THE IMAGE STAMMERS

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ABSTRACT

Bodies, burdened with narratives and inscribed by laws, function as signifiers of the State propaganda and nationalisms that supersede the Individual. The Image Stammers discredits the seamless fusion of the body-politic of the Singapore state with that of the Individual. This paper looks at the State as its singular source of artistic stimulation and seeks to dislodge the ventriloquised voice of that State acting upon the art object and its producer, so as to liberate the image from the singular meaning the State imposes. To do this, the analysis in this paper intervenes in the State and its organ, the media, in their attempt to imprison the reality of the performance image so as to reverse the silence that has been demanded of the artist. By reinstating this voice into the visual work I have produced in this text, based on theories of “internalised” Orientalism discussed by Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, as well as notions of abjection in the work of Elizabeth Grosz and Julia Kristeva, this paper attempts to strip the State of its veneer of “purity” to expose an underside that subjects female bodies to forms of nationalism which are now more codified than ever. This paper foregrounds textual and visual embodiment as a testimony of lived experience which may further entrench, notions of Singapore as an authoritarian state. The Image Stammers bears no pretension of objectivity nor a “politically safe and correct” one within the context of this paper, but instead, strews fragments of subjectivity throughout its textual landscape. It seeks to overturn the “impurity” of the abject (signified by performance art and contemporary artists) as defined, loathed and expelled by the State, into the power of resistance and maintenance of the integrity of the Individual. The Image Stammers retrieves the abject as markers of the limits of State power to become signifiers of resistance for its reconstitution into allies of the artist.
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Glass doors, silicon, water

Photo: artist
INTRODUCTION

"Asian"

"Woman"

"Artist"

Even as I invoke these signifiers to describe myself, I "hear" the attempts these descriptions make to still the "stammer" of female and feminized bodies. This is a given especially in the Southeast Asian region. It is familiar territory and an enduring one. Till the present, Asia has been feminized and entrenched as the Other of the West. And yet, we are not homogeneous. Asia is not a lump to be digested whole. Nonetheless these signifiers are an intrinsic component of my work, functioning as offerings that visually embody the Others within the Other - individual Others, gendered Others, politicized Others. This paper thus approaches Otherness more as a scope of fluid possibilities and potential than as fixed and inert positions.

Bodies, burdened with narratives and inscribed by laws, perform as signifiers of the State propaganda and nationalisms that supersede the Individual. The gaps between these terms "Asian", "Woman", and "Artist" conjure up "Region", "Gender", and "Politics". They become sutured to the weights of Otherness even as they collide into each other.

This thesis sets up a relationship between the body of visual work I have produced and the critical reflection within the theoretical text itself. Not necessarily corroborative in nature, the two forms of activity do however work in tandem as they draw upon each other. The text circulates around collective fragments of subjectivity (performance-installations) beginning with the latest work I showed in 1998. It is then followed by a series of events and other works which establish the environment within which art, my practice and "praxis" exists in Singapore.

I will also reconstruct a significant moment in Singapore art history when the State placed a proscription on performance art and future performances by artist Josef Ng, based only on tabloid reports of his participation in a performance event in 1994. In recounting this, I locate a rupture in the State's relationship with male homosexuality and its attempt to criminalize any critique of its hetero-normalizing strategies. Within this context, the thesis recounts the State's process of expelling artists who are perceived as practitioners of "the debasement of art". This paper discusses how the State organizes positionality - proximity or distance from its centre, which is the true operation of abjection as Kristeva has theorized. It further examines the use and misuse of power and status by the media in legislating artistic content on behalf of the State to quarantine what it perceives as abject.

As I explore the implications of being a contemporary artist in Singapore today, the intention is also to register in depth, through my work, a resistance to the seamless national agenda of the post modern technocratic Asian city-state. By not only policing and disciplining the body in/of art, but shaming or "abjecting" it into submission within such a context (Singapore), a form of sanitation is vigilantly maintained. This paper will explore the socio-political milieu surrounding contemporary artists working in Singapore. With particular reference to the performance of Josef Ng, I will be exploring this form of
abjection with reference to his performing body, “stilled” into position as an “example” of the debasement of art” on the front page of Singapore’s press.

