

In the Spaces of Exhibition History:
a study of art exhibitions in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1990s

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A Thesis submitted to the
Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts (Research)

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Acknowledgement

This thesis owes much to the unwavering support and direction of my supervisor, Associate Professor Laura Miotto. I am grateful for her kindness, encouragement and sage advice.

In the process of researching, I am indebted to the institutions and individuals that allowed me access to their archives. A special mention to Mr. Koh Nguang How for his generous provision of archival images that come graciously with many hours of recounting the past, as well as the unique collaboration provided by his artistic practice. The staff members of the National Archives of Singapore, National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre as well as the National Museum of Singapore Resource Centre have been very helpful in assisting with my search queries and allowing me access to their collections.

This project has been enriched by individuals who have shared their time and stories with me in extensive interviews. I am thankful to Teo Eng Seng, Gilles Massot, Goh Ee Choo, S. Chandrasekaran and Choy Weng Yang for recounting their vivid experiences as artists, curators and exhibition organisers.

Throughout the duration of my research, mentors, experts and colleagues have given me their valuable input, this has shaped the project in many ways. I thank Seng Yu Jin, Marc Glöde, Michelle Lim, Michael Walsh, Scott Michael Anthony, Andrea Nanetti and T.K. Sabapathy for being available for my consultations, and for sharing their insights. I would like to extend a special gratitude to Kamillah Bahdar who generously edited this thesis and for offering her astute comments. I appreciate Nicole Teh Yu Xuan for lending her valuable time in assisting with the online database in this thesis, as well as Zen Teh for being a reader and an unwavering supporter.

I wish to acknowledge the generous funding of the NHB-NTU grant, provided by the National Heritage Board of Singapore which has been a great enabler for this project. I would also like to thank Airtable for the concession towards the database platform used in this research.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unending support in everything I do.

Abstract

This research is a study of art exhibitions in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1990s, focusing on the exhibition space as a source of discourses. Within an art exhibition, the disposition of space is fundamental in experiencing artworks, yet it is seldom given ample emphasis in writings on art. In response this project explores interdisciplinary methods to study the spaces of modern and contemporary art exhibitions, at the same time critically evaluating the concepts of space as a subject of historical study. This thesis consists of a two-part investigation: firstly, an overview study of the historical impulses and transformation of art exhibition spaces in the selected period and place; secondly a closer grained study of three selected case study exhibitions, using archival materials, interviews and developing the use of drawing as a research tool. Within the 1970s to the 1990s there was a significant change in terms of the typology of exhibition venues as well as the spatial articulations of artworks in exhibitions. These are symptomatic of the shifting ideologies of art amongst artists and stakeholders, as well as developments in Singapore's policies and infrastructures. The changes also coincide with the transition between modern to the contemporary in Singapore's art historical context, making the 1970s to the 1990s a pertinent period of study.

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Introduction

To exhibit art is to make it public, to manifest itself so as to be available for public reception and discourse. Art exhibitions in Singapore today occur at an extremely high frequency; they can be found in a variety of venues from large-scale museums of art to smaller galleries or pop up exhibitions in informal venues such as private residency flats or a disused bomb shelter. In 2017 alone the city-state hosted a total of 1077 visual art exhibitions (Arts and Heritage Division 2018). The figure gives a sense of the proliferation of art exhibitions, captured as a statistical abstraction. However, as exhibitions come and go, an analysis of their legacy, cumulatively and individually, remains a challenging undertaking. Exhibitions are cherished for providing a personal encounter with works of art, much of its merits lie in the realm of this artistic experience, which is difficult to quantify. Rooted in and/or mediated through material practices, the disposition of space is fundamental to an art exhibition, but on the other hand it is seldom given ample emphasis in writings on art. This gap especially pronounced when considering writings on Singapore and Southeast Asian Art; on the other hand whilst globally there has been growing interests in incorporating ideas of space in art discourses, there is still much to be done. Writer and art historian Mary Anne Stanizewski talks about the preference towards the discrete work of art as a subject of analysis in art historical studies, she notes that “Although there has been an increased interest in installation design since the 1980s, the way modern artworks are actually seen and displayed remains a relatively overlooked consideration.” (Staniszewski 1998, xxi) In view of this, my thesis aims to study art as enmeshed within a framework of relationships and processes—it explores interdisciplinary methods to study art exhibition spaces, through the use of oral and archival sources as well as through developing the use of drawing as a research tool.

In the process of developing this thesis I have noticed that the term space is so deceptively simple, it is often taken for granted that its meaning must be obvious and universally understood. However, through researching and defining the arguments in this thesis I found that the conceptualisation of space shifts across time, culture and languages. The implication of this is not merely semantic, but also has an effect on one’s world view.

Therefore, a discussion of space and its definition is important to the arguments within this thesis. I have adopted Doreen Massey's arguments in *For Space* (Massey 2005), where she argues that the concept of space that conceptually is devoid of time does not always prevail throughout different periods in history and across societies, but is a result of ideologies associated with modernisation and the Enlightenment that conceptually alienate space from characteristics such as contingency, temporality and simultaneity. She chooses instead to imagine space as "simultaneity of stories-so-far." (Massey 2005, 9) This will be further elaborated in the methodology and definition section (page 6-14), as well as reinforced within the analysis of case studies in **Chapters 2-4**.

The period between the 1970s to the 1990s in Singapore has been selected as a pertinent period of study for encompassing formative developments between modern and contemporary art in Singapore. During this period changes to spatial articulations of exhibitions are apparent and significant, spurred by factors such as changing ideologies of art, development of infrastructures and availability of resources.

Prior to the 1970s, there were venues for showing art exhibitions that belonged to the government or clubs and associations such as the British Council Exhibition Hall, Chinese Chamber of Commerce exhibition hall, YMCA Art Gallery and the Victoria Memorial Hall. Most of these venues were for hire and did not necessarily cater to art exhibitions only. Towards the 1970s, there was a growth in the number of galleries that showed art exclusively, Singapore's first large-scale institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), was established in 1976. Many of the galleries set up around the 1970s, such as the Alpha Gallery, Balai Seni Melayu and the NMAG took the form of the modern gallery space—a neutral, white-cube like interior. Almost concurrently with the emergence of Singapore's first institution of art, several experimental exhibitions, such as Tang Da Wu's *Earthworks* and Tan Teng Kee's picnic which both took place in 1979. Tan's outdoor exhibition was set up in his backyard, which culminated in him setting his sculpture on fire and watching it burn down. Meanwhile Tang's exhibition involved placing his soil works intermittently on the floor of the NMAG, intervening into other existing exhibits. Both Tan and Tang's exhibitions explored alternative ideas and attitudes on the display strategies of their works, questioning the conventions and the ideology behind existing gallery spaces and displays. These exhibitions became the sporadic beginning of a rich dialectic from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s—between on one hand, the drive to legitimise art through prioritising

and isolating art within an established white cube like space, and on the other hand the critical reaction of questioning institutional conventions and presenting art outside gallery space, thus reconnecting with everyday life and contextualising art.

The contextualisation of art is a phenomenon apparent in places outside Singapore, albeit in different timelines and with varying reactive strategies. Lee Yu Lin in her thesis *Strategies of Spatialization* (Lee 2012) talks about a “historical dialectic between modern art museums, contemporary art, and contemporary art museums”(22) in which artists attempt to critique institutional values of modern art museums, particularly the values that manifest in the form of the “white cube space”. The white cube is a term coined and popularised by Brian O’Doherty in his work *Inside the white cube : notes on the gallery space, Part I* (O’Doherty 1976). It describes modern gallery settings, especially the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which often include white walls, windowless spaces, artificial lighting and a spatial display strategy that directs the audience to focus only on the art, therefore sanctifying it but also removing it from the context of the world outside, thus the decontextualisation of art. Regarding the phenomena of contextualisation of art, Lee also gives the examples of performance art, happenings, site-specific works and Land Art by artists such as Alan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria and James Turrell in the USA. She also mentions, among others, Situationsim in France, Arte Povera in Italy as well as the Gutai and Mono-Ha in Japan.

The contextualisation of art in Singapore took place under a set of different historical conditions, particularly pertaining to the interaction between its early art institution and the artists. Singapore inaugurated its first major institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) in 1976. The National Museum Art Gallery adopted standards of space design similar to the hallmarks of the white cube space. Staff members from the National Museum was sponsored for exchange in New York and the MoMA, from there they adopted traits deemed necessary for the establishment of an art museum in Singapore. It can be argued that with the inauguration of the NMAG, Singapore heralded a reference point for the larger concept of an institution of art, one which began to have the infrastructure to validate forms of art practices. However, the NMAG as an art institution had the unique organisational structure of being an appendage of the National Museum of Singapore which initially was a department in the Singapore government. It languished under excessive bureaucracy challenges and was not able to establish a strong institutional landscape. In this circumstance,

independent artist platforms with alternative and critical art practices were directed not necessarily towards only the art institution, but towards larger and diverse factors that affected the prevailing system of production and circulation of art. This includes existing economic and land use policies, art education, as well as the developmental role of art that was prescribed by the state. Alternative and critical approaches were apparent in the spatial strategies adopted by many young artists from the late 70s to the 90s. In terms of venue, there was an increase in the use of spaces that were originally not intended to be used in the display of art, such as shopping centres or even rural villages and warehouses. Many of the exhibitions such as the *Yin Yang Festival* (1987) in National University of Singapore and *Art Commandos* (1988) held in the old Saint Joseph Institution building are informal in nature, impermanent but highly energetic and experimental. They stood in contrast to the permanent displays in the NMAG. Apart from the critique on institutions of art, other issues such as Singapore's rapid urbanisation and commodification of land space were apparent in the spatial strategies of art exhibitions such as *The First and Second Open Studio* (1988 and 1989 respectively) held in The Artists' Village, and *The Space* (1992), held in Hong Bee Warehouse. There was a locus between the increasing specialisation and institutionalisation of spaces of art toward the 1970s, and a trend in the contextualisation of art in the 1980s and the 1990s. This indicates a constant exploration and dialogue amongst artist and exhibition makers on the issue of the place of art. This would have ramification on the spatial articulations of art exhibitions in the selected period of 1970s to the 1990s.

Following an economic recession in 1985, the Economic Review Committee (ERC) noted the potential for economic growth of the "cultural and entertainment" sector, which included the performing arts, film production, museums and art galleries (Economic Review Committee 1986, 180). This led to the formation of the Committee of Visual Arts (CVA), part of the The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA). The CVA submitted a Visual Arts Report in 1989 which noted the lack of infrastructure for the arts (Ong 1989). Post 1990s, the Singapore government's spending in support for the arts increased exponentially. At the same time however, there was also an increase in censorship laws, the most notorious being the ban on unscripted performance in 1994. In the years that follow, a combination of factors and policies had a diluting effect to the critical edge in art¹. In 1992,

¹ In "Practising Contemporary Art in the Global City for the Arts, Singapore", C. J. W. L. Wee writes about the controversies and limits of artistic experimentation, as seen in Singapore 1993 & 1994.

Singapore: Global City for the Arts (Singapore 1992) campaign was launched, mobilising several government statutory boards such as the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), with support from the National Arts Council (NAC) and National Heritage Boards (NHB). The campaign envisions Singapore as a culturally attractive global city in competition for global capital and talent. Art and culture were engaged in city and national branding, and were deeply intertwined with economic growth. In the year 2000, the *Renaissance City Report* (Singapore 2000) by Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) continued the promotion of local art globally, allocating \$50 million more funding over five years in addition to the existing funding for the arts. In effect, the state became an important and purposeful patron of the arts. Post 1990s, young artists were also able to access higher education in arts more easily, and many became increasingly professionalised. Institutions also found ways to incorporate previously critical works such as site-specific works into their programming. Alternative art began to be readily assimilated into institutional and state-supported programmes. A combination of these factors encouraged a subtler form of critique in art. Thus, the study of art exhibition spaces beyond the 1990s will require a different set of frameworks to study and is best addressed outside the remit of this thesis. On the other hand, within the period of the 1970s to 1990s in Singapore, the trajectory towards art as critique, expressed in terms of spatial strategies were at its most distinct, consisting of remarkable case studies for developing research methods and arguments within this thesis.

A study of art exhibition spaces in Singapore between the 1970s to the 1990s is an enquiry that will extend beyond the unique status of the individual work of art or the artist. It situates relationships and processes amongst people, places and hegemonic groups that continuously shape spaces, within the narrative of art. The rest of this chapter will elaborate in greater detail the orientation and approaches taken in this research.

Research Methodology

Definitions & Core Issues

Spurred by historical factors shifts in ideologies and artistic experimentations, the spaces of art exhibitions have been continuously changing. This section introduces the two key terms “art exhibition” and “space”, teasing out some core issues that arise in the process of reviewing various literature as the starting point of my research methodology. The discussions on “art exhibition” and “space” in this section also serve to set specific conceptual orientations and framework of thoughts, but they are not intended as exhaustive studies on the subjects of art exhibition and space in themselves.

Defining Art Exhibitions: sites of production and reception

Art exhibition as a form continues to evolve throughout history and localities. Martha Ward notes that “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also when our modern usage of the word ‘exhibition’ developed. Though not exclusively used for art, it did refer generally to showing publicly.” (Ward 2005, 320) An example of a notable exhibition format from the seventeenth and eighteenth century is the Paris Salon, which began in 1667. In 1737, it began to be held on a regular basis and was open for public. Once its regularity and publicness were established, the Paris Salon became an influential institution that validated its exhibited works of art. Initially started as an exhibition showcasing the works of recent graduates from Écoles des Beaux-Arts, the Salon paved ways for an artist’ success through patronage connections. Undoubtedly, some of the significant aims and conventions of exhibitions we know today resonate with the Paris Salon, however art exhibitions today often question established norms. Outside Europe, art exhibitions also draw from many other strands of display modes and rituals, which varies across the world depending on its localities and culture. Some earlier modes of artistic displays with roots that depart from the seventeenth and eighteenth century European exhibitions include, for instance, the Yaji (雅集) ritual that originates in China. It refers to literati gatherings in private spaces such as gardens for discussing literature, scroll and album paintings, as well as various aesthetic objects. Vernacular modes of display rituals provide viable alternatives, they also problematise hegemonic modes of art exhibition, as

artforms originally intended for specific display rituals become subsumed, often awkwardly, into the modern and contemporary art exhibition model.²

Being aware of the vast scope of study possibly undertaken, this thesis narrows the scope of featured art exhibitions as visual art activities in Singapore that are contemporaneous around the period. On the other hand, exhibition of art or artefacts from the previous epochs (eg. an exhibition of Hindu-Buddhist Art between 8th-13th century staged in 1959) will not be studied in detail, although it will be considered as an indicator of the cultural resources available at the time. The choice to focus on exhibitions which showcases artworks made close to the exhibition period enables the research to examine exhibition-making as an important site of production and reception of modern and contemporary art, where “modern” and “contemporary” are notions where the idea of the present takes on great importance. Thus this research considers art exhibitions as a site of audience reception and a process through which art is made available in affective and discursive ways. Each exhibition has the potential to affect the experience and interpretation of an artwork through the context it provides. This suggests that an art exhibition is an active discourse on art, where curatorial ideas can be exercised and performed.

The moment(s) of transition between the modern and the contemporary, or markers of the arrival of contemporary art in Singapore, is a topic that is still energetically discussed. C.J.W.L. Wee points towards several historical conditions that occur in the 1980s, namely Singapore’s attainment of economic success, the state’s budding emphasis on the development of the arts and culture policies, as well as the arrival of expressions of contemporary art, which he describes as a “flexible art practice that breaks with a modern art that was medium-specific and object-based to take on a transmedia or perhaps trans-category orientation.” (Wee 2017b, 247)

Meanwhile June Yap considers the global within aesthetic expressions of Singapore artists’ works. She argues that “[f]or aesthetic interpretation, however, the global is not merely significant in a historical capacity. It also articulates the definition of contemporaneity of art, for Singapore and also the region.” (Yap 2017, 319) In Yap’s essay, the global within aesthetic expression not only refer to a fixed notion of the whole world, but as having the characteristics of “movement or flow, of commensurability and as free or unconstrained” (Yap

² An instance of Chinese scroll paintings displayed in a white cube like gallery will be featured in a case study of the exhibition *Art '76*, see page 50.

2017, 320). Yap also explains how “globalisation is not just about geopolitics, it is also a discourse of interests and a way of seeing.” (Yap 2017, 326) Reflecting also on the trajectory of contemporary exhibitions at large in the world, Lucy Steeds’ notes that the word “contemporary” in relation to art initially can be traced to exhibition titles “made in distant locations but sharing the current time” She also elaborates upon the implication of studying exhibitions of contemporary art: “Consideration of contemporary art’s exhibition means prioritizing its becoming public—its moments of meeting a public, or rather, plural publics. ...More broadly, the disparate experiences and dissonant discussions of art that emerge in the moment of exhibition are a basis on which the cultural realities of our places and our times are negotiated in relation to other cultural realities. ” (Steeds 2014, 13) Where Yap identifies the notion of the global within the contemporary, Steeds frames her arguments on the desire to relate distinct cultural realities in contemporary exhibitions. Either way in both cases it can be deduced that the contemporary arrives with a shift in geographical and spatial imaginings. This shift in geographical and spatial imaginings are not uniformly even, it is dependent upon the location where the exhibitions are staged. The physical location of the exhibition significantly orientates inclusions and exclusions of artists, works, viewers, positioning and reading of the exhibition. Bruce W. Ferguson et al. considers the cartography of politics from the locality of an exhibition: “By definition, the location of an international exhibition constructs a map of the world from the perspective of both the city and the country that sponsors it, underlining any notion of an equality of nations.”(Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 2005, 47)

In Singapore the modern is aligned with the formation of the nation, its sovereignty within its realm and in relation to other nations each with their own established boundaries. The vision of globalisation on the other hand is one of openness, of transcending borders, free exchanges and by association, the free market of neoliberal capitalism. These are symptoms of the shift between the modern to the contemporary that can be observed within the analysed case studies that span between the 1970s to the 1990s in **Chapters 2, 3 and 4**. The trajectory of art exhibitions in Singapore within the surveyed period of the 1970s to the 1990s point towards several tendencies that include an awareness of the world-at-large, a reflexive consideration of local expressions, as well as an emphasis on the new that is increasingly superseded by an emphasis of relevance within a specific geo-social reality amongst others.

Artistically between the 1970s to the 1990s there is a shift between object and medium specific towards a more complex expression that is interdisciplinary, particularly with the incorporation of the idioms of performance and installation. Notably, the shift from artists creating medium-specific works towards interdisciplinarity and incorporation of performative idioms have been observed elsewhere globally starting from before the 1970s. Rosalind Krauss notes that since the 1960s, the works of Robert Smithson and Richard Long, amongst others, can be considered within the expanded field of postmodernism. In this post-medium condition, artists no longer orientate themselves within the category of a given medium, instead they occupy a logical space and a position which is “organised instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation” and “within any one of the positions generated by the given logical space, many different mediums might be employed.” (Krauss 1979, 43)

Interdisciplinarity brings into question some of the defining characteristics of the visual art exhibition. The art exhibition is temporal, it unfolds in time and involves a gathering of people who may be audiences, organisers, artists and more who perform highly ritualised acts of consuming and producing art and artistic discourse in the duration of the exhibition. Thus the case studies in this thesis will be studied through a framework of analysis that sees exhibition spaces as a continuous process, which will be elaborated later on pages 25-26.

The notions of time, participation, performance and ritual are some of the identifiable elements in an art exhibition, but these notions are also present in other spatial event genres that can involve visual arts, including: retail gallery, performance event, happenings, informal gathering, studio visit or public art viewing. The boundaries between these events and art exhibition are not necessarily clear cut. Indeed, visual artists in Singapore between the 1970s and the 1990s have created art exhibitions that ignores or problematises boundaries. In some exhibitions, time-based and performative strategies were used to elude the status of artworks as finished and finalised objects; the artists continued working as if the exhibition space is also a studio. Events such as party happenings and theatre performances also incorporated extensive visual art elements, involving visual artists who would later on consider their performance artefacts and props as artworks. As multi-disciplinary artists explored the medium of performance art, the genres of performance event, happening and exhibition intermingles. This thesis recognises the presence of these slippages within the exhibitions

surveyed, which in itself constitute a rich dialectic pertaining to the expanded field of art. Nevertheless, for the exhibitions selected in this thesis, especially the detailed case studies, the artists, curators or organisers involved have publicised and positioned their event broadly within the purview of a visual art exhibition, although some of these exhibitions may have multi-disciplinary or cross-genre aspirations.

Defining Space: simultaneity of stories-so-far

The way we imagine space has far-ranging effects; for instance, previous section posits how shifts in spatial imaginings are implicit in the transition between the notions modern and contemporary. Beyond the realm of semantics, our understanding of space also constitutes more or less towards our understanding of the world, and therefore, our priorities and biases. It is then important within this research to consider some implicit understandings and to consider the frameworks that engender lively discussions on space and thus spaces in exhibition history.

Whilst the nature and understanding of space has been much debated about, quantity and emptiness are some of the most pervasive conceptual tools to describe space. One of the most notable model of space as quantity is the Euclidean Space, a three-dimensional space described by three co-ordinates. On the other hand, the model of space as empty, absolute and independent of matter can be traced to Newton's *Principia* which was first written in 1687. Newton's absolute space is a radical conceptualisation, it a concept that is irrelevant to human experiences. In *Principia*, Newton describes time and space as "quantities" and actively argues for the elimination of human perception in his treatise (translated here in 1999 from Latin into English by I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman): "Although time, space, place and motion are very familiar to everyone, it must be noted that these quantities are popularly conceived solely with reference to the objects of sense perception. And this is the source of certain preconceptions; to eliminate them it is useful to distinguish these quantities into absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common." (Newton 1999, 409) This conceptualisation of space becomes the premise of classical mechanics and was considered a breakthrough that can successfully organise and explain a large variety of natural phenomena. Considered simple enough to be understood in its derivative form of assumed logic, the idea of space as an absolute and as quantity continues to be reinforced today in education through elementary physics and mathematics, which in turn constitutes much of

our almost intuitive understandings of space. Its unquestioned manoeuvre brings about a range of implications; Doreen Massey in her book *For Space* (Massey 2005), describes a long association of space with stasis, closure and representation (13). Massey argues space is often conceptualised as devoid of temporality and this connotationally deprives space of its most challenging characteristics—contingency, temporality and simultaneity. Alternatively, she lists the following propositions towards defining space:

“First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. ... Second, that we understand space as the sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity... Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. Third, that we recognise a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made... Perhaps we could imagine space as simultaneity of stories-so-far.” (Massey 2005, 9)

In *For Space*, Massey also outlines several areas of the debate on space, which often led to what Foucault refers to as the “long history of denigration of space” (Foucault 1980, 70). Massey argues that there is a tendency that representation is often equated with space itself, as can be seen in the works of Henri Bergson. On one hand, Massey applauds Bergson’s critic on the over-insistent focus on the discrete at the expense of the continua, and his insistence on the necessity of reimagining things as processes. For her, these ideas are pertinent as it challenges exclusivist localisms based on claims of eternal authenticity (20). However, Bergson’s conceptualisation of space, illustrated by his narration of Zeno’s paradox is dually opposed to time. Space is considered as a discrete difference, whereas time to him is continuum and process. Massey disagrees and argues that the “slice of space” that Bergson conceptualise is in fact its representation, which is derived from fixing things and hence taking time out of space. Another debate is how the definition and conceptualisation of space are often caught up in the greater dialogue between “natural” and “human” sciences. Despite “natural” science’ claim to empirical truth and scientific rationalism, Massey argues that much of the underlying assumption in natural sciences occur within closed equilibrium systems and a “timeless” process where there is no meaningful distinction between past and future. The premise of closed equilibrium system also occurs in classical and Newtonian mechanics. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that the natural sciences are beginning to change towards

the recognition of an open and fully historical notion of time—for example, the recent and still developing model of nonequilibrium thermodynamics (Massey 2005, 31-32). Finally, one more pertinent area of debate highlighted by Massey is the political implications and alignment pertaining the conceptualisation of space, often evaded as claim for truth or inevitability and perpetuated by hegemonic groups throughout history. She raises several example; for instance, Johannes Fabian’s argument that Newtonian physicalism is easily transformed into “political physics” that reinforces 19th century Western colonial expansion, since “it is impossible for two bodies to occupy the same space at the same time”, thus the choices would be to remove the other body or “assign them a different time”, asserting that they are merely behind and will eventually follow the path of the West³ (Fabian 1983, 29-30). Massey also acknowledges, with regards to definition of space and political alignments, that her propositions resonates with recent politics that are committed to anti-essentialism. (Massey 2005, 10).

For this research, Massey’s propositions to align contingency, temporality and simultaneity with space is fitting for a historical study of exhibition spaces. In the imagination of “simultaneity of stories-so-far” it is recognised that there are multiplicities of imaginations and meanings. This is important as within the period and case studies there are notable shifts in geospatial imaginations⁴ and subjective experiences⁵.

The notion of space as simultaneity of stories-so-far highlights that space are both never static and is intrinsically discursive. As such this thesis does not make an exclusive break between real space (physical, social, material) and space of knowledge (discursive space, world of facts), as doing so would return us to the dualistic thinking and thus the beginning of the static imagination of space. The title of this thesis “*In the spaces of exhibition history*” similarly does not clarify “which space”⁶ is the subject of the thesis, as the thesis argues that both real space and the space of knowledge are not separate systems. “*In the spaces of exhibition history*” is a call to engage with, to be in the midst of an active thinking on the concept of space, and thus the role it plays in our historical understanding on art exhibitions and their significance.

³ This argument is also quoted in (Massey 2005, 72-73)

⁴ See page 7-8 on Yap and Steeds' arguments on how the global configure in the contemporary.

⁵ See page 15 on Klonk's argument that the subjective experience of gallery spaces is conditioned by social and cultural circumstances of the time

⁶ Several readers and mentors have commented that the thesis title do not clarify if the focus of the research is on real space or discursive space, however this shiftiness is intentional and a quality I find necessary to breach the limit of that seemingly obvious and infallible divide.

This research also regards the space of art exhibition as not neutral but embodying its own unique ideology. Brian O’ Doherty’s essays published in *Artforum* in 1976 and subsequently through his book *Inside the white cube : the ideology of the gallery space* (O’Doherty 1999) articulates this notion in his unpacking of the “white cube gallery”. He describes a gallery space as an enclosed expanse of white walls, with controlled lighting and ample space to isolate individual works of art. This was a format that was already popular in European and Northern American galleries since the 1930s. Alfred Barr, then director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was responsible for exhibition installation experiments that preceded and anticipated the white cube gallery configuration. O’Doherty’s essays cemented the imagery and highlights the ideologies behind this archetypal modern gallery space. In his essays, O’ Doherty’s scrutinises the qualities of the modern gallery space as untouched by time and the outside world, thus subtly asserting the eternality of the status quo in artistic values, and in turn of a certain existing power structure represented by the gallery as institution. He writes, “A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so the windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. ... In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as a firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum.”(O’Doherty 1999, 19) O’ Doherty rejects the apparent neutrality of the gallery space and considers the codified ideologies behind such spatial presentation, which reinforces transformative power of the gallery and confers the status of art on the exhibits.

This research also refers to Suzanne Macleod’s analysis that the gallery and museum architecture is intricately linked to its social and cultural contexts. Her argument extends the analysis of an art space beyond the frame of the artist or the curator’s intent. In her essay “Rethinking Museum Architecture: towards a site-specific history of production and use” (MacLeod 2005), Macleod revisits the case of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, to illustrate four key overlapping observations(13-21) derived from literatures that views the built environment as a social and cultural product that is continually reproduced during use. They are:

1. Architecture as a social and cultural product

Architecture can be thought of as the outcome of a social need within a specific time, space, site. Thus to understand a building, it is also important to understand the society that produces it.

2. The boundaries and possibilities of architecture

This refers to how organisations and bodies are able to set the agendas as well as set out the possibilities of what the architecture should be schematically.

3. Individual agendas and questions of power

The final form of space is affected by a range of individuals who often have conflicting visions, agendas and values. These individuals may include the architect and also other stakeholders.

4. Architecture's continuous remaking through use

Museum and galleries are constantly changed and remade through the use it is put through, thus it does not imply that a space is completed and stops changing once it is inaugurated.

Macleod's notion of four overlapping observations are formulated for the study of Museum architecture, with the case study of the Walker Art Gallery. They are interesting to this research as there are some general overlaps between art exhibition making and the planning of an art museum which will eventually show art exhibitions. However, there are organisational and temporal differences as this thesis focuses on the individual exhibition spaces which are typically planned as temporary events. While the architect is often attributed as the author of the museum building, exhibitions are often attributed to the artists and the curators. Nevertheless, both the study of museum and exhibition spaces will benefit from a rigorous enquiry into the surrounding socio-cultural contexts, the agendas of a wider range of stakeholders and the continuous transformation of the space through occupation and use.

Situating this research: relevant literature

This thesis has benefited from an increasing number of works with an interest towards spatiality, especially within the context of art exhibitions in Southeast Asia, coupled with an awareness of regionality against the backdrop of the global art world. Some of the aforementioned academic works include T.C. Chang and W.K. Lee's *Renaissance City Singapore: a study of arts spaces* (Chang and Lee 2003), Kathleen Ditzig's *An exceptional*

inclusion (2017), as well as Lee Yu Lin's *Strategies of spatialization* (2012). Chang and Lee approach the study of art spaces in Singapore through Madanipour's multi-conceptualisation of space as integrated with social and psychological dimension. They raised the example of The Substation as " 'ideological spaces' which resist the government's censorship laws" (129), thus arguing that widening the definition of what consist the definition of space is pertinent in studying Singapore's cultural landscape. Chang and Lee's argue that there is a tension between the provision of "hardware" versus "heartware", highlighting the present day condition: there is a large amount of government spending on infrastructures and developing spaces for the art which draw in global audiences, but aspects of the creative milieu, such as a supportive environment for growing talents, the freedom from censorship as well as basic working studios for the artists are still lacking. Chang and Lee analysed existing policies, government papers and initiatives; they also conducted surveys and nine in-depth interviews to illustrate their argument. Chang and Lee articulate a resonant sentiment, which would be reflected in my own case study in **Chapter 4** on the exhibition *The Space*.

Ditzig's detailed case study features the 1957 *First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition's* inclusion of *Recent American Prints in Color*, a travelling exhibition from MoMA's International Program. She traces the decisions from the conception of both the conference and the traveling exhibition as distinct events with their own agenda, the eventual incorporation of *Recent American Prints in Color* into the conference and their reception. The *First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition* was a historically significant event for being the first survey of art in Southeast Asia. She also highlights MoMA's participation in USA's Cold War cultural propaganda, a condition persisting into the late 1980s. Ditzig's traces institutional negotiations and reception from the public which gave different result from the expectations of the organising bodies. This highlights that there is a larger range of stakeholders apart from the organisers and they contribute in shaping the discourse of the exhibition. Her analysis methodology provides a reference point to my own exploration into the interpersonal and institutional dynamics towards the continuous shaping of the case studies' exhibition spaces.

Lee Yu Lin's thesis *Strategies of Spatialization in the Contemporary Art Museum: A Study of Six Japanese Institutions* (2012) discusses the spatialisation strategies of contemporary art museums as generating an engaging spatial relationship between art and its exhibition milieu. She hypothesises that "Art museums must be seen as a rational response to

the demands of contemporary art/artists, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a critique of the museum as a neutral context of art, and in particular, of the ‘white-cube’ exhibition model of the museum of modern art” (viii). Lee considers the dialectics between art museums and artists in the 1960s and 1970s (mainly USA and Europe, to a certain degree Japan) as generating productive paradigm shifts and shaping the characteristics of institutional programming and space design of contemporary art museums. A similar dialectic on the contextualisation of art occurred in Singapore between the 1970s to the 1990s, which I will explore further in page 36.

