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Recoding the « Non-Existential » Artwork: Nation and Contemporary Art Through the Lives of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)

The facts are familiar enough by now: In 1972, as a member of the Modern Art Society in the nation-state of Singapore, the artist Cheo Chai-Hiang mailed from England a proposal to its 8th annual exhibition to draw a square 5 feet by 5 feet, half on the wall and half on the floor. If it had been executed, the artwork would have been titled *Singapore River*. The artwork was never shown. Instead the president of the Society sent back a letter that appears to reject the proposal. Only from 1999 onwards was the artwork rediscovered and restored to the annals of Singapore’s art history. By 2013, the curator of an exhibition series focusing on iconoclastic acts in Singapore’s art history observed that “Cheo’s proposal marks a site of absence... it has, rather oddly enough, become emplotted as a founding moment in the trajectory of conceptual art hereabouts.”[1] The unrealised proposal is known today as 5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*), and is ambiguously positioned as “a prelude to the contemporary” by the newly-opened National Gallery of Singapore.[2]

This paper is about the ‘loquacious things’ that (re-)articulate/mute and (re-)present/absent the artwork within the nation frame and its histories – this, in order to address a question in the journal’s brief focused on contemporary art: « In a globalized world, is it still possible to talk about art in relation to the nationality of the artist, and on what basis can one define the link of an artist or of a work of art with a particular Asian culture? » The question throws doubt on a representational relation between contemporary art by Asian artists and their respective nationality and/or « Asian culture ». It could be understood as a call to reassess, revise, and rejuvenate the bases for privileging the explanatory value of the national and cultural. While helping to develop interpretations for the art of Asian countries within an alternative system to a universalising ‘Western’ one, recovering the national and/or cultural as interpretative frame is often undergirded by a continued attachment to ‘authenticating’ art through its distinctive cultural ‘origin’ and separate (self-sufficient) genealogy. Such an interpretative frame also transmits knowledge about art « via structural relationships between texts and contexts as signifying systems, »[3] to appropriate Rogoff’s words. As I hope to suggest through my case study, organising knowledge and evaluating art production in these ways would precisely submerge many critical functions of post-object art in newly-independent nations after World War II, contributing to its non-presencing in art histories. ‘Art’, on the other hand, would be further propped up as a cultural product availing itself to the global gaze. Rather than understanding the representational relation between art/artist and nation/culture as destabilised only by recent globalised and migratory conditions underpinning art production, the inherently precarious conceptions of nation and culture as bounded, stable and internally coherent units – ones that are able to confer an authentic and particularistic identity on subjects (or art objects) – need to be thoroughly reconsidered. (Fig 1)
This paper therefore takes as its case study an artwork that tends towards disappearance under national representational regimes. The study problematizes the identity relation often naturalized between the non-Euroamerican art/artist with nation/culture, and even the notion of an ‘origin’ that presumes the authenticity and singularity of the artwork. To begin to approach the complexity of responses with regard to art’s identity(s) and role(s), this paper proposes that rather than remain strictly within the boundaries of a fixed frame of nation/culture, we detect already a “condition of translation” as Lydia Liu did in her historical study of modern Chinese literature. [4] This does not posit a formal and linguistic triumph achieved from meaning equivalence, but privileges interpretation and recodings between languages, [5] semiotic systems, historical times and changed contexts, from which differences result. The modality of translation allows us to perceive the nation as the very site of negotiation, struggle and transformation of meanings. Instead of fixing the meaning of the artwork in the past and as issuing from the artist-author, from which the lineage of contemporary art may be drawn, I locate the artwork’s meanings as produced by the continual dynamics of its ‘translations’. These result in the blocking, framing, escaping, channelling, disappearing, surfacing, filling, flattening, layering, mutating and multiplying of the artwork. The « translations » are performed by ‘loquacious things’ – textual bodies materialising from artists and other artworld agents who mediate this artwork between languages, media and publics. Insofar as every ‘translation’ of the artwork involves decoding and recoding, decontextualising and recontextualising, the artwork here emerges and is followed as polyphonic, multi-bodied and multisited.

Studying its voicings and bodies through ‘loquacious things’ in varying space/times, I hope to more openly approach the differentiated ways in which 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) has been connected and disconnected to ‘nation’ and ‘culture’. In this paper, the artwork’s reconstitutions, recontextualisations, and rehistoricisations are investigated by following four forkings in its life, or rather, lives. It will revisit the episode thwarting its inscription in Singapore around 1972 by re-reading the ‘rejection’ text of the Modern Art Society as a recoding of the artwork. Next, it analyses the voicing and writing into being of the unrealised proposal between 1999-2002 through the scheme and concerns of art history in Singapore. Third, it explores the contrastive ‘emptying out’ of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) as deconstructive ‘Other’ of Singapore art and art history in an experimental television program in 2005. Lastly, it goes on to ponder the rewriting of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) in
the form of an artwork also made in 2005, to presence the trace of displaced histories and un-
articulable losses between 1972 to 2005 in the story of Singapore’s rise « from third world to
first ». I argue that we need to develop explanations for the retrospective recuperation of the
artwork in order to recognize meanings and crucial differences. What we are in fact dealing with here
is a complex politics of presenting in relation to the nation frame of Singapore that is erased by the
identity relation instituted between artwork/artist and nation/culture in representational global
articulations; the dogged persistence of which Monica Juneja has usefully termed the non-
Euroamerican artist's “burden of representation” towards his/her “culture.” Hence, before going
more in-depth into the discussion of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)’s recodings, I first examine the relations
between art and identity within the frame of Singapore. (Fig. 2)

1. The « Non-Existent » Nation’s Art-Identity Impasse

Neither spoken nor written about until between 1999-2000, the artwork’s surfacing was catalyzed by
the 1999 Singapore Art Museum publication compiling the Chinese language writings on art by Ho Ho
Ying (“HHY”): Singaporean painter of abstract art, 2012 winner of the nation’s artistic award, the
Cultural Medallion, and co-founder, former president and « chief theoretician » of the Modern Art
Society. Within that volume – a compendium of 88 essays in the Chinese language written between
the 1958-98 – is the Letter written by HHY to Society member Cheo Chai-Hiang (“Cheo”) while
Cheo was studying in Brighton Polytechnic, England, by the Sussex coastline. This is a detailed
rebuttal to Cheo’s proposal of Singapore River and connected to a chain of personal correspondence
between the two artists since Cheo moved to England for his studies in 1971. Presented with this
book by HHY, his one-time mentor and long-time friend, Cheo’s memory was jolted about the
artwork he had conceived and proposed to HHY in 1972 via mail sent from England to Singapore.
Based outside Singapore between 1971-2003, Cheo reconnects with art historian TK Sabapathy
during a 1999 artist residency in the nation-state. A chain of published essays by Sabapathy
discussing Cheo’s proposal followed between 2000-2002. As highlighted and repeated by Sabapathy
in his texts, the Letter states that the proposal was “hollow”, “empty” and “monotonous”.