To locate the State within its strategies, I refer to Heng and Devan to discuss the nationalisms that are deployed to subject women’s bodies to forms of patriotism. The multiple and competing constructions of women’s bodies as threat, machine, object, lack and abjectness which I critique in my work renders more transparently the covert strategies of feminization that actualize the realities of Otherness in this region. This is done with strong references to the theories of abjection by Kristeva and Grosz. Because bodies enact and perform particular regimes of social and political relations, they are co-opted for State ideologies with questionable rhetorics of identity. In this paper my message to the State is that constructions of race, culture, regionalism, religion, gender and sexuality, contrary to its own beliefs, are legitimate concerns for contemporary art practice and discourse.

By not separating my visual work from the theoretical text, I allow the image to pronounce its stammer, so as to provoke a diversity of responses. I employ textuality here to reinstate my voice in the object of art before the ventriloquised voice of the State turns the object against me, even as it may escape or be subjected to processes of sanitation by State organs. Through this paper, I re-produce my allocated position as the signifier of the abject, contained in the boundary of the State into a boundary between the State and the Individual - to overturn the “impurity” of the abject, as defined and loathed by the State, into the power of resistance and maintenance of the integrity of the individual. The Image Stammers retrieves the abject as signifiers of resilience that mark the limits of State power for its reconstitution into allies of the artist.
I THE PATRIOTIC BOWEL

If the state or the structure of the polis/state mirrors the body, what takes on the metaphoric function of the genitals in the body politic? What kind of genitals are they? In other words, does the body-politic have a sex?¹

Grosz

Singapore has amassed a collection of symbols that speak of its economic advancement and prowess. Known for its cleanliness and rich heritage of indigenous Malay and immigrant cultures from China, India, South East Asia and Europe, the heart of the city centre still bears the residual traces of its colonial past, most noticeably in its urban landscape. Despite major demolition over the years, a few "choice" old buildings from this past have been spared. In conserving them, they have also been reassigned, now, more often than not, commercial roles. Architecture is evidently employed as one of the highly effective forms of visually communicating this postmodern city-state's commercial dynamism, economic and political stability to the rest of the world. As seen from the sky, it is poised for aerial magnificence, and at ground level, it rises, heroic in stature. "Cleansed" of its past, a form of dirtlessness is and will be its present and future.

Underlying all this visibility, however, is an undergrowth - a complex maze of well connected drains efficiently etched into its surface islandwide. They serve as receptacles for decay and filth as well as excess volumes of rain, flood or waste water that cannot be allowed to overflow into this pristine city environment - shallow, revealing longkangs (drains) feeding deep narrower ones, which in turn, service the gaping canals to divert all kinds of waste away. With no obvious starting point, they rhizomatically proliferate, bifurcate, interlink and operate from multiple centres, stating its presence everywhere.

As a child, I have witnessed objects drift past in the canals - from carcasses to furniture and uprooted trees, embraced helplessly and lifelessly by the speed of the torrential tropical rains. Drains operate as a visible sign of the abject, discouraging any form of proximity by the stench it produces. As metaphorical repositories for society's overflowing "unconscious" - they collect, siphon and direct the abject - the polluting, expired, decaying or the "useless" into watery depths - the sea around the island.

But the abject, like the unconscious, has a persistent way of imposing itself on us. The very ubiquity of drains reminds us of the impossibility of disappearance, the futility of evasion. There is no escape, only return.

In describing the national desire for dirtlessness in Singapore, I cannot escape from speaking of its underside."dirt" - swelling in its literal, corporeal and political charge in the State as well. In this context, Singapore, a State which prides itself on being run by a "transparent" government managing a "clean and hardworking people", by the same token, consciously and self-consciously contrasts itself from its surrounding economies, describing them in terms which include the "corrupt", "nepotistic", "contentious", "lazy" etc. How then does this rhetoric frame the contemporary Artist?

