged.

What did this mean for the art surveyed in the 1990s exhibition? In the first place, nostalgia for a rural Singapore. By the 1970s, the depiction of tropical landscape was established in Chinese *xieyihua*-style painting, which attempted to capture the essence of a landscape or birds using rapid brushwork. As urbanisation progressed, the “[d]epiction of recurrent themes such as the old Chinatown and the Singapore River can be seen as escape avenues from the current plastic age,” according to Koay’s essay.³⁶ She points out both the nostalgia and sense of loss embedded in such artwork. The Singapore River was a favourite of watercolourists, so much that in 1986, the Arbour Fine Arts Gallery featured younger artists in a private exhibition (infamously) entitled *Not the Singapore River*.³⁷ So too Koay offers, as part of her second category of artists (those who indirectly register their environments), a 1975 oil painting done by Liu Kang (1911–2004), *Life by the River* (fig. 1). The artist is regarded as a “pioneer” artist whose work combined post-Impressionist technique with Chinese ink styles in depicting scenes of Bali or Singapore. Liu Kang’s painting offers a brightly coloured realist (though not naturalistic) scene of a village with a river going through it, with the variety of everyday life presented: people talk, wash clothes on the river bank, push their boats in the river, etc. The presence of community bonds is patent. Koay conjures up what is *not* in the scene: “Liu Kang’s works can be interpreted as

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ Kwok Kian Chow, *Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 92–4. Ahmad Mashadi posits that the critical artistic formations of the 1970s in West Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, by and large, “may be seen as a collective critique against the formality, un-reflexiveness and repetitiveness of what was called ‘international abstraction’ and ‘provincial lyricism’ which had dominated art-making.” (Ahmad, “Framing the 1970s,” 415.) This contention applies to Singapore from perhaps the late 1970s as well; pictorial abstraction was notable and the “provincial lyricism” that is mentioned appears in the guise of watercolours of a Chinatown and a Singapore River from yesteryear.

an unconscious reaction to the regimented society of schematic HDB flats which dominates [the] Singapore skyline of the 1960s and 70s.”³⁸ Already, by the mid-1970s, the force of a gathering modernisation is felt.

In the second place, Koay registers the presence of artistic pluralism. Those who “isolate themselves to create an inner world,” the third category in her catalogue, include a diverse set of artists—abstract painters, Chinese-style ink-and-colour painters and even, we might be surprised, multimedia artists. She brings up an art exhibition/event of 1988, *Trimurti*, as one example of this category. Three younger artists, S. Chandrasekaran (b. 1959), Goh Ee Choo (b. 1962), Salleh Japar (b. 1962), staged a collaborative work at the Goethe-Institut that combined painting, installation sculpture and performance art, unified by the Sanskrit term *trimurti*, used to define a manifestation of three forces: creation, preservation and destruction. Hindu, Chinese divinity as well as Malay-Muslim cultural and religious elements are explored by each artist, in the name of how such differences could also embody the unity of multiracial identities in Singapore.³⁹ The three artists performed individually on 7 and 12 March 1988, during which they worked and reworked the central installation in the hall. Koay sees the event as part of a larger artistic trend, regardless of whether it appears in pictorial or transmedia guises: “the use of negative space was important and meaningful in experiencing the beautiful as the forms themselves.”⁴⁰ And therefore the three, while unusual in their attempt to blend Asian religious cultures

³⁸ Koay, op. cit., 7.

³⁹ In their joint statement, the three artists say this: “*Trimurti* is a Sanskrit word describing three forms usually associated with the Hindu Godhead of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. [...] There is a need to show that different things can exist together harmoniously and in perfect equilibrium. It is true that each artist has his own culture and religious background. Each is in itself unique, but as a language of the heart, mind and soul and as an expression of humanity, is universal. [...] Expressing this unity, each artist shows one aspect of this universal manifestation.” (S. Chandrasekaran, Goh Ee Choo & Salleh Japar, “*Trimurti*, 1988 Statements and Documentation,” in *Trimurti and Ten Years*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1998), 11.) A retrospective of *Trimurti* was staged at SAM in 1998.