I return to an adjective that I have used less pointedly before to describe 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) –
« non-existent, » employing it in this paper to highlight the artwork’s escape from
representation. I advance this as prism for reconsidering the (dis)connections made between the
spheres of art, nation and culture in 1970s and from 2000 onwards. What does the culture(s) of a

We have nothing. Ours is a newly-independent country in which much has to be done. We are here on the virgin earth to explore, to experiment, to create something which will be entirely different from what is existing in the world, to create a third world outside the East and the West. This is our path towards the creation of Singapore art.[12]

Conceptualizing Singapore as without a culture of its own, the “cultural desert stereotype”[13] is a way of rewriting the landscape. In so doing, the exhibition foreword prepares multicultural, multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore to be imprinted upon with the new.[14] Art’s role is to develop a unique and original artistic language(s) from ground zero for a projected « Singapore art » in the imaginary future, filling up the frame of the ‘empty’ nation with distinctive cultural content. In contrast, Cheo writes from Birmingham, England, in an essay published in Chinese in 1972:

Singapore has her unique cultural background and social settings, and we should not (and it’s actually impossible for us to) casually or unilaterally accept any one type of art. However, when there are new developments in the international art scene, as well as the emergence of new concepts, we should always keep ourselves informed in order that we are not swept behind by the progress of time. We should attempt to understand them whether we choose to accept or reject them, and whether they are appropriate or inappropriate for us.[15]

For Cheo, Singapore culture(s) was already present. There was no lack of cultural materials. The collective « we » needs to be involved in relativizing its cultural positioning(s) so as to develop art inter-subjectively. Artistic flows are neither uni-directional nor totalizing; and the notion of cultural progress, no more so.

Both the Society’s forewords and Cheo’s article were written in the aftermath of 1965, when Singapore separated from its hinterland of Malaysia. Its new identity as an independent nation was anxiety-filled, sanctioning an ideology of economic survival and progress no matter the ‘cultural’ costs. Even scholars in the 1970s had believed that the notion of Singapore as cultural tabula rasa served national interests to separate the Singapore population from attachments to culture connected to Malaysia or other lands from which its population emigrated from. [16] This in turn facilitated the forces of rapid capitalist modernization. Hence, Singaporean identity in terms of a continuous and authentic cultural marker of nationhood has been questionable from the outset. Writing in 1996, Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat makes a revealing diagnosis,

Until 1965, Singapore as an independent political entity was an ‘absence’; it was not an idea which a population was trying to realize. This ‘absence’ accounts for the desperate need and successive attempts to ‘define’, to ‘substantiate’ and to eventually ‘realize’ a national identity at every level of social and political life. Unlike economic development, however, success in identity building appears to be elusive; hitherto, the ontologically real appears to cunningly slip out from under attempts to represent it.[17] (Emphasis mine.)

I point out the tropes of absence and emptiness for the nation and its cultural condition in the 1970s that continue to be invoked today. The competitive, fragmenting and homogenizing tendencies of global capitalism, while undoubtedly transforming Singapore’s everyday cultures, in turn posed tensions to the distinctive imaginary of the nation and its social cohesion.
Chua has analyzed how, in the formation of the modern nation state, Singapore's cultural sphere has been remodeled by the government's multi-racial policy and legislative controls that erased hybridity between cultures and flattened diversity within each 'racial' group. Erecting and policing racialized boundaries through the CIMO scheme (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others), neutral and « formal equal treatment » of the races could then be installed as « a tool for governance ». English has been instituted as 'neutral' language for all races. It became the language of governance, the language of the common curriculum in education, and the « language of commerce, science and technology – the language of economic modernization ». The costs over the years have been cultural substance(s). Everyday cultures have been displaced by the ideal identification of a 'racialized' Singaporean with « the Sinic, Indic and Islamic civilizations. » That is to say, there is « no culturally defined 'Singaporean' way of life » that can be claimed across racial boundaries. Hence, rather than attaining the 'fullness' of these cultural civilizations, the 'Singaporean' seems to be catapulted further and further away from them by language and experience. The 'Singaporean' is evermore lacking and absent. (Fig. 3)

The disciplining of culture enabled the challenges that economic individualism posed to national unity and Singapore governance – known to be paternalistic and authoritarian – to be diverted as attacks by the 'Western' cultural 'Other' on essentialized 'Asian' identity spheres by the 1980s. These spheres are consequently in constant need of 'cultural' reinforcement. The laudatory, didactic tenor of the belated invocation of Confucian, Asian values and Shared Values discourses from the 1980s-90s by the governing elites, dominated by English-educated technocrats of Chinese ethnicity, can be better understood in this light. The elusiveness of 'Singaporean culture' and a sense of national belonging are such that even up to 1998, the Prime Minister would lament at the National Day rally: Singapore is a « state without a nation. » Was Singapore after 33 years of nation building still tabula rasa, or more than ever so? Singapore and the Singaporean slips from positivist representation or the « ontologically real »; a « non-existent » nation.

I have gone to some extent to describe the disconnections posited by changing state policies between culture and nation after 1965, because the violence of these disconnections could be understood as producing effects and remotivating the role of art. One effect or remotivation is in
how art tries to connect with culture and/or nation in order to gain a ‘fullness’ of identity eluding official discourse on one end of the pole, or to problematize its own representation on the other. In so doing, artists variously position the role of art in relation to what Terence Chong has identified as the new form of nationalism needed after Singapore’s unsought-for independence – one which called for the arts to be « ideological tools for the creation of a new society. »[24] In Chong’s historical study enfolding Ministers’ speeches, Singapore’s case since independence involved resuscitations of the idea that the arts should help tocivilise and cultivate gracious citizens, containing the aggressive effects of capitalism. Art was and is also a « site for the performance of multicultural fantasies ». [25]

In the 1960s-70s, art should make life « much more pleasant and agreeable. »[26] It should further « (express) the very highest ideals and thoughts which only human beings are capable of. »[27] The writings of HHY in the 1960s–70s allow us to nuance with an artist’s perspective our understandings of art development in Singapore under government policy. Consistent with the ‘desert’ imagery for the nation, the conditions for art practice were perceived in terms of ‘lack’: a lack of audience and collectors, a lack of serious criticism and education about the arts, a lack of State support for cultural activity. Such conditions of ‘lack’ began to change from the late 1980s, when the arts were earmarked as a crucial industry for supporting the nation’s continued economic prosperity. Key reports tendered in the late 1980s to early 1990s consolidated Singapore’s aim to become a « Global City for the Arts » and addressed key infrastructural needs.[28] The Singapore Art Museum, the national collection of Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art, and the National Arts Council for funding artistic projects are some of the gains from these reports. In 2000, the government released the Renaissance City report to further the role of the arts in positioning Singapore « as a key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century, » as well as « to strengthen Singaporeans’ sense of national identity and belonging. »[29] Repeating calls from decades ago to nurture civilised members of society, it appears as if little advance has been made in the cultural state of Singapore in the intervening years. Now, the future vision has settled on a « Renaissance Singaporean », who while having « an adventurous spirit », is at the same time « attuned to his Asian roots and heritage. »[30] As Chong observed, the Renaissance theme has already been raised in the 1980s in government rhetoric on the arts. It defines the desirable artist for Singapore society, as against the romantic individualist: « a free spirit, a rebel against society, a Bohemian often with unsavoury habits. »[31] In contrast, the Renaissance artist « did not consider it demeaning to be working to meet the demands of his patron within the bounds set by his patron. »[32] Art historian Yvonne Low notes how, from the late 1980s to mid-1990s, the state itself became the main patron of the arts, and into the 2000s, also its mediator in international settings as it attempts to find a positioning for an identity (‘Singapore art’) as « a unique selling point in the global market. »[33] Art is now a cultural product of Singapore, as well as a part of its « creative industry ». [34] Political scientist Terence Lee even concludes in his study on cultural policy, « culture in Singapore has become more than ever a site for governmentality and control. »[35]

