singapore biennale 2025

pure imagination

pure intention

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Message

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Singapore Biennale 2025, an edition that holds special significance as we celebrate Singapore's 60 years of independence (SG60). Since its inception in 2006, the Singapore Biennale has become a cornerstone of the region's arts calendar. We have moved beyond traditional gallery spaces to actively engage with the city's urban and cultural landscape. We firmly believe in the power of contemporary art to spark dialogue, build social cohesion and define Singapore's place as a vibrant international arts and cultural hub. This edition continues that tradition by connecting global artistic practices with the dynamic voices of Southeast Asia.

This year, the theme *pure intention* offers an evocative lens for introspection. Singapore is renowned as a carefully planned city, a testament to the collective effort that has shaped its deliberate design. But this Biennale invites us to look beyond that blueprint and immerse ourselves in the city's lived experiences, rituals, histories and aspirations that have truly shaped our shared environment and complex urban identity.

As we mark SG60, it is timely for us to reflect on our nation's historic milestones with new perspectives. The Singapore Biennale 2025 is more than a celebration of contemporary art; it is an act of shared discovery and experience. Works are woven into the fabric of everyday environments, from the storied grounds of Fort Canning Park to the layered memory of the Rail Corridor. In locations like the strata-titled malls of Lucky Plaza and Far East Shopping Centre, the artworks probe the unique social dynamics of place. By transforming these familiar, lived sites, the featured artists—a diverse assembly of over 80 voices from Singapore and around the world—provoke a shift in perspective, encouraging visitors to uncover the narratives embedded in our collective environment. This reflects the National Arts Council's (NAC) commitment to bringing the arts closer to the community, making them more accessible to everyone in the public domain.

On behalf of NAC, I would like to thank the Singapore Art Museum and the curatorial team comprising Duncan Bass, Hsu Fang-Tze, Ong Puay Khim and Selene Yap for their vision and dedication and the artists for their commitments, which has given shape to this momentous undertaking. I congratulate all Singapore Biennale 2025 contributors for bringing their ideas and concepts to life, so that more can appreciate and participate in the arts.

We invite you to experience Singapore with fresh eyes by joining us on this exciting journey of discovery!

Low Eng Teong
Chief Executive Officer, National Arts Council, Singapore
Commissioner, Singapore Biennale 2025

Message

The Singapore Biennale has, since its inception in 2006, been a platform through which contemporary art engages the shifting conditions of the city. In its eighth edition, Singapore Biennale 2025: *pure intention* extends this commitment by turning their attention to everyday spaces that shape how we live, gather and dream. Rather than situating art apart from daily life, this Biennale unfolds across it: within neighbourhoods, public sites and shared spaces, inviting critical insights into how Singapore, as a city-state, quietly transforms.

Presented in the year of Singapore's 60th anniversary, this edition does not seek to summarise the nation's story or offer a singular narrative of progress. Instead, it creates room for reflection across five neighbourhoods, with more than 80 artists and collectives engaging the city as it is lived: in housing estates and historic sites, shopping centres, green spaces and museums. These are places not only shaped by planning and policy, but also by the memory and practices of those who inhabit and continually negotiate them.

The theme *pure intention* is not proposed as an idealistic or a moral position. Instead, it gestures toward a form of artistic attentiveness: how actions are shaped by context, how histories linger within built environments and how care might be practised within community spaces. As such, the works presented throughout the Biennale ask us to look again, reconsider the familiar and even evaluate how meaning emerges through repetition.

This edition of the Biennale is shaped by a distributed curatorial model that brings together curators from the Singapore Art Museum alongside curatorial contributors, artists and organisations from Singapore and beyond. This approach reflects the project's ethos: polyvocal, collaborative and, in most instances, site-specific. It acknowledges that no single perspective can account for the complexity of the city-state and that contemporary art today is most engaging when it operates through dialogue and exchange.

Many of the projects in *pure intention* are site-responsive, unfolding over time and through the participation of those who inhabit these spaces. Some are embedded within daily routines whilst others require deliberate visitation. Together, they form a constellation rather than a linear path. This mode of presentation reflects a belief that contemporary art need not always announce itself loudly. Its power often lies in its capacity to heighten awareness of the systems and rhythms that surround us.

As the organiser of the Singapore Biennale, the Singapore Art Museum remains committed to expanding access to contemporary art and to fostering meaningful engagement across diverse audiences. By extending the Biennale beyond museum walls, this edition reflects a conviction that art belongs within public life and is a space for shared experience.

I would like to thank the artists, curators, collaborators, partners and supporters who have contributed to the realisation of Singapore Biennale 2025. Their generosity and care have shaped a biennale that is grounded and accessible.

This catalogue brings together essays, artist texts and documentation that trace how the Biennale unfolds across the city's everyday spaces. In doing so, it invites readers to move through Singapore with *pure intention*, encountering these works through moments of uncertainty, attentiveness and a search for meaning in transience.

Eugene Tan
Chief Executive Officer & Director
Singapore Art Museum

Solicitations and Countless Others Like Them

—

Duncan Bass

About Duncan Bass
Duncan Bass is a curator at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). His writing and curatorial projects explore the intersections of art and contemporary culture, emphasising the societal implications of emerging technologies. For the Biennale, Bass is particularly interested in mining contradiction, absurdity and magical thinking as expressions of contemporary social and political anxieties.

In late 2023, I began to receive a barrage of targeted social media advertisements promising early bird prices for penthouse apartments in Singapore's Golden Mile Complex (GMC). These solicitations, and countless others like them, are symptoms of a contemporary condition that grounds *pure intention*. To understand Singapore through the lens of *pure intention*, one must see how its intentionality operates through highly interventionist government policy that is most visibly expressed in the rapid transformation of the built environment. The quasi-socialist housing policies and financing schemes of the 1960s enabled GMC's creation; decades later, the contemporary technocratic state facilitated its sale in 2022 and its redevelopment as a conservation landmark. In the brief window between the confirmation of new ownership and the developers' announcement of "The Golden Mile," false advertisements for spacious residential units with waterfront views promised an escape from the homogeneous and alienating architecture populating the skylines of global cities and from the social atomisation and economic precarity that increasingly define contemporary life.

Contemporary forms of magical thinking detach outcomes from material causes, positioning intention as a sufficient force to reshape reality. Within the logic of the technocratic state, this desire for metaphysical certainty mirrors the state's gestures towards control—engineering the environment and scripting the skyline—efforts that, while rationalised, remain tethered to a fantasy of order in a fundamentally disordered world. It is this convergence of the spiritual and the systemic, the irrational and the hyper-rational, that renders *pure intention* not only a matter of private faith, but also of public ideology. This exhibition takes its title from a provocation wherein the logic of state planning meets the messy realities of contemporary life. The participating artists articulate these contradictions and the resulting search for new ways to navigate a world that often feels out of control and a city that insists such control is not only possible but desirable.

Concept Plan

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, a national planning team formed with the help of the United Nations Development Programme produced the country's first long-term Concept Plan (1971).[1] The plan adopted a "Ring City" model proposed by Dutch consultants, along with an associated "frame of mind and way of thinking." Development at the time relied on ad hoc alliances between the state and private developers, creating space for experimental architectural projects with explicit social and political aims. Constructed between 1969–1973, The Golden Mile Complex (GMC), designed by William S.W. Lim and Design

Partnership, embodied these ideals. Originally known as the Woh Hup Complex, it reflected "linear city" influences and introduced the high-rise, mixed-use strata-titled model that would define Singapore's urban development. Strata title refers to a collective ownership model in which a single property is subdivided into its constituent units. The Land Titles (Strata) Act (1967) enabled such developments to be financed through the sale of individual units; a mechanism first tested at People's Park Complex (PPC).[2, 3] Unlike single-developer shopping malls elsewhere, strata-titled malls resisted the homogenising effect of global retail trends. Neither GMC nor PPC would have been possible without the advent of Singapore's Urban Renewal Department's Sale of Sites Programme (1967), which facilitated the relocation of squatters, small businesses and a community centre from the future GMC site and made the PPC site available after it was razed by a fire in December 1966. This moment of societal transformation, when social upheaval met state-led modernisation, is reflected prominently in artworks from Singapore's National Collection featured in *pure intention*. The earliest, *After the Fire I* (1957) by **Liu Kang** (1911–2004) depicts the aftermath of a fire in muted earth tones beneath an ash-grey sky. Woodblock prints by Lim Yew Kuan (1928–2021) and Lim Mu Hue (1936–2008) capture the social and political realities of Singapore, extending the socialist woodcut movement championed by Chinese revolutionary thinker Lu Xun in the 1920s to the Malay Peninsula.[4] Lim Yew Kuan's *After the Fire* (1966) replicates the formula of Liu Kang's canvas, purportedly recording the aftermath of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire. As with the market fire that resulted in the construction of PPC, the Bukit Ho Swee fire cleared physical and political space for the construction of Singapore's first public housing.[5]

Tristan Duke's photographs of catastrophic fires in the American West invoke these historical images of devastation and dislocation. *Marshall Fire, Colorado 01* (2023) depicts the destruction of a wildfire in Boulder, Colorado. *Palisades Fire, California 02* and *Palisades Fire, California 03* (all 2025) document the 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles, California. Together, they convey both the frantic energy of increasingly devastating wildfires and their enduring impact on the affected communities. To produce these images, Duke crafts optical lenses from ice, incorporating variations in the local environment and the elemental time of the melting ice lens. The visible aperture that frames the resulting photographs recalls the later works on view by Lim Yew Kuan and Lim Mu Hue, which are themselves reminiscent of dioramas that draw the viewer's gaze towards the distant urban environments depicted. Yet unlike the explicit political motives of social realism, this formal mechanism separates the viewer from the landscape, conveying a sense of alienation absent from the earlier woodcuts.

This shift can be charted across two depictions of Singapore's Mount Faber by Lim Mu Hue. The earlier of the two, produced for the historically significant 1966 exhibition *Woodcuts*, presents a view of the harbour with a clear vertical delineation between fore, middle and background, where the figures in the foreground look expectantly towards the newly independent nation's future. In *Scenery from Mount Faber* (1977), the same view is enveloped in thick foliage, with a recently inaugurated cable car system towering over distant cargo cranes. Unlike the earlier woodcut, the pastel and graphite drawing is devoid of human subjects; the symbols of "progress" embodied by the cable car and steel ships sharply contrast with the tropical vegetation that frames them.

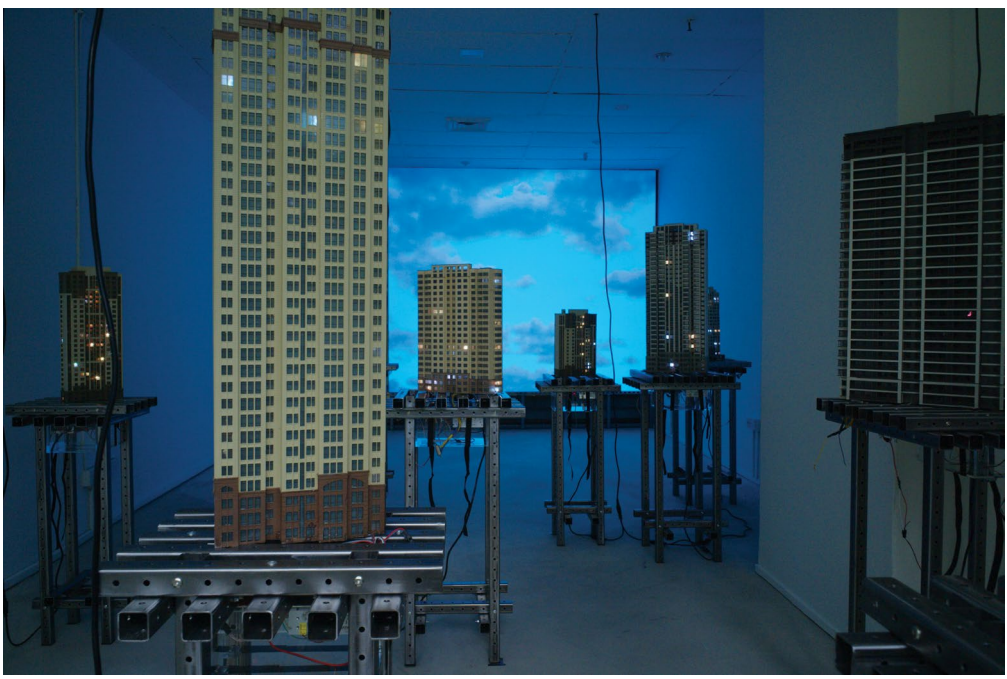
Employing a similar compositional technique, **Lim Yew Kuan**'s *Roaming Clouds* (1970) forgoes the artist's celebrated observational realism in favour of an ethereal aerial view painted from memory. A dreamlike landscape shows a small village at the meeting of two rivers, the surrounding topography obscured by the swirling clouds that occupy the bulk of the image surface. While the village appears suspended in time, "progress" is depicted through the technological and transnational vantage point of the artist.



Lim Yew Kuan. *Roaming Clouds*. 1970. Oil on canvas. 60 × 70 cm.
Gift of the artist. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Ahmet Öğüt's *Pleasure Places of All Kinds* (2014) articulates a similar tension between historic preservation and future development. The series comprises 1:100-scale models of 钉子户 (nail houses), a Chinese term for private residences whose owners refuse to sell or relocate, disrupting large development projects. Set into pristine white pedestals, the models are surrounded by excavated raw earth that suggests impending construction, memorialising acts of resistance to urban change across geographical and political contexts.

Yuri Pattison's *entropy study* series (2025) extends this inquiry through mass-produced models of unrealised Chinese housing developments created for real estate sales offices. After Evergrande Group's default in 2021, these models surfaced on secondhand marketplaces.[6] In Pattison's works, the windows of these miniature high-rises are illuminated by radioactive particles detected by Geiger counters; their frantic clicks signalling the presence of unseen forces. These artefacts connect invisible radiation—emanating from terrestrial and extraterrestrial sources—to the "market forces" driving property speculation, underscoring links between material and virtual economies.



Yuri Pattison. Front: Installation view of *entropy study*. 2025. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission; Back: Installation view of *cloud gazing (americium)*. 2025. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

These models are presented against the backdrop of Pattison's *cloud gazing (americium)* (2025), a real-time animation of shifting cloud formations determined by an improvised Quantum Random Number Generator (QRNG) that translates the radioactive decay of Americium-241 into numerical data. With this system, Pattison turns statistical modelling into a digital act of divination, fusing the speculative logic of finance and climate science with the ancient impulse to predict the future.

Presented in Far East Shopping Centre (FESC), a strata-titled mall along Singapore's Orchard Road, Pattison's work sits adjacent to a unit housing the building's management, a generic office space marked by a sign, "The Management Corporation Strata Title Plan No. 397." FESC typifies the fate of many strata-titled malls in Singapore: since 2023, the building management has attempted to seek consensus among owners and planning approval for a collective sale of the property. The very ownership model responsible for these malls' distinct character now hastens their decline. Since most of the strata-titled owners must agree to invest in the maintenance and upgrading of facilities, strata-titled owners often opt for collective en bloc sales to developers or real estate investment trusts—which may then decide to overhaul the property or, more likely, to demolish and redevelop. In their 2024 analysis of Singaporean strata malls, Calvin Chua and Aurelia Chan distinguish the difference between strata malls' "structure" and their "spirit." In this context, structure describes the architectural, infrastructural and economic features of these sites, while spirit conveys the intangible character cultivated by tenants and communities of visitors.[7]

Sited at FESC, **Jiajia Zhang**'s *Lure* series reworks familiar forms of public advertising to probe the construction and reinforcement of desire at a societal level. Each of the three sculptures appropriates the shape of a cartoon mascot used to market products to children. Stripped of their branded identities, these inexpensive cardboard standees support small video monitors, typically used for in-store surveillance, to display short films produced by the artist between 2012 and 2024. In *Innocence and panic* (2016) and *When I was in one of my favourite malls, I found it hard to get into trouble* (2012), Zhang focuses her lens on the hands and feet of passers-by or on the reflective surfaces of windows, mirrors and shop displays, highlighting the anonymity of the crowd and the physical and psychological barriers separating interior and exterior.

These reflective surfaces recur in the standees themselves, whose characters are anonymised and obscured by mirrored vinyl that reflects the viewer and their surroundings. Zhang's final video, *Lure (Gifts)* (2024),





Jiajia Zhang. Installation views of *Lure (Innocence and panic)*. 2016. Foam-core cutout, vinyl, metal alloy, 25.4 cm screen and video (colour, sound), 2 min 36 sec. Collection of the artist.

layers personal and social desire by juxtaposing found footage of perfume advertisements with a voiceover reading of "The Gift of the Magi." Adapted from an English-learning tape once used by Zhang's father, the slow and deliberate narration recounts a parable of aspirational fantasy akin to those underpinning capitalist systems of luxury consumption and globalisation. The placement of the video-sculptures within FESC, the vacant units encircled by the high-end stores of Orchard Road, demonstrates how material aspirations often appear just out of reach. While Zhang's generic mascots literally reflect the structure of the shopping centre, her films collectively capture the spirit of increasingly homogenised retail spaces.

Strata-titled malls vividly illustrate *pure intention* as a dual process of calculated technocratic planning and market speculation, offering fleeting opportunities for formal experimentation and the organic development of non-traditional social spaces. These interventions embody Singapore's desire to impose order and progress through finely engineered policy frameworks—melding architectural innovation with novel ownership models to channel economic activity and shape urban life. Yet the social realities and artistic reflections of displacement, alienation and financial uncertainty reveal that these good intentions carry inherent contradictions: they aspire to control and coherence but often produce fragmentation, precarity and unpredictability. This tension between visionary planning and unintended outcomes underscores *pure intention* not merely as a moral stance but as a structural condition.

Faith in the System

In his introduction to *The Singapore Mall Generation*, Liew Kai Khiun documents the closures of malls and major cinemas throughout the 2010s, including Pearl Centre (2013) with its Yangtze Cinema and Shaw Towers (2019) with its Shaw cinema complex. He highlights the role of film (as a medium) and *the cinema* (as a site) in the construction of collective identity in the 20th century and its corresponding dissolution in the 21st century.[8] The decline in cinema attendance and the subsequent shuttering of theatres left a notable void in Singapore, previously home to one of the highest per capita cinema attendance. **Ming Wong**'s *Filem-Filem-Filem* (2008) depicts abandoned and repurposed cinemas throughout Singapore and Malaysia with 50 Polaroid-style instant photographs, paying homage to the pioneering multicultural film industry of pre-independence Singapore. While the instant-photograph format grants the images a sense of intimacy, immediacy and authenticity, the images are digitally composited and re-photographed, producing an unreal architectural presence that captures the memory of these "dream



Ming Wong. Detail of *Filem-Filem-Filem*. 2008–2010. Instant colour photograph from a series of 50, 8.5 × 10.8 × 0.8 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum. Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

palaces" more than a specific moment in time. Presented as a continuous horizontal strip, the work takes on the appearance of a 70 mm film reel, hinting at the unstable temporality of the images themselves.

While Ming Wong's work excavates the fading architectures of cinema, **Adrian Wong** extends this inquiry into the filmic conventions themselves, exploring his family history through tropes popularised by Hong Kong's film industry. Wong's latest work, *With Hate from Hong Kong* (2025), revisits the career of his paternal grandfather, Eddie Wang (王居仁). From the early 1960s until his death in 1981, his grandfather composed scores for over 300 films for Hong Kong-based studios. At the height of their popularity, demand for kung fu films led studios to assemble new films from pre-shot footage, which they edited, dubbed and scored to produce the semblance of a narrative structure.

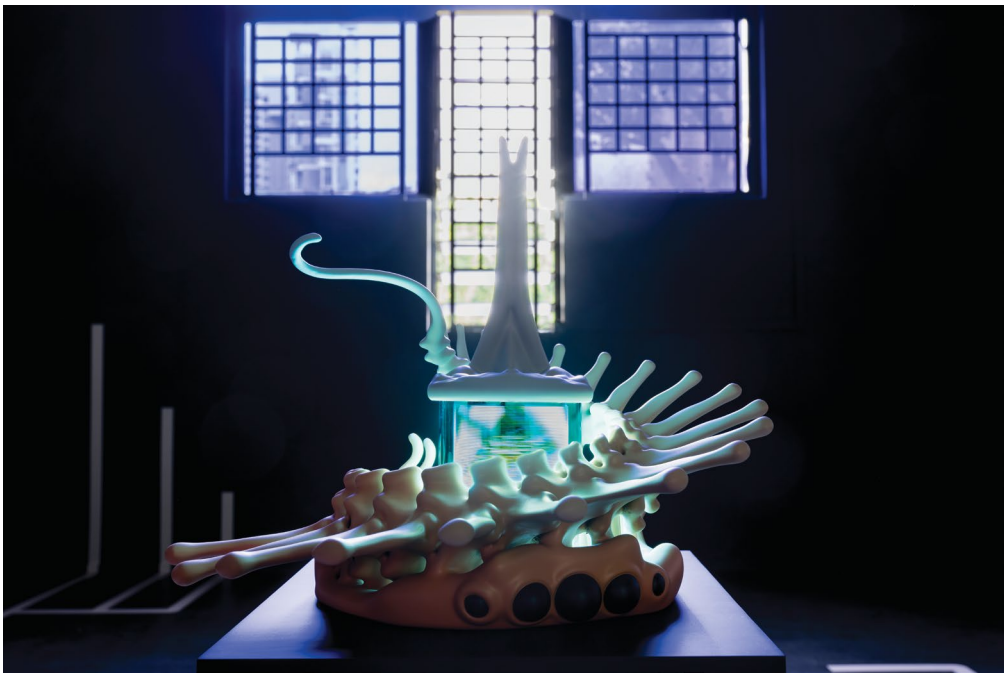
Adapting this process of found narrative, Wong's *With Hate from Hong Kong* combines footage from his earlier melodrama, *With Love from Hong Kong* (2025), with stunt work and fight scenes performed by lookalikes on the sets of the fictional soap opera. Scored in the manner of Wang's own compositions, the film's script was written after

editing and dubbed in the manner of 1970s–1980s B films. Through these recognisable narrative and production tropes, the collaged footage inverts the gendered conventions of television soap operas that Wong interrogated in *With Love from Hong Kong*, granting its female protagonist, a vampire set on revenge, the capacity for exaggerated violence characteristic of martial arts films. Presented in a staged setting adjacent to Tanglin Halt Market, at the centre of one of Singapore's oldest public housing estates, Wong's installation repurposes familiar elements purchased from nearby shops to blend the vernacular environment of the film with that of the rapidly changing neighbourhood.



Riar Rizaldi. Installation view of *Mirage: Agape*. 2025. Single-channel video (colour, sound), 28 min and animatronic head. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

Just as Wong reshapes familiar cinematic tropes to investigate both lineage and legacy, the third entry in **Riar Rizaldi**'s *Mirage* series continues the filmmaker's exploration of mysticism through the techniques of educational media. Whereas the first two episodes took the form of early Hanna-Barbera cartoons and Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, Rizaldi's work *Mirage: Agape* (2025) furthers his inquiry into Sufi mysticism in the Indonesian archipelago through the format of a sword-and-sandals historical re-enactment. In this looping narrative, the spread of various religions from the maritime hub of Barus becomes



Brandon Tay. Installation view of *Votive Spiral*. 2025. 3D-printed aluminium, LED fans, aluminium rail, aluminium plate and paint, 110 × 56 × 44 cm. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Özgür Kar. Left: *Death with the Little Bell*; Right: *Death with Little Flute*. 2021. Custom cases: 122 × 176 × 125 cm (opened); 122 × 176 × 38 cm (closed), and video, (black and white, sound), 15 min. Collection of the artist.

a mechanism to explore the theory of emanation. In contrast to *creation ex nihilo*, emanation theory posits that the universe, and everything contained therein, "flows" from a single infinite and unchanging point. Drawing on the Persian polymath Ibn Sina's intersecting treatises on medicine and mysticism, *Mirage: Agape* deploys emanation theory to connect the origins of the universe with quantum biology. At the centre of Rizaldi's looping narrative are two mutually exclusive protagonists: when they touch, one is cast into the void while the other mutates into a crazed zombie, only to restart the cycle. Despite deploying camp gore like that of Wong's vampiric heroine, Rizaldi's undead protagonists combine two readings of zombies: as the quintessential modern subject of Marxian alienation and as the "philosophical zombie," a thought experiment rejecting materialism and casting the transformed individuals as subjects devoid of human consciousness.

This intersection of biology and mysticism takes a different form in **Brandon Tay**'s paired sculptures, which draw on pivotal moments in scientific history that were triggered by unconscious or irrational phenomena. *Votive Spiral* (2025) embodies a subconscious revelation that led to the discovery of DNA's double helix structure, while the adjacent *Serpent Vessel* (2025) distils Friedrich August Kekulé's famous daydream of the ouroboros that inspired his molecular structure for benzene. Tay expands these subconscious revelations into a speculative narrative with theocratic undertones, illustrated through *Ophidian Codex*, a series of diagrams developed in collaboration with Darius Ou. By reimagining these dream-inspired scientific epiphanies as mystical experiences with far-reaching consequences, Tay suggests that intuitive leaps and subconscious revelations can radically alter the course of history, challenging our understanding of progress, belief and the body's role in an increasingly technological world.

The skeletal forms of Tay's *Votive Spiral* reappear in a triptych of video sculptures *Death with Clarinet* (2021), *Death with Flute* (2021) and *Death with the Little Bell* (2021) by **Özgür Kar**, each depicting an animated skeletal figure, contorted and confined by the dimensions of television monitors housed in custom flight cases. These playful animations function as both absurdist theatre and memento mori. Equipped with a clarinet, a flute and a small bell, they draw on historical imagery from medieval picture Bibles—specifically, the *Danse Macabre*, a procession where the dead lead the living to their graves—and on the

Western musical trope of the *diabolus in musica*, a dissonant trichord arrangement thought to evoke a sense of foreboding. Reflecting on their screen-based existence, one of the skeletons chants, in a strained and melancholic voice, a truism of contemporary internet culture: "You either get the vibe. Or you don't... get the vibe." This "vibe," as evoked by Kar's narrator, links a key reading of *pure intention* to the affective nature of online culture through language used to broadly define social, political, aesthetic shifts that are sensed but not yet seen or named. This refocuses the emphasis of *pure intention* away from Singapore's regimented planning of the built environment towards a more metaphysical understanding that is purely intention (or intention all-the-way-down).

Kar's blend of humour, mortality and constraint finds a quiet echo in **Paul Chan**'s *Khara en Tria (Joyer in 3)* (2019), where inflatable bodies also balance lightness with a deeper sense of fragility. A key work in Chan's *Bathers* series, *Khara en Tria (Joyer in 3)* adapts the prototypical art-historical figure of the bather to the media culture of the 21st century. Extending his earlier series *Breathers*, these inflatable fabric sculptures, animated by industrial fans, nod to the flailing "tube men" ubiquitous in roadside advertising. In Chan's work, however, their collective choreography transcends that utilitarian origin, challenging the tube man's isolation and its association with capitalist consumption.

Chan describes his inflatable dancers as "breathing artworks," drawing on the ancient Greek *pneuma* (breath) as spirit. This idea finds an echo in a 1946 essay on Alexander Calder's early mobiles, wherein Jean-Paul Sartre insists "they breathe, they are nourished by the air."[9] Expanding a recent body of work, **Tuan Andrew Nguyen** appropriates Calder's visual language to probe the entanglement of Western modernism and imperialism. Like Chan's *Bathers*, the apparent simplicity of Nguyen's *Temple* (2025) belies its art-historical and spiritual references.



Tuan Andrew Nguyen. Installation view of *Temple*. 2025. MK82 and M117 artillery shells, pounded brass from artillery shell, aluminium, steel (including stainless-steel cable), wood, composite, water-hyacinth fibre, rubber, paracord and enamel paint, 500 × 954 × 955 cm. Ng Teng Fong Roof Garden Commission by National Gallery Singapore. Photography by Joseph Nair, Memphis West.

Formally, *Temple* recalls the bright orange and refined minimalist lines of a Calder stabile while its materiality evokes the lasting impacts of the American war in Vietnam. Its bright "Day-Glo safety orange" surface signals danger, adopting a colour used to mark unexploded ordnance (UXO). The more extreme peaks and valleys of *Temple*'s sculptural form echo the Hương Tích cave, home to the Chùa Hương temple complex in northern Vietnam. *Temple* also incorporates a wind chime, a gong and two bells repurposed from UXO recovered in the Quảng Trị region of central Vietnam, the site of the heaviest aerial bombardment in history. Each of these sonic elements is tuned to 432 hertz, a frequency believed to promote physical and spiritual healing. Regardless of the scientific validity of these claims, Nguyen's transformation of these objects—from military tools designed for destruction into spiritual tools crafted for healing—is only strengthened by the animistic possibility of material memory.

At once metaphysical and material, *pure intention* here reflects a condition of contemporary life shaped by desire and constraint, revealing the tension between our aspirations to shape the world through magical thinking and the persistence of



Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork. Installation view of *HNZF IV*. 2025. A7 aeroplane stabiliser, stainless-steel base, loudspeakers, water pumps, fountain pipes and hydrophones, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

historical reality. In contrast to Nguyen's transmutation and attempts at sonic healing, **Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork**'s *HNZF IV* (2025) opts for the sensory immersion of noise music as a response to the weight of historical trauma. Crafted from aerospace scrap, computer-controlled water pumps and a series of hydrophones, the fountain alters the meditative sound of water streams into a menacing roar that echoes within the heavy masonry walls of the old gate at Fort Canning Park. This resonance draws on the artist's experiences of the natural limestone caves in Okinawa where civilians once hid from aerial bombing during World War II. These caves serve as symbols of the psychological violence of military invasion and occupation. Presented at Fort Canning Park, a former site of British and Japanese military command on the island, the amplified sound of water echoing through the old fort gate draws parallels between the experiences of Okinawans and Singapore's own history of violent occupation during the war.

Garden City

The most visible counterpoint to Singapore's strata malls is Jewel Changi Airport (Jewel), an integrated shopping mall and public park situated between terminals at Changi Airport. Designed by a team led by Moshe Safdie and developed by Changi Airport Group in partnership with CapitaLand, an investment, development and real estate holding company headquartered in Singapore, Jewel was financed through a Singapore Real Estate Investment Trust (S-REIT), a publicly traded instrument investing in property and related assets.

In 2002, CapitaMall Trust became the first publicly listed REIT in Singapore, promoting a single-owner model that more stringently selected and audited tenants to ensure investment returns. As Liew Kai Khiun observes, this interventionist approach favoured by shareholders "sounded the death knell of multi-owner strata-titled planned shopping centres in Singapore."[10] Formally, S-REIT malls follow a global trend in glass-and-steel construction, replacing the concrete podium-and-tower design of 1970s–1990s strata-titled developments. Iconic architectural spectacles such as Jewel's Rain Vortex and Marina Bay Sands are countered by a homogenisation of retail offerings, replacing the once organic mix of tenants with high-return international outlets.

Tracing the "widespread demolition and replacement" of strata malls in the wake of recent en bloc sales, Chua and Chan diagnose a "palpable sense of placelessness" spreading across Singapore.[11] This sense of placelessness, they argue, can be understood as an absence of spirit resulting from the increasing homogeneity of architectural spaces and management structures, each incentivised by a logic of optimisation, whether of retail space or revenue.

Infusing the placelessness of air travel with a sense of romance, **Ju Young Kim**'s *Aeroplastics* series repurposes the ubiquitous and often overlooked interior components of commercial aircraft as sculptures



Ju Young Kim. Left: *Where the tide carries us*. 2025. Original aircraft window, stained glass, cast bronze, electrical components and steel, 210 × 60 × 55 cm. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission; Right: *In case of emergency break glass*. 2024. Original aircraft window, stained glass and steel, 126 × 160 × 59 cm. Collection of the artist.

incorporating stained glass, cast metal and programmable lighting systems. The gentle curves of the reclaimed plastic components stand in stark contrast to the aggressive angles and military history of Kiyomi Gork's *HNZF IV*. Where *HNZF IV* draws on histories of invasion, occupation and internment, Kim's sculptures evoke a more quotidian form of alienation inherent to contemporary society.

Despite the ubiquity of these experiences and the near uniformity of transit spaces, Kim introduces deeply personal elements. The earliest work on view, *Unsent Parcel* (2022), consists of a used piece of aluminium hand luggage, its worn shell adorned with a shipping label and a soft glow emanating from within. This illumination makes visible the flush pink of an enlarged image of the artist's palm, which lines the interior of the suitcase and draws on the conflicting desires inherent in palm reading: to know one's own future and to alter this perceived predestination. Two larger sculptures by Kim employ the artist's recognisable combination of vacuum-formed plastic and Art Nouveau-inspired stained glass. The inset window of *Where the tide carries us* (2025) is adorned with a

simple image transfer of a staircase descending into the Venetian lagoon, a projection of the memories or aspirations of an unknown passenger onto the carefully designed characterlessness of the cabin. Read in conjunction with Lim Yew Kuan's *Roaming Clouds*, the aircraft is infused with affective residue, spaces filled with the experiences of individual travellers rather than homogeneous and hermetically sealed environments.

The nostalgic haze of Lim's painting is amplified by **Pierre Huyghe**'s *Offspring* (2018), a reimagining of Act II from the artist's seminal exhibition *L'Expédition scintillante* (2002). Inspired by descriptions of weather patterns in Edgar Allan Poe's novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and by a polar expedition the artist took part in aboard the schooner *Tara*, the ghostly installation emits wisps of smoke illuminated by bright, dancing beams of colourful light. This ballet without performers is set to an algorithmic composition that evokes the familiar tones of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies Nos. 1* and *3* (1888); the famous scores are abstracted and constantly modified, making each experience of the work unique. This unpredictable choreography recalls the fleeting impressions of polar auroras transposing extreme latitudes onto Singapore's equatorial climate.

This paradox is less critically examined in the permanent installation *Borealis* at Singapore's Gardens by the Bay (GBTB). Opened in 2012, GBTB established a model later adopted by Jewel Changi Airport. As announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2005, GBTB accompanied a policy shift from Singapore as "Garden City" to "City in a Garden."[12] Its climate-controlled glass domes simulate cool, dry Mediterranean climates and tropical mountain regions, exemplifying the artificiality of the country's "natural" environment. Collectively, these shopping centre-tourist attraction hybrids are most representative of the S-REIT model and its rejection of organic local character in favour of simulated spaces that are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

The "Garden City" vision was formally introduced in 1967 by Lee Kuan Yew through a tree-planting initiative and the development of public parks to "make life more pleasant" and to signify that Singapore was a well-organised city fit for tourism and foreign investment.[13] The campaign lends its title to *Garden City (Orchidaceae)* (2025), a series of botanical sculptures by **Álvaro Urbano**. Inspired by 19th-century illustrations of flora and fauna, Urbano presents a speculative narrative where economic crops introduced during the colonial period—nutmeg, pepper, rubber and coffee—become hosts for flowering orchids. These cash crops and epiphytic orchids act as botanical proxies for the colonial government and the modern Singaporean state, which has tactfully used the naming of hybrid orchids as a mechanism of soft power since 1956. This process of "orchid diplomacy" was formalised after independence and has grown to an industrial scale through the Singapore Botanic Gardens' Orchid Hybridisation Programme.[14] Urbano's delicate forms sit at odds with his material choice, with the sterility and rigidity of stainless steel reflecting the engineered nature of the orchids, the plantations that preceded them and Singapore's proliferation of manicured green spaces.

While Urbano's work reflects on the manicured image of both nature and nation in Singapore, **Faysal Altunbozar** turns to the quieter, everyday ways humans shape complex ecosystems. Altunbozar's *Carriers* (2025), a series of cast resin wall sculptures combining the forms of trainer soles, seedpods and insect bodies, highlights a complex web of interdependence in which humans unwittingly disperse seeds of both native and invasive plant species. The series title further connects botanical and biological threats, linking the introduction of invasive species with the risk of viral infection during the HIV epidemic. Altunbozar incorporates seeds into these intimately scaled compositions, each tied to Singapore's history of nature and commerce. In addition to the large seeds of rubber trees, the artworks feature *Bougainvillea* and *Delonix regia* seeds—plants introduced from South America and Madagascar—and poppy seeds, recalling Singapore's history as a key node in the opium trade.



Álvaro Urbano. Detail of *Garden City (Orchidaceae)*. 2025. Stainless steel, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Faysal Altunbozar. Installation view of *Feeder No. 8 (lowlands)*; *Feeder No. 9 (jungle fatigue)*; *Feeder No. 10 (120 DPM)*. 2025. Epoxy clay, ceramic granules, charcoal, lacquer, nylon mesh, nylon webbing, D-Rings, bird bands and seed mix, *No. 8*: 75 × 8 × 8 cm, *No. 9*: 71 × 17 × 17 cm, *No. 10*: 75 × 17 × 17 cm. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

This focus on unintended ecological entanglements extends into *Feeders* (2025), a series of hanging sculptures that relocate Altunbozar's inquiry to the political and botanical histories of cruising sites on the north side of Chicago. During the Cold War, these sites housed Nike missile arrays, which were concealed by honeysuckle bushes. Introduced as camouflage, the vegetation unintentionally became habitats for insects and migratory birds. The openings on *Feeders* derive from ERDL camouflage prints designed to simulate the jungle environments of Southeast Asia.[15] In a gesture that parallels Tuan Andrew Nguyen's reclamation of unexploded ordnance from the landscape of Vietnam, Altunbozar repurposes the forms of ballistic missiles into bird feeders, transforming a tool of destruction into a site of nourishment.