My paper will address the perpetuation of an impervious phallocentric body-politic of the State within which the artist operates as the signifier of the abject in terms of production, ideas and ideals which cannot be incorporated into the State's body-politic, and therefore must be expelled.

Sealed Space

Nowhere is Singapore's facade of "good taste" more architecturally evident than the Singapore Art Museum itself. In its early days as the St. Joseph's Institution, it was a school for educating young boys run by Catholic Brothers who were stationed in the colony as missionaries. Its conservation and conversion, from a colonial building housing Western-based religious ideals and education to holding captive artistic ideals and objects, is part of the State's newly acquired taste for legitimacy and the value of "a sense of history". In subsuming the arts under this new regime of "culture", the early 1990's witnessed an inspired quest for a "soul for the nation" through "art and culture", culminating in its ambition to be the "regional art centre".

By reconstructing the St. Joseph's Institution into the Singapore Art Museum, a building and site that used to signify the colonial project of "purging" the land of its indigenous cultures, religions and tongues via the educating of its future generations suggests that even the colonial past could be recuperated by the postcolonial ruling elite. I have grown into adulthood with the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew invoking the equation of the "West" with decadence (this was a position at odds with his own educational background in England which includes a majority of the ruling elite) when he also claimed that English was the language of "currency" and access to trade. The British colonial masters, having been ousted in 1965, like all abject states, can no longer be incorporated into the New, the Clean and the Future; the architectural symbols of Singapore's colonial past, destined for expulsion through demolition or, if gutted, will have to be reconfigured as signifiers of a State which seeks the legitimacy of history. In attempting to register new roles for this chosen colonial architecture, the State sends out conflicting signals which not only recuperates a past as an instrument for receding colonialism as a nostalgic period of past Western hegemony, but also to cater to tourists, a valuable source of capital that it very much depends on. The Sub-Committee on Services of the 1985 Economic Committee formulated the cultural project aiming for

a vibrant cultural and entertainment services industry that would enhance our image as a tourist destination, make Singapore a better place to live in, and also help to attract professional and skilled workers in Singapore.²

The Singapore Art Museum Corridor

Photo: Singapore Art Museum Corporate Brochure
For the ARX5 project\textsuperscript{3} at the Singapore Art Museum in 1998, I chose the one-foot wide drainage space between the glass facade and the balcony balustrade of the Museum to create a performative-installation because of the spatial limitations and contextual challenge it posed. The entire perimeter of the upper floor of the Museum's upper floor is defined by this narrow space of about ten inches wide. This drainage space is in turn sealed off from the "aura" of art within by an equally continuous floor-to-ceiling wall of thick tempered glass. The panoramic glass seal around the Museum, despite its transparency, functioned as a sign of the imposition of control within the Museum and marks the boundary that separates the highly controlled environment within the Museum proper (in terms of temperature, noise level, humidity, security, traffic flow and design, lay-out and most of all, taste), and the street.

However, in the Singapore context, the street is as much a site of control, prohibition and "dirtlessness", as the interior of the Museum. Signages warning of offences such as "no spitting", "flush the toilet", "no chewing gum", "no littering", "no loitering", "no jaywalking", etc with fines allocated clearly to each category, are visibly posted on the streets. What I am suggesting here, through these examples, is the emerging body politic of the State imposing itself on the body of the Individual. Grosz explains,

\begin{quote}
[T]he city is, [..] also the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts, the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed [...] As a hinge between the population and the individual, the body, its distribution, habits, alignments, pleasures, norms, and ideals are the ostensible object of governmental regulation, and the city is a key tool.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

In the examples cited above, which subject the habits of bodies to "governmental regulation through the city as a key tool", they obviously encompass bodily waste, saliva ("no spitting"), urine ("flush the toilet") and gum mixed up with saliva ("no chewing gum") which the government has found, makes the streets look "dirty" as they harden, turn "black" literally, become permanent and too laborious and therefore, costly to remove. The last three exemplifies disorder on the streets ("no littering", "no loitering", and "no jaywalking").