The aporias of art and identity arising from the cultural displacements and economic instrumentality of nation-building policies return us to the politics of presencing. The artwork’s « non-existence » traces the boundaries placed around art by state policies and their dominant version of Singapore modernity. Cheo’s writing in a Chinese newspaper in Singapore in 1973 rings with relevance. Published on the closing day of the Society’s exhibition for which his proposal was rejected, it (fore)warns:

Modern art should never have a pre-defined boundary. Whoever tries to pre-set a rigid boundary for modern art will sentence it to oblivion.[36] (Emphasis mine.)
1. **The Letter between Sussex Coastline and Singapore River: Nation, Self-Indulgence and Audiences**

HHY’s Letter is therefore re-read here to perceive the voice and body of the proposal that emerges from it as response to the historical problems for a « Singapore art ». The Letter decodes the travelling proposal, and encodes it anticipatorily within the context of Singapore in 1972 in order to resist its realization. It thereby enacts a translational regime that cannot be understood other than as vitally inscribed in the very fabric of how the artwork signs today. In the beginning of this paper, I signalled that the unrealized proposal’s name was meant to be *Singapore River*, but is known today as *5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)*. Its titling as *Singapore River* implants it as a contextual critique imbricated with the ‘nation’. The iconicity of the Singapore River for the nation’s founding myths and economic life, made it an important subject for Singapore’s art practices. Senior artists and young hobbyists alike churned out often idealising views of the riverbank, its bumboats and godowns. Cheo seemed to make a direct point about his proposal submitted for the Society’s 8th annual exhibition in an essay published in January 1973 in a Chinese newspaper on the closing day of the exhibition: “There are artists who spend their whole life making little precious paintings of ‘Singapore River’ and rhetorically claim to be ‘bringing art to the masses.’ I find this rather laughable.” (Fig. 4)

It was in fact the Letter which initiates reference to the proposal only in terms of its physical measurement of *5’ x 5’* (para. 1). In so doing, the Letter dissociates the nation from the proposal, setting the ground for an oft-repeated passage today, which I reproduce in part:
Art, besides being new, also has to possess intentionality and particularity in order to strike a sympathetic chord in the viewer’s heart. Imagine an artist installing nothing other than a bare cube in a big public square, and declaring, “This is real art.” The viewer can also place a dead tree in the middle of a park and say this is art too. It is very confusing when an artist mixes art with non-art. (Para. 3, transl. Cheo) [39]

Installing the proposal’s significant critique as a more formal one of transgressing the boundaries between art and non-art, the Letter makes no direct mention of the former’s questioning of how the relationship between nation, audiences, and art may be reconfigured. Such bordering and flattening of 5’ x 5’’s voicings and multiplicities go towards its characterisation as « boring », « hollow » and « monotonous », in difference to the elevated artistic object which singularity is questioned by the proposal. « The viewer can also place a dead tree in the middle of a park and say this is art too. »

Signing the proposal in terms of its bare dimensions, the Letter deflects its place-based critique into a series of displacements. It narrowly reconstitutes 5’ x 5’ as « derived from ‘The School of Metaphysics’ in modern art »/“现代若干形而上派的作品” (para. 3), compared to Cheo’s relatively open coding of the “more conceptual” nature /“观念化” of Singapore River/« 新加坡河 » in an earlier letter dated November 5, 1972, from Cheo to HHY. [40] Thereby, it enacts a reading regime for the artwork as foreign. Such characterization works to close in on the proposal as being out of context and unsuitable for Singapore audiences, thereby enacting 5’ x 5’ as a failed translation of new art from abroad. As ‘Other’, 5’ x 5’ fails to speak to the Self of Singapore. This enables the Letter’s encoding of 5’ x 5’ as “lack(ing) the persuasiveness of proper usage”/“缺乏适当应用的说服力” (para. 3, transl. mine). In other words, the artwork needs to convince the Singapore audience; it fails to. A certain kind of Singapore public is encoded in HHY’s Letter: One « not exposed to theories of art » and who so « finds it hard to accept new and explorative types of art work » (para. 5, transl. Cheo), who gets endangered and confused by the proposal’s deviance from the role of art which the Society promulgates – to « enrich our thoughts and souls »(para. 3, transl. Cheo). A sensibility of censorship at work? (Fig. 5)
Fig. 5 Excerpt from photocopy of letter from Cheo to HHY, dated November 6, 1972. (Reproduced with permission from artist)

Too mute and impotent for an artwork, 5’ x 5’ is implicitly and disapprovingly charged as guilty of self-indulgence in the rhetorics of the Letter. Working « only to please himself », the artist who « does not take the response of the viewer into account » raises the spectre of the excessively individualistic Western ‘Other’. Reasonable artists are, contrarily, « keen to contribute to the society that nurtures us » (para. 4, transl. Cheo). This translation of 5’ x 5’ as mute, self-indulgent plaything rather than an articulate, thoughtful intervention into Singapore’s worlds of painting outlines the ambiguous relationship the Letter institutes between art and society. Art needs to celebrate individual innovation: « Only when we manage to create something new can a truly Singapore art and a Singapore culture emerge », writes HHY in an essay published in 1971.[41] But it must also operate within certain ideological boundaries so as not to threaten social collectivity. The blankness of Singapore River, instead, makes perilously redundant the need for a « culturally-acquired competency »[42] (which HHY’s writings on artists, criticism and audience have been concerned about), and even the painter’s very expression onto the canvas. For it is the ‘expression onto’ – the bodying forth of the artist onto the canvas in a protrusive gesture – that gets castrated by Singapore River, if it was not so rendered mute and impotent by the Letter. While the Letter is described by Sabapathy as a « considered, forthright response »,[43] a passage sticks out for its extolling of individualistic expression:

I am fascinated by the flowing movement of paint. I splash it onto the canvas impulsively, because it gives me a sense of freedom. Living in this politically, economically and socially repressive and heavily regimented space and time, one often is stagnant. Splashing colours and creating free
flowing, spontaneous and unrestrained lines releases me from feelings of oppression. ...Often, while working in my studio, the air impregnated with oil paint, I enter a fantasy world. (Para. 7)

The above is Cheo’s translation from 2005, which allows for smoother reading. To flesh out the implications of HHY’s statements here, I would re-translate the first two sentences above as follows, « I grasp the flowing movement of paint – just fascinating – and add some dynamic splashes, thereby expressing the unrestrained boldness of my individuality. » One will note in the last line of Cheo’s translation how the air in the artist’s studio is “impregnated” with paint. This is a revealing translation that expresses the fecund copulation of paint and canvas, to which I layer on another more literal one: “the fragrance of the oil paint reaching the four walls.” The fullness of paint, its material graspability, reach and dynamic bodying forth in splashes and flows, create an image of vital masculine creation. This image functions as the inverse of 5’x 5”s sterility, « emptiness » and « boredom »; its inability to grant « any satisfaction » (para. 3, transl. Cheo). Despite the rationalizations in the Letter, the enactment of painting’s hypermasculinity in response betrays the proposal’s castrative threat to the identity of the modern artist in Singapore, constructed around supplementing the lack of depth and emotion in Singaporean life organised by capitalist logic. While earlier charging artists with the communitarian responsibility of contributing to society, HHY now tosses this aside: « Even if my painting contributes nothing to society or to the country, it will not cause anyone any real harm » (para. 7, transl. Cheo). The Letter thus traces a diffusion of harm through a movement of castration, first threatened by the proposal, then performed on it. (Fig. 6)