Feeders reflects on military history and its unintended outcomes, honouring how marginalised and more-than-human communities reclaim such spaces as a refuge of intimacy and survival. In Singapore's highly engineered green spaces, these spontaneous ecologies counter the managed visions of the "City in a Garden" and, more recently, "City in Nature" policies. The inversion of the city-garden relationship, literally contained within the climate-controlled domes of Gardens by the Bay, suggests an awareness in the collective subconscious that *this* is not *natural*.

In stark contrast to the spectacle of GBTB, artist collective **Diakron** and **Emil Rønn Andersen** present an alternative engagement with environmental simulation. Combining synthetic biology and computer science, *7 Summers* (2025) introduces a living, breathing method of future simulation. Filmed at a state-of-the-art climate simulation facility at the Risø research campus in Roskilde, Denmark, the hybrid film visualises seven potential futures based on predicted climate change scenarios. The foundational footage was captured in an Ecotron—a controlled environment capable of modulating temperature, CO_2, wind, humidity, and light in regulated chambers—allowing for a durational material simulation of future weather conditions. Over the course of several months, three model ecosystems—an industrial wheat field, a fallow plot and a salt marsh—are exposed to their own potential futures based on possible climate change scenarios.



Diakron & Emil Rønn Andersen. Installation view of *7 Summers*. 2025. Single-channel video (colour, sound), 21 min. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

These model ecosystems are documented using Andersen's patented DK179913, a technological solution for simulating light around an object, ultimately enabling the composition of photorealistic simulated backgrounds and natural lighting approximations. The resulting datasets are used to insert the projected biotopes into vast digital renderings of Risø's future landscapes, offering an expansive image of futures that may or may not come to pass. While the simulated nephomancy of Pattison's *cloud gazing (americium)* reflects desperate attempts to predict the future, *7 Summers* depicts the physical effects of radically different conditions for future life and offers a sensory encounter with the instability of natural systems at their breaking point. Yet both works reflect the temptation of simulation, replete with its lure of mastery and control.

The immersive, climate-controlled simulations of Pattison, Diakron and Gardens by the Bay transpose speculative futures and displaced geographies onto the present, revealing *pure intention* as a technocratic desire to aestheticise control and render the volatility of the natural world legible, programmable and economically productive. **Yuyan Wang**'s *Green Grey Black Brown* (2024) fractures this illusion of mastery to reveal the tensions of climate capitalism. Weaving found industrial

and commercial footage into a montage that captures the algorithmic indifference of a TikTok "For You" feed, Wang constructs a paradoxical collage of images that includes landscapes scarred by oil extraction, factories manufacturing plastic plants, and the artificial greenery populating dioramas and malls.

Her film expands to techno-solutionist fantasies of a warming planet—liquid trees, vertical farms, even factory ruins painted green to appear as a lush forest to meet environmental quotas. In Wang's arresting images, petroleum collapses time, linking its Mesozoic origins to its extraction, combustion and transformation in the Anthropocene. A slowed rendition of the 1983 hit single "Owner of a Lonely Heart" accompanies the barrage of images. The song's opening lines carry a new existential weight in this altered context: "Move yourself, you always live your life, never thinking of the future."

The illusion of mastery over nature—whether through technology, architecture, or curated landscapes—finds its clearest expression in the myth of the air-conditioned nation: an environment so tightly engineered, so meticulously controlled, that the chaos of the world seems held perpetually at bay. Air-conditioning here is not only a technical solution but a metaphor for statecraft—a way of sealing off discomfort, unpredictability and entropy. Nature is not preserved but performed: curated tropical gardens, synthetic biodiversity and reclaimed coastlines that stand in for ecological harmony while masking environmental precarity. This choreography of comfort, precision and cleanliness produces a simulation of stability—Singapore as climate-proof, crisis-proof, future-proof. Yet this managed reality reveals its own anxiety: that control is always partial, always symbolic, a ritual gesture made in the face of global forces that exceed even the most disciplined forms of governance.

And so, the contradiction at the heart of *pure intention* is laid bare. If good intentions imply an unfulfilled promise, then *pure intention*s verge on delusion—a belief so complete in its moral or aesthetic clarity that failure becomes invisible or irrelevant. In this sense, manifestation culture, speculative investment and state-led environmental design are all symptoms of the same condition: the refusal to accept disorder as real. The participating artists do not aim to resolve these contradictions but to inhabit them. They engage in a kind of strategic failure: not cynicism, but a refusal of certainty; not purity, but persistence in the face of its impossibility. If there is power in intention, it lies not in its ability to manifest a better world but in its capacity to name the systems that forestall it.

1 "Shaping our future together," Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority, updated August 2025, https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Resources/Publications/Skyline/Skyline-issue14/Shaping-our-future-together/sg-first-ltp.

2 "Completion of People's Park Complex," NLB, updated November 2025, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=bad9f4ed-c644-462d-8124-de3b7f208049.

3 For the sake of clarity, I adopt the distinction made by Calvin Chua and Aurelia Chan in their book *Singapore Strata Malls: A Retrospective for the Future*, which uses the broader term "strata malls" to refer to "collectively-owned retail developments [in] the state and private sector that have a particular collective character" and the narrower term "strata-titled malls" to refer "specifically to malls owned by groups of private individuals registered under the Strata Act." See Calvin Chua and Aurelia Chan, *Singapore Strata Malls: A Retrospective for the Future* (Suburbia Projects, 2024), 10.

4 Foo Kwee Horng, Koh Nguang How and Lim Cheng Tju, "A Brief History of Woodcuts in Singapore," *BiblioAsia*, National Library Singapore, accessed September 2, 2025, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-2/issue3/oct-2006/singapore-history-woodcuts/.

5 Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS Press, 2015).

6 Daisuke Wakabayashi and Joy Dong, "5 Years On, China's Property Crisis Has No End in Sight," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/25/business/china-property-downturn.html.

7 Chua and Chan, *Singapore Strata Malls*.

8 Liew Kai Khiun, *The Singapore Mall Generation: History, Imagination, Community* (Marshall Cavendish, 2022), 20.

9 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialist on Mobilist," *ARTnews*, December, 1947, https://calder.org/wp-content/uploads/bibliography/art-news-1947-2/12-1-47.ArtNews.pdf.

10 Liew Kai Khiun, "Arcades in the Air," in *The Singapore Mall Generation: History, Imagination*, Community (Marshall Cavendish, 2022), 43.

11 Chua and Chan, *Singapore Strata Malls*, 12.

12 Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech at the Opening of Gardens by the Bay," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, June 29, 2012, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-opening-gardens-bay.

13 "'Garden city' vision is introduced," NLB, accessed November 13, 2025, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=a7fac49f-9c96-4030-8709-ce160c58d15c.

14 "Singapore's Orchid Diplomacy," *BiblioAsia*, NLB, accessed November 13, 2025, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-18/issue-1/apr-to-jun-2022/singapore-orchid-diplomacy/.

15 ERDL takes its name from the US Army Engineer Research & Development Laboratories, which developed the pattern in 1948.

PRIMAL INSTINCT: Delirious and Other In-formal Models of Nature

Hothouse

About Hothouse
Hothouse is a Singapore-based collective that supports and prototypes artistic practices. It nurtures experimentation and multimedia research/production as a mode of upending conventions and liberating inquiry. Founded in 2020, it is housed within the symbiotic time-space shared between three entities: new media art collective INTER—MISSION, creative design agency Currency, and speculative research lab formAxioms (fXØ).

This ever-evolving interdisciplinary setup encompasses expertise across contemporary art, technology, design, and architecture, allowing for emancipatory approaches towards knowledge building and dissemination. The collective fosters encounters that strengthen critical and long-form creative practices, embracing speculation, excess, and ambiguity as part of its creative exchange with artists, creatives, businesses, and audiences. They do not shy away from speculation, excess, ambivalence, redundancy, ambiguity, inefficiency, etc. Today, Hothouse focuses on technological transdisciplinary work through its Internal Practices series, public programmes, and publications.

Hothouse's curatorial programming and artistic productions have also been presented at National Gallery Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore Design Week, Singapore Art Week and OH! Open House.



Installation view of Tini Aliman's *Field Notes & The Ecology of Chance* as part of Hothouse's *PRIMAL INSTINCT* (2025). Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

My childhood was elegant homes, tree-lined streets, the milkman, building backyard forts, droning airplanes, blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees. Middle America as it's supposed to be. But on the cherry tree, there's this pitch oozing out—some black, some yellow—and millions of red ants crawling all over it. I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath." [...] "I learned that just beneath the surface there's another world, and still different worlds as you dig deeper. I knew it as a kid, but I couldn't find the proof. It was just a kind of feeling. There is goodness in blue skies and flowers, but another force—a wild pain and decay—also accompanies everything.

—David Lynch[1]

Noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog, as every message, every cry, every call, every signal must be separated from the hubbub that occupies silence, in order to be, to be perceived, to be known... As soon as a phenomenon appears, it leaves the noise; as soon as a form looms up, or pokes through, it reveals itself by veiling the noise. So noise is not a matter of phenomenology, but of being itself.

—Michel Serres[2]

The Designed Garden and Other Forms of Nature

What forms of nature—inconvenient or resistant—were erased, tamed or ignored in the creation of our landscaped utopia? What tangled histories, buried ecologies and ungovernable voices haunt the cracks of the (one-)nature imposed by design? How might we reimagine nature through hybrid, emergent and impure models that resist commodification, purity and control? What alternative rituals, instincts and material encounters could reopen space for contingency, unpredictability and ecological plurality? How can human and more-than-human actors navigate spaces freed from premeditation and imposed order, allowing for unregulated growth and entangled belonging?[3] Taken together, these questions form not a map but a terrain set in motion. Hothouse sets forth this framework for another nature to speak, asking what kinds of alternative growth might take root in the fractures of our designed environments if space is left for other natures and *PRIMAL INSTINCT* to emerge.

The Cracks of (One-)Nature—What Leaks Through Refusal

PRIMAL INSTINCT opens another relation to *pure intention* through a transdisciplinary lens—an approach not born of method but of necessity, shaped by the velocity and violence of the now. This is not an exercise in critique but in compression—where understanding moves beyond the analytical and becomes a reckoning: emotional, pressurised, and yet strangely clarifying. The *photosynthescript* that is "Nature" is no longer a neutral backdrop; it has become a fractured archive of possibility. We subvert the idea of (one-)nature[4] not with answers but with gestures that gradually replace it with a multiplicity of models grafted and woven into its cracks. This is not an appeal to idealism but a recognition of what already is: tangled, emergent and forever forking paths. These cracks are not simply structural flaws but generative spaces: signs of strain in the imposed coherence of a singular worldview. They are places where tension accumulates, where the fiction of unity shows its fiction, where suppressed knowledge, alternative ecologies and hybrid ontologies surface. Cracks become not symbols of failure but sites of possibility.

Points of rupture are foreign by default. They are not direct interruptions of the master's discourse but inflections—points of diffraction. They are movable topologies, non-identities that are difficult to represent. We are interested in finding those moments of intensification, to have a peek at what hides beyond, running parallel to, subjected to, yet countering the bluntness of a *pure intention*. We are lured towards what ultimately gets things in motion: latent drives, subversions kicking, the *PRIMAL INSTINCT* and informal strategies of reproduction, myths of redefinition, ... possibly minor acts and marginal sites, indexes showing the possibility of radical inventions and activations, art speaking through primal screams, pointing to or gesturing towards a certain ontological rebellion. Cracks and folds are entry points, the topological complexity or point of rupture for unruly growth. They are metastatic fissures, allowing a polyphony of perspectives to take root and sprawl—for a subtle yet radical rewilding of thought.

An invitation is extended to enter terrains where nature is no longer singular or polished, but multiple, unresolved and insistently alive. We begin from the recognition that the leaps of *pure intention*—so foundational to the nation-state's Garden City vision—were not neutral gestures, but acts that narrowed the field of possibility, that set boundaries on what could be seen, felt, or allowed to grow. In this (one-)nature of the designed garden, other potential natures were stripped away: the unpredictable, the deformed, the uncanny, the sublime.

Against this backdrop, we searched for instincts—not as answers, but as cracks and countercurrents, in-formalities[5] through which alternative natures might surface. From this search came three instinctual responses, each proposing its own model of nature: *Square Forest*, *Field Notes & the Ecology of Chance* and *TOTAL-PLEASURE-SUITE*. Though divergent in form, they converge in their refusal of containment, offering ways to sense what lies beyond the monolithic coherence of a singular "nature."

The field sits in suspension. Once the site of formal education—trimmed hedges, ordered timetables, the measured repetition of drills—it now waits, unsure whether the next gesture will be preservation or erasure. Raffles Girls' School, the name carries the layered weight of colonial commemoration and the nation's own elite histories, its playing fields long used to train discipline, stamina and collective display. Today, the grass is left to its own rhythm, neither fully wild nor entirely maintained—an in-between that resists certainty.

In this pause, three works have taken root. They are not posed as answers or puzzles to be solved. They remain open to shifting encounters—appearing, in different moments, as interruptions, echoes, or temporary definitions.

From across the expanse, a towering cube of green draws the eye—*Square Forest* by Salad Dressing—its trees rising well above head height, their canopy forming a dense, shaded volume. Approaching, the temperature drops, light fractures and the atmosphere turns inward. The perimeter is visually dense and seemingly impenetrable, prompting hesitation and detour. One finds an entrance, and at the volume's heart, a large, unmoving figure shaped from foliage—a lucky cat—anchors the space. Severe in outline yet porous to the elements, it sits as both guardian and witness. The forest's stillness carries its own pressure, a sense of endurance that is contemplative yet unyielding.

Nearby, *Field Notes & the Ecology of Chance* by Tini Aliman takes shape as a loose ring of stainless-steel poles etched with random numbers and embedded in the earth, their surfaces catching the sun briefly before sliding back into shadow. Rising at their centre is a mast fitted with four horn speakers, each facing a cardinal direction. At intervals, bird calls break the air—familiar yet never quite belonging to this moment. The sound slips from different directions, displacing the present with echoes of other hours, other landscapes, other histories—temporalities and identities.

Further along the grass, skeletal metal frames mark the ground—*TOTAL-PLEASURE-SUITE* by Elizabeth Gabrielle Lee. The components, once the most ordinary of canteen tables, have been unscrewed, disassembled and reconfigured into lean, repetitive structures. Their linear discipline is softened by small irregularities: tilts, bunches, the occasional leaning away. The table frames recall their former service without nostalgia, their current form slipping between architecture and choreography, workaday object and improbable ornament.

In this open ground, the works sit among the field's pauses and continuities, the way grass advances between markings of a pitch. They register change not as a sharp break but as an uneven drift—like something already underway before it can be named. The models of nature presented here are instinctive, ritualistic and somewhat haunted by the spectre of forgotten pasts and impossible or *lost* futures. They unfold through open systems, contingency, probability and the absurd calculations that underpin modern life and its myths of fortune. Each model sets the sterile infrastructures of the city against embodied practices of discovery and care. Drawing from folk belief, pre-modern cosmologies and hyper-modern rituals alike, they carry ecological memory—not only of land and ancestral time but of an inner, intuitive relation to the unknown.

This tension between design and unpredictability, between the measurable and the unnameable, becomes a central interrogation of what it means to be human. Here, the human subject is not autonomous and rational but obsessive, seeking, driven by connection or feral abstraction. Even within the most controlled environments, the irrational and the sacred surface—not as opposites to contemporary life but as elements entangled within it.

The act of listening to nature, participating in a lottery, whispering to a shrine, tending graves or casting totemic relics might be seen not simply as superstition but as enduring gestures of desire, care and resistance. Within *PRIMAL INSTINCT*, these practices may appear less as nostalgic remnants and more as invitations to notice how rituals create openings—spaces where the unannounced can surface, where a grin might flash through the cracks of order.

For some, this may suggest how the neatness of planned landscapes often mutes the vivid saturation of what is patchy or leftover. (One-)

nature makes it difficult to encounter these residues—objects, sounds or fragments that do not fit the design—yet it is precisely in such encounters that the possibility of instinctive gestures arises. What altars could be assembled from mud, from chance fragments, from stray acoustics?

An audience might come to sense how (one-)nature, with its norms and standards, restricts such possibilities, standardising value and forbidding serendipity. In this light, the cancelled encounter, the wasted time, even the instinctive impulse to repurpose or misuse, become part of what is repressed. Perhaps then, what emerges is not a fixed conclusion but an open question: what does it mean for spontaneity, for contingency itself, to be disallowed by (one-)nature?

"Nature" is at once all and nothing, a prism of complexity, a constellation of concealed models awaiting exploration and collective redefinition. It is a cipher—generic and open at its base, yet always inscribed with multiplicities within its folds. What matters is not the recovery of a singular truth, but the emergence of alternative modes of speaking and making nature, to see what blossoms through hybrid interpretations and representations, by attending to the marginal characters left aside when one model (of nature) is privileged over the very many.

We are interested in the collective dimension of definition, in the acts of translation, invention and negotiation that bring new social and environmental ecologies into being. Nature—entropy, necessity, feral drives—and the human—story, abstraction, feral drives—stand here as co-constitutive forces, entwined in a dance between unpredictability and structure. To be human is not only to chase rational progress but to honour the unknown, to stay with what is fragile, futile or unresolved, and to discover meaning within unlikely motions. In this light, the works become both elegy and invocation—a quiet rebellion against the tyranny of certainty.

On Site: Former Raffles Girls' School Field—You Built This, It Doesn't Care

The site is marginal, an informal infrastructure, strangely liminal—neither abandoned nor fully tended. The former Raffles Girls' School field remains after the school has moved, a patch of ground now loosened from the regimentation of drills and chalked lines. The grass is uneven, untrimmed, brimming with weeds and untamed growth. Trees edge its perimeter, and the surface carries faint echoes of its past: the memory of games, the discipline of routine, the performance of order. Without daily care, it has softened, rewilded in parts and begun to drift towards entropy.



Installation view of Elizabeth Gabrielle Lee's *TOTAL-PLEASURE-SUITE* as part of Hothouse's *PRIMAL INSTINCT* (2025). Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Installation view of Salad Dressing's *Square Forest* as part of Hothouse's *PRIMAL INSTINCT* (2025). Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

In it, with it, on it, we envision a
mediated occupation of a field
unshackled from precision—a
ground open to the chance
of becoming. This is not
mere abandonment but
a deliberate inquiry
into the tension
between control
and autonomy.
What might flourish
when systems of dominance
are surrendered? How do human
and more-than-human actors navigate
uncharted ecologies, where time and change
carve their paths unchecked?

The gesture—of letting go of control, of reframing, rewilding, shifting, parasitising[6]—becomes both conceptual and visceral: an ode to ecological autonomy, primal impulse and the infinite possibilities of contingency—the unregulated. It asks us to reconsider the entangled relationships between species, spaces and the forces that bind and unbind them. What was built persists, but it does not care.

1 David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch*, ed. Chris Rodley (Faber & Faber, 1997).

2 Genesis [1982], trans. Geneviève James et al. (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 13.

3 The term *more-than-human* designates a conceptual shift within philosophy, anthropology and ecology that contests the anthropocentric paradigm by decentring the human as the sole or primary locus of agency, meaning or value. *More-than-human* underscores the entanglement of humans with nonhuman entities (animals, plants, machines, ecologies, spirits, etc.), invoking ontologies of relationality and distributed agency. The phrase challenges the binary oppositions of nature/culture and human/nonhuman, proposing instead an ecology of practices wherein agency is shared across species and systems.

4 By "(one-)nature" we refer to the imposed idea of nature as singular, coherent and universal—a constructed unity that erases the plurality of ecologies, knowledge, and lived experiences. The parenthetical "one-" signals both the fiction of this oneness and its fragility, opening space for multiple, entangled and resistant natures to be acknowledged.

5 Teresa Stoppani: "…brings in it the informed, intended not as an absence of form, but as a performative process of form-making that knows no origin (type, plan or model) but works with the given […] It is a movement of change that originates and erupts from within to subvert the established." See "Dust Revolutions. Dust, Informed, Architecture (notes for a reading of Dust in Bataille)," *The Journal of Architecture* 12, no. 4 (2007): 441.

6 The act of parasitising here refers to the philosopher Michel Serres's work. He describes the parasite as a disruptive third term—a figure of noise, interruption and transformation that feeds on, and simultaneously, reconfigures systems of communication, order and exchange, producing new relations out of disorder. There is also a political dimension to the parasite, one that Matteo Pasquinelli rearticulates as a form of inherent possibility of subtraction: a minor, tactical power that siphons energy, knowledge, or value from hegemonic structures and reroutes them as counter-power. See Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Grasset, 1980); Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (NAi Publishers, 2008).

Arcades in the Air: Shopping Centres in the Global City Singapore

Liew Kai Khiun

This article is a revised version of Liew Kai Khiun's chapter "Arcades in the Air: Journeying through Singapore's Planned Shopping Centres," in *The Singapore Mall Generation: History, Imagination, Community* (Marshall Cavendish International, 2022).

About Liew Kai Khiun
Dr. Liew Kai Khiun is a scholar of Asian Cultural and Media Studies in Asia. His research interests include contemporary and historical popular cultures in Singapore. His recent publications address the heritage of Singapore's shopping centres as well as women's participation in Singapore's computer history. Through various organisations and initiatives, Kai Khiun has also actively championed for the conservation of Singapore's built and natural heritage.

> **A family, for instance, would be able to park their car in Raffles Quay near the park and shop in the huge complex bounded by Lavender Street, Serangoon Road, Clemenceau Avenue, Havelock Road, Outram Road, Cantonment Road and the seafront, without once having to stop at a traffic crossing. As the shoppers move from one complex to another, normal highway traffic would either thunder below or above the arcades.[1]**

Written by R. Chandran, a reporter from Singapore's local daily broadsheet *The Straits Times*, this excerpt envisages the future of shopping in Singapore with a network of trains facilitating the unhindered movement of shoppers within a three-mile radius. Titled "What that Singapore 'arcades in the air' will be like," the article, published on 28 May 1969, anticipated a radical transformation of the Singapore landscape with new shopping complexes connected by modern escalators, underground pedestrian lanes and skybridges. Accompanying this article was an illustration of an artist's impression showing a broad covered overhead bridge linking two buildings across a motor carriageway.

Celebrated with significant fanfare, the year 1969 marked the 150th anniversary of the establishment of Singapore as a British colony in 1819. However, having separated from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, Singapore had only just become a republic. In addition to European- and ethnic Chinese-run department stores in the downtown area, Singapore's retail landscape included rows of shophouses, open bazaars, and roadside hawker stalls. Operating at street level, these establishments had to contend with both vehicular and pedestrian traffic within the humid tropical climate.

A few years before the columnist's vision, the Collyer Quay area saw the opening of Singapore's first overhead pedestrian bridge in 1964. The structure was a skeletal, narrow 113-foot light-gauge steel bridge, which stood 17 feet above the road and was decorated with state crests on each side.[2] Given that much of the island was still largely rural, with *kampong* settlements and farms, the idea of an overhead bridge in the downtown area was considered novel. With the country's first escalator installed in Orchard Theatre in 1965, the idea of an air-conditioned complex with shops and escalators was probably unthinkable.[3]

A slice of Chandran's futuristic vision was realised in 1974 with the revamping of the overhead wooden bridge into a fully covered, air-conditioned, expanded walkway with 56 retail outlets, served by escalators at both ends. Named after the century-old Change Alley, which was renowned for money changers serving both the financial district and the seaport at Clifford Pier, the SGD 7 million retail linkway was part of the urban renewal undertakings. Beyond its functional purposes in facilitating commuter traffic, the Change Alley Aerial Plaza is connected to the adjoining SGD 70 million Ocean Building, built of fibreglass with a futuristic circular revolving restaurant at the Clifford Centre that produces a "glowing jewel-like effect when the lights are on at night."[4]

"Arcades in the Air" went beyond the description of the Change Alley Aerial Plaza. At the critical juncture of Singapore's postcolonial historical trajectory, it was part of a transformative futuristic vision of a generation seeking to imaginatively leapfrog Singapore out of its current condition as just another Third World city. Taking office as Singapore's first Prime Minister in 1959, Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) proposed in 1967 a more hygienic and naturalistic goal for Singapore as a "garden city beautiful with flowers and trees and as tidy and litterless as can be."[5] This goal was further encapsulated within Singapore's Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam's (1915–2006) vision of a highly mobile citizenry, a well-managed metropolis connected internationally by modern technologies such as electronic communications and by air travel. Considered by Rajaratnam to be in its infancy, this global city, which he termed "Ecumenopolis—the world-embracing city," contrasted with the traditionally more insulated cities as well as the necropolis of many contemporary overcrowded and dilapidated megacities unable to cope with increasing urban populations.[6] From commercial flights bringing tourists to comfortably air-conditioned premises serviced by dense networks of escalators and lifts, as well as dedicated car parks, the burgeoning modern and hygienic shopping centres from the 1960s were beginning to herald a new retail culture and consumer experience in the global city of Singapore.

The visions of the Garden City and Global City became the futuristic zeitgeist of the new republic, filtering down to urban planning visions. Here, the modern mall was described by Sim Loo-Lee[7] as the "Planned Shopping Centre," which also gave the publication its title. This referred to the proliferation of modern shopping centres with retail outlets stacked over several storeys of the podium supporting tower blocks of commercial offices and apartments. Three interrelated infrastructural, architectural, and economic attributes defined this era. The spread of shopping centres followed the trajectories of relocation and suburbanisation.[8]

Accompanying the expansion was the transport network of roads and, subsequently, from the 1980s, rail networks into the growing suburbs, which were in turn served by new shopping centres.

In terms of commercial zoning, as part of creating more shopping districts outside the city centre, the concept of shopping became systematised spatially. This started from the former idyllic suburbs of Orchard Road in the 1970s and the reclaimed lands of Marina Bay in the 1980s, Suntec City in the 1990s, and finally the Marina Bay Sands in the 2010s. Within the historical Chinatown district, examples included the People's Park Complex, designed by D. P. Architects, and Outram Park Complex, completed by 1970. At the eastern outskirts of the city centre were Golden Mile Centre and Shaw Tower, both completed by the 1970s, with offices, residential apartments and cinemas. With the rail network linking one mall to another across the country from the 1980s, Singapore's landscape resembled the futuristic scenario of moving from one complex to another "without having to stop at a traffic crossing."[9]

Accompanying the horizontal expansion was the vertical extension of shopping centres made possible by advances in engineering technology, particularly lifts, air-conditioning, and escalators that made the "Technology of Tall"[10] possible. The ability to cool the entire building complex, even in equatorial Singapore, was fundamentally critical for these buildings. New shopping centres like High Street Shopping Centre were the site of General Electric's and Mitsubishi's largest air-conditioning project, with a total installation of 60 water-cooling units in 1971.[11] Local companies like Ryoden supplied and installed lifts and escalators in new buildings in Singapore with the Japan-based Mitsubishi Electric models.[12] By the same year, *The Straits Times* envisioned a changing Singapore skyline of multistorey centres with "instant shopping in air-cool comfort."[13]

Introduced to the Orchard Theatre in 1965 as a single-direction flight of moving stairs,[14] the escalator became essential to shopping malls from the 1970s. It became further entrenched in popular imagination when the British pop music sensation David Bowie was filmed using an escalator at the newly built Far East Plaza during his visit to Singapore in 1983. With the centralisation of electrical systems, made possible by computerisation first adopted in Plaza Singapura in 1973, mall operations became further simplified and economised.[15] These malls offered a more dynamic edge to the existing street-level shophouses, single-level markets and amusement centres.

Both the affordances of building technologies and the realisation of urban zoning plans of the postcolonial government facilitated the connectivity and conveniences of shopping districts and belts that constituted the idealised "Cosy Town" of the future described by urban planner Lim Chew Kuan. Highlighting the extremes between the efficient but overtly imposing "superhuman" town and the congested "swamped" towns moving towards disintegration, Lim's Cosy Town was characterised by an "atmosphere of interest, intimacy and activity."[16] Lim Chew Kuan defined a Cosy Town shopping centre as one where parks and delivery tunnels complemented public transport and pedestrian networks, allowing for a comfortable "essentially human scale [in which] market scale and shopping arcade [could] be realised."[17]

Within this futuristic vision, the historical development of these malls can be categorised generally into three areas: architectural typologies, design and retail management, and ownership. With the emphasis on megastructures of mixed-use commercial and residential towers, retail podiums wrapped in imposing concrete facades began to pop up. Examples include Singapore's more iconic shopping centres like Plaza Singapura, People's Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex, which also reflected the Brutalist architectural movement.[18] Design trends in shopping centres began to shift from the imposing concrete walls to the visually lighter feel of glass by the turn of the 21st century, with new megamalls such as Orchard Central, ION Orchard and Marina Bay Sands by the 2010s. Complementing metallic boards, glass panels provide more playfully wavering and jagged facades that luxuriously contrast with visual and lighting decorations. In the case of revamped shopping centres like Plaza Singapura, replacing the front concrete façade of the premises with glass provided more pleasant window views, particularly for restaurants.

In terms of management and operations, the shopping centres in Singapore were organised under two main arrangements, namely the

strata-titled malls, consisting of more autonomous individually owned units within the building, and centrally curated malls owned by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs). Implemented in the 1960s, the former were typically more dated malls, while the latter, emerging from the early 2000s, represented newer complexes. Departing from the relatively more laissez-faire management of the strata-titled malls, REIT management adopted highly interventionist approaches towards the selection and auditing of tenants and marketing of the premises to guarantee investment returns.[19]

The REIT mall concept was replicated regionally, particularly with extensions into China from 2006,[20] including the iconic Raffles City "Horizontal Skyscraper" complex in Chongqing, which spans 300 metres across four glass towers on the 22.7-acre development designed by Safdie Architects (who also designed Marina Bay Sands and Jewel Changi in Singapore).[21] Changi International Airport remains one of the busiest airports in the world, serving tourists, shoppers, and passengers alike. It was perhaps in the oval-shaped glass Jewel Changi Airport complex, opened in 2019, that the vision of the "Arcades in the Air" became the hyperreality of "Arcades in the Airport." Completed with waterfalls amidst lush gardens surrounded by retail outlets, the complex receives around 300,000 visitors a day. Now, as one of Singapore's iconic landmarks, Jewel Changi Airport serves as a connecting node that sustains Singapore as both a global city and a garden city, first envisaged half a century ago.

However, the Change Alley Aerial Plaza that inspired this vision in the 1960s remains largely forgotten. Expressing his angst about the changing landscape of the vicinity that he remembered fondly from childhood, Singaporean-Australian Boey Kim Cheng wrote during his visit:

> **Nobody pauses to look at the hanging reminders of the past; few remember that this area was the landing stage for Singapore's history and a launch pad for its meteoric rise into a corporate nation, a high-rise metropolis that remembers very little of what it was like mere decades ago. The photographs are tokens of a past, a sense of belonging and history that nobody seems anxious to reclaim.[22]**

Boey recalls his childhood memories of the area in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time when sea travel was still the dominant mode of international travel. With air travel taking over in just two decades, the vision of arcades in the air was transferred from the seaport to the airport.

At the time of writing, the Change Alley Aerial Plaza has been renamed OUE Link, part of the REIT's OUE Bayfront, where it is described as "an air-conditioned overhead pedestrian bridge with retail shops commanding double frontages, providing convenient and sheltered access to Raffles Place. Other than easy access to the Telok Ayer and Raffles Place MRT Stations, the Downtown MRT Station is also within walking distance via an underground pedestrian linkway."[23] In contrast to the vision of arcades in the air in the 1960s, this description of the linkway comes across as banal. Although it seems unlikely now, for the constantly futuristically-oriented world city of Singapore, a similar description may await Jewel Changi Airport by the centenary of Singapore's independence in 2065.

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7 Sim Loo-Lee, *A Study of Planned Shopping Centres in Singapore* (NUS Press, 1984).

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10 Jason Barr, "The Technology of Tall (Part 1): Skeletons, Outriggers, and Buttresses," *Building The Skyline*, July 16, 2019, https://buildingtheskyline.org/skyscraper-technology-1/.

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17 Lim, "Shopping Centres of The Future," 67.

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Signs of Existence

Selene Yap

About Selene Yap
Selene Yap is a curator at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Her curatorial practice follows a situational approach, developing research and exhibitions in close dialogue with artists whose work respond to the contingencies and particularities of place, process and memory. Yap previously held research roles at the Future Cities Laboratory and the Singapore University of Technology and Design. She was also Programme Manager for Visual Arts at The Substation, supporting exhibitions and initiatives that sought to defy conventional use of the arts space. For the Biennale, she asks how systems work and where they slip, using those gaps to rethink belonging and to surface the absences that shape how we inhabit landscape.



Tan Pin Pin. *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. 2025. Video and voile screen, synchronised double-channel HD projections (colour, four-channel sound), 39 min. Collection of the artist.

Somewhere in a unit in Lucky Plaza, Inuka, Singapore's first polar bear born in captivity, turns in his pool while, on the facing screen, the Pan Island Expressway holds a steady 80 km/h. A parallel frame fixes distance and carries both images so they overlap: white fur slides over asphalt; lane markings pass through water. For a moment, the bear's loop and the road's pace align; then they slip. The overlap produces a brief coherence before dissolving.

Tan Pin Pin's *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (2025) makes a simple yet exact point: systems set the terms, but meaning arrives in the gaps. Speed limits, enclosures and viewing distance are all in place, yet attention builds in the drift between them. Its allure lies in the strange composite of bear and road which makes visible what the enclosure and flow routinely make imperceptible: the tempos and bodies that move through the city without ever meeting, yet shape each other all the time. Prompted by these small frictions, the work traces how power works in ordinary time. At times captivity becomes care, congestion becomes governance, and leisure becomes compliance. These spatial and temporal tensions remain unresolved, letting small observations accumulate so the present can be read through its quiet interruptions.

What the work reveals is not contained by its frame. Its tensions reverberate into the city that made it possible. Tan's work discloses coexistence, not opposition: how systems rely on minor deviations to stay alive, and how meaning travels along paths no plan can fully predict. This sense that planned systems cannot fully account for all the meanings that emerge from them underpins the Biennale. Intention is *not* the whole story. Systems generate afterlives and side effects. Within *pure intention*, these gestures towards reuse or transformation recur. A container holds an image of exchange. A drain returns to the ground as sculpture. Screens that measure time also leak it when two tempos meet. In offices and households, maintenance routines, small repairs and informal adjustments keep things going. These everyday acts are quiet but formative. They show how planning meets improvisation, and how control and drift share the same surface.

pure intention clarifies this across the incidental and the peripheral, attending to instances where meaning emerges through attunement rather than resolution: through sensitivity to how infrastructures and gestures, maintenance and imagination, hold one another in place. To approach a city often characterised through narratives of intention requires slowing the drive towards singular explanations. The city's structures invite attention to what exceeds their designs—residual gestures, provisional

arrangements. Artists in this Biennale compose attention within systems of water, ground, logistics and time. Some works follow existing flows, while others reroute or make them perceptible. What becomes significant is not only what systems intend but how they are inhabited, felt and reconfigured in practice.

The works in *pure intention* do not illustrate Singapore's logics from outside but engage them from within. The Biennale centres on locale, be it town, city, nation or museum. It examines how systems and gestures can be read through one another, how atmosphere informs representation and institution, and how the artifice of a formal practice interacts with a social collective grounded in belief and the critique of structure. The Biennale also presents how modern and contemporary artists, from Genpei Akasegawa to CAMP, sustain an ecology of forms in which structures and habits render the conditions of art and their myriad poetic effects.

The Intentional and the Incidental

I can't help but dream of a kind of criticism that would not try to judge... It would multiply not judgements, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them—all the better.[1]

The following sections take as their subjects cargo in transit, kung fu melodramas, spectral presences and devotional sayings, tracing how these varied, porous bodies act as affective intercessors between the environments they occupy and shape—from colonial-era housing and early post-independence housing estates to a former school and strata-titled malls. They are situated in Singapore, a hyper-capitalist, hyper-efficient and technocratic Southeast Asian city, where tensions are generated between economic imperatives and lived experiences. These subjects prompt reconsideration of architecture and landscape. Through them, we encounter spurious evidence, the sort cast off as no more than anecdotes, situations and fieldnotes—flimsy, inefficient, unsanctioned, informal. Manifestly local and vivid, such discrepant evidence impresses itself firmly onto architectural encounters. This essay therefore writes with and through its subjects and their anecdotes, situations and fieldnotes. What happens when these sticky entities are admitted into architectural discourse?

The Biennale positions itself to focus on the incidental, aiming to disrupt the usual approach to discourse and pedagogical closure. Existing scholarship tends to be couched in a statist framework of national

development, an indigenous-to-modern perspective described through transnational narratives, and notably, postcolonial histories. These modalities have largely focused on authorship, intentionality, design lineage and influence, or the politics, society and culture enveloped within the city's production processes. *pure intention* resists the compulsion to look for meaning or significance that pre-empts opportunities, instead allowing space for insight, epiphany, fabulation. When experience meets interpretation here, the reading is shaped as much by environment as by concept. The discursive becomes porous—absorbing the textures, frictions and atmospheres of the city—so that analysis no longer presents itself as explanation, but as something attuned to the contingencies through which meaning takes form. Moreover, the Biennale seeks to implicate the museological imaginary, recognising that the ground on which it stands is never seamless but shaped by the tensions and omissions through which art becomes legible. Within these conditions, it allows the works to challenge their own organisational categories, opening space for narratives that press against what has been secured.

The three sections in the essay provide close encounters with these sites and works through affective evidence, presented in the immediacy of words and photographs. To this end, the writing remains close to the experience of encountering each piece of architecture or landscape. Each section strives to record the sensory and the visual, stalling overarching conclusions, straining to find precise words and exact theories and histories, to capture and transport discourse to that place, and to the immediacy of encounter.