There are a range of published books that serve as important resources to this thesis, such as Mary-Anne Staniszewski’s *The power of display* (1998) and Charlotte Klonk’s *Spaces of experience* (2009). Staniszewski’s subject of research is the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)’s historical exhibitions. MoMA had staged many exhibitions by the twentieth century international avant-gardes; its first director Alfred Barr was responsible for the arrangement of displays and for leading early experimental installation designs. Notably, a dominant exhibition display mode that emerged from its experimental phase is described by Herbert Bayer as a “field of visions”, whereby artworks were shown at slightly below eye level, so they could “stand on their own” (66). Staniszewski discusses that the repressed history of exhibition installation design is not coincidental, but revealing of the collective ideology on art that accepts the autonomy of discrete works of art—despite the fact that a publicly displayed work of art is always shown within a spatial context and installed in a particular way. Her work provides a plausible model of a historical and theoretical framework for an exhibition history thesis with a focus on the spatial context. However, organisations in Singapore rarely keep a similarly extensive archive as the MoMA, which is a major challenge for this thesis.

Charlotte Klonk’s *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (2009) is a historical overview of gallery interiors, mainly on art exhibitions and galleries in Europe and North America. Klonk’s focus is the subjective experience of these gallery spaces as conditioned by social and cultural circumstances of the time—a historically specific way of experiencing galleries and exhibitions. Klonk cites Baxandall’s notion of the “period eye”, a culturally informed way of seeing. She asserts that experience has a history, and the gallery interiors are good places to find it. Klonk’s investigation into the history of subjective experience is an important reminder on the changing subjectivity of the artists, the art audience and exhibition organisers that factor into the spatial articulation of an exhibition.

Apart from the works highlighted above, this thesis also benefit from the study of spatial and performative tropes in Ray Langenbach's *Performing the Singapore State* (2003) and Simon Soon's *Place of learning* (2018). Ahmad Mashadi's *Framing the 1970s* (Mashadi 2011) gives an outline of the social and political transformation that contextualised the artistic practices of the decade. Finally, William Lim has written extensively on architecture and urbanism in Singapore and Asia from the perspective of cultural study (2004) (2005) (2008); these are valuable resources that illuminate the implications of Singapore's style of urban development from the post-war period and how it brought about a range of artistic and cultural civic responses.

What my research offers on top of these works is an in-depth methodological exploration on what it means to study spaces historically and a critical analysis of commonly held definitions and tropes of space; These are some problematics that I will explore within the relevance and context of my selected case studies in the following chapters. This research also studies spaces through specifically creating representations and visuals that aid in-depth analysis. This situates the research as an interdisciplinary endeavour located between the fields of exhibition history, spatial studies and design.

Research Approach

The methodology in this thesis is informed by studies from the fields of history and art history, as well as architecture, social geography and social sciences research methods.

Ongoing research into exhibition history and its spaces in Singapore in the 1970s-1990s reveal unique complexities and challenges. In this thesis many of the spaces studied have been demolished or greatly altered due to Singapore's fast pace of change, thus much of the research is dependent upon **representation**⁷ of spaces in the past. Representations such as photographs or floor plans capture certain character of the space, for example scale and relative positionings. They are also discrete instances that can be easily analysed. Photographs, among all other visual representations, claim to capture the reality objectively. However, photographs are also subject to the authorial intent of the photographer, biases and discrepancies. Thus it is useful to distinguish between representation and real space when

⁷ I have mentioned Doreen Massey's argument against equating representations with real space earlier on page 11, when discussing the definition of space.

examining the reliability of the representation and the circumstances of its production. Photographs of exhibition spaces captured by professionals often do not show any people, this is despite the fact that exhibitions are mounted to be shared with people. There are also instances of discrepancies, such as the photographs of the exhibition *Art '76* (held in the NMAG, 1976). The photographs were captured before the display was completed because they had to be printed in catalogues for the opening day. In such circumstances, this thesis will take note of the limitation and the usefulness of the photograph as a visual artefact.

Official archives, when they were available, reveal some key considerations involved in the construction of institutions or exhibition making, but rarely do they allude to decision-making processes. Increasingly, what this research process reveal is that the final spatial articulations of art exhibitions in Singapore between the 1970s and the 1990s are a combination of factors such as budget limits, artistic ideologies, availability of resources to be seconded for the purposes of artists and organisers, spontaneity and more. In short, the decision-making process towards the articulation of an exhibition space is rife with contestations that can be valuable to unpack. For this reason, oral history and interview is often used to find out about experiences from relevant individuals.

This thesis consists of a two-part investigation: firstly, a contextual study of the historical impulses and transformations of art exhibition spaces in the selected period and place; and secondly a closer grained study of three selected case study exhibitions, using archival materials, interviews and research drawings. This research adopts Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of space to underpin a historical study of art exhibitions in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1990s. As detailed in the previous section⁸, Massey's framework considers space as an intersection of stories that is open to flux and intertwined with time. Massey's framework embraces the contingencies that makes up common everyday spaces and continues to subject them to change. In adopting this conceptualisation of space, a close-grained analysis of a selected exhibition is preferred to reveal its complexities, thus the case study is seen as an appropriate format employed within this thesis.

Research in the field of arts and humanities privileges the form of expository writing as both presentation and exploration. However, expository writing as a linear form of communication tend to be inept at conveying spatial complexity. As an alternative language, drawings and diagrams are able to communicate scale, sequence, form and structure with

⁸ See page 10 for a discussion about the definition of space in this thesis.

greater ease and facility. The use of spatial drawing as a tool have been well explored in the field of architectural research. In this thesis, spatial drawings are created to explore individual exhibition case studies visually as well as to organise relevant archives. The following sections will elaborate on the use of oral history, interview, archive research and drawing, an online database created for this thesis, as well as the thesis structure and case studies.

Oral history and interview

Due to the lack of image and document archives surrounding the topic of Singapore's exhibition history, it is necessary to engage with oral interview and oral history. Interviews can be used as oral sources for information on the selected exhibitions. In addition, they can be interpreted as drawings that indicate the appearance of the exhibition space.

The book *Memories & Reflections: The Singapore Experience* (Chew 2007), published by the National Archives of Singapore, introduces the subject of oral history and gives recommendations and guidelines to plan, conduct interviews, record, preserve and disseminate oral history reliably. The book defines oral history as “the systematic collection of memories and knowledge about historical events and periods by researchers and institutions conducting recorded interviews with selected narrators.” (1) The idiosyncrasies of human memory is acknowledged, and it is recommended that they are considered both as evidence and abstraction which has to be verified where accuracy is required. The interviews conducted for this thesis follow many of the recommended guidelines from *Memories & Reflection*. For example, memory aids are used to help interviewees recollect aspects of the past. For an interview with Choy Weng Yang, previous Head of Design and Curator of Art in the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) photographs of the NMAG rooms were brought along to facilitate questions about the design process of the NMAG.

Archive research and drawing

Drawing is a powerful form of investigation that has been used for a long time in the field of architecture. It allows for different forms of knowledge to emerge and has been particularly effective in interviews where the informant communicates properties of a space through engaging with drawings. As a tool, drawing is particularly effective in communicating

and exploring scale, sequence, spatial configuration, form and structure. There have been several publications in the use of drawings as a tool for research. Ray Lucas' *Research Methods for Architecture* lists some of the ways that drawing can be used for research (Lucas 2016, 175-178). In this research project, drawing is used for copying, collaborating and drawing attention. Drawing has also been used as a tool for research in the social sciences. The book *Picturing Research: Drawing as Visual Methodology* (Theron et al. 2011) describes drawing as a tool for Social Sciences, used in circumstances where it can be difficult to describe certain memory or emotions in words. In the book, drawing is also used to break the ice with reserved participants, and to engage extroverted participants more reflexively.

In this research project, drawing is used as a tool for **recalling, a means for ordering archives and visualising spaces**. At times, it is used in conjunction with oral interview to verify an informant's memory of an exhibition experience. For instance, it is an important feature in the case study of *The Space* in **Chapter 4**, for which artist and archivist Koh Nguang How was an informant and collaborator for my research on the exhibition (see **Appendix 1C** for my drawing and collaboration process with Koh). Although Koh's archive contains extensive photographic documentations, the sense of space, sequence and locations of artworks are not easily established from the photographs alone; they have to be ordered in a meaningful way to communicate organisation and spatial complexity. After initial meetings with Koh, I began with a simple spatial drawing of the five levels of the warehouse, based on a floorplan tracing by Tang Da Wu⁹. Koh then selected some images from his collection, and together with the list of artworks, positioned the photographs within the drawings. Koh also indicated if there were any corrections required for the drawings. The outcome is a series of 5 spatial drawings with details of the surrounding environment and artwork numbers indicating their position (See **Appendix 4A**). A guidebook contains a revised version of the list of artworks, with select exhibition views (See **Appendix 4B**). Spatial drawings have also been created for the two other case studies in this thesis, *Art '76* (see **Appendix 2A**) and *Trimurti* (see **Appendix 3A**). Similarly, they are used for the ordering of archives and visualising spaces. However, unlike *The Space* there are no available collaborators to create the drawings with me. Most of the information in the drawing are obtained from existing archives, essays and oral interviews. In both exhibitions I have conducted detailed interviews with the exhibition

⁹ The choice for using Tang's drawing as a starting point is because the original architectural floorplan had not been updated throughout the years, thus Tang's drawing was in fact a better reflection of the state of the venue.

organiser (Mr. Choy Weng Yang for *Art '76*) and artist (Mr. Goh Ee Choo for *Trimurti*) who spent a significant amount of time discussing the spatial processes and outcomes in both exhibitions.

Spatial drawing is a form of reconstruction of the past and an attempt to study its visual aspects, but it has to be recognised as a limited **representation**; the drawing is not the place or event itself. In *Patterns of Intention* (Baxandall 1985), Michael Baxandall considers the language of art criticism and remarks: “We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures—or rather, we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification.”⁽¹⁾ Baxandall analyses the language of criticism as a re-enactment, one that can never fully approach the object of criticism itself, but also one that has its own focus or attention. The visual reconstructions or re-enactments in this research project can be seen as a form of non-textual criticism, or at least a criticism-in-progress. Far from being a neutral visualisation, they have their own attention and exclusion, as well as lines of enquiry. Although within this specific direction of enquiry, efforts have been made to ensure that the visualisation is as accurate as possible. Both the case studies of *Art '76* and *Trimurti* has been drawn in the plan format, which clearly shows the outline of the gallery spaces. In *Art '76* (**Appendix 2A**) the drawing communicates the continuous passageway shape of the gallery. The different rooms also feature specific genres of artworks as shown in the allocated photographs within the drawing. In *Trimurti* (**Appendix 3A**) the drawing situates the gallery within the 6th floor of Singapore Shopping Centre and highlights the location of the three installations which were activated during three separate performance sessions. The orthographic drawings produced for *The Space* (**Appendix 4A**) is a perspective that is all encompassing, made for the purpose of summarising and analysing the complex spatial configuration of *The Space*. The orthographic format also allows the denotation of material information, such as the cage-like partitions that characterises the warehouse.

Online database of exhibitions

In order to investigate trends in exhibition venues, I have generated a database of art exhibitions in Singapore between the 1950s - 1990s¹⁰. This database aim to include as much as possible all art exhibitions featuring works by professional and emerging artists that happened between the 1950s and the 1990s. However, exhibitions showing works of children

¹⁰ Database access URL: <https://airtable.com/shriUju9TPAIY2StE>

and young people, which are typically organised by schools as extra-curricular activities, are excluded from this survey.

The database entries are generated through combing existing exhibition catalogues in the National Library of Singapore, National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre, National Museum Resource Centre as well as searching through the online newspaper database NewspaperSG. As a result, exhibitions with publicity material can be found and accounted for, but exhibitions that were not sufficiently covered by the media or did not produce printed ephemeras collected by the above archives may not appear in my research database. Hence the result within the database does not reflect a definitive total number of exhibitions that happened through the decades; what it reflects is a substantial sample of existing exhibitions in Singapore within the selected periods. From this we can deduce trends such as the preferred venues through-out the years, the venue types and the duration of the exhibitions which has generally grown longer towards the 1990s. **Appendix 1A** contains figures summarising the results of the database. They will be used for an analysis of the typological changes in art exhibition venues between the 1970s - 1990s, in **Chapter 1**.

Thesis Structure: General Analysis and Case Study

The first section of this thesis (**Chapter 1**) will be used to study relevant key developments between the 1970s - 1990s that have bearings on art and its spaces. The developments are:

a.) The Changing Typology of Art Exhibition Venues

Within the fairly short decades of 1970s-1990s in Singapore, there are notable differences on how art was exhibited in space. Typology, as a systematic classification or study of types, is used to emphasise these differences productively.

The concept of “type” and “typology” has been used since the early nineteenth century as a means to compare formal aspects of architecture. Architect Sam Jacoby notes that within architecture, the meaning and interpretation of type and typology has since been continually transformed. On one hand it is considered a conservative, static norm, but on the other it is being revitalised when its application is extended to

the city and morphology¹¹ (Jacoby 2015). The application of typology in this paper for the analysis of exhibition venues depends less on the classification of formal syntax of building sections. Rather, the types pertain to the spatial configuration and the organisational structure of the exhibition venue. For instance, some of the venue types considered in this paper include “private gallery” and “public museum gallery”. Both indicates that the venue has the spatial configuration of a gallery, but the former is privately run while the latter is run by a public institution which with a public mandate and is supported by the state. **Appendix 1B** shows the full list of terms used in describing venue types in this paper. The aim of this section is to investigate if certain types of exhibition space emerged within certain time and context and to describe how the forms vary across the period of study.

b.) The Institution of Art and its Formation

Singapore’s first large scale public institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), was inaugurated in 1976. The NMAG is one of the first instances of the state’s investment in the arts, and the inaugural exhibition was the beginning of the acquisition of artworks for the National Collection. The presence of the state in visual arts is perceptible through national institution of arts such as the NMAG and subsequently Singapore Art Museum and National Gallery of Singapore, as well as a host of state-led art development programmes. Despite the comparative abundance of resources that institutions have, writers such as C.J.W.-L Wee and David Teh have criticised Singapore’s institutions as lacking intellectual leadership. Teh notes that independent artists group and artist-run space produced more notable exhibitions, and are the *de facto* institutions of art (Teh 2016, 34). This section considers the presence of the institution of art and how it establishes itself spatially, as well as how artists reacted to the dominant institution of the time.

c.) The Ideology of the White Cube and the Contextualisation of art

The act of display implies a certain removal from the everyday as it highlights exceptional traits to make visible to the audiences. The white cube gallery takes this

¹¹ In architecture morphology refers to the transformation of forms of the built environment, in Jacoby's text, especially through human interaction with material in built environment. Often morphology describes discursive processes, such as the evolution of buildings cluster within a city over time.

act even further, placing the artwork in a neutral surrounding and enclosing it from the outside world, in a windowless, artificially lit space that create an impression of being timeless. The idioms of the white cube gallery space are often readily adopted by institutions of art, however there was also a counter current of artists who sought to reconnect art with the everyday and its context. Contextualisation of art is evident through a range of spatial strategies such as the use of unconventional venues, experimental events and time-based art. This section considers both tendencies of decontextualisation and re-contextualisation of art as evident in the exhibition space in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Case studies and their selection

A case study, in this thesis, is an in-depth exposition of an art exhibition. It is also intricately related to a set of generalised analysis from the preceding general analysis section. Considering the varied definitions and function of case studies, Gary Thomas and Kevin Myers in *The Anatomy of Case Studies* (Thomas and Myers 2015) asserts that the design frame of a case study must be able to incorporate different methods and analytical frames, thus analytical eclecticism is often a feature of case studies. They also propose that the case study illuminates and explicates the frame of analysis, and that the singleness of the case relates to the generalised knowledge. Thus, the ability of the case study to illustrate and perpetuate the arguments in the preceding general analysis section is an important criterion for selection. Choosing case studies is a highly selective process and it is acknowledged that there are many important exhibitions that have been excluded to keep the writing within a reasonable length fulfilling the specifications for a thesis. I have created an online database (See **Appendix 1A**) as an avenue for me to survey a large range of exhibition prior to making a final selection of case studies.

I have selected *Art '76*, *Trimurti* and *The Space* as exhibition case studies representing the decades between 1970-1990. These exhibitions are chosen for being cases of distinct spatial environments and typologies that arise out of unique institutional and socio-political dynamics in Singapore between the 1970s-1990s. They are also notable exhibitions due to their historical significance, success amongst the audiences and artistic merit. What follows is a brief description of these exhibitions with further emphases on their merits as case studies.

Art '76

exhibition opening date: 21/8/1976

venue: National Museum Art Gallery

The National Museum Art Gallery is Singapore's first major institution of art. *Art '76* is selected for being the inaugural exhibition that signalled both the opening of the institution as well as the beginning of the artwork acquisition in the National Collection¹², which was later on inherited by Singapore Art Museum as well as the National Gallery of Singapore. This exhibition is also an instance where the gallery is purposefully designed with the idioms of the white cube space in an effort to reinforce the unique status of the art object.

Trimurti

exhibition opening date: 7/3/1988

venue: Goethe-Institut Art Gallery (in Singapore Shopping Centre)

Trimurti is selected for being an instance of a contemporary art exhibition employing a critical stance through multidisciplinary expressions that questioned the boundaries of art and its prevalent mode of exhibition in the 1980s. *Trimurti* also assertively draws from myths and mystical rituals associated with local religious or cultural practices, focusing on Asian identity and philosophy in art, in response to what is perceived as the dominance of art forms that has roots in Western art. This exhibition was restaged 10 years after in 1998, in Singapore Art Museum, as a testament of its seminal status.

The Space

exhibition opening date: 31/5/1992

venue: Hong Bee Warehouse, Clarke Quay

The Space is a fringe event organised by the National Arts Council and The Artists Village. It is selected for being a unique collaboration between a government

¹² Currently the National Heritage Board (NHB) manages the National Collection, they are further divided into the collections of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Museum of Singapore, The Peranakan Museum, Singapore Philatelic Museum, Indian Heritage Centre, National Gallery of Singapore and Singapore Art Museum. Artworks within the National Collection are mainly in the National Gallery of Singapore, which is focused on modern art, as well as Singapore Art Museum which covers contemporary art.

organisation and an independent artist collective, as well as highlighting Singapore's rapidly changing landscape as a result of urban development and globalisation. The exhibition venue was a disused warehouse along the Singapore River, which was torn down shortly after for redevelopment despite efforts to negotiate turning it into an artists' space. Some central themes that can be found within this exhibition was how artists in Singapore need space to grow and create, as well as how Singapore regulated and developed its land and space leading up to the 1990s. Many artists in the exhibition created works that respond to this historical condition, especially through site-specific strategies.

Framework of analysis for case studies

Previously, I have explored the definitions and conceptualisations of the terms "art exhibition" and "space". I posited that temporality and contingency are integral characteristics of an art exhibition space. McLeod's four overlapping observations¹³ (MacLeod 2005, 13-21) as mentioned above resonates with this orientation, therefore I have adapted from it the three frameworks that conceptualises the art exhibition space as an interstice of stories and a continuous process. This frame work will be used to analyse the case studies in **chapters 2, 3 and 4**.

1. Art exhibition and its space in relation to its context of production

Art exhibitions may allude to its context of production through a few ways: firstly, artists being aware of certain socio-cultural conditions, would create artworks or install them in a manner that fits his/her intentions. Secondly, exhibition-making is a material practice and therefore dependent upon available resources for creating a calibrated experience. Adjusting the experiential aspects of the exhibition, for instance lighting, display surfaces or indoor climate control, depends upon access to available venue, funding, technology or know-how, which would greatly affect the outcome of the exhibition. Thirdly, exhibitions reflect prevailing ideologies on art and how art should be viewed at the time. A study of these three

¹³ See pages 10-13 for a discussion of the definition of space and Suzanne Macleod's four overlapping observations.

contextual factors gives a fuller picture towards the outcomes and decisions involved in the exhibition-making process.

2. Art exhibition and its space as shaped by varying and often conflicting agendas and motivations of individuals and groups involved in the exhibition-making

Artists and curators often play a major role in the spatial articulations of an exhibition, but there are often also other stakeholders or agencies involved in the exhibition making, such as institutions or the audiences. The spatial articulation of an art exhibition thus reflects the interactions and contentions between individuals and groups involved.

3. Considering the art exhibition space as situated in its temporal context and as continuously being remade

To see the spaces of an exhibition as a process is to recognise that all exhibitions are a form of intervention to an environment that has a much longer lineage and wider geographical relationships. The venue and the site of the exhibition could impart character to it, therefore every exhibition is not a tabula rasa but a situated event. Exhibition spaces also undergo continuous transformation through its various usage, for instance through planned programming that includes performances, interactive elements, continuous art-making, or circumstances due to external factors such as audience interaction or disruptions due to censorship.

In comparison with Macleod's original set of four observations, the discussion on architecture has been omitted for this research in order to consider exhibitions more broadly outside the category of architecture. In addition, as the case studies are based on single exhibitions, the third point which pertains to how spaces change through usage has been reinterpreted. In this case, the time period prior to the exhibition is considered along with the transformations that the exhibition engendered after its stipulated exhibition period has passed.

1. Overview of art exhibition spaces between 1970s-1990s

This paper proposes that towards the 1970s in Singapore, the spaces of art exhibition were increasingly specialised. At the same time, the works of art within these spaces gradually become decontextualised from the other realms of life outside art. This was a trend that began to be notable as early as the 1950s all through the 1970s. In the following decade, between the 1980s to the 1990s, a shift was perceptible: through the venues used, display strategies and the art making process, there was a return to the contextualisation of art. This arc is not unique only to Singapore, it occurs globally in different places and time period, under varying specificities. The rest of this chapter explores this phenomenon through an overarching analysis of the changing typologies of art exhibition venues in Singapore, particularly in relation to the emergence of Singapore's art institutions. This chapter will also consider the notion of decontextualisation and contextualisation of art in further detail, paying attention to its occurrence in Singapore and bringing in comparison with similar trajectories that happened internationally.

Art exhibition venue typologies throughout the decades

In *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (2009), Charlotte Klonk argues that the subjective experiences of gallery spaces are conditioned by social and cultural circumstances of the time. In other words, our past experiences and embeddedness in history affect our visual and experiential world. For instance, Klonk discusses the colours of gallery walls which was considered neutral and appropriate in early nineteenth century: "A widely read nineteenth-century writer on colour harmony and its application to interior decoration, for example, stated that 'green is the most neutral of all the decided colours'. ... Nevertheless, in the early nineteenth century green was progressively abandoned in favour of a stronger statement. Red walls had already been standard in private collections in Italy, Germany and Britain... Both the British Institution and the New Gallery, part of Marquis of Stafford's Cleveland House, showed their pictures on walls covered in dull red and this was also the colour chosen for the Dulwich College Picture Gallery in 1817..." (32)

Klonk notes that the choice of red was considered appropriate as it complements the gilding in frames; it can also be attributed to new interests in complimentary colours at the

time. Comparing the nineteenth century gallery wall colour preference with the preferred white gallery walls of today, we will find that what we deem as a normative art gallery experience is different from what the nineteenth century European visitor expect in their art galleries.

Even within the fairly short decades of 1970s-1990s in Singapore, there were notable material differences on how art was exhibited in space. Before the emergence of the public art museum in Singapore in 1976, and prior to an increasing number of private galleries in the early 1970s, clan and association venues or government buildings were the most common spaces for viewing art. As the decades passed, different venues became available for staging art exhibitions, giving rise to distinct art viewing experiences. Typology, as a systematic classification or study of types, is used in this chapter to emphasise these differences, then to begin proposing relevant historical conditions that contribute to the proliferation of certain venue types within a particular decade.

“Venue types” as used in this thesis pertains to both a scheme of spatial and organisational specificity. For instance, in “university museum gallery”, the word “gallery” indicate a permanent space for displaying significant objects or art, while “university museum” indicate its organising structure. A list of the range of venue types used in this research with their descriptions can be found in **Appendix 1B**. The access URL of the database and summary figures of result can be found in **Appendix 1A**.

Changing venue types through the decades

Figures 1.1 to 1.4 shows tables of venue types organised by decades, the number of exhibitions shown in the different venue types are also listed in the table¹⁴. The tables are derived from the online database and they are used to compare the venue types used for staging exhibitions between the decades of 1960s to the 1990s in order to see if there is a pattern of change. The 1960s have been included in this section for a comparative analysis with the developments in the 1970s. There is a limitation on the accuracy of the figures, especially in terms of ensuring that all exhibition venues that exist between the 1960s to the 1990s have been covered. The list of exhibition records is generated by searching through the archives of the National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre, National Museum Resource Centre and the online newspaper database NewspaperSG. As such, exhibitions that were not

¹⁴ See Appendix 1A bar charts for the names of different exhibition venues recorded in the database.

covered by the media or did not produce printed ephemeras may not appear in my online database or be reflected in the tables below.¹⁵

Changes in dominant venue types, which in turn indicate the dominant spatial and organisational configuration, allude to shifts in what is perceived as common exhibition-going experience, as well as changes in dominant institutional spaces. Looking at the tables, it can be observed that halls in Government buildings and associations used to host a large portion of the art exhibitions in Singapore before the 1970s, but they were gradually replaced by private galleries, commercial venues and public museums. Public museums continue to host a large portion of art exhibitions in the 1980s and the 1990s, while independent art spaces took on increasingly important roles towards the 1990s.

1960s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|--|--------------------|
| Government Building Exhibition Hall | 61 |
| Government Building Exhibition Gallery | 1 |
| Association Exhibition Hall | 15 |
| Education Institution Gallery | 12 |
| International Institution Gallery | 4 |
| Public Museum Gallery | 1 |
| Private Gallery | 1 |
| Commercial Venue Gallery | 1 |
| Public Open Air Exhibition Venue | 12 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 2 |
| Total | 110 |

62 exhibitions in government buildings

Figure 1.1: Summary table of art exhibition venue types during 1960–1969. Most exhibitions were hosted in government buildings and exhibition halls within independent associations such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

Image © Hera 2019

1970s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public Museum Gallery | 60 |
| Government Building Exhibition | 33 |
| Cultural Centre | 3 |
| Private Gallery | 53 |
| Association Exhibition Hall | 18 |
| Commercial Venue Atrium/ Hall | 6 |
| Commercial Venue Outdoor Spaces | 1 |
| Educational Institution Gallery | 1 |
| Education Institution Museum | 1 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 6 |
| Total | 182 |

7 exhibitions in commercial venues

Figure 1.2: Summary table of art exhibition venue types during 1970–1979. The National Museum Art Gallery was set up in 1976 and quickly became the nexus of art exhibition activities, hence the highest number of exhibitions recorded were staged in public museums. Private galleries also play an increasingly important role.

Image © Hera 2019

¹⁵ See page 20-21 for a discussion of the online database data generation method.

1980s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public Museum Gallery | 121 |
| Private Gallery | 47 |
| International Institution Gallery | 27 |
| Commercial Venue Gallery | 9 |
| Commercial Venue Atrium/ Hall | 25 |
| Commercial Venue Outdoor Spaces | 1 |
| Association Exhibition Hall | 14 |
| Independent Art Space | 3 |
| Government Building Exhibition Hall | 3 |
| Government Building Gallery | 1 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 11 |
| Total | 262 |

35 exhibitions in commercial venues

Figure 1.3: Summary table of art exhibition venue types during 1980-1989. The NMAG (within the category of public museum gallery) remained as an important venue for hosting exhibitions. Apart from private galleries, international cultural institution such as the Goethe-Institut also played an important role in the art scene, hosting workshops and exhibitions. Image © Hera 2019

1990s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public Museum Gallery | 87 |
| Independent Art Space | 44 |
| International Institution Gallery | 21 |
| Private Gallery | 53 |
| Commercial Venue Atrium/ Hall | 70 |
| Commercial Venue Gallery | 14 |
| Education Institution Gallery | 13 |
| Association Building/Venue | 5 |
| National Agency Gallery | 4 |
| Cultural Centre | 5 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 13 |
| Total | 329 |

84 exhibitions in commercial venues

Figure 1.4: Summary table of art exhibition venue types during 1990-1999. The Singapore Art Museum was set up in the 1996, taking over and extending upon NMAG's role as a museum of art. The Substation (under the category of Independent Art Space) quickly became an important venue amongst young artists to exhibit and dialogue. Image © Hera 2019

Prior to the 1970s, there was a lack of specialised venues for the production, showing and circulation of visual art. Many of the constant venues for showing art are mostly multi-purpose halls for hire within buildings belonging to the Singapore government or independent associations. For instance, the British Council exhibition hall was an important venue in the 1950s. In 1953 five artists organised an exhibition after their trip to Bali in 1953, this exhibition is now considered a landmark event in the formulation of the Nanyang style of painting. Other venues frequently used for art exhibitions include the Chinese Chamber of Commerce or the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). These government and independent associations buildings mostly served other main functions and advocacies while supporting the arts on the side, they provide some basic equipment and surfaces of displaying art. For instance, the British Council Exhibition Hall provided stands which can be moved around, and the lighting normally depended upon ceiling and hanging lights or daylight coming from opened doors and windows (see **Figure 1.5**). Apart from these

multi-purpose halls there was also The University of Malaya Art Museum, founded in 1955, which showcased monumental art in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition and archaeological artefacts of Malaya, Southeast Asia, China and India. The museum had a collection called “Contemporary Malayan Art” shown in a section of the gallery, which consisted of works by artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng. The University of Malaya Art Museum moved to a larger venue in 1958 due to the limited space. Photographs from its opening in 1959 shows ample display walls and showcases, as well as ceiling lights which gave an even wash (see **Figure 1.6**). “Contemporary Malayan Art” was a relatively small section within the wide range of artefacts that it collected, hence another venue was required for exhibiting and collecting the growing number of local artists and artworks.



Figure 1.5: *Fifth Exhibition of Local Artists* in 1954 held at the British Council Exhibition Hall, showing artworks hung on movable panels.

Image courtesy of National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre



Figure 1.6: University of Malaya Art Museum opening in 1959.

Image source: University of Malaya Art Museum guidebook (Sullivan 1959, 1)

Singapore artists, patrons and stakeholders have recognised since the 1960s of the need for more specialised gallery spaces. The Singapore Arts Council was set up in 1967 with the objective of establishing a national gallery of art, which would only come to fruition in 1976. Hedwig Anuar, director of the National Library noted in 1967 that the “exhibition room” in the National Library building, a popular venue for hosting art exhibitions was in fact a lecture hall used for many different purposes. She explained that “Art lovers and artists will only have their special requirements catered for when an art gallery is established.” (Anuar 1967) In addition, the president of the Singapore Art Society Ho Kok Hoe and the regional

representative of the British Council T. F. S. Scott also publicly called for the establishment of art galleries in 1968¹⁶ and 1965¹⁷ respectively.

In line with Singapore's growing art scene, many private art galleries were set up towards 1970s and they increasingly replaced multi-purpose halls. The Alpha Gallery was an important art space that held its inaugural exhibition in 1971 and was active throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. Although it is a small and intimate venue, the gallery was able to host exhibitions of renowned artists due to the network of friendships amongst the Alpha Artists, the gallery managers and one of the gallery's early founders, architect Lim Chong Keat. The Alpha Gallery interior consisted of white walls with simple furniture and a combination of ceiling and adjustable spot lights. Moveable walls also allow for layout changes.