⁴⁰ Koay, op. cit., 8.

with installation and performance art, “practise the same form of escape from the urban environment” as others.⁴¹

By the time Koay reaches her fourth category, “works [that] are inspired by the current environment,” the urge for artistic pluralism is more marked for both younger and older practitioners, even as the general artistic support for diversity is not unqualified.⁴² Performance artist–painter–installation sculptor Tang Da Wu is in that category, as is Teo Eng Seng (b. 1938) and younger artists with links to TAV. She brings up Teo’s *The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River* (1986, fig. 2) as an example of the artist as “educator” who “recontextualizes the realities of society and projects or magnifies the interpretation for the benefit of the viewer.”⁴³ While she does not say more than this, Teo’s work is both an experiment in form and a reevaluation of some Singapore art content. *The Net* is an installation comprising a fishing net mounted and stretched out on a wall with variously coloured pulped paper as sculptural elements figuring as debris or detritus “caught” in the net. Teo, who had abandoned painting in 1979, calls this medium “paperdyesculp.” The work questions both the use of conventional art media and the clichéd image of the Singapore River to represent local identity, given how polluted the river had become by 1986. But we have to be careful: while Teo is anti-conventional, he is no avant-gardist, trying to eradicate art’s aesthetic difference from life. When interviewed in 2001, and asked to comment on the increasingly visible artistic diversity by the 1980s, he acerbically replied that this “diversity” was partly the result of poor art education—a lack of sufficient technical training— starting in the 1960s, and going into the 1970s, when “[f]resh idea[s] came in and

⁴¹ Ibid., 9.

⁴² Ibid., 6.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

what is that fresh idea—talk. Talk a lot? Come out with very big words.”⁴⁴

Koay’s emplacement of Teo alongside committed experimental artists such as Tang Da Wu is significant for the answer it contributes in relation to the question, why does the contemporary take off? Even if Teo is critical of the perceived lack of conventional skills in contemporary art practices, he finds in some of the new ways of art-making a renewed critical capacity to engage with present-day concerns. With the above in mind, we briefly can revisit three contemporary art events that were symptomatic of artistic dissatisfaction in order to bring out the common points in diverse arts practices that make them “contemporary.”

In the first of these events, Cheo Chai-Hiang (b. 1946)—a member of an art group that privileged abstraction, the Modern Art Society—in 1972 submitted a proposal for the Society’s annual exhibition by mail for an artwork to be titled *Singapore River*.⁴⁵ (He was then living in Birmingham in England, where he was in an art school.) The proposal was for a work, measuring 5 feet by 5 feet, to be drawn partially on a wall and partially on the floor of the exhibition hall. It not only brought up the question of art’s materiality but also questioned how the Singapore River might be thought of, given both its importance in Singapore’s history as an entrepôt and its multitudinous appearance in nostalgic and touristic visual renditions of Singapore.⁴⁶ The proposal was rejected.⁴⁷ What image that has

⁴⁴ John Low, “‘Non-Visible Bodies/Spaces’: Interview with Teo Eng Seng,” in *The Substation, Open Ends—A Documentation Exhibition of Performance Art in Singapore* (Singapore: The Substation, 2001), unpaginated.

⁴⁵ This proposed artwork is now generally referred to as *5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)* (1972). The Modern Art Society, started in 1964, led the way in championing abstraction, “though such a goal was never explicitly claimed or articulated by the Society; even so, its propagation of a new aesthetic implied abstract strategies and outcomes.” (T.K. Sabapathy, “Contexts and Issues,” in *Cheo Chai-Hiang: Thoughts and Processes [Rethinking the Singapore River]*, eds. T.K. Sabapathy & Cecily Briggs (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts & Singapore Art Museum, 2000), 18.)