Intercessors

I. Intuitive Ecologies: Seeding, Drifting and the City's Metabolism

Singapore's coastline is an active, restless edge. Concrete seawalls, refineries, container terminals, military reserves, and gated waterfronts hold the island firmly in place, even as the sea continues to press and reshape what stands on it. Though ringed by infrastructure, Singapore is also pelagic: the largest of more than 60 islands, some of which have been absorbed through reclamation or fused into new ground. Along the Singapore Strait, the terrain records decades of dredging and consolidation—the shifting of ports towards Tuas, the quieting of former shipyards and the cranes now stilled behind shuttered gates. Seen through this metabolism, the coastline operates less as a line than as a living process, absorbing currents of labour, cargo, weather and anticipation.

The idea of the *in-between* here surfaces not only as a geographical location but as a condition of life itself. It speaks to the drift that shapes this region: the fluidity of movement, the porousness of relations, the ways people, objects and stories slip across categories of land and sea, state and informality, enclosure and exposure. The gap between the Strait of Malacca and the Riau archipelago is one example of this condition—a space defined as much by shipping routes as by informal trade and unplanned exchanges. Thinking from this in-between opens a way into what might be called *intuitive ecologies*: systems that seed, drift and recalibrate themselves without waiting for formal sanction. Their rhythms are relational and atmospheric, attentive to what persists despite the tightening of territory.

From the coast, the lens turns inland to inhabited zones. A zone is not only a location but an experience of time—one in which humidity quickens growth and decay, and where life continually negotiates the forms built to contain it. In such an environment, the artists gathered here work with rather than against drift.

The works show how meaning emerges from contact, drift and repetition: from the small negotiations that hold a place together as much as from the infrastructures that order it. In this spirit, the first work in this section turns to the Straits themselves, following the movements and entanglements that shape life along this shifting perimeter.

CAMP's work often begins in places where circulation is most dense and visibility is thinnest—ports, holds, backrooms and the bureaucratic corridors where goods are logged rather than seen. For years, the studio has followed the life of the cargo across the Indian Ocean, reading shipping manifests as images and treating inventories as a kind of cinema of movement. As they note, "focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics...commodities, like persons, have social lives."[2]

In *Wharfage* (2008–2009), they traced wooden vessels travelling between Sharjah and Somalia, assembling a maritime travelogue from ledgers, annotations and the dark interior of a ship's hold. *Destuffing Matrix* (2012) turned to the fractured geographies of ports and their hinterlands in Kochi, asking whether a rearrangement of boxes, data columns and customs seals could produce another picture of circulation altogether. Across these projects, CAMP's practice stems from observing how systems behave up close—where paperwork frays, how containers tell stories and where the global and the personal meet in the movement of things.

Metabolic Container (2025) extends this method of tracing circulation to Singapore. Each week at Tanjong Pagar Distripark, shipping containers arrive from Batam, carrying goods that are ordinary, repacked, and whose contents require trust more than description. CAMP begins here, with the routine itself. Inside a 20-foot container, they build an active space: not a representation of a ship's hold but a working proposition. Boxes are rearranged, scents and textures drift, ingredients are borrowed across cuisines, noise is added and withdrawn. The process mirrors the diasporic and informal economies that have long shaped regional



CAMP. Top: Installation view of *Metabolic Container*. 2025. Existing and produced boxes, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission; Bottom: Detail of *Metabolic Container*.

trade, where proximity creates influence and where the familiar shades into the uncertain. What results is less a static archive than an ongoing metabolism. Circulation appears as a living process, not only logistical but emotional, sustained by memory, adjustment and the quiet negotiations that keep systems moving.

Where CAMP attends to circulation as a living system, **Kate Newby**'s *A Line Through Time* (2025) turns to another infrastructural lineage—one inscribed into the city's ground. The work engages the Rail Corridor, a 24-kilometre path running from Kranji to the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station. For more than a century, it linked Singapore to Malaysia and the wider peninsula, carrying people, goods and the routines of cross-border life. After the rail's closure in 2011, this strip of land, once managed as Malaysian territory within Singapore, performed another role: a continuous landscape sitting just outside the pace of surrounding development. Farming plots, shrines and pockets of biodiversity have taken root along its edges, and the trail now supports the everyday movements of walkers, runners and nearby residents.

Newby's installation inserts 30 metres of handmade drain tile along this layered terrain. The tiles are coated with slip made from Singapore clay, grounding the work materially in the soil it joins. The gesture is quiet but pointed, a line placed into the ground that mirrors, in softened form, the history of another line once embedded through it. Calibrated with engineers to follow the site's existing hydrological system, the tiles operate within its existing drainage patterns rather than imposing new structures. Their presence is registered slowly, through shifts in moisture, through how water settles after rain, and through changes in vegetation.



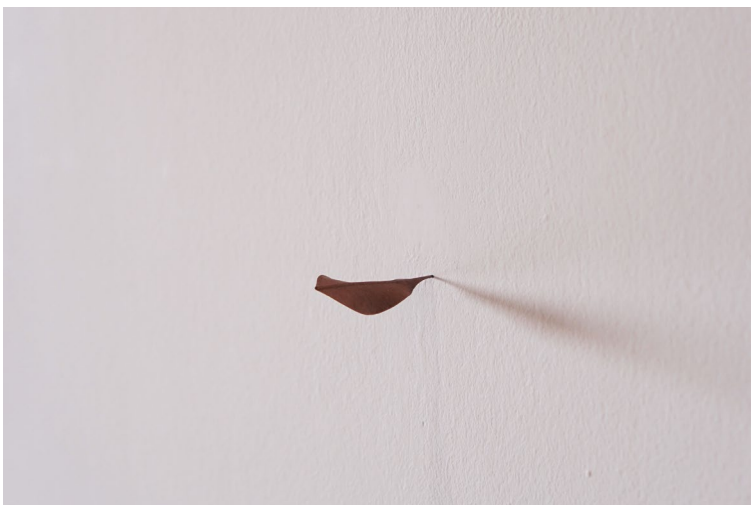
Kate Newby. Detail of *A Line Through Time*. 2025. Ceramic, local slip (Singapore construction site), glaze, minerals and concrete, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist and KAYOKOYUKI.

By setting the work into the ground, Newby attends to the corridor as a place shaped by ongoing transformation, both human and ecological. In the context of *pure intention*, the installation reflects on how boundaries and infrastructures persist even as their functions change, and how an artwork might inhabit this terrain not by overriding it but by allowing place and piece to shape each other over time.

Newby's work foregrounds the shaping force of terrain; **Tanatchai Bandasak** begins from another inflection, treating objects as records of the environments they have moved through.

Bandasak works with objects that hover between states—neither fully functional nor completely discarded but caught in the hinge between making and unmaking. His practice begins with foraging: moving through industrial yards, shoreline edges and suburban lots to acquire objects that bear the residue of prior tasks. These materials, once tethered to specific forms of labour, protection, or containment, are re-situated to register the quiet pressures of the environment and time, becoming forms that carry the ambient conditions around them rather than depicting them.







Tanatchai Bandasak. Installation views of /s/. 2025. Horn bollard from Pasir Panjang container terminal, Kapur leaf and plastic bottles from snake farm at Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission. Images courtesy of the artist.

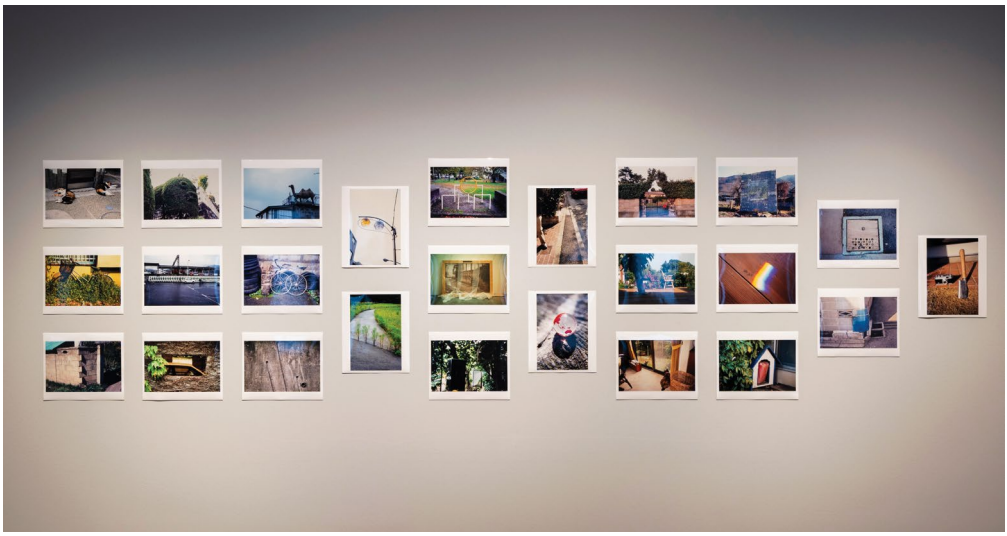
In */s/* (2025), three elements that form part of the artwork are dispersed throughout the Singapore Art Museum, appearing less as sculptures than as markers of transition: points where one space, material, or state gives way to another. At the entrance, a marine bollard—temporarily withdrawn from its berth—extends across the gallery floor, a mooring point without an anchor. Nearby, a cluster of flattened plastic bottles sourced from Bangkok's Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute[3] recalls their former role as temporary housing for rescued snakes. The small ventilation holes cut for the snakes remain as apertures; as the bottles collapse, they exhale residual air and moisture into the gallery. Outside, the spear-like tip of a camphor leaf pierces the wall. Where camphor would ordinarily dissipate into vapour, here, the work enacts sublimation as a gesture—release without visible trace.

Across these elements, Bandasak works with contrasts: land and sea, enclosure and exposure, holding and letting go. Each object marks a boundary already in motion, drawing attention to subtle exchanges—of air, pressure, touch—through which environments impress themselves on the materials that pass through them. The atmosphere of the work arises not from spectacle but from these slight recalibrations, through which the world registers itself in small, persistent ways.

If Bandasak's works situate us at the hinge between making and unmaking—objects subtly altered by the environments they move through—**Genpei Akasegawa** turns to what endures after intention has fallen away. His long-running project *Hyperart: Thomasson* (1987–2006) takes its name from the American baseball player Gary Thomasson, whose costly but unproductive stint on a Japanese team became, for Akasegawa, a metaphor for forms meticulously preserved despite having lost their function. A staircase that leads nowhere, a sealed door kept freshly painted, railings guarding an empty drop—structures kept upright by habit, care or bureaucratic momentum long after their justification has faded.

For Akasegawa, such remnants reveal the afterlife of planning: how the city continues to maintain what no longer serves and how the logics of upkeep can exceed or outlive the logics of use.

Rather than drawing direct parallels, this presentation invites viewers to consider how the Thomasson sensibility might sharpen our perception of Singapore's own urban fabric. In a city where erasure is often swift and maintenance highly systematised, the work offers a framework for noticing the minor incongruities and vestigial arrangements that surface. Such traces may be rare, but they remind us that even within a tightly managed metabolism, the city accumulates small, unintended by-products of continuity that mark where meaning and function no longer fully coincide.



Genpei Akasegawa. Installation view of *Hyperart: Thomasson*. 1987–2006. 25 C-print photographs, each 30.5 × 25.4 cm. Collection of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE.

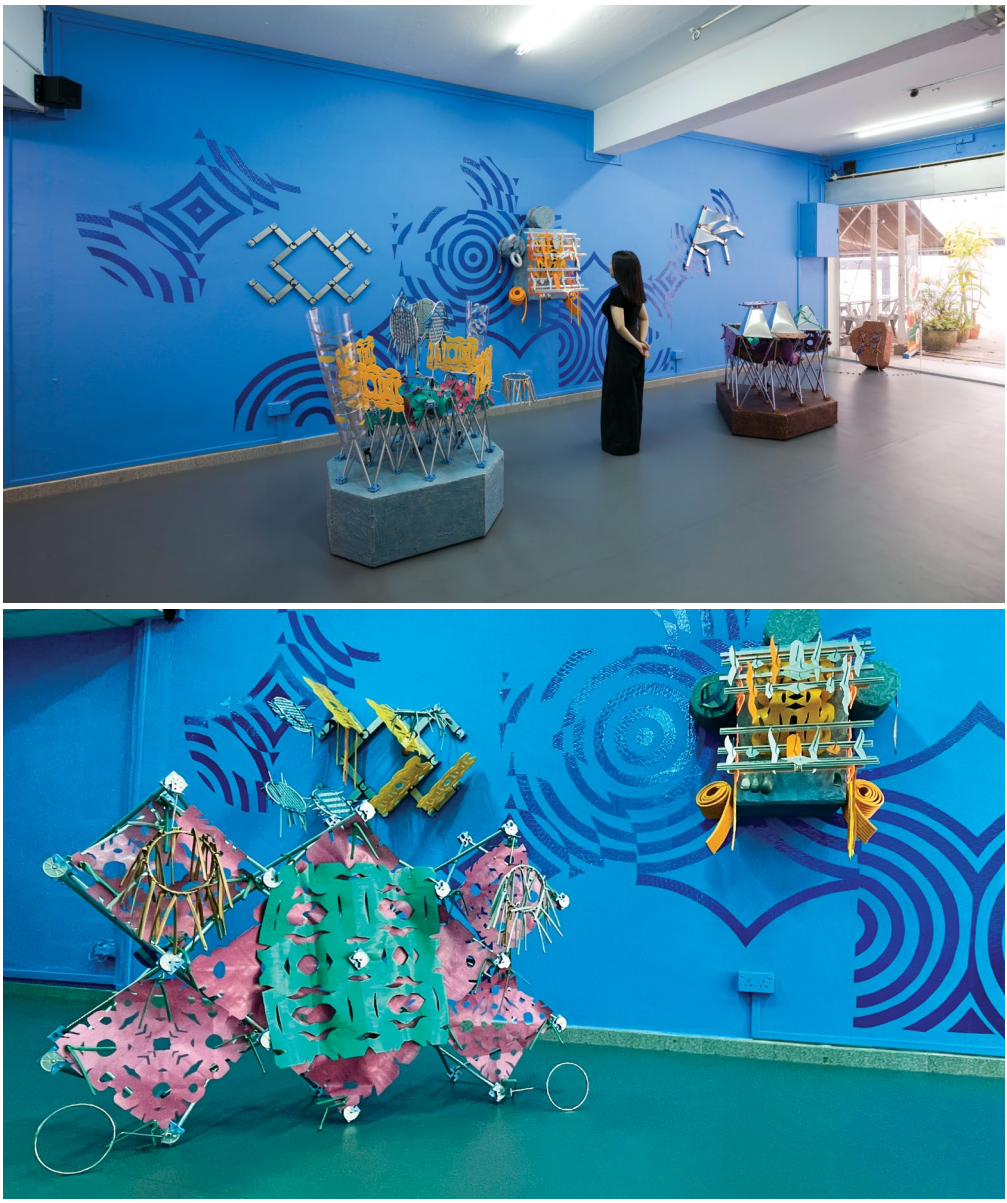
II. Vernacular and Domestic: Gestures, Language and the Ordinary

Domesticity forms one of the most active sites of spatial production in Singapore. Unlike housing, which is conceived at the scale of units, estates and national policy, domesticity unfolds through the minute processes of homemaking: routines, rituals and improvised adjustments that shape how people inhabit space. These gestures reproduce shifting definitions of privacy, social conduct, hygiene, and family life. At the same time, domesticities inflect broader national concerns of order, care, exclusion and belonging, revealing how personal agency is exercised within state-curated environments. Domesticity crosses scales and agendas, offering insight into how individuals negotiate and subtly re-script the city's spatial narrative.

The vernacular enters here as a complementary framework. If domesticity traces the lived negotiations of space, the vernacular names the cultural, mythic and linguistic textures through which these negotiations become legible. The vernacular is not simply the familiar or the local; it encompasses kinship, folklore, ritual, taste and social organisation. It has a vivid sense of physical spaces and textures, as well as the structures of relation and rhythm that organise everyday life. To attend to the vernacular is thus to adopt a mode of seeing that is unhurried and empathetic, capable of holding the minute and the structural together, taking in both the small details that anchor daily survival and the broader forms through which identity, class and belonging are arranged.

These domestic and vernacular textures are not only expressed through objects, routines or stories; they are carried in perception itself. How people sense space, its rhythms, sounds, hesitations and small movements, shapes how home is inhabited and how relations unfold. The everyday is first registered through the body before it is named, and this terrain of sensing offers another way into the vernacular.

It is on this perceptual plane that **Joo Choon Lin** begins. For her, sight, hearing and touch must work together to complete our experience of the physical world. *The laugh laughs at the laugh, The song sings at the song* (2025) unsettles familiar habits of looking by treating the world as continuous activity, event and movement. Installed in a former active ageing centre, the work draws from the site's vernacular character: forms fold, hinge, sag and rise; sound motifs guide the viewer's pace. Balloons deflate and are replaced, rock slabs descend and modular "film objects" shift configuration over the course of the Biennale. Nothing is fixed. Meaning emerges through cycles of maintenance and change rather than through a single, stable image.



Joo Choon Lin. Top: Installation view of *The laugh laughs at the laugh, The song sings at the song*. 2025. Sound design by Joe Ng. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission; Bottom: Detail of *The laugh laughs at the laugh, The song sings at the song*. Image courtesy of the artist.

This continual reconfiguration echoes the everyday improvisations that shape domestic and communal life. Joo treats perception as a practice grounded in ordinary habits—how objects are handled, how materials fatigue, how rooms evolve with use. Through ongoing maintenance, the installation mirrors the subtle rhythms of care, repetition and quiet reinvention that permeate these lived spaces. Her work positions the

environment as protagonist, showing how familiar spaces can be re-encountered once their movements are made visible.

Joo's environment unsettles how perception is organised, letting forms shift until new relations come into view. **Sorawit Songsataya** picks up this reorganisation at the level of language. In *Grammar (restated)* (2025), notation becomes a vernacular of its own—a grammar assembled from fragments, pauses and textures that resists singular reading.

Songsataya's work tests how language behaves when approached as graphical musical notation. From a distance, the mobile pieces resemble staves scattered with note heads, a score waiting to be read. Up close, the marks come from digitally cropped details of butterfly wings taken from open-source 3D models. Printed on textured, handmade paper, the images shift attention from paper as surface to paper as a worked, tactile form. Moving between digital capture and material print, the work traces how images detach from their sources and gather new associations. Open to reading as score, diagram, or skin, *Grammar (restated)* offers a visual grammar that remains fluid and an evolving system for sensing rhythm, pause and pattern.

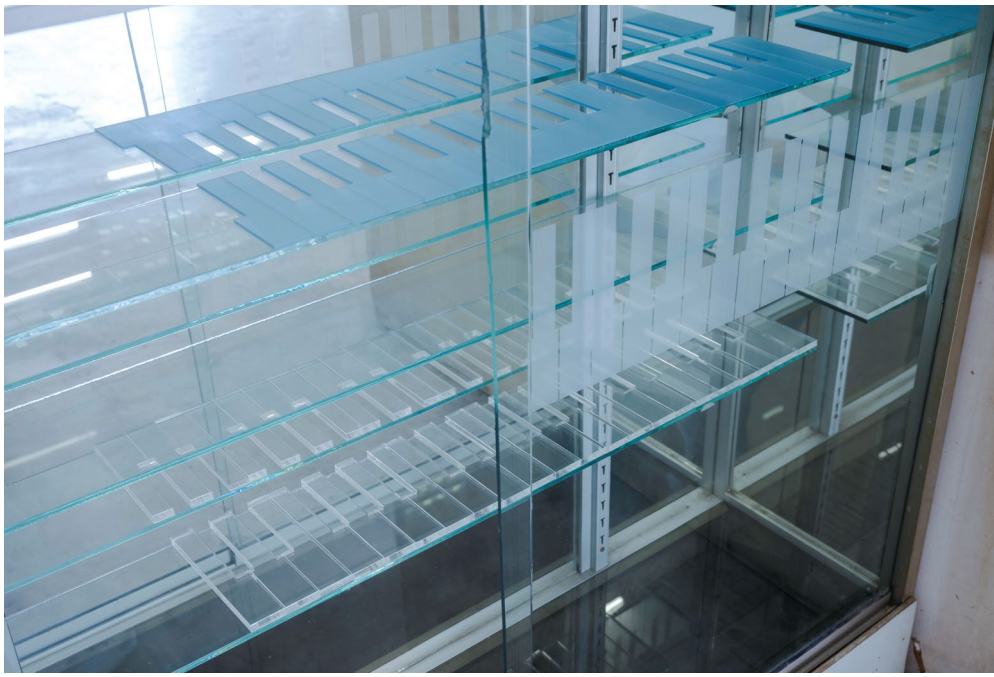


Sorawit Songsataya. Installation view of *Grammar (restated)*. 2025. Rattan vine, UV prints on handmade paper, dried sedge and polyester sewing thread, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

Songsataya's visual grammar sets the stage for another mode of ordering that is both formal and intuitive, one that resonates with how domestic and vernacular life take shape in this region. In Southeast Asia, these textures are shaped by pervasive media: melodramas playing in living rooms, habitual viewing patterns shared across generations, family anecdotes and the cultural detritus that circulates through television, VCDs and cinemas. Popular media becomes a form of vernacular "architecture," an emotional and imaginative scaffold through which desires, identifications and social bonds are rehearsed and reinforced. These circulations, at once intimate and widely dispersed, form part of the vocabulary through which the artists work, turning the ordinary into a site where memory is stored and cultural inheritance drifts.

Like Songsataya, **Kah Bee Chow** introduces a system of ordering from a grammar built from the materials and habits already present in a place. In *Études (Tanglin Halt)* (2025), installed in a former traditional Chinese medicine shop at 49 Tanglin Halt Road, one of Singapore's oldest public housing estates, Chow works with existing spatial features: custom wood, glass and mirror shelving; wall and floor markings; leftover brackets and fittings that once structured another kind of display. Instead of redesigning, she reads the shop as a musical score to be interpreted, rehearsed and lightly rephrased. She approaches the space through the framework of a piano examination form, adopting its grids, annotations, proportions and placement. Yet, as with any étude, the point is not mastery but attentiveness. During installation, Chow applied these rules by bending or setting them aside as the space required. The work tests its own grammar, echoing Singapore's cultural comfort with systems, checklists and the satisfaction of getting things "right," while also exposing how structure can guide or constrain. Chow's adjustments unfold through small corrections and provisional alignments, attuned to the estate's histories of routine and unhurried transition.

In the rear space, Chow presents *Effeminacy* (2012), a video work centred on the dining table, the surface where much of domestic activity occurs. Chow records her mother in their Penang home, quietly arranging salvaged flowers while a Chinese melodrama plays offscreen. Most of the





Kah Bee Chow. Top: Detail of *Études* (*Tanglin Halt*). 2025. Vinyl, laser-cut Plexiglas, cast polyester, digital prints on paper, bronze casts, glass, steel hooks, acrylic paint on latex, wood, LED candles and brackets, dimensions variable; Bottom: Installation view of *Effeminacy*. 2012. Digital video (colour, sound), 14 min 5 sec. Collection of the artist.

frame remains open, almost vacant, as her mother anchors the left edge; her father passes briefly through. We never see the television, only the shifting attention it produces: voices from a tense scene about a daughter pleading for acceptance, a pause in the room, a faint shimmer of reflected light on the glass partition behind her mother. As gestures repeat, the table becomes the structure that holds these rhythms, revealing how belonging is formed through the steady accumulation of the mundane.

Adrian Wong extends the living room into a site where identities are rehearsed, tropes flipped and improbable plots absorbed into everyday time. For decades, TVB dramas and kung fu films formed the backdrop of many Hong Kong and Southeast Asian household routines, playing during dinner, shaping family habits of watching, quoting and re-enacting. These broadcasts were more than entertainment; they became a shared vernacular, a language of emotion and aspiration that travelled across diasporic networks through free-to-air TV broadcasts and streaming services, settling into everyday life.

Wong enters this terrain through a personal lineage. His grandfather was a prolific film composer during Hong Kong's studio era of the 1970s–1980s, when low-budget productions were often assembled rapidly from pre-shot footage and rescored into new coherence. Wong adopts this industrial improvisation in *With Hate from Hong Kong* (2025), intercutting material from an earlier soap-opera-inflected project with newly staged stunt sequences performed by doubles. The resulting video oscillates between melodramatic spectacle and martial-arts excess, granting its female protagonist the force and agency usually reserved for male heroes. In reworking these familiar genres, Wong extends the notion of the vernacular beyond household gestures into shared cultural repertoires that circulate across the region, revealing how identity and longing are shaped not only within the home but also through the media that animates it.

If Wong works with cinema's interior architectures, the plot devices and stunt rhythms that have shaped viewing cultures, **Apichatpong Weerasethakul** and **Guo-Liang Tan** turn to cinema's exterior life: its atmospheres and the way an image can be held in the air before it settles.

Two Who Remember the Sea (2025) grows from the artists' shared fascination with the spaces and rituals of the cinematic. The invitation began with the slowly unrolling theatre backdrops in Weerasethakul's *Blue* (2018), whose shifting gradients of twilight echoed the brightening skies of early morning in Singapore. Installed in the wooded quiet of Wessex Estate, a former colonial residence, the work extends that sensibility into the open. Suspended sheets of silver fabric sway with the sun and wind, moving like figures passing through a clearing. Their constant opening and closing forms a permeable screen that catches light, shadow and drifting air, allowing the forest to shape the image as much as the artists do. In this setting, the installation listens closely to local vernaculars of the environment: humidity that dampens movement, intense light that washes forms out, landscapes that never stay still. It echoes Weerasethakul's own belief that memory, time and observation transform moment by moment.



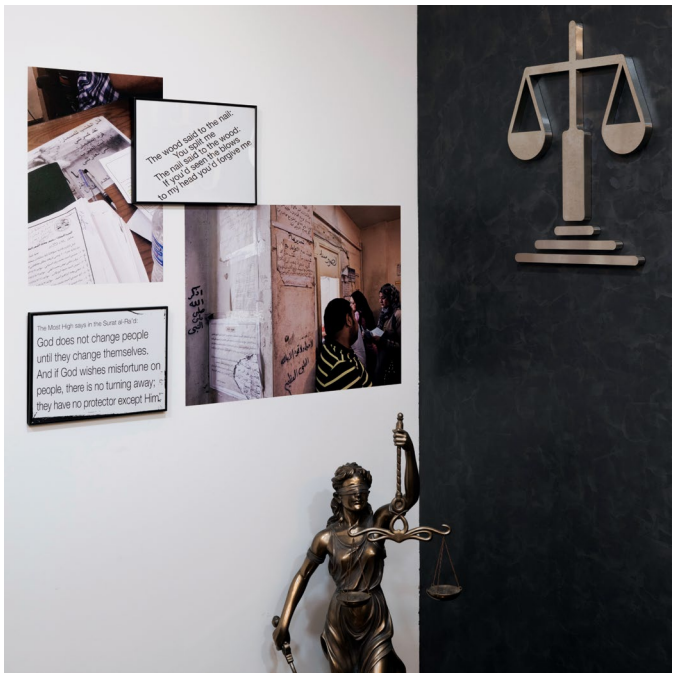
Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Film still of *On Blue*. 2022. Image courtesy of Kick the Machine Films.

These cloths also draw from a broader Southeast Asian cultural repertoire of hauntings and gentle wandering spirits, where the supernatural is woven into ordinary life rather than set apart from it. The shifting silhouettes recall the wandering figures of Thai artist Hem Vejakorn's illustrations, evoking presences that hover between tenderness and unease. Here, they move not through darkness but through daylight, their energy drawn from the same sun that sustains the surrounding greenery. In Singapore, where wooded edges hold traces of former estates, wartime histories and quieter forms of gathering, the work opens a space to sense how past and present drift through each other.

III. The Official and the Peripheral: Archives, Protocols and Gestures at the Margins

Bureaucracy shapes much of Singapore's visible terrain. Systems promise clarity, predictability and uprightness. Both architectural design and administrative postures signal civic propriety and the orderly management of life. Singapore's built environment inherits a longer lineage. As Claude Lévi-Strauss observed, architecture enters cultural history alongside empire; its verticality gathers political force, material wealth and social discipline into built form.[4] Colonial and postcolonial infrastructures alike continue this logic, presenting themselves as evidentiary, empirical and self-legitimating—as the model *for* the real world and the model *about* the real world. Yet around this official frame, other forms of expression persist. They take shape in the margins: annotations, workarounds, informal rituals and the everyday acts through which people negotiate what authority asks of them.

These peripheral gestures do not simply oppose the official. They reveal a parallel civic order—one built from tacit knowledge, improvisation, affective labour and the quiet persistence of belief. In a city organised around bureaucratic rationality, residents continually reconfigure space to accommodate practices that administrative systems do not explicitly provide for. They are carried in improvised gathering spaces, makeshift shrines, devotional sayings taped in offices or the subtle recalibration of rules as they pass from paper into life. Such expressions are often treated as eccentric or aberrant because they disrupt the clean lines of civic management. Yet they endure because of their articulation of desires and obligations that cannot be fully housed within official categories. They point to a question that shadows any modern city: *what room is there for forms of meaning that exceed its design?*



Maha Maamoun. Detail of *The Subduer*. 2017. Digital print on vinyl, printed booklets and single-channel video (colour, sound), 5 min 13 sec. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist and Gypsum Gallery.

Maha Maamoun's *The Subduer* (2017) arises from witnessing such moments first hand. While navigating Egypt's notary offices to secure power of attorney for her father, she noticed the peculiar mix of administrative directives and devotional sayings taped to the walls. Some instructed the public on procedural steps; others offered counsel on patience, humility or the fleeting nature of worldly possessions. In a place defined by paperwork and property transfers, these texts formed an unofficial system aimed at managing emotion, both for those seeking services and the civil servants behind the counter. Maamoun's photographs capture this double register, revealing how an institution meant to formalise life also absorbs its strain, contradiction and longing.

By foregrounding the emotional life that circulates through bureaucratic interiors, *The Subduer* extends the Biennale's interest in how systems acquire unexpected textures. In Singapore, where the administrative often shapes the visible contours of daily life, it offers a lens for recognising how formal structures acquire informal guidance, sentiment and negotiation, becoming social environments as much as official ones.

The devotional texts that Maamoun records show how bureaucracy gathers parallel languages and efforts to manage feeling within an institution designed for verification and transaction. **Debbie Ding** extends this line of inquiry through civic instructions, public prompts and behavioural cues that echo the cadence of official messaging, revealing the informal logics through which people navigate and internalise administrative order.

Rules for the Expression of Architectural Desires (2014–2021) begins from the premise that the built environment is shaped by impulses, fantasies and apprehensions that move through a population long before they solidify into plans. In Singapore, where comfort is often secured through control, such desires surface obliquely, in forms that slip between sanctioned visions of order. Installed across MRT stations and encountered in transit, the work adopts the familiar tone of civic messaging—so familiar, in fact, that its humour and absurdity often register only on second glance. Rules such as "pedestrians are forbidden from wearing shoes which disturb the ground" or "all students must sit for geographic placement exams" hover at the edge of plausibility in a place where directives routinely shape behaviour, and where bureaucratic logic can slide, almost imperceptibly, into the everyday.

Gala Porras-Kim shifts attention to the socio-economic frames that structure rest itself. *Our identity is determined by our productivity* (2025) responds to the Sunday gatherings of Burmese migrant workers around Peninsula Plaza, where

makeshift picnic sheets transform public space into temporary commons. Her sheets, printed with poems in the languages most widely spoken by migrant workers in Singapore—Burmese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bangla/Bengali, Tagalog—as well as English, fold these voices back into the installation. These texts—part reflection, part testimony—speak of rest days, stalled time, longing, and the fragile interval where respite and precarity meet. Circulated through the same shops that sell everyday goods, the work unsettles how institutions classify people, objects, and even hours, suggesting that identities, like those of the peripheral workers who sustain the city, remain fluid, improvised and negotiated at the edges of the official.

Amitav Ghosh reminds us that in most historical records, only "the literate and the consequential" inscribe themselves upon time; the lives of others persist, if at all, through "a mere accident," in "barely discernible traces" that slip into the archive unintentionally.[5] The works in this section attend to these peripheral registers—not to amend the official record, but to reveal the forms of life that run alongside it.

Maamoun, Ding and Porras-Kim show, each in their own way, how institutions accrue what they cannot fully contain: devotional sayings taped to a wall, rules that hover at the edge of plausibility, poems printed on sheets laid down for a day's rest. In the key of *pure intention*, such traces suggest that what lies outside the bureaucratic frame is not blankness but a field of gestures, sometimes fragile, sometimes insistent, that make ordinary life perceptible.

Situations

What gathers across these three intercessors—drift, domestic negotiation and the peripheral life of the official—is not a definitive thesis about Singapore so much as a set of situations in Lauren Berlant's sense: scenes in which something emerging presses into view before it can be named, "materials in which worlds are made and not forced."[6] While Singapore's dominant narratives promise clarity, coherence and orderly progression, the works assembled here offer a preview into "something incoherent or uncongealed in the ongoing activity of the social"[7]: the residues, glitches, hesitations and makeshift practices through which life is actually lived alongside official structures.

Such remaindered evidence is inevitably cultural. It surfaces in film, installation, literature and the informal markings that gather around infrastructure. Taken together, these works insist that the city is not a settled design but a continuously negotiated field, porous to spontaneous constituencies and the liveliness already circulating within it. They show how people adapt to the contingencies of the present, adjusting themselves to situations until new bearings can be found. For Berlant, a situation is not a stable form but an unfolding atmosphere, a genre of the historical present in which something still-forming draws us in, asking for a mode of attention that can move with it.[8]

The works in this Biennale might be read in that key—not as declarations but as small, deliberate interruptions that momentarily estrange the familiar city. They attune us to what is forming, to the subtle disturbances of ordinariness and to the cultural traces that make those disturbances perceptible. In gathering them, the Biennale asks us not to resolve the city but to inhabit its unfolding textures, to follow where they lead and to imagine the futures they begin to sketch—uncertain, atmospheric and already underway.

1 Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (The New Press, 1997), 323.

2 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Openings: CAMP," Artforum, accessed November 30, 2025, https://www.artforum.com/features/openings-camp-195846/.

3 The Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute, known as Bangkok's historic "Snake Farm"—is a long-standing centre for snake study, conservation and public education, founded in 1923 in honour of Queen Saovabha Phongsri.

4 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Criterion Books, 1961), 292.

5 Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (A. A. Knopf, 1993), 16–17.

6 Lauren Berlant, "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness," Supervalent Thought, accessed November 19, 2025, https://supervalentthought.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf.

7 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 198.

8 Berlant, 5.

Water Under the Bridge

A Bridge Under Water

The Packet

Water Under the Bridge / A Bridge Under Water is an exhibition curated by **The Packet** for the **Singapore Biennale 2025**. Conceived as a late-2000s internet cafe, the exhibition brings together newly commissioned works by **Anisha Baid**, **Devadeep Gupta**, **Alana Hunt**, **Chu Hao Pei**, **Aiganym Mukhamejan**, **Shahana Rajani** and **Shenuka Corea**, alongside works by **Center for Political Beauty**, **Tabita Rezaire**, **Sohrab Hura**, and **Finbarr Fallon**, as well as contributions from **The Packet**.

Text by Tashyana Handy
Edited by The Packet

About The Packet
The Packet (established in 2019) is made up of a group of artists from Sri Lanka. With a particular focus on hyper-locality, collaborative processes and conversation, it grew out of eight artists coming together to realise an artist publication entitled The Packet. While a core group of members continues to drive its work, The Packet functions as a collaborative platform that has embraced the work of 19 young artists in Sri Lanka to date. They work across print and digital mediums, with site-specific interventions that respond to a stratified world, exploring what it looks like "to do thinking in public." Their work has been featured in the Serendipity Arts Festival (2019, 2020), the Goethe-Institut's Day-Afterthoughts project (2020), among others.

On a humid Saturday morning in July 2024, workers in Sri Lanka were about to break ground on the Port Access Elevated Highway, an ambitious expressway meant to unclog Colombo's streets and accelerate its postwar transformation into a South Asian hub. This highway was designed to connect Port City Colombo, a 269-hectare emerging fantasy of glass towers on reclaimed land, to an expressway leading to the airport. It promised to ease congestion, streamline freight operations and bolster regional trade.

As the shovelling began, numerous bone fragments emerged that were later confirmed to be human. Since then, the skeletal remains of more than 88 individuals have been excavated from what is now considered a mass grave within the Port City Colombo precincts, a few hundred metres from Sri Lanka's naval base.[1]

As noted by a journalist, "the remains of a dead body in a place other than a cemetery always lead to a mystery and a crime."[2] Sri Lanka's history is punctuated most notably by two student-led insurrections in the south of the country, a civil war in the north and east and decades of disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Nearly 30 mass graves have been discovered across the island since the early 1990s, most of them far from urban centres. However, the discovery of this particular mass grave took place in the very epicentre of Sri Lanka's postwar narrative promise of progress, beneath the infrastructure meant to carry the nation into a brighter future.

In postwar Sri Lanka, highways, ports and airports are symbols of a rebirth allegedly deterred and postponed by the war. State media and political elites often regurgitate a story in which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—the Tamil militant separatist organisation against which the government waged a thirty-year war—had been the sole obstruction to Sri Lanka's inevitable rise to prosperity.[3]

In this telling, the Port Access Elevated Highway serves as a metaphorical bridge over troubled water, imagined to be carrying the nation across the ruins of war into abundance. The modern becomes ritualised; the bridge becomes prayer. Even unfinished highways, bridges to nowhere, and dangling ramps extend this logic. They operate less as functional infrastructure than as evidence of continuing development, offerings to the idea of progress itself.

Yet the skeleton beneath the bridge interrupts this ritual. It collapses the temporal separation between past violence and future promise. It demands recognition of what architectural renderings cannot show: that the foundation of this "bright future" is unsettled. The bridge over troubled water is now overcome by the water it sought to traverse.