The 1970s also saw the beginning of major corporate collections of art. Large corporations such as UOB acquired artworks to display in the new building's concourse, lobby and offices in 1973. UOB also held annual art exhibitions as part of its patronage since 1981. Plaza Singapura, a newly opened mall in 1974 that was then managed by DBS Land, commissioned sculptures by Ng Eng Teng in front of its facade and also held several art exhibitions. With the patronage of corporations towards acquiring and exhibiting works of art, commercial buildings such as shopping centres and office towers became common art exhibition venues from the 1970s onwards.

A significant milestone was reached when Singapore inaugurated its first major institution of art in 1976, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). The NMAG was designed as a white cube like space with what was at the time considered state-of-the-art interior fittings. With the inauguration of the NMAG and the improvements in art infrastructure, there were also concurrent reactions towards what is seen as a valid way of displaying and disseminating art. Young artists experimented with various spatial strategies that presented alternatives to how museums and galleries presented art. In terms of venue there was an increase in the use of spaces that were originally not intended to be used in the display of art, such as rural villages, warehouses or roving exhibitions that could span several locations. Many of the exhibitions took on a format that was similar to Happenings, which bordered between event, installation and performance, placing more importance on the artistic experience rather than the art object as a culmination of artistic activities. For instance,

¹⁶ 1968. "Wanted: An Academy of Arts." *The Straits Times*, 26 May 1968, 4.

¹⁷ 1965. "Call for art galleries." *The Straits Times*, 21 February 1965, 3.

Yin Yang Festival (1987) and *Art Commandos* (1988) are two events with performances and workshops that included exhibitions. The *Yin Yang Festival* exhibition component was staged in the Singapore University Graduates House, meanwhile participants of *Art Commandos* held an exhibition at the old Saint Joseph Institution building which would later be occupied by the Singapore Art Museum. They are informal in nature, impermanent but highly energetic and experimental. These events stood in contrast to the permanent displays in the NMAC; they reflect a critical attitude to an existing hegemony within predominant institutions and system of art, as well as towards conditions such as Singapore's rapid urbanisation and commodification of land space which changed the way Singaporeans lived and worked. These concerns became apparent in the spatial strategies of art exhibitions such as *The First and Second Open Studio* (1988 and 1989 respectively) held in The Artists' Village, as well as *The Space* (1992), held in Hong Bee Warehouse¹⁸.

The 1980s and the 1990s saw artists collectives and independent platforms as thought leaders for alternative practices and much of the development in contemporary art. Securing a permanent space for these collectives and independent platforms were a constant challenge in Singapore due to the lack of space. Many turned towards disused buildings or spaces which were vacated or slated for demolition as they were considered no longer economically viable. Amongst them, The Substation, founded in 1990 by the late playwright, theatre director, and arts activist Kuo Pao Kun is an important and currently still existing independent non-profit arts space which embraces both performing and visual arts, especially experimental practices. The Substation is located within a disused Public Utilities Board power station at Armenian Street that has been renovated. After its opening it soon became one of the most active venues that hosted art exhibitions in the 1990s. Apart from being an event and exhibition space, The Substation was, and is currently still a significant place for young artists to gather, exhibit and dialogue.

Art institutions in Singapore

Art institutions play a defining role within the art world. Elizabeth Mansfield defines institutions fundamentally as “organising principles” (Mansfield 2002, 2) through which beliefs and conventions could form and be circulated, thus providing communal stability,

¹⁸ See **Chapter 4** for detailed case study of the exhibition *The Space*.

history and identity. This definition suggests that the institution may have a physical form or remain intangible. One manifestation of the art institution is the museum of art, a hegemonic space that is organised and operated on behalf of the community or the nation. The publicness of the art museum, together with its significantly larger resources makes it one of the most readily recognised form of art institution.

When the NMAG opened in 1976, other newly independent nations in Southeast Asia were also mooting for their own institution of modern and contemporary art at around the same period. Indonesia's Taman Ismail Marzuki Art Centre had opened earlier in 1968, the Cultural Centre of the Philippines opened in 1972, the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art in Thailand opened in 1976. These institutions were mostly state-funded, except the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art which was mooted by a group of individuals that included citizens and expats. These significant investments were not incidental. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson notes how the census, the map and the museum was instrumental in how the colonial state imagined its dominion (Anderson 2006, 163), this "political museumizing" (183) was subsequently adapted by the post-independent nations in their own validations. In Singapore, the NMAG's inauguration was carried out in tandem with a modernising process which refocused the museum's collection towards local history, culture and art. In the NMAG official opening catalogue, it was noted that prior to this modernisation process, the museum had been colloquially known as a "Si Keng", implying that it was a house of dead things (Hooi and Sheares 1976).

At its most effective state, the art museum is able to establish its institutional ideologies, defining within the art landscape its centre, peripheries and boundaries. Museums can also be an important repository, directing its resources towards storing and preserving collections with a scale and commitment that is difficult to achieve individually. The establishment of the NMAG marked the beginning of the important process of collecting works by local artists on a national level. The NMAG's acquisition programme alleviated artists of the burden of storing larger works in land-scarce Singapore. It also provided an avenue for exhibiting works, therefore making them accessible to the public. The growing collection was also a ripe opportunity for the growth of artistic discourses.

The NMAG adopted standards of space design similar to the hallmarks of the white cube space. Staff members from the National Museum had been given travel grants to visit New York and the MoMA, as cultural support and part of the USA's cold war diplomatic

policy. Amongst the staff members that embarked on the trip, Constance Sheares, the then curator of art decided to adopt the white cube gallery traits seen in MoMA's galleries as she deemed necessary for the establishment of an art museum in Singapore. Choy Weng Yang who had gone for a study trip through the UNESCO Fellowship at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies was also a proponent of the tenets of the white cube gallery and would later join the NMAG as Head of Design.

The NMAG remained as Singapore's only large-scale art venue for more than two decades despite facing challenges in its role as Singapore's foremost institution of art. The NMAG was bureaucratically challenged; making decisions within the museum was a complicated process as the National Museum was part of the Ministry of Culture, thus many decisions were subjected to the approval of the Ministry. Its funds were in turn controlled largely by the Finance Ministry, which unfortunately places the development of the Museum in low priority. Rajamogan notes that, "In such a situation, the flexibility, initiative and incentive most necessary to carry out museum activities were seriously lacking" (Rajamogan 1988, 60) This persisted until the establishment of the National Heritage Boards in 1993, a statutory board formed through the merger of the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department, which allowed the National Museum of Singapore to make decisions more autonomously rather than being subjected to direct state intervention.

Apart from its administrative structure, there were also criticisms to the NMAG's role as an institution of art. In an article originally written in 1989, art historian T.K. Sabapathy writes that although the NMAG has secured some success, its policy of renting out gallery spaces on a first-come-first-served basis meant that "the Gallery has surrendered its role to determine the nature and quality of exhibitions and uphold the standards of work on display in its premises" (Sabapathy 2018, 249). He also noted that the annual acquisition budget which was \$25,000 in 1989 was inadequate.

In 1988, The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) was formed with the goals of making recommendations toward making Singapore a culturally vibrant society, as well as to consider Singapore's long-term arts and cultural development. The Committee of Visual Arts (CVA), part of the ACCA, wrote in its Committee of Visual Arts Report about the lack of infrastructure for the arts. By the 1980s, the artworks in the National Collection gradually outgrew the space provided by NMAG, and it was clear that the NMAG had to change. The CVA recommended the establishment of a "fine arts gallery in the former St

Joseph Institution” (Singapore 1988, 6), which was eventually named the Singapore Art Museum. In 1996, Singapore’s first dedicated museum of art, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) was inaugurated with one of the largest budgets in the region. The collection of artworks in the NMAG was then transferred to be managed by SAM as well as the NHB until the establishment of the National Gallery of Singapore in 2015.

The next section will examine further the dynamics between, institutions, artists and the art landscape in Singapore.

Decontextualisation and contextualisation of art

Lee Yu Lin in her thesis *Strategies of Spatialization* (Lee 2012) talks about a “historical dialectic between modern art museums, contemporary art, and contemporary art museums” (22) in which artists attempt to critique institutional values of modern art museums that manifest in the form of the “white cube space” (Lee 2012, 1). Lee’s discussion of the contextualisation of art began with how early modern art museums, particularly the MoMA institutionalises art by excluding the art object from the outside world and emphasising its aesthetic value. The white cube gallery reinforces the art institutional value where the institution is able to validate certain art practices by housing and exhibiting them. It was this larger value system of art that provoked the reaction of artists such as Alan Kaprow, Yves Klein, Robert Smithson amongst others who created site-specific works in which art and site as context is intricately connected.

As mentioned in the previous section, there are some differences in the relationship between contemporary artists and the art institution in Singapore. The emergence of experimental art in Singapore, which also explores the context of art outside the white cube gallery seems to be spurred by other factors as much as it is an institutional critique towards the white cube-like spatial articulation which manifested itself in modernist galleries such as the NMAG and the Alpha Gallery.

By the late 1970s and the 1980s, there were already precedents of experimental gatherings, happenings and performances outside Singapore such as Alan Kaprow’s Happenings in the late 1950s, Futurist plays and performances as well as Dadaist gatherings and performances in Cabaret Voltaire in the early 1900s. Many of the second and third generation artists were educated overseas in countries such as France, UK and USA. Closer to home, the platform Asia Regional Exchange also brought artists from Australia and Asia

Pacific to come together and exchange ideas in workshop and expositions. In short, by the 1980s, Singapore artists were able to access and refer to aspects of the contemporary art practices happening in several different parts of the world, comparing and shaping their own individual practices.

The early 1980s saw a flexibility of boundaries between visual and performing arts and energetic collaborations that was unprecedented. Previously in the 1960s and the 1970s, there was a prevalence of art collectives such as the Modern Art Society, the Equator Arts Society, as well as the Singapore Watercolour Society, whose members were brought together either by common artistic ideologies or by specific art mediums. The societies held annual exhibitions, and there were also medium specific exhibitions such as *The First Sculpture Exhibition* in 1967 and the 6-men *Woodcut* exhibition in 1966. By the 1980s the artistic concern had gone beyond the mastery of a single medium. Artist and writer Gilles Massot recalled his experience working with progressive theatre and events group such as Theatreworks and his collective Talking Eyes, which produced experiential works that were not consciously positioned within the expectations of what consisted as visual art: “within that scene, people were doing things that were not really positioned, because it was really spontaneous and organic. They were doing it without really knowing what they were doing.” (Massot 2018) This is not to say that the experimentations were aimless and did not have a clear vision, rather they were done with an emphasis towards the artistic process, without an intention to move towards a formulaic outcome too quickly.

The spontaneity and freedom of exploration associated with the 1980s and the 1990s also saw artists negotiating most critically on the notion of art and its context. T.K. Sabapathy noted in 1993 that “young artists in their twenties and thirties are earnestly re-examining prevailing norms, and re-evaluating the role of the institutions that support the production and consumption of art.” (Sabapathy 1993) He also note that the artists preferred the use of conceptual, installation and performance art strategies due to a few reasons. Firstly, they are modes that do not conform to finite stylistic values and could be used to examine current ideals. Secondly, the artists were able to use these methods to confront issues in a way that would not be possible with conventional means. Artists such as Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng and Lee Wen staged performances not only within the galleries but in the streets and the public realm, reaching out to audiences that may not necessarily come to the art gallery. Tang’s performance *Tiger’s Whip* was shown in the streets of Chinatown in 1991 and was a

critique of how the tiger's penis was openly sold as an aphrodisiac in traditional Chinese medicine shop despite it being a protected animal. In this case, the choice of showing the work outside the gallery and in a location where the context of the critique became more pronounced created tension, further emphasising Tang's message. As institutions seek to assimilate ever-evolving art practices into gallery spaces, experimental artists continue to find ways to escape the established norms and boundaries. This exchange between artists and institutions is a dialectic that is of interest to this thesis.

The rest of this thesis will look deeply into three case studies of art exhibitions and its spaces, in a bid to illustrate and expand upon the overarching observations laid in this chapter.

2. Inaugurating the “white passage”: *Art ‘76*

“The seventies was a time of Singapore developing its museum knowhow. At NMAG I tried to create a big white-shed. I came to this realisation after a study trip in USA with over twenty curators, with US state Department funding—what Singapore wanted was white walls with [lighting] tracks and power points on the floor for vitrines.”

—Constance Sheares

The exhibition *Art ‘76* opened on 21st August 1976, ceremoniously inaugurating the beginning of an institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). The NMAG was located within the National Museum of Singapore’s rear wing. The exhibition *Art ‘76* also marked the occasion to unveil eight newly renovated galleries and its accompanying facilities¹⁹ that comprised the venue of NMAG. In the quote above, Constance Sheares, the then curator of art²⁰, described her vision of the NMAG as a “big white-shed” in an interview with curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (Low and Mustafa 2015, 2). Indeed, the eight galleries within the NMAG had adopted certain formal characteristics associated with the white cube, such as predominantly white walls and ceilings, and a gallery design that strived to seem as neutral as possible to allow the artworks to be the main focus. Considering that the white cube is a vernacular that arose out of historical conditions that led to its tentative beginnings in the US in the 1930s and subsequently its dominance as a normative standard in the 1960s, what are some implications of this import into Singapore’s first state-run art institution? Mustafa notes that Sheares’ evocation of “the big white shed” is perhaps a sort of “tropical” adaptation of the white cube (Low and Mustafa 2015, 2). The word shed also implies an outhouse or a storage, a structure that is more rudimentary or open to the surroundings. Perhaps shed also refer to a particular initiation period of, in Sheares’ words, “Singapore developing its museum knowhow” (Low and Mustafa 2015, 2). Yet in terms of its physical structure the rooms of the NMAG was neither slight nor open; it was a solid build-up that

¹⁹ The NMAG also include a theaterette with a stage and changing rooms, a conference room and an office space for the Singapore Arts Council.

²⁰ Constance Sheares was engaged as Curator of Art who graduated from Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London and began working for the planning of the NMAG since 1973.

effectively walled in and insulated one from the tropics, its air-conditioning producing its own micro climate.

The NMAG is located in the rear wing of the National Museum, a long section behind the rotunda. A floor plan from 1904 shows the initial space allocation of the ground floor into rooms for the curator, taxidermist as well as for the library and the museum store. The first floor shows the long rectangular plan divided into two rooms and a larger rectangular space.

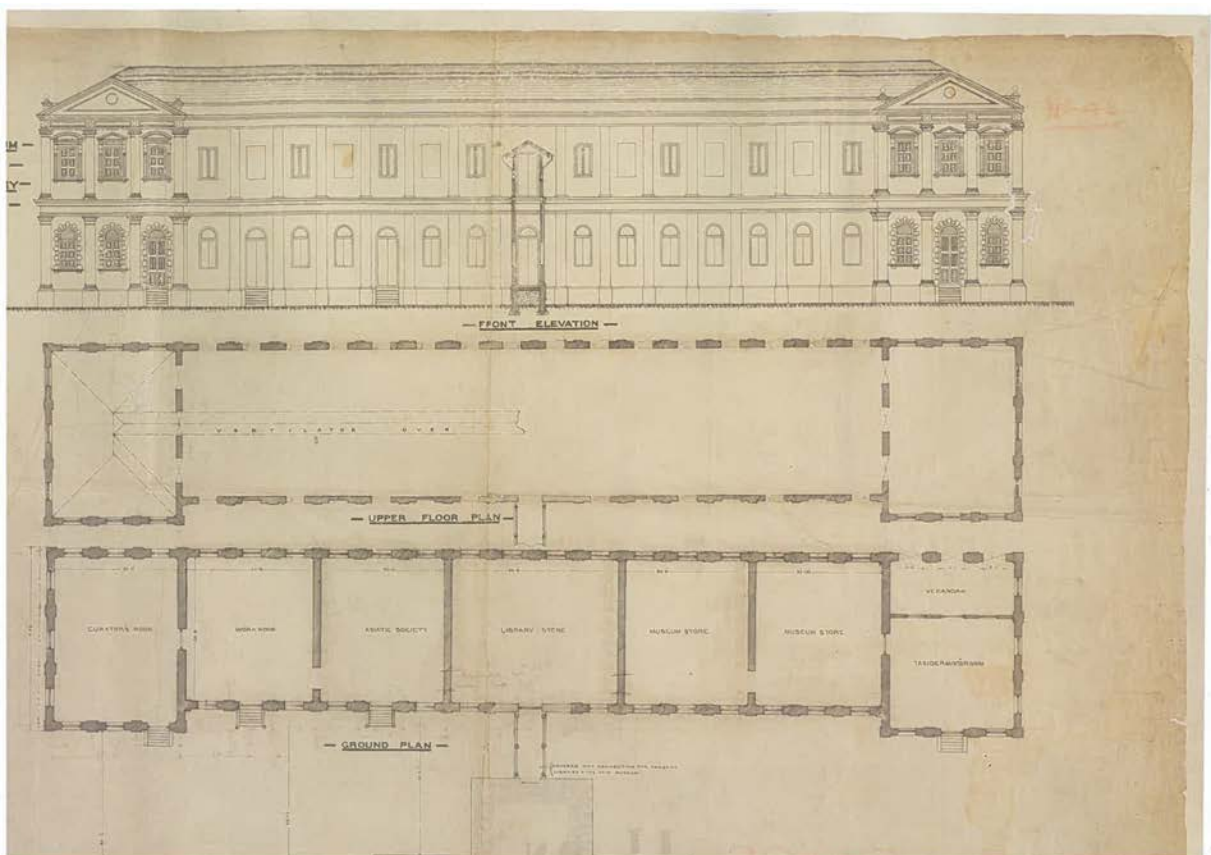


Figure 2.1: A construction floor plan of the Raffles Museum extension building, which would eventually be used for the NMAG

Image source: National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board (Teo 2017)

After a major renovation²¹, Galleries 2-7 as described in the Art 76' catalogue, “provide for a continuous run of exhibition space and an uninterrupted flow of traffic for a distance of approximately 124.2 metres”. This continuous corridor on the first floor of the

²¹ See section 3, *The exclusion and inclusion of time*, for more description of the National Museum Wing Building prior to its 1973 renovation.

museum housed galleries 2-6, the focal point of the exhibition, which displayed artworks that were especially chosen from the *Art 76*' invitational selection process.

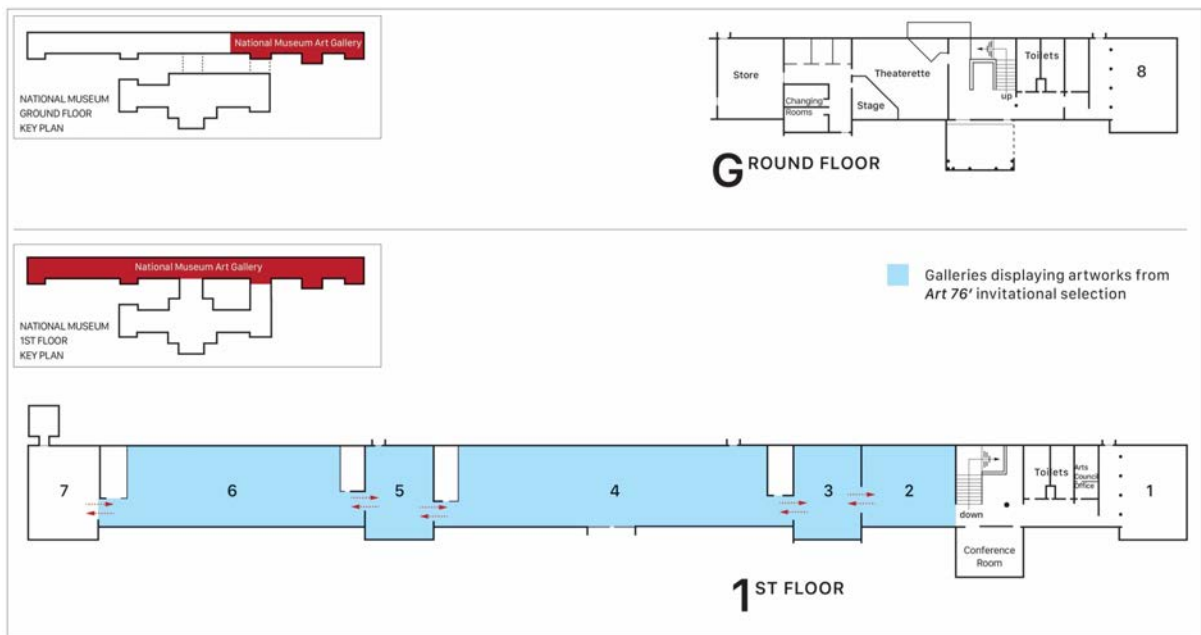


Figure 2.1: Map showing the location of the N MAG within National Museum of Singapore, highlighting the continuous passageway of galleries in the first floor.

Image © Hera 2019, drawn based on plan of N MAG in the N MAG opening catalogue (Singapore 1976).

First floor plan also shown in Figure 2.5.

Prior to its association with museums, “gallery” refers to a passageway, covered or partly open, as well as a long portico. The gallery in the form of a long passageway or a series of connected rooms is one of the most enduring archetypes, a feature commonly found in civilian buildings and palaces as early as the Renaissance period. The gallery in the form of passageway presents the possibility of a continuous space uninterrupted in the middle by pillars. It also allows for the incorporation of a continuously unfolding narrative through the exhibits. Some famous examples of galleries of art in the form of passageways include the rooms of the Uffizi Gallery, the Louvre and the Dulwich Gallery. The N MAG followed this tradition of the gallery form as a long passageway or interconnected rooms, but also followed closely the tenets of the modern gallery aesthetic exemplified by the MoMA. An alternative to the spatial metaphor of the “great white shed” is to consider the N MAG as a “white passage”. Technological advances of the 1970s enabled this spatial articulation. With the advent of air-conditioning it was possible to create large-scale climate-controlled enclosures. Where the Uffizi, the Louvre and Dulwich galleries had initially relied on windows and skylights, in 1976 the N MAG opted for ceiling lights and track lights, as written in N MAG’s opening

catalogue, “natural lighting cannot be depended upon and is generally damaging to painting and other artworks” (Hooi and Sheares 1976).



Figure 2.2: A photograph of NMAG’s Room 4, or Room of the Early Pioneers.

Image source: NMAG Official Opening Catalogue (Hooi and Sheares 1976).

Image also shown in Figure 2.5.



Figure 2.3: The Grand Gallery of the Louvre, painting by Hubert Robert, 1796.

Image source: Wikimedia Commons (Robert 1805)



Figure 2.4: Photograph of the Dulwich Gallery

Image source: Dulwich Picture Gallery (2019)

Inside *Art 76*

Art 76 was an invitational show with a selection process. There were local precedents of the invitational selection process; many art societies such as the Society of Chinese Artists

followed a selection process where a panel of esteemed individuals judged the entries. Curator of Art Constance Sheares in an interview with T.K. Sabapathy mentioned that the inaugural exhibitions and several others that she curated also had a selection committee: “All these exhibitions had a jury, you know. The proposal came from me. I said, ‘I’d like to do this.’ But there was a selection committee again.” (Sheares 2016, 4) This was an organisational process implemented to share both the responsibility and the possible criticisms towards the contentious act of selecting artworks.

For *Art 76*, notable artists both young and old were invited to submit their artworks. The selection committee then narrowed down the 234 works entered to 150 works by 92 artists. Each artist had a maximum of two works on display so the exhibition could include as many artists as possible. The works were done within the last two years and were not exhibited before. The exhibition showcases the “present state of art” at the time. After selection, the works were categorised according to five groups: 1.) Figurative Painting, 2.) Non-figurative Painting, 3.) Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 4.) Watercolour and Prints, and 5.) Sculpture. These five categories were distributed into five galleries, in a slightly different order—sculptures were found in both Room 4 and Room 6, while Chinese Painting and Calligraphy was allocated to Room 2 and Room 3. The following diagram shows images of the gallery rooms corresponding to the floorplan.

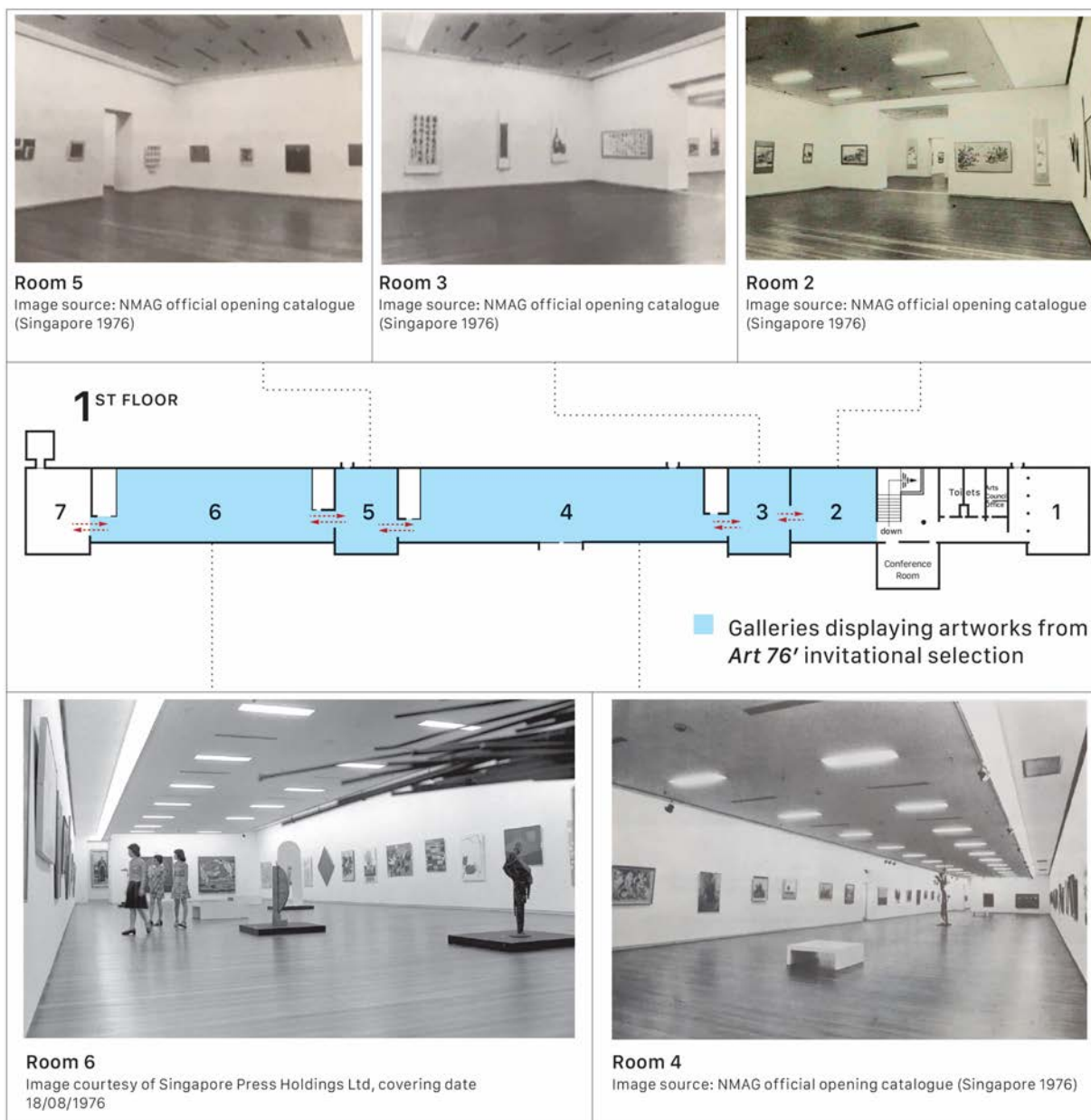


Figure 2.5: Diagram showing photographs of the gallery rooms corresponding to their location on the floorplan. Image © Hera 2019

A range of exhibition photographs have been gathered in an attempt to study the gallery interiors within the exhibition *Art 76'*. Despite conscientious attempts, most of the photographs found were taken before the exhibition opening itself. This presents some limitations. For instance, the NMAG opening catalogue showed photographs depicting all eight galleries, but these images (Figure 2.2 and Room 2, 3, 4, 5 within Figure 2.5) were taken some days before the opening in order to allow for time to design and produce the catalogues that were distributed on the opening day. Another photograph by *New Nation* photographer Philip Lim (Room 6 within Figure 2.5, also shown as Figure 2.7) was taken

three days prior to the exhibition opening. Only **Figure 2.6**, a photograph from National Archives of Singapore is taken after the official opening. One inconsistency that can be noted is that the photographs taken before the exhibition opening do not show the presence of artwork labels, but the photograph in **Figure 2.6** shows Minister For Culture Jek Yeun Thong reaching out to read a small artwork label for Thomas Yeo's painting *Spirit of Wing*. Thus, the spatial analysis in this chapter bears in mind that there is a possibility of changes to non-permanent elements within the gallery interiors, such as movement to the layout of artworks and the addition of artwork labels.



Figure 2.6: Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong touring *Art 76'* soon after its official opening in Room 6. Image courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, covering date 21/08/1976, Image no.: 19980002550-0113.

Art 76' served as a selection ground for the National Collection artwork acquisition. The works in the exhibition were later acquired, albeit through donation of artworks from the artists. Despite of this the exhibition was considered a milestone in terms of the state's support. Artists also noted that the large-scale venue was unprecedented in Singapore; it enabled the display of large-scale sculptures which was previously challenging to exhibit and store due to a lack of suitable venue. It was perhaps due to this reason that in the 1970s painting was still the dominant medium of art. Constance Sheares remarks in the catalogue,

“Sculpture has not yet assumed a dominant position in the visual arts in Singapore due partly to the lack of access to proper facilities and partly to the relative costliness of the materials.” (Hooi and Sheares 1976). The exhibition *Art 76'* featured only six artists who presented sculptural works: Joseph McNally, Kim Lim, Tan Teng Kee, Iskandar Jalil, Ng Eng Teng and Teo Eng Seng. Unlike paintings and prints which were wall-bound in this exhibition, the sculptural works were able to occupy the voids in the middle of the gallery rooms. They also divert the visitor circulation, which would otherwise only be concentrated along the walls of the gallery. **Figure 2.7** shows Room 6, with sculptures and seatings which were rhythmically positioned throughout the gallery. Shown in the innermost part of the gallery is Kim Lim's geometric steel sculpture *Day*, with another of her bronze sculpture *Pegasus* in front of it. Joseph Mc Nally's *Cyclops* can be seen towards the foreground on the right, while the photograph only captures a section of Tan Teng Kee's *Space Sculpture No.1* at the top right corner of the photograph.



Figure 2.7: Room 6 of NMAG, showing some of the sculptures displayed in the exhibition *Art 76'*.
Image courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Ltd, covering date 18/08/1976.

Socio-cultural and political context

The NMAG was considered the first instance of the state's major investment in the arts infrastructure, and the Government Funds had contributed \$100,000 for the renovation

and conversion work itself. A large portion of the building fund (\$1,148 816) came from the Singapore Arts Council, which was considered a society registered under the Societies Act. Apart from funding from the Singapore Government and independent societies and individuals, the USA State Department also contributed towards travel grants for National Museum and NMAG staff for a study trip to the USA to acquire some strategies and skills to run a museum. The 1970s saw a period of transformative political changes amongst the newly independent Southeast Asian nations, it also coincided with the Cold War, a period of geopolitical tension between the USSR and the USA, with both faction extending, amongst others, cultural support in order to gain dominance in this ideological war.