It thus suggests that it is also the interior body of the citizen of Singapore which must be policed, for with each tiny act of expectorating, the citizen is spitting upon the body of the State. Any mark of human waste product is thus seen as a defilement of the purity and essentialised phallocentric body of the State. Grosz qualifies that phallocentrism is not so much the pre-dominant use of the phallus as "the pervasive unacknowledged use of the male or masculine to represent the human"\textsuperscript{5}. She locates the problem as not so much to

\textsuperscript{3}The ARX5 programme, predated the Brisbane-based Asia Pacific Triennials (APT) by more than a decade in vision, posed participants from Singapore, Hongkong and Australia with the rare attraction of being involved in a project that is committed to a shifting psychology of power bases, from Perth in Western Australia to the two countries mentioned over a one year period, aside from working on "homeground", to test notions of cultural permeability, or conversely, opacity, in contexts and constituencies other than the familiar and the comfortable.

\textsuperscript{4}Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities", Sexuality & Space, Princeton Architectural Press [1992]:249

\textsuperscript{5}Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities", Sexuality & Space, Princeton Architectural Press [1992]:247
neutralize such usage but to "reveal the masculinity inherent in the notion of the universal, the generic human, or the unspecified subject". This fear and revulsion of being polluted as in the case so far, or of being deposited with corporeal abjectness, bodily expulsions and seepage, conjures up the sign of the valorized and sealed impermeable male body that Grosz discusses in *Volatile Bodies*. I am suggesting that this is what the image of Singapore is modelled after and which will become clearer further into the paper. Such is the form of attraction - a dirtless and hygienic culture, arts, greenery, food, sights and entertainment - that the State can offer to the tourist - a visit to an Asian economy that is comparatively free of infections that may invade the body such as malaria, typhoid, diarrhoea etc. It is thus a State in which even the bowel must be suitably patriotic. Chee tells us,

In the code of conduct for the Vigilante Corps Members, the PAP [the ruling political party] tells the people that they must 'eat natural food which must be non-fattening' - but not too much, because 'fasting occasionally is good'. They must bathe because 'bathing in hot water is good for bodily cleanliness'. And not only must the outside be clean, but one's entrails must be kept spotless by 'regular moving of the bowels'.

As a super hi-tech State, its public and private sphere, is thus highly surveilled to achieve a condition of being "all-centre". And in this centre is the vague and slippery term known as "the common good". Yet this term is not open for debate or contestation by competing publics; it is a set of ideologies imposed upon the bodies of the citizen from above, hierarchically. Because the notions of social cohesion are so essentialized and proliferate on the body of the citizen, through "hygienic" sanctions and the marginalisation of dissent into the sphere of the abject [re. non Asian] the ruling elite can mobilize power insidiously. Deleuze and Guattari further decodes,

The central power of the State is hierarchical and constitutes a civil-service sector, the center is not in the middle but on top because [it is] the only way it can recombine what it isolates

[...] through subordination.

The State's "diverse points of order" resonate with claims of its "educated" women citizen's "betrayal" of racial, moral and heterosexist purity through "lopsided reproduction" which I further discuss into the paper. However, there exists one space in Singapore that contains abjection. Its punishment for opponents stepping outside its parameters and daring to criticize its benign patriarchy are, according to leading dissident Chee Soon Juan, imprisonment, torture and banishment to the most abject space within such a social milieu as Singapore - solitary confinement. The Whitley Detention Centre is the "cold room" in the heart of the Internal Security Department in Singapore where political dissidents are imprisoned and interrogated. I feel that just one paragraph of Chee's book provides an insight into the lives of the political detainees,

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6 ibid
7 Chee Soon Juan, "To be Free", Monash Asia Institute, Monash University [1998]: 270-271.
9 ibid
Performance View:

"Still Waters (between estrangement and reconciliation)" 1998
ARKS, Singapore Art Museum

Glass domes, silicon, water, phone booths.