Image courtesy of The Packet.

Sri Lanka is not alone in building bridges over buried histories. Across the region, bridges promise passage while concealing the past. But these symbols of modernity are sites of violence and these memories endure. Even bridges that exist predominantly in myth or fiction continue to warp and corrode present realities.

The first "bridge over the River Kwai" was built by the Japanese army during World War II on a tributary of the Khwae Yai in Thailand as part of the 415-kilometre Siam–Burma Railway. The Japanese forced enslaved civilians and Allied prisoners of war into backbreaking labour, and many died from disease, starvation, brutal working conditions and abuse.[4] The bridge itself played only a minor role in the larger story of the notorious Siam–Burma Railway project until it was later mythologised in popular culture.



Image courtesy of The Packet.

In 1952, the bridge was rebuilt in prose in Pierre Boulle's novel, and in the process transported to a different location and given a new name: *The Bridge over the River Kwai*.[5] While the novel can be read almost as a satire of colonial-era militarism,[6] David Lean's extremely successful 1957 film adaptation, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (shot in Kitulgala, Ceylon) transformed it into a revisionist spectacle of English pluck and courage, in which a handful of British soldiers restored a wounded imperial self-image. In this retelling, colonial myth-making overwrote the brutal histories of the Japanese "Death Railway." Infrastructure becomes a stage, myth and narrative rather than a record of imperial decline.

That gesture endures. Kitulgala, once wild and untamed, now welcomes tourists to the "bridge site," where a small stump marks Lean's set. In Thailand, the river flowing under the historical bridge, Mae Klong, was renamed Khwae Yai to align it with fictional versions and prevent confusion for prospective tourists.[7] While the temporary structure built in Ceylon no longer exists, the cinematic bridge survives, being endlessly rerun. Visitors come for the stump but stay for the fantasy. In this way, Commonwealth nostalgia continues to feed on these cinematic ties, tethering Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, to a vanishing imperial centre.

The *Ramayana*, an ancient epic from India, tells of Setubandhanam, the bridge built by Prince Rama to cross the ocean and rescue his wife Sita from the demon-king Ravana, who ruled the island of "Lanka." Many believe that this bridge is the thirty-mile chain of submerged shoals sitting between Rameswaram in India and Mannar in Sri Lanka, also known as Adam's Bridge. Geologists call it a natural formation, while devotees view it as proof of the epic's historicity. In each instance, the bridge seems to sit at a threshold between myth and terrain.

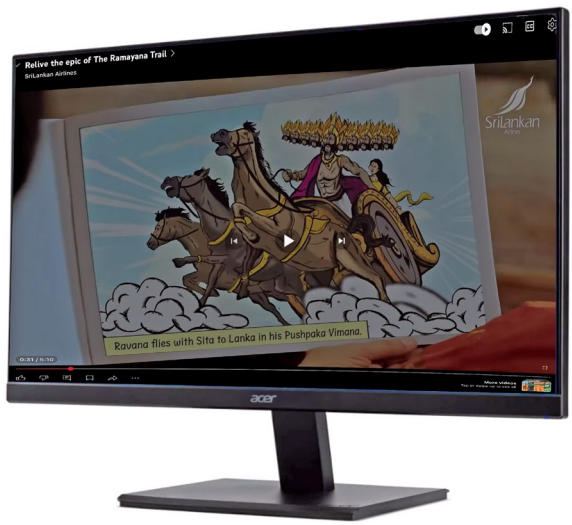


Image courtesy of The Packet.

While the Ramayana cast Ravana as the villain of the story, Tamil rulers in northern Sri Lanka claimed Ravana not as an evil demon-king but as an ancestor, styling themselves as custodians of the submerged passage to India.[8] In contrast, the Sinhalese majority began their origin story with Vijaya, an exiled prince from India. Yet after the war, a hardening Sinhala Buddhist revisionism claimed Ravana, instead of Vijaya, as the king and founder of the primordial monarchy, thereby granting the Sinhalese an indisputable indigeneity. State agencies and nationalist groups staged a "Ravana revival": the demon-king was recast as the progenitor of the Sinhala majority;[9] the country's first research satellite was named Raavana-1; a Sri Lankan Airlines advert sold a "Ramayana Trail" package targeting Indian tourists. Today, Rama's Bridge embodies a retelling in which a reimagined past crosses over to an idealised future. On the other end of the bridge is a lost Atlantis, a world to be recovered and monumentalised. Svetlana Boym[10]

calls this “restorative nostalgia,” a longing for a home that never was. Rooted in the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (longing), it follows twin plots of return and conspiracy, seeking a world that no longer exists—or perhaps never did. In postwar Sri Lanka, this impulse now materialises in concrete and glass. But it was not always so.

In Sri Lanka’s heady post-independence years, the country still clung to its ancient ideal of agricultural dominance.[11] Long before colonisation, the Mahaweli Ganga, the country’s largest river, fed a network of tanks and canals built by ancient kings. Seeing irrigation as evidence of statecraft and prosperity, British administrators christened ancient Ceylon a “hydraulic civilisation.” It was no surprise, then, that post-independence nation-building fused neoliberal economics with restorative nostalgia. The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme of 1977 promised dams, power stations and new settlements for 250,000 landless families, purportedly reviving a bucolic past in which the village, the temple and the irrigation tank formed the central pillars of the community.[12] Financed by global development organisations, ideas of speed, capital-intensive infrastructure and visible progress married nationalist ritual and symbolism.

However, while donor funds and technical expertise were concentrated on large, high-visibility infrastructure, the actual settlements they were meant to support were left wanting. Settlers received small plots of land, but neither seed stations nor other micro-infrastructures and systems they needed for grassroots-driven agriculture to thrive were provided. As a characteristic feature of neoliberalism, the myth of progress manifested in impressive infrastructure-making processes that marginalised public welfare. In Sri Lanka, the fault lines of conflict that emerged on multiple fronts during these years could perhaps be traced to the empty promises of independent nationhood and progress.

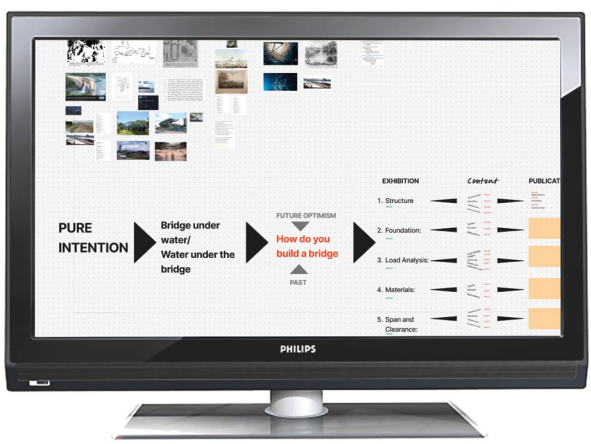


Image courtesy of The Packet.

In May 2009, as the Sri Lankan civil war reached its climax and the Mullivaikkal genocide unfolded, the Vadduvakal Bridge in Mullaitivu became a place where every choice risked death.[13] Hundreds of thousands attempted to flee, trapped between advancing army forces and retreating water. The waters and surrounding sands became a killing field. Photographs show bodies strewn along the banks, while survivors recall shelling and gunfire tearing through what was supposed to be a civilian safe haven. Bodies were carried downstream and families were torn apart.

Years later, there has been no accountability for the atrocities committed there. Successive governments have refused to recognise Vadduvakal as a site of genocide,[14] even as they proclaim its reconstruction a milestone of postwar development. The bridge, ordinary in construction, was once provisional—its function survival itself, a thin margin between being and annihilation. Today, it is recast as a connector, a deliverer of growth, a triumph of budgetary prudence. Yet, as the demands of survivors and families of the disappeared fall on deaf ears, beneath its piers runs not only water but memory. It is a passage built on atrocity, a crossing whose very promise of connection depends on forgetting what happened at its foundation.

In suturing ethnic politics to economic growth, Sri Lanka's leaders have repeatedly sanctified themselves as custodians of progress while displacing demands for justice. In official renderings, water now runs under the bridge: ribbons are cut, vehicles cross and development flows. Yet for many communities, the churning waters of memory refuse to settle.

As Port City's bare beginnings of a highway find their foundation in a mass grave, Vadduvakal's haunted crossing reminds us that each span rests on unsettled ground. With every bone fragment catching the sun, the bridge becomes double-edged: a promise of passage and a platform for forgetting, a structure built to move a nation forward while immobilising its past. To catch sight of skeletal remains while crossing is to witness the bridge overcome by the very water it was built to traverse. To cross it is to tread the surface of forgetting, sensing—or refusing to sense—the weight of what lies beneath.

1 Newswire.lk, "Skeletal remains of 88 found in Colombo Port Mass Grave," *Newswire*, August 21, 2025, https://www.newswire.lk/2025/08/21/skeletal-remains-of-88-found-in-colombo-port-mass-grave/.

2 Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, "Decapitated Skeleton near Colombo Fort Does the Discovery Link to Sri Lanka's Dark Past?" *Daily Mirror Online*, July 15, 2024, https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/Decapitated-skeleton-near-Colombo-Fort-Does-the-discovery-link-to-Sri-Lankas-dark-past/131-287321.

3 Alessandra Radicati, "Hub city: aspiration and dispossession in 21st-century Colombo" (PhD diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017).

4 The Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway, was a railway line between Thailand and Burma built by the Japanese during World War II. At least 250,000 Southeast Asian civilians were subjected to forced labour to build it and more than 90,000 civilians and 12,000 Allied soldiers died in the process of its construction.

5 The book *The Bridge over the River Kwai* by Pierre Boulle was first published in French by Julliard in 1952 as *Le Pont de la rivière Kwaï*. The English translation was published the same year. Pierre Boulle, *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* (Julliard, 1952).

6 Ian Watt, *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

7 Felix Pülm, "'The Bridge on the River Kwai' – Memory Culture on World War II as a Product of Mass Tourism and a Hollywood Movie," *Humanities Journal (Graduate School), Ramkhamhaeng University* 4, no. 2 (2015): 52–63.

8 Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran, Krishantha Fedricks and Justin W. Henry, "Reclaiming Ravana in Sri Lanka: Ravana's Sinhala Buddhist Apotheosis and Tamil Responses," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2019): 796–812.

9 Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran, Krishantha Fedricks and Justin W. Henry. "Reclaiming Ravana in Sri Lanka: Ravana's Sinhala Buddhist Apotheosis and Tamil Responses."

10 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).

11 Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948.

12 K. Paranage, "Assembling modern water: The hydrosocial politics of water and development in the Mahaweli Development Project, Sri Lanka" (PhD diss., Monash University, 2020).

13 Meera Srinivasan, "A Poverty of Hope Among Sri Lankan Tamils" *The Hindu*, May 25, 2024, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/a-poverty-of-hope-among-lankan-tamils/article68211648.ece.

14 Sinthujan Varatharaja. "Sri Lanka Narrating Violence and Trauma" *Warscapes*, March 21, 2025, https://www.warscapes.com/opinion/sri-lanka-narrating-violence-and-trauma.

Matter Matters

Asian Film Archive

About Asian Film Archive
Founded in 2005, the Asian Film Archive (AFA) is dedicated to the preservation, research and (re)presentation of film and moving image practices across Singapore and Asia. As an archive, screening and curatorial platform, AFA engages with cinema as a living medium—one that traverses histories, technologies and sensibilities.

AFA holds the AFA Cathay-Keris Malay Classics, Singapore's first film collection inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Register, and continues to expand its collection, saving deteriorating, endangered films. New restorations, such as *Bambaru Avith* (1978), *Batch '81* (1982), *Patah Hati* (1952) and *Taming of the Princess* (1958), reactivate cinematic histories for contemporary contexts.

AFA's key programmes—such as *Retrospective: Edward Yang*, *Y2K DreamZ*, *Reciprocal* and the *Monographs* video essay series—explore the porous boundaries between cinema, memory and media art, engaging audiences, artists and scholars across disciplines.

AFA situates itself within the expanded field of the moving image, cultivating intersections between art, film and theory through screenings, exhibitions, commissions and publishing. By approaching "Asia" as an evolving constellation of images, histories and affinities, AFA opens up possibilities for reimagination and recontextualisation.

Matter Matters runs from 31 October 2025 to 31 January 2026 at the atrium of Oldham Theatre (1 Canning Rise, Singapore 179868).

Read the interviews in full here: https://asianfilmarchive.org/despatches/.

About the Curator
Natalie Khoo is a filmmaker and programmer based in Singapore who was an archaeologist in a previous life. She programmes for Asian Film Archive and has led *Retrospective: Edward Yang*, *y2K DreamZ*, and *Orienting Paradise*, employing a multidisciplinary approach to programming for the archive. Her own films have screened at Kurzfilm Festival Hamburg, Queer East and MCAD Manila among others. She has served on the jury of Forum Film Dokumenter and Singapore Shorts, and was previously a film programmer at National Gallery Singapore for *Painting with Light*.

Text by Sheryl Gwee.

Rooted in the Greek word *arkhē,* "beginning, origin, first place," the etymology of "archive" hints at its generative potential, not just as a repository of things used and forgotten, but as a dynamic process of contestation and dialogue where objects, media and voices jostle for primacy. Who speaks, and who remains silent? What gets uncovered, and what remains buried? This project is an ode to the archive as a living seedbed of material culture, a place where matter *matters*.

Reflecting on the Asian Film Archive's role in the collection, preservation and exhibition of the moving image over the past 20 years, *Matter Matters* approaches the archive through an archaeological lens, turning tender attention towards things "humble and noble, past and present, in use and abandoned."[1] As archaeologists gather and care for material remnants, they offer us varied interpretations of what could have been, showing us how things create people, as much as people create things.

Much as an archaeologist gathers the missing pieces, seeking to reconstitute bygone ways of life, so too do the exhibiting artists as they reconstruct lost film cultures via the archive. Through three artworks and one film programme that speculate on lost cinemas, *Matter Matters* uncovers material remnants that carry forgotten memories and repressed histories—an unfinished co-production that could have bridged Cold War ideological divisions; the forgotten films of a female filmmaker; luminous cave paintings that prefigure modern cinema; narrative reliefs montaged on the walls of precolonial Javanese temples. These multilayered sites of material culture are revived through imagination and empathy, the third space of memory that erupts somewhere between the past and the present.

Working within the gaps of the archive, the artists in this exhibition challenge monolithic narratives, bringing to light alternative voices and counter-histories, be they feminist, leftist or decolonial. *Matter Matters* is a celebration of the archive as a teeming web of untold stories, of unruly objects and practices, and of unexpected, persistent patterns of kinship among people and the things that matter.

1 Alfredo González-Ruibal ed., *Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity* (Routledge, 2013), 18.

DAWN OF LOVE

A graduate in Film Studies, Trương Quế Chi is a Hanoi-based artist and curator who has delved into Vietnamese cinema across genres, periods and contexts, notably through her curatorial role in multi-edition events by Hanoi's TPD Film Centre. With a background in Environmental Science and Photography, Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Đạt Vũ observes spaces and human relationships in relation to representation and agency. Growing up in the North and the South during postwar Vietnam's 1986 Reform era, Đạt and Chi join this collaboration to explore hidden histories and sites of memory.

Images courtesy of the artists unless otherwise specified.



Left: Trương Quế Chi; right: Đạt Vũ

Đạt Vũ and Trương Quế Chi. *Dawn of Love*. 2025. Scented quicklime, film props, prints, book, music track, light systems, inox tables and chairs, dimensions variable.



Dawn of Love unfolds from a memory: the unfinished Franco-Vietnamese film directed by Nguyễn Vinh Sơn, adapted from the short story *Chuyện tình kể trước lúc rạng đông* ("Love Story Told Before Dawn") by the writer Dương Thu Hương. Set in the Socialist North during the Vietnam War, the narrative centres on a romance fractured by ideology. Yet after just one month of shooting in early 1998, production was suspended. Since then, almost no information about this cinematic project has surfaced.

This multimedia installation reimagines the forgotten film as a site of remembrance, beginning with the final scene where the protagonist visits his lover's grave. Stones made from quicklime are infused with the lingering scent of the northern countryside, displayed alongside objects that echo unrealised props and a wartime watercolour sketch.

These material remnants trace a terrain where desires and losses of a generation resurface, intertwined with the journey of a cinema bound to its nation and people.

AFA **What drew you to the unfinished film as a site of loss?**

Chi I was interested in Dương Thu Hương, not just because she was a significant, rare female writer of my parents' generation, and not just because she was uncompromising, but because one of the books that I found in my father's library had her signature.

Dương Thu Hương was also a screenwriter and a contributor to northern Vietnamese cinema. The feature film adaptation of "Love Story Told Before Dawn" was led by Lazennec, the French company that produced Trần Anh Hùng's *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993) and *Cyclo* (1995).

In the early 1990s, Vietnamese cinema was eager to "open up" with major collaborations connected to France, such as *Indochine* (1992), *Điện Biên Phủ* (1992), and *L'amant* (1992). Yet there were still stories that were not ready to be told at that moment in time.

I still remember a quotation by Dương Thu Hương about the idea that Vietnamese people knew how to live in wartime but did not know how to live in peacetime. There is a sense of resentment and also of violence that both of us feel.



Dương Thu Hương's short story collection, *Love Story Told Before Dawn* (Hanoi Publishing House, 1988). Book cover by Vũ Gia Ngọc.

Behind-the-scenes images of the unfinished film, a co-production by Giải Phóng Films and Lazennec. These are from the personal archive of director Nguyễn Vinh Sơn. Image by Liên Phạm and Vanessa Drummond.



Đạt

When Chi and I tried to reach out to the crew members, some of them were reluctant to recall what had happened. Even though it's not a loss from the conflict, it reminds me of how, when examining Vietnamese oral history, there are numerous gaps. Mostly, members of the older generation do not want to share their pasts with their offspring. We understand it may pain them to recall history.

By transforming quicklime into tombstones for these lost memories in this project, we aim to commemorate the pain while also mitigating it. It's a forever dilemma: to heal from wounds, you have to confront them, but then you run the risk of going through it all over again.



Experimenting with scent-infused quicklime.

AFA **Could you share more about your choice of materials?**

Đạt Quicklime reacts with water to generate high heat and was used as a form of punishment in the past, particularly for women deemed "immoral" and for prisoners of war. Quicklime also appears in a Vietnamese idiom, "*bạc như vôi*." *Bạc* has two meanings in Vietnamese: the material silver and the process of fading. This connects with the white-to-greyish colour of *vôi*, quicklime—a material that crumbles in the presence of air. In the process of experimentation, we discovered that quicklime is very suitable for holding fragrances and essential oils.

Chi What remains most vivid for us, when reading Dương Thu Hương's story, is a tragic love story, full of scent, the colours of rural nature, and the landscapes of the North. And within it, a sense of fire—in anger, rage, passion, shame, helplessness, tenderness and sorrow. This intensity remains, weaving threads of connection to the previous generation, forming fragments in our quest to distil the essence of a "lost film."



A portrait of battlefield medic Nguyễn Văn Lợi, drawn in 1970 by painter Vũ Đức Quỳnh.

MEMBRANE

The Observatory is a group from Singapore working predominantly with music and sound. Driven by curiosity, relentless reinvention and critical engagement with a changing world, The Observatory's experimental, interdisciplinary projects push the frontiers of performance, carving out transformative sonic and sensory experiences. The band's current constellation consists of Cheryl Ong, Dharma and Yuen Chee Wai.

Founded in 2005 and currently led by Rueangrith Suntisuk and Pornpan Arayaveerasid, DuckUnit creates immersive spatial environments through stage, lighting and sound design. Their past projects include collaborations with commercial brands, music festivals and moving-image installations with acclaimed artists and filmmakers.

Images courtesy of the artists unless otherwise specified.



The Observatory and DuckUnit



The Observatory and DuckUnit. *Membrane*. 2025. Virtual reality, surround sound, 15 min.

Born out of the artists' ongoing cave explorations, *Membrane* delves into a numinous time-space where echoes of a primordial past pulse through a subterranean landscape. The installation brings together layered instrumentals, found sound and virtual reality (VR) technology, inviting audiences to enter a rich, multisensory experience as they speculate on humankind's enduring fascination with light, movement and storytelling. Could ancient caves be our oldest cinemas? Another word for "membrane" is "film," which speaks to our desire for places where contact with another order of reality becomes possible. *Membrane* is an attempt to create a transformative, elemental space where the border between this world and the next might become porous.

AFA **Could you tell us about your recent research trip together? What were some unexpected discoveries during the process?**

Cheryl This time, we decided to go to Sulawesi because the focus was on cave art. The experience was very humbling. You get a sense of the scale from pictures but to experience it in person brings you to a different space and time.



A cave painting found in Leang Bulu' Sipong 4, South Sulawesi, estimated to be 48,000 years old. It depicts an anoa being hunted by part-human, part-animal figures.[1]

Chee Wai You realise that this painting is part of a larger environment. Because of time, erosion and disintegration, you can't figure out the entire panel, but you can see traces and fragments. You start to appreciate the imperfections, the marginal details, the things that don't make it into official documents as the so-called "oldest" ones.

Some of our research was on shamanism and on how, almost everywhere in the world, handprints on cave walls were created similarly—the stencil, through the body outwards, to breath, to imprint. There was speculation that this was a kind of portal, that the cave wall was like a membrane they wanted to pass through, to the other side, behind the wall.



Hand stencils in the caves of the Maros-Pangkep karst.

AFA **When we first spoke about this project, we discussed how the cave could be a kind of lost cinema. I'm curious if you had any other musings about it.**

Chee Wai While filming some 360° videos, we felt that sense of being enclosed in a cinema space. As we painted the cave with light and saw the shadows appear and disappear, that was magical.

Cheryl The direct connection is still in terms of materiality. Film as a medium. Instead of a film strip, the images are on a cave body. It documents the process of time.

Chee Wai With the physical film strip, there's a linearity to the chronicle of time. But when you're in a cave, that is deep time. That is time in a sculptural way.

Dharma Time frozen.

Chee Wai But it still grows. The cave is still growing, the land is still rising, stalactites and stalagmites are still growing. In a way, it is a film that is elongated and is still screening in the space, over time.

Dharma When we were at Leang Tedongnge, where one of the oldest cave paintings was, it felt like standing in front of a huge screen, and maybe it is that lost screen.



A cave ceiling where a larger painting may have been found.
However, due to natural degradation, much of it has been lost.

AFA **How does this relate to your choice of medium, VR?**

Pornpan For me, VR is a way to imagine how prehistoric people might have seen the world. We want to take off our present conditioning. We try to leave our cognitive "now" to see the world as they did.

Rueangrith When you put the goggles on, you leave your body and enter another space. Your eyes and ears can still connect with that space, even while your body remains here. In that sense, it's also some kind of cinema—you leave the "real" world and enter something else.

AFA **Could you share more about the sonic components of your work?**

Cheryl Apart from certain sections with more musical, reflective passages, the rest would most likely be a lot of sound design, helping to build the world together with the visuals. Sound is very powerful. You can hear, from North to South Sulawesi, how the environment changes completely—from the cave to the volcano, to the village, to the forest.

Dharma Besides field recordings, we are also exploring otherworldly sounds, bringing all these together in one experience. We're using synthesis effects and techniques we've been developing, pushing it further to create that experience of another realm beyond the cave.

A rare, clear image of a human figure represented as a therianthrope, dating to around 27,000 years ago.





Inside Leang Tedongnge.

"One main point of inspiration stemmed from the hand stencils we encountered in numerous caves—the bodily traces and remains of the people who made the paintings. We decided to approach the soundtrack by giving it bodily traces. Drawing on the art of foley, we spent time in the studio recording sounds made with our hands, with objects and surfaces, editing through field recordings from the caves, post-processing them to uncover new sound worlds. To make strange the familiar."
—The Observatory, 2025.

1 Adhi Agus Oktaviana, et al., "Narrative cave art in Indonesia by 51,200 years ago," *Nature* 631 (2024): 814–818.
Images courtesy of The Observatory.

A SECRET PORTRAIT OF WAN HOI-LING

Elsa Wong is a Singaporean multidisciplinary creative based in New York City. With a background in fashion photography and a practice spanning art direction, set design and filmmaking, Wong crafts surreal, emotive environments that play on the affective structures of performance. Her projects have been featured in *i-D*, *FEMALE* Singapore, *NOWNESS Asia*, and at Queer East.

Images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise specified.



Elsa Wong

Elsa Wong. *A Secret Portrait of Wan Hoi-Ling*. 2025.
Single-channel video projection shot on 16 mm Kodak Vision 3 500T film, wire gauze, plaster, cardboard, found objects, acrylic paint, confetti, wood, image prints and celluloid film, 12 min 30 sec.



This semi-fictional, cinematic portrait reimagines the lost legacy of Wan Hoi-Ling (1909–unknown), a pioneering female director and screenwriter. Working across Hong Kong and Singapore, Wan created anti-imperialist, anti-colonial films and was imprisoned during the Japanese Occupation in Singapore. However, little survives of her story, which is often overshadowed by her romance with fellow filmmaker, Hou Yao (1903–1942).

Through found objects, double exposures, vibrant patterns and handcrafted textures speckled with light, this portrait evokes intimate, interior worlds, rather than historical certainties. The film's overt theatricality points to its own constructedness, gesturing towards the gaps in the archive that conceal Wan's "secret" life. The film is voiced in English, Mandarin and Hokkien, reflecting Wan's cosmopolitanism and drawing attention to the process of narrativisation itself. In acknowledging that every portrait necessarily falls short of the real human behind it, the film offers an empathetic vision of a woman moving through love, ambition and loss.

AFA **Your initial sketches of the installation showed three screens, which eventually became three parts of a single-channel projection. Could you share how you've developed the film's narrative structure?**

Elsa The interviews and essays written about Wan often went through her filmography to describe both her personal life and her career. I noticed three distinct timelines: first, her time with her partner, when they collaborated on films that were optimistic and future-oriented.

In the late 1930s, Wan apprenticed with Hou in Hong Kong as assistant director and scriptwriter. In 1940, the Shaw Organisation invited the two to Singapore, where they co-wrote and directed eight Malay films, including *Mutiara*, billed as the "First Singapore-Made Malay Talkie."[2] Hou was executed during the Japanese Occupation for his involvement with anti-Japanese resistance activities, possibly in the 1942 Sook Ching Massacre.[3]

Then came the second part, when she was alone. The films she made then reflected her personal struggles and had a more serious and sombre tone than those she created with her partner.

After Hou's death, Wan stayed on in Singapore and directed *Spirit of the Overseas Chinese* (1946) and *Miss Nanyang* (1947). The latter film focused on comfort women during the war.

The third part was when she began to "disappear." During this time, she wrote one last script called *Love Torn*, which I thought was a very poetic, all-encompassing title that spoke to her journey across the first two parts.

Crafting the film's signature handmade aesthetic.



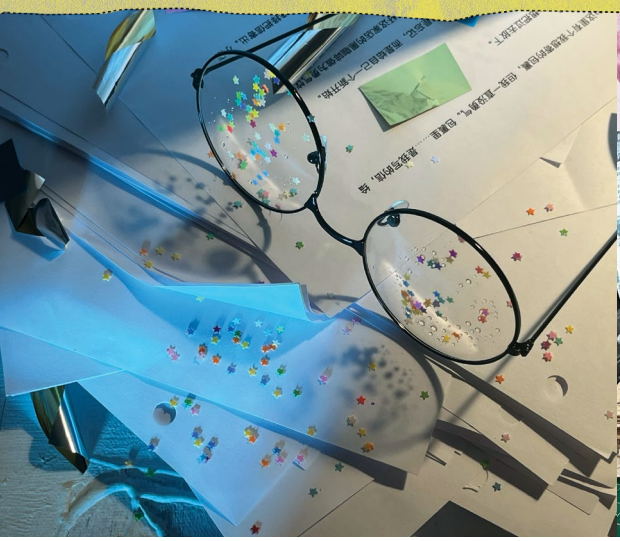
AFA **Could you tell us more about your materials and techniques?**

Elsa The film is composed of still lifes and miniatures, and I chose to shoot it on 16mm. So much of Wan and Hou's work was shot on film, and some of it has been lost—there's something about the object of the film reel itself that I wanted to bring into this work.

For this project, I kept contemplating whether I wanted to shoot a live-action sequence. At the same time, I felt I couldn't do Wan Hoi-Ling justice by filming a person. If I wanted the portrait to exist in the space of pure imagination, I needed to fully commit to building miniatures and using objects to represent different parts of the script. It was a good challenge that made me dive into the relationship between object and emotion—how to create consistent visual clues throughout the scenes.



Floral patterns and cityscapes inspired by 1930s Hong Kong.



Hou Yao's round spectacles.



A collage of film posters and film stills forms the backdrop to Wan and Hou's time together.

AFA **What were some of these connections between objects and emotions?**

Elsa The confetti was something I was really drawn to. I watched a film that had a party sequence filled with confetti in the air. I felt this sense of endless celebration, but it also seemed fake, like an orchestrated moment. When I looked at actual confetti, the reflective parts were very interesting to capture.

So much of Wan's filmmaking was about light—light burning into the film. I wanted to carry that into my work, letting those specks of light run continuously through the film.



An imaginative recreation of the coffee shop that Wan set up at Great World Amusement Park in Singapore, after Hou's death. She also tutored a student in acting and dancing.

AFA **Will you construct a soundtrack for the film?**

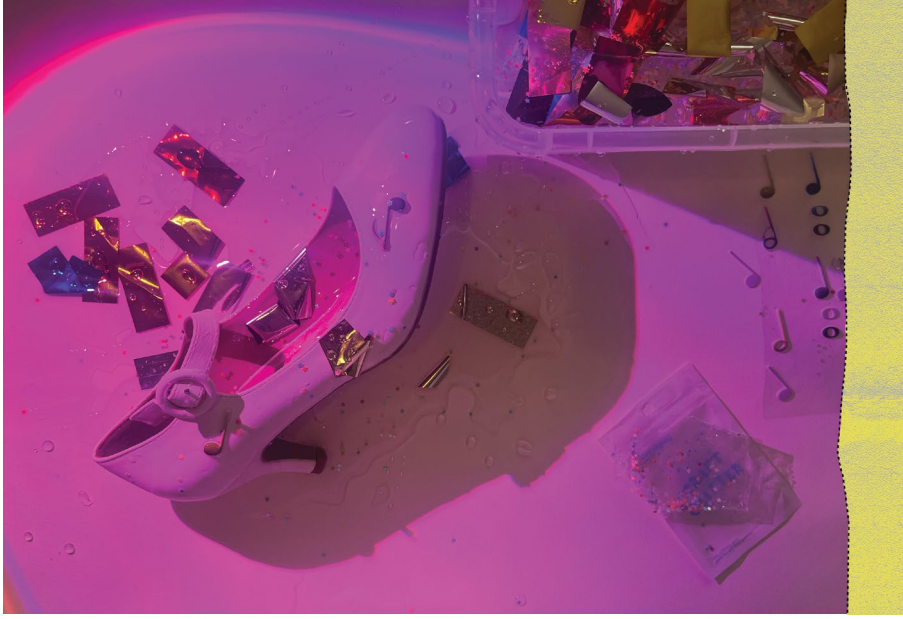
Elsa The script is in English, but my voice actor and I decided to workshop some parts into Chinese and Hokkien on the day of recording. I'm trying to reflect how they might have spoken at the time, representing the spirit of overseas Chinese.

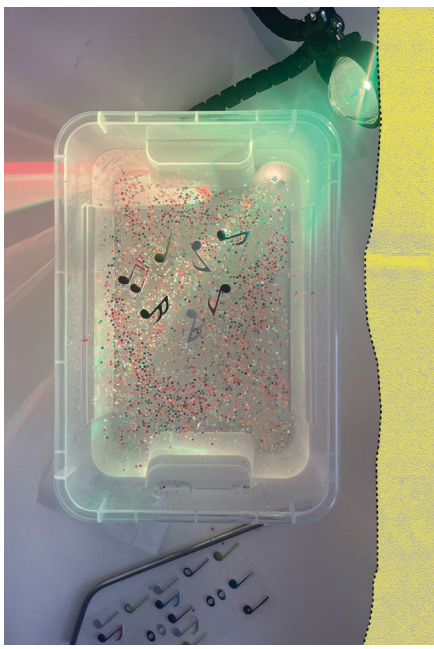
I came to this conclusion about three different languages or voices while talking to a friend about how language is fluid. With translation, subtitles and the original language, there's always an added layer. It's never one-to-one.

AFA **When you say language is fluid, I feel that's relevant to the work. I read that Wan Hoi-Ling was often thought to be a man. As a woman making films in a male-dominated industry back then, it must have been very different.**

Elsa I wrote it into the script—Wan was very driven, and she knew she needed to be mentored by an established man, because historical records centred on him. Her name appears too, but there's more about him. It's my imagination, but I think part of her knew that might be what she had to do.

A simple white shoe which Wong found at a thrift store became a metonym for Wan's presence/ absence in the film.





2 Wai-Siam Hee, *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-Language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya before and during the Cold War* (Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 168.
3 Law Kar, "Reexamining and Reconstructing the Legend of Hou Yao (abridged version)," in *Transcending Space and Time: Early Cinematic Experience of Hong Kong (Book II: Pioneer Filmmaker Hou Yao)* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 63.

PRASASTI · INSCRIPTIONS (FORUM LENTENG)

Based in Jakarta, Forum Lenteng is an egalitarian, non-profit organisation founded in 2003, amid a growing eagerness for new cultural freedoms in post-Reformasi Indonesia. Through film production, documentation, research, education and open distribution, Forum Lenteng seeks to decentralise media knowledge and develop visual literacy, spurring the growth of socially-engaged artistic ecosystems.

Within Forum Lenteng, the platform Candikala focuses on excavating precolonial visual histories through an archaeological lens, recovering lost narratives that have been subject to systematic erasure.

Images courtesy of Forum Lenteng unless otherwise specified.

Terracotta Connection (Pilot Project): Silsilah Tanah (2021), a presentation of Candikala's research on terracotta culture in West Java, particularly in the northern coastal region of Pantura. The project traces narratives surrounding the Jatiwangi people's relationship with their land.



Curated by Forum Lenteng, *Inscriptions* is a film programme to be screened at Oldham Theatre in March 2026. Here, we provide a quick peek into the films alongside excerpts of AFA's conversation with Hafiz Rancajale, Yuki Aditya and Luthfan Nur Rochman, who wear multiple hats as filmmakers, programmers and researchers within Forum Lenteng.

AFA **If you had to summarise the programme in three words, what would they be?**

Forum Lenteng Excavation, framing and assemblage.

The films we have chosen are attempts to excavate long-lost knowledge about precolonial visual history, which informs us about what is not highlighted by the modern art curricula and official state history. It's an effort to dig into something that has been obscured from this generation, to rewrite our history, and to offer alternatives—a counter-history to what has been told all these years.



Members of Candikala at a lecture on the political systems of ancient Indonesian kingdoms by the renowned epigraphist Dr. Ninny Soesanti Tedjowasono.

Framing relates to how knowledge is defined by the state. *Siwalaya (Realm of Shiva)* (dir. Afrian Purnama and Yuki Aditya, 2023) discusses how the archaeological monument Prambanan was framed through nation-building efforts during the first years of Indonesia's independence, such that an image from one region in Indonesia, Java, was made to represent the archipelago as a whole union.



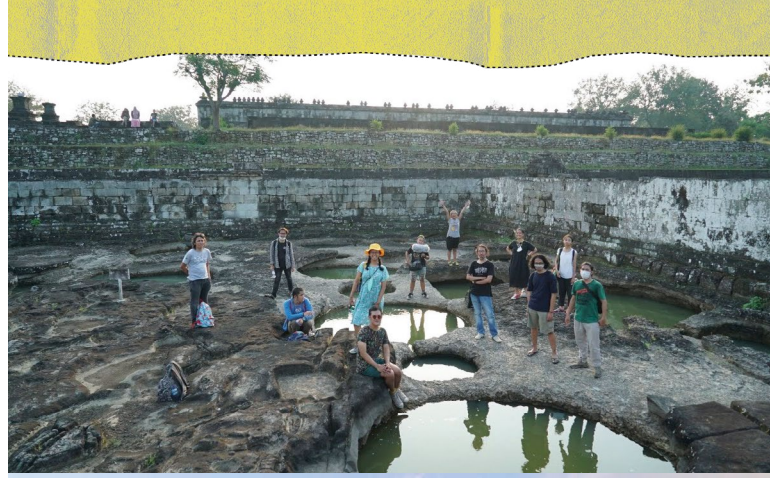
Members of Forum Lenteng studying the Ramayana bas-relief at Prambanan, the largest Hindu temple complex in Indonesia.

We can also question and contest the framing of *Darah dan Doa (The Long March)* (dir. Usmar Ismail, 1950) as the first instance of "national cinema" in Indonesia when we consider the role of leftist filmmakers and their work, which was extinguished in the massacre of 1965. The other Southeast Asian films in the programme similarly address how people deal with the traumatic wounds of the Cold War, and how they managed to survive in the peripheries.

AFA **So we have excavation, framing—in terms of national framing, and visual framing with architecture. Your third word was "assemblage," right?**

Forum Lenteng "Assemblage" is clearly evident in the films. *The Myriad of Faces of the Future Challengers* (dir. I Gde Mika and Yuki Aditya, 2022) assembles fragmented Indonesian cinema histories from YouTube and other forms of media. In *Bachtiar* (dir. Hafiz Rancajale, 2025), we assembled pieces of history—oral histories, state documents, correspondences. We are oscillating between personal narratives and state histories, and the relationship between them.

The same goes for the other works we have curated from Southeast Asia, like *Future Cries Beneath Our Soil* (dir. Pham Tu Hang, 2019) and *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* (dir. Kavich Neang, 2019). One of Nguyễn Trinh Thi's films, *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), also talks about ancient temples in Vietnam, and how they relate to the Vietnam War—how bombing launched by the United States shaped the history of the temple and that of the Champa people in Panduranga.