At the time of the opening of *Art 76*, the National Museum was going through a series of revitalisation and restructuring processes that had bearings on the formation of the NMAG. The National Museum was previously known as the Raffles Museum and was a colonial institution. In 1960, soon after Singapore acquired self-governance, the Raffles Museum was renamed as the National Museum. Previously the museum had a large Zoological and Anthropological Collection which was part of a larger network of scientific collections in the region as well as research knowledge that would converge in the British Natural History Institutions. Not all objects within the Zoological Collection were able to be put on display, mainly because the Zoological Collection had two types of specimens: mounted specimens, often on display and of interest to members of public, and the scientific specimens, which were used for scientific study (Tan 2015). Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the National Museum's mandate was redefined as a place of learning and enjoyment for the public, a "civic asset" (Art 76 catalogue). In 1972 The National Museum's administration was transferred to the Ministry of Culture, meanwhile The Zoological Collection was then transferred out²², so the National Museum's display can be redirected towards history, culture and art of Singapore.

In his book *Of whales and dinosaurs: the story of Singapore's Natural History Museum* (2015), Kevin Y. L. Tan notes that towards 1965 there were already public calls for the government to "modernize" the museum as it was beginning to look dated and old (123). For this reason, as well as to accommodate the change of focus in museum collection, in 1974

²² The natural history collection, now referred to as the Zoological Reference Collection (ZRC), was transferred to the Science Centre in 1972 and later to the National University of Singapore in 1988, the collection is currently under the management of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, which is currently both a public museum and a research institution.

the National Museum began a remodernisation process that included major renovation work in three phases. The first phase was a conversion and renovation of the rear wing into an art gallery, the NMAG. The Inauguration of the NMAG can thus be seen as a part of a larger modernisation process for an entity that was considered outmoded and associated with the colonial administration, into a relevant and assertively public museum that would play an important role in establishing a collective national identity within a newly independent Singapore. This shift would have a significant bearing on the exhibition-making process of the *Art 76*.

Contentions and negotiations to NMAG's spatial design

The exhibition-making process of *Art 76* is shaped by contentions between organisations and individuals that led to the decisions that shaped *Art 76* spatially. In the previous chapter, it has been discussed that the NMAG's status as an appendage of the National Museum and thus being a department of the Ministry of Culture had implications on its organisation and vision as an institution.

In her curatorial text, Sheares' writes that "A sound evaluation of the present state of art can only be achieved through an objective study of the varying contemporary trends." (Hooi and Sheares 1976) A selection team was formed for the vetting of artworks, the committee include Liu Kang, Lim Chin Teong, Koh Boon Piang, Christopher Hooi²³ and Constance Sheares. The selection process aimed to include as many artists as possible, therefore all artists were limited to having a maximum of two artworks included in the selection. These works also had to be created in the past two years and not exhibited before. Apart from mentioning that "there are no hard and fast rules", these two selection criteria were the only ones succinctly described, but they were not indicative of the aesthetic, conceptual or contextual merit of the artworks selected.

On the organisation of artworks in the gallery, Sheares writes that "The works have been divided into five sections for the purpose of homogenous systematic viewing." Homogenous and systematic indicate an impartial process whereby no personal preference is indicated towards any single work within the exhibition. It recalls the previous practices of the

²³ Christopher Hooi was the director of the National Museum of Singapore from 1973 to 1981. Previously, he was also the Curator of Anthropology in the museum between 1957 to 1967.

Raffles Museum, which as a natural history museum had organised collections in a systematic way according to taxonomical or comparative organisation. A systematic viewing is an experience that is undifferentiated, it encourages a flow whereby a visitor comes in, look, move to the next work, stop and look, then continue walking again along the line, procession-like.

The idioms of the white cube gallery, which had arisen out of its specific context in Western modern art, are now applied as a unifying framework to the different genres of artworks in the open call. Interestingly, two of the genres in the open call, Chinese calligraphy and Chinese paintings have a long history of development independent from the tradition of Western modern art. Chinese calligraphy and painting have been presented in a variety of formats, some of which such as the horizontal scroll and the leaf album, are not meant for wall display. The *yaji* (雅集), a private gathering of the literati, is a more appropriate occasion for the sharing of works within an intimate distance. In a *yaji*, participants are also able to handle works such as unrolling sections of horizontal scroll paintings or responding through inscribing calligraphy or seal on the paintings' colophon. However, this interactivity is not possible in the context of a modern civic museum which is open to great number of public visitors, especially considering the possible damages sustained by the artworks through handling. Photographs of Room 2 and Room 5 of the NMAG which shows Chinese Painting and Calligraphy works, seems to have excluded the horizontal scroll and the leaf album format which requires closer engagements to appreciate. Instead most of the selected works are vertical scrolls or framed, which are both more congenial for wall display. Moreover, they did not upset the homogenous systematic viewing experience. The displays of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy works in Art 76' reflects how the idioms of the white cube gallery favours certain viewing experiences and formats over others.

There are existing testimonies on the contentions towards the design of the NMAG galleries. They provide a closer grained insight into the exhibition-making process of Art 76', as well as the negotiations towards the spatial articulation of the NMAG.

Upon being appointed Director, Christopher Hooi consulted professionals from the Public Works Department (PWD). His plan included an extension building at the back of the Wing Buildings that would occupy parts of the Fort Canning Hill. The building was a solution to the lack of amenities, in particular exhibition holding areas where components of the exhibits could be temporarily stored before they were set up, as well as spaces for the staff's

research library and a Singapore History Gallery. In an interview, Hooi recounted his consultation process, “I was thinking with all these requirements why not sit down and work out all the requirements and then get the co-operation and help of the PWD. ... They actually produced a sketch plan and the details were so good that with a bit of polishing up we could have called for tenders for a new building. I was thinking of a new building behind the existing Museum building encroaching some parts of Fort Canning.”(Hooi 1992)

Hooi also recounted how the renovation plan and the addition of the new building was then divided into phases, of which only some came to materialise under his directorship: “... I put the plan to the Ministry who came back with an interesting reply saying that it will cost about 12 to 19 million dollars—too expensive. So he said it should be divided into three phases. ... Eventually by the time I left the thing was shelved.”²⁴ (Hooi 1992)

Nevertheless, the Public Works Department (PWD) provided the architecture renovation plans of the NMAG and the first phase of renovation and modernisation work proceeded. Christopher Hooi included facilities such as the theaterette with its changing room, and the auditorium to accommodate various performing arts activities as well. Subsequently the NMAG hosted talks, lecture demonstrations, film shows, music recitals, poetry and dance, albeit on a more modest scale compared to the visual arts exhibitions.

The NMAG official opening catalogue mentions the appointment of Choy Weng Yang as the Head of Design in preparation for NMAG and as a process of modernising and revitalising the National Museum, “The particular attention paid to having good displays and attractive publications began with the appointment of the Head of the Exhibition and Design Unit in January, 1975 and the increase in the number of Artists from one to three in 1974.”(Hooi and Sheares 1976) In a recent interview I conducted with Choy, he highlighted several of his design contributions to the NMAG that was unveiled in *Art 76*: “I designed the conference room, the round table. Everything had a design, some was appreciated, others were taken for granted. I even designed the benches... I learned from foreign museums, they had benches every now and then for people to sit down. But I was super cunning. I designed it as a square, so that you can sit on it, but sometimes we could put sculptures over it. So it served as a display stand as well. The benches were white, because I was conscious of bright colours interfering with the artworks.”(Choy 2018) In the same interview, Choy also

²⁴ Between 2003 to 2006 more redevelopment works were carried out, including building restorations as well as an annex building that extended partly into Fort Canning Hill. Local architecture firm W Architects designed the annex as well as an atrium and a glass rotunda.

described the artwork installation process with art installers, who would work based on some simple and specific guidelines that he gave. They were experienced installers who had been working for the Museum prior to Choy's employment and would carry out the work effectively and swiftly. Paintings were hung around eye level and were spaced regularly and generously.

While the PWD's involvement with the renovation work had begun through discussions with Hooi as early as 1974, Curator of Art Constance Sheares and Head of Design (subsequently also Curator of Art) Choy Weng Yang also recalled their involvement with negotiations to the interior of NMAG's gallery spaces. Choy Weng Yang, in an interview with Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, recounted the following incident: "...one day as NMAG construction was still going on in the 1975, Hooi suggested the three of us²⁵ walk around. The architect responsible for the renovations was from Hong Kong²⁶, and he showed us some wall colours that he was considering for the galleries—they were deep tones—and I immediately mention that the proposed colours would not work. I said, 'Look, it's the painting that's important.' He then asked me to suggest a colour, and Constance and I decided on white. Another shock I received was the floor. The architect had already chosen his favourite carpet colour—light pink or something like that. Having gone through the Museum of Modern Art in New York I said, 'No matter which colour you choose, the whole gallery will be ruined. With carpets, you are competing with the painting!'" (Mustafa 2016, 47)

The above anecdote illustrates the complex dynamics between museum staff and architect in the process of negotiating the final design of the space. In this case, the architect had been responsible for an ongoing long-term design process and received the above comment and intervention. In the interview, Choy further continues: "Later on, fortunately, there were some budgetary issues; we did not have enough money, so they kept the exposed wooden floors! Constance and I went around and I said, 'What's wrong with this?' There were a few cracks on the floor. I recall that she responded, 'This effect is quite good, let's just fill the cracks.'" An added circumstance of budgetary limitation tipped the scale towards Choy and Sheares' vision of a gallery whose central purpose is to hang paintings and to allow visitors to focus on the artworks while the surrounding wall and floor finishing recede into the

²⁵ The three individuals are Choy Weng Yang, Christopher Hooi and Constance Sheares.

²⁶ The identity of this specific Hong Kong architect in charge of the renovation has not been found yet, he had been working for the PWD during the National Museum's 1974-1976 renovation.

background. Brian O’ Doherty, in the book *Inside the White Cube* (O’Doherty 1999), comments on the role of the wall as a display surface as paintings become the focal point. He writes that, “If paintings implicitly declare their own terms of occupancy, the somewhat aggrieved muttering between them become harder to ignore. ...We enter the era where works of art conceive the wall as a no-man’s land on which to project their concept of territorial imperative. And we are not far from the kind of border warfare that often Balkanizes group shows.” (27) Indeed within the NMAG the white walls did not merely allow visitors to focus on the artworks, instead they become contentious real estate. “Homogenous systematic viewing” from this perspective is also a guiding principle for territorial settlement on the amount of space given around the individual pieces of 140 paintings and drawings displayed along the NMAG walls.

The contentions towards NMAG’s spatial design would continue during and after *Art 76*, especially through the visitor’s use of the venue, which resulted in responses from the exhibition organisers. For instance, with regards to the way visitors moved around in NMAG, Choy Weng Yang recalled that “The visitors normally walked quite fast, so we spaced the artworks out. Later on, during my time, we developed large letterings, so the visitors stayed longer.” (Choy 2018) Rather than having a single author, the spatial articulation of *Art 76* and indeed other exhibition spaces, are resultant from a continuous process of contentions and negotiations.

3. The exclusion and inclusion of time

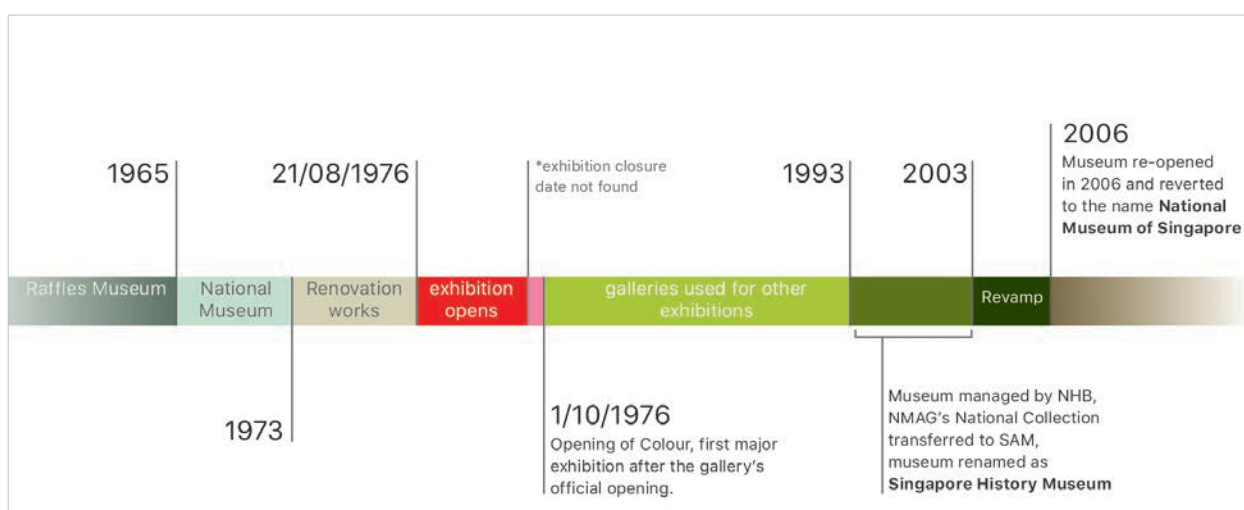


Figure 2.8: A timeline of events at the site of the National Museum building before and after the opening of *Art '76*

As the inaugural exhibition of NMAG, *Art '76* can be seen as an important event marking the National Museum of Singapore's process of modernisation and revitalisation that occurred in three phases since 1974, which in turn was spurred by Singapore's nation building and search for national identity since the 1960s. The NMAG inherited the extension building that were completed in sections in 1906, 1916 and 1926. Initially, the exterior and interior was built in the Neo-Palladian style. The images below show the upper level of the library extension, which was later converted to the NMAG.



Figure 2.9: The library extension wing of National Museum (image taken c1916.), which would be renovated into the NMAG in 1973

Image source: National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board (Teo 2017)



Figure 2.10: The library extension wing of National Museum (image taken c1916.), which would be renovated into the NMAG in 1973

Image source: National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board (Teo 2017)

Under the renovation programme, sections of the rear wing were repurposed into a modern structure, visually and functionally. Singapore's tropical atmosphere has a high level of humidity and its temperature also fluctuates significantly as the day gets hotter with the mid-day sun. Temperature fluctuation and humidity pose challenges to the conservation of artefacts and artwork, so air-conditioning and dehumidifiers were used to insulate objects within the museum from the climate outside. Apart from the benefits in artefact and artwork conservation, air-conditioning also attracts visitors to the Museum through the provision of physiological comfort. Windows which were previously valued for air circulation were not a

necessity anymore, apart from providing visual interest. Indeed, in NMAG the windows previously present in the library extension wing were built over to increase wall surfaces for the display of artworks. Apart from windows, Neo-Palladian elements that existed in the building previously, such as ornamental ceiling cornice, the Ionic columns in **Figure 2.9** and the tympanum above the door in **Figure 2.10** were removed.

There was an emphasis on the currency of *Art '76*, evident through its interior spatial design and several other components: firstly, its exhibition title highlights the year of the exhibition 1976, and secondly, the open call selection process only considered works that were created within the past two years prior to the exhibition and has not been exhibited before. The museum was undergoing a major change from being an encyclopaedic museum to a national cultural and historical museum. Spatially, parts of the structures were repurposed, conserved and excluded where necessary in the interest of creating a contemporary aesthetic of a post-independent Singapore.

Following *Art '76* many more exhibitions and programmes were staged in the NMAG. It was soon apparent, however, that Singapore's growing art scene would require more space and infrastructures. According to the *Committee on Visual Arts Report* in 1988 (Singapore, 1988), “[s]ince 1976, when the National Museum Art Gallery was established, no major physical facilities for art exhibitions have been built”. (24) The NMAG remained as a nexus of institutional artistic activity till the opening of the Singapore Art Museum(SAM) in 1996.

With the opening of the SAM the National Museum was renamed the Singapore History Museum for a period of 13 years, before reverting back to calling itself the National Museum of Singapore. To date, even as the SAM takes up the mandate of being an institution of contemporary art while the National Gallery of Singapore(NGS) asserts itself as an institution of modern art. The National Museum continues to showcase art exhibitions alongside its showcase of experiential perspective on Singapore's story. The successors of NMAG, the SAM and the NGS, both have spaces that follow the model of being chimerical structures with cutting-edge and functional interiors housed in conserved colonial buildings. Both SAM and NGS were set up in a postmodern era where artists have been experimenting with display settings that deviate from the sterile setting of white cube like spaces²⁷, thus the gallery designs of both SAM and NGS are no longer singularly focused on the white cube

²⁷ The following chapters will detail on case studies that show examples of these experimentations.

experience. To date all three museums continue to engage architects and exhibition designers who would experiment with various exhibition designs and display iterations in a bid to create exhibitionary spectacles that would attract world-wide audiences. Nevertheless, the exhibition *Art '76* marked a unique moment where visions of modernity and nation-building crystallised as Singapore's first major institution housing the National Collection of art. This case study has unpacked specific intersections of visions, contextual and technological circumstances as well as contestations embedded within the spatial articulation of the exhibition.

3. Interconnected realms: *Trimurti* (1988)

In the previous chapter, we have seen how abstract formalist works were prominently displayed in the National Museum Art Gallery's inaugural exhibition under the category "Non-Figurative Art". The formalist works of Tay Chee Toh, Anthony Poon and Arthur Yap were singled out in curator Constance Sheares' exhibition essay (Hooi and Sheares 1976)—these works were gaining widespread acceptance. In an essay first written in 1972, artist Cheo Chai Hiang, considering several global artistic trends such as Pop Art, Minimal Art, Earth Art, surmises several ideas and concepts suggested by these trends, which include "a total rejection of formalism", "precedence of artistic process over finished work" and "use of simple materials and ordinary objects" (Cheo 2016, 40). Cheo's essay *New Art, New Concepts* (2016), has been hailed by art historian Kwok Kian Chow for anticipating "the new art of the 1980s and 1990s" (Kwok 1996, 141). In his book on the history of Singapore Art *Channels and Confluences*, Kwok further nominates the exhibition *Trimurti*, first held in March 1988, as an exemplar of this "new" art. He writes that "[d]espite the lack of intense and sustained contemporary aesthetic discourses within the larger period of the 1980s, *Trimurti* appears to have addressed most comprehensively the multiple scopes outlined by Cheo." (Kwok 1998)

Trimurti features artists S. Chandrasekaran, Salleh Japar and Goh Ee Choo and was held at the Goethe-Institut Gallery, an active venue that regularly hosted exhibitions. It was then located on the sixth floor of the Singapore Shopping Centre in Clemenceau Avenue, towards the Southeast end of the Orchard Road shopping area. Singapore saw a remarkable expansion in shopping spaces throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. By 1980, Singapore was able to boast the reputation of a "shoppers' paradise" with the highest shopping space per capita in Southeast Asia (The Straits Times 1980). The Orchard Road shopping area was developed to attract tourist spending and was a remarkable manifestation of global consumerism in its scale and success in the 80s and 90s. Shopping centres were (and to this day are still) able to gain enough real estate share to become landlord to a wide range of services and activities outside shopping. This includes public libraries, post offices and art displays through commissions or exhibitions in gallery spaces and common areas. Although shopping centre owners do not necessarily interfere with exhibitions staged inside the gallery (as in the case of *Trimurti*), they would have influence over the zoning of the shop units. By virtue of their unit allocation within the shopping centre, non-shopping related activities are

often still organised according to the logic of shopping and retail profitability. The Goethe-Institut gallery, as a non-profit cultural diplomacy institution is located on the topmost floor of the shopping centre, where visitors may not reach as easily unless they have a destination in mind.

Another feature of the gallery synonymous with a shopping centre's spatial idiom is the row of glass panels and entrance near the gallery entrance, which would have functioned as display windows in other retail units. (See plan of the gallery in relation to the sixth floor of the building in **Figure 3.1**) The glass panels allowed visitors to look into the gallery when they first exit the lift on the 6th floor. They would have seen the exhibition title lettering "Trimurti" on the wall and Goh's *Preservation* installation (**Figure 3.2**) in front of it.

The shape of the gallery can be described as consisting of two angular rooms connected by a passageway. Past the glass panels and entrance, Neutral white walls enclose the venue and covered the passageway and the second gallery from viewers outside. The permanent interior finishing within the space is utilitarian, with white walls and lighting tracks that facilitate a wide range of exhibitions. In this venue that inclined towards a perceived neutrality, the *Trimurti* artists aspired to bring about an "energy space" where "a total happening takes place involving paintings, sculpture, installation and performances. It is a microcosmic enactment of the macrocosm." (Chandrasekaran, Goh, and Japar 2016, 361).

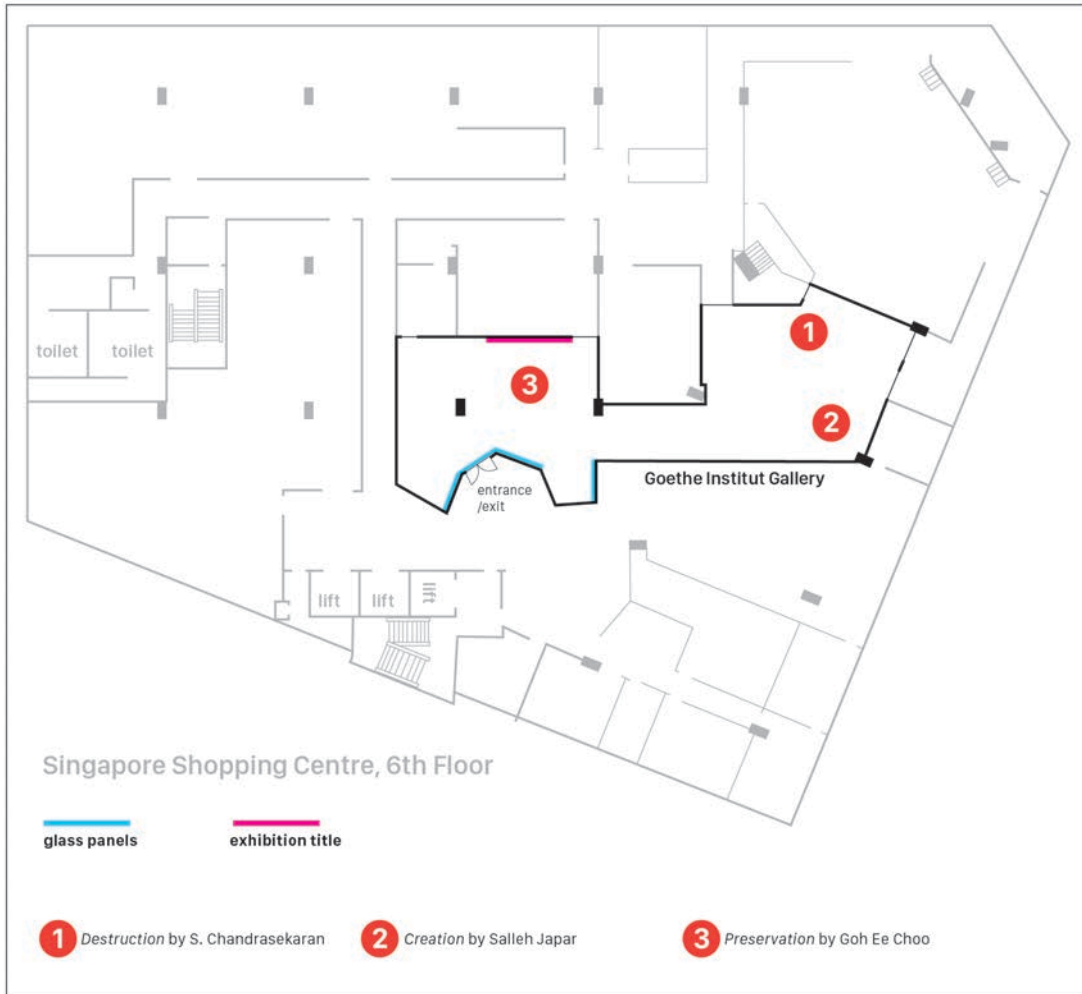


Figure 3.1: Location of the 3 installations in the Goethe Institut Gallery.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to Singapore Shopping Centre floorplan and *Trimurti* catalogue from 1988²⁸.



Figure 3.2: *Preservation* by Goh Ee Choo, photographed before the performance.

Image source: *Trimurti and ten years after* publication (Sabapathy and Mashadi 1998, 16)

²⁸ Originally presented as photocopied handout by the three artists. It is reproduced in the publication *Histories, practices, interventions: a reader in Singapore contemporary art* (Say and Seng 2016)



Figure 3.3: *Destruction* by S. Chandrasekaran, photographed after the performance.

Image source: *Trimurti and ten years after publication* (Sabapathy and Mashadi 1998, 14)

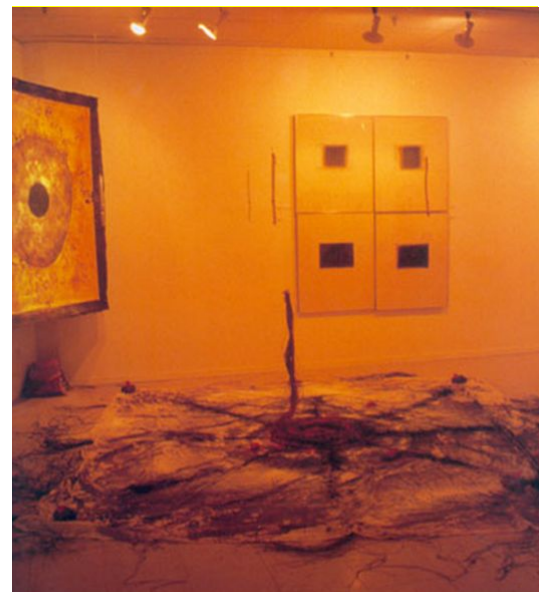


Figure 3.4: *Creation* by Salleh Japar, photographed after the performance.

Image source: *Trimurti and ten years after publication* (Sabapathy and Mashadi 1998, 13)

“Trimurti” is a Sanskrit word that means “three forms” and also refers to the three Hindu Godhead of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They are the manifestation of creation, preservation and destruction. This concept is used to advance syncretic explorations on art and local identity as each of the three artists took on a role and interpreted each role autonomously in accordance to their own selected body of religious and philosophical knowledge: Chandrasekaran was destruction and approached his artmaking through the philosophy of Hinduism; Japar was creation and drew inspiration from Sufism; Goh was preservation and worked with the philosophy of Daoism. The artists also made trips to collect local materials such as kumkum, banyan tree and turmeric for artmaking. Many of these materials are significant as they are often used in rituals or carry symbolic meaning, thus these latent content of the materials bled into the ongoing discourse formation within the exhibition.

Goh’s installation *Preservation* was located at the entrance and was therefore the first artwork first seen by visitors; past *Preservation*, framed works punctuated the passageway into the second angular room; this room was where Chandrasekaran’s and Japar’s installations

Destruction and *Creation* are located. *Art '76* had encouraged homogenous systematic viewing of artworks, but in *Trimurti* the gallery space was configured in a symbolically-charged manner and activated through three sessions of performances. The performances around the installations were carried out in a sequence that started from the deepest end of the second angular room, with *Destruction*, performed on the 7th of March 1988 at 6.00 p.m., then *Creation*, performed on the same day at 6.15 p.m., near the connecting passageway. Lastly, *Preservation* was performed on a different day, 12th of March 1988 at 6.00 p.m. near the entrance-cum-exit. During the performances, the installations were activated, and transformed materially and metaphorically in relation with each other.

All three performances were recorded on video²⁹, together with a set of written documentations authored by the three artists (Sabapathy and Mashadi 1998, 11-20). **Figures 3.5-3.9** also shows photographs captured during their performances in 1988.

Chandrasekaran's performance began with him circumambulating his installation, then he proceeded to pull down ropes that were fixed on the ceiling, and broke the pots filled with red kumkum powder on the floor. Japar began by moving around Chandrasekaran's installation, collecting fragments, then proceeded to the location of his installation. He laid and unfolded a burlap, then lit candles at the four cardinal directions of the installation and sowed seeds and sprinkled some red kumkum powder. Goh brought in chickens and scattered seeds during his performance. Whilst Goh was performing, Chandrasekaran's performance was projected onto an adjacent wall. Each of the three artists incorporated elements from the other artists' installations and performances, thus creating connections that build up on each other's performances.

²⁹ Available from the National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre.



Figure 3.5: S. Chandrasekaran performing *Destruction*
Image courtesy of Goh Ee Choo



Figure 3.6: Salleh Japar beginning his performance at the remnants of Chandrasekaran's *Destruction*.
Image courtesy of Goh Ee Choo



Figure 3.7: Salleh Japar during his performance *Creation*, positioning a lit candle
Image courtesy of Goh Ee Choo



Figure 3.8: Goh Ee Choo performing *Preservation*, moving slowly as an old man.
Image courtesy of Goh Ee Choo



Figure 3.9: Goh Ee Choo performing *Preservation*, prostrating at the centre of the circle.
Image source: *Lian He Zao Bao* (Huang 1988)

1. “Total happening” in Singapore

In Singapore, one of the first performance-cum-installation art can be attributed to Tan Teng Kee’s 1979 picnic in his council estate yard. The event was not initially communicated as an exhibition—friends and associates were invited for a picnic with an outdoor showcase of Tan’s sculpture and painting works, displayed in his backyard. There were two performative elements that questioned the endurance and exclusivity of art in the event. Firstly, Tan offered his painting *The Lonely Road*, a 100-metres canvas for sale, but also

indicated that he would cut it up according to size and section that the buyer wished to acquire. Secondly, as a climax to the picnic, Tan ignited his *Fire Sculpture* and watched as it burnt down to ashes. Much of Tan's artistic career has been devoted to the medium of sculpture, and he is notable for several major public commissions. On the occasion of Tan's picnic, T.K. Sabapathy remarks: "Hitherto, Tan's practice had been directed towards the production of works which were tangible and durable; in this instance, he embarked upon an action which completely undermined and completely obliterated the existence of a work as an object." (Sabapathy 1991, 26) Ray Langenbach notes that performance art is often characterised by "modes of modernist negativity", adding that this characteristic also "provide the form with a negative dialectics, and aesthetic resistance to the consolidation of official regimes of taste. The very legitimacy of the form then, is paradoxically based on its dialectical relationship to official culture, and in some cases, also to academic and theoretical cultures." (Langenbach 2003, 89) Apart from Tan's picnic, Tang Da Wu's exhibition in 1979, *Earthworks*, also contained performative components. The 1987 *Yin Yang Festival* was also another event where young artists such as Chandrasekaran could participate and experiment with performance art.

By 1988, the term "happening" had been used to describe art events which included elements of performances and installation art, exemplified through the works of Alan Kaprow and the New York Scene Happenings which took place since the late 1950s. In two interviews with Goh Ee Choo and S. Chandrasekaran, I asked about the use of the term "total happening" in *Trimurti*, Goh Ee Choo replied that "[i]t referred to an event" and how "[e]verything related to art is involved to bring forward the statement, so we see it as total art, as it happened in time, so event." Goh also asserted that "it was not related to what was happening in the US"(Goh 2019). Chandrasekaran commented that "Understanding about the West, it allowed us to question our role as artists in Southeast Asia. ... The term "Happening" may be from the West, but our interpretation is different."(Chandrasekaran 2019). In the interview, both artists noted that the term "happening" has been previously used in a different cultural context, but both assert their agency in interpreting and defining the format. In Chandrasekaran's comment, we can also infer how globalisation and exchanges of culture encouraged reflexivity in defining his own cultural identity in relation to Western culture and artistic developments.