⁴⁶ Isabel Ching, “Tracing (Un)Certain Legacies: Conceptualism in Singapore and the Philippines,” *Diaaologue*, Asia Art Archive, July 2011 <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/1045> (accessed 12 February 2016).

present-day social facticity might be contained suitably within *Singapore River's* conceptual square? Teo Eng Seng's presentist re-examination of the river is not without precedent.

The second event came in September 1979, when Tan Teng Kee (b. 1937, Malaysia), held an informal outdoor exhibition in a field outside his home of roughly 30 of his Constructivist-styled metal sculptures and 30 abstract oil paintings that was sponsored by the Goethe-Institut. This event is now referred to as *The Picnic* (1979). He also painted a 100-metre long painting entitled *The Lonely Road* that, unpredictably, he offered to cut up into smaller and more affordable sizes. Even more unpredictable, T.K. Sabapathy opines, "was the incineration of his three-dimensional constructions [at dusk]; [... Tan] embarked upon an action which completely undermined [...] the existence of a work as an object. As a phenomenon it is singular in Tan's artistic career and unique in the story of art in Singapore."⁴⁸ The curatorial text for a 2016 exhibition that featured Tan reads: "[*The Picnic*] has been described by art historian T.K. Sabapathy as the first 'happening' or performance event to be held in Singapore. Yet the exhibition came about by circumstance."⁴⁹ While recognised as "the first event of its kind in Singapore," as curator Russell Storer notes, it remains hard to justify an appellation as specific as a "happening" to an event that was singular, sponsored by a cultural organisation and had art for sale; one might say that the event seems to be eclectic and exploratory chaffing at conventional artistic restrictions, even as there is no systematic forsaking of art's aesthetic dimensions.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Curator Low Sze Wee notes that "there is some contention [as to] whether [the proposal] was in fact rejected. Some contend that it was left out of the exhibition due to [an] administrative oversight." (Personal communication to the author, 27 February 2016).

⁴⁸ T.K. Sabapathy, *Sculpture in Singapore* (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991), 26.

⁴⁹ National Gallery Singapore, "Tan Teng-Kee, '*The Picnic*,'" curatorial wall text for the exhibition *A Fact Has No Appearance: Art Beyond the Object*, held at National Gallery Singapore, 21 January to 19 June 2016.

⁵⁰ Russell Storer, "Melting into Air: Tan Teng-Kee in Singapore," in *A Fact has No Appearance: Art Beyond the Object*, eds. Clarissa Chikiamco, Russell Storer and Adele Tan, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 58. Storer goes on to add: "Tan did not consider himself as a conceptual artists and never created

And in the third event, Tang Da Wu, after art studies in England, presented in 1980 at the NMAG a set of works prepared in 1979: an environmental installation exhibition that included a set of linens—seven pieces that he had hung in a gully over three months at a construction site in Ang Mo Kio—and square wooden boards covered with dried mud in the shape of circles, held in place by glue while the rain had largely washed away the mud that surrounded the circles. (The circles referred to the idea of infinity from the *Yi Jing* (or *I Ching*), the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*.) *Gully Curtains* (1979) and *The Product of the Rain and Me* (1979) were two parts of a larger exhibition entitled *Earth Work* (1980, fig. 3) that piqued curiosity among art audiences. Drawings made using earth pigments also were displayed. The very title that Tang chose deliberately invokes and indicates his artistic reworking of 1960s land art, or earth art, for his own purposes. A 2016 restaging of *Earth Work* featured a letter that Tang wrote to the then-Ministry of Culture, dated 27 March 1980, requesting a grant-in-aid for the exhibition:

[The proposed exhibition] is my observation of the Singapore red earth, it is very special. I am interested in the changes of the earth due to the rainfalls, the heat and the gravity, apart from its physiographical aspect. [*sic*] [...] My way of working isn't scientific, it is very much philosophical, base[d] upon my "zen" studies and influence[d] by "Tao"⁵¹ and "I Ching." I am also making a [*sic*] 8mm film call[ed] "Earthdance" as complementing to "Earthwork."⁵²

another event in this mode, in Singapore or elsewhere." (Ibid., 58) In a 2016 interview, Tan says: "I tried many things and developed my own aesthetic. I do not know if this is modern art, conceptual art or performance art. Different people have different views. As an artist, I was just making art that appealed to me. Art that was about openness of spirit." (Deepika Shetty, "Fiery History of Singapore Art," *The Straits Times*, 21 January 2016, "Life" section). For an overview of Tan's work, see T.K. Sabapathy, *Tan Teng Kee: An Overview, 1958–2000* (Singapore: Sculpture Square Ltd., 2001).

⁵¹ Presumably a reference to the *Tao Te Ching* (or *Daodejing*). This is a fundamental text for both philosophical and religious Taoism.

⁵² Tang Da Wu, Letter to the Director, Ministry of Culture, 27 March 1980 (letter on display, *Earth Work 1979*, National Gallery Singapore, 22 January to 29 May 2016). Unfortunately, the film that resulted was lost. Curator Charmaine Toh suggests that: "*Earthdance* is possibly the earliest example of video art in Singapore. [The film's significance lies in that r]ather than simply using the camera to document, Tang was clearly conscious [in his account to her] of the medium itself, taking it into account in the creation of work. Using the camera's viewfinder, Tang marked out the trapezoid area of the field framed by the camera. He then filmed himself repeatedly running along the edge of the marked-out area, creating a furrow in the earth." (Charmaine Toh,

An experimental and a putative transmedia or trans-category art practice is wedded through Tang's plain, ingenuous and idiosyncratic rhetoric to an environmental awareness inspired by Chinese texts and ideas, using earth from a construction site that was the result of the state's ongoing urban development. It is worth noting that Tang, like Cheo, had been a member of the Modern Art Society; he appears to follow Cheo in pronouncing, implicitly, the end of "the sovereignty of [modernist] painting, institutionalised by exclusionary aesthetic values and positions,"⁵³ while simultaneously delivering a quiet critique of urbanisation's degrading environmental impact, with no reconciliation offered between the value of the red earth and the urbanisation that has exposed it to erosion.⁵⁴ The result is artwork in which the historical present of fracture and fragments is privileged, and this presentism is not vitiated by the "philosophical" studies undergirding the circular shapes used in it—the Chinese cultural texts are not marshalled, as they might be, to valorise a timeless realm.

The three works or events manifest the embryonic elements of what become characterised as contemporary art in Singapore by the late 1980s and may be thought of as a transmedia enterprise; and art that will treat the incomplete fragments of historical contemporary life. Regarding the last element, particularly for Tang, we see that the critique of the ruptural futurity of modernisation gives rise to an emphasis on the historical present. Together, these events are an index of what emerged in 1980s Singapore as the contemporaneity of contemporary art.

"Notes on Tang Da Wu's *Earth Work*," in *Earth Work 1979: Tang Da Wu*, ed. Charmaine Toh, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 12–3.)

⁵³ T.K. Sabapathy, "Regarding Exhibitions," in *The Artists Village: 20 Years On*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Contemporary Art and the Postconceptual