[Above] Members of Candikala at the Ratu Boko sites in Yogyakarta.
[Below] Members of Forum Lenteng excavating the cosmology of ancient Java.

Calling on Publics

Ong Puay Khim

About Ong Puay Khim
Ong Puay Khim is Director of Collection, Public Art and Programmes at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Prior to SAM, she held curatorial positions at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore and ICAS LASALLE. She was part of the curatorial team of Bangkok Art Biennale 2020. For the Biennale, Ong is interested in engaging practices that respond to or intervene in everyday phenomena, as well as those that reflect on the publics in spatiotemporal dimension of place and geography.

Singapore is well known for its efficiency, cohesion and urban innovation. It is a city-state where urban planning, redevelopment and cultural governance have profoundly shaped the contours of public life and where its urban environment is tightly planned and regulated. Urban planning in Singapore is not merely spatial—it is ideological. Through zoning, land acquisition and redevelopment, it shapes a particular public that is orderly, harmonious and economically productive. Public spaces are carefully managed: void decks are semi-public and monitored; malls function as privately governed public spaces; and streets are designed for circulation, not congregation. What this also means is that the notion of public space as a political and civic domain for assembly, open debate and social interaction is rarely used as such. Instead, Singapore's public sphere operates under conditions where urban design serves as a form of social engineering, structuring the realms of discourse and assembly. These forces define which publics may be heard, which histories may be remembered, and which social and cultural expressions become legible and serve to shape the relationship between state and people, and among peoples, giving rise to the perception of managed audiences rather than spontaneous publics. This text examines works in Singapore Biennale 2025 that draw attention to the spontaneity of the publics (and their spaces) in Singapore and introduce various formations of publics. The artworks do not simply address existing publics and the assumed publicness of spaces but actively produce new ones through encounters and interactive processes. They also reveal that the publicness of spaces in Singapore is characterised by negotiations of space in everyday life, such as in the project by Akira Takayama/Port B.

Over several months, **Akira Takayama/Port B** collaborated with a group of students from the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore to develop a series of board games, each inspired by a specific district in Singapore, from secondary forests to offshore islands, from heritage districts to rental estates. Players engage in an imagined journey across real neighbourhoods, discovering unknown stories, exploring material memories of places and navigating spatial constructs. The project, *Theatre-Let Project: Board Game Centre Edition* (2025), continues Takayama's practice of challenging theatre conventions by redefining the relationship between audiences and urban spaces. By prompting acts of touring, each board game transforms audiences into performers and allows them to define their relationship with urban spaces and, in the process, assert their own agency in forming relationships with places and people. Juxtaposing this playful exploration is the work of **Ayesha Singh** which inserts another form of spatial intervention and considers how built environments reflect the intricate



Akira Takayama/Port B. Detail of *Theatre-Let Project: Board Game Centre Edition*, 2025. A collection of board games created through a series of workshops, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Ayesha Singh. Installation view of *Continuous Coexistences (Singapore)*. 2025. Stainless steel, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

process of constructing identity and social cohesiveness. Responding to Singapore's representation of multiculturalism through architecture, *Continuous Coexistences (Singapore)* (2025) combines elements of iconic structures including Keramat Sultan Iskandar Shah, Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple and the demolished National Theatre, amongst others, weaving together these recognisable architectural forms into an unbroken three-dimensional line drawing. Sited next to Raffles House at Fort Canning Park, the elevated ground allows the work to outline various views of the civic and financial districts it overlooks. Here, the urban landscape of a thriving arts, cultural and lifestyle precinct and of economic pragmatism is seen through representations of diverse beliefs, revealing the dynamic play between administered and embedded forms of identity. As with Takayama's project, subjectivity in this spatial interaction is core—as the viewer moves around the sculpture, different and overlapping visages offer themselves for contemplation.

As manifested in Takayama and Singh's work, redefining our relationship to a place requires an interaction between our built environment and the various ways its spatial configurations regulate our daily experience and movements. The informal spatial practice in Takayama's project takes on a speculative, playful slant in the work of **Debbie Ding**, which teases various possibilities for critically rethinking our daily navigations and social relations. *Rules for the Expression of Architectural Desires* (2014–2021) by Ding is a series of speculative rules, schemes, devices and instruments for the urban and social design of a city. Rules, such as "Pedestrians are forbidden from wearing shoes which disturb the ground" and "Use of private green spaces is permitted for those wearing camouflaged suits" or "No dreaming allowed in working zones, public sleepers must be evicted," seek a re-examination of the ideas that underlie the design of a city, governing forms of public social behaviour, use and accessibility of spaces and the logics of productivity. Urban spaces take shape through gestures and interventions. Here, the city is defined through societal rules and is made immaterial, suggesting changes in behaviour can transform the urban landscape. The work thus presents the possibility of rewriting the rules that define a city and the potential of imagining a new city shaped by desires and alternative solutions. Another form of agency takes place. Perhaps.

If Takayama, Singh and Ding propose ways to reimagine spatial relationships, other works in the Biennale turn to the body itself as the site where publics form—through gathering, gesture and collective action. Throughout the 1990s, **Seung-taek Lee** carried out a series of events



Seung-taek Lee. Installation view of *Earth Play*. 1989. Acrylic on PVC balloon, diameter: 700 cm. Collection of Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (KAIST).



Angelica Mesiti. Installation view of *Future Perfect Continuous*. 2022. Single-channel HD video (black-and-white, surround sound) 8 min 8 sec. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery.

involving the tour of a giant rubber balloon painted to look like the Earth. Titled *The Earth Performance* series, the work invites passers-by to touch, push or care for the globe. The gathering of bodies in various acts of play prompts attention to environmental conservation and care as the Earth balloon bruises, scrapes and tears in the process. Inspired by the satellite images of Earth taken from space in the 1970s and resisting the diminishing agency of nature in the postwar period of rapid industrialisation, both the object *Earth Play* (1989) and performance *Earth Performance Reenactment* (1989–2024) question the role of art and society in communicating environmental issues, making Lee one of the early proponents of eco-art.

While in Lee's work, the gathering of bodies around an object produces shared experience and draws attention to pertinent issues, **Angelica Mesiti**'s *Future Perfect Continuous* (2022) calls on the power of coordinated gestures to reveal the transformative potential of human actions and experience. The work involves a sequence of simple actions—clicking, snapping fingers, rubbing and clapping hands—that, when repeated and multiplied, mimics the sound of a rainstorm. One hears the sound and catches flashes of light shining from behind a half-constructed wall. Uncertainty sets in as our ears begin to identify the sound as rain, but our eyes cannot locate it. Upon encountering the video and the "makers" of the weather event, the experience of the work shifts from recalling a natural phenomenon to experiencing a moment of togetherness. The sense of collective consciousness is heightened as the sound of the storm intensifies and yet we become keenly aware of intimate connections between individuals as their eyes meet one another and gestures are transmitted and accumulated. As in Lee's work, nature figures but as a rainstorm. By calling upon or recalling this phenomenon, which is among the most unpredictable of natural occurrences, the work is a poetic remembrance of the wonders of nature but also an allusion to turbulence and uncertainty. Ambiguity and indeterminacy become values in themselves within the beauty and hopefulness of collective action.

In an artist talk on 1 November 2025, Gabriela Golder articulated her methodology, an excerpt as follows:

> **The performers do not interpret;**
> **they process, amplify, insist.**
> **They repeat until meaning fractures,**
> **until words become mantra,**
> **until they can no longer be ignored.**
> **Ideas become calls, songs, acts of endurance.**

Repetition is not redundancy—
it is persistence until something shifts.
Singing becomes a disruptive act.
To demand through song does not soften protest;
it magnifies it.
Every phrase a blow,
every repetition a tactic.
[. . .]
The camera is a witness.
But it is a body.
It breathes with the other.
It trembles with the other.
It holds the weight of what cannot be said.
[. . .]
I knew that shouting alone does not work.
You have to go out into the street to find others.
The street as a space of resistance.
As a space of invention.
As a space where bodies gather,
and in gathering, create something new.

State of Assembly (2025) by **Gabriela Golder** explores collective organisation through gatherings of women from different generations and backgrounds who imagine alternatives for better living conditions. The work extends Golder's exploration of how art serves to highlight and communicate issues of urgency, to profile neglected subjects and their stories, and in the process of making, resists erasure and prompts a rethinking of how lives are lived. Specifically in *State of Assembly*, she examines forms of public assembly which, since Argentina's 2001 socio-economic crisis, have become a prevalent form of public and collective expression. Through songs, texts and readings, the work performs a call to think together and imagine collectively, and, rather than gather in rage, to assemble and ask: "What do we propose?"

A conscious transmission takes place in both the works of Mesiti and Golder: the former through a keen awareness of and response to bodies sharing the same space and the latter via unifying proclamations of shared concerns—both collectively formed. In *Love Was Taught Last Friday* (2025), **Young-jun Tak** zeros in on a more intimate form of transference. The choreography film explores how embodied knowledge is shared across generations. The film begins with the deliberate movements of



Gabriela Golder. Installation view of *State of Assembly*. 2025. Three-channel video (colour, sound), 45 min. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Young-jun Tak. Installation view of *Love Was Taught Last Friday*. 2025. Single-channel video (colour, sound), 20 min. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

a father-and-son team of woodcarvers in South Tyrol, who continue the traditional craft of producing religious idols. This footage is set against the collaborative choreography of Christopher House and two of his former students, whose intimate movements unfold in Berlin's Veterinary Anatomy Theatre, the city's oldest historical educational venue. Presented in a former school hall, the work draws parallels between disparate sites of knowledge transfer and the continuation of rare creative professions. To see the three works in parallel is to observe the persistence of forms of transference which perform, at both individual and social levels, resistance to hegemonic forces.

Returning to Golder's work in which the streets are where publicness can be enacted, **Emily Floyd**'s *Field Library* (2025) proposes an outdoor library as a site for expression and exchange of ideas, knowledge and opinions. Combining two important types of public space, the work is both public seating and a play space. The library comprises booklets offering a selection of critical texts and creative writings, which provide perspectives on intersecting urgencies, including geographies and migration, alternative and feminist pedagogies and reciprocal care chains. In their spatial configuration, the various sculptural blocks are arranged to allow different social relations and settings to form. *Field Library* thrives on conversations and encourages free use by anyone, whether during public programmes or through individual or communal readings.

Floyd's library responds to a broader phenomenon in Singapore and globally: the erosion of public spaces, one of the signs being the reduction or reconfiguration of public seating in ways that discourage gathering and conversation. Designed not for comfort or for mass gathering, such social infrastructures in malls, parks and pedestrian streets seem to have undergone similar changes, with spots for rest and incidental encounters with others diminishing. Such may be the consequence of standardised design and uniform development or of the regulation of public spaces. It may also be due to commercial strategy, which deters undesirable behaviours or encourages forms of consumption. What is lost is thus the potential sociability of public areas and the possibility of spontaneous public discourse. Yet all it takes is for someone to bring a chair, or a few of them.

In an act to reclaim spaces for conversation, **Izat Arif** installs a series of benches in various publicly accessible spaces. Titled *In Loving Memory* (2025), the series comprises benches, each of which carries a personal statement by the artist, responding in different ways to ideas of improved





Izat Arif. Installation views of *In Loving Memory*. 2025. Terrazzo bench and outdoor industrial paint, 83 × 119 × 69 cm. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

living, personal and collective remembrances, identity and the changing landscape as markers of positive development. Each bench performs as a proxy for the artist, its utterance an invitation to sit and chat. Statements such as "Your ancestors struggled for this bench" seek stories of individual families' struggles and sacrifice and queries about the ancestors they relate to. Another bench claims a familiar rhetoric, "Soon you will no longer remember that this was a swamp," raising the question of symbols of progress while subtly probing the validity of the metaphor—with the current approach to environmental thinking, the swamp may no longer be something undesired. Other benches make playful claims to space: "*Tiada halangan berkumpul dan berkomplot di sini*" (There is no obstacle to gathering and plotting here) and "You can be comfortably radical within this designated area." These statements wittily adopt the language used in public signs of instruction to denote a relationship to a space not originally intended for such uses.

While the works of Golder, Floyd and Izat are deliberate attempts to offer spaces for the gathering of bodies and for dialogues, they prompt the question: Can there be relational spaces in a highly regulated environment? *untitled 2016 (form follows function or vice versa no. two)* (2016) by **Rirkrit Tiravanija** suggests a provisional answer: even a simple gesture can create temporal micro-publics that unite in an unpredictable and dispersed manner. Situating itself in a space of public circulation within a shopping mall, the work invites members of the public to own a piece of art in the form of a T-shirt. Not only does the work appropriate consumerism, but it also adapts this ubiquitous piece of clothing's popularity as a medium for self-expression and advertising. This trend, which flourished since the 1960s and from the 2000s started featuring political and social statements, permeates different segments of society. Through the act of claiming a piece of culture and wearing its message of "Freedom cannot be simulated," *untitled 2016* becomes a vehicle for engagement, expanding the social dimension of art and creating a shared experience. The phrase "form follows function or vice versa" in the title is approached in nuanced ways, suggesting that such relationships are not always one dimensional.

The works discussed so far not only address the publics but call them into being by bringing about space, experiences and situations for their



Rirkrit Tiravanija. Installation view of *untitled 2016 (form follows function or vice versa no. two)*. 2016. Stainless steel and T-shirts, dimensions variable; box: 55.9 × 91 × 122.6 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.

creation. Yet another mode operates through address itself: speech and text express publicness, but song and sound carry more emotive power, gathering publics in memory and through recurrent attention. *Seaweed Story* (2022) by **ikkibawiKrrr** features a rendition of "Jeju Arirang" sung by the Hado Haenyeo Choir. The *haenyeo*'s (sea women) song evokes the island's memory of resilience and solidarity, the *haenyeo* community having led an anti-Japanese movement that resisted colonial exploitation and ethnic discrimination during the occupation. In **Allora & Calzadilla**'s *Returning a Sound* (2004), a young activist traverses Vieques on a light motorbike, its exhaust pipe fitted with a trumpet. The sound produced announces the end of 60 years of regular bombings from weapons tests by the US Navy, and this single gesture of an individual serves as a psychological wake-up call for unity. Reflecting the material landscape of Vieques, another work by the duo, *Under Discussion* (2005), turns to the landscape as it follows a fisherman's son travelling around the island on a boat made from an upturned conference table. As the journey frames our view of the coastline, we begin to notice the spaces on the shore. Two signs come into view: "Welcome to the Vieques Wildlife Refuge" and "No Trespassing, Authorized Personnel Only: Danger—Explosives," seeming at odds with each other. The work reveals a landscape the artists refer to as "transitory geography," and is informed by questions of what marks the land we inhabit and how we can reclaim these spaces.



ikkibawiKrrr. Installation view of *Seaweed Story*. 2022. Acrylic on Foamex board and single-channel video (colour, sound), 5 min 22 sec. Collection of the artist.



Fiona Amundsen. Installation view of *Blowing in the Wind* series. 2023. Digitised large format analogue photography on lightboxes, various sizes. Collection of the artist.

What marks the land? How do we capture the impacts of human intervention on the land and its effects on people materially? Works of Fiona Amundsen, field-0 [Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen Zhan] and Cian Dayrit bring visibility to specific communities subject to varied forms of violence enacted through evolving landscapes and ownership. Shot in Guåhan (Guam) and Tinian Island, the site from which atomic bombs were launched, **Fiona Amundsen**'s photographic series, *Blowing in the Wind*, alludes to "downwinders"—individuals and communities exposed to radioactive materials. Through the use of local seawater and employing techniques that capture traces of radiation in the darkroom process, the resulting images show skin flakes, plants and land blurred by radiating white spots that visually manifest the destruction, confronting the viewer and seeking awareness of the injustices in Moana-Oceania. Like the radioactive materials Amundsen makes visible, the long-term research project by **field-0 [Jingru (Cyan) Cheng and Chen Zhan]** examines how infrastructure development disrupts the lives of Indigenous communities. Comprising a four-channel video (*Drifting Bodies*, 2025), a live feedback instrument (*The Humming of the Power Grid*, 2025) and accompanied by fieldwork photographs, the installation traces the complex relationship between transnational energy networks and local communities. The construction of dams that link the hydroelectric power network drastically changes the lives of the Indigenous Karen hill tribes, many of whom find themselves living in floating houses that shift each day when the dam releases water to generate electricity. Yet drinkable water is not readily available to these communities. Across Thailand and into Laos, the hum of power lines is evoked in *The Humming of the Power Grid*, a reminder of the daily realities. Where, and who, does a green energy project serve? What regimes of (in)visibility are these communities subject to? These works, as with those of Cian Dayrit, witness, give voice to and resist erasure.

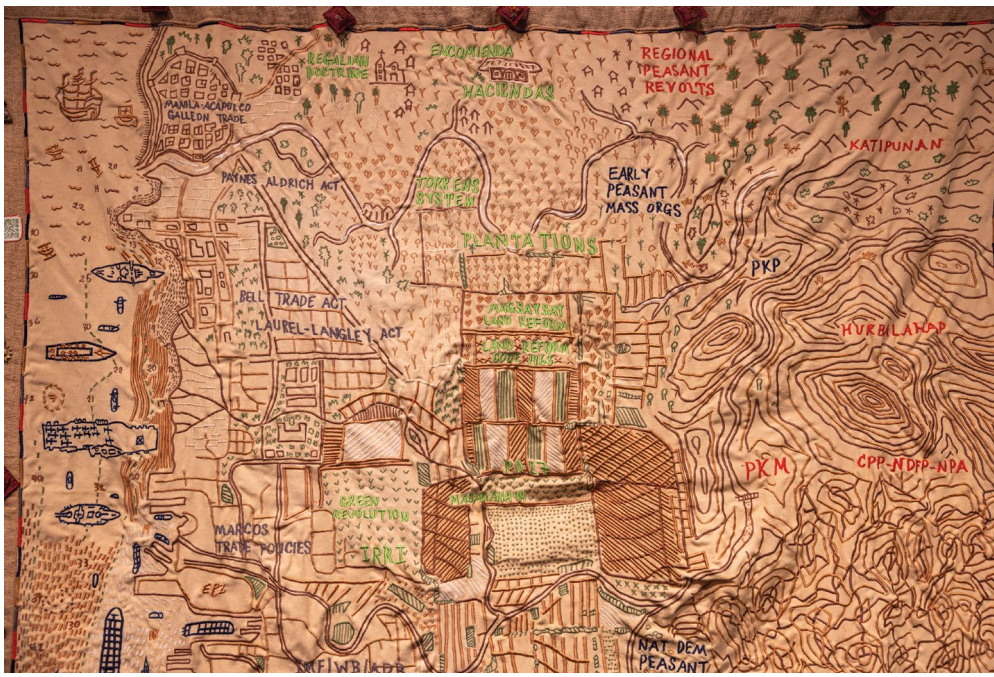
Cian Dayrit is known for his series of counter-cartography textile works, which seek to examine the structures of power, particularly of the agrarian population which has for centuries suffered under an oppressive feudal system. Collaborating with local craftspeople and peasant communities, *Feudal Fields: Luisita* (2018), *Feudal Fields II: Tinang* (2024), *Feudal Fields: San Jose Del Monte* (2025) and *Agrev Algorithm* (2022) are part of Dayrit's long-term engagement in documenting the systemic aggression, peasant struggles and the ongoing fight for land reform in the





field-0. Top: Installation view of *Drifting Bodies*. 2025. Four-channel video installation (colour, sound), 10 min 30 sec, curtains and mattress; Bottom: Installation view of *The Humming of the Power Grid*. 2025. Aluminium tube, mixer, amplifiers, transducer, contact microphone and photographs on aluminium, dimensions variable. Collection of the artists.



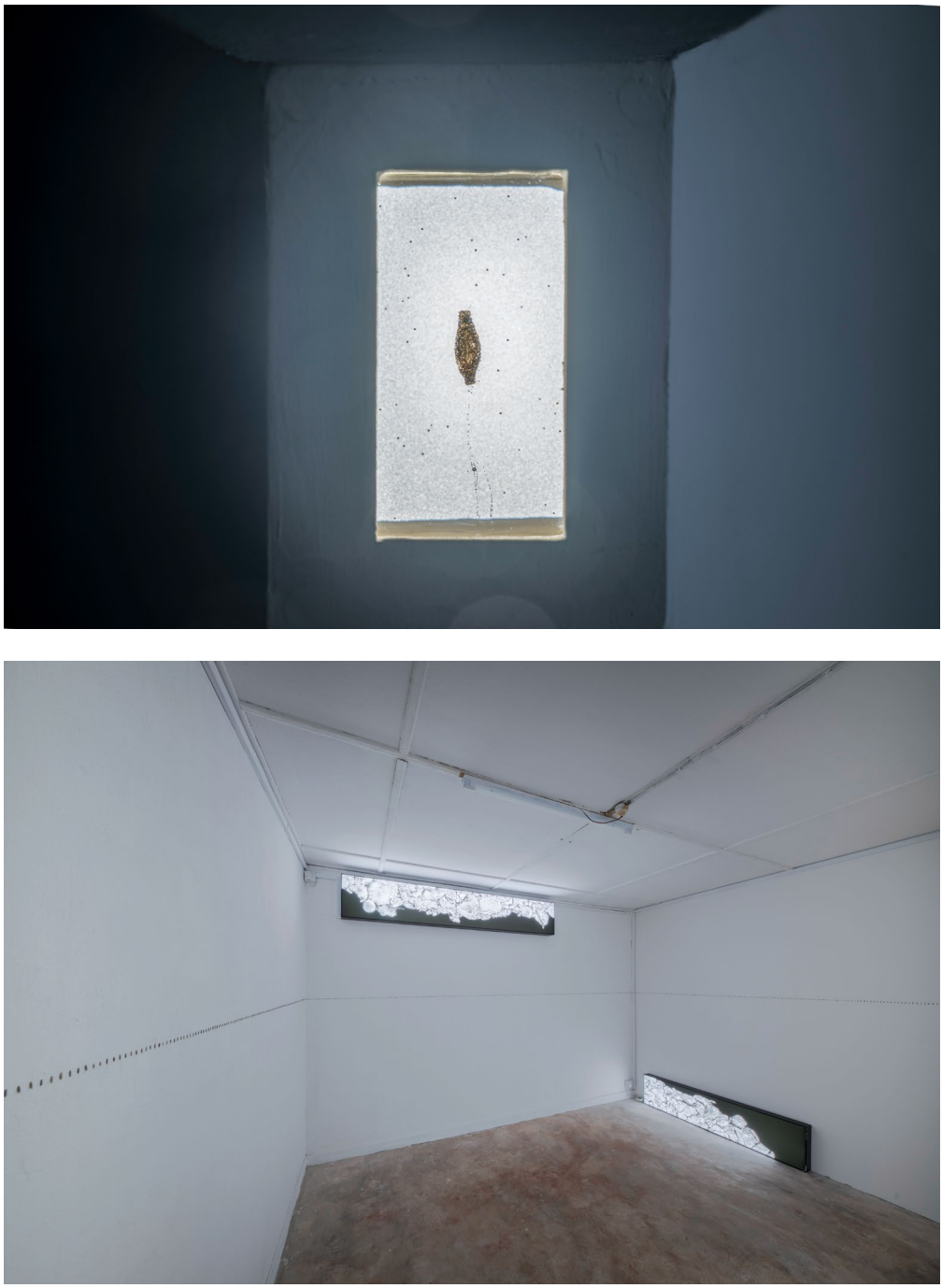


Cian Dayrit, in collaboration with Henricus and Mark Sanchez. Top: Installation view of *Agrev Algorithm*. 2022. Textile cartography and embroidery on fabric, 159 × 190 cm. Collection of the artist; Bottom: Detail of *Agrev Algorithm*.

Philippines. The use of geographical mapping has a crucial reference to the Murillo Velarde map created by Jesuit priest and cartographer Pedro Murillo in 1734—the Velarde map was used to refute China's claims over the South China Sea, while in Dayrit's textile maps, cartography performs another kind of resistance, one from within.

The works mentioned in this text draw out one of the approaches to the curatorial framework of *pure intention* in which publicness is a series of relations—an interplay between theory (systems of governance) and practice (lived experience), and where production, reproduction and transformation of everyday, temporal encounters give meaning to physical and social realities. While the works insert themselves into "public spaces" such as the malls, residential estates, parks and museum galleries, it is perhaps not so much the space as the human activities that define publicness.

The material world is but a physical bearer of intention, brought into being by, yet at times indifferent to, human will. Considered not as grand intentions but as a mere testament to material existence, nowhere is its carelessness better articulated than in the works of **Tan Zi Hao**. *The Scale of One* and *Levelling Schemes* (both 2025) take the cases of household casebearers as a manifestation of the unwilled acts of humans in the debris we produce. Composed of dust, dead skin and other detritus, these protective shields of casebearers contain microscopic traces of our existence, the worldly materials we use, and perhaps squander. The series of prints in *Levelling Schemes* presents a microscopic image of the cases, resembling a cosmic-looking terraformed landscape—a world reshaped from waste. Tan's works suggest that in the grand scheme of human endeavours, our intentions are as careless as the debris we produce. Yet we persist in a relentless pursuit of progress, as if the waste we unwittingly produce can sustain, and perhaps even create, entire worlds. It begs the question that the curatorial team asks with *pure intention*: how do we live meaningfully in a system designed for efficiency?



Tan Zi Hao. Top: Detail of *The Scale of One*. 2025. Household casebearer's case in resin, wall protrusion and sound, dimensions variable; Bottom: Installation view of *Levelling Schemes*. 2025. UV printing on fabric, lightboxes, household casebearer's cases and sound, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

Anarchiving Public Housing

Lilian Chee and Lin Derong, 2020.[1]

About Lilian Chee and Lin Derong

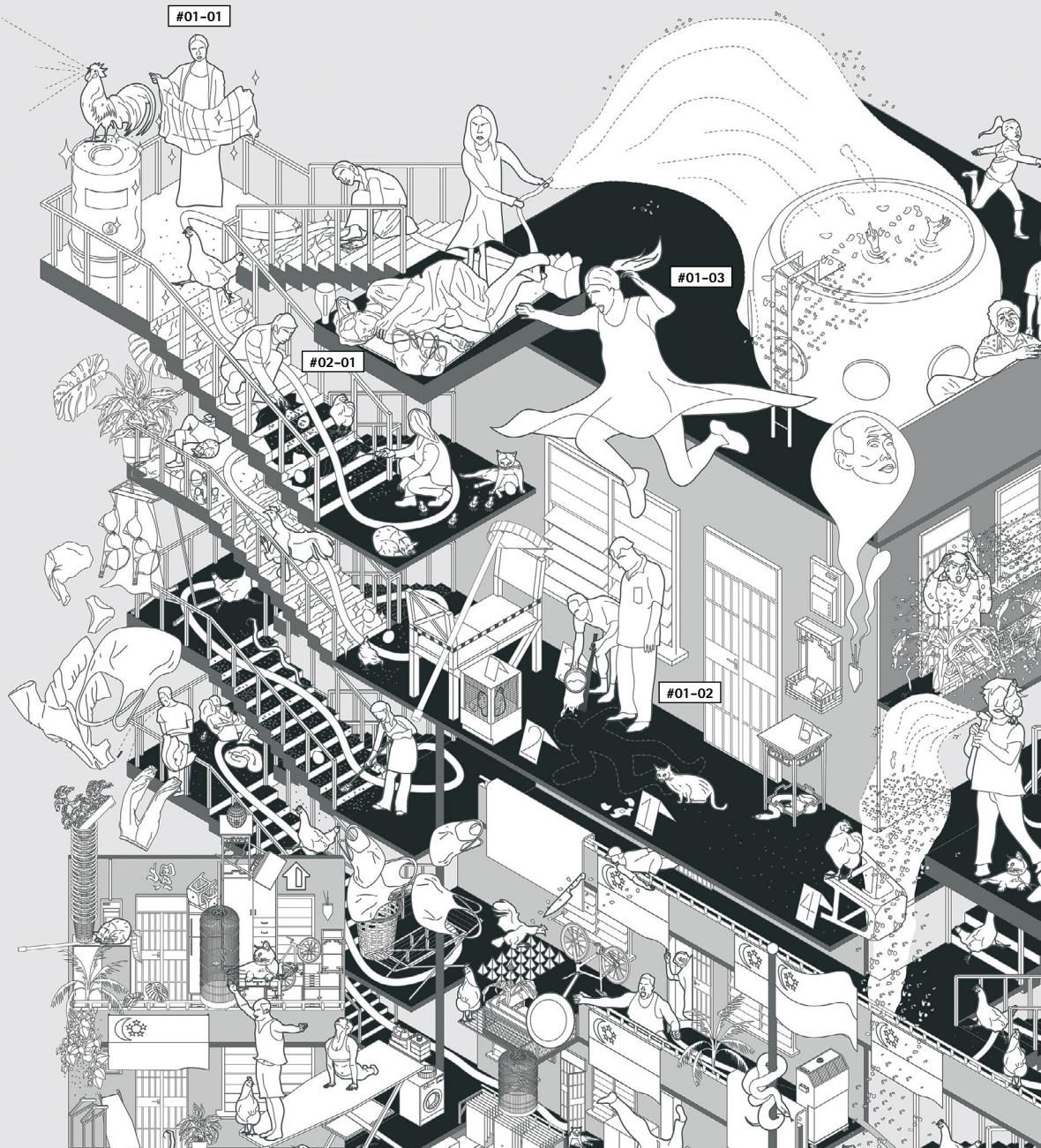
Lilian Chee is Associate Professor of Architectural Design and Visual Culture at the National University of Singapore (NUS). A writer, curator, and award-winning educator-researcher, she brings an interdisciplinary lens to the scholarship of domesticity, affect, gender, and everyday life. Her research and films explore how care, equity, and housing shape lived experience. Chee also leads key design and research initiatives at NUS, including the Social Design Lab and the Research by Design cluster. Notable works include the films *03-FLATS* (2014), *Objects for Thriving* (2022), *At Home with Work* (2025), and the architectural monograph *Architecture and Affect* (2023).

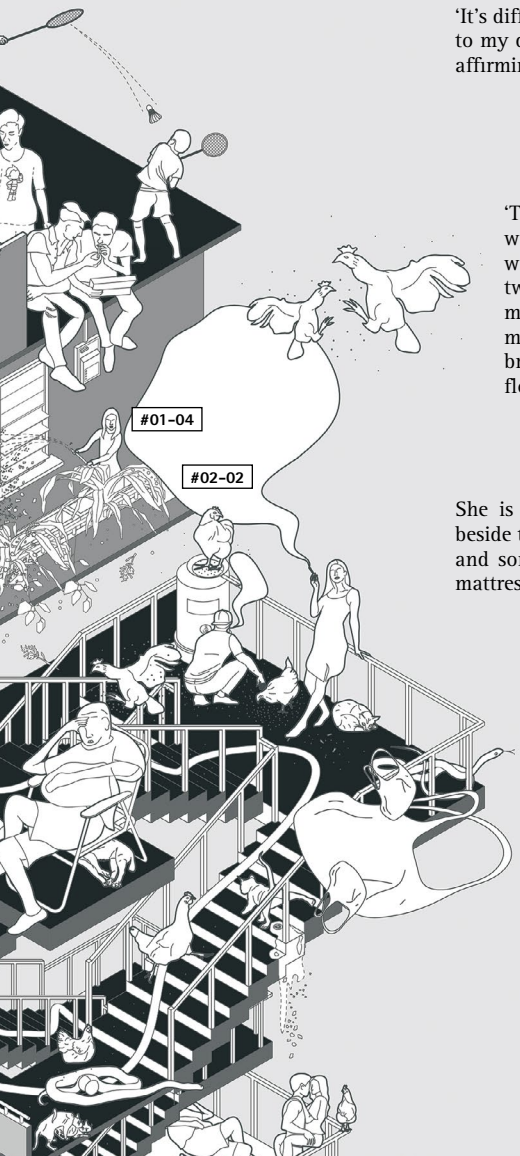
Lin Derong is a Registered Architect at FARM in Singapore, where he specialises in leading complex commercial commissions alongsidehigh-level conceptual research and speculative architecture proposals. Since graduating as valedictorian from the National University of Singapore in 2018 with the Aedas Medal for his thesis, Materialising Sand, he has focused on translating design research into meaningful placemaking and the built environment. His architectural practice is complemented by a continued inquiry into material landscapes.

1. Text and Image: Lilian Chee, *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces* (Routledge, 2023), 161–167, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315604565.

Situated in three shared spaces of the Singaporean public housing block—the common corridor, the stairwell, and the ground level void deck—*Anarchiving Public Housing* reimagines this housing typology as a densely woven tapestry of occupants, their spaces and their domesticities. Extrapolated from events recorded in local news and popular fiction, the drawing makes visible individual desires and tactics, documented in both sanctioned and illicit domestic practices. Encountering architecture in-between actions of domesticity, the collage-axonometric shows the high-rise block distorted in scale to accommodate the fine-grained experiences of everyday life. Positioned in-between the genres of an infographic and a graphic novel, the drawing visualises the influence of sub-spaces and stories produced through spontaneous domestic action and exuberant imagination. Domesticity nests, appropriates, and/or alters the repetitive geometries of mass housing. Following Henri Lefebvre's schema of the social spatial production, the block corresponds to the ideological 'conceived spaces' thought up by architects and planners, while these private-public spaces in the block vary in their production of space, vacillating between the 'perceived spaces' of collective urban living, and the 'lived spaces' marked by utopian intentions, or disobedient manoeuvres.[2] Here, the architectural drawing, normally disciplined by the demands of the block (the instrument of 'conceived space'), brings together what visual representations of housing rarely accommodate. It speculates on the affective encounters experienced through these occurrences, picturing how they ultimately shape and/or unravel perceptions of housing's architecture.

2. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991), 1–67.


#01-01
#01-03
#02-01
#01-02



#01-01 I GOLDEN STAIRCASE

In March 2017, eight steps of a bare concrete staircase on the 20th storey of a public housing block in the Balestier estate were covered in 400 sheets of 21-karat tissue-thin removable gold foil by a then third-year fine arts student. The initially anonymous installation sparked controversy. A week later, she was asked to scrub it all off. She left behind eight gleaming concrete steps and a 3×3 square inch piece of gold foil on the right hand corner of the lowest step as a memento.

Priyageetha Dia, *Golden Staircase*, 2017.

#01-02 I MURDER

'The body was found at about 5.30am, and by the time the police came there was something of a crowd around it... So I closed my eyes and thought about the man, the unfortunate man who stumbled upon our corridor, and got killed, seven stab wounds, no relatives found, dying words unrecorded, nothing to answer to but a ledge that blocked his view of dawn, and the fast-fading stars.'

Alfian Sa'at, 'Corridor,' in *Corridor: 12 Short Stories* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 51–64. Here: 54, 63.

#01-03 I SUICIDE

'It's difficult to explain what happens next. I jumped over the parapet wall, to my death, I think. The last thing I see is a pair of cats rutting; they are affirming life, the exact opposite of what I am doing.'

James Toh, *12 Storeys* (Singapore: National Library Board and National Book Development Council of Singapore, 2008), 19.

#01-04 I GARDENING

'The hating started one day when my grandchildren decided to play with water pipes. They had just come back from school and were waiting for me to open the door when the younger one decided to twist the tap that fed water into our neighbour's house... I opened my eyes and then turned around to find my neighbour looking at me from her window. I looked down at her still-surviving plant, the branches stripped bare because my grandchildren had torn off all the flowers one day.'

Sa'at, 'Corridor,' 56, 63.

#02-01 I BEDROOM

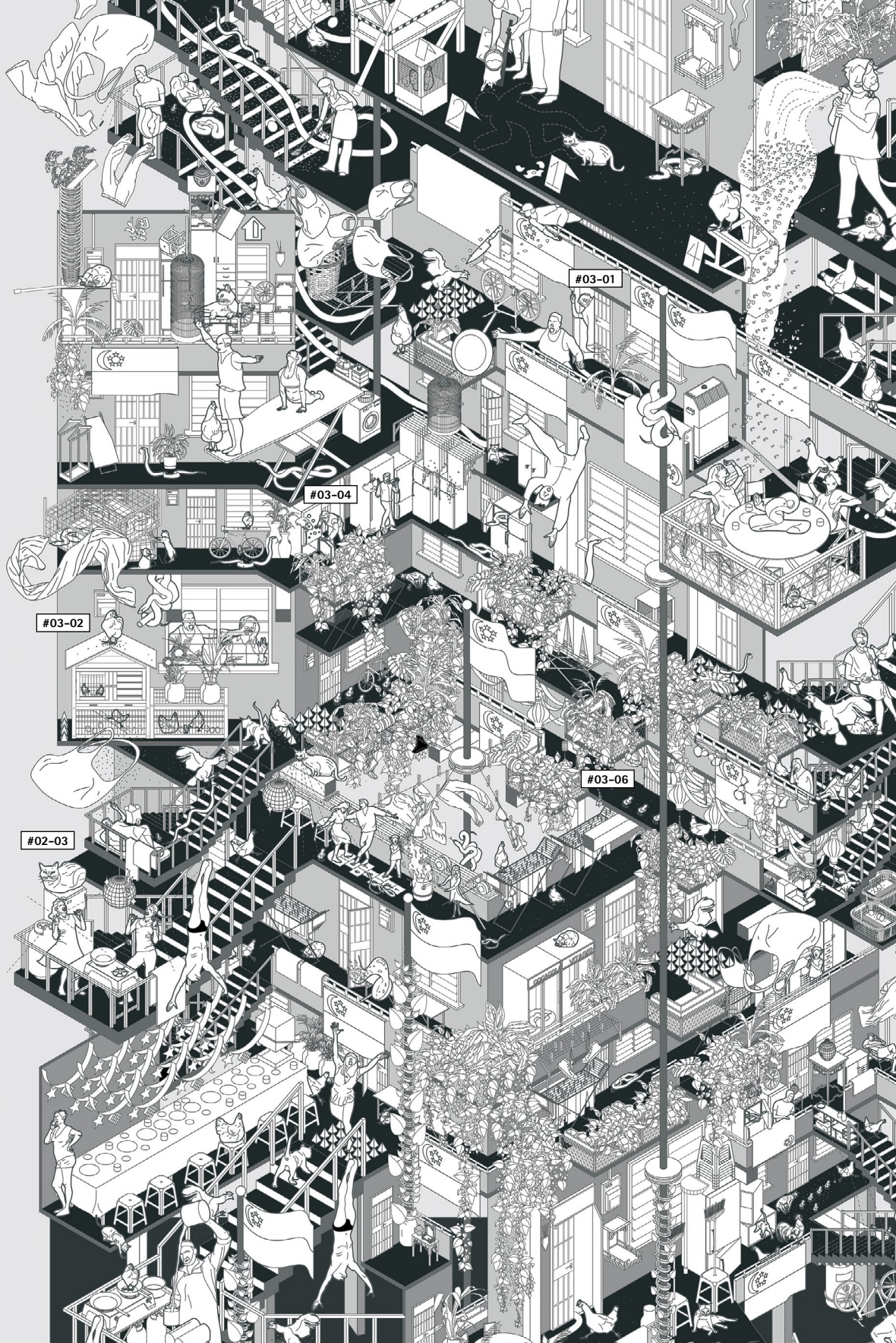
She is a resident who sleeps long-term on the HDB staircase landing beside the flat she jointly owns with her daughter, as they share a difficult and sometimes abusive, relationship. The makeshift bedroom includes a mattress, pillow and a plastic bag of personal belongings.