Contemporary to the New York Scene Happenings, and Prior to *Trimurti*, there were also other movements around the world throughout the 1950s-1980s that rebelled against the modern gallery set up and its institutional ideologies. They include: New Realism and Situationism in France, Fluxus in Germany, Minimalism in the US, Arte Povera in Italy, and Gutai and Mono-ha in Japan. Although differing in terms of strategies and motivation, these movements also widely utilised performances, site-specific works and installation art.

Referring again to Cheo Chai Hiang's 1972 essay *New Art, New Concepts* (2016), in which he describes the work of Alan Kaprow as an instance of artists making "a total break from picture-making as the final destination" (41), we can infer that the precedences of art movements from the likes of Alan Kaprow were available information to the young artists in 1988. In his writing *Assemblage, environment and happenings*, Allan Kaprow, an artist and writer who was integral in the development of the New York scene happenings, defines it quite plainly: "Happenings are event that, put simply, happen." However, there are key differences between the happening of the *Trimurti* artists and the works of the New York Scene artists as exemplified by Allan Kaprow. Kaprow in his writing asserts that happenings "exist for a single performance, or only a few, and are gone forever as new ones take their place" (Kaprow 1968). The *Trimurti* artists produced installation made of perishable materials and also staged performances. However, they also produced a significant number of art objects in the form of paintings, prints and painted Sari which were able to be sold to art collectors. The artists also painstakingly created documentations of their performances as videos and descriptive texts. The practice of the *Trimurti* artists did not reject the outcome of art objects that are also commodities. The works of the *Trimurti* artists had a different thrust, reacting to a set of culturally and geographically specific conditions. For instance, their use of installations and performances were employed to challenge the primacy of easel painting in artistic practice and education in Singapore at the time. It was important for the artists to demonstrate that different streams can be practiced together and holistically, such that "every part of the gallery become a canvas where the audience can walk into" (Goh 2019).

Trimurti's critical stance is directed firstly towards the dominant "Western" as the centre of the global art and secondly the art educational system within Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), which in 1988 was an important educational institution and the only academy of art available in Singapore until the founding of St Patrick's School in 1982.

Amongst the *Trimurti* artists, a sentiment of dissatisfaction towards their artistic education at NAFA was apparent, and this contributed towards their reactive strategies and togetherness in having a common purpose. Japar recounts his experience studying at the NAFA between 1983 and 1986: “It was routine. You just come to school, set up your easel and then start painting. There was not much in the way of teaching, the lecturers would go around and point out the things you should rectify.” (Sheares et al. 1998, 75) Furthermore, when asked about the artistic environment during his education in NAFA, Chandrasekaran comments, “I wouldn’t call it an artistic environment at all because they were very concerned about the finished product and not the process. ... it was always a lecturer to student concept of teaching, there was no reasoning.” (Sheares et al. 1998, 55) NAFA, the longest established educational institution for art in Singapore, had not incorporated contemporary art strategies into their pedagogy in 1988. This is despite experimental exhibitions and events that happened locally and was gaining momentum amongst young artists in the 1980s, such as Tan Teng Kee’s picnic, Tang Da Wu’s *Earthworks* exhibition in 1979, and the street performances of the Singapore Arts Festival in 1984.

2. Multicultural performativity: individuals, national and global institutions

Through an analysis of various textual and documentation material produced by the artists, we can distil two broad emphases within the exhibition *Trimurti*: firstly, the integration of performance art and formal practices in an interconnected manner, termed by the artists as ‘total happening’, and secondly, the artists’ embrace of multiculturalism whilst maintaining an exclusionary dichotomy of “East” and “West”. There was a range of earlier works and movements from artists around the world that display similar tendencies to the works of the *Trimurti* artists. However, the notion of “influence” from these earlier works or movements will not be explicitly imposed upon the *Trimurti* artists. Eminent art historian Michael Baxandall argues that the notion of influence should also be considered in terms of the intention of the artist. He writes: “‘Influence’ is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who is the patient: it seems to reverse the active/ passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the experiential beholder will wish to take into account.” (Baxandall 1985, 58-59) Baxandall further notes that the artist, rather than the predecessor, should be considered as the agent. As such the vocabulary of the inference will be “much richer and more attractively diversified:

draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to...” (59) Hence this section will map out the surrounding circumstances that *Trimurti* emerged from, as well as the range of resources and information available to the artists which they admittedly drew upon or rejected.

Trimurti began as a commission for the occasion of Goethe-Institut’s regional meeting. The three artists were friends and had previously collaborated in a 5-person exhibition, titled *Quintet*. Initially, Goh Ee Choo was approached by Goethe-Institut’s cultural officer, Moh Siew Lan, and was offered to exhibit at the Goethe-Institut Gallery. Apart from regular meetings with Moh Siew Lan, there was no definite brief given to the artists, although they maintained that they were given a high degree of autonomy in developing their artistic concepts. With regards to the curation of the exhibition, Chandrasekaran comments that “[t]he show was curated by ourselves (artist as curator), with support from T.K. Sabapathy, Ms. Constance Sheares and Ms. [Moh] Siew Lan. ... Each has their own perspective, and we created our own time and space. The curation of the show was more a realisation of ideas, a creative process rather than curation.”(Chandrasekaran 2019) The lengthy discussions between the artists with art historian T. K. Sabapathy and cultural officer Moh Siew Lan constitute the curatorial negotiations within the exhibition, although from the perspective of the artists they are considered as part of the creative process.

While the artists had rejected their own graduation show, they gravitated towards the Goethe-Institut which supported their artistic ethos and provided better financial and logistical support. The artists were required to pay a fee of \$400 to participate in their graduation show, which they consider unaffordable in 1988. In comparison the Goethe-Institut Gallery did not charge any fee and gave some support such as creating labels and printing publicity posters. They were not given a budget to produce their own installation works, but towards the end of the exhibition Goethe-Institut cultural officer Moh Siew Lan purchased a few works in support.

Trimurti is an assertive and persistent search for an alternative way to make and show art that does not originate from the “West”. This was pursued by each artist in dialogue with each other, but also autonomously along the lines of his selected religious and cultural wellspring (Hinduism, Daoism and Sufism) which each championed as an artistic approach. The notion of universality amongst heterogeneity had great appeal and much resonance in the 1980s. Globally, the ease of travel and communication facilitated exchange of cultures and

notable cultural phenomena such as the 1960s counterculture, Spiritualism and the New Age Movement. These movements had much bearing in popular culture and in turn constitute an accessible cultural milieu with perceptible interests in syncretism, older esoteric traditions and religious philosophies.

It is not known whether the multicultural and decidedly non-West thrust of *Trimurti* was unproblematic to Goethe-Institut, or if in fact it became an appropriate reason for their choice of programme during Goethe-Institut's regional meeting. Nevertheless, the Goethe-Institut Gallery in the 1980s was an important and progressive space for the arts community in Singapore. It regularly hosted art exhibitions and could be compared to important galleries such as the Alpha Gallery and the Arbour Fine Arts. In an interview, Chandrasekaran remarked about the merits of the venue in relation to the three artists' practices, "The 1980s was a dynamic period, it was the beginning of many things. German art has a long history of critical practices, and the Goethe-Institut was built to engage in that dimension where the other local galleries tended to be mainstream. Goethe-Institut supported works like ours." (Chandrasekaran 2019)

In Singapore, the appeal of multiculturalism is tangible in several registers. In state and governmental level, unity in diversity is a pertinent ideal that is part of Singapore's national narrative of a multicultural and young nation. The Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others (CMIO) multiracial model is part of Singapore's state performativity, which was initially prescribed as an essentialist classification by the British colonial administrators³⁰. However it does not represent well the complex and plural range of ethnic, language and religious identities in Singapore, which goes beyond the four specified groups along with their seemingly unambiguous religious and mother-tongue stereotyped groupings (the Chinese who speaks Mandarin, the Malay and Muslim who speaks Bahasa Melayu, the Indian who speaks Tamil and is Hindu or Buddhist). *Trimurti's* argument towards universality, as well as the artists' juxtaposition of each associated cultural-religious philosophy, adhered to some aspects of the CMIO racial model narrative.

It can be noted that the three artists allowed themselves to be seen according to their respective prescribed racial identity of "Chinese", "Malay" and "Indian", who in turn

³⁰ Geetha Reddy writes about the origins of Singapore's racial model, starting with how racial classification was used in the British' census of the Singapore population, the initial census in 1871 had 33 defined categories which began to be increasingly streamlined into the six main racial categories from 1921 onwards, namely "Europeans, Eurasians, Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others", the categories had further sub-groupings. (Reddy 2016, 55-56)

subscribed to a religious philosophy that was stereotypically associated with his own racial identity (Daoism corresponding to Chinese, Hinduism to Indian, Sufism and by proxy Islam corresponding to Malay). In his essay “ ‘Different Things’: Trimurti and Multicultural Assertions” (Mashadi 1998) Ahmad Mashadi remarks, “*Trimurti* speaks within the prescribed language and vocabulary that have pervaded national discourses on culture, and in its objective claims for ‘harmony’ and ‘equilibrium’ amongst ‘different things’. ... Each entity, managed and articulated within a delineated space is proposed, not unlike the national ‘cultural-show’ model, to be able to maintain its necessary sovereignty, while at the same time productive in its contribution to the larger collective—nation.” (40) Mashadi’s remark highlights a set of national ideologies that existed at the time of the exhibition, when multiracial state performativity was and continued to be restaged in annual events such as National Day Parade or Chingay Parade. These are events in which ethnic performances are considered important components. It is also well to note however, in 1988, what Mashadi termed as “multicultural assertions” were employed by the young newly graduated artists in an emancipatory manner, with regards to their art education experience.

NAFA’s educators in 1988 were predominantly Mandarin-speaking; in an interview with Constance Sheares, Chandrasekaran recalled that while he was enrolled in NAFA, art history classes were initially only taught in Mandarin. Afterwards, a student from the United States was engaged to conduct classes, but he found it unsatisfactory. Consequently, Chandrasekaran, Goh and Japar attended art history classes taught by T.K. Sabapathy in NUS. The artists’ engagement with the theme of multiculturalism was partly motivated by their experience studying in an institution that remained predominantly Chinese in 1988³¹.

Aside from the socio-political dynamics that foregrounded Trimurti’s mode of multicultural art-making, the artists succeeded in yielding formal and material approaches that were imaginative and compelling. The three artists explored materials rarely used for art-making yet were also available locally in nature or were culturally significant objects. The three artists went on field trips to collect local materials to be used within their object-based works as well as performance art works. Chandrasekaran remarks: “The material marked a big shift, especially the use of materials from our own cultures, like kumkum, turmeric, twine, banyan tree, circular shapes or bindus, all these make differences. I can claim I am different because I make the differentiation. I saw performance as part of our culture.” (Sheares et al. 1998, 54)

³¹ This would eventually change, NAFA currently delivers its classes in English language.

Their integration of material and performative practices as a whole is characteristic of installation works. A modernist gallery with a neutral environment and pictures arranged in a single row slightly below eye level imagines the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes, but installation art disrupts this normalised configuration, engaging the senses and heightening the viewer's awareness of how objects are arranged in space, or performed. An in-depth study of the installation works within *Trimurti* is made possible by their carefully crafted sketches and descriptions, shown in **Figures 3.10, 3.11 and 3.12**. The three sketches indicated the spatial configuration of their installation works. Despite the use of organic materials, the plan and section of the three installations are largely based on circular and geometric shapes, reflecting each of their own interpretation of cosmological orders, processes and constitution of the world. Proportion and geometry have long been used in the construct of sacred spaces in various religious traditions, in varying permutations ranging from primordial to monotheistic (such as Islam and Christian) or panentheistic (such as Hindu) religions. Geometrical shapes, especially the circle, are immaculate and clear, they are communicative and performative of perfection and transcendent beings. In the exhibition *Trimurti*, geometrical shapes are also encoded metaphors. As described by the artists, Chandrasekaran's *Destruction* was based on a section of the Trikona triangles—two connected triangles one upright and one inverted—representing Shiva and Shakti. It is configured based on a plan of a spider's web representing the energy of Shiva and secured on nine sides, representing the nine Shaktis. Japar's *Creation* was configured based on five radiating circles, each representing five levels of macrocosm (god and the world) and microcosm (the self), further imposed on a square with the same central axis as the circles, indicating the four cardinal directions. Meanwhile, Goh's *Preservation* is configured based on the eight-sided pa kua, which represents eight interrelated concepts of reality. The artists' use of geometric configurations, as well as their ritualistic performances, were intended to have symbolic and metaphysical affects.

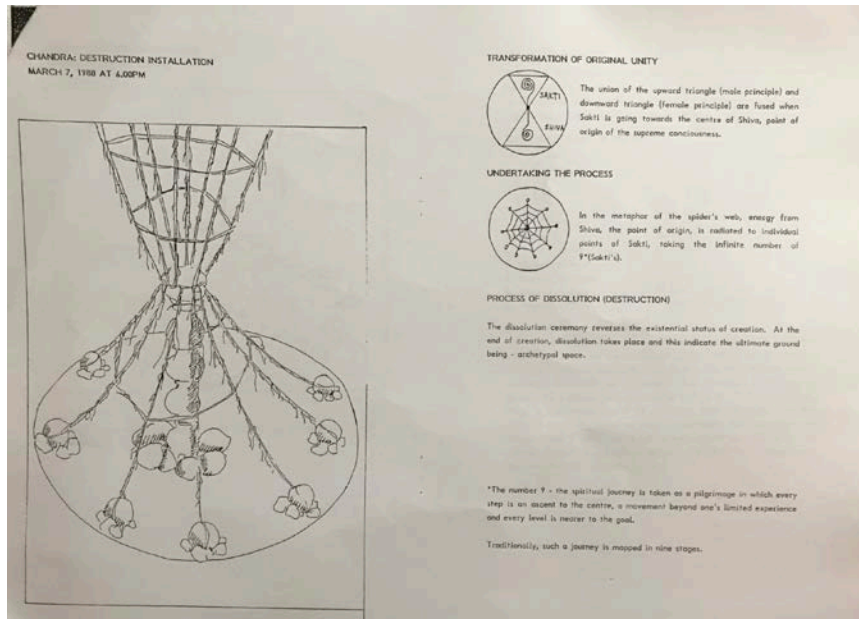


Figure 3.10: Sketch of the installation *Destruction* by S. Chandrasekaran, showing a spatial configuration embedding the icon of Shiva and Shakti Trikona on the elevation, and the spider's web metaphor for the plan.

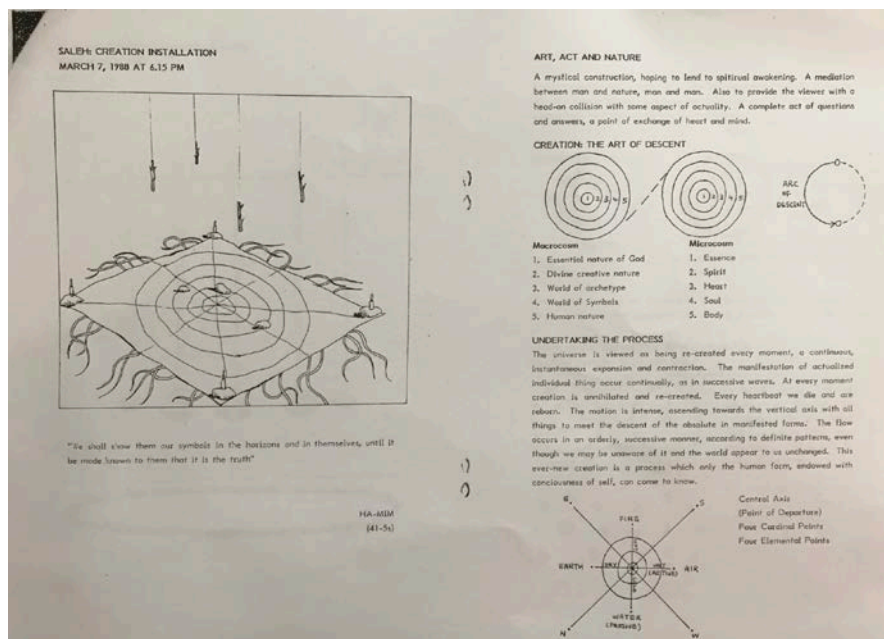


Figure 3.11: Creation by Salleh Japar, and his explanation of the plan representing different levels of microcosm and macrocosm in concentric circles, as well as the four cardinal points and four elemental points cutting across the centre.

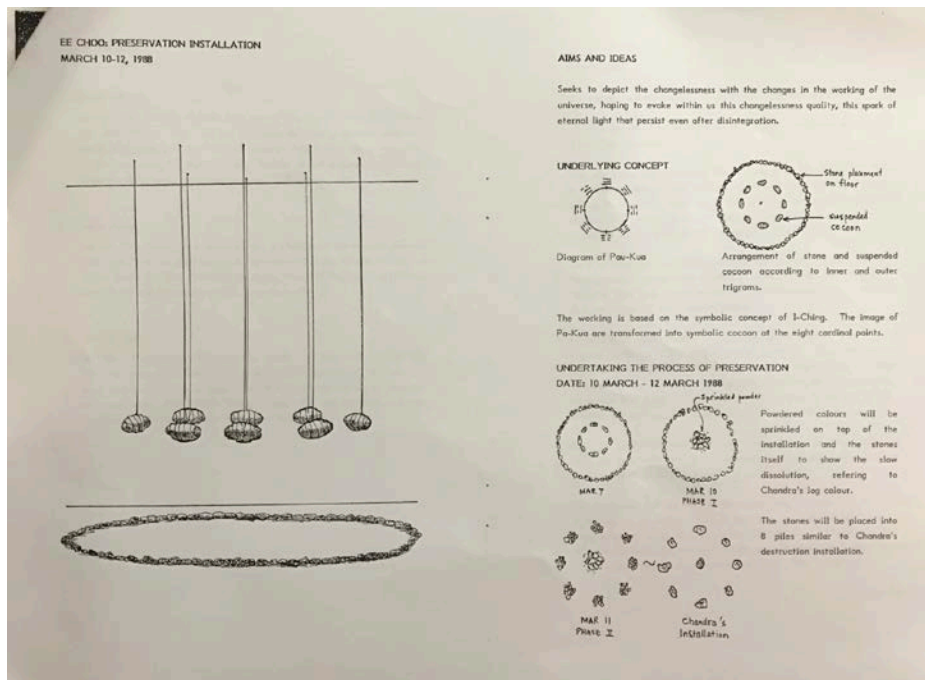


Figure 3.12: Sketch of the installation *Preservation* by Goh Ee Choo. Initially there were eight cocoons hung from the ceiling and arranged according to the eight cardinal points of the pa kua, there were also tiny pebbles on the floor arranged in a circle. The installation underwent transformation in three phases, with the final configuration referencing Chandrasekaran's installation.

On top of the sketches and writings, the artists' documentation materials³² created after the exhibition provides descriptions of their completed performance. Their explanations indicate their embrace of mysticism in the making and perceiving of their artworks. In their writing, the artists switch back and forth intuitively between discourses from their distinct religious belief, philosophy and art. For example, Chandrasekaran writes about his performance, "The performer enters into the installation area filled with reverberating sounds of a heart beating. First, he circumambulates, absorbing the energy around the space. In an increasingly charged atmosphere, suggested by flickering coloured lights and the crackling sounds in addition to the intense sound of heart beat, the performer tears down the ropes, bringing the initial phase of passive equilibrium state to the active state of dissolution." To allow ourselves to empathise with this explanation is to entertain the possibility of partaking in Chandrasekaran's subjective experience—that we may potentially acknowledge, even though we may not see, there was the presence of energy, of charged atmosphere and dissolution. These propositions were put forth by *Trimurti* within the domain of art, posing a

³² The documentation has been published in *Trimurti: ten years after* (Chandrasekaran, Goh, and Japar 1998).

challenge to its secular status in the modern-day context, at the same time questioning the primacy of the visual sense amongst all other sensory experiences.

3. *Trimurti*, across time

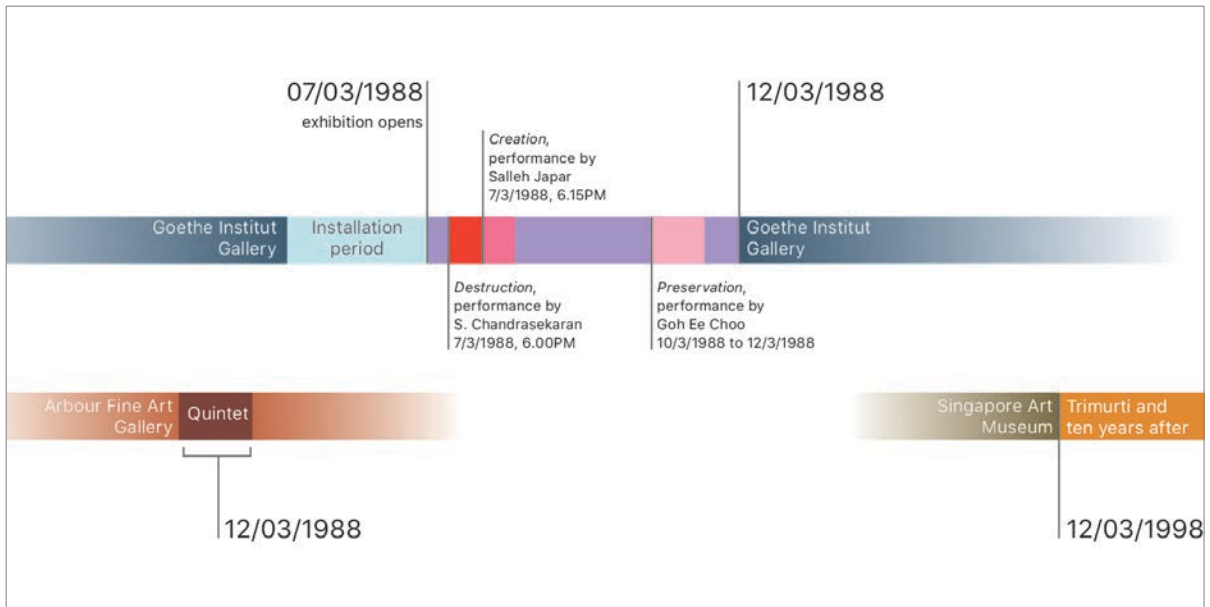


Figure 3.13: A timeline of the exhibition *Trimurti* as well as its later iteration in 1998, and a previous exhibition *Quintet* which was a precursor to *Trimurti*.

A recurring argument across the three case studies in this thesis is that the study of an exhibition space should not be isolated as its own discrete microcosm, but rather along a continuum of events. An understanding or a study of a space is open to contingency, as events preceding and proceeding the exhibition continues to colour its discourses.

In tracing the genesis and transformation of the exhibition *Trimurti*, there are two events worth noting that fall well outside the duration of the exhibition. The first is a precursor exhibition, *Quintet*, which provided a starting point for some of the conceptual explorations in *Trimurti*. The second is a re-staging of the exhibition in 1998 at the Singapore Art Museum. *Trimurti* was considered as an extension of the artists previous exhibition and experimentation *Quintet*, where participating artists attempted to utilise all planes of the venue Arbour Gallery to install artworks, including the floor and ceiling. In *Quintet*, there is

the beginning of an enquiry towards the audiences' artistic experience, beginning with a reconsideration of the pictorial viewing perspective.

Trimurti extended upon some of the preoccupations within *Quintet*, further introducing the notion of time and an insistence that the works within the exhibition correlated to another as a whole. The idioms associated with installation art also became more overt in *Trimurti*. The two exhibitions were also inter-related as some of painting works in *Trimurti* had already been shown in *Quintet*. The newly presented works that became the focal points of *Trimurti* were the three installations which were activated at different times through a series of interrelated performances. The programme of performances in *Trimurti* did not happen continuously. While Chandrasekaran's and Japar's performances happen one after another, there was a space of two days to Goh performance. Goh noted in an interview that the two days pertained to the passing of time. (Goh 2019)

Trimurti was considered a success, and as a recognition to its appeal and historical importance, *Trimurti* was restaged 10 years later in 1998 in the Singapore Art Museum. The 1998 exhibition also showed artworks made by the artists between 1988 and 1998, tracing the development of the three artists after their unique collaboration in 1988. Aside from re-affirming the importance of the 1988 exhibition, the 1998 exhibition was an occasion to consolidate *Trimurti's* relevant archives, artefacts and discourses as a publication. This had an impact on the enduring subjective historical understanding of *Trimurti* and its relevance.

Working with the trope of multiculturalism, *Trimurti* syncretically and fluidly combined different media, disciplines and cultural systems. The exhibition is a productive ground for developing new ways of interpreting meanings as well as reconsidering the notion of the exhibition space. It is also a theatre of ethnic and social performance, both as a critical position and as an assertion of identity in the midst of uncertainties from the challenges of global consumerism and a western centric international art scene in 1980s and 1990s.

4. Site of Indeterminacy: *The Space* (1992)

The Space, held from 30 May to 21 June 1992, was a fringe event for the Singapore Arts Festival 1992, organised by the National Arts Council (NAC) and The Artists Village (TAV). The exhibition takes place at the disused four-level Hong Bee Warehouse (see **Figure 4.1**), its rooftop, and the surrounding areas along the Singapore River in Robertson Quay. Prior to entering the warehouse, visitors may have noticed the installations around the river and at the external area of the building, as well as performances during certain times of the exhibition. One such performance is Sakiko Yamaoka's *Topaz* (**Figure 4.2** and **4.3**). The performance began with the artist crossing the river in front of the warehouse, while stringing innumerable paper boats across to what was previously a tiny island called Pulau Saigon. The work is particularly poignant especially when considering the previously bustling river trade and activities that disappeared in the 1980s, as well as the merging of the Pulau Saigon with the mainland in 1991 and hence the loss of its original land form.



Figure 4.1: Hong Bee Warehouse with *The Space* exhibition banner.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.2: Sakiko Yamaoka's *Topaz*, a performance resulting in an installation of interconnected paper boats floating across the river.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.3: Sakiko Yamaoka performing *Topaz*, stringing paper boats across the river with the aid of a float.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

The Space showcased works from 40 local artists and 20 international artists. Many of whom, like Yamaoka, chose to create site-specific works. Curator-cum-art historian Miwon Kwon asserts that “site-specific art, whether interruptive or assimilative, gave itself up to its environmental context, being formally determined or directed by it.” (Kwon 2004, 11) In this quote she refers to two models of site-specificity defined by Rosalyn Deutsche: firstly assimilative, where the art work aims towards an integration with the environment, and secondly interruptive, where the artwork acts as an intervention into the existing order of a site. In both cases, the site within which the work is situated is integral to the conception and the outcome of the work. Amongst the artworks showcased in *The Space*, we see instances of both the assimilative and the interruptive model of site-specific works. Amongst the site-specific works, some were resolutely bound to the site, being ephemeral or consciously left to eventual demolition along with the warehouse building. Some works were able to be exhibited in reference to their original site context after their removal, and others were created by the artists to be independent from the site of the exhibition. Nevertheless, within *The Space* the character of the Hong Bee Warehouse and its surroundings lent these works an exhibitionary quality that is quite distinct from gallery settings.

By 1992, Singapore was already an air-conditioned nation³³, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) boasted a fully air-conditioned and state of the arts facilities. In the

³³ Referring to Cherian George's comment “...think of Singapore instead as the Air-conditioned Nation—a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control, where people have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability.” (George 2000, 15)

previous chapter, *Trimurti* also took place in a gallery located within a shopping centre³⁴, a large enclosed space for leisurely commerce that was only possible through the introduction of air-conditioning as indoor climate control. However, *The Space* at Hong Bee Warehouse was not insulated from the climate. A newspaper article (Ong 1992) notes the poor ventilation, heat and lack of toilet facilities. The article describes how visitors entered a large warehouse that was dimly lit. Large paintings hung on the wall, while objects were suspended from the ceiling or were informally placed on the floor where visitors might accidentally step on them. Hong Bee Warehouse as an art exhibition venue led the artists and organisers to forsake aspects of comfort; in return what became available to them were the warehouse' immense scale and spectacle, its unique materiality and the freedom to engage expressively with the rugged building.



Figure 4.4: Ground level of Hong Bee Warehouse during the exhibition *The Space*.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

1. Situating *The Space*: socioeconomic and cultural landscape

The urban fabric of the site surrounding Hong Bee Warehouse has changed much in the last few decades through the Singapore River clean-up programme, which started in 1977. Many structures in the area were demolished and new ones rebuilt. Between the decades of 1960 and 1990, Singapore's economy underwent rapid and sustained growth. In 1962, the then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew mentioned that the idea of an independent Singapore was

³⁴ Specifically, the venue was Goethe Institut gallery, located within the Singapore Shopping Centre.

a “political, economic, and geographical absurdity” (Ministry of Culture 1962). However, by the early 1990s Singapore was known as one of the “four Asian tigers” (World 1993). Singapore’s economic success was attributed to a number of government intervention and policies such as export-led industrialisation, attracting multinational corporations and investing in universal education to develop its workforce and human capital. Aside from economic modernisation, urban development was also pursued aggressively. A series of laws³⁵ were created to give the Singapore government legal rights to expropriate land, albeit with compensations. These laws were put into practice most significantly in the relocation of the residents of rural or informal settlements (kampong).

The area surrounding Singapore River had been associated with trading and business activities for more than a hundred years. It was teeming with activities such as river trade, hawkers, markets and urban kampongs which contributed to much of the river pollution. The 1977 clean-up plan was a turning point—it identified sources of pollution such as pig farms, unsewered premises from urban kampongs, street hawkers, duck farms, vegetable wholesalers, as well as riverine activities which included transport, boat building and repairing in workshops or warehouses along the river banks (Ministry of Environment 1986). The finding was acted upon with pragmatic efficiency in a nationwide effort involving several government bodies. Within ten years, pig and duck farms were phased out by the Primary Production Department (PPD), squatters were resettled by the Housing Development Board (HDB) and Jurong Town Corporation (JTC), sewage facilities were provided by the Sewerage Department, street hawkers were resited by the Hawkers Department, riverine activities including cargo warehouses such as Hong Bee Warehouse were also resited to Pasir Panjang or Jurong by Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) and JTC.

The Singapore River clean-up was a gentrification process that caused a significant level of displacement and erasure of urban and collective memory. The Singapore River is a particularly symbolic site that is historically considered as a lifeline to the city and to many Singaporeans. Moreover, many other areas in Singapore at the time were also undergoing similar gentrification process, this prompted much public criticisms. Some of the most productive reactions include William Lim and Goh Poh Seng’s theoretical conservation project called *Bu Ye Tian* in 1982 (Lim 2004, 32-33), and the formation of the NGO

³⁵ They are the Land Acquisition Ordinance (1955), Land Acquisition Act (1966), Property Tax Order (1967) and Control Premises Bill (1968).

Singapore Heritage Society in 1986. Critical civic initiatives were crucial to the subsequent implementation of legislations and regulations such as the Conservation Plan in 1989.

By the time of the exhibition in 1992, Hong Bee Warehouse was no longer functioning. In a plan by URA published in 1986, it was specified that Robertson Quay, where the warehouse was located, would be designated as an area for hotels, shopping and residential development, with a landscaped/ open-spaced pedestrian mall. Buildings such as Hong Bee Warehouse were physical vestiges linking to histories of river commerce, as such provisions were made for some warehouses with “distinct architectural value” to be retained for adaptive reuse. However, Hong Bee Warehouse was not selected.