Fig. 6 SAMPLE Ho Ho Ying – Painting 701 (1970), Oil on board, NUS Museum, 122 x 122 cm. (Image courtesy of NUS Museum)

III. An Art Historian’s Singapore River: Context as Framing Device

Words written in the English language “giving voice” to the proposal first surfaced in art historian TK Sabapathy’s contributions to the monograph Cheo Chai-Hiang: Thoughts and Processes (Re-thinking the Singapore River) in 2000.[44] For the purposes of our case study on the relation between art and nation, it should be pointed out that Sabapathy’s textual practice uses propositions carefully when relating art or its history to the nation frame: « in Singapore » (rather than « Singapore art » or « art
of Singapore »), and often, pluralising the term history to « histories ». It is indicative of a tentative model about histories of art in Singapore that does not assume any natural identity relation between the terms art, artist, nation, and culture, and tries to steer clear of constructing frames for a representative art of the nation. Sabapathy is also the sort of art historian/critic/curator who pays attention to the linguistic mediation that embeds an artwork’s visibility. As he states in his 1991 curatorial text for the exhibition Sculpture in Singapore at the National Museum Art Gallery:

**Explanation and interpretation are ostensive, articulate and public modes of mediation; they occur in and gain currency and value in the public realm. ...Indeed, one can press the matter further and assert that an object is an art work at all only in relation to an interpretation or an explanation.**

We follow how, from its missing presence in the histories of art in Singapore, Sabapathy coaxes the unrealized proposal to speak in the public sphere. Rather than employ Sabapathy’s texts to fix the authentic meanings of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River), I treat them as voicings ascribed to the proposal by an influential artworld agent, crafting, mediating, translating “public versions” of artwork for his time. What sort of voice(s) and body(s) of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) form and emerge from Sabapathy’s tentative art historical scheme(s)? Further, how did such voice(s) and body(s) enable Sabapathy to make proposals at the turn of the millennium about the relationship between contemporary art and its contexts?

The texts authored by Sabapathy for Cheo’s 2000 monograph were primarily concerned with how the artwork signed and functioned in Singapore, giving short shrift to Cheo’s connections with international post-object art tendencies. They put the content of Singapore excised by the Letter back into the body of the proposal by using contexts as framing device. Eliciting the proposal’s meanings from contexts, they place it firmly within the « histories of art in Singapore ». Literally, Sabapathy called it by Singapore River. He gave it significance by pitting it against the heightened ‘expectations’ of the Modern Art Society, in a somewhat dramatised voicing used by Sabapathy compared to his evocative but usually measured prose:

**What was this submission? ...Surely it was a painting, visually arresting, claiming a cherished presence and inducing heightened yet disinterested states of aesthetic contemplation?**

Emerging from this context, the visually and empirically empty Singapore River could gain positive, specific form as some thing that “emptied out these expectations » and made counter-voicings to « force serious thinking. » Diverging from the Letter, Cheo’s proposal (and practice) now figures as a positive presence; a communicative, gap-filling body within a historical framework for local and localised art histories of Singapore. But in this scheme, there was the problem that Singapore River was not inscribed in the public sphere. It never was really ‘made’. How can it have explanatory value for the transition from the modern to the contemporary in Singapore? (Fig. 7)
Indeed, Sabapathy’s *Singapore River* is an ingenious story arc incorporating the Letter; one capable of narrating the transition from modern to contemporary art in Singapore. Reproducing a passage in the Letter partially quoted above (i.e. « Art, besides being new... »), Sabapathy identifies the continuous shiftings between art and non-art spheres as « a defining feature » of Cheo’s practice in 1972 and today. [50] “The reception of *Singapore River* in 1972 signalled the operations of a closed artistic world and system,” Sabapathy writes, considering the Letter’s voicings. Hence, the proposal “would not have been comprehensible”. [51] By 1989, when Cheo presented a new artwork in Singapore – interpreted by Sabapathy as « repris(ing) corresponding issues » of *Singapore River* – things had changed. “Now the audience was prepared to actively engage with art in order to discern its very definitions, constitution and significance”. [52] By Sabapathy’s account, the 1989 work “can be viewed as revisiting the unrealized site of the *Singapore River* submission in 1972”, [53] a revisitation and transition to the contemporary that is (almost) complete. *Singapore River’s* provocations have been emplaced and digested.

In a text written for a booklet accompanying Cheo’s solo exhibition *36 Strategies* at the Casula Powerhouse in Sydney, a collateral event during the Sydney Biennale in 2000, Sabapathy makes the decision to couch Cheo as an « Agent of Change, » and *Singapore River’s* propositional voice/body begins to morph into that akin to a transgressive avant-garde:

“(l)Interrogative”, “provoke”, “advocate(d)”, “pushed”, “radical, profound and sweeping”, “struck a blow at the very heart of the art world in Singapore”.

Through this text, the minimal frame of *Singapore River* bodies forth with a sort of robustness and probing masculinity; a reversal of its very castration and muting performed by the Letter! *Singapore River* becomes vitally and fertilely connected to the pulse of art and change in 1970s Singapore. Here, Sabapathy’s *Singapore River* becomes a historical body that moves the modern towards the contemporary in Singapore: « Even as the scheme was rebuffed, its ramifications generated disquiet; gradually there emerged comprehension of Cheo’s intentions and even some
recognition. » Sabapathy proceeds to demonstrate that change occurred by referring to a single brief review[54] written by HHY for Cheo’s solo exhibition in 1975 as « ringing endorsement of the proposition that Cheo Chai-Hiang can be cast as an ‘agent of change’ in the context of art in Singapore. » I point this out not only to suggest what may be a compensatory mechanism at work for the historical absence of Cheo’s provocations manifesting in the public sphere in 1972, but to show how this approach starkly juxtaposes with the exhibition, 36 Strategies, that precisely plays with tactics of linguistic, cultural and physical displacements rather than emplacement. [55] The pairing discloses Sabapathy’s politics and burden of representation. These accordingly marshall contemporary art practices towards legitimating Singapore as interpretative site from which to speak, instead of applying ‘Western’/ ‘universal’ evaluative criteria. Emplaced within a scheme of causing actual change in Singapore’s artworlds, the unrealised proposal begins to dwindle within its frames. (Fig. 8)

![Fig. 8 Installation view of Cheo Chai-Hiang’s 36 Strategies, 2000, at Casula Powerhouse, Sydney. (Image courtesy of the artist)](image)