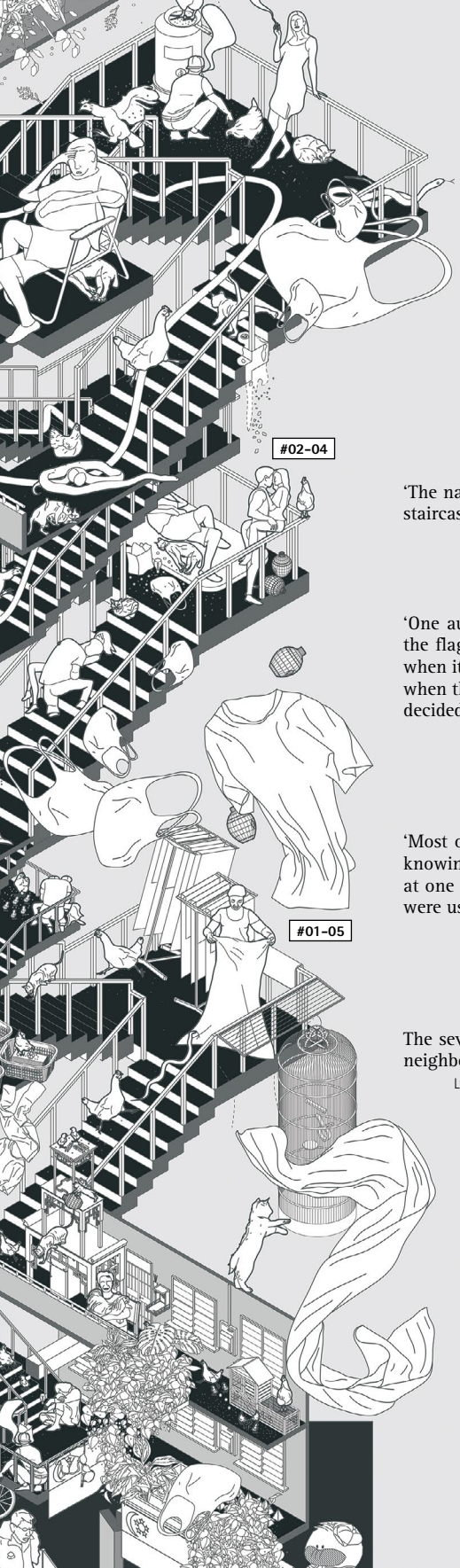
The New Paper, 'This staircase is her bedroom.' September 13, 2010.

#02-02 I SMOKING

A smoker was fined S$200 for smoking at a HDB staircase landing. The National Environment Agency explains that 'common areas in residential buildings, such as common corridors, void decks and stairwells are off-limits to smokers.'

Belmont Lay, 'Someone caught smoking at 10.14pm at Toa Payoh HDB flat staircase landing fined S$200,' *Mothership.sg*, October 21, 2018, https://www.mothership.sg/2018/10/fine-smoking-hdb-staircase/.


#03-01
#03-04
#03-02
#03-06
#02-03



#01-05 I LAUNDRY

'A clear passageway of 1.2m clearance is to be maintained at all times, ensuring an unobstructed escape path during emergency situations.'

Cherlynn Ng, 'Resident advised to remove laundry at Anchorvale Link staircase by Town Council,' *Stomp*, January 8, 2018, https://www.stomp.sg/singapore-seen/the-staircase-landing-is-not-your-private-area-even-if-you-have-loads-of-laundry.

#02-03 I CLUBBING

Some youths were seen clubbing in the HDB staircase during the recent pandemic circuit breaker, 'swaying to music, in front of a flickering light.'

Beatrice Del Rosario, '"Circuit Breaker Fever": Youths Go Clubbing in HDB Staircase,' *msn.com*, April 29, 2020.

#02-04 I LOVERS

'The naked young couple looked dead as they lay motionless on the HDB staircase landing. But they had, in fact, fallen asleep after having sex.'

Chan Seet Fun, 'The Naked... But not Quite the Dead,' *The New Paper*, July 19, 1997, 12.

#03-01 I FLAG

'One auntie hanging her clothes out said, [it is] very troublesome to put the flag out and she does not have the flag after returning the flag back when it discoloured. ... Another reason ... was that the flag always fl[ys] up when the wind blows and [it is] pretty irritating to see it that way, so [she] decided not to hang up the flag.'

Terry Xu, 'The national flag, to hang or not to hang,' *The Online Citizen*. August 1, 2013, https://www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2013/08/01/the-national-flag-to-hang-or-not-to-hang/.

#03-02 I PYTHONS

'Most of the tenants on the floor refused to talk about—or even admit to knowing—that two-metre-long baby pythons are lying in a makeshift cage at one end of the corridor. But a 70-year-old woman in the flat said they were used in "sacrificial offerings".'

Sit Yin Fong, 'Mum's the Word on these Pythons in HDB Passage-way,' *Singapore Monitor—2nd Edition*, August 15, 1984, 2.

#03-04 I SEVEN REFRIGERATORS

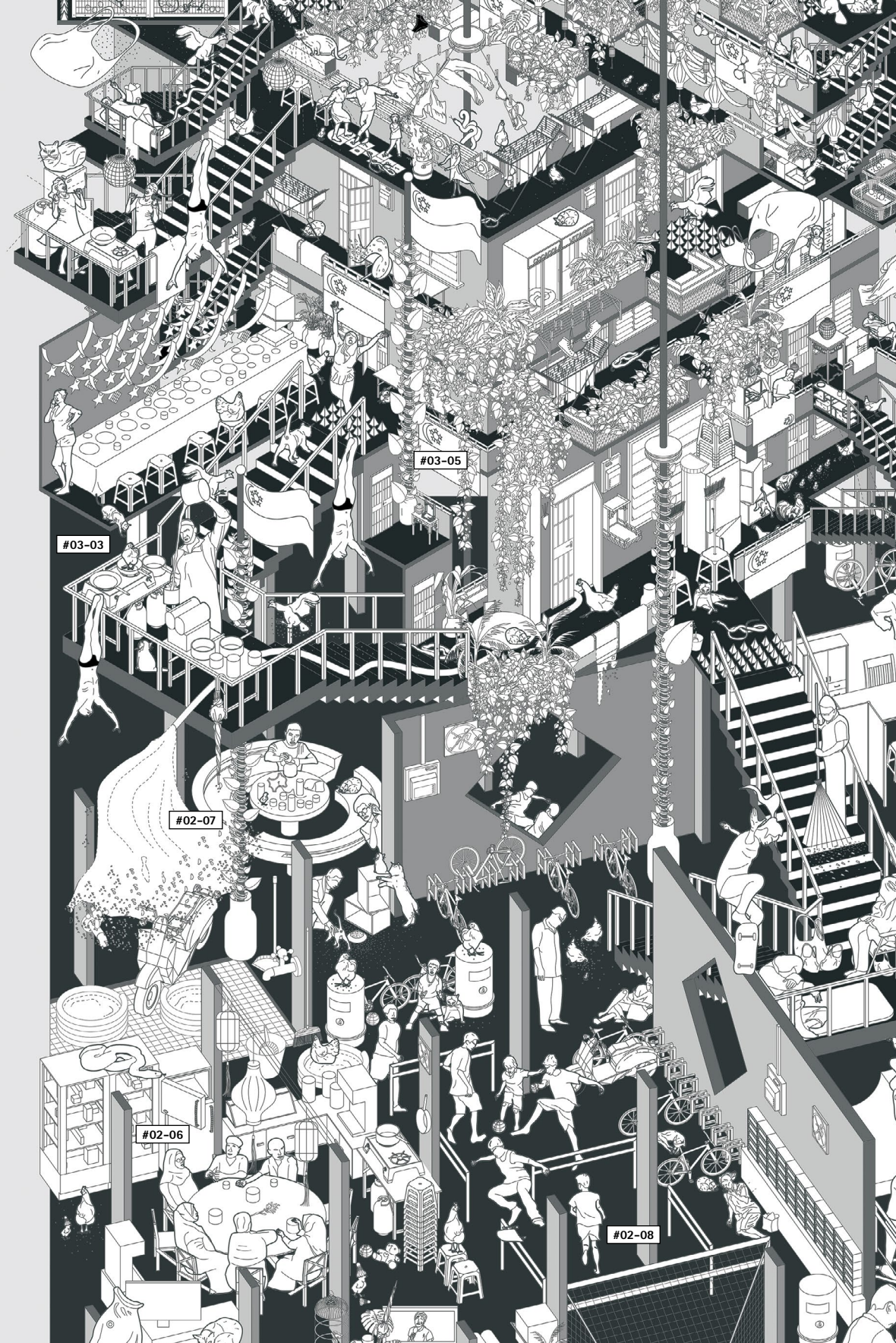
The seven refrigerators were lined up along a HDB corridor, causing one neighbour to get hot under the collar over the clutter.

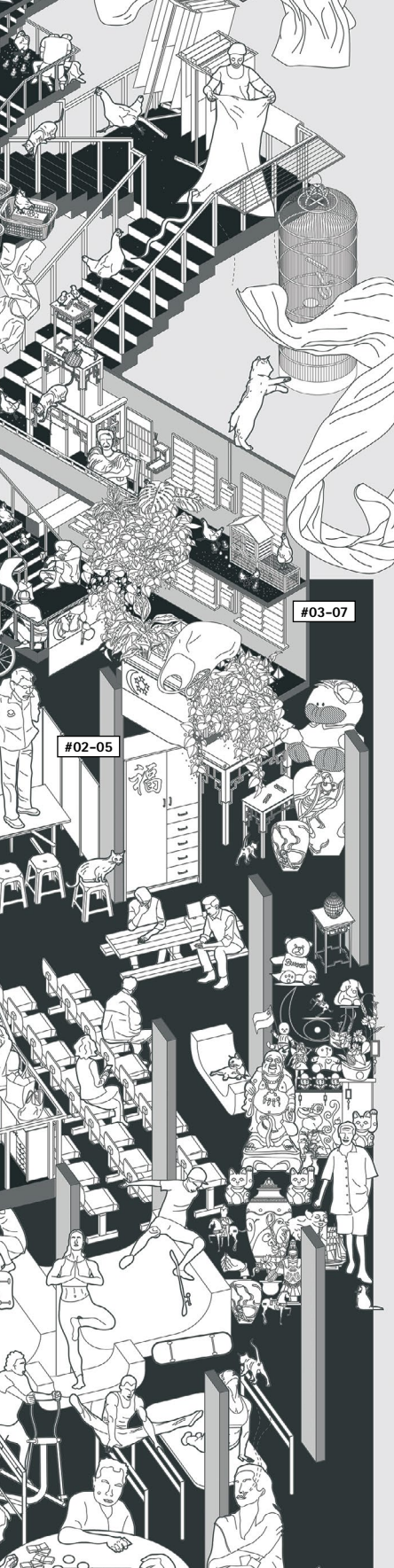
Lydia Lam, 'Simei Corridor Fridges Removed after Warning,' *The Straits Times*, December 21, 2017.

#03-06 I DECORATION

For the past few Chinese New Year festivities, she decorated the common lift lobby, stairwell and corridor with the most elaborate decorations.

Nyi Nyi Thet, Zhangxin Zheng, and Fasiha Nazren, 'S'pore Lady once again Decorates HDB Corridor, Creating Awesome CNY Atmosphere for Neighbours,' *Mothership.sg*, February 5, 2019, https://mothership.sg/2019/02/cny-decorations-bedok-aunty-linda/.


#03-05
#03-03
#02-07
#02-06
#02-08



#02-05 I CUBICLE

For 27 years, he conducted his Meet-The-People sessions at the void deck in a 'makeshift cubicle' made of light aluminium panels.

Icemoon, 'Chiam See Tong's Legendary Makeshift Cubicle at the Void Deck,' *Second Shot*, May 18, 2011, http://www.2ndshot.blogspot.com/2011/05/chiam-see-tongs-legendary-makeshift.html.

#02-06 I HAMLET

The HDB void deck contained 'household staples such as rice cookers, refrigerators stocked with fresh groceries, a television, a sink and potted plants.'

Yeo Sam Jo, 'Yishun residents turn void deck into 'kumpung central'.' *The Straits Times*, March 24, 2016.

#02-07 I WORKSHOP

He used his void deck as a workspace for four-and-a-half years. From a practical standpoint, the void deck's 'concrete table[s are] large space[s],... conducive to... leather crafting....' He would have registered the void deck as his work address if that was permitted.

Kenneth Chan (Director), *In Between: Into The Void* (Singapore: Viddsee Original Production, 2019), https://www.viddsee.com/video/in-between-into-the-void.

#02-08 I SOCCER

'With their slippers as goalposts, four boys play soccer with a plastic ball... Their field is a void deck, whose floor coats their soles with ovals of grey. When one of them scores a goal, an imaginary stadium roars euphorically.....'

Alfian Sa'at, 'Bukit Batok, 5 PM,' in *Malay Sketches* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012), 129.

#03-03 I KITCHEN

'All over Singapore..., HDB kitchens are spilling over onto stair landings and common corridors... when the kitchen is too small and the cooking paraphernalia fiddly, the landing or corridor outside becomes a handy extension.'

New Nation, 'When the Stairs Become a Kitchen,' February 10, 1980, 29.

#03-05 I JUNGLE

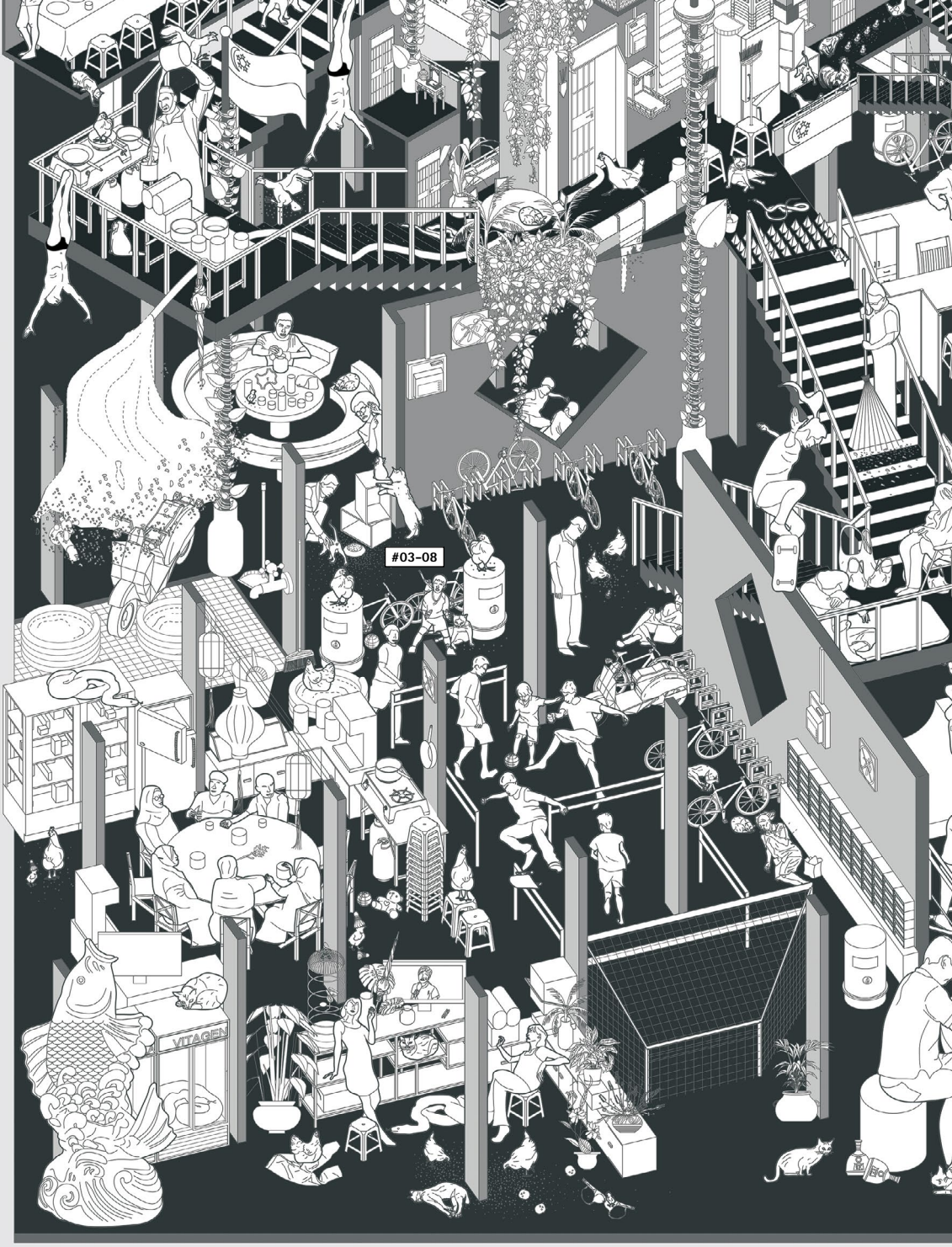
Almost 40 pots of tall leafy plants formed a jungle along the corridor outside a flat nicknamed the 'HDB Jungle House.' A neighbour living in the flat below claimed that he had to trim the plants that blocked his window, and that these attracted ants into his flat.

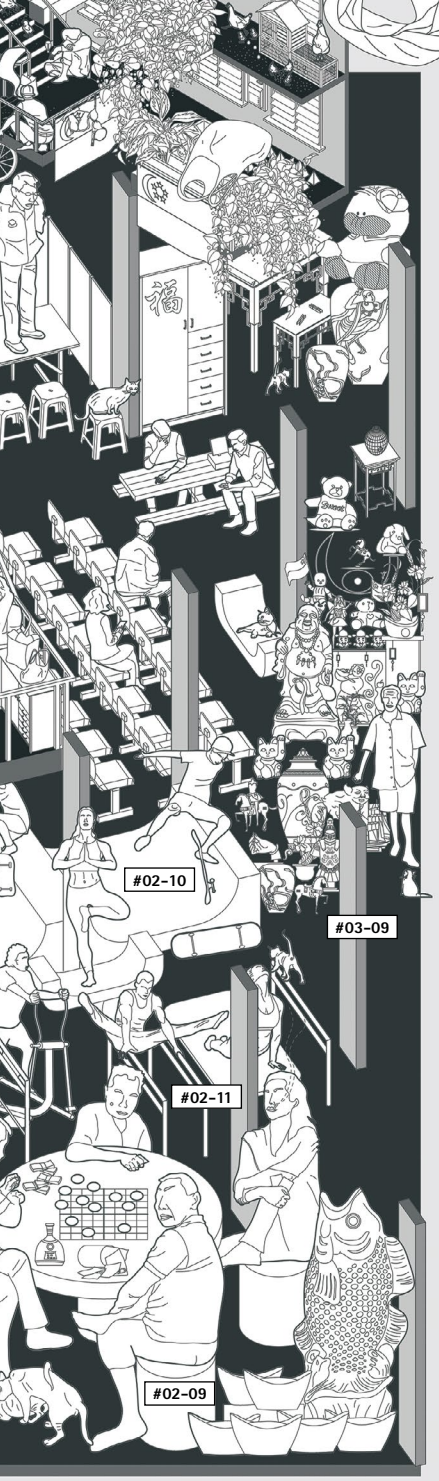
Salome Ong, 'Plant-loving Neighbour Causing Obstruction and Fire Hazard with "Jungle House," say HDB Residents,' *The Straits Times*, May 27, 2019.

#03-07 I FARM

A complaint was made to the authorities that 'chickens and ducks were reared in boxes under flower pots and posed a health hazard, in addition to the dirt and flies... Time and patience are required to educate these families to accustom themselves to living in flats.'

The Straits Times, 'Chicken "Farms" at Kallang Flats: Board takes Action,' April 27, 1966, 8.


#03-08
VITAGEN



#02-09 I GAMBLING DEN

From about 9pm to 3am every night, up to 20 people – usually senior citizens – gamble at the void deck's stone tables, playing different games, including blackjack, and placing bets up to hundreds of dollars.

Shaffiq Alkhatib, 'Chai Chee void deck turns into gambling den at night,' *The New Paper*, March 7, 2016, https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/chai-chee-void-deck-turns-gambling-den-night.

#02-10 I SKATEBOARDS

The void deck contained '[s]kateboarding obstacles – consisting of a rail, ramp and some wooden boxes,' which have been 'glossed with layers of graffiti spray-painted over the years.' The police continually patrolled the area and took down the names of skateboarders. He responded by setting up rules to regulate how the space should be used by the skateboarders.

Reclaimland.sg, 'An agreeable anarchy,' accessed November 28, 2020, http://www.reclaimland.sg/rl/?p=677.

#02-11 I EXERCISE

Exercise equipment was set up on Astroturf, which was evenly spaced across the length of the void deck.

Stella Soon, 'Singapore's Most Spoil Market Void Decks That Prove They Don't Need Metal Railings,' *thesmartlocal.com*, March 29, 2017, https:// www.thesmartlocal.com/read/unique-void-decks/.

#03-08 I CATS

A parliamentary question was raised to the Ministry of National Development as to whether it was timely to remove the ban on keeping pet cats in HDB flats, and instead regulate cat pet-keeping to minimise neighbourly disagreements.

Ministry of National Development, 'Written answer by Ministry of National Development on keeping pet cats in HDB flats,' January 6, 2020, https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-matters/q-as/view/written-answer-by-ministry-of-national-development-on-guidelines-for-keeping-pets-at-home-to-ensure-harmonious-living-among-neighbours.

#03-09 I TOWER

He erected a 'pagoda-like tower of psychedelic toys, figurines and knick-knacks' in late 2016 at a HDB void deck. Its colours and familiar figures cheered up the occupants. Despite the tower's fans, the Town Council instructed that the structure be dismantled, citing fire-safety concerns.

Melody Zaccheus, 'Artistic' tower of items at HDB void deck trashed,' *The Straits Times*, March 2, 2017.

Art as an Infra-structure of the City

Hsu Fang-Tze

About Hsu Fang-Tze
Hsu Fang-Tze, a curator at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), operates at the intersection of archival research, expanded cinema and sonic politics. Her practice has focused on bridging the gap between discursive exploration and artistic production, drawing on her background as a lecturer at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and a curator at the NUS Museum. She engages in curating, film programming, archiving and publishing through collaborations with institutions across East and Southeast Asia. Her contribution to the Biennale delves into the memory politics of public spaces, exploring the tension between state-driven urban planning and grassroots placemaking to reveal the evolving aspirations of local communities.

The city is a manifestation of the politics of infrastructure, yet its livedness depends on what can be defined as an "infra-structure." The word "infrastructure" begins with the Latin prefix "infra," meaning "below," which indicates a foundation. Adopted in English around 1927, it initially denoted preparatory work completed before building railroad tracks, such as laying the roadbed.[1] Infrastructure serves as the bedrock that supports a higher order system or hierarchy. In redefining the prefix "infra," political scientist and anthropologist James Scott introduced the concept of infrapolitics to characterise a form of resistance that operates below the threshold of overt political action. For marginalised subaltern groups, resistance manifests in covert, evasive ways, forming what Scott terms "hidden transcripts."[2] These subtle forms of defiance, such as pilfering or sabotaging, minimise risk while potentially exerting significant cumulative impact and challenging the boundaries of domination. Scott describes infrapolitics as a collective presence that lives within a system "like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum."[3] The term "infra-structure" thus reveals an alternate existence of the city, one that eludes common visibility or recognition. Just as infrared light exists beyond the visible spectrum, "infra-structure" refers to how a city functions through subtle acts, gestures and thoughts. It is a network of unseen social actions that holds the city together, extending beyond the traditional definition of "urban" as the opposite of "rural." As such, "infra-structure" conveys how certain actions exist in domains that appear politically irrelevant or remain discrete yet embody the predominant mode of daily engagement for people navigating systems of control.

Interpreting archival sources and artworks, with and against the grain, can highlight the subtle unfurling of infra-structure. Exactly one century ago, on 14 May 1925, an unsigned column appeared in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* arguing for "a much-needed public concert hall" to be included in the City Hall building plan. As indicated in the report:

> **We do not accept the view that municipal offices need be palaces, as offices, but the chance arose of providing something for the rate-payers, and the representatives of the rate-payers, that is badly wanted, namely a dignified hall for reception and presentation purposes, a meeting place of moderate dimensions in a convenient neighbourhood, and a Public Concert Hall.[4]**

In 1925, Singapore was a thriving British Crown colony and a key global trading hub within the Straits Settlements, characterised by significant urban development, a diverse population and emerging social and technological changes.[5] The demand for a concert hall within City Hall signalled an emerging public invested in shaping the city and its infrastructure. The public demand surrounding the concert hall transcended mere commentary on urban planning; it reflected an age-old question: What defines a city—is it people coming together as a collective, or the physical and governmental structures they occupy?

Today, more than half of humanity resides in cities, making urban areas the quintessential framework for understanding human society. While it is challenging to envision Singapore beyond its image as a city, it is crucial to redefine the city by examining its fundamental operations through infra-structure in order to understand urban life. Hence, the Singapore Biennale 2025 emerges from a curatorial framework of *pure intention*, which embodies the creative synergy between intent and outcome, nurturing poetic expressions while highlighting the dynamic between planning and spontaneity or improvisation, thereby conveying the dignity of life. It encourages curiosity, reflection and reconsideration, along with what Bertolt Brecht calls "the most beautiful of all doubts"[6]—a belief in the shared authorship of our current reality.

But how does one apply such a poetic notion to the concrete reality of a city? It begins by turning this "beautiful doubt" towards the city's most fundamental operating systems. To understand the in-betweenness or threshold that *pure intention* suggests, this essay examines how tactics and strategies complement and reinforce one another within urban life. In doing so, it explores the layered strata where lived experiences coexist and intertwine within the city's physical and conceptual spaces. The essay highlights critical moments of necessary divergence when localised struggles use organised artistic practices to transcend the constraints of structural reality. Two intertwined yet analytically distinguishable threads structure the curatorial articulation of *pure intention*: infrastructure vs. infra-structure.

Infrastructure vs. Infra-structure: City as Context

The etymology of "city" underscores a political dynamic between the human collective it represents and the infrastructure that governs and sustains it. Originating from the Old French *cite*, which traces back to the Latin *civitas*, the term initially emphasised social and political organisation rather than physical geography. *Civitas*, derived from *civis* (citizen), referred to the body of citizens or the social structure that bound them together, distinguishing this entity from *urbs*, the Latin term for the physical settlement itself.[7] Over time, *civitas* and its derivatives evolved to denote the principal town where civil governance and episcopal authority resided, but the core meaning remained rooted in the idea of a collective political entity.

The foundational tension between the political body (*civitas*) and the physical territory (*urbs*) found an intense expression in 20th-century postcolonial nation-building projects. In Singapore, artists were documenting the rapid transformations of the city and actively redefining the interactions between the public (*civis*) and the physical built environment (*urbs*).[8] This complex interplay—between land exploited by a colonial power and the nation being constructed—is powerfully rendered in **Lim Mu Hue**'s *Bukit Timah Quarry* (1966). Born and raised in Singapore, and known for his versatility across various mediums, Lim participated in the country's first woodblock exhibition in 1966. Upon closer observation, the human figure standing atop the hill in the top left corner presents a forward-facing stance and an outstretched posture. This creates a juxtaposition between the far-left scenery of the port and village, and the vast quarry below. The composition symbolises a dialogue between human determination, the past and the transformed natural environment for the future. In the colophon to the 2003 reprint of *Bukit Timah Quarry*, Lim reflected, "Bukit Timah Quarry, where landforms and bodies were shattered to build our home..."[9] His meticulous woodcut technique is distinguished by the use of dense hatching and cross-hatching to capture quarrying marks and hollowed-out mountains. The juxtaposition of the landform and the quarry's concave area reminds viewers how the city's infrastructure was built through the sacrifices of both the stones quarried at Bukit Timah Quarry and the people who endured the early hardships necessary to transform Singapore into a city. *Bukit Timah Quarry* memorialises the construction of infrastructure that provides the present generation with a foundation for envisioning a prosperous future.

While Lim's woodcut memorialised environmental sacrifices embedded in Singapore, other artists turned their lenses towards the human agents actively constructing the city's infrastructure. Photographer **Wu Peng Seng**'s *Painters* (1956), *Cement Worker* (Undated) and *Scaling* (1963) highlight labourers engaged in building the new Singapore, featuring hard edges and high tonal contrasts often associated with a burgeoning metropolis. Art historian Charmaine Toh has examined these photographs within the framework of pictorial photography, which emphasises aesthetic excellence and technical proficiency over documentary accuracy.[10] These photographs exemplify a tension between realism and artistic expression, capturing the essence of everyday life. The portrayal of labourers in various industries became a powerful representation of these heroic workers, foregrounding their vital role in transforming Singapore from a rural landscape into an industrialised nation. As Singapore experienced significant transformation, Wu's photographs captured this evolution, portraying construction sites as a testament to collective (*civis*) determination within a dynamic narrative of progress, set against the built environment (*urbs*). Wu's photographs offer a human-centred perspective on the interaction between the making of the city and its infrastructure. Through his framing, Wu invites a reconsideration of Singapore's developmental narrative of continual construction and reconstruction.

Lim's landscape and Wu's photographs offer a profound understanding of the nation's collective psyche in the context of nation-building. They elucidate a symbiotic relationship wherein the city embodies the collective intentions of its inhabitants, while its infrastructure manifests governance. This framework transcends mere functionality, serving as a silent repository of the effort, labour and aspirations of its creators. Much like the adage "still waters run deep," the seemingly tranquil surface conceals significant social depth. As a result, the true essence of a city is not found in its infrastructure but in its infra-structure, akin to an aquifer, it represents the essential component of a dynamic collective existence.

...They are waiting for

a story, and not one that goes: *we have had a fire*
***in the family*. That evening's still bright, years later,**

and their faces still aglow, as starting out the open
window I find myself unsure of how to begin.

—An excerpt from "Relocations,"
Commonwealth by Theophilus Kwek (2025)[11]

In Singapore Biennale 2025: *pure intention* (SB2025), infrastructure and infra-structure facilitate numerous dialectical considerations across various creative genres for understanding parallels and contrasts across the urban landscape. The curatorial approach of SB2025 emerges from a study of urban morphology: strata malls transformed into ethnic enclaves, colonial sites reclaimed as public spaces, as well as the Rail Corridor, which weaves together natural and built heritage. Each site embodies social contexts that inform and are shaped by the built environment and government policies. The city's diverse residences and cultural institutions activate multitemporal public spaces, encapsulating layers of lived experience. Concurrently, the continuous evolution of residential areas exemplifies the national motto—*Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore), while commercial outlets transform into various ethnic enclaves. Infrastructure and infra-structure operate simultaneously in urban environments, encompassing both planning and improvisation, strategy and tactics, rigidity and adaptability. These built entities collectively form a series of neighbourhoods, establishing the thematic framework of SB2025: *pure intention*, where the unexpected outcome transcends the plan.

In Theophilus Kwek's poem "Relocations," fire symbolises the complex relationship between infrastructure and infra-structure through cross-generational trauma in conjunction with nation-building. The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire, often referred to as an "unprecedented inferno,"[12] played a pivotal role in Singapore's swift evolution into a high-modernist nation-state.[13] Like Kwek's family experience of the 1968 fire at Bukit Ho Swee,[14] the catastrophe illustrates the duality of fire: destructive force and catalyst for renewal, what Empedocles saw as apocalyptic and Prometheus[15] offered as a vital spark.

Fire, the central figure in the poem, also serves as a memorable narrative that connects Kwek's family through what Patrick Flores calls "affective agency,"[16] which allows for the expression of form as "more than a mere function of technique," positioning form as "tropic (rhetoric that is metaphorical, figurative, or shaped by figures of speech)," and "[necessitating] the intervention of style."[17]

Flores's approach reveals how natural elements, like fire, mediate between artists and their milieu. Two artworks created before the 1970s, a period that involved extensive development of public housing, capture the duality: **Liu Kang**'s *After the Fire I* (1951) and **Lim Yew Kuan**'s *After the Fire* (1966). Neither of the artworks depicts the fire itself. Instead, both emphasise the aftermath, directing the audience's focus to a lingering hope, accentuated by the stark contrast between displaced squatters and barren debris beyond reality. Although they differ in scale, medium and the events they depict, both pieces capture the dual essence of fire—its capacity for destruction and the necessity for renewal.[18] In its capacity for enduring hope, we find the essence of infra-structure—a framework that precedes physical structures and upholds societal integrity when devastation exceeds the limits of representation.

While fire, as a trope, unveils affective agency through narratives of destruction and hope, water offers a different, more pervasive model of initiative. **Jesse Jones**'s *The White Cave* (2025) taps into hydrofeminist currents by treating water not as an external force but as an internal, connective medium—an ancient archive of transformation and renewal that courses through bodies, voices and generations. The portal introduced by *The White Cave* shifts agency from a singular event, such as a fire, to a cyclical, immersive process. In the single-channel video shot on 16 mm film, Colombian-American soprano Stephanie Lamprea vocalises transgenerational knowledge in a salt therapy cave, where the sea, as an archive, binds body to memory and ritual to resurrect the legacy of female prophecies, demonstrating an affective force that is both sensuous and political. Beyond being a part of the artist's symbolic language that hints at a vehicle between realms such as life and death, memory and amnesia, oyster shells serve as both sculptural elements and a medium of social expression. They evoke colonial violence through the fetishisation of desire, as these exotic shells became collectible items in Europe during the 17th century, a trend that spread through cabinets of curiosities. In Jones's *The White Cave*, water is accentuated as a fluid entity with the capacity to connect all bodies, dissolve boundaries and act as an associative agent, providing a powerful metaphor for understanding the social fabric itself. Just as hydrofeminism



Jesse Jones. Detail of *The White Cave*. 2025. Worflex curtain and oyster lids, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

traces the flow of memory and resistance through the more-than-human world, we can analyse how infrastructure operates within the social body, acting as a navigational current that shapes the dynamics between the built environment (infrastructure) and the emergent human framework (infra-structure).

Life, whether characterised by fire or water, requires the formulation of approaches to interact with and traverse the surrounding milieu, whether it is identified as society or the cosmos. In the context of SB2025, a biennale that reflects on and engages with the built environment of Singapore, *pure intention* emerges as a thought compass, serving as the primary tool for navigating the dynamics between the built environment (infrastructure) and the grassroots agency of subtle resilience (infra-structure). Public policy related to urban development highlights the significance of *pure intention* in understanding the social operations that arise from the unexpected interplay between intention and outcome. It also illuminates the role of inter-human infra-structure as a mechanism for reclaiming agency from the bottom up within structures of infrastructure. In Singapore, a strata mall exemplifies the essence of *pure intention*. It is a retail development where individuals, rather than a single corporation or entity, own the units. This ownership model became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, following the introduction



Eisa Jocson. Installation view of *The Filipino Superwoman X H.O.M.E. Karaoke Living Room*. 2025. Single-channel video and mixed media, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Gabriela Golder. Installation view of *State of Assembly*. 2025. Three-channel video (colour, sound), 45 min. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

of the Land Titles (Strata) Act in 1967.[19] Early examples, such as the People's Park Complex and the Golden Mile Complex, pooled capital from individual investors through strata-titled development. These strata-titled projects embodied "stakeholder capitalism" in Singapore, aligning state development goals with individual entrepreneurial ambitions.[20] This refers to an economic model designed to align the objectives of the state, private owners and the public within the built environment, which is a unique democratic feature of Singapore. The widespread ownership in strata malls reflects property-owning democracy, which can be described as the distribution of assets to empower citizens.[21]

By positioning artworks within the shop units of strata malls such as Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road and Peninsula Plaza in the Civic District, *pure intention* fosters audience engagement with collective autonomy as an infra-structure. Audiences can engage with the works while appreciating how the creative agency of these modernist buildings resonates with the aspirations of migrant communities who sustain them.