Much of the locus of the artworks in *The Space* can be seen against the backdrop of a constantly overhauled environment, in which the modernising aim of the nation as an imagined community is prioritised over the sense of place that an individual develops for the inhabited surroundings. At the same time *The Space* can also be considered alongside other initiatives in the 1980s where architects, intellectuals and artists attempted to stake a claim over the space they live in.

The Artists Village (TAV), an artists group co-organising *The Space*, had previously produced events and exhibitions that responded to notions of modernisation, nature and alternative artistic practices. Their initial headquarter in Ulu Sembawang had been a rural farm complex which was reacquired by the government and was left vacant for a period time. In their brief two years of residency in Ulu Sembawang, the artists created a haven where young artists could experiment with ideas, material and genres, especially performance and installation works, which were still considered alternative practices in the 1980s. Located within a progressive city-state, spaces like The Artists Village at Ulu Sembawang and Hong Bee Warehouse seemed like ruins arrested in time. They may appear economically unproductive and slum-like, but they were also generously tolerant of differences and complexities. They are postmodern “spaces of indeterminacy”, which architect and urbanist William Lim³⁶ describes as “rugged in nature and are able to withstand abrupt usage changes, fragmented design expressions and uncompromisingly irrational spatial arrangements. ... They

³⁶ Lim was also actively involved in the debate on the conservation of structures along the Singapore River, including the “river warehouses” in Robertson Quay. His theoretical conservation project “Bu Ye Tian” which was initiated together with poet and entrepreneur Goh Poh Seng on the south bank of the river Boat Quay was adopted with modification, resulting in the adaptive reuse of some shophouses and structures, while significantly avoiding high-rise developments.

provide alternative lifestyles and natural resistance against global forces of rational conformity.” (Lim 2005, 24)

Hong Bee Warehouse in 1992 provided the artists with a certain freedom to experiment aesthetically and ideologically in a way that could not be achieved in more permanent and well-furnished setups. The artists created large-scale interventions and experimented with various treatments to the floors and walls. Noboru Yoshida (**Figure 4.5**) created a massive sculpture which was in-progress throughout the exhibition. Dominique Hui’s drawing and installation (**Figure 4.6**) was also worked directly on the floor and walls. In land-scarce Singapore, these activities were made possible within the warehouse’s window of indeterminacy.



Figure 4.5: Noboru Yoshida chiselling at *Studio—Work in Progress* at an unused entrance to the Warehouse during the period of the exhibition.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.6: Dominique Hui’s installation, including the works *Stripes* and *Ban Censorship*.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

2. Analysing the configuration of artworks in *The Space*

In this research, spatial drawings are made to analyse locations of artworks and the general spatial organisation in *The Space* at Hong Bee Warehouse. The following shows five drawings of the different floors and spatial analyses for each level. The numbers on the drawings represent the location of artworks. A larger version of the drawing can be found at **appendix 4A** and the accompanying list of artworks with corresponding numbers can be found at **appendix 4B**.

First floor and the surroundings

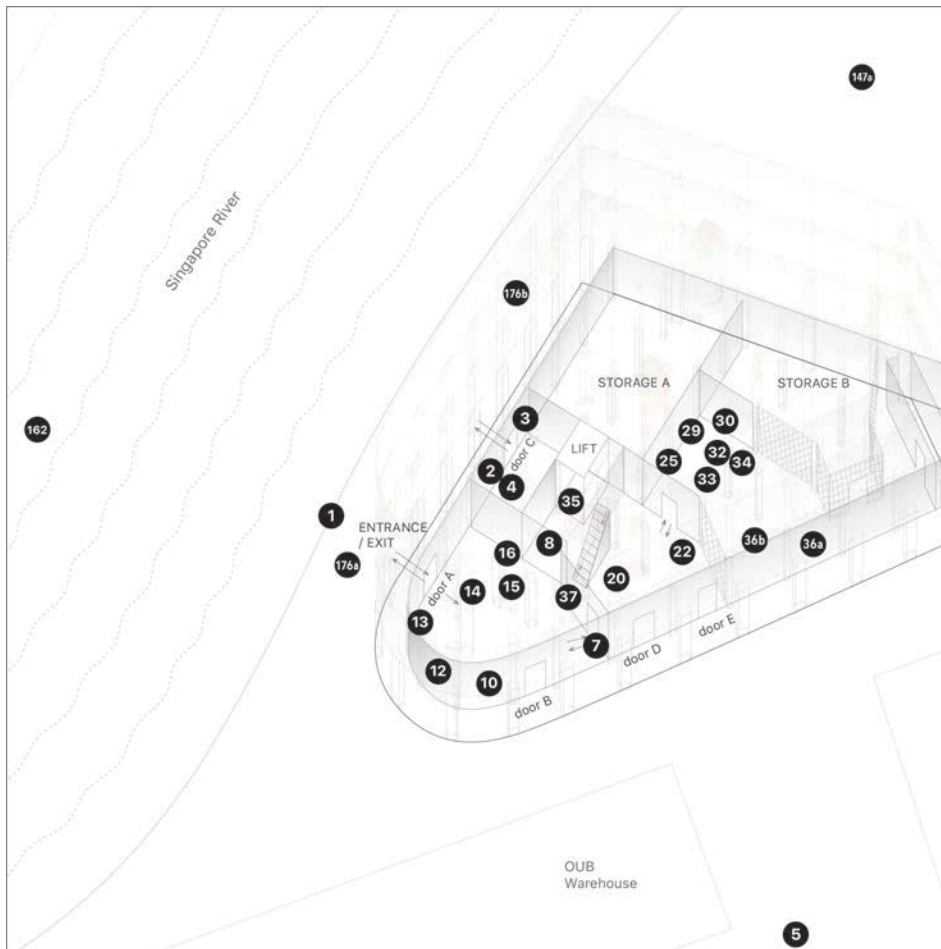


Figure 4.7: Spatial drawing of Hong Bee Warehouse first floor and its surroundings.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to floorplan drawing by Tang Da Wu and the photographic archive of Koh Nguang How.

The first floor of Hong Bee Warehouse was used as a reception area, with existing walls used to demarcate areas for installations. There were also two large areas designated for storage (Storage A&B), which contained amongst other things, rubbish and debris from cleaning the ruinous warehouse. Interestingly many of the artworks throughout the exhibition utilised these rubbish and debris as materials. Outside the warehouse, visitors would have seen along the river bank an assemblage of nets, drawings and writing excerpts by Surapol Panyawatchira (see **Figure 4.8** or location number 1 in **Figure 4.7**). Like Yamaoka's paper boats, Panyawatchira's assemblage was left to disintegrate in the elements.

Upon entering the warehouse, one of the first works that greeted the visitors was Sharon Lee's *Bottle* (seen in the foreground of **Figure 4.4**), a soft sculpture made of fabric with a grid motif of photographs printed by silk screen. The sculpture was not elevated on a pedestal but placed upon plywood boards. This decision had several implications on the display of the artwork. The plywood boards here have some similarity of functions compared to a plinth. For instance, to protect the sculpture from dust and also to demarcate the area around the sculpture, thus indicating the realm

of the artwork from what lay outside of it. However, there were some differences. By opting for boards instead of plinths, the elevation of the sculpture was reduced, placing it at a closer level with the viewer. It is not unthinkable that visitors may step upon the board to approach and engage with the sculpture more closely. Plywood as a material is aligned to the notions of “in-process” and “making”. It is generally “finished” with a different material or covered with paint when used for interior fittings; it is only seen in its raw form in temporary uses such as construction hoardings. The Space was organised on a modest budget; the venue did not have the same facilities as an art museum and there was a lack of display walls and plinths. Throughout the exhibition space, many artists adapted found materials for their display, such as using crates and boards as plinths or working directly on the walls and floors. The use of materials found around the warehouse emphasised the sense of site, working on site and using what constituted the site as material. Their experimentation was driven both by austerity as well as by their reconsideration of the spatial idioms of display and thus the projected status of the art object. A common attitude throughout the exhibition is the acceptance of the “unfinished” state of artworks and exhibition supports, which in turn brings attention to the materials’ life cycle, re-using, recycling or even anticipating up-cycling.



Figure 4.8: Surapol Panyawatchira’s installation of fishing nets, drawing and writing on paper, titled *All that is natural in my country is already destroyed; but there is something left—that is the people. Directly or indirectly the people are destroying directly or indirectly each other; continuation of destruction seems definite; What can we do?*

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

Second floor

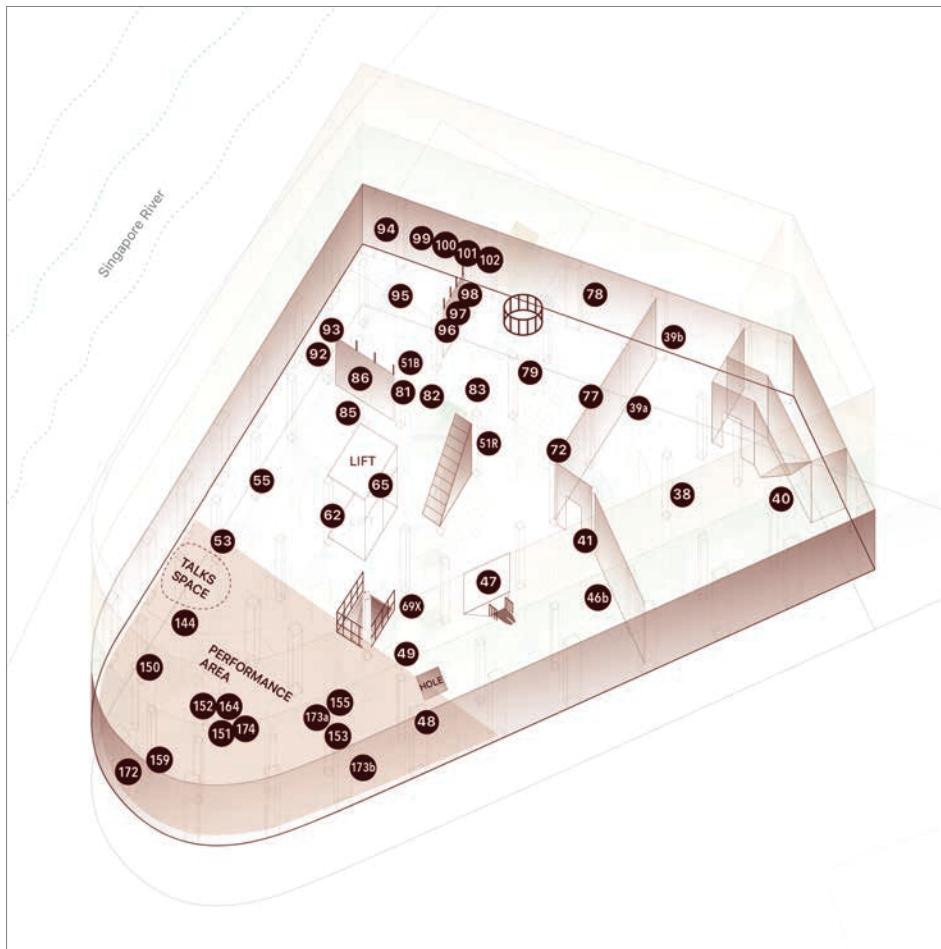


Figure 4.9: Drawing of Hong Bee Warehouse second floor, indicating performance area highlighted in maroon and talks space demarcated in dotted lines.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to floorplan drawing by Tang Da Wu and the photographic archive of Koh Nguang How.

The second level had an area used to conduct talks and performance artworks. Among the performance artworks, the artists tended to move around different levels of the warehouse, but many of their paths were concentrated in the second-floor performance area. The performance works were mostly scheduled on the Sundays of 7th June 1992, as well as 14th June 1992. Some of the performances carried out in this space include Vincent Leow's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (see Figure 4.10 and location at number 152 in Figure 4.9), which utilised props from his installation on the third level, titled *Yellow*³⁷. Amanda Heng's *Memory of June 4' 89* (see Figure 4.11 and Figure 4.12 and location at number 153) was also performed in front of Chumpol Apisuk's *Like Every Candles* (see Figure 4.9 and location at number 49). Similar to the previous case study *Trimurti*, as well as many other exhibitions involving installations and performances, installations may act as stage and props for the performances, or as an artefact resultant from the performances. Performance artists

³⁷ See Fig 4.11, artwork number 114.

also made use of the installations created by other artists, thus creating relationships and blurring discrete separations between single artworks.



Figure 4.10: Vincent Leow performing *Lifestyle of the rich and famous* wearing the money suit.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.11: Amanda Heng performing *In Memory of June 4 '89*.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.12: Amanda Heng's performance *In Memory of June 4 '89* extending towards Chumpol Apisuk's *Like Every Candles*.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

Third floor

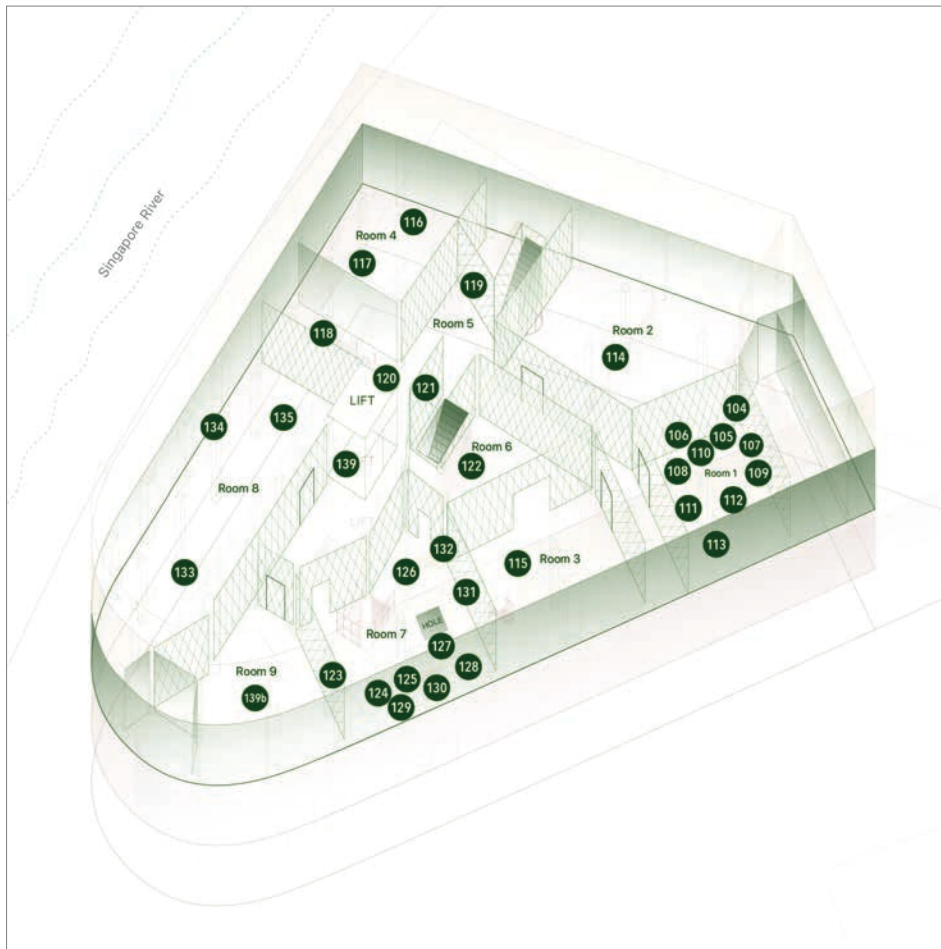


Figure 4.13: Drawing of Hong Bee Warehouse third floor, where different rooms were formed by cage-like partitions.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to floorplan drawing by Tang Da Wu and the photographic archive of Koh Nguang How.

The third floor housed distinctive cage-like partition walls, originally used to demarcate storage areas in the warehouse. In this exhibition, they were used to demarcate rooms or zones of installations, with each room either containing different artworks or one single installation work. Amongst all five floors, the layout of the third floor created a sense of enclosure and boundary. Some rooms began to develop a distinct visual style and thematic coherence. For instance, room 2 (see **figure 4.14**) which contained Vincent Leow's installation *Yellow* (114) playfully juxtaposed found materials which were highlighted in yellow with several dollheads and a doll figure dipped in red. Room 8 (see **figure 4.15**), which housed the works of Chen Kun Yi, Juliana Yasin and Amanda Heng collectively explored the themes of womanhood and domesticity.



Figure 4.14: *Yellow* a mixed media installation by Vincent Leow in Room 2, which included the money suit used for Leow's performance *Lifestyle of the rich and famous*.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.15: *Clouds and Objects* by Amanda Heng in Room 8. The works of Chen Kun Yi and Juliana Yasin are in the background.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

Fourth floor



Figure 4.16: Drawing of Hong Bee Warehouse fourth floor with larger experiential installations.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to floorplan drawing by Tang Da Wu and the photographic archive of Koh Nguang How.

The fourth floor is a more open planned area used for large installations. There are mainly five artists who worked on installations and assemblages in this level, namely Kiyonori Bori, Ryuichi Sakazaki, Ahmad Abu Bakar, Faizal Fadil and Samsuri Ibrahim. There are two large-scale installations: Kiyonori Bori took the top left section, painting the walls and the floor white and torching circular mandalas upon the wall (See **Figure 4.17** and **140**). This had a theatrical effect, which made his artwork a popular spot for performances. There were three performances that took place within Bori's installation; one by Sakiko Yamaoka (See **Figure 4.18** and **164**) and two by Hitoshi Ushijima (See **Figure 4.19** and **168, 169**). Meanwhile, Ryuichi Sakazaki created a large-scale installation of found wood that also extended into the stairways, going up from the third floor to the fourth floor (**141**). Ahmad Abu Bakar created sculptural works, also made of found wood, which visually resonated with Sakazaki's installation (**143e**). The bottom area was occupied by a series of sculptural assemblages by Samsuri Ibrahim (**146a-f**) and Faizal Fadil (**143, 145**).



Figure 4.17: *Mandara* by Kiyonori Bori which occupied a corner of the fourth floor. Bori made use of a partition to indicate the boundaries of his area and painted the walls and floor white.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.18: *Plates*, performance by Sakiko Yamaoka, on the location of *Mandara*. Details of Bori's drawing scorched upon the walls can be seen here. The performance continued later at the second-floor performance area.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.19: *Orchids 2*, one of the two performances by Hitoshi Ushijima within the location of *Mandara* by Kiyonori Bori
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

Rooftop and the surroundings



Figure 4.20: A spatial drawing of Hong Bee Warehouse rooftop and its surroundings.

Image © Hera 2019. Drawn in reference to floorplan drawing by Tang Da Wu and the photographic archive of Koh Nguang How.

The roof housed works that interacted with, or responded to the surrounding areas, including the sky and landscape around the warehouse. For instance, Hitoshi Ushijima's work *View from the edge of rooftop* (Figure 4.21, 4.22 and no. 147a-b) was part performance. Ushijima scattered turmeric powder on the field beside the warehouse, while audiences watched from the warehouse rooftop. In her work *Work in progress: Drawing on the rooftop—HOLE things that extend to the atmosphere* (Figure 4.23, 4.24 and no. 148a-c), Kanae Ohgi responded to the surrounding views and sightline, creating paintings on the roof ledges that corresponded with the colours of the sky. Amanda Heng, Ho Soon Yeen and Chen Kunyi collaborated on a performance piece, *Women, Space & Objects* (Figure 4.25 and no. 171a-d).



Figure 4.21: Hitoshi Ushijima scattering turmeric for *View from the edge of rooftop* at the field beside the Hong Bee warehouse.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.22: Audience viewing Hitoshi Ushijima's performance from the Hong Bee Warehouse rooftop.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.23: Photograph showing Kanae Ohgi's *Work in progress: Drawing on the rooftop—HOLE things that extend to the atmosphere*, latex paint on warehouse roof surfaces. The white silhouettes on the right is a remnant from the performance *Women, Space & Objects* by Amanda Heng, Ho Soon Yeen and Chen Kunyi.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.24: Kanae Ohgi painting on the warehouse rooftop.

Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.25: *Women, Space & Objects* performed by Amanda Heng, Chen Kunyi & Ho Soon Yeen.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

3. The Avant Garde & the Art Institution: Organising and inhabiting *The Space*

David Teh notes that in Southeast Asia, artists have led the way in creating significant and influential exhibitions through artist-run platforms and collectives. These artist-run platforms such as TAV are less encumbered by bureaucracy or institutional tastes and was able to provide thought leadership. In Teh's words, they are "*de facto* institutions", creating shows where "one finds the stuff of exhibition histories and the key pivots toward the contemporary" (Teh 2016, 32). Though lacking in economic resources compared to state-run organisations such as the NMAG, TAV was able to organise several larger-scaled exhibitions and events within their initial premise at Ulu Sembawang as well as pop-up shows in venues such as Orchard Road or a roving art bus. Many of these exhibitions were staged in non-gallery spaces, similar to *The Space*. They often involved many artists and succeeded in attracting local residents, commuters, as well as the art community to visit and engage with various artistic activities.

TAV's foray into collaborations with state-run institutions and organising large-scale events further strengthened and complicated their role as a *de facto* institution. Some examples of these events organised in the early 1990s are: *A Sculpture Seminar* in 1991, presented at the NMAG, and co-organised by TAV, *The Space* in 1992 co-organised with NAC, as well as the

2nd Sculpture Seminar in 1993, presented by the National Museum of Singapore and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). As an independent and alternative art group, the TAV did not reject collaborations with institutions of art. In fact, the TAV were extremely prolific in these institutional collaborations more than any other art groups.

The NAC, who co-organised *The Space* with TAV, is a statutory board formed in 1991³⁸, reporting to the then newly set up Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA)³⁹. NAC's role was, and still is, to assist the ministry in formulating policies pertaining to the arts, to assist its implementation, as well as to encourage community participation. The NAC also dispenses funding and is seen as an enabler of the arts. At the point of its formation, Minister George Yeo had promised maximum autonomy to the NAC despite its direct affiliation with the state. The NAC's collaboration with the TAV for the 1992 Fringe Festival was regarded with equal optimism and scepticism. T.K. Sabapathy writes, in the exhibition catalogue of *The Space* that “[c]ollaboration between a national body and an art group need not be viewed negatively and construed as signalling unbridled prejudice or preference.” He mentions that a particular advantage from the collaboration was “the prospect of stamping the festival in any one year with a distinct character or mark”. TAV was the single group in 1992 given charge to carry out the Fringe Festival, a testament to its status as a foremost artist group in Singapore at the time. Compared to the TAV's more autonomous organisation structure in rural Ulu Sembawang in 1988, the collaboration for *The Space* in 1992 meant that NAC as a government statutory board needed to be considered as a key stakeholder.

Nevertheless, as a visual art fringe, the exhibition was able to, and was indeed expected to adopt an experimental tone. The visual art fringe was distinct from the Singapore Arts Festival itself, which in 1992 was named the *Homecoming* series and featured Singaporean artists based overseas who were already deemed successful. The aims of the visual art fringe resonated TAV, who was dedicated to the promotion and encouragement of experimental and alternative arts in Singapore, as well as establishing an open space for artists to grow and exchange ideas. As a group often associated with practices that were ground breaking and critical, TAV championed an issue that became the motif of the exhibition as well as a cause for rally— space for the arts and artists.

³⁸ Organisations that have been given autonomy to perform an operational function by legal statutes passed as Acts in parliament. The statutes define the purpose, rights and powers of the authority. They usually report to one specific ministry.

³⁹ The MITA was set up in 1991. It has since been replaced by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) in 2012.

Prior to the opening of the exhibition, there were already discussions to convert Hong Bee Warehouse into a permanent art venue. In an introduction text to the exhibition brochure, T.K. Sabapathy notes that artists in Singapore had a lack of available working space, which was debilitating. Sabapathy also mentioned the importance of cultivating artistic activities in Singapore, expressing the hope that Hong Bee Warehouse would become a workplace for artists beyond the 1992 Singapore Arts Festival (Sabapathy 1992). Considered along the agenda of advocating working space for artists, the multifarious artistic practices in *The Space* gained a coherence in emphasising not the art object, but the place of art itself.

Within TAV itself, the role of the group president was rotated constantly. Zai Kuning was acting president at the time, while Amanda Heng and Koh Nguang How took on the role of planning and organising, a responsibility usually associated with an exhibition's curator. The participating artists in the exhibition were enlisted through the substantial network of TAV members. A regional event *Artist Regional Exchange 3 (ARX 3)* in Australia, happened in the midst of organising the show, which Heng and Koh also participated in. Several artists they encountered in the programme were subsequently invited to participate in *The Space*. Koh Nguang How also created a collaborative work with Tim Maslen, which was presented in both *The Space* and *ARX 3*. As an artist-led platform, the collaboration within TAV and the participating artists in *The Space* was not entirely without tension. Organising and setting up the exhibition required much work, but not all were willing to voluntarily invest their time. This had some implications towards the confidence in turning the Hong Bee Warehouse into a permanent independent space for the arts. A newspaper article by Ong Soh Chin covering the plans for the warehouse hinted towards the possible lack of manpower should Hong Bee Warehouse become an artist-run space. It included statements from Kuo Pao Kun who had in 1990 successfully mooted for The Substation: "... at the height of excitement about having found the place, only about 10 people volunteered to clean up the place. What happens when you go all the way into long term? Unless there is a dedicated core of people willing to work full-time for the warehouse, it will be difficult to see the project through." (Ong 1992, 3) TAV eventually managed to extend their tenancy in the warehouse, but their larger aim of a permanent arts space did not come through.

4. *The Space* as process: intersecting stories

To see the spaces of an exhibition as a process is to recognise that all exhibitions are a form of intervention into an environment that has a much longer lineage and wider geographical relationships.

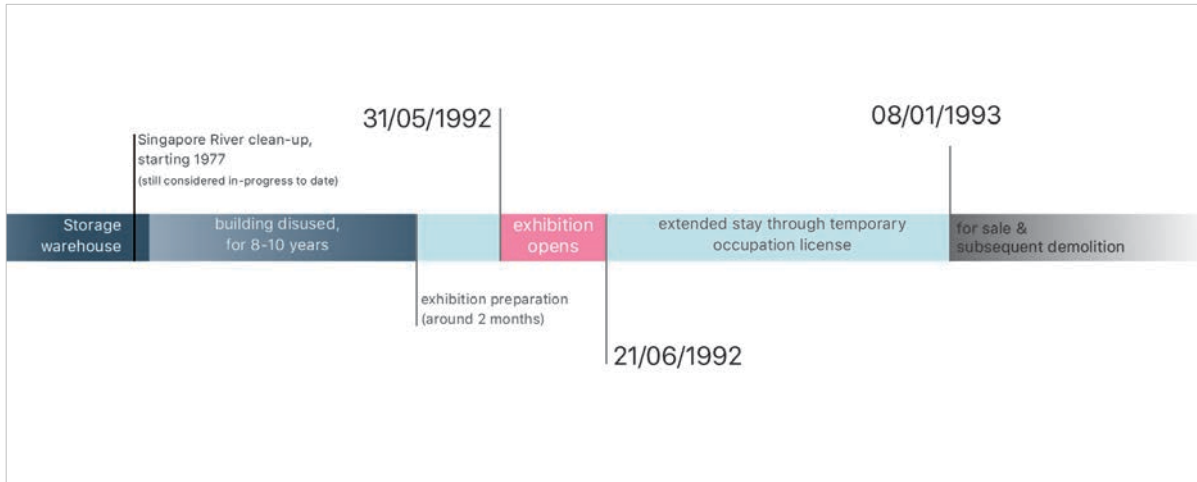


Figure 4.26: A timeline diagram of processes in Hong Bee Warehouse leading up to *The Space* and afterwards. Image © Hera 2019

The Hong Bee Warehouse was a functioning river trade storage warehouse since the 1950s before it was abandoned in the early 1980s. By 1992, there were structural issues and also an accumulation of dust and trash had to be managed before the venue was fit to receive visitors of the exhibition.

Great effort was spent cleaning the warehouse which was disused for almost ten years. Before water and electricity came, the artists collected rain water to clean the thick layer of dust. Traces of the cleaning activities was visible throughout the exhibition. At the back of the ground floor, lay a huge storage of trash material (see **figure 4.27**), resultant from the cleaning. Trash and dust also became inspiring materials for the artists, with 18 different artworks utilising trash material and dust from Hong Bee Warehouse. Amongst these, Ryuichi Sakazaki created an installation made with found wood that covered a large area of the fourth floor and blocked sections of the stairway (see **figure 4.28**). Visitors were encouraged to walk on them, making creaking sounds in every step.



Figure 4.27: Trash and storage area.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How



Figure 4.28: Ryuichi Sakazaki's installation *Untitled* made with found wood.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

There were other interventions to increase display wall surfaces for paintings and works that were hung on the wall. Windows were blocked by panels on which artworks could be hung. The organisers brought in exhibition stands that were previously used in the National Museum and also made use of affordable chipboards to construct partitions.

The exhibition opened on the 31 May 1992. Artists conducted performances, talks and live art demonstration intermittently. Many of the artworks presented continued to be transformed throughout the exhibition and were aptly named and described as “Work in Progress”.

After the end of the exhibition, talks about converting the warehouse into a permanent art space did not come into fruition. The Artists Village obtained permission and

paid to extend the use of Hong Bee Warehouse. A few artists, such as Zai Kuning and Dominique Hui, created new works during this interim period. The Temporary Occupation License issued by the Urban Redevelopment Authority ended on Friday, 8 January 1993, after which the building was soon slated for demolition. The demolition of the Hong Bee Warehouse was captured in photographs by Koh Nguang How (see **figure 4.29**). Several artworks still remained in the space when demolishing works took place, such as Kanae Ohgi's *HOLE* and Noboru Yoshida's *Studio—Work in progress*.



Figure 4.29: The demolition of Hong Bee Warehouse.
Kanae Ohgi's *HOLE*, a mural of blue rectangles in varying tones painted on the rooftop is still visible.
Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How

Currently, on the site of Hong Bee Warehouse stands The Quayside, a complex of riverfront restaurants and bars. The failure to secure the warehouse made the *The Space* even more of a pivotal event situated between the old and new Singapore River, where for a brief period of time a myriad of artistic experimentations by energetic young artists took place.

Conclusion

This thesis begins by considering how the period of 1970s-1990s in Singapore had seen some of the most interesting shifts in exhibition models that is rooted in their spatialisation. Having observed how the study of spaces and display design has been neglected in previous art historical studies, this thesis considers some of the definitions and assumptions that can be pertinent in historical studies of art exhibition spaces, asking seemingly basic questions which has implications on the historical study of art exhibitions: What is an art exhibition? What is space? How do we conceptualise space in historical studies? Following Doreen Massey's seminal work *For Space*, I argue that that space is inherently temporal and should not be conceptualised as devoid of time. This conceptualisation not only engenders the historical study of space, but also revitalises the notion of space from its association with measurements thus lacking meaning. In terms of methodology, this thesis proposes the study of spaces as a simultaneity of stories-so-far, considering photographic and pictorial representations as important artefacts capturing certain characteristics of the space that can be analysed and studied. With this epistemological direction, I further define a framework of detailed case studies of art exhibition spaces, namely:

- 1. Art exhibition and its space in relation to its context of production**
- 2. Art exhibition and its space as shaped by varying and often conflicting agendas and motivations of individuals and groups involved in the exhibition-making**
- 3. Considering the art exhibition space as situated in its temporal context and as continuously being remade**

Following this methodological framework, I demonstrated the productive analysis of three art exhibition case studies: 1.) *Art '76* in the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), 1976, 2.) *Trimurti*, in the Goethe-Institut Gallery, 1988, and 3.) *The Space* in the defunct Hong Bee Warehouse, 1992. The three case studies illustrate exhibitions with distinct spatial typologies: a newly refurbished colonial museum, a gallery belonging to an international institution housed in a shopping centre, as well as an abandoned building appropriated for the occasion of a fringe exhibition. The case studies show some of the first instances in Singapore that exhibitions were hosted in these spatial types, but since then these models have recurred. For instance, both Singapore Art Museum and the National Gallery of Singapore

are art institutions housed in a renovated former colonial building. Many important avant-garde exhibitions have been hosted in shopping centres and commercial spaces, such as the *Artists General Assembly* organised by the collective The Fifth Passage in Parkway Parade in the year 1994. Finally, numerous spaces of indeterminacy have arisen out of Singapore's aggressive demolish-and-build strategy, and they have become important alternative venues for young artists as well as sites for large-scale pop-up events such as the *Singapore Biennale 2006: Belief* held at various locations including the Former City Hall and Tanglin Camp as well as *Singapore Biennale 2011: Open House* at the old Kallang Airport.