Photo: Khiew Huey Chien
Deprived of all means of communication, prisoners looked for signs of intelligible life in the most improbable places. Toilets, though reeking of urine and vomit, afforded the prisoners a tiny measure of privacy, where blood from squashed mosquitoes provided precious ink for scribbling rudimentary messages.  

We can see here that after extended periods of mental and bodily torture, the prisoners reconstitute the abject into elusive but precious signifiers of sense ("toilets"), an atmosphere of privacy ("urine and vomit"), material for expression ("blood"), the source of this material ("mosquitoes") and form of communication ("scribbling"). For these prisoners, who reside not in the street, nor in their homes, but in the heart of the all-seeing and overseeing centre, the abject is re-imagined and retrieved as allies.

The drainage space at the Museum was one of the few architectural features that retained the original integrity of its humble function (draining away the abject) and was the signifying vessel for this abjection that also had the potential for chaos — flooding, stench, inundation, humidity and moisture. It thus betrays recognition of the power of the impure over the purity within the Museum. It threatens the inner environment of preciousness, authenticity and more importantly, legitimacy, within the Museum. Also striving for this legitimacy is critical art which is individualistic and speaks of the validity of peripheral visions. But in striving to hermetically seal the Museum from “corrosive” and polluting elements, the institution has had to include dissenting voices emanating from the art objects which it collects from around the region, which in turn, undermines the State ideology that it is also pressured to conflate with its own – humanitarianism, racial purity, heterosexism — in order to be what it declares in its corporate brochure, the “largest known international collection of twentieth-century Southeast Asian art.”

To the eye looking for the incidental, non-designated “exhibition” space, the drain was overflowing with aesthetic possibilities and meaningful potential for me especially within the Museum context. Through much negotiation with the conservation department, I was permitted to block up the drainage holes and situate custom cut glass dams at existing entry points to build up a volume of water up to eight inches high. This depth was arrived at from a physics-based translation of an average person applying pressure on the weakest mid-section of each panel of glass (4m x 1.5m). The blockage undermined the architecture’s original purpose of draining water away and echoed the imposition of control within the Museum. When seen from within the institution, the glass wall was now inverted to function as a façade for the body of long still water installed in the drainage space. The object of art, drain water, displayed as it was outside of the Museum, was now protected from the glass-encased Museum and the viewer.

The art work became the presence and threat of abjection to the Museum’s carefully-honed integrity in that the drain water threatened to seep, leak, invade if not burst into the inner sanctum of preciousness. It was a moment when defilement of the place of art threatened, being neither truly inside nor outside of the Museum.

I see this as an example of many practices that operate as a resistance and a celebratory articulation of the abject state, which upsets the clinical control of the State. Burkin cites Kristeva and reminds us that the true nature of abjection lies in the allocation of position.

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11 Choe Soon Juan, “To be Free”, Monash Asia Institute, Monash, 1998 University [1998]:256
Performing View:

"Still Waters (between estrangement and reconciliation)" 1998
ARXS, Singapore Art Museum

Glass domes, silicon, water, photo bases.

Photo: Jason Lim
He explains that

Those most marked by a border condition, a position at the rim - neither fully inside nor fully outside - are most likely to provoke abjection.\textsuperscript{12}

During the making of this work, the drain water insidiously found its way into the Museum proper by emerging through "subterranean" cracks of cement work in its flooring. I had inadvertently located the weak parts of the Singapore Art Museum’s newly refurbished concrete structure.

\textit{Still Waters} was therefore a collection of moisture held for so long in obeisance to the marked and sealed glass borders of the museum. Made visible by blue pigment, it is located in a brief passageway of sunlight. Where boys once ran to and from classrooms, this archaeological remnant of the Museum’s colonial past now hosts the visitor who strolls to and from each gallery.