Sabapathy’s restoration of the proposal is significant not only for the influence of his scholarship, but because, I suggest, he has constructed a highly useable narrative and reading practice for the artwork. These bind Singapore River to contemporary art development in Singapore. Their knowledge ordering structures while cautious of links between nationalism and art, nevertheless avail contemporary art to be co-opted as « cultural products of the modern nation-state ». [56] Based on ‘arriving’ at ontological meanings from reconstructing Singapore contexts, such method of presencing Singapore River inevitably neatens up the artwork’s gesturing towards other places, other artworks, other worldviews, other articulations of modernity disconnected or displaced from Singapore. Escaping representation within the nation frame, these form the radical residue of the proposal seeking (re-)addressal. In Sabapathy’s concise text included in the volume Selves: The State of the Art in Singapore (2002), which saw cultural practitioners weighing in on the issue, it appears that it is Singapore River’s very disappearance from the landscape of ‘Singapore art’ that comes in useful for Sabapathy’s remounting of the past. Titled « Paradigm Shifts and Histories of Art », it made references to the paradigm-shifting orientation of the performance art group « The Artists Village ». Arguably, the essay needs to be understood as operating against the background of a ‘ban’ on funding performance art in Singapore between 1994–2003. The funding freeze occurred as a result of
performances at an event co-organized by the group in an artists-run gallery in 1994. Reported sensationaly in major newspapers, it was deemed by the National Arts Council as « vulgar, completely distasteful… deserving public condemnation ». Singapore River’s body now stands in a continuum with other loquacious episodes in Singapore revolving around the Modern Art Society, testifying to a history of provocations in the Singapore artworld. Drawing in Singapore River and HHY’s rejection as the latest in a chain of three examples, Sabapathy could argue that provocations to make porous art and non-art spheres (as does contemporary performance art) are not « of other and only Euramerican histories ». Even if perceived as threatening or frightening, they belong to a vital local practice of shifting paradigms in the nation’s history since independence, one that needs to be understood by makers of art policy. The implication being that the provocative role of art advanced by the proposal remains disowned and disavowed. Sabapathy’s text thus initiates the placement of both Singapore River and HHY’s rejection into circulation as contemporary voicings against the narrow political limits placed on art and the artist as individual.

1. Singapore(an) Art and A Thousand Singapore Rivers

In 2005, an episode in the English-language art docudrama series 4x4: Episodes of Singapore Art by prominent Singaporean contemporary artist Ho Tzu Nyen aired on a public television channel. The Episode, « Cheo Chai-Hiang: A Thousand Singapore Rivers, » is one in a series of four episodes, each focusing on an artwork in « Singapore art » made, proposed or performed between 1959 and 2002. As an account of historical art objects or events, it can be seen in contradistinction to Sabapathy’s Singapore River in terms of its treatment of ‘art’ and ‘history’. Being an experimental film object, the series of four episodes has been widely placed in art exhibitions, creating a branching, layering and densification of Sabapathy’s voicings in terms of how Cheo’s proposal is being understood today. Further, as a contemporary artwork, 4x4: Episodes of Singapore Art can be understood as drawing relevant genealogies for itself that are not linear, and for which past, present and future are intertwined rather than divided, thereby eroding the principal constructions of the art historical agenda. Insofar as Cheo’s proposal is iconoclastic of dominant values underlying ‘Singapore/an art’, the Episode can be considered to extend its legacy into ‘Singapore art history’. « The time is out of joint, » Hamlet’s famous line repeats in the Episode. Investigating the Episode, we seek to understand how – in translating 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) intersemiotically for the moving image at the interstices between television and experimental film, between contemporary artwork and art history – the Episode voices and presences the artwork to rewrite the singularity of the linear historical approach as multiplying exponentially into A Thousand Singapore Rivers. (Fig. 9)
Lasting 22:31 minutes, the Episode begins with a male presenter or ‘announcer’ with a loud speaker, relaying modern Singapore’s rise as inextricable from the Singapore River. Throughout the Episode, he attempts to stick to the path of enumerating « Singaporean art », but he is challenged. A female viewer or commissioner interjects his predictable, scripted narration with questions and perspectives proffered about Cheo’s proposal. Early in the Episode, the male announcer gives a proselytizing account: Singapore River as « pulse of our country’s trading economy, » « an obsessive site » for Singapore artists to « return to »: « There must be a thousand of these depictions ». Paintings in watercolor and oil of the Singapore River roll past horizontally without a hitch, finally coming a stop when Cheo’s proposal is reached. What is the form of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)? Simply, a rectangular body of descriptive and interpretative text, ostensibly in English; one of those wall-mounted explanatory captions often seen accompanying an exhibited object in a museum. As the male protagonist makes some derogatory comments and tries to move on with his narrative, the female enters the scene from an angle behind the camera to scrutinize the wall text. The sound of flowing water enters as well. She ponders it and chides the man for his hasty judgment, « Apparently, it is one of the most important pieces of work in Singapore’s art history… ». Dismissive, the announcer tries to move the narrative forward. The sound of water fades off and the camera follows him through more laudatory Singapore River paintings announced through the loudspeaker, until the sound of flowing waters begins to flood the screen. Unable to ignore it any longer, the camera has to pan out and backwards to the female reading the caption for Cheo’s proposal again. Presented as an interruption to the forward moving simulacrum he presents, the announcer anxiously shouts: « Miss, I asked you, why are you still looking at that… that thing?! » She continues to inquire and unfold the proposal. Frustrated, the man eventually bludgeons the female to death with his loudspeaker, and the Episode ends with the murdered rising as spectre to haunt her murderer.

Therefore, the Episode is structured by the differencing between the male body who voices the officialdom of « Singaporean art » and the female body who voices Cheo’s proposal. The irresolution between the two counterposed voices results in a dynamic of rising antagonism and repeated attempts to variously articulate and silence. This dialectic amplifies the opposition between the
‘boring’ regurgitation of stable signifying orders and the ‘lively’ sound of flowing waters, between the rationality of endless progress and the ghostliness of returns, between Singaporean as an identity frame and Singapore as a changing site that escapes representation, and between the paintings’ repetitive still-imaging of the river and the potentialities of the ‘empty’ frame of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River). Feeling confronted (castrated?), the male announcer disparages, becomes threatening and aggressive, or anxious, frustrated and helpless, amplifying what in HHY’s Letter remain only subtexts about its impropriety:

« It was a ridiculous suggestion for a ridiculous artwork. » « I don’t even know how it is included here. » « ...infected by the conceptual art bug. » « Luckily the Cheo bug never quite caught on in Singaporean art. » « It was a failure, it was rejected. » “No Respect!” « Stop, stop looking at that... that thing?! »

It becomes clear that the man’s role is to voice out an underlying socio-cultural order within which Cheo’s proposal would be received, recoded and rejected. This underlying order is patriarchal and authoritarian. It is intolerant of voices that question its signifying structures. The film thereby reconstitutes the proposal as historically and culturally ‘Othered’ to the Singaporean. (Fig. 10)

Fig. 10 Still from Cheo Chai-Hiang: A Thousand Singapore Rivers, 2005, at 11:10. (Reproduced with permission from artist)

This non-Singaporean non-existent non-art begins to sign as « failure » within the signifying system of texts of « Singaporean art. » Turning the case around, however, the non-realisation of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) is no longer its weakness in the scheme of Singapore art history. It is reconfigured as its primary force; its rejection recoded as central to the meaning of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) today. This is in part achieved by drawing a line of connection between the « failure » of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River), the deferred, interruptive effect of the Duchampian readymade towards aesthetics, and Hamlet’s ghost, to recontextualize and rehistoricise 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) as always already a spectre. In so doing, 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) becomes co-extensive with the displaced and displacing spectres of an international avant-garde. Ho’s 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) is also a thing; The Thing, that « pulls us back to the ground » (11:15). In a direct reference to Freud’s Das Ding, 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) is also a primordial body, existing prior to integration in the imaginary and symbolic orders. In
this sense, its physical groundedness is contrasted to the « progressive » verticality of painting in the Western aesthetic tradition. As « failure, » 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) therefore continually returns us to a primal state where linear, teleological narratives are undone, and one is restored to the running waters of life. The disturbance its presence causes to such narratives is played out at several points in the film formally via the camera panning left and right, the cutting backwards and forwards in time, and the disruption of sequences with rapid juxtapositions of trauma scenes. Despite never having been executed, the proposal’s actualization occurs in its returns and reprisals as hauntings of the patriarchal signifying system. The spectres and repetitions that arise from its repression from the mould of Singapore modernity would continually interrupt tendencies towards a stable narrative of Singaporean art.