The spatial articulation of art exhibitions in the case studies also allude towards distinct ideologies on art, on organisation or negotiations in exhibition-making as well as on the historical zeitgeist within which the three case studies are situated in.

The case study of *Art '76* staged in the NMAG in 1976 are foregrounded by Singapore's post-independence period, and is an example of how exhibitions are mounted in tandem with the national agenda of modernisation as well as a search for national identity in Art.

The case of *Trimurti* in 1988, shown in the Goethe-Institut Gallery continues along the trajectory of the search for identity, but this narrative is complicated through the incorporation of performances with parochial and shamanistic elements against the backdrop of the shopping centre as a symptom of the then physical expansion of global consumerism. The increasing prevalence of installation art and performance in exhibitions questions the subject-object hierarchical relationship between a viewer and a work of art. Furthermore, the overtly ritualistic performances cocooned within the white cube like Goethe-Institut Gallery was an antithesis to its immediate setting of a shopping centre—a building type so iconic of consumerism and pervasive amongst Singapore's new urban reality at the time. In *Trimurti*, the immediate surroundings existed uneasily alongside the exhibition gallery, its own cultural microcosm.

On the other hand, *The Space*, shown in 1992, embraced its site, history and detritus from the building's ruination; it exemplified the contextualisation of art in its surroundings. This was an exhibition mounted in a non-gallery space and where many artworks do not rely on supports or hanging method commonly found within galleries such as plinths or display walls. In fact, many artworks were simply placed on the floor or are presented as installations that engulfed sections of the warehouse, creating an experiential space. Many artworks by

both local and international artists were site-specific and explored themes pertaining to the warehouse and the river as a place.

These three case studies are not intended to illustrate a sequence of evolutionary narrative. The newer modes of exhibiting art do not replace the previous ones successively; rather what we see today is a gamut of exhibitionary idioms based on different ideologies on art and its display. The 1990s concludes the period of study in this thesis as this was a period where institutional critique expressed as spatial strategy became most distinct, and the study of art exhibition spaces beyond the 1990s will require a different set of frameworks to study, thus escaping the remit of this thesis.

Exhibitions have become the most eminent form of interface between art and its audience, cherished for promising direct artistic encounters. Yet as a medium of communication, exhibitions possess an inherent fatality. Exhibitions are ephemeral, they can be recalled but not recovered; they are also continuously superseded by newer, even more contemporary exhibitions in a rhythm that is increasingly fast paced. A historical study of exhibition space is a recalling into the encounter with art, but also probes at the exhibition as a model of interfacing and discoursing art. To reiterate the pertinence of the historical awareness of exhibition space, I would like to quote T. K. Sabapathy's introduction in The Substation's 1996 conference *Space, spaces and spacing*, "... it is not just that 'art' has a 'history' for which other histories form an explanatory context or background. The very conditions that allow art to come into being—the sites of its display, circulation and social functioning, its positions in systems of exchange and power—are themselves subject to profound historical forces and shifts. And we are engendering these shifts even as we are subjected to the outcome of them."(Sabapathy 1996, 17)

A study of the spaces of art exhibition allows us to extend our enquiry beyond the authorial intention of the artist or the curator. It gives us a fuller picture of the processes and relationships that is a part of exhibition making. This research is written in a period of time in Singapore where art exhibitions are at their most fast-paced, energetic and vibrant, but it is also a time when exhibition fatigue is beginning to be perceptible. Amidst this relentless output, it is important to reflect critically upon our preconceptions and reliance on exhibitions as a mode of cultural distribution, perhaps also to consider alternative modes of art circulation and discoursing.

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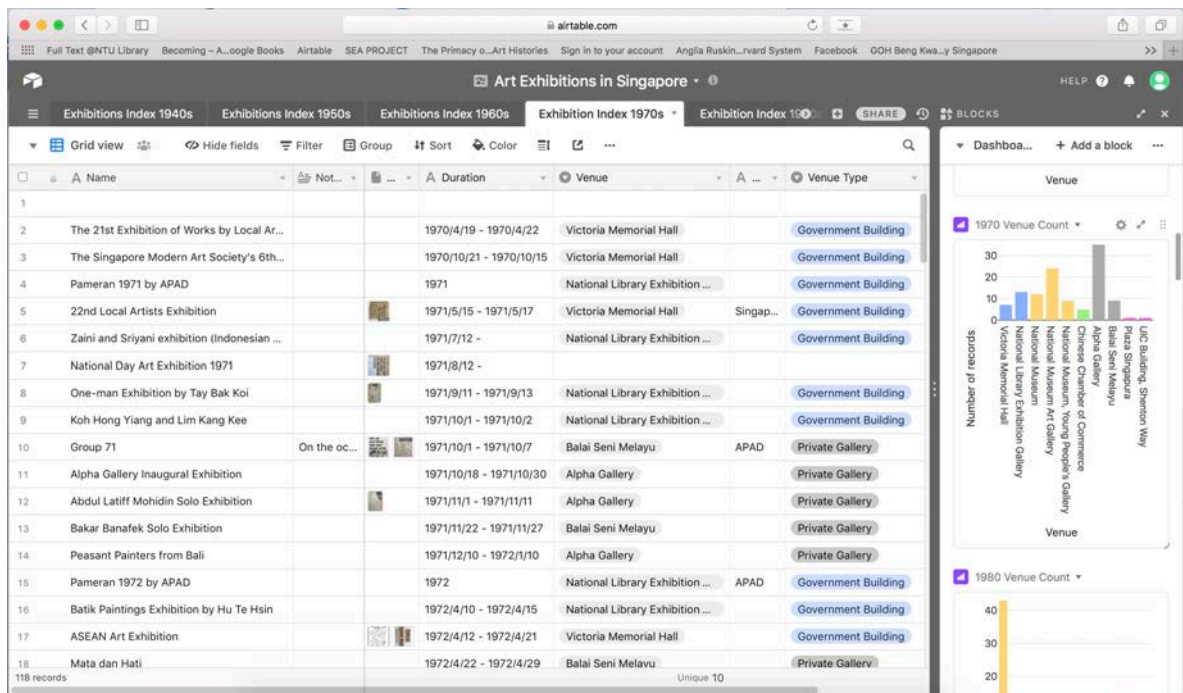
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Appendix

Appendix 1A:

Online database of exhibitions in Singapore



Database can be accessed from this URL:

<https://airtable.com/shriUju9TPAIY2StE>

Summary figures:

1960-1969 (Included for comparison)

Number of exhibitions recorded in database: 110

Total number of exhibition venues: 17

Venues with the highest number of exhibitions:

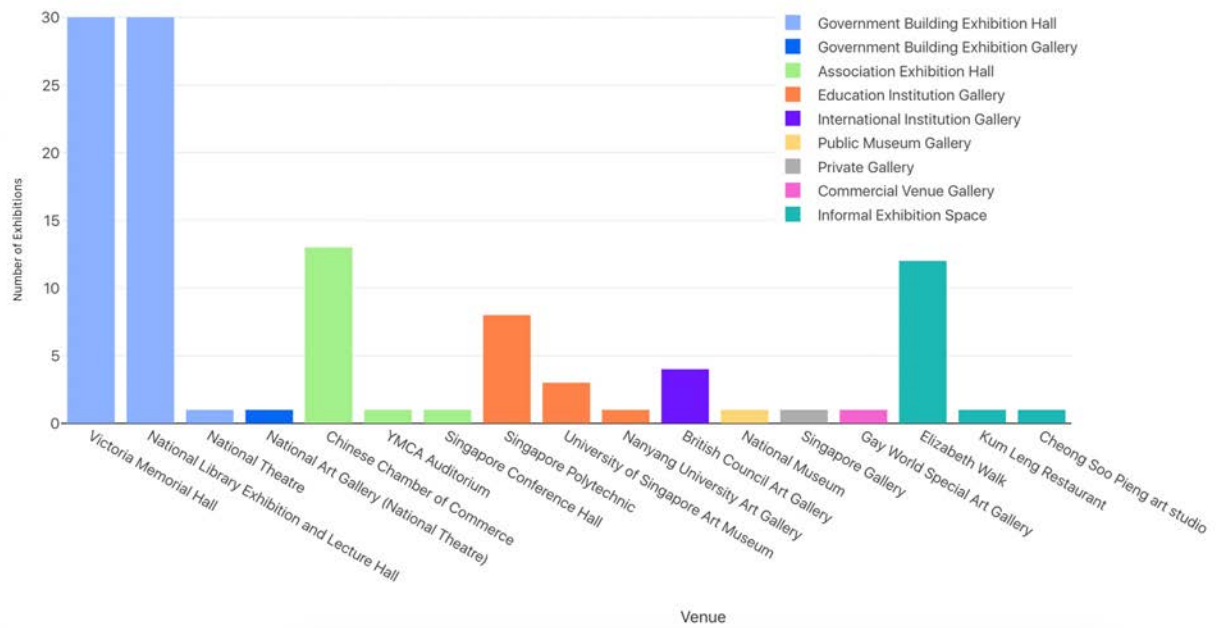
1. Victoria Memorial Hall (30)
2. National Library Lecture and Exhibition Hall (30)
3. Chinese Chamber of Commerce (13)

1960s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|--|--------------------|
| Government Building Exhibition Hall | 61 |
| Government Building Exhibition Gallery | 1 |
| Association Exhibition Hall | 15 |
| Education Institution Gallery | 12 |
| International Institution Gallery | 4 |
| Public Museum Gallery | 1 |
| Private Gallery | 1 |
| Commercial Venue Gallery | 1 |
| Public Open Air Exhibition Venue | 12 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 2 |
| Total | 110 |

62 exhibitions in government buildings

1960 Venue Count



1970-1979

Number of exhibitions recorded in database: 182

Total number of exhibition venues: 26

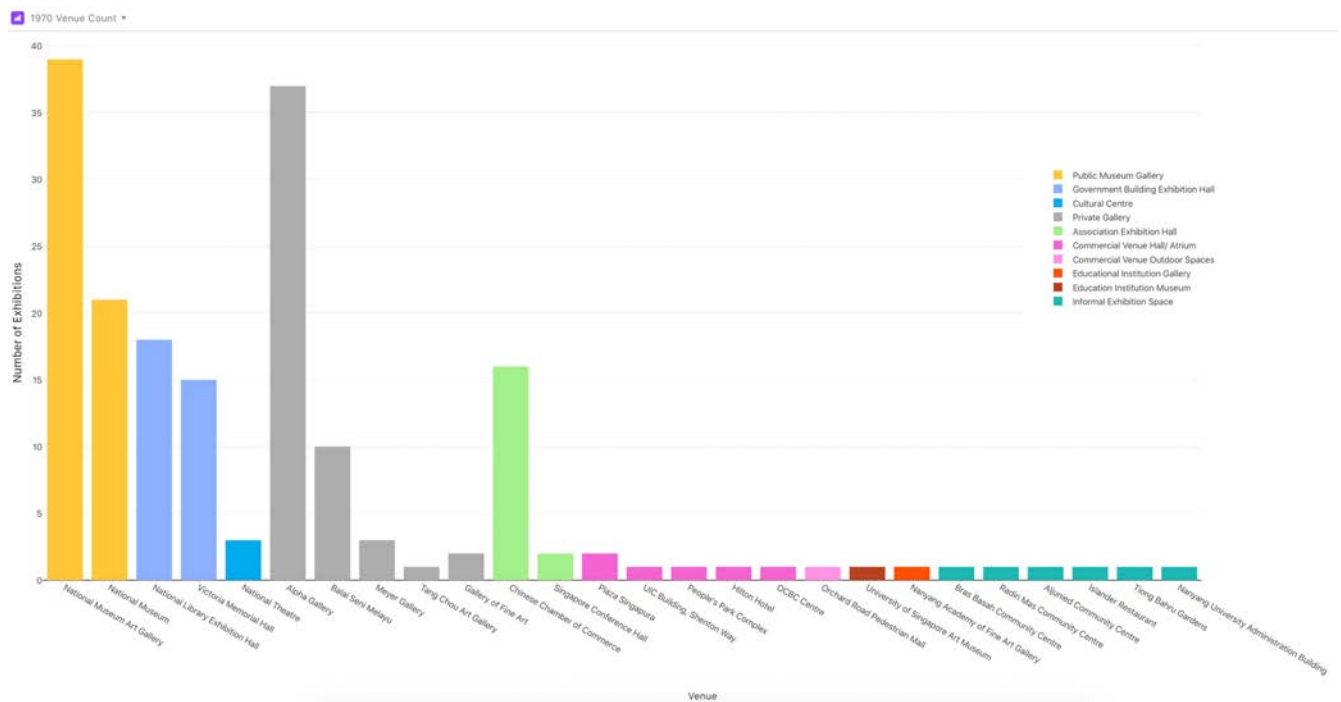
Venues with the highest number of exhibitions:

1. National Museum and National Museum Art Gallery (60)
2. Alpha Gallery (37)
3. National Library Lecture and Exhibition Hall (18)

1970s Summary Venue Type

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public Museum Gallery | 60 |
| Government Building Exhibition | 33 |
| Cultural Centre | 3 |
| Private Gallery | 53 |
| Association Exhibition Hall | 18 |
| Commercial Venue Atrium/ Hall | 6 |
| Commercial Venue Outdoor Spaces | 1 |
| Educational Institution Gallery | 1 |
| Education Institution Museum | 1 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 6 |
| Total | 182 |

7 exhibitions in commercial venues



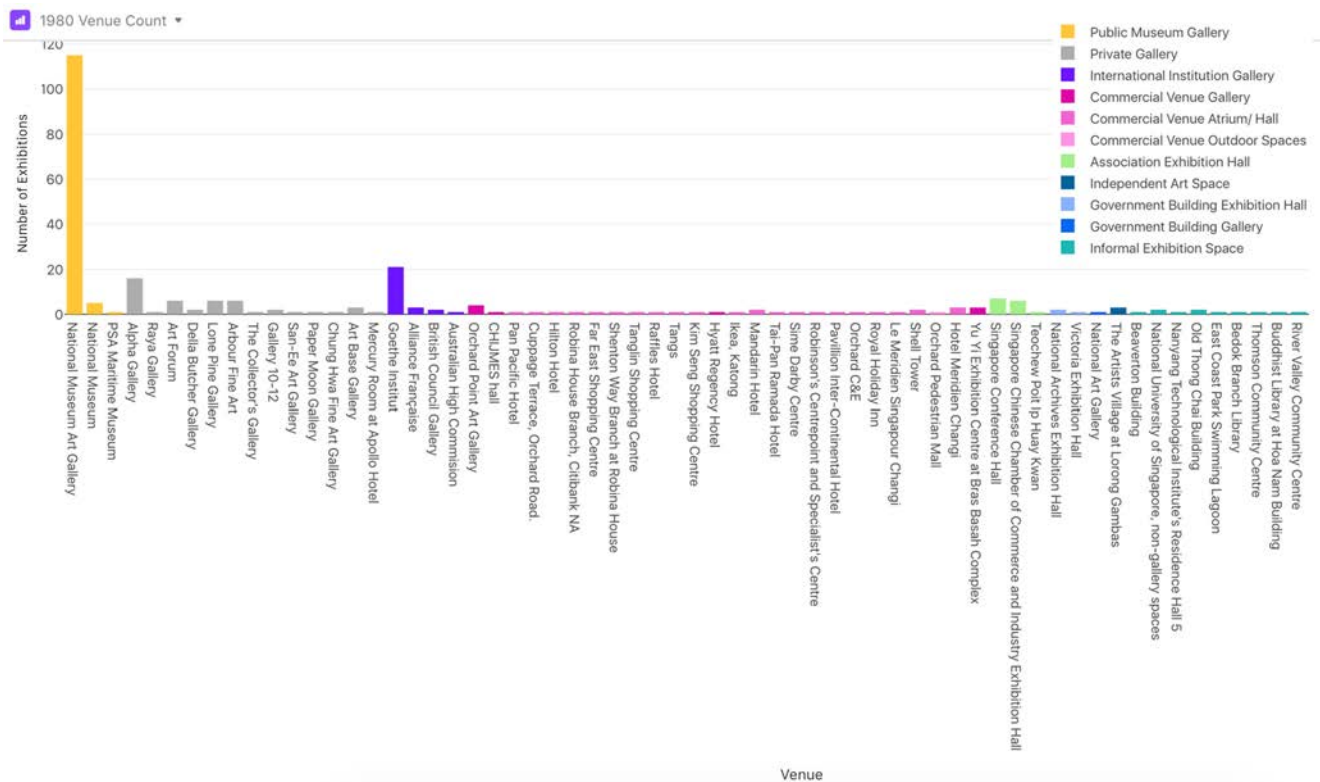
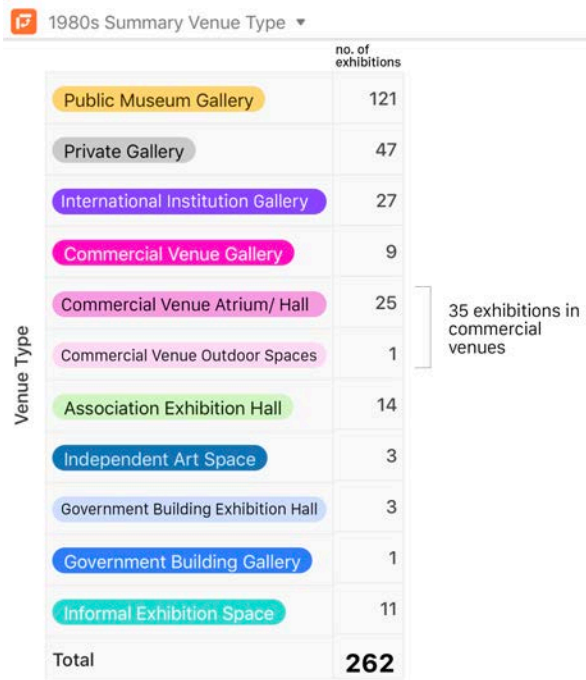
1980-1989

Number of exhibitions recorded in database: 262

Total number of exhibition venues: 62

Venues with the highest number of exhibitions:

1. National Museum and National Museum Art Gallery (120)
2. Goethe-Institut (21)
3. Alpha Gallery (16)



1990-1999

Number of exhibitions recorded in database: 329

Total number of exhibition venues: 107

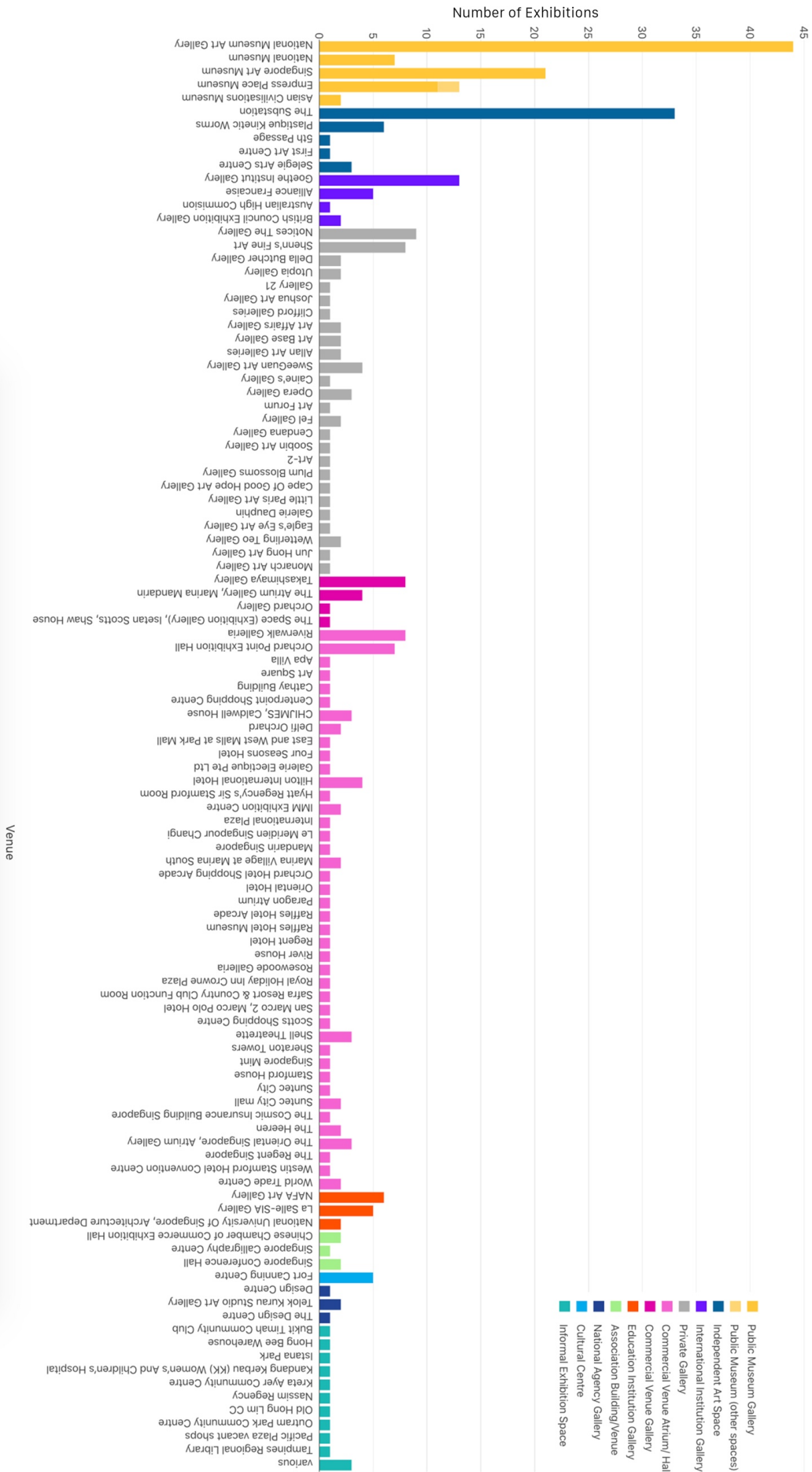
Venues with the highest number of exhibitions:

1. National Museum and National Museum Art Gallery (51)
2. The Substation (33)
3. Singapore Art Museum (21)

1990s Summary Venue Type ▾

| Venue Type | no. of exhibitions |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public Museum Gallery | 87 |
| Independent Art Space | 44 |
| International Institution Gallery | 21 |
| Private Gallery | 53 |
| Commercial Venue Atrium/ Hall | 70 |
| Commercial Venue Gallery | 14 |
| Education Institution Gallery | 13 |
| Association Building/Venue | 5 |
| National Agency Gallery | 4 |
| Cultural Centre | 5 |
| Informal Exhibition Space | 13 |
| Total | 329 |

84 exhibitions in commercial venues



Appendix 1B:

List of venue types and description

The online database of exhibitions created by this thesis uses the term “Venue type” to broadly classify an art exhibition venue’s scheme of spatial and organisational specificity. The venue type gives clue to the facilities afforded by these spaces, their availability as well as their institutional credence. For instance, the term “**gallery**” in the venue types “public museum gallery” or “private gallery” refers to an indoor space that is used predominantly for the exhibition of art and artefacts. As such, a gallery typically will be either purpose-built or renovated for this purpose, with implements for the display of art such as lighting, display wall or hanging system. Prestigious exhibitions are likely hosted in a gallery space that provide an extensive atmospheric, lighting and structural control. The institutional status of the gallery also give validation to the artworks displayed.

Exhibition hall is another common description in the database which refers to an indoor space often used for exhibitions of art and other industries. An exhibition hall may or may not have extensive implements for the display of art. An exhibition hall may be large scale, covering a big area and able to accommodate large crowd, or it may be more modest in scale. Many exhibition halls are robustly built to endure the rotation of activities and movements of heavy objects around the hall.

On the other hand, **informal exhibition spaces** are also often used for pop-up exhibitions, these venues are normally used for purposes other than displaying or exhibiting. As such an exhibition activates the venue into an exhibition space, also making the exhibition more or less permeable to the activities that usually happen within or around the venue, the venue itself would also resume its everyday activities once the exhibition is over. A full list of the venue types used in the online database can be found below.

List of Venue Types:

Government building exhibition hall

An exhibition hall within a venue occupied by a branch of the Singapore government or the British colonial government (before 1959) or by a government organisation. An exhibition hall within a government building may be used for other functions apart from art exhibitions, such as trade shows or fairs.

eg. British Council exhibition hall, Victoria Memorial Hall, National Theatre exhibition hall, National Library hall

Government building gallery

A gallery within a venue occupied by a branch of the Singapore government or the British colonial government (before 1959). A gallery within a government building exclusively showcases art and artefacts, it also has more state-of-the art facilities for the display of unique objects.

eg. National Library exhibition gallery

Association/society exhibition hall

An exhibition hall within a venue occupied by association groups, which are self-help groups organised according to identity or common interest, such as clan associations, cultural associations or sports club. Singapore, a country of immigrants, has long relied on associations and clans as a communal means of organising activities and furthering interests. Exhibition halls and galleries belonging to associations and societies used to be important venues for showing art until they were gradually replaced by more specialised galleries in the 1970s.

eg. Chinese Chamber of Commerce exhibition hall, Singapore Conference Hall

Association/ society gallery

A gallery within a venue occupied by association groups.

eg. YMCA Art Gallery

Public Museum Gallery

A gallery within a public museum. The public museum is publicly often funded by the taxpayers and is state-run. It has the obligations to be inclusive to most, if not all citizens. Singapore's first art gallery within a public museum is the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), inaugurated in 1976. It is considered the first major institution of art in Singapore.
eg. National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore Art Museum

Art Museum Gallery

A gallery within a public museum of art. The museum of art is considered an institution. This means that the art museum could typically accord the highest level of validation to the exhibitions held within its premises. Singapore's first art museum is the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) inaugurated in 1996.
eg. Singapore Art Museum

Education Institution Gallery and Museum

A gallery within an educational institution venue. Although it may not receive direct oversight from the government, it is often partially or fully funded by the government.
eg. Singapore Polytechnic gallery, University Art Museum

Private Gallery

A gallery belonging to an individual, including galleries that are run as a business.
eg. Balai Seni Melayu, Alpha Gallery, Arbour Fine Art, Art Forum, Della Butcher Gallery

Commercial Building Space

A venue housed in a building that operates businesses, this space is also used for other functions apart from art exhibitions.
eg. Plaza Singapura Hall

Commercial Building Gallery

A gallery housed in a building that operates businesses.
eg. CHIJMES gallery, Takashimaya Gallery

International Cultural Institution Gallery

A gallery within a foreign cultural institution, which takes interests in the development of Singapore's art scene as cultural diplomacy.

eg. Goethe-Institut Gallery, Alliance Francaise Gallery

Independent Art Space

A space that hosts artistic activities, such as art-making, performances, events or exhibitions regularly. It is run on a permanent basis by artists or stakeholders for a specific agenda pertaining to art, such as the promotion of certain artistic ideologies or art forms. Often, it does not have a clear business model and tends to be non-profit. The people who run this space often has a strong individual or collective identity as well as a clear ethos.

eg. The Artists Village at Ulu Sembawang, Plastique Kinetic Worms

Informal exhibition space

A venue that normally has other uses but is transformed into an exhibition space for a duration. Informal exhibition spaces gained prevalence in the 1980s and the 1990s due to a lack of suitable or affordable spaces to show art, as well as an increase in abandoned spaces which were slated for demolition or renovation as they were considered no more economically viable. Underlying this is the rise of public housing and the acquisition of kampong (rural or informal dwelling) lands, as well as the shift to knowledge-based economy which rendered many spaces of traditional labour-intensive industries less economically profitable. With the increasing adoption of performance art in the repertoire of artistic practices amongst young artists, public performances in informal exhibition spaces become popular. Art festivals also sought to reach out to more sectors of the public and often include public performances and pop-up exhibitions in their programming.

eg. Hong Bee Warehouse, Tan Teng Kee's backyard, National University of Singapore swimming pool and open spaces

National Agency Gallery

With the development of arts and cultural policies, statutory boards such as the National Arts Council (NAC) and National Heritage Boards (NHB) were set up in the early 1990s. These statutory boards are organisations that have been given autonomy to perform an operational function by legal statutes passed as Acts in parliament, they also manage agencies (eg. Design Singapore Council managed is an agency of Economic Development Board). Independent art spaces are often supported by the NAC, but run their own art space independently. On the other hand, some art spaces and galleries are managed by the staff of these statutory boards or agencies.

eg. Telok Kurau Studios Gallery

Cultural Centre Gallery

A dedicated gallery space within a centre for multiple art forms, such as performing arts, music and visual arts.

eg. Jendela Galley at The Esplanade

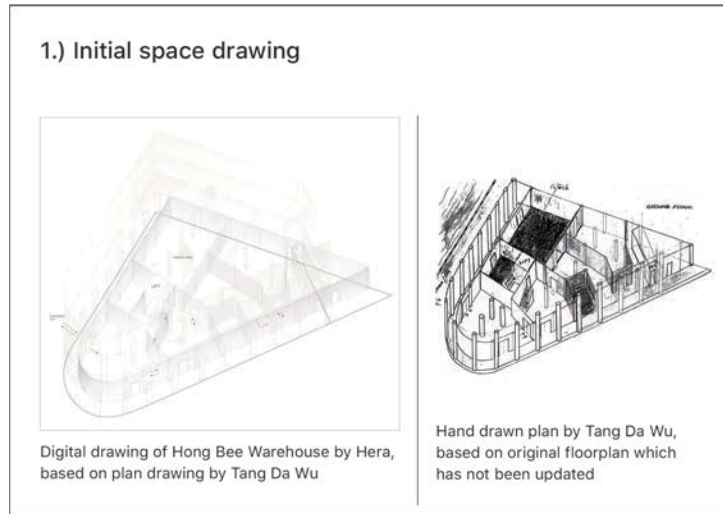
Cultural Centre Space

A non-gallery space within a centre dedicated to multiple art forms, such as performing arts, music and visual arts.

eg. Fort Canning Centre, The Esplanade

Appendix 1C:

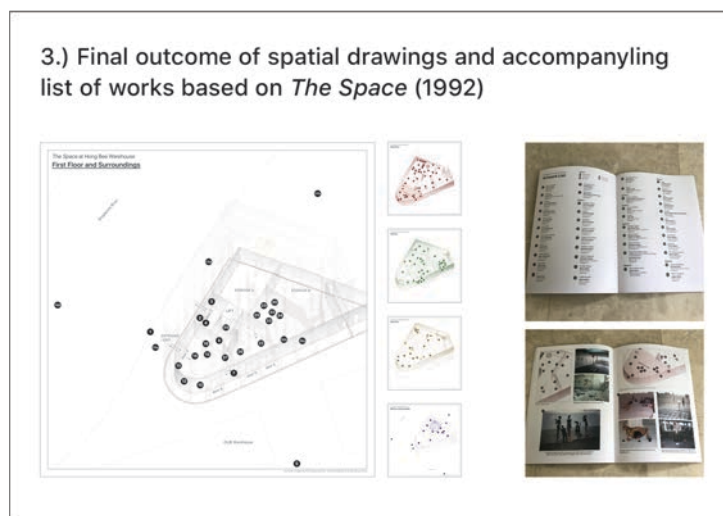
Process of Spatial Drawing of *The Space* (1992)



The spatial drawing was based on a hand drawn isometric sketch by Tang Da Wu which has not been updated as it was based on the initial architectural plan. I discussed the changes to positions of the wall with Koh based on his archive of photographs and created digital drawings of all five levels of the warehouse to capture a more accurate layout of the space.