I chose this space for its sense of journey, the passing of time and the remaking of histories. The shallow pool of blue water is a site for the reenactment of a loss of innocence. Performed in a space that operates simultaneously within and without the institution, it reflected the "fugitive" status of the performing body in Performance Art - an activity as good as banned in Singapore since 1994. The history of this state of affairs will be discussed further into the paper.

\textbf{Reflecting Estrangement}

The performance component\textsuperscript{13} of \textit{Still Waters} was also an attempt to negotiate the reconciliation with or estrangement from what Singapore means to me personally and artistically. I entered into the space and stepped into the water to distribute little \textit{sampan}s (boats) folded out of photographs of my children’s faces onto the blue surface. I was totally isolated and yet completely public to the audience from behind the glass encasement. They could witness every action, gesture and expression, just as theirs was to me. I immersed my body lengthwise into the water, negotiating the entire distance in this way, constricted by the ten-inch width which my body had to obey. I could only be on my side at any one time. This amount of water displaced became the ephemeral trace of my presence in the Museum and in Singapore.

I put a \textit{sampan} against my ear in a gesture of paying undivided attention to what it might possibly reveal to me. I had to immerse my ear in the water to block off the high level of noise in this "outside" world and the silence within the museum became very evident then.

Like the water seeping through the gaps, the work’s "illegality" invites the socio-political and the personal-political to seep in and fill the critical gaps wherever "innocence" is proclaimed. Through a performance of an agitated body half immersed in water, a universal story of estrangement and loss presses against the glass walls of the Museum, insisting to be allowed in.


\textsuperscript{13} The other performance in this space is that of the custodians of the Museum, who entered into this narrow space and with restricted bodily movements, ritually clean, wash, unblock the drains and polish the glass panels faithfully every week.
While I managed to use an aesthetics of ambiguity in my work, the use of an in-between space, the drain, invading and intruding the context of the Museum while escaping its controlled environment, the Hongkong participant for the ARX5 project, cartoonist Zunzi Wong however suffered a different fate. His direct political satire, a wall-size caricature of the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in a corporate suit standing over Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in overalls and spraying a pesticide made of fines and punishments, was completely torn down on the day of the opening by Museum representatives. A series of discussions with the curator, Joanna Lee, saw the artist indulging in the censorship of choice hits of his work e.g. removal of Lee’s and Goh’s faces. The carefully treaded negotiation between the curator and Wong obviously did not meet with the level of "cultural sensitivity" that the institution’s higher ranks expected. This resulted in the total removal of the work, as I have mentioned. We can thus see the maintenance of a pure unsullied image of the State's body politic operating again. However, this incident, four years following the proscription on performance art in 1994, illustrates how the Museum, as a State-dependent organ, will sacrifice its own dignity by stifling, or in this case, erasing "dirt" (artistic social criticism) in the name of "cultural sensitivity".

The enterprise of hollowing out the Museum's interior and then enveloping the remaining shell with a glass shield becomes a metaphor for the State's desire to be impervious to any internal or external threat. In the same way that the Singapore Art Museum acts as an unconditional mouthpiece for the cultural ideology of the State, it is an architectural cocoon - a site of absolute mastery over any disturbing element that poses itself as a threat. Chun Beng Hui notes that Singapore, as "a nation based on communitarian ideology, emphasizing collective interest, has stunted the development of individual rights for the sake of maintaining the 'survivalist' myth".

The Museum, in acting with such close alignment with the State's second generation leaders, operates within the problematic intersection of showcasing the products of individuals, while constantly emphasizing the "common good". This runs counter to the (S)tated ambition of collecting and exhibiting contemporary art of the region, a field which is increasingly more critically and politically informed. Only in a State such as Singapore, where an attitude of extreme unease with impurity - racial, sexual, artistic and cultural, does theories about abjection have so much collateral as the abject cannot be either mediated or co-opted into such an environment. This is because as I have shown, what is abject in the Singapore context is the criticism of the ruling elite which stabilizes and perpetuates the production of its own pure, clean, seamless image by vigilantly expelling what it deems as "not in the common interest", as "rocking the boat".