The Episode consequently dismantles the structural relationship between artwork and its national contexts, instead playing up their differencing by recoding 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) as disavowed, primordial, and revenant as a ghost that passes through spatial and temporal frames. In these senses, Ho’s A Thousand Singapore Rivers is anti-modern and anti-genealogical. The artwork that is 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River) is also presenced as extended and losing its integral boundaries. Not only is it the original mailed proposal, but in the female producer’s voicing, also encompasses the response of HHY. Further, its lives are continued by the Episode, which every time it is played or discussed, performs a deconstruction of ‘Singapore/an art’ and art history. Rehistoricising the proposal’s importance as a ‘failure’ that engenders critical reprisals is to challenge the definition of art’s role to entertain, « enrich » or « cultivate » passive masses, and to seek out other ways of engagement with audiences that can provoke « serious thinking ». Audiences’ participation in interpreting the artwork and questioning ‘Singapore art’ would accordingly also multiply and continue the lives of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River), the Letter and the Episode, working against the proposal’s 1972 ‘censorship’. The filmic medium’s circulation and repetition therefore opens up the history(s) of ‘Singapore art’ to constant democratising movements and recodings in the present; A Thousand Singapore Rivers.

1. Tracing The Letter and Bordering Language: The Re-Address / Redress

Moving back to Singapore in 2003, Cheo followed the Singapore River in backwards flow in search of its ‘origins.’ Instead, he finds that its riverine pathways have been covered over by cement slabs blocking him from reaching its source – an effect of Singapore’s rapid urbanization in the last decades. The unrealised proposal of 1972 was finally executed there on the cement slabs in 2005 with strings. It was also pictured on the wall bordering Cheo’s family ancestral temple that faces the sea in Fujian, China. In the same year in October, Cheo opened his solo exhibition at Sculpture Square in Singapore entitled Rejected, Mislaid, Erased, Revisited. It included the work Dear Cai Xiong (A Letter from Ho Ho Ying, 1972). Stretching floor to ceiling, four large panels tower over the intimate exhibition space of the Sculpture Square. Each panel was set within a gold-painted frame and mounted on the wall. They show pencil tracings of the Letter as it was reprinted in within HHY’s 1999 published volume, in four pages. The work may be seen as a ghostly palimpsest of 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River), another spectral revisitation so effectively argued by A Thousand Singapore Rivers. But what returns to haunt here? And what is not brought into view? To consider how Dear Cai Xiong reconstitutes the unrealized proposal, we need to return more squarely to the concerns of language politics and translation. (Fig. 11)
While the drawn frame of Singapore River makes provisional relations with space and time, the gold-coloured frames in Dear Cai Xiong loom large, solid and decisive. Their size evokes the gravity and import of history paintings. Paradoxical to its monumental form are the faintly-outlined Chinese characters. Here, the words come closest to the concept of « trace » in Derridean deconstruction, presencing only a central absence and a fundamental instability of meanings. The Letter manifests only as tracings; the printed Letter itself being only a trace of the original Letter (not existing any longer), which in turn traces Cheo’s unrealized proposal (original proposal and statement also missing), and so on, towards the infinite regression of a missing original and displacement of authentic memory. Picking up the conversation over the proposal left off from 1972, Dear Cai Xiong gives physical expression to the Letter’s subtexts and traces of disavowal. Through the Letter’s rejection, the proposal presences itself as both moored to and disconnected from the cultural-linguistic worldviews of an artworld that was conducted in the Chinese language. Both the Letter and 5’ x 5’ thus body as half visible and half present; like echoes without an originating voice, like ghosts without a body – their continuing circulation seeking redress for something(s) lost.

Previously bound within the pages of a Chinese-language book that already encodes its audience-reader according to language borders, the spectres of 5’ x 5’ now roam the gallery space. They have to be encountered by the contemporary gallery visitor no matter one’s ethnicity and language facility. Whereas Cheo’s eagerness in communicating new ideas in the early 1970s through his writings and artwork submissions was patent, here, Dear Cai Xiong – while soliciting its reading – insists that there is no satisfactory co-equivalence in translation. Consequently, Cheo’s proposal presences through it as an entity grafted socially, culturally and linguistically. The Letter’s ghosts released across space-time reveal the existence of new cultural-linguistic borders that result from the profound transformations and discontinuities between generations in the temporal disjuncture between 1972 and 2005, blocking off historical access. The losses extend epistemically. Dear Cai Xiong echoes the disempowerment of the ‘Chinese-educated’ in Singapore – a social collectivity and construction and theemasculuation of the Chinese-language in public discourse. Demonized as
« communist/chauvinist » and as « a danger or obstacle to progress »[66] as the Cold War advanced, sociologist Kwok Kian-Woon observes how « by the 1980s... the Chinese-educated voices in the sphere of wider public discourse became either significantly circumscribed or simply mute. »[67] For Singapore’s modern art history written in English, the « art historical contexts » of the 1970s harnessed by the Chinese-spouting Letter[68] begin to pose a crisis to the field’s representative capacity. Through Dear Cai Xiong, Cheo’s proposal re-manifests as a deep paradox of physical transparency and cultural opacity, profuse articulation and resolute muteness. For how can the proposal, which was integrated with discourse in a particular socio-linguistic field, be owned by Renaissance Singapore today? (Fig. 12)

Fig. 12 Left: Installation view of Dear Cai Xiong (A Letter From Ho Ho Ying, 1972) at Sculpture Square, pencil on unprimed canvas, 4 panels of 379 x 257 cm per piece, 2005, Singapore Art Museum collection. Right: (from left to right) Cheo Chai-Hiang, Tzeng Chee Ho (Modern Art Society member), Ho Ho Ying and Loo Voon Ying (wife of Ho Ho Ying) in front of Dear Cai Xiong, October 1972. (Images courtesy of the artist).
Not to downplay, however, that the physicality of the multiply-reproduced Letter makes it more than echoes or copies of texts. Its body is both palpable and immaterial; its ‘thingness’ is more than painting. Its looming effect and inscriptions involve the body of the gallery visitor in enacting a memorialisation. At the point that thought, meaning or discourse reaches its limit, the ‘thingness’ of Dear Cai Xiong takes over. ‘Silences’ become palpable through its framing, and the artwork’s body emerges as mournful and stately, memorialising what is no longer. Such monumental framing of echoes and absences activate audiences’ own sense of meaning loss on many layers, and have a quality of standing testimony to losses unarticulated in the public realm. The framing becomes a sign of the ‘othered’ and bordered off realms of self and sentiment, cultural community and collective memory. Re-addressing audiences 33 years later through Dear Cai Xiong, the 1972 proposal is hence reconstituted together with the Letter as a testimony of linguistic loss, structural amnesia, and the hollowness of contemporary Singapore’s search for cultural roots. With or without ability to read the contents of the Letter, the bodies and voices emerging from Dear Cai Xiong gesture towards a flattening of the nation’s own pluralism, its purging of dissenting articulations of modernity, and the complex, often non-articulable, costs of attaining ‘progress.’ Dear Cai Xiong therefore resurfaces the anxiety over the possibility of ever representing ‘Singapore’ and ‘Singapore/an art’.