If the 1970s offer the tentative appearance of contemporary art, the late 1980s offer both more artists and artists engaged in pluralistic or heterogeneous art exploration. The question here is whether there was any understanding—if only tacit or implicit—as to what contemporary art’s remit was to be; and given what was being said of the new art’s “alterity” and agenda of aesthetic transgression, how firmly alternative was it exactly? These questions are raised in a subtle and searching essay, “Regarding Exhibitions,” by the long-time observer of Singapore art, T.K. Sabapathy. When TAV was established in their founding premises by Tang Da Wu and his artist wife, Hazel McIntosh, in a village in then-rural Sembawang in June 1988, it became a magnet of what was regarded as the alternative in not only artistic but larger cultural terms: the Village’s notoriety in art circles also drew non-arts attention.⁵⁵ Sabapathy tells us that the ten artists who participated in TAV’s inaugural show—Tang himself, Amanda Heng (b. 1951), Vincent Leow (b. 1961) and Baet Yeok Kwan (b. 1961) among them, all of whom have since progressed to various levels of distinction—had uneven art practices, and were attracted to TAV by particular interests, and undoubtedly, by the prospects of working with Tang. What was the general lure of the Village? Sabapathy suggests the following: openness and space for advancing individual practices, combined with collegial yet competitive interaction; “provision of a milieu that was physically expansive and psychologically salubrious as it was set apart from the uniform, restrictive and reductive urbanization of Singapore in the late 70s and throughout the 80s”; and “non-dogmatic operatives—although methods for producing and thinking on art were steered along reflexive paths.”⁵⁶ The Village embodied—in its rural location—the ability to

⁵⁵ The space for the Village was lost in 1990, as the land it was on was acquired by the state for development.

⁵⁶ Sabapathy, “Regarding Exhibitions,” 7.

escape the disciplined homogenising modernity of the city-state, with its uniform slab- and tower-blocks of flats, undertaken in the name of economic betterment. TAV both signified and gave literal space for critical reflection. Sabapathy is clear that no party line on art production was enforced, though “steered [...] reflexive paths” existed. There was room for individual manoeuvre. As the Village was claimed to be, as Sabapathy writes, “a pre-eminent site for prospecting alterity, it is tempting to cast it as a radical agency; in which circumstance, its radicalism is posited in terms of subverting or transgressing [...] prevailing conventions, systems and institutions by advocating activist strategies. Nothing is further from the case.”⁵⁷ The last phrase does not mean that Sabapathy dismisses the significance of the work and the artists associated with TAV, any more than it contradicts his own stance on the Village’s attractions, but that its artistic “radicalism” was not as *thoroughgoing* as it might appear, even if its larger socio-cultural impact drew “watchfulness or surveillance.”⁵⁸ He offers his reflections on two exhibitions that took place in 1989 for which he was present: the inaugural *Open Studio Show* (in January) and the *Drawing Show* (in December).

That the inaugural show was staged in a literal village meant that art escaped the exclusionary confines of a high-cultural space, and could be “diffused” and “dispersed”: the very mode and location of its exhibitionary condition signified freedom for both artists and audience. This also transgressed curatorial norms: the audience interacted with the art in a non-hierarchical and non-ritualised manner, with the result, Sabapathy observes, that art’s autonomy was not “sequestered.”⁵⁹ However, to his surprise, the show included some paintings and “sculpture-like formations” that possessed “continuing or residual affiliations with prevailing modern conventions,” even while other works showed clear conceptualist

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

inclinations.⁶⁰ Tang displayed his own drawings and paintings; “interest in engagement with painting as such was not trivialized,” as one might expect.⁶¹ Amanda Heng even had six drawings of male and female nudes on display, “rendered brusquely, violently, and as a partial entity,” and “the body is seen as invasively manipulated, even abject.”⁶² Gender issues are foregrounded, but while the drawings are hardly conventional, they were executed while she was a student at the then-La Salle School of Art.⁶³ While the drawings, in retrospect, help us to see the continuity in Heng’s work as it develops in the 1990s and later, when she starts practising performance and installation art, life drawings undertaken in an academy nevertheless “lodged oddly with anticipations of TAV as a site for alterity.”⁶⁴