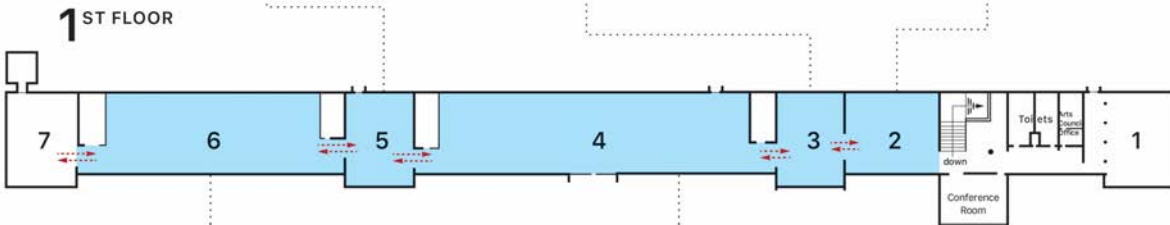


Koh recounted his experience in the exhibition and different artwork he documented. This gave me a clearer idea on the dimensions of the warehouse, how the artworks occupied the space and how the artists and audiences moved around in the warehouse. Koh also ordered his extensive photographic archive based on my drawings, labelling them so I know the locations of the artworks.



Based on the list of artworks, I added artwork numbers to denote the location of the works. I also selected some photographic images to be printed in a guidebook for the drawings. This was a long process of correspondence with Koh Nguang How to determine the correct placement of numbers and to select the photographs from his extensive archive. In this thesis, I have included the spatial drawings in **appendix 4A**, the list of artworks in **appendix 4B**, while the photographic images of the artworks can be found in **Chapter 4** as figures.

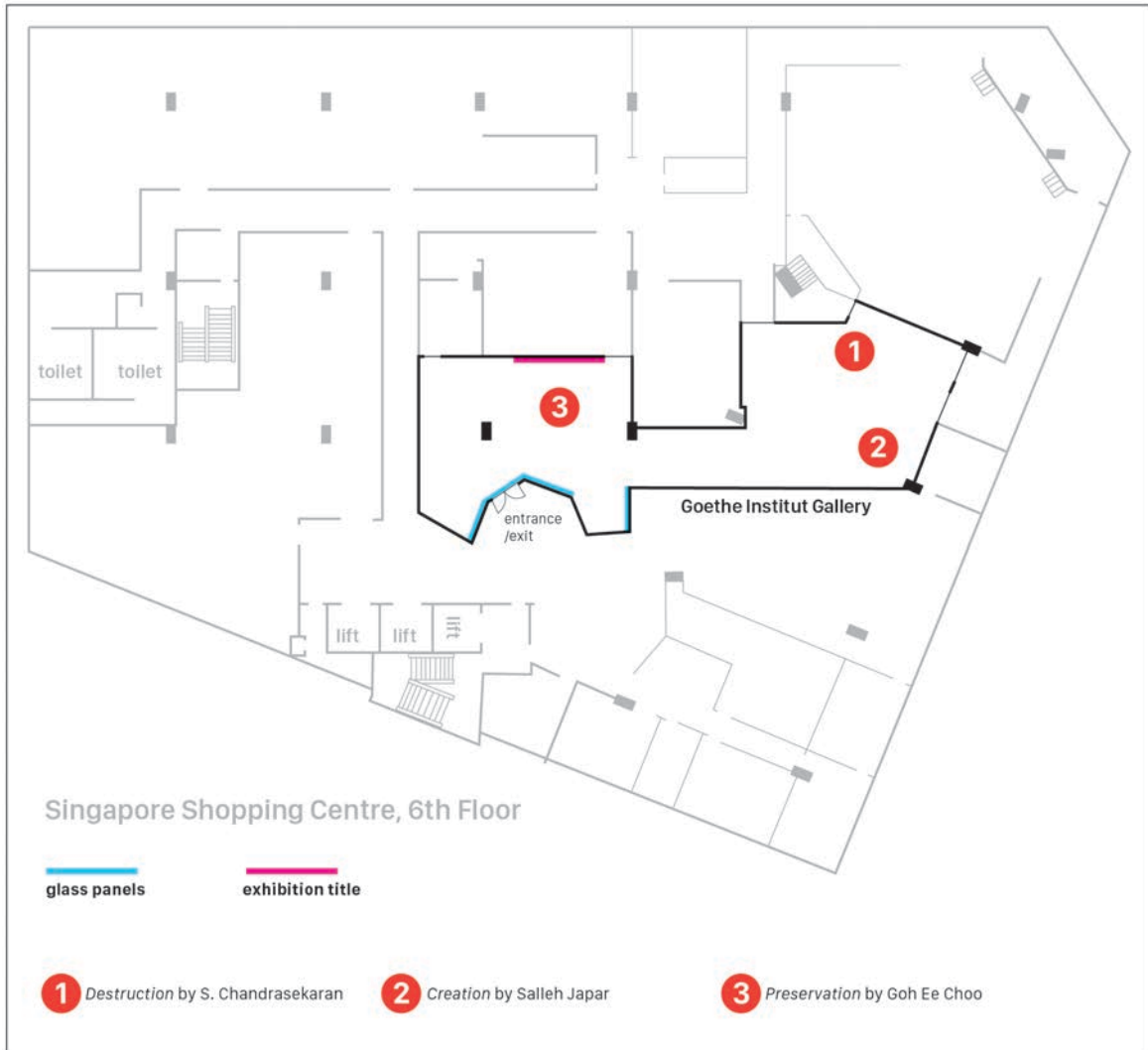
Appendix 2A:

Spatial drawing of the exhibition *Art '76*

| | | |
|--|--|---|
|  <p>Room 5 Image source: NMAG official opening catalogue (Singapore 1976)</p> |  <p>Room 3 Image source: NMAG official opening catalogue (Singapore 1976)</p> |  <p>Room 2 Image source: NMAG official opening catalogue (Singapore 1976)</p> |
| <p>1ST FLOOR</p>  <p>■ Galleries displaying artworks from <i>Art 76'</i> invitational selection</p> | | |
|  <p>Room 6 Image courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Ltd, covering date 18/08/1976</p> |  <p>Room 4 Image source: NMAG official opening catalogue (Singapore 1976)</p> | |

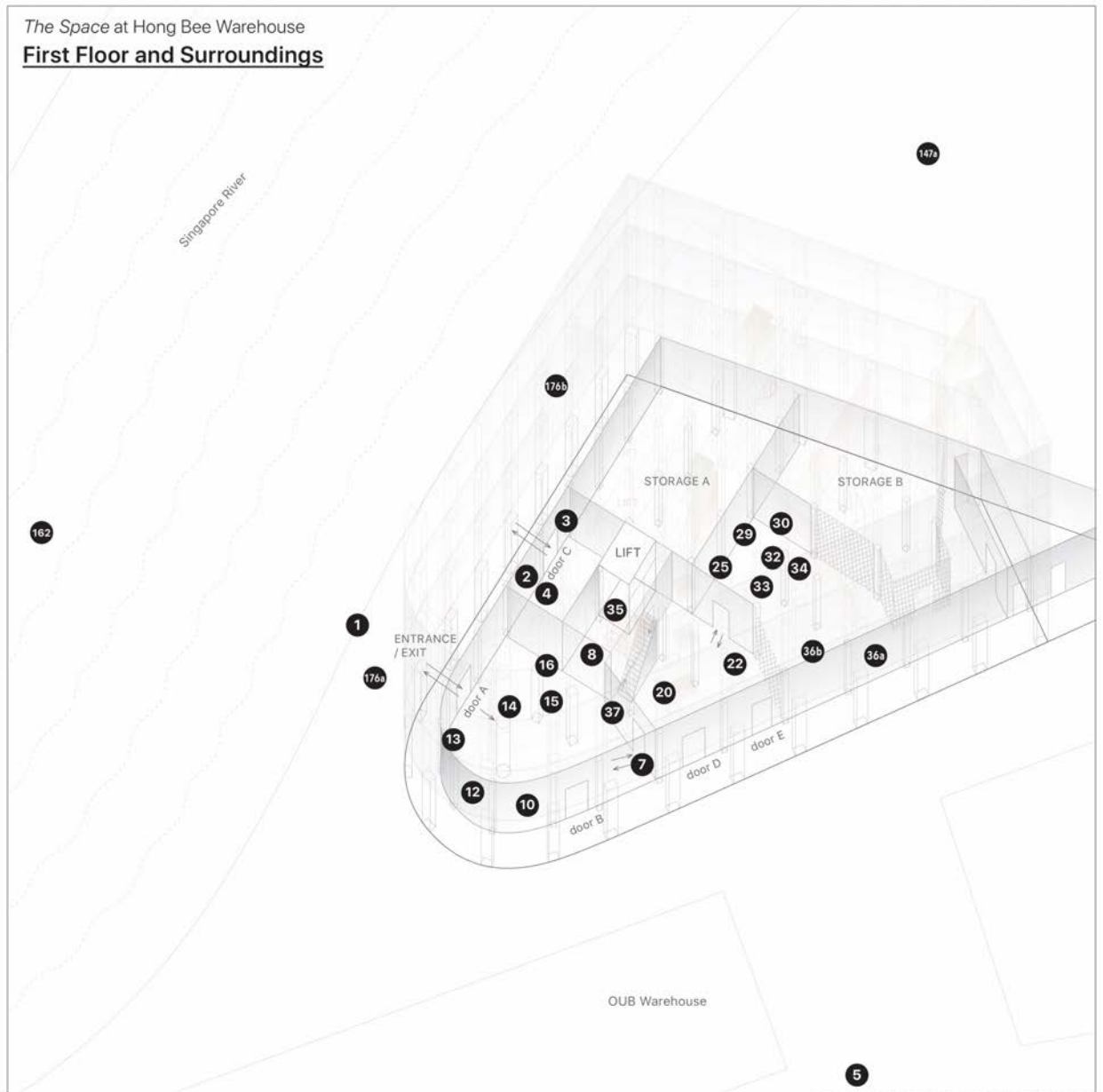
Appendix 3A:

Spatial drawing of the exhibition *Trimurti*

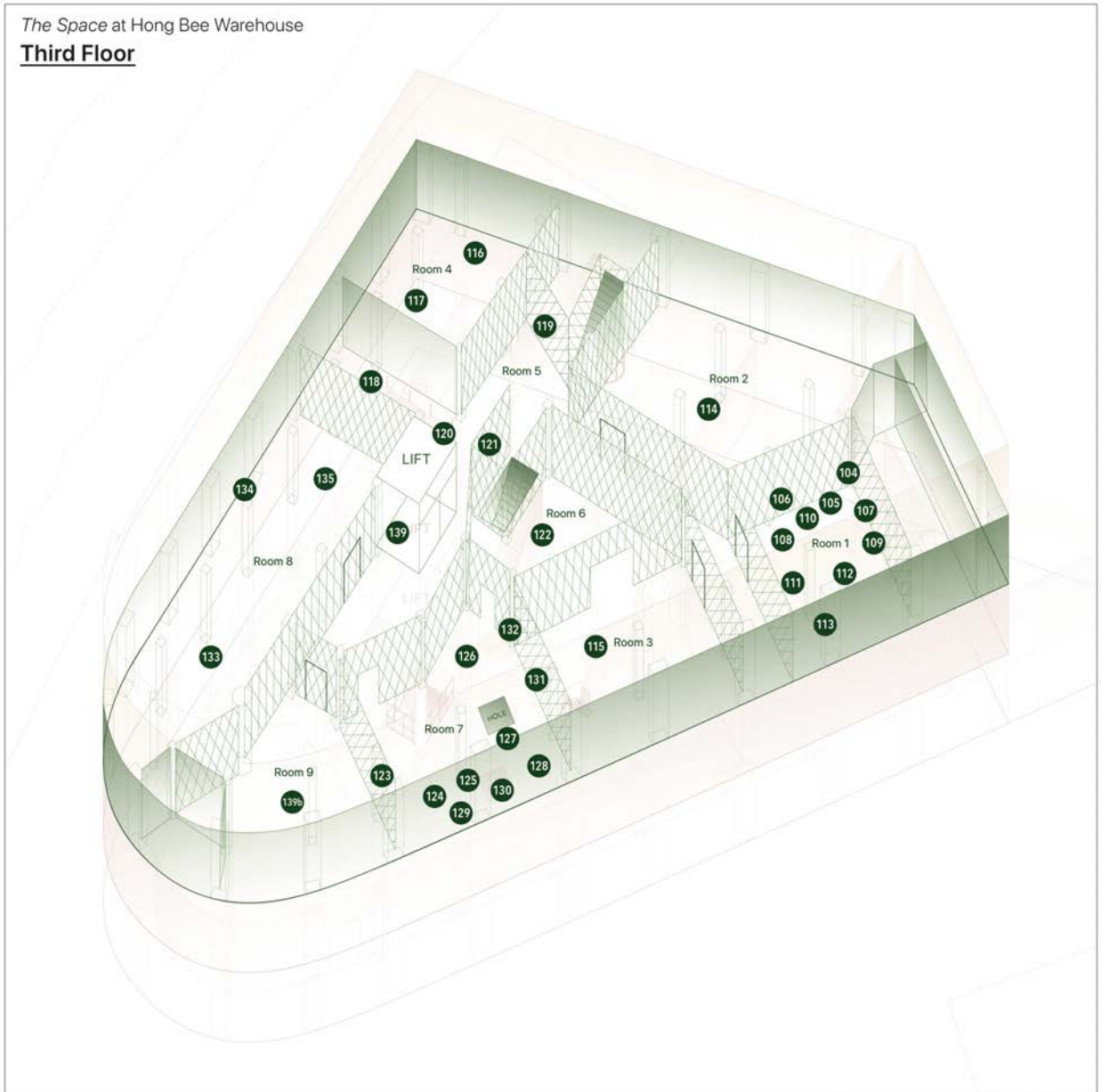


Appendix 4A:

Spatial drawings of the exhibition *The Space*

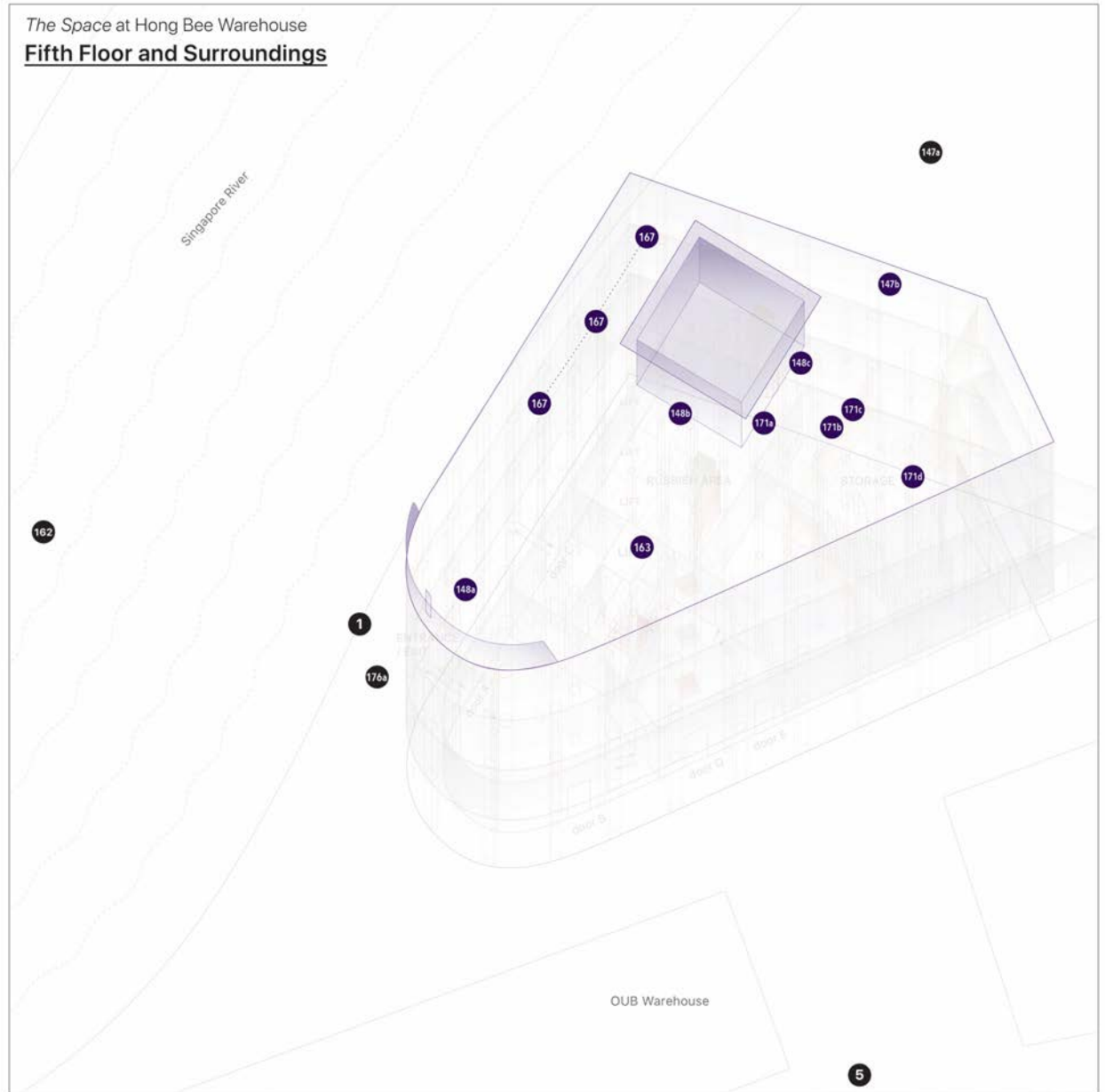


archival images by Koh Nguang How, spatial diagram and design by Hera





archival images by Koh Nguang How, spatial diagram and design by Hera



Appendix 4B:

List of artworks corresponding to spatial drawings of the exhibition The Space

Legend

- Ground floor ● Second floor ● Roof (5F)
● Third floor ● Fourth floor

- 1** All that is natural in my country is already destroyed; but there is something left—that is the people. Directly or indirectly the people are destroying directly or indirectly each other; continuation of destruction seems definite; What can we do?
Surapol Panyawatchira
Mixed media
Thailand
- 2** For Sale
Ho Soon Yeen
Plaster, found objects, pork
Singapore
- 3** Studio-Work in progress
Noboru Yoshida
Stone and Wood
Japan
- 4** Studio-Work in progress
Noboru Yoshida
Stone and Wood
Japan
- 5** Fire
Eve Tan In In
Wood, paint, found objects
Singapore
- 7** Dance to Dio
Azman
Acrylic on paper
Singapore
- 8** Non
Azman
Acrylic on paper
Singapore
- 10** User-friendly
Jose Tence Ruiz
Mixed Media
The Phillipines
- 12** SOS
Vincent Leow
Oil on Canvas
Singapore
- 13** Untitled
Shahrul Nizam
Acrylic on Canvas
Singapore
- 14** Bottle
Sharon Lee
Fabric and photo-silkscreen
Singapore
- 15** Untitled
Ahmad Abu Bakar
Wood and found objects
Singapore
- 16** Untitled
Faizal Fadil
Plaster and metal
Singapore
- 20** The Winged Victory reconstruction project
Jose Tence Ruiz
Mixed Media
The Phillipines
- 22** Altar to the Existential calendar
Jose Tence Ruiz
Mixed Media
The Phillipines
- 25** Untitled
Sharul Nizam
Acrylic on Canvas
Singapore
- 29** Book of Influence
Lee Wen
Oil on Canvas
Singapore
- 30** Figure Drawings (7pcs)
Ho Soon Yeen
Ink on Paper
Singapore
- 32** Untitled
Shannon Tham
Mixed Media
Singapore
- 33** Untitled
Ahmad Abu Bakar
Mixed Media
Singapore
- 34** Untitled
Mohd. Raafat
Mixed Media
Singapore
- 35** Sending the Flowers
Koh Nguang How
Flowers
Singapore
- 36a** Working Space—Zai will keep on producing his work, responding to the material in and around the warehouse, and to what is going on in and around the warehouse during the exhibit. "It is not an exhibition for me. I've not been producing for some time due to space and financial difficulties, somehow a very common problem. I take this opportunity to treat the space as my studio until 21/6. I don't know what I am going to do with the work produced here—probably return them to their usual state—junk. Anyone interested in taking them out of this warehouse for show or storage please call me at 487-2695. Thank you."
- 36b** **Zai Kuning**
Found objects, mixed media
Singapore

Legend

- Ground floor ● Second floor ● Roof (5F)
● Third floor ● Fourth floor

- 37** An Epitaph of three spritual-hue men
Azman
Acrylic on board
Singapore
- 38** You can verge inside of yourself but...
Kiyo Kusano
Installation of dried chillies, lead, velvet, clay
Japan
- 39a** Untitled
Kiyo Kusano
- 39b** Installation of dried chillies, clay
Japan
- 40** You can verge inside...II
Kiyo Kusano
Installation of lead, velvet:
Japan
- 41** Ban censorship
Dominique Hui
Mixed media on paper
Singapore
- 46b** Stripes
Dominique Hui
Mixed media on paper
Singapore
- 47** Hands
Ahmad Mashadi
Mixed media
Singapore
- 48** Untitled
Mohd. Raafat
Wood and metal
Singapore
- 49** Like every candle
"Like every candle we lit, like every loosening petal of the flower, like barbed wires, the hooks, we lit the light over the dark passage and carefully we walked together..."
Chumpon Apisuk
Mixed media installation
Thailand
- 51B** Untitled
Zhang Ke Shen
- 51R** Mixed media
Singapore
- 53** A study of MRT people lines
Clifford Ess
Mixed media wall installation
Singapore
- 55** Directional arrows
Clifford Ess
Enamel
Singapore
- 62** Untitled
Shahrul Nizam
Acrylic on canvas
Singapore
- 65** Somewhere along evolution
Karen Ang
Mixed media
Singapore
- 69X** Untitled
Surapol Panyawatchira
Mixed media installation
Thailand
- 72** Untitled
Surapol Panyawatchira
Mixed media installation.
Thailand
- 77** Exportation
Koh Nguang How
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 78** Black Moon #13 "Me"
Eng Hwee Chu
Mixed media installation
Malaysia
- 79** 2 dirty old men
Koh Nguang How and Tim Maslen
Mixed media installation
Singapore and Australia
- 81** Bad Bird
Koh Nguang How
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 82** Blue Bird
Koh Nguang How
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 83** Black/White
Low Eng Teong
Photographs, acrylic
Singapore
- 85** Silver Aeroplane
Vincent Leow
Oil on Canvas
Singapore
- 86** Extension
Cheng Ping
Copper tubes and bakau timber
Singapore
- 92** Untitled
Ahmad Abu Bakar
Glass bottle and clay
Singapore
- 93** Untitled
Ahmad Abu Bakar
Glass bottle and clay
Singapore

Legend

- Ground floor
- Third floor
- Second floor
- Fourth floor
- Roof (5F)

- 94** Tears of Lenin
Chua Say Hwa
Mixed media
Singapore
- 95** Sweet Slab
Koh Nguang How
Mixed media
Singapore
- 96** Pusan Beach (Korea)
Chen Cheng Mei
Mixed media print
Singapore
- 97** Planet 'v' I
Phyllis Koh
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 98** Cotton beaters
Chen Cheng Mei
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 99** Wash basin
Cheng Ping
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 100** 3
Cheng Ping
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 101** Microwave Oven
Cheng Ping
Oil on Canvas
Singapore
- 102** Back street
Raymond Lau Soo Peng
Oil on Canvas
Singapore

Room 1

- 104** Dreams in Music
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 105** Dream
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 106** Dreaming
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore

- 107** Dreams in Images
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 108** Dreams in Paintings
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 109** Dreams in Dance
Peh Soh Chwee
Oil on canvas
Singapore
- 110** Work in progress
Peh Soh Chwee
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 111** A moon dance
Susi Leeton
Oil on canvas
Australia
- 112** A bed of roses
Susi Leeton
Oil on canvas
Australia
- 113** A break in the mist
Susi Leeton
Oil on Canvas
Australia

Room 2

- 114** Yellow
Vincent Leow
Mixed media installation
Singapore

Room 3

- 115** Work in progress
Ian Woo and Lim Siew Hua
Mixed media installation
Singapore

Room 4

- 116** Work in progress
Azman
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 117** Untitled
John Low
Charcoal on paper
Singapore

Legend

- Ground floor
- Second floor
- Third floor
- Fourth floor
- Roof (5F)

Room 5

- 118 Ripples of karma
Lee Chuen Ping
Mixed media/fabric installation
Singapore
- 119 Distant voices
Celestino Gulapa
Enamel on rubberised fabric
The Phillipines
- 120 Fellow Hoodlum
Celestino Gulapa
Enamel on rubberised fabric
The Phillipines
- 121 Faces of the Galaxy series
a. Read My Lips b. Smoke in Your Eyes
c. Running Noses
Lee Chuen Ling
Mixed media
Singapore

Room 6

- 122 Stop making sense
Dante Perez
Mixed media installation
The Phillipines

Room 7

- 123 Pimp
Virginia Empleo
SoftSculpture
The Phillipines
- 124 Prostitute
Virginia Empleo
SoftSculpture
The Phillipines
- 125 Hobo
Virginia Empleo
SoftSculpture
The Phillipines
- 126 Mama San
Virginia Empleo
SoftSculpture
The Phillipines
- 127 Threads
Edwin Agawin and Virginia Empleo
Mixed media
The Phillipines
- 128 Mick
Edwin Agawin
Acrylic on canvas
The Phillipines

- 129 Bob
Edwin Agawin
Acrylic on canvas
The Phillipines
- 130 Andy Warhol
Edwin Agawin
Acrylic on canvas
The Phillipines
- 131 Extinction
Edwin Agawin
Acrylic on canvas
The Phillipines
- 132 The Vanishing Healers
Edwin Agawin
Acrylic on canvas
The Phillipines

Room 8

- 133 Clouds and Objects
Amanda Heng
Mixed media, found objects
Singapore
- 134 Work-in-progress
Juliana Yasin
Mixed media
Singapore
- 135 Study of Ears
Chen Kun Yi
Photograph positive
Singapore

Lift

- 139 Untitled
Low Eng Teong
Photography
Singapore

Room 9

- 139b Working Space for ARX 3
Koh Nguang How and Tim Maslen
Mixed media
Singapore and Australia
- 140 Mandara (9pcs)
Kiyonori Bori
Acetylene torch on paper
Japan
- 141 Untitled
Ryuichi Sakazaki
Found and constructed wood
Japan

Legend

- Ground floor ● Second floor ● Roof (5F)
● Third floor ● Fourth floor

- 142** Untitled
Ahmad Abu Bakar
Wood
Singapore
- 143a** (a): Bicycle
143b (b): Pallets
143c (c): Shelves
143d (d): Golf
143e (e): Wooden installation
(f): TV on easel
Faizal Fadil
Found objects
Singapore
- 144** Preservation
Samsuri Ibrahim
Found objects
Singapore
- 145** Tidbits
Samsuri Ibrahim
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 146a** (a): Toilet attap
146b (b): Baby trash
146c (c): Tyre
146d (d): Pump
146e (e): Flush toilet
Samsuri Ibrahim
Mixed media installation
Singapore
- 146f**
- 147a** View from the edge of rooftop
Hitoshi Ushijima
Turmeric
Japan
- 147b**
- 148a** Work in progress
Drawing on the rooftop—HOLE things that
extend to the atmosphere
Kanae Ohgi
Latex paint
Japan
- 148b**
- 148c**
- 150** Plastic
Josef Ng and Shannon Tham
Performance
Singapore
- 151** Performance with dried flowers
Azman
Performance
Singapore
- 152** Lifestyle of the rich and famous
Vincent Leow
Performance
Singapore
- 153** In Memory of June 4 '89
Amanda Heng
Performance incorporating Chumpol Apjuk's
Like Every Candles
Singapore
- 154** Ways to Walk a Plank 1000
Vincent Leow
Performance
Singapore
- 155** Space
Zai Kuning
Performance
Singapore
- 157** Untitled
Zai Kuning
Performance
Singapore
- 158** Who do you say I am, huh?
Matthew Ngui
Performance
Singapore
- 159** Pillow
Matthew Ngui
Performance
Singapore
- 162** Topaz
Sakiko Yamaoka
Performance
Japan
- 163** Ribbon
Sakiko Yamaoka
Performance at fourth floor and roof
Japan
- 163**
- 164** Plates
Sakiko Yamaoka
Performance at fourth floor and second floor
performance area
Japan
- 164**
- 165** MorePlates
Sakiko Yamaoka
Performance at second floor performance area
Japan
- 167** Drawings on roof
Hitoshi Ushijima
Oil pastel
Japan
- 168** Orchids 1
Hitoshi Ushijima
Performance
Japan
- 169** Orchids 2
Hitoshi Ushijima
Performance
Japan

Legend

- Ground floor
- Second floor
- Third floor
- Fourth floor
- Roof (5F)

171a Women, Space & Objects
Amanda Heng, Chen Kunyi & Ho Soon Yeen
Performance
Singapore

171b

171c

171d

172 Her Identities
Amanda Heng, Chen Kunyi and Juliana Yasin
Performance
Singapore

173a Treasure
Koh Nguang How

Performance
Singapore

173b

174 Caged
Lee Wen

Video
Singapore

176a Untitled
Faizal Fadil and Van

Performance
Singapore

176b

**Second Floor
Performance Area**

P1. In Memory of June 4 '89
Amanda Heng
153 Performance incorporating Chumpol Apisuk's
Like Every Candles
Singapore

P2. Her Identities
Amanda Heng, Chen Kunyi and Juliana Yasin
172 Performance
Singapore

P3. Performance with dried flowers
Azman
151 Performance
Singapore

P4. Space
Zai Kuning
155 Performance
Singapore

P5. Treasure
Koh Nguang How
173 Performance
Singapore

P6. Pillow
Matthew Ngui
159 Performance
Singapore

P7. Lifestyle of the rich and famous
Vincent Leow
152 Performance
Singapore

P8. Plastic
Josef Ng and Shannon Tham
150 Performance
Singapore

P9. MorePlates
Sakiko Yamaoka
165 Performance at second floor performance area
Japan

**Second Floor
Talks Space**

T1. The Practice of Art: Prospect & Goals
towards the end of a Century
T. K. Sabapathy
Talk
Singapore

T2. Baguio Arts Guild
Santiago Bose
Talk
Phillipines

T3. Who do you say I am, huh?
Matthew Ngui
158 Performance
Singapore

T4. Who do you say I am, huh?
Matthew Ngui
158 Performance
Singapore

T5. Ways to Walk a Plank 1000
Vincent Leow
154 Performance
Singapore

T6. Untitled
Zai Kuning
157 Performance
Singapore