To further nuance how the relationship between nation, art and one’s cultural roots is deeply problematized, I focus on the work’s ambivalence about ethnicised cultural ‘authenticity’. There is another aspect that is captured within the golden frames: Cheo’s faithfully copying of the Letter to present/absent again the proposal. In ink painting, copying indicates proper deference to, and placement of oneself in line with, the tradition. For the Chinese language, it is a time-honoured way
of memorizing characters to achieve facility of its written form. Therefore, Cheo’s proposal re- surfaces in *Dear Cai-Xiong* through a system already inscribing deferential social structures and learning traditions – ones that emphasise the emulative and repetitive, rather than the innovative. *Singapore River’s* articulations of a critical thinking art for Singapore modernity is therefore cramped by rigid frames and frameworks of all sorts. Playing on the gaps between historical-cultural spaces, *Dear Cai-Xiong* interweaves a critique of contemporary Singapore with a more equivocal re-connecting with the rejection presented by the Letter than in the Episode. It resists 5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*)’s incorporation into a place of memory, delaying the proposal’s historical closure, and the historical closure of Singapore modernity. *(Fig. 13)*

![Fig. 13 Cheo Chai-Hiang tracing the Letter for Dear Cai-Xiong, 2005. (Image courtesy of the artist).](image)

**Postscript**

5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*) continues to slip between emplacement and effacement within the nation frame. Bodied as foreign, mute, and sterile through the Letter’s scheme, borders separating Self/Other, Empty/(Meaning-)Full, Local/Foreign, Singular/Multiple, Individualism/Communitarianism are set up. Subsequent ‘branchings’ of the artwork’s life(s) re-channel the Letter’s translational regime through reconfiguring relationships between nation, culture and artwork into alternative articulations of modernity. This paper’s experimental voicing of 5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*) arises from a struggle for language, vocabulary, metaphor and narrative that move towards opening up rather than disciplining the polyphony and silences of the histories of art in Asia. It hopes to bring out how differences are produced and complicated by the mesh of mediations of art production. It wants to argue for a more calibrated sense of art’s politics amid the policing of spaces for their expression. It tries to work against the grain of historicizing processes that tend towards subduing and reducing, rather than affirming, the radical discursive potentialities of artwork from the 1960s-70s in various contemporary contexts in Asia. It is interested in the subterranean terrains of dominant visibility orders and knowledge regimes. I will be glad if it is understood as another branching and continuation of the artwork’s life(s), both bound to and gesturing towards other and/or ‘othered’ voices, texts and bodies.

In 2013, an exhibition at Sculpture Square, Singapore, re-examined 5’ x 5’ (*Singapore River*) as a prescient and critical imaging of the vast changes to the urban landscape. The leading curatorial
essay for an exhibition in 2014 on conceptual art and the collective in Southeast Asia gives Cheo mere name mention. Asking how « the genealogy of conceptual practices in Southeast Asia » could be written focusing on « Asian contextualization », Cheo’s practice is footnoted as « more closely related to European conceptualism ». At the new National Gallery of Singapore housed in the imposing neo-classical colonial building of the former Supreme Court, a reconstitution of Cheo’s proposal was commissioned for its Singapore art gallery. Cheo proposed for the square of 5’ x 5’ to be etched out of its wall and floor, though only inch deep. Finally firmly inscribed in history(?), it is but a shallow hollowness. The curators eventually realised the artwork along an unrelatable passageway leading out from the Singapore gallery. The continual presencing and erasure of the « non-existent » artwork under representational frames reveals the difficulty of taming it into stable schemes of signification, and is symptomatic of how its articulations remain unexhausted. Many of these frames remain moored to a hazy equivalence structured between nation, culture, and artist/artwork. They thereby submerge the compelling part of the proposal’s legacy, which is to produce complex (dis-)identifications and critical roles for art. To bring back information and address the crucial agencies and incommensurable meanings of artwork, their continued discursive functions under mediated conditions of knowledge production and circulation need to be more attentively examined. This helps to bring out the deep heterogeneity of artistic articulations, fundamental to the project of decentering Modernism, and (national) modernisms. (Fig. 14)

Fig. 14 Installation view of Cheo Chai-Hiang, 5’ x 5’ (inched deep), 2015 (see spot-lit area at right-side of image) at DBS Singapore Gallery, National Gallery Singapore, 2016. Photo: Isabel Ching

[1] Louis Ho, “Voids, Riverine and Otherwise”, p.4, Iconoclast 2013 – A Void: Returning to the River, exh. cat. 15 Aug – 16 Sep 2013, Sculpture Square Limited, Singapore, p.4-11. The exhibition at Sculpture Square, Singapore, launches the space’s exhibition series Iconoclast, under the direction of Alan Oei. The series aimed to “create discourse on seminal Singapore artworks”, while the exhibition » will not only focus on the artistic content of these artworks, but the historiography, and the reflexive formation of each artwork’s canonised status. » (see preview document of A Void: Returning to the River, accessed August 10, 2014, available from http://www.artsrepublic.sg/a-void-returning-to-the-river/).
[2] Low Sze Wee and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, « Some Introductory Remarks », at p. 22, in Siapa nama kamu?Art in Singapore since the 19th Century, exh. cat., from 25 Nov 2015, National Art Gallery of Singapore, p.8-29. The title of the catalogue is in Malay, the national language of Singapore which is nevertheless little spoken these days by Singaporeans outside of the Malay ethnic group. It translates as « who are you? » (kamu more commonly used as a plural « you »).


[5] Liu’s scholarship focuses on literature, thereby enabling questions about the kind of language, rhetorical strategies, discursive formations, naming practices, legitimizing processes, tropes, and narrative modes used for establishing difference to be asked. See ibid. p. 28.


[11] Singapore has famously been conceptualized as an experiment of tabula rasa, of a landscape built from scratch on the erasure of its colonial and pre-colonial histories, after Rem Koolhaas’ publication of “Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... Or 30 Years of Tabula Rasa”, in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, S, M, X, XL (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1008-1089. There exists a belief that the reality of tabula rasa applies to cities or nations like Singapore and Hong Kong emerging from economic colonization, as compared to cultural colonization. However, as noted by Professor of English at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, C.J.W.-L Lee, “(t)he cultural desert stereotype perhaps became more of a reality when intense modernisation built upon a basically petit-bourgeois worldview intensified from the 1970s” – in “Introduction”, in Performance Paradigm: A Journal of Performance and Contemporary Culture, no. 8 (August 2012), special issue on “Practising Contemporary Art in the Global City for the Arts, Singapore”, guest ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee,


[14] It is interesting to compare this with how conceiving primitive cultures as tabula rasa enabled European colonisation to justify itself as a ‘civilizing mission’ of societies.


[22] Ibid.


[27] Wee Toon Boon, Acting Minister of Culture, 9 July 1969; quoted in Chong, ibid. p. 134. For the full speech, see Wee Toon Boon, Speech by Mr Wee Toon Boon, Acting Minister for Culture, at the Opening of the Art & Crafts Exhibition held in Conjunction with the Singapore Youth Festival on Wednesday 9 July at 5.30pm at Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

[28] Scholars have identified Singapore as entering a second phase of development after its economic stagnation in mid 1980s, after which the arts was identified as a growth industry that additionally supports Singapore’s attractiveness as a place to invest, live in and travel to. The key reports in the late-1980s-early 1990s include the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989; two reports in 1992 Singapore: Global City for the Arts and Censorship Review Committee Report.