The co-existence of apparently incompatible art forms, even if laced with subversive or unusual content, also occurs with other youthful artists with partial or no affiliation with TAV. Sabapathy brings up the four-artist show, *Man, Objects and Images*, held at the NMAG in August 1988. There was a willingness, as in the inaugural *Open Studio Show*, to break with the “prevailing [...] curatorial operatives [...] customarily seen in art galleries here.”⁶⁵ Tang Mun Kit (b. 1955) coordinated the exhibition “and articulated their aims or premises.”⁶⁶ The title chosen for the show, in eschewing “metaphorical associations,” signalled an interest in presenting how both more conventional art forms (paintings as done by Wong Shih Yaw [b. 1967]) and found objects (Tang’s “rehabilitated discarded materials and found things [...] [which] were cool, unostentatious, yet sustaining”) could be pressured to offer “fresh

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 7–8.

⁶³ From 2007, the school became known as LaSalle College of the Arts.

⁶⁴ Sabapathy, “Regarding Exhibitions,” 8. For an introduction to Heng’s work, see Singapore Art Museum, *Amanda Heng: Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

thinking” on art.⁶⁷ Artistic “impurity” appeared also in the heterogeneous form of artist-organised shows. What, as such, is the “contemporary turn” we witnessed in the late 1980s, when the conventional and the various anti-formalisms are yoked together, Sabapathy suggests, with “distinctiveness”?⁶⁸

Sabapathy’s queries and reflections make clear that the contemporary turn was *not* keen on the absolute anti-aesthetic of a “pure” conceptual art. The issue of art’s necessary constitution by concepts is accompanied by, minimally, practical understanding that all art requires some type of materialisation and presentation. Arguably, that which was initially thought of in the 1960s as “post-formalist” strategies offered Singapore artists the idea of the anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic *and* non-aesthetic material to engage with questions of art-making in particularly unprecedented areas of investigation such as: the environment and modernisation; gender and sexuality issues; cultural and ethnic identity—concerns not exactly addressed by abstract pictorialism or, in fact, by any of the forms of historical modern art in Singapore.

The contention that Peter Osborne offers us that contemporary art is postconceptual art is helpful in siting the indigenous and indigenised re-formations of contemporary art in Singapore. We can begin with the “failure” of conceptual art:

It was the ironic historical achievement of the strong programme of “analytical” or “pure” conceptual art to have demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a *necessary*, though *radically insufficient*, component of the artwork through the failure of its attempt at elimination [...]⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Sabapathy, “Regarding Exhibitions,” 9. For an introduction to Wong’s work, see C. J. W.-L. Wee, “Christianity, the Work of Wong Shih Yaw and Contemporary Art,” in *The Inoyama Donation: A Tale of Two Artists*, ed. Low Sze Wee, exh. booklet (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 20–9.

⁶⁸ Sabapathy, “Regarding Exhibitions,” 9. At this juncture, we can also recall *Trimurti*, which was brought up by Susie Koay in her catalogue essay referenced earlier: there too we see a clash of elements—religion and essential(ised) cultural-ethnic identities are explored in the name of a harmonious multicultural identity that (admittedly) seems to remain more a series of juxtaposed multi-racial identities, which are hardly the predictable contents of contemporary art.

⁶⁹ Osborne, op. cit., 49.

Osborne then adumbrates upon this “ineliminability”: “The aesthetic concept of art [...] mistakes art’s necessary aesthetic appearance for the *ground* of its apparently autonomous, and hence infinite, production of meaning, which is in fact historically relational, rather than ‘positive’ in an aesthetic sense.”⁷⁰ That is, while art is constituted by concepts, it also *must have* some “felt, spatio-temporal” presentation, and therefore materiality is ineliminable in that sense; this in turn leads us to the “critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials,” which then further leads to an “expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art.”⁷¹ There is no problem of artistic unity posed in this expanded field of art production, for the “unity of the individual artwork [is distributed] across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time.”⁷²

While the visual-artistic situation in Singapore did not participate in quite such a complex discourse on contemporary art, an understanding of the issues Osborne sets out helps to reveal how re-energising and, for some, liberating the postconceptual was as it offered fresh critical means for the exploration of the present condition of Singapore in the 1970s and the 1980s.