Eisa Jocson's *The Filipino Superwoman X H.O.M.E. Karaoke Living Room* (2025) serves as a compelling example of this dynamic. The project reveals the interaction between the formal structure of the strata mall and the vibrant infra-structure of its community. By placing a living room—a space of intimate, chosen kinship—within a commercial unit at Lucky Plaza, the work highlights the social dynamics of the Filipino enclave. The room is not just a display; it is an act of reclamation. The infra-structure, rooted in the social function of karaoke (*Bidyoke* in Filipino tradition) and the shared aspirations of members of H.O.M.E. (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) community, temporarily supersedes the unit's commercial purpose. The creation of music videos through collaborative workshops directly expresses collective autonomy. Participants are not passive subjects but active creators, transforming the ancient tradition of the "epic" into modern personal anthems. The artist-facilitated workshop creates a powerful connection between the building's original history—a vessel for the entrepreneurial dreams of a new nation—and the contemporary aspirations of the migrant community sustaining it. Ultimately, the project complicates this celebration by examining the biopolitics of care and labour, using lyrics and performances to reflect on the sorrow and sacrifice underlying these bonds of resilience.

Gabriela Golder's three-channel video installation *State of Assembly* (2025) broadens the exploration of infrastructure beyond the specific context of the strata



Gala Porras-Kim. Public activation of *Our identity is determined by our productivity* at the Singapore Writers Festival. 2025. Picnic sheets and public activation, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission. Image courtesy of Arts House Group.



Detail of the customised design of the makeshift picnic sheet of *Our identity is determined by our productivity*.

mall, shifting the focus to collective political imagination. While the Filipino community reclaims commercial spaces for social and cultural purposes, Golder's work documents an infra-structure created in direct response to socio-economic crises in Argentina since 2001. It builds on the same principle of collective autonomy but shifts from the marketplace to a form of assembly. Here, women from diverse backgrounds gather around a shared question: "What do we propose?" The recitation in Golder's work serves as a powerful political gesture, parallel to how karaoke functions as a cultural expression in Jocson's project. It acts as a grassroots mechanism for addressing precarity, reclaiming public discourse and challenging dominant narratives. The work's polyphonic, multi-screen composition reflects the concept of a decentralised, emergent infra-structure, where diverse voices and fragments converge to ask: "How do we construct the common from dispersion?" *State of Assembly*, like the artistic interventions in the strata malls, harnesses the power of collective intention to envision futures from within fractured systems.

Gala Porras-Kim's time-specific outdoor installation[22] *Our identity is determined by our productivity* (2025) engages with the socio-economic fabric of another strata mall, Peninsula Plaza, to explore the tension between labour and rest. While Jocson crafted an interior space of kinship, Porras-Kim draws inspiration from an existing, organic infra-structure: the makeshift picnic sheets used by Burmese communities on rest days. The custom-designed plastic sheets, adorned with poems written by migrant workers, elevate an act of rest into a platform for voice and expression. Porras-Kim's artistic approach illustrates collective autonomy by championing workers as poets, highlighting their aspirations and challenges. The distribution of these sheets engages the mall's commercial infrastructure. By distributing them for free to the shop owners who sell similar plastic tablecloths for one dollar, the project subtly undermines the commercial logic of the space. It blurs the line between a commodity and a piece of art, between a person at rest and a published poet. In doing so, the work creates a resonance between human needs and commercial structures, prompting audiences to reconsider productivity and the fluidity of identity in these urban spaces.

> **If, in its historical and etymological senses, infrastructure was that which enables military movements, infrastructure today seeks to become adequate to movement as a relational and scalable problem.**
>
> —Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (2013)[23]

In postcolonial contexts, infrastructure's contemporary influence intertwines with its militarised past. As Laura Anne Doyle suggests, a "long-historical [and] inter-imperial analysis" shows that merchants and states have jointly coordinated state-building and profit-making since before Europe's rise.[24] Her perspective shows that infrastructure is not merely physical—it is a historical process shaped by trade, labour, and military conquest, which continues to define the political-economic evolution of the present. Here, the entanglement of geology, geopolitics and commerce is illustrated in **Rizki Lazuardi**'s *Operation Thunder Tooth* (2025). Set in Jampang Kulon, Java, the video installation merges two eras: the CIA's 1965 search for Soviet missiles and the current market demand for megalodon fossils. By juxtaposing Cold War anxieties with modern profit-seeking, Lazuardi reveals how imperial conflict remnants persist alongside ecological transformations, grounding mega-scale historical events in the local landscape. While Lazuardi explores the subterranean layers of geopolitical history, **Aya Rodriguez-Izumi**'s *Gate: 3* (2025) confronts the visible presence of military empire. Reflecting on the US military occupation in Okinawa, the sculpture serves as a site of resistance and healing. Born from communal beading workshops in Singapore and New York, the work weaves Okinawan heritage and Afro-Atlantic memories. Over 1,000 strands of beads form a nebulous entity that dialogues with heritage trees and traces of Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTMB), which served colonial exploitation and resembled a form of border division after Singapore's independence. The communal beadings transform war infrastructure into a manifestation of peace. These works show how art can transform the legacy of militarised infrastructure into survival stories, serving as a source of hope that connects lives.

In Singapore, the gradual normalisation of militarism is intertwined with the built environment established during colonial rule. From the British army barracks built in 1926, later known as Fort Canning Centre, to the arrival of KTMB rail lines in the early 20th century, and from the staggered

appearance of lighthouses to present-day reworkings of the watchtower, a question lingers. Can the autonomy claimed through nation-building, or the supposed end of colonial rule, ever reckon with the structural violence embedded in our shared landscape and memoryscape? These logistical rationales shape daily interactions in ways worth examining.



lololol. Installation view of *Light Keeper*. 2025. GPS-enabled sound walk and light installation, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.

Light Keeper (2025) offers an alternative to ingrained logistical rationales. Against the backdrop of Fort Canning, artist collective **lololol** (comprising Sheryl Cheung and Xia Lin) explores human fascination with wayfinding through poetics and politics. The project includes a sound walk, a light installation at Fort Canning Lighthouse and a three-channel video titled *Light Keeper: Signal* (2025). Inspired by the ongoing effort of deciphering the Singapore Stone—an undeciphered artefact symbolising humanity's quest for direction—the work reimagines navigation not as decoding or control, but as a journey of discovery. A sound walk transforms the park into a memoryscape, weaving folklore, scripture, Singapore Stone sonification and lighthouse keeper interviews. These elements invite participants to navigate through memory, curiosity and instinct, rather than logic. The light installation at Fort Canning Lighthouse references Badang's myth of hurling the Singapore Stone, creating a loop that transforms the lighthouse from a functional tool into a poetic interface—



Cui Jie. Installation view of *Thermal Landscapes*. 2025. Acrylic and coloured pencil on canvas, 210 × 750 × 4.5 cm. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission.



Installation view, from left to right: Kei Imazu. *Memories of the Land/Body*. 2020. Oil on linen canvas, 300 × 600 cm. Taguchi Art Collection; *Pelvis and Rhizome*. 2023. Oil on linen canvas, 194 × 162 cm. Private collection in Indonesia.

a sentinel between known and unknown. *Light Keeper* challenges uncritical acceptance of inherited infrastructures, encouraging critical engagement with history and technology and suggesting that reclaiming agency requires re-navigating inherited landscapes.

Complementing the navigational themes of *Light Keeper*, **Cui Jie**'s *Thermal Landscapes* (2025) shifts focus to the watchtower, delving into its complex relationship with the intense drive of capitalist development. In postcolonial Singapore, these structures transformed from colonial surveillance tools into emblems of economic modernity. Cui's painting portrays high-rises such as the Hilton Singapore Orchard and the Millennium Hilton Bangkok as monuments to Southeast Asia's financial cycles, blending them with kitsch ceramic figurines, undersea cables and Ballast Flora preserved in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. By juxtaposing progress with sentimental indifference, the work mirrors the remnants of alienating infrastructural ideologies. Yet the inclusion of migratory plants hints at a capacity for survival and adaptation, offering a glimpse of resilience within these estranged landscapes of rapid growth. If Cui's painting encourages us to ponder the ideological and environmental estrangement embodied by urban infrastructure, **Kei Imazu**'s *Hainuwele* series explores myth, the human form and colonial violence to engage with the ideological framework of developmentalism. Her paintings draw from the Seram Island creation myth of a murdered goddess whose body yields staple crops. In *Memories of the Land/Body* (2020), Imazu overlays a colonial depiction of a volcano with a female figure and colonial motifs, revealing how map-making transformed territory into an exploitable resource. Her works *Harvesting from the Buried Goddess Body* (2023) and *Pelvis and Rhizome* (2023) connect this myth to her experience of burying her child's placenta. Through myth, memory and colonial history, Imazu's painterly archaeology exposes the strata beneath the visible world. Her blurred brushwork resists colonial cartographic certainty, revealing land as fundamental infrastructure—scarred but capable of regeneration.

Alternative infrastructure frameworks, informed by infrapolitics, move beyond concrete entities and standardised networks to prioritise fluid, socio-material arrangements. In his seminal essay "People as Infrastructure," Abdou Maliq Simone highlights how marginalised urban residents create provisional conjunctions of persons, spaces and objects to derive maximal outcomes from minimal elements, anchoring precarious livelihoods in Johannesburg.[25] "Jugaad Infrastructure" emerges from North India's everyday struggle, focusing on minor devices (e.g., solar lamps) that gain significance when deployed in large numbers, emphasising versatility and improvisation.[26] Both concepts analyse how subaltern actors pierce formal/informal boundaries to tailor resources, demanding functionality and flexibility over fixed aesthetics. This framework views improvisation and collaboration as essential to sustaining everyday life.

These frameworks of improvisational infrastructure find expression in culinary culture. **RRD** applies this lens in *Gastrogeography: Stories from Mexico to Singapore* (2025). Their initiative, a "Mexican Street Snacks Takeover," reimagines eating as a visual investigation of colonial processes from pre-Hispanic times to the contemporary era. Mobilising cookbooks, magazines, street food packaging, advertisements and materials



RRD (Red de Reproducción y Distribución). Installation view of *Gastrogeography: Stories from Mexico to Singapore*. 2017–ongoing. 3D-printed sculptures, screen-printed tablecloths, ceramic plates, cookbook publication, multichannel video and printed posters, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

from Mexican roadside kiosks, RRD examines these syncretic expressions to address parallel histories of Singapore and Mexico's colonial legacies. RRD integrates paintings, plates, murals, sculptures, tablecloths and printed materials, with video content merging street food gastronomy with Mexican mythologies. With the installation facing Tanjong Pagar Port, a historical transhipment hub, RRD's replicas of José Agustín Arrieta's still lifes highlight the bonds between Mexico and Singapore through food products, symbolising the Magellan trade that connected Asia to Latin America and Europe. *Gastrogeography* guides audiences across geographical divides, exploring the closeness between Singapore and Mexico through the convergence of colonial trade routes in culinary memories.



Kapwani Kiwanga. Installation view of *Flowers for Africa: Rwanda*. 2019. Protocol of assembly and display including archival iconography to guide the reconstruction of a floral arrangement consisting of foliage and wooden support structure, c. 600 × 800 × 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Galerie Poggi, Paris; Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin; Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg, London.

The artistic expression of infrastructure intersects with natural, capitalistic and nationalistic imaginaries in memory politics. **Kapwani Kiwanga**'s *Flowers for Africa: Rwanda* (2019) interrogates this assemblage, reflecting an eco-authoritarian logic in which "difficult, unpopular decisions will have to be taken and enforced by a state insulated from electoral cycle pressures."[27] Her triumphal arch, a symbol of nationalistic celebration, is adorned with eucalyptus meant to wilt over time. As eucalyptus was introduced during Belgian colonisation, Kiwanga's work highlights coloniality within post-war nation-building aspirations in Singapore. The plant's decay critiques the state's attempt to curate permanence beyond democratic incrementalism. By staging tension between sovereignty and organic decline, Kiwanga manifests the fading of Pan-African aspirations, showing how natural forces contest the orchestration of political memory.



Huang Po-Chih. *Momocha*. 2025. Kombucha and essays, dimensions variable. Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission. Image courtesy of Currency Design and the artist.

In Kiwanga's work, a tension emerges between two temporal modes—natural transience and nationalist monumentality. Meanwhile, **Huang Po-Chih**'s *Momocha* (2025) intertwines the macro system of economic crop migration with the micro realm of personal experiences in both biological and mental digestion. His project creates a sensory and economic infrastructure by brewing a series of new flavours—kumquat, sour citrus tea, and pepper—rooted in his decades-long engagement with the community in Xinpu, Hsinchu. These primary kombucha ingredients were sources of income for Xinpu and resonate with the economic crops that were once widely cultivated in Singapore. Each of the three kombucha flavours represents the fusion and conflict of cultures, ethnicities, migrations, cash crops and landscapes from both regions. "Artists are the enzymes of society," said Huang, suggesting that the arts can impact society from within. *Momocha* can be fully experienced only when audiences read the essays through the QR code on the bottle, engaging with the speculative journeys of these ingredients. By merging natural fermentation with capitalist



Kang Seung Lee. Installation view of *The Heart of a Hand* series. 2023.
Collection of Commonwealth and Council.

commerce through vending machines, Huang establishes a system that challenges the erasure of the developmental force inherent in capitalist logic. Both artists use living elements—plants and fermentation—as infra-structure to circulate alternative memories through sensorial encounters.

While the above mentioned projects engage with the infrastructure's ideological dimension, **Kang Seung Lee**'s *The Heart of a Hand* series explores a deeper structural violence: the potential exclusion of an individual from cultural history. Lee's project shows that memory forms our most vital infra-structure. When memory is erased, art functions as infrapolitics—reconstructing what has been lost. Lee's work pays tribute to Goh Choo San (1948–1987), a visionary choreographer from Singapore whose remarkable contributions were initially overlooked in the annals of global dance history due to his untimely death from AIDS. Through a series of wall-mounted pieces, Lee presents figures and bodies only to obscure them, encouraging viewers to contemplate the theme of life's erasure. This act of memorialisation, experienced via viewers' engagement, serves as a framework to restore dignity through solidarity.

In the final resonance, this essay interprets the Singapore Biennale 2025: *pure intention* through the concept of infra-structure. It contends that infra-structure extends beyond the physical constructs of concrete and steel, uncovering the invisible forces that truly shape urban life. By examining selected works from SB2025, the essay shows how art engages infrapolitics. These artistic expressions become the "hidden transcripts" that embody the city's living essence. *pure intention* highlights these gestures, honouring the space between grand designs and lived experiences. It considers that cities are shaped as much by the infra-structures of their inhabitants as by master plans. The Biennale thus asserts that understanding a city requires appreciating these profound dynamics, where the true dignity of life is expressed and sustained.

1 Walter Buhr, "What Is Infrastructure?," *Econstor* 107-03, (2003), https://hdl.handle.net/10419/83199.

2 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (University Press of Colorado, 1990).

3 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 183.

4 "A 'Town Hall' Hall," Singapore Free Press, May 14, 1923, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/singfreepressb19250514-1.2.34.

5 Public wireless radio broadcasting in Singapore commenced in April 1925, spearheaded by the Amateur Wireless Society of Malaya (AWSM).

6 Esther Leslie, "Anti-Fascism, Anti-Art, Doubt and Despair," *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (2019): 293–313, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1627053.

7 Raymond Williams, "City," in *Keywords A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 55–56.

8 The concept of the Malay city (*kota*) encapsulates the civilisation's life philosophy. Rooted in Melayu-Islam principles, these intricate structures symbolised a society that was both meticulously planned and organised, coexisting harmoniously with nature. The design was intended to be "... lengkap dalam segala aspek seperti unsur pentadbiran, ekonomi mahupun agama... (translated as 'complete in all aspects such as administrative, economic and religious elements')." In contrast, the Chinese term for city, 城市 (*chengshi*), inherently suggests a collective dwelling for commerce and the exchange of goods. Given the overshadowing influence of colonial modernity brought by the British presence, the following discussion will not deal with the etymology of "city" in both Malay and Chinese in discussions on the politics of infrastructure within the discourse of the city. See also Mohd Zul Md Bahrudin, "The Concept of City in Malay Civilization," *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Strategic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 130–37, https://doi.org/10.47548/ijistra.2021.33.

9 Yueh Siang Chang, *Recent Gifts Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue & Jimmy Ong* (NUS Museum, 2013).

10 Charmaine Toh, "Pictorialism and Modernity in Singapore, 1950–60," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 2, no. 2 (2018): 9–31, https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2018.0013.

11 Theophilus Kwek, *Commonwealth* (Carcanet Press, 2025), 41.

12 Kah Seng Loh, "The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee Fire and The Making of Modern Singapore," (Phd diss., Murdoch University, 2008), 251.

13 Kah Seng Loh, "Ashen History: Narrating the Fire at the Origin of Modern Singapore," *City & Society* 32, no. 2 (2020): 387–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12289.

14 In the note at the end of *Commonwealth*, Theophilus Kwek writes that, "parts of 'Relocations' draw from oral history and archival records presented by Loh Kah Seng in his thesis, 'The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore,' as well as from my own family's memories of the 1968 fire at Bukit Ho Swee." See Kwek, *Commonwealth* (Carcanet Press, 2025), 99.

15 Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 7–20.

16 Irene J. Winter, "The Affective Properties of Styles: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (Routledge, 1998), 72.

17 Patrick Flores, *Figuring a Scene* (National Gallery Singapore, 2024), 22.

18 For more historical accounts on the two fires being depicted, see Kah Seng Loh, "Memory, Heritage and the Bukit Ho Swee Fire: Lecture by Dr Loh Kah Seng," YouTube, accessed November 15, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrW0FNj8Jgg.

19 Edward Wei Ti Seng, "Compensation Thresholds for Collective Sales: Singapore & Australia Compared," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 18, no. 3 (2023): 345–361, https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2023.21.

20 Calvin You Jin Chua, Aurelia Hui-En Chan and Yunqing Chew, *Singapore Strata Malls: A Retrospective for the Future*, ed. Justin Zhuang (Suburbia Projects, 2024), 11.

21 Beng Huat Chua, "Singapore: A Property-Owning Procedural Democracy in Practice," *Housing Studies* 39, no. 11 (2023): 2744–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2023.2218291.

22 *Our identity is determined by our productivity* comes to life during the weekend gatherings of Burmese communities at the public spaces of Peninsula Plaza, particularly Sundays. The work is only fulfilled when the work serves as a picnic sheet during these occasions, where activities deemed non-productive occur.

23 Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract & Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 115.

24 Laura Anne Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Duke University Press, 2020), 48.

25 Abdou Maliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 68–90, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jhd1.6.

26 Ankit Kumar, "Jugaad Infrastructure: Minor Infrastructure and the Messy Aesthetics of Everyday Life," *Geo: Geography and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.153.

27 Mark Beeson, "The Coming of Environmental Authoritarianism," *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 2 (2010): 279.

(*Figures, dedications, and civilisations*)

Tokoh–tokoh, pengabdian, dan peradaban

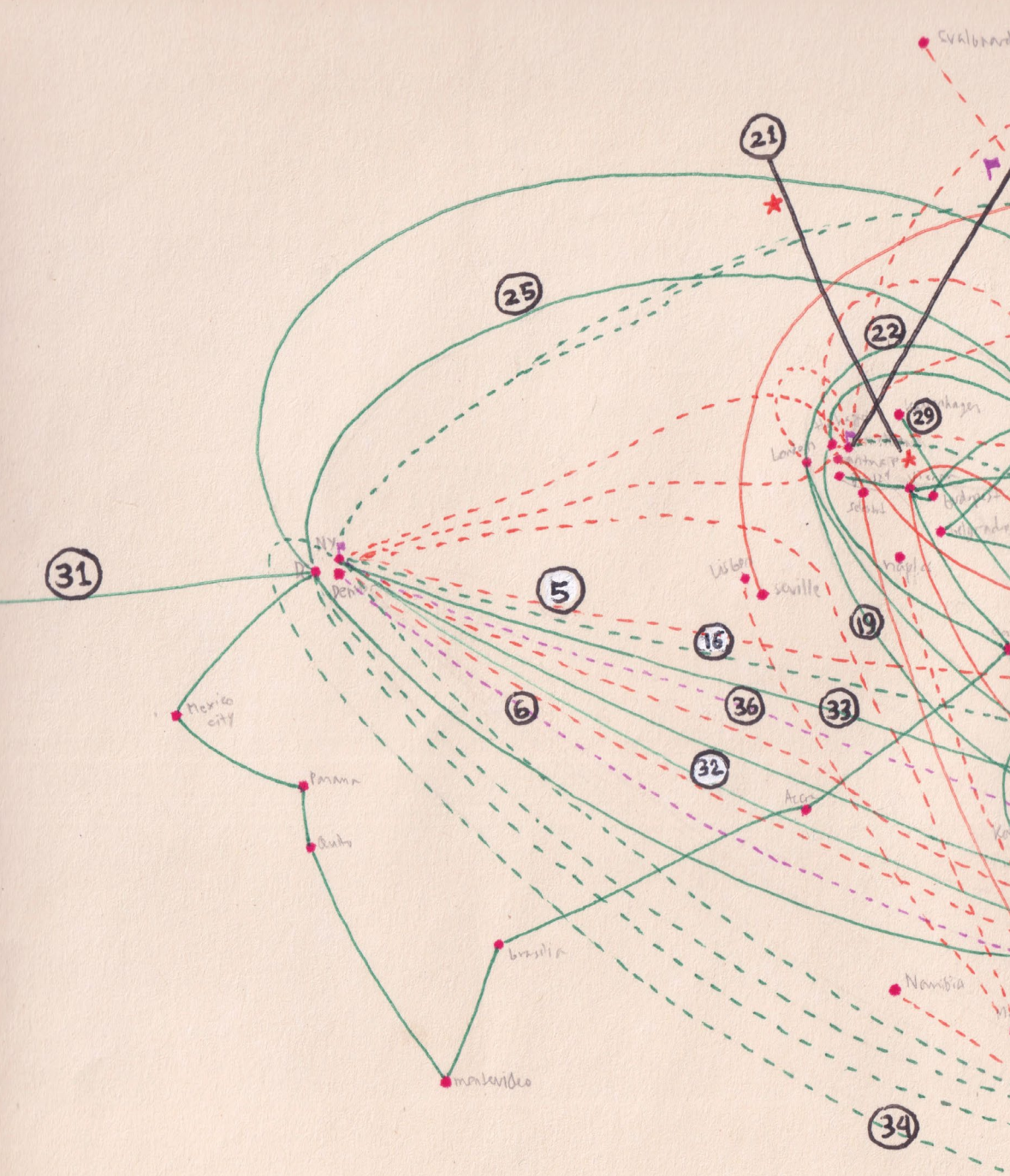
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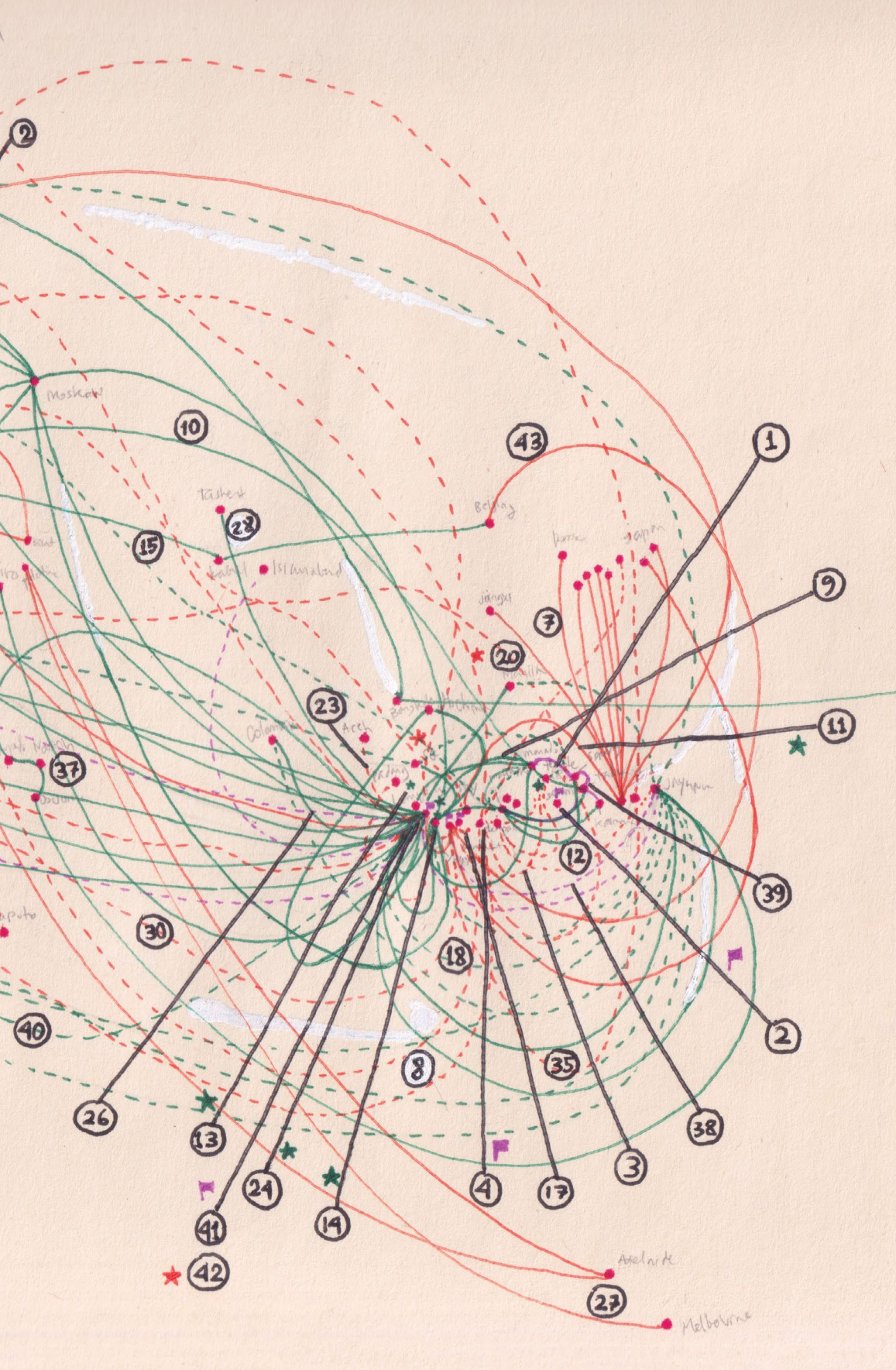
Hyphen—

About Hyphen—
Hyphen— was co-initiated in 2011 by Ratna Mufida, Pitra Hutomo, and Grace Samboh as a sustainable conversational space regarding aesthetic practices. Not long after, that space expanded through engagement in various artistic activities, including exhibition-making, various forms of publishing, archiving, research, open-ended conversations, karaoke, barbecue nights, feasts, etc. Hyphen— aims to put forward curiosity and people's common well-being as the estuary of artistic practices. They were joined by Akmalia Rizqita "Chita" and Rachel K. Surijata (in 2020), as well as Ruhaeni Intan and Andri Setiawan (in 2023).

They currently play with explorations on the practices of Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (Indonesia New Art Movement, 1975–1989), Kustiyah (1935–2012), and Danarto (1940–2018); exhibition histories surrounding *Kesenian Indonesia* (Indonesian Art, 1955), *BINAL Experimental Arts* (1992), *Contemporary Art Exhibition of the Non-Aligned Countries* (1995); while attempting to unravel Indonesia's so-called national history through its visual representations.

Disclaimer from the Author
This map weaves oral testimonies, archival sources and artistic practices; factual accuracy is pursued but it is inevitably partial. Sensitive issues—including colonial violence, sexual violence, genocide and military repression—are mentioned. We acknowledge that these histories remain contested and that their retelling carries responsibilities. What we offer here is not closure but coordinates for reckoning.
Image courtesy of Hyphen—.


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seville
Mexico city
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Montevideo
Namibia


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Adelaide
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Melbourne

This map is a constellation of movements—of people, treaties, artworks and materials—traced across oceans and borders between the 1930s and the present. Navigating a refusal of chronologies, some lines follow statecraft and diplomacy; others mark circuits of extraction or routes of exile. Many link to artworks included in this exhibition, which themselves become acts of remembering, resisting, or refusing the histories that shaped them—since no history is neutral or ever contains the whole truth.

The legend gathers short entries on treaties, agreements, travels, as well as on artistic and diplomatic work around *Sesudah banjir itu: No. 44*, 2025 (*When the flood is over: No. 44*, 2025)—a conservation work on Diorama No. 44: The Liberation of West Irian, 1 May 1963, in the Museum Sejarah Nasional (Indonesia's National History Museum). Each entry insists that history is lived not only in documents or monuments but in bodies, voices and matter: in resin blocks, tailings dumped into rivers, letters that never surfaced, or a drum struck on an island traded away.

This map is not a neutral record. National histories are themselves curated to fix a singular, state-sanctioned narrative. The figures conserved here are equally problematic. They carry distortions, omissions and ideological violence. Yet they also reveal how official histories are constructed—and how we might confront, remake and resound them in the present, for the future.

LEGEND

1. ✳ ***Possibilities of owning other's text*** **(2021)**
This is a film by **Julia Sarisetiati** (b. 1981) and **Ary "Jimged" Sendy** (b. 1978). Shot in Parepare, a port long shaped by the departures of workers—from precolonial trade routes to today's migrant labour flows—that becomes the site of a gathering: a scholar, fisherman, labourer, mother, youth, businesswoman and an unemployed man. They begin by introducing themselves, slowly learning each other's precarious realities. Into this circle enters the 19th-century *sureq* of Bugis noblewoman and poet Colliq Pujié (1812–1876), whose sung texts called for resistance against her family's feudalism and colonial rule. Rehearsing and performing her words together, the group turns Colliq Pujié's poetics into a collective act of remembering and resisting within the urgencies of our time.

2. ⚑ **Treaty of Breda, 1667**
An equal-swap trade between imperial rivals: The Dutch Republic ceded control of Manhattan—then New Amsterdam—to the British Empire in exchange for Roen, a tiny nutmeg rich island in the Moluccas.

3. - - - - ***Golden nutmeg*** **(2013)**
This single nutmeg is a work by **Titarubi** (b. 1968). Gold-plated by the artist's own hand, a singular nutmeg stands on a pedestal: the starting point of Titarubi's long engagement with spice, value and colonial history. In the 17th century, nutmeg from the Maluku Islands was prized like gold, fought over by empires and even traded for New Amsterdam. Today, Papua's mountains of gold continue this cycle of extraction. By devising her own gold-plating system and labouring over each seed, Titarubi does more than represent history—she transforms it. This small, gleaming nutmeg would become the kernel of a larger body of work, where hundreds of gilded seeds accumulate into monuments of desire, violence and survival.

4. ⚑ **Treaty of Giyanti, 1755**
A line drawn by Dutch hands split the Mataram Sultanate into Surakarta and Yogyakarta. One agreement fixed rival courts, cities and palaces, laying the architecture of colonial rule in Mataram (now Central Java).

5. – – – – ***Drummer's gonna drum* (2017) & *Drummer's gonna drum #3* (2023)**

Julian Abraham "Togar" (b. 1987) drums on the surfaces of cities built by the empire. In Yogyakarta (2017), he strikes stone, soil and walls shaped by the 1755 Giyanti Agreement—a Dutch-imposed partition that carved royal territory into architecture. In Pulau Roen (2023), where nutmeg was once worth a continent, he drums along coastlines and colonial remnants—the island was traded for Manhattan—a blunt transaction between spice and land. Togar continues his series of sonic inquiries: rhythm as reading, percussion as audit. These gestures are not music, but labour. Patterned, persistent, unresolved. A body striking the world to hear what history echoes back.

6. – – – – **Kontrak Karya (Contract of Work/CoW), 1967**

In April 1967—just a month after Soeharto seized power—the Indonesian government signed its first CoW with Freeport Indonesia, a subsidiary of the **US company Freeport-McMoRan,** granting them the rights to exploit Ertsberg mountain in West Irian. This very first foreign investment deal of the New Order became a main pillar of the economy even if the profit-sharing was set at 10 per cent for Indonesia and 90 per cent for Freeport.

No Papuans were involved in this CoW, which was signed two years prior to *Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat* (Act of Free Choice), the referendum that legalised Indonesia's rule over Papua in 1969.

7. ——— **Gold & copper extraction, since 1936**

In 1936, Dutch geologist Jean Jacques Dozy reported vast copper reserves in Papua's Carstensz Mountains. Rediscovered by Freeport executives in 1960, Ertsberg became the basis for Indonesia-Freeport CoW (first signed in 1967, second in 1991 and third in 2018, lasting until 2041).

Mining began in 1972; Grasberg, discovered in 1988, soon eclipsed Ertsberg. By 2019, Freeport had extracted 12.245 million tonnes of copper and 1,430 tonnes of gold. In 2023 alone, 825,000 tonnes of copper, 1.97 million ounces of gold, USD 3.16 billion net income.

Most of this ore leaves Papua. Concentrates are shipped to Freeport's smelter in Spain, to Japan, China and South Korea. From 2025, the Gresik smelter in East Java—majority-owned by Mitsubishi—will process the bulk, yet still for export. Papua's mountains are folded into global circuits of capital, enriching elsewhere.

The costs remain local. Grasberg's open-pit mine discharges

167 million metric tonnes of waste daily into the Ajkwa River; by 2041, three billion tonnes of tailings will poison the ecosystem sustaining the Kamoro and Amungme. A heavy military presence "securing" the mine has brought violence and human rights abuses.

From Dozy's report in Leiden to Freeport's furnaces in Spain, from Mitsubishi's smelters to China's cables, Papua's gold and copper continue to leave. Wealth flows outward. What remains is dispossession.

8. – – – – ***Staring at oneself in a mirror of sort,*** **since 2015**

Across the globe, **Kinez Riza** (b. 1989) seeks out fragments of deep time—fossils, stones, sediments—that have long drawn the fascination of archaeologists, collectors and empires. Colonial expeditions once turned such fragments into frontiers of extraction: Dutch records of the Ertsberg outcrop in 1936, for instance, paved the way for Grasberg, now one of the world's largest gold and copper mines. Kinez's practice articulates a refusal of such logic. She photographs rare materials with restraint—set against stark grounds, lit to reveal form and shadow—treating them as presences rather than possessions. She elevates their value without taking them, suggesting another relation: to admire without extracting, to attend without exploiting. In her images, nature itself is an archive—where human and non-human histories persist in fragile entanglement.

9. ——— **The painter Emiria Sunassa, 1894–1964**

She was born in Tanahwangko (now North Sulawesi) of Tidorean lineage. The island sultanate of Tidore once held tributary lands stretching west to North Sulawesi and east to Papua (including Fakfak, Kaimana, Raja Ampat and Sorong). **Emiria** spent her life travelling across the archipelago and abroad, before her final years in Lampung.

10. ——— **Rehearsed improvisation, colonial mobility, shifting identities: Emmy, Sunny, Emiria, ca. 1910–1920**

Before **Emiria** entered Jakarta's artistic and political circles in the 1940s and 1950s, she was remembered otherwise. Oral accounts suggest she was identified not as a princess of Tidore but as Emmy Pareira (a Minahasan woman from the Manoppo-Pareira clan), raised in Manado and educated in Christian missionary schools. In the mid 1910s, she and one of her sisters were known as musicians—pianist and singer—performing in Dutch société circles in Ternate and, briefly, in Europe (1914–1915). There she went by the name "Sunny." Later, in the 1920s, she described herself as a "girl from the East" studying eurhythmics (music through movement) with the Dalcroze method in Brussels and Vienna.

11. ✳ **Two jobs at once, why not?! 1925–1928**
In Halmahera, **Emiria** worked as an administrar for *Landbouwonderneming Akelamo* and as director of *Oba Cultuur Mij.*

12. **- - - - [*Tenun* (weavings)], since 2010**
Musician and researcher **Presiden Tidore** (b. 1991) works through sound and thread, tracing the legacies of Emiria Sunassa and the sovereignties she embodied. Alongside his music, he has built a collection of tenun—woven textiles from Sumba, Tidore, Ternate, Flores, Aceh and Papua—deliberately outside the Javanese canon of "national culture."

Each cloth is a portable archive. A record of gendered labour, local knowledge and island memory. Moving from loom to stage, market to museum, home to biennale, they carry the stubborn persistence of peripheries that are often written out of history. These textiles resist being frozen as heritage for him and his peers. They unravel the myth of cultural centrality and rethread a constellation of edges, where sovereignty lies in the weave itself.

13. ✳ **Nederlandsche Koloniale Petroleum Maatschappij, 1929**
Whilst working for the US-proxy Dutch colonial oil company, **Emiria** lived near the Gerong River, where she sailed a lot and went hunting for elephant tracks.

14. ✳ **Ondermining Artama, 1933–1937**
Emiria worked as *administrar* in another Dutch colonial venture in Pengalengan.

15. **——— & - - - - A proposed home, transcolonial communication and bureaucratic magnet, 1954**
Excerpt from **Emiria**'s letter to **G. F. Pijper***:
They have also requested me for Makassar, for the Kebudajaän [culture department], which is the reason for my plans. It was a request I received a long time ago, and they keep coming back to it. When I start talking about Tanahwangko, I will mean that I will be getting a house in Tondano, where I will join the Pinaesaan Faculty to do something related to the Kebudajaän [culture department], but by then you will know where I will be. If it weren't quite so ridiculous, I would suggest that you come to Tondano. There your life would be different. Apart from lecturing, you would have a life approximating life somewhere in Holland, because it has stayed that way until today. You'd see old mangles there, which I believe farmers still use in your country.

* Letter dated 15 October 1954 from Emiria Sunassa to Willem Pijper, from the Guilaume Frédéric Pijper archive and collection, Leiden University Libraries. Translation by Zena Vollenberg-Jenkins. From a forthcoming volume, edited by Anissa Rahadiningtyas, Marije Plomp and Roger Nelson, under advance contract with Leiden University Press.