[29] Renaissance City Report, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts 2000, p. 4. Looking back at the landmark 1990 report, the Renaissance City Report in 2000 clarifies that the earlier report had two aims. One, « (t)o establish Singapore as a global arts city » and two, « (t)o provide cultural ballast in our nation-building efforts », at p. 4.


[35] Ibid. p. 281.


[37] It is noteworthy that page 22 of the inaugural National Art Gallery of Singapore publication for the exhibition in its Singapore galleries, Siapa nama kamu? states, “the 1972 proposal was titled 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River)”. The slippage in the National Art Gallery catalogue, a slippage made by myself before [Ching, « Tracing (Un)Certain Legacies »] can be seen as a symptom of the extent to which present understandings of this artwork’s historical meaning are in fact conflated with its subsequent rewritings by others, including by HHY’s Letter.

[38] The Singapore River remains an important subject today for contemporary artists seeking to question the Singaporean identity and its « progress » as a nation state, see Ching, « Tracing (Un)Certain Legacies ».

Mentioned in this November 5, 1972 letter was a second (unrealized) proposal from Cheo for the same exhibition that “also stems from ‘audience participation’, but still has some ‘formal’ element to it, unlike Singapore River, which is of a more conceptual nature” (translation mine). It is interesting to note how the existence of this second proposal was not mentioned in the Letter; all the attention was given to 5’ x 5’.

Ho Ho Ying, « Why do we need to be innovative », 1971, in Ho Ho Ying, Collection of Writings on Singapore Art, 42-43, at p. 43. Translation by Cheo in Sabapathy and Cheo ed., Re-connecting: Selected Writings on Singapore Art and Art Criticism, 45.

McGuigan, J., Culture and the Public Sphere, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 32. Quoted in Lee, « Creative Shifts and Directions », p. 285 in the following context: « There is a generally unspoken acceptance among the middle-class and well-educated Singaporeans that in order for art, music and cultural appreciation to take root in Singapore, Bourdieu’s habitus of cultural capital – best understood as “culturally acquired competency” in the appreciation of the arts (McGuigan 1996, p. 32) – must be developed. »


Two texts were written by Sabapathy for the monograph, Cheo Chai-Hiang: Thoughts and Processes, above cited. Namely, the « Introduction », p. 11-4, and « Contexts and Issues », p. 15-37.


The approach of Sabapathy can be contrasted to Cecily Briggs’ – Australian artist, art educator, and wife of Cheo – who co-authored the monograph. Briggs writing is concerned with bringing out the range of artworks and thoughts of Cheo throughout his various inhabitations and journeys in England, Barcelona, Rome, Australia, Singapore and China from the 1970s to the 1990s so that dialogues between the works made in or in response to Cheo’s sojourning experiences may be brought into dialogue with each other. Although such approaches can be understood as devised to be complementary to each other within a single publication, I read the scope defined by Sabapathy’s leading essay, « Contexts and Issues », as undergirded by his interest to explain and interpret the modern and the contemporary in relation to the nation/locality of Singapore in order to authorize the location from which to speak.


Ibid p. 12.

Ibid p. 12-13

Ibid p. 36

Ibid.
While referred to as an exhibition review by Sabapathy, this is in fact an introduction to the exhibition written for Cheo’s 1975 solo exhibition at the National Library, Singapore. For the full article, see Ho Ho Ying, “Cheo Chai-Hiang: Seeker of New Representations”/ “寻求新意象的蒋才雄” (transl. mine), Collection of Writings on Singapore Art, p. 232-3.

Chinese classic

Low, « Positioning Singapore’s Contemporary Art », p. 130.

The event, the Artists General Assembly (AGA) of 1993/4, was co-organised with 5th Passage Artists Ltd in 5th Passage Gallery, Singapore.

NAC statement January 4, 1994. Cited in Lee Weng Choy. Josef Ng and Shannon Tham also charged for sniping his pubic hair while turned

T.K. Sabapathy, “Cheo Chai-Hiang: Agent of Change”, p. 75. Earlier on the same page, Sabapathy refers to the general suspicion that the government has towards artists and their activities aimed at shifting paradigms: « Are these freakish occurrences perpetrated by dangerous minds with subversive intentions?... Can they be apprehended in an art historical sense? If they can, then in relation to which or whose histories? ».

Ibid. p. 83. Sabapathy was also drawing this essay into his lifelong project of arguing for the necessity of instituting art history as a recognised discipline in Singapore. For more on the thwarted attempts to set up art history as an academic discipline in its own right, see Sabapathy, Road to Nowhere: The Quick Rise and the Long Fall of Art History in Singapore, Singapore: The Art Gallery at the National Education Institute, 2010.

4×4 Episodes of Singapore Art, scripted and directed by Ho Tzu Nyen, Free Flow for Arts Central, 27 September 2005.

If one can concur with Kevin Chua’s analysis of the form of HTN’s films as bound up with “the social experience of modernity in Singapore,” then the filmic form here can be understood not only as undermining the stability of art history and its signification processes, but also the coherence of a linear developmental model of economic progress as overriding frame of the nation that has suppressed other articulations of modernity.

Since both Cheo’s solo exhibition and the Episode were developed during the period after Cheo moved back to Singapore and occurred in the same year, they can conceivably be understood to have been in dialogue with each other, adding another layer of complexity to their confluences and divergences. HTN even wrote about Cheo’s practice in 2005, describing the relations instituted by it as « rhizomatic, omni-directional and complex » – see Ho Tzu Nyen, “Cheo Chai-Hiang: The Time Is Out of Joint”, ArtAsiaPacific, Fall 2005, Issue 46, 54.

This is contrasted to its signing within a network of interruptive strategies of an international avant-garde in the Episode (albeit one that acts on the specificities of local features), to the Letter’s foreignizing of it, and also to the transcendental view of art as communicating universal emotion and beauty, which HHY and Society members, as well as the political establishment, arguably held/holds.

Kwok Kian Woon traces the social formation of the « Chinese-educated » to Chinese schools established by clan associations during the colonial era. Their prominence and social collectivity reached new heights in the 1950s when the Mandarin-language university – the Nanyang University
was formed in Singapore. See Kwok, « Chinese-Educated Intellectuals in Singapore ». Both HHY and Cheo, as well as some other members of the Modern Art Society, had attended this university in the 1960s, which had become a hotbed for leftist student radicalism under constant government suppression. Nanyang University was eventually merged with the English-language Singapore University, or some prefer to say, was closed down in 1980.

[66] Ibid. p. 499. Kwok also points out how the Chinese-educated were much more politically veriegated and cosmopolitan than how they were portrayed. Both the English-educated and the Chinese-educated in politics were mostly leftist in the 1950s, and may instead be seen to each have propounded « a vision and version of modernity » of varying degrees of radicality, for which the politically more dominant version amongst the English-educated won out irrevocably by the 1970s.

[67] Ibid, p. 507.


[69] Having seen Cheo’s exhibition myself in 2005, I am struck by the insights that Mieke Bal’s phenomenological analysis of Louise Bourgeois’ work offers for Dear Cai-Xiong. See Mieke Bal, Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing, University of Chicago Press, 2001. Bal notes how « (o)ne of the crucial meanings of the Cells as theoretical objects is to resist ‘translation’ » (p. 77), so as to avoid domestication of its meanings and open up audiences to transformation. She also dwells on how the architecture of Bourgeois’ Spider steps in precisely at « the paradox in the relationship between visual art and narrative », thereby resisting « a narrative approach » from the audience (p. 2).