Conclusion: And the Contemporary Now ...?

The contemporary as a goal is shaped by the particular relations to the immediate past and to a desired future. For 1980s Singapore, the contemporary was affected also by the sense of possibly “finally” living in the same historical moment as the advanced West, *in contrast* to its neighbours’ slower economic development—and therefore in contrast to the region’s

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 48.

⁷² Ibid.

more “backward” time. Through the concerted focus on export-oriented industrialisation (EOI), the city-state sought to escape the fear that “geography is destiny.” One Malaysian cultural-political commentator, Karim Raslan, has characterised Singapore’s post-independence development as one in which there is “a deliberate de-emphasising of the [peninsular Southeast Asian] region—in terms of language policies, culture and politics”:

The [Singapore state’s] fixation with the global agenda has made many [younger] Singaporeans [especially] lose sight of the imperatives of geography, turning their backs on the region. The [regional] hinterland is steadily being forgotten [...]. For example, less and less Singaporeans can speak Malay—even *pasar* [bazaar] Malay eludes them.⁷³

The differences in Singapore contemporary art from that of Indonesia and the Philippines in the 1980s can be accounted for, to a reasonable extent, by the developmental and global agenda of the PAP government.

The contemporary in the first quarter of the twenty-first century must not be assumed to be the same as that of the 1980s–2002. This essay in fact could be said to have asked, “What *was* the contemporary and contemporary art in the 1980s?” A major issue now, given that the city-state has become global and informational in form, having used its economic capacity to create art institutions still not quite possible elsewhere in the region, is whether Singapore contemporary art is able to practise a double-coding in which its own artistic significations are maintained even as they are situated in the contemporary art museum or the Singapore Biennale and accrue new collective sociocultural meanings—and also benefit from the sizeable funding the state puts into the arts.

There is, therefore, also the major art institutions to think about. The emergence of East Asian and Australian biennales and museum exhibitions from the 1990s showcasing

⁷³ Karim Raslan, “The Singaporean Dilemma,” in his *Journeys through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2002), 85.

modern and contemporary Asian art, alongside Singapore art institutions, indicate that self-reflexive investigations have emerged on how “the rest of the world” produced and still produces its modern culture out of related quasi- or directly colonised experiences, whatever the limitations in funding and other institutional capacities.⁷⁴ The relationship of artists in the region to art institutions is not necessarily one in which, as Jim Supangkat observes of Indonesian artists, “like many contemporary artists worldwide, were questioning the authority of art institutions”: modern Indonesian art museums “hardly exist at all,” and that “has created the general impression that the status of modern or contemporary art is not understood by the Indonesian people. As a result, all artists in Indonesia—even the most radical—hope for the greater development of art institutions.”⁷⁵

Singapore art institutions need to negotiate the politics of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regionalism and postcolonial nationalisms to curatorially write over older and newer contemporary art’s own significations to project the utopian horizon of socio-cultural connection, while struggling to *not* allow such projections to take on only the dystopian form of the market. The contemporary now poses new conundrums that could not have been fully anticipated in the 1980s.

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⁷⁴ Wee, ““We Asians?””.

⁷⁵ Supangkat, “Multiculturalism/Multimodernism,” 79.

IMAGE REFERENCES

Fig.	Thumbnail	Artwork Details	Copyright
1		Liu Kang <i>Life by the River</i> 1975 Oil on canvas 126 x 203 cm Gift of the artist Collection of National Gallery Singapore	[P-0521 / CF]
2		Teo Eng Seng <i>The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River</i> 1986 Paperdyesculp and net Dimensions variable Gift of the artist Collection of National Gallery Singapore	[ASB-0043 / CF]
3		Exhibition poster of <i>Earth Work</i> 1980	