16. ——— & - - - - Visa rejected, 1961

Papua and the surrounding islands were still considered Netherlands New Guinea when **Emiria** wanted to return to her hometown. When the Dutch rejected her visa, Emiria announced her plans to appeal to the UN headquarters in New York. She transited in Singapore, where she was hosted for at least ten months by A. H. Edrus of Qalam Publishing. She never went to the UN.

17. - - - - *Cangkul terakhir yang lupa diasah* (*The last hoe, left unsharpened*), 2025

This is an installation by **Nasikin** (b. 1991). Consisting of panels resembling rice-field embankments arranged in a circle, it forms a cylindrical monument evoking a memory of the fields. The piece was created using papier-mâché, treating it as a medium for making notes and recording. Attempting to reflect on his farming past, Nasikin said that a blunt hoe wounds the farmer, harms the soil and unsettles the constellation. Raised in a *tumpangsari* farming family, he reimagines relations between humans, crops, animals and the cosmos—relations fractured by industrial agriculture and land dispossession. For him, soil is not only a medium but an archive, a ledger of labour, belief and violence, insisting that the land itself remembers more persistently than any record.

18. ——— & - - - - The Asian-African Conference, 1955

In Bandung, as part of the **Biro Irian** committee, **Supeni** was remembered for moving through halls and foyers, approaching delegates one by one to secure support for Indonesia's claim over West Irian. This kind of improvisational, face-to-face diplomacy earned her the nickname "Irian Lady." As part of Sukarno's newly formed bureau, she embodied how the claim to West Irian was carried not only in speeches but in persistent personal encounters.

19. ——— & - - - - The 46th Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Conference, 1957

Leading the Indonesian delegation to London, **Supeni** raised Indonesia's claim over West Irian. The intervention sparked a public reaction from the floor—a controversy that spilled into the press. In this moment, Supeni's role was not only representative but disruptive—a reminder that the question of West Irian was not confined to Jakarta but pressed into the heart of Europe.

20. ——— & - - - - A knock on each door, 1962

Supeni confirmed Philippine support for Indonesia's claim to West Irian in a meeting with Vice President **Emmanuel Pelaez**. She sought—and won—assurances that no air strikes would be launched from Clark Field, a nearby US airbase. The meeting, held in a private residence, exemplifies her mode of diplomacy: informal, improvised, yet decisive in securing a fragile promise.

21. - - - - & ✳ ***Dindin*, 2025**

This is a book that collects thoughts and excerpted conversations with people from diverse, multidisciplinary backgrounds whose works explore various practices to discuss and develop strategies, scenarios, models, critical visualisations and commentaries addressing the discourse of decolonisation. One starting point for this compilation was a series of talks '*Padat Merayap*' ('Congestion'), initiated in 2019 by **Riksa Afiaty** (b. 1986) and **Karoline Swiezynski**, from Jan van Eyck.

Contributors include: Akmalia Rizqita, Catarina Simão, Claudia Martinez Garay, Ferdiansyah Thajib, Gökcan Demirkazik, Grace Samboh, Harm Stevens, Ilya Fedorov, Köken Ergun, Maria Inarita Uthe, Marjolein van Pagee, Michelle Wun Ting Wong, Oesman Effendi, Pablo José Ramírez, Patrick D. Flores, Post Museum, Riksa Afiaty, Roy Villevoye, They Are Here, Timoteus Anggawan Kusno.

22. ——— A preamble to cultural diplomacy, 1947–1956

In 1947, **Dr. Hurustiati**—who had earned her medical degree from the Geneeskundige Hooge School (GHS) in Jakarta—moved to London with her husband and pursued anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. There she also lectured and organised cultural programmes, including the *Exhibition of Indonesia*, in 1952, one of the earliest documented international group exhibitions of artists from Indonesia. In 1954, she relocated to Moscow before returning to Jakarta between 1955 and 1956. In 1955, the Cultural Department of the Indonesian Embassy published *Collected Lectures and Speeches of Dr. Hurustiati Subandrio.*

23. - - - - ***BIOSPOKE*, since 2024**

This is an installation by **Togar**. *BIOSPOKE* is a sonic space for rehearsal and dialogue, where percussion meets testimony. **Oni Imelva** (b. 1981)—singer, narrator and human rights advocate from Aceh—brought her voice into the space. She recalled the widow-warriors of Keumalahayati's Inong Balee, exposed how violence is normalised from Dutch colonial board games to post-tsunami films and named sexual violence as a weapon of war, still reckoned with through the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She also invoked Syiah Kuala's 17th-century *fatwas* affirming women's right to lead, learn and speak. Against Togar's drums, her words became rhythm: not music, but a living archive, a strike against forgetting.

24. ✳ **The legacy of Hurustiati in women's reproductive rights, 1956–1957**

While heading the Public Health section of the Ministry of Health, **Dr. Hurustiati** established the Perkumpulan Keluarga Berencana Indonesia (PKBI, Indonesia's Planned Parenthood Association). Her leadership helped shift family planning from private initiatives into national strategy, shaping the foundations of population policy. PKBI continues to be a key institution for sexual health and reproductive rights in Indonesia—remarkably, one that resists alignment with narrow moral or religious agendas.

25. ——— & - - - - **West Irian in Moscow & Washington, 1957**

The newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs, **Subandrio**, embarked on a series of Cold War missions to rally international support for Indonesia's claim over West Irian, navigating between Washington and Moscow while seeking backing from Asian-African states.

26. ——— & - - - - **The Asian-African Conference of Women, 1958**

Kongres Wanita Indonesia (KOWANI, Indonesian Women's Congress) sent **Dr. Hurustiati** and Maria Ulfah to Colombo where they appealed for West Irian.

27. – – – – ***Comparative monument (Palestine)*, 2012**

In Melbourne, **Tom Nicholson** (b. 1973) photographed war memorials inscribed with the word "Palestine"—monuments built in the 1920s to honour Australian troops who fought in British campaigns, particularly the 1917 capture of Beersheba.

In Ramallah, Nicholson re-sited these forms as stacks of posters for people to take and paste across the city. This gesture relocates "Palestine" from stone in Australia back to Palestine itself, unsettling the imperial geographies that tied Australia into Britain's war machine. The work implicates the echoes of 1917 in the dispossessions of 1948, while also resonating with Aboriginal experiences of land loss. By moving these monuments across places, Nicholson proposes a monument not of permanence but of circulation, solidarity and re-imagination.

28. ——— **The Afro-Asian Writers' Conference, 1958**

Dr. Hurustiati participated in the Tashkent forum.

29. ——— **The 50th International Womens' Congress, 1960**

Dr. Hurustiati participated in the Copenhagen meeting.

30. – – – – ***Single object* (c. 1994–1996) & *A piece of memory #1-2* (2012)**

Anusapati (b. 1957) grew up among rows of rubber trees on the outskirts of Jakarta, a landscape erased by highways, factories, and malls. His practice has long been shaped by such memories of trees and their disappearance. Unlike industrial logging, Anusapati works only with fallen wood, off-cuts, or timber at the edge of death, giving it a final life in sculpture.

Single object (ca. 1994–1996) was made after Anusapati returned from his studies at the Pratt Institute in New York. Carved from durian wood, the piece takes a rounded form split by a narrow opening, evoking the kentongan (village alarm drums) and the pulse of a living tree. Later works like *A piece of memory #1–2* (2012) transpose wood into bronze, mimicking logs so precisely they confuse permanence with fragility, memory with matter.

Through such gestures, Anusapati insists that wood is not merely material but memory, a witness to erased landscapes. His practice stands in stark contrast to extractive logics that reduce forests into commodities, fuelling state revenues and military repression. In every hollowed surface or cast imprint, Anusapati renders absence palpable: The tree that once was, the world that vanishes with it.

31. ——— **The Sukarno Safari, 1961**

On 16 April 1961, **President Sukarno** embarked on a two-month state tour spanning some 19 countries. He visited the so-called Cold War superpowers within one itinerary—the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

The "safari" was both a spectacle and a grand diplomatic act that staged Sukarno as a postcolonial leader who moved conveniently between blocs while carrying a single demand: West Irian must return [to Indonesia].

32. ——— & - - - - **1030th Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, 1961**

Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Subandrio,** delivered a case for West Irian, framing it as an unfinished project of decolonisation.

33. ——— & - - - - **A preamble to the New York Agreement, 1962**

Having secured US support for Indonesia's position, **Subandrio** led the delegation and signed the New York Agreement—an accord that transferred West Irian from the Dutch to the UN authority, with a future referendum promised.

34. ——— & - - - - **The 17th session of the United Nations General Assembly, 1962**

The "Irian Lady," who began with door-to-door persuasion in Bandung, now stood at the UN podium, leading the Indonesian delegation. **Supeni** presented Indonesia's case for West Irian. At the height of Cold War manoeuvres, she argued Indonesia's position in the world's central diplomatic arena—turning her from Sukarno's envoy into an international figure.

35. ——— **Trikora III, c. 1961–1963**

Dr. Hurustiati sat in the front row on 1 May 1963 at the UNTEA ceremony in Kota Baru. In a photograph, she sits among four women in kebaya, *jarik* and sunglasses, right next to the stage—visible in archival records yet invisible in the diorama. Her presence indexes the dissonance between lived memory and curated national myth.

She led a group of "Trikora III," consisting of cultural performers tasked with entertaining officers and Indonesia's army in West Irian. The show was first held at Dr. Djalal Abdoh's residence and the second in Hamadi, both in Kota Baru (previously Sukarnapura, now Jayapura).

36. The New York Agreement, 1962–1963

On 15 August 1962, **Indonesia and the Netherlands signed the New York Agreement** to resolve the dispute over West Irian. Under this agreement, the United Nations established the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) as the transitional authority and facilitated the transfer of control over West Irian.

On 1 May 1963, UNTEA **formally transferred the administrative responsibilities over West Irian to Indonesia**. A ceremony was held in Kotabaru (now Jayapura). On stage, there were C.V. Narasimhan (UN), Djalal Abdoh (UNTEA), and, from Indonesia, Subandrio (Minister of Foreign Affairs), Sudjarwo Tjondronegoro (representative in West Irian), a bodyguard and a teenage girl wearing kebaya. Also present were bureaucrats, Korps Wanita Angkatan Laut Indonesia (KOWAL, Women Troops of the Navy) and Pakistani troops (UN peacekeeping forces deployed since the UNTEA period).

This performativity marked the end of a long dispute between Indonesia and the Netherlands, decorated with flags, dignitaries, absences and ignorances. Women who sat in the front row, visible in various records—Hurustiati Subandrio, Rusiah Sardjono, Tatiek Azis Saleh, Laksmiharti Tjondronegoro—were never sculpted into the diorama that retells this day. Presence in life, absence in history.

37. The painter Sriyani, 1930–1999

Moving across the globe, painter **Sriyani** lived a cosmopolitan life. Like Emiria Sunassa, she pursued painting across shifting geographies; like Hurustiati, her husband's diplomatic postings informed her oeuvre. Her trajectory charts not just an artist's career but also how art and diplomacy were entwined in women's lives in mid-20th-century Indonesia.

Sriyani studied at the University of Education Center for Drawing Teachers (now Institut Teknologi Bandung) in 1950. Five years later, she moved to Moscow with her husband, where she continued to paint and exhibit. Not long after, she relocated to The Hague, studying at the Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten and showing internationally, including in Cairo (1959). She returned to Jakarta later that year, exhibiting actively until 1961, before another move—this time to Ho Chi Minh City (1962). Her CV notes a visit to West Irian in 1964, though the context is unclear. Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Arts Council) collects her woodcut depicting Papuan figures, titled *Ibu dan anak* (*Mother and Child*, 1973).

Between 1965 and 1966, she lived in Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Kampala, and then in Paris (1966–1968), before finally resettling in Jakarta. From then until 1999, she exhibited steadily, including a solo exhibition at Taman Ismail Marzuki (1978).

38. – – – – **Trikora, 1961**

On 19 December 1961 in Yogyakarta, President Sukarno made a political declaration to reclaim West Irian. Dubbed **Trikora** (*Tri Komando Rakyat*, literally Three Commands of the People), it called for the crushing of the Dutch puppet state of Papua, the raising of the Indonesian flag in West Irian and the mobilisation of volunteers.

39. ——— **Komando Mandala, 1962**

Following the declaration of Trikora, the **Komando Mandala** (Mandala Command) was established as its military operation. This joint force of several military commands was based in Makassar and led by Major General Soeharto. From late 1962 to 1964, the operation consisted of three phases: infiltration (troop landings to take control of territory), exploitation (open attacks on Dutch military forces) and consolidation (establishing authority for Indonesia).

40. – – – – **TNI AD ♥ USA, 1950s–1960s**

Indonesian Army (TNI Angkatan Darat) officers travelled to the United States for training through the **US Military Assistance Program**. Amongst them were Ahmad Yani at the Command and General Staff College (1955) and Sarwo Edhie Wibowo at the Infantry Officers Advanced Course (1957). These journeys embedded doctrines of "professionalism" and anti-communism, while cultivating networks with US counterparts. What returned to Jakarta was more than military technique: a Cold War alignment that empowered A. H. Nasution, and later Soeharto, to consolidate the army's role in politics.

41. ⚑ **Supersemar, 1966**

Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret (March 11th Decree) was Soeharto's licence to seize power from President Sukarno, ban the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and launch mass arrests that paved the way for the 1965–1966 US-backed genocide. Its origins remain disputed—drafted freely or under duress remains unknown.

Now over 50 years old, this mysterious letter has yet to surface in its original version. The National Archives holds three different versions of the letter, fuelling decades of controversy.

42. ✳ ***1966*** **(2019)**

This installation by **Uji Handoko Eko Saputro** (b. 1983) is structured like a church ritual—confessing, reflecting. It is an opportunity to confront the *Supersemar*. We are asked to kneel, to place our hands on its desk, to follow a certain ritual, and, eventually, to say something in the set-up. Instead of a priest, we face ourselves in a mirror—an echo of the mirror and painting in Soeharto's room in the 1966 *Supersemar* diorama. The ritual ends with the churn of a dot-matrix printer: four copies of the diorama sketch are produced, yet the "original" remains blank, with only the carbon copies faintly showing the image. Here, absence, repetition and reflection bind into one gesture: complicity.

43. **Polyurethane (resin): From block, to pour, 1960s & 2020s**

In the 1960s, when Indonesia began sculpting its official past into the dioramas at Monas, the figures were carved from solid polyurethane blocks, likely imported from Japan through postwar reparations and state cultural cooperation. The material arrived rigid and unfamiliar—industrial plastic in block form, carved like stone.

Today, sixty years later, we use something else: liquid resin, poured by hand into silicone moulds from clay figures we model ourselves. It is cheaper, more toxic, more available—mostly imported from China, sold in jerrycans, repackaged locally thanks to "creative economies" encouraged by online shopping. What once arrived through Cold War reconstruction now circulates via global manufacturing routes shaped by 21st-century logistics and soft empire. From Japan to China, the resin still comes from elsewhere.

The histories these figures embody are not clean. They carry distortions, omissions and state fictions. But instead of erasing them—violently, bureaucratically—we choose to face them. We remake the figures to remake our relation to them. This is not reproduction. It is a form of reckoning. It is conservation from the people, by the people, for the people: slow, flawed and deliberate. In resin, we hold on to history—not to preserve its version, but to expose it, cast by cast.



Figures, dedications, and civilisations. Storage display at Griya Seni Hj. Kustiyah Edhi Sunarso, Yogyakarta. 2 September 2025–29 March 2026. Photo by Grace Samboh. Courtesy of Hyphen—, Griya Seni Hj. Kustiyah Edhi Sunarso and the artists.



Figures, dedications, and civilisations. Installation view at RUBANAH Underground Hub, Jakarta. 25 October–12 December 2025. Photo taken by M. Revaldi. Courtesy of RUBANAH Underground Hub, Hyphen— and the artists.



Figures, dedications, and civilisations. Installation view at RUCI Art Space, Jakarta. 25 October–23 November 2025. Photo taken by M. Revaldi. Courtesy of RUBANAH Underground Hub, Hyphen— and the artists.

Contemporary Art and the Culture of Speed

Lee Weng Choy, Selene Yap, Hsu Fang-Tze,
Duncan Bass and Ong Puay Khim

About Lee Weng Choy
Lee Weng Choy is an art critic based in Kuala Lumpur. For over twenty years, Lee lived and worked in Singapore; he was Artistic Co-Director of The Substation arts centre and President of the Singapore Section of the International Association of Art Critics. He has taught at institutions such as the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In recent years, he has focused on facilitating writing workshops.

Weng Choy It started with a message from one of the curators of the Biennale. The team was interested in reprinting an old Substation conference presentation of mine from 1995 titled "The City, the Body."[1] To say I responded with shock would be an exaggeration, but I was hesitant and a little perplexed: what could a thirty-year-old text by a middling writer in his early thirties have to say to art audiences today? I did share with the team that, after I reread the old presentation, I wasn't compelled to kill myself. Eventually, they persuaded me with their reasons, though we won't be reprinting it here—we're doing something else: a conversation in writing, revisiting the themes and issues raised back then.

Space, Spaces, Spacing, The Substation's annual conference of 1995, was the final one of founder Kuo Pao Kun's tenure. As an avid audience member of the first two—Art vs Art and Our Place in Time—it meant a lot to be invited to speak at the third. In the mid-nineties, I taught part-time at LASALLE, back in the days of the old Mountbatten Road campus. Art history, of course, was on the curriculum, but I was among the first to regularly teach art theory classes. For my Substation presentation, I wanted to offer an analysis of the conditions of Singapore art. At the time, theory could be alienating in public talks, and I took the tone of a lecturer introducing unfamiliar ideas to students. That hasn't aged well. What also dates the text is how, by the nineties, the use of "postmodernism" was receding, superseded by terms like "contemporary art."

The most significant thing about my 1995 presentation has nothing to do with what I said—it's the framework. The first Substation conferences were landmark events. They were not without antecedents, but they set precedents: local audiences, academics and all manner of cultural workers—from artists to administrators, poets and playwrights—came to discuss art and culture in ways hitherto unexamined in public. By the end of the decade, things changed. I wonder: when talking openly and critically in public became more commonplace, did The Substation conference, something rare, no longer seem as necessary? During my own tenure at the arts centre in the aughts, there was a shift in priorities and a different set of stakeholders: our gatherings were often geared towards the development of a specific sector, like the visual arts, and were more about reaching out regionally rather than bringing the local community together.

Getting back to "The City, the Body," here's the outline I provided after my prefatory remarks:

My purpose today is to theorise a context—or "space" if you will—for the role of art in contemporary times. I have already begun with the thesis that the city is a postmodernist space—a city of signs, an imagined community. As a postmodern space, the city should be seen in the context of contemporary capitalism; I will discuss briefly the idea of contemporary capitalist society being a hyperreal "society of the spectacle." The body, too, is something constructed by our imaginations. More precisely, the body, the city, these are discursively built—that is, constructed or articulated through discourse. I will touch on how the city and the body are not constructed in isolation from each other but inescapably together. In my discussion of the city, the body, I will apply some insights from psychoanalysis, sketching the role of enjoyment in the construction of identity. I will talk about "speed" as a dominant mode of enjoyment in Singapore that is constitutive of Singapore as a city and Singaporeans as a people. I will close with a brief discussion on the role of art as an intervention in this dominant mode of enjoyment. My suggestion is for art to offer itself as an alternative mode of enjoyment to "speed."

A note to the reader on how this conversation was constructed: Much as I appreciate the curatorial team's questions below, I haven't attempted direct answers and have only tried to address indirectly their underlying concerns. This is in part because I haven't lived in Singapore for ten years and am reluctant to offer opinions about what's happening there. Also, I'm the one who's arranged the questions in this order, as I've wanted to draw an arc with my various responses.

Selene

For the Biennale's aim to complicate external conceptions of Singapore as merely regulated and regimented, I thought my prompt could mobilise your long-standing interests in historiography, spectacle and the temporality of the city as drawn from two of your writings: "The City, the Body" and "Authenticity, Reflexivity and Spectacle" (2004).[2]

I find it interesting, reading your earlier text on the organisation of "speed" as a cultural form alongside your later essay that speaks to Singapore's historical imagination as a practice of adjacency—or time as a series of cuts, flashes and paratactic links—while holding it in tension with the nation's powerful telos of linear progress. Following your Walter Benjamin-inflected approach to anecdote and montage in the later essay, how might anecdote and montage operate

within a city that experiences the present as continuous with itself, an intensely persistent "now" that is always "on the verge of tomorrow?"

For the Biennale, we wish to problematise the view that Singapore was willed into being by *pure intention*. Instead, we consider "intention" as the city's primary substance, i.e., ubiquitous, infrastructural, directional. Where, then, do subtle or transient manipulations of the environment, like small acts of acclimatisation or naturalisation, become critical? I understand your point that your absence from Singapore has made it feel awkward to think you have anything to say about the present, but if you were to bring together two or three anecdotes that splice together image, policy and place to reveal Singapore's montage-time amid progress rhetoric/surface overlooked rhythms, incongruent times and minor gestures that complicate the dominant timing of development, what would they be of?

Weng Choy Selene, I know you're asking for specific examples, but let me reply generically. "Anecdote," Walter Benjamin wrote, "brings things closer to us in space, allows them to enter into our lives. Anecdote represents the extreme opposite of history—which demands an 'empathy' that renders everything abstract. Empathy amounts to the same thing as reading newspapers. The true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our space (and not to imagine ourselves in their space)."[3] As I understand Benjamin, he's referring to the presumption of progress and accumulation, where all the news from all our yesterdays adds up to make history. He rejects this historiography. We shouldn't imagine history only as a journey to an abstract past; we should also seek out how history is here in our concrete present. At the same time, we have to unpack how today's agendas shape our narratives of yesterday.

Just like Benjamin's "anecdote," my favourite artworks bring things closer to me in space, allowing the materials, stories and concepts to enter into my life—and not the other way around. To imagine myself in their space would amount to appropriating or colonising that other space. Allowing others to enter my space is a way to learn about them in their terms, not mine. Moreover, while a work of art does many things—the best artworks-*cum*-anecdotes don't just *illustrate* themes, ideas and narratives—they *illuminate* them. These days, I'm not as interested in how certain artworks might illustrate the Singapore condition; rather, I endeavour in my writing to resonate with their illuminations. I write, partly as an "alternative mode of enjoyment to speed," perhaps, but mainly because I find that art can still be meaningful in our difficult world.

For a young art critic, reading and research are like training, preparing you to be a sharp and quick thinker: you see the art, then perform an analysis and interpretation. As an older writer, I want a lot of time—time to live with the artworks. One reason why I write about the same artists and return to the same artworks over and over again is that it allows "life" to enter into the writing. Carefully, patiently and repeatedly reflecting on artists—the parallel lives, the occasional intersections—and bringing all that into a prolonged meditation on their work is what I try to do.

Fang-Tze The city exemplifies a conundrum, as reflected in your reading of Singapore and its resonance with Guy Debord's notion of the "society of the spectacle" in the era of late capitalism.[4] Screens pervading urban spaces—on cellphones, MRT turnstiles and in shopping centres—transform reality into images, creating "hyperreality" where everything is "always already reproduced."[5] The representation often assumes greater significance than the object itself. To conceptualise postmodernism in Singapore's cultural context, consider the "culture of speed" as a predominant, albeit anxious, form of enjoyment that fundamentally organises Singaporean society administratively and culturally, shaping both the city and its inhabitants. Under the circumstances that foster "single, unconnected units of consumer desire,"[6] you emphasise the body while suggesting art as an alternative to this paradigm of speed.

Singapore, as a city-state defined by scale and density, has served as your point of comparison. If there is a distinction between theory-making and theorisation, your discursive practices align with theorisation by declaring your positionality regarding the subject. Theories travel, and so do you. Could you elaborate on your experiences navigating cities and how embodied memories inform your understanding of the theoretical frameworks in developing "The City, the Body" in relation to these experiences? How do you position your theoretical framework while composing this essay, considering the emerging artistic discourse in Singapore through The Substation? Additionally, what contemporary practices did you encounter during this period that influenced the propositions presented here? Could you share insights into these encounters that shaped your argument in this essay?

As an observer and participant in multiple editions of the Singapore Biennale, what does it signify when a large-scale art event like a biennale stays relevant in addressing the "demand" for time through artworks, especially in Singapore's fast-paced urban environment? If the Biennale's demand is no longer to reframe our relationship with time, what could a new biennale demand be in a generative sense? I reference

your "Biennale Demand" (2008), created when reflection on the Asian Biennial Boom became unavoidable, contrasting this with your later reflection, "Discipline and Practice" (2019), published in *M+ Magazine*.[7] In this conjuncture, what implications emerge when a biennale, as a site of meaning, engages with contemporary anxieties—particularly when speed manifests through telepresence and disappearance, as discussed in Paul Virilio's critique?

Weng Choy I had forgotten that 2019 essay in *M+ Magazine*. Thanks, Fang-Tze, for reminding me. The Hong Kong Museum of Visual Culture wanted to revisit a 1996 questionnaire on art history and visual culture, convened by the art journal *October*, and invited a mix of academics, artists and me to comment. As edifying as it was to reread the original discussion in vol. 77,[8] I was surprised by two things: firstly, I thought I would have a stake in the debates but didn't. A number of respondents, like Susan Buck-Morss, argued that visual culture has already changed the way we think about art and art history. Only a few, like Thomas Crow, argued rightly for the importance of comparative studies of different geographies. Secondly, the whole exercise in *October* seemed to me to be a highly specialised self-reflexivity that belied a lot of anxiety about how art and art history will change. In my own contribution to *M+ Magazine*, in addition to addressing the refusals and resistances towards theory within the region, I also broached the topic of intellectual vulnerability.

When I started as an art critic, my focus was on theory and *seeing*. If there's been any maturation in my writing, maybe it's because I try less hard to feel knowledgeable and try harder to be more open. There's been an evolution in my priorities, away from theory towards conversation and *listening*. (Fang-Tze, as you say, theory travels, but the eye travels quite differently from the ear, don't you think?) These days, if I do anything close to teaching, it's facilitating writing workshops, for example, with MA students doing exhibition histories. They have their supervisors and professors to guide their research, then they meet with me, and I try to help them develop their voices as writers, which comes from learning to listen to others as well as to themselves.

During the aughts, there was a growing demand for new biennales in Asia and all over the world. In the essay, "Biennale Demand," I wanted to turn the question around—ask not what we want from biennales, but what biennales demand of us. In part, these large-scale exhibitions demand that we give them a lot of our viewing time, and that we see them in time—in the histories of art, exhibitions and society.

What do I, as an art writer, now want from biennales? Honestly, I don't know anymore. While still eager to visit different cities to see these exhibitions, my expectations have changed. I used to want biennales to teach me how to look at them. Back in the day, I wanted to grasp the whole thing and offer some theoretical perspective. Lately, my approach has been to deflect their largeness—I don't feel the need to try so hard to understand the project in its entirety—instead, I focus on smaller moments, enjoying individual works, or subtle curatorial gestures.

Fang-Tze, on the topics of "spectacle" and "speed," I'll get to that in my response to Duncan below.

Duncan In our conversations, you positioned The Substation conferences in a moment when the political potential of art and the promise of theory were both palpable and traced the subsequent neutralisation of that threat and disillusionment with what art/theory can do. So, what is the role that the Biennale envisions for art in society?

Since we all seem to return to this question of speed, I think it's worth furthering my own interpretation of "speed" in Singapore and how that relates to "pure intention" as I understand it. For me, the conception of "speed" or "efficiency" is essentially false since it lacks clear direction. To expand the metaphor, any notion of "linear progress" requires velocity rather than speed, whereas I understand your reading of "speed" in Singapore in terms of centrifugal force: a necessary speed required to keep things stable but not towards any specific ends. This hints at a reading of *pure intention* that might be better articulated as "purely intention," or intention all-the-way-down. This reminds me of an observation from Deleuze and Claire Parnet, who talk a lot about "speed," something like: "Nothing develops, but things arrive late or early...."[9]

To distil this into a question, what are your current thoughts around the tension of stasis, speed and velocity with regard to Singapore since 1995? Either on the macro-level in terms of its social, political, economic and spatial development, or on the micro-level in relation to the role and reception of art in Singapore, either by the public or the government?

Weng Choy Duncan, I'll speak to your comments about art, theory and politics alongside Fang-Tze's ask to provide more context for my Substation presentation. Looking back at the late eighties and the early nineties, when contemporary art emerged in Singapore, it's worth remembering how much sharper the contrast felt between the contemporary and the modern art practices that came before (today, with historical perspective, we tend to emphasise continuity instead). A sense of urgency, a desire

for change and the will to claim agency modulated the tone of the times. This moment of newness in the region inspired, maybe too optimistically, the belief that the future of art and culture could be written by a new generation of artists and thinkers, rather than be overdetermined by capital. I don't think art historians get caught up like some theorists do—supposing that the revolution is happening right there in their dense jargon-stuffed prose.

With regard to the nineties and the turn of the century, I still think Guy Debord was mostly right. However, by the late aughts, a different regime of spectacle was ushered in; fundamental changes of scale came with new technologies. In terms of speed, things got so much faster. With spectacle, it wasn't always about getting bigger and bigger. Smartphone screens were constantly in our faces, but they also became somewhat scaleless. An Instagram selfie in front of Mount Fuji has the same scale as a snapshot of your breakfast.

As someone who once wrote, "Too analog to blog,"[10] I feel profoundly disoriented by late capitalism's latest. In the eighties, I took philosophy classes in university that discussed whether hypothetical artificial intelligence would be possible. Fast forward four decades, and higher education is struggling to establish policies for assignments and AI. The scale of disinformation is unprecedented, eroding social trust and connection at a whole other level. As for biennales, we now demand that they maximise attention on social media platforms. But do exhibitions and artworks really want to become repackaged as "content?" I no longer have the perspective or self-assurance to assert: *No, art isn't content!*

What's it like for digital natives like Gen Z or Gen Alpha to navigate speed and spectacle? My generation, which fondly remembers the floppy disk and the handshake sound of a 52 kbps modem, can speak of knowing what acceleration is, but do "kids today" experience life already at terminal velocity?

These days, I'm less interested in doing theory myself than hearing from younger generations. That's another reason intergenerational conversations have become so important to me. I've been lucky to be involved in more than a few; here are a couple:

Tom Melick and I met when we were both invited to develop and facilitate a Zoom writing workshop during the pandemic for staff at National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum. We became fast friends online and have since met a few times in person. He's a millennial. He's also a co-founder of Stolon Press. Tom has produced and written wonderful material for the imprint. I've said repeatedly that it's to my friends that I write, even as I harbour aspirations to address the public and history at large. I'm currently working on an essay for Stolon and look forward to speaking with Tom as a reader, editor and friend.

Besides writing for friends, there's also co-writing with them. Hay Wu—from Gen Z—is a writer, researcher and art worker currently doing their MA in Digital Humanities at Cambridge. After reading some of their poetry and prose, including a brilliant piece of collaborative writing that played with anonymity and themes of desire and fandom, I approached them with the intention of writing something together. It will take several more conversations before we produce anything, but already I've benefited enormously.

Khim

I hope to explore further the proposition you made about the role of art in the 1995 text which premised our discussion here. In it, you spoke about the hyperreality of the contemporary city and the body, of speed as a dominant mode of enjoyment in Singapore, which led to the argument that "if art is to intervene, it must transform the enjoyment that constitutes our reality," and for "an art that makes critical consciousness an enjoyment. This is art as radical pleasure."

In my view and perhaps somewhat in hindsight, one of the things this edition of the Singapore Biennale may end up doing is to play on precisely the speed of the city and its hyperreality: if a shopping mall assumes a cultural identity (organically but consequentially adopted/subsumed to become a local signifier), it is amplified. How then might we leverage this space to insert other forms of agency and collectiveness? If the history of a place is fought by layering onto it a renewed idea of a planned communal/leisure/environmentally conscious/non-violent space, it is given emphasis but with a certain contested specificity. In seeking a pause to reconsider and critically reflect, its strategy may be to partake in the same strategies of creating signs in which the body performs, in the hope that a critical mind will see some of the absurdity in all of this and start to question. I am not saying that this edition of the Biennale sets out to do this. It is rather a reflection on how art can intervene in a contemporary life of preoccupations, not by taking things out of their normalcy, as the sociologist Chua Beng Huat suggests,[11] but to be part of that noise and take it to some extreme in order to assert ourselves and wishfully expose and invite critical consciousness. After all, a biennale is usually funded for the potential of its spectacle. Is that what art needs to do to serve its propositions? I would be interested to hear your present views on how art intervenes.

Weng Choy

Khim, I've waited till the end to address the hardest question—about art's agency—a question that underscores our entire conversation.

One of contemporary art's constitutive assumptions is that you can curate artists from any and everywhere, exhibiting them all within a single structure like a biennale. More than just displaying diversity, biennales also prompt the different artworks to speak to each other. These many "speakings to" are part of what makes art discursive. Even though we do not have a coherent world art history, there is commensurability within the field, because our multiple discourses and histories intersect or *can* intersect—and precisely because of mechanisms like biennales, museums, independent art spaces, schools and universities, which encourage, manage and establish these interconnections.

"Digital culture" is characterised by an even greater diversity, but it doesn't designate a field like art so much as a universe of disparate phenomena, encompassing everything from information to entertainment to communications. Digital culture's expansiveness, however, may not be its most defining characteristic. If art, deep down, is *discursive*, then perhaps digital culture is *participatory*. Digitally produced and distributed content may dominate our attention, though not only because the overlords of late capitalist spectacle are pumping out material for our consumption—it's us—we, the users, who also produce and participate in this chaos.

The problem is that this distinction doesn't get to the heart of the question of *what art can do differently* from other forms that are part of the culture of speed. What I said in "The City, the Body," which you cite, Khim, sounds nice, but it's not enough, especially not today. In raising the spectre of social media, my insinuation is that it's bad: it makes us envious, anxious and distracted, excites outrage as well as rage, spreads disinformation and so on. Hold on, there are some positive things—I like cats and owls and whales on Instagram; IG poetry is pretty good too; there are concise criticisms of wealth inequality, social injustice and so on. Okay, so it's not all crap. There's a problem in social media that's the same problem for art. There's too

much awful noise and there're too
many bad actors, all coming at us at
full speed; what can any one thing do,
not just as an exception, or momentary
interruption, but as an *intervention*?
Not long ago I read an *e-flux* article on the
troubles afflicting the university today,
"On Hating Students."[12] While I appreciate the
analysis, I feel the writer doesn't do enough
to alleviate despair. Sure, this isn't the first
time the world is going through horrible wars,
a resurgence of racism and authoritarianism,
and other terrible things. Though our late-stage
climate crisis is kind of unique. I think we have
a responsibility to do more than doomscrolling—
whether on social media, or when reading and writing
about art. I don't have answers, but I know that, for me,
a way forward is to listen more.

Returning to the nineties, which is how this conversation got started, let me share this ritual I did when I used to teach theory at LASALLE. At the start of every course, I would tell students: afterwards, if you can remember some of the ideas I discussed—including those from dead white men like Freud or Marx—then good. Better if you've developed your capability to read, write and think critically. But most important of all—during and after the course—is that you care; care to question and care to learn. One more thing about the nineties: let's remember that back then, across the region, hope was on the horizon.

1 Lee Weng Choy, "The City, the Body," in *Space, Spaces and Spacing*, ed. Lee Weng Choy (The Substation, 1996).

2 Lee Weng Choy, "Authenticity, Reflexivity & Spectacle: or, the Rise of New Asia is not the End of the World," in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critiques* 12, no. 3 (2004), special issue ed. Joan Kee.

3 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Richard Sieburth, "Benjamin the Scrivener," in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13–37.

4 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books, 1994).

5 Lee Weng Choy, "The City, the Body," in *Space, Spaces and Spacing: The Substation Conference 1995*, ed. Lee Weng Choy (Publisher unknown, 1995), 73.

6 Lee Weng Choy, "The City, the Body," 78.

7 Lee Weng Choy, "Biennale Demand," in *Contemporary Art in Asia*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (MIT Press, 2011); an earlier version was published in Asia Art Archive in 2008; and Lee Weng Choy, "Discipline and Practice," *M+ Magazine*, accessed November 27, 2025, https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/visual-culture-questionnaire/.

8 *October* 77 (Summer 1996).

9 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Columbia University Press, 2007), 93.

10 Lee Weng Choy, "Too analog to blog." The blog is no longer available online; the post was originally published 31 December 2010 on https://www.art-it.asia.

11 In the 1995 text, "The City, the Body," Weng Choy puts forth the point that art must not only transform our perception of reality but also its enjoyment if it were to intervene in our realities, responding to Chua Beng Huat from *Art vs Art: Conflict and Convergence*, ed Lee W.C., (The Substation, 1995), which he quotes: "[By] taking a chunk of material reality out of its normalcy and in putting it on show, in framing it differently within aesthetic demands, [art] breaks the monopoly of established reality…"

12 Daniel Spaulding, "On Hating Students," *e-flux*, 28 May 2024, accessed November 27, 2025, https://www.e-flux.com/education/features/610182/on-hating-students.

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pure intention



This edition of the Biennale turns to the city itself, its corridors, thresholds and edges, as a site of artistic and civic experiment. Artists work with everyday spaces to surface overlooked histories, rehearse new relations and ask what it means to act with care and clarity in public.

The accompanying publication gathers texts by writers and thinkers who reflect on how these projects unfold across footpaths, shopping malls, housing blocks, green spaces and civic infrastructure. Contributions by four invited curatorial collectives map independent presentations hosted within and alongside the Biennale. Together, they reveal how contemporary art engages not only with space but also with the rituals and responsibilities of being in a carefully planned place like Singapore today.

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