The dilemma of the Museum therefore lies in this intersecting register of its ambition and desire for the cultural and economic prestige that comes with showing contemporary work, while simultaneously disavowing such work. Within such an environment, contemporary art takes on the properties of excrement, to be expelled, or sanitized.

I have introduced this work as a backdrop for this section of my thesis which resurrects the A.G.A. (Artists General Assembly) controversy, a historical moment in Singapore art history that resulted in the ban on performance art and the performing body of artist Josef

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14 Ray Langenbach, "Atropia", unpublished paper
Ng. Given that a significant period of time has passed since this State ban (which was later re-qualified by a ruling requiring S$10,000 bond for all "scriptless" performances), this approach has been adopted to draw out the aesthetics of abjection and conversely, the sanitation of art and culture by the State. Art is mobilized as another tool of the State's ideology of "Asian values".
II THE PATRIOTIC PENIS

This part of my paper discusses the use and misuse of power by the Singapore State. It illustrates how the photographic image is used in relation to the art work, be it object or performance based, to turn the work against itself. Dressed as an act of moral and paternal correction, this form of censorship on the part of the State is evidently a dependable practice resulting in a dispossessed and radically de-centered subject. In so doing, the hysterical positioning of "unscripted" performances, as an impending threat of abjection and disruption to its social, moral and political constitution is a necessary glimpse at how art-making in Singapore is forced to exist within a highly claustrophobic intellectual and socio-political space.

The State, using its own basis of assessment, employs a highly selective method of admitting intellectuals, politicians or artists into its ranks as "official" or "legitimate" cultural and/or social critics. Thus, by absorbing what is portrayed as its own critical reflection, the State again hermetically seals off this minute space to ensure not only a minimum seepage of "dirt" ("unlicensed" criticisms), but that its carefully constructed image, is never threatened, tainted nor dismantled. But more importantly, my introductory discussion on the AGA event, as well as the pivotal role of the press in reproducing it as a controversy will make apparent the strategies and methods with which practitioners like myself have had to invent in order to remain challenging and critical without being neutralized by various State organs.

The shrinking profile of artist collectives such as 5th Passage and Artists Village attest to the inhospitable conditions that saturate critical art practice in Singapore. As artists are forced to equip themselves with "survival" tactics of vigilant self-surveillance, the exhibition of art has become a process of trepidation, focused on an identification parade of testing thresholds and inventing subversive codes. Artistic autonomy now resides in studying and guessing national and incremental levels of "dirtlessness".

Critical practitioners resort to the use of creative codes, a tactic that allows for certain types of messages to seep through. This system of codes, for example, naming performance art as theatre, "dance", "standing sculptures", home exhibiting, extremely oblique titling of social critiques etc. become strategies to ensure that the art work, in negotiating its passage from the sanctity of the studio into the realm of the public is enabled, and not deterred, undermined or crippled enroute. The real danger that pervades Singaporean society therefore, is the internalizing of the State censoring machine, swallowed whole by its citizenry which in turn, backflips into an inward policing gaze that imprisons the mind itself.

The Image-World

In the real world, something is happening and no one knows what is going to happen. In the image-world, it has happened, and it will forever happen in that way.\(^\text{16}\)

Susan Sontag

\(^{16}\)Susan Sontag, On Photography, Dell Pub. [1973]:168
A plethora of art agencies ranging from the practitioner, administrator, consumer etc. has relied on the photograph as a mode of presentation, documentation and as art itself. In *The Object of Performance*, Henry Sayre\(^\text{17}\) reminds us of the late sixties when the diminishing aura of the art object almost threatened itself into extinction. With the dominant presence of conceptual and performance art then, and its reliance on the photograph as a mode of "presentation", he also observed that in effect, the primary role of the museum - to acquire, house or display the art object - was both undermined and by the same token, redeemed by "objectless art". This was "the record of the art event that survived the event, and more often than not, this document turned out to be a photograph".

One of the ways in which the Singapore government defends itself from its critics is to use its press to ridicule or marginalize them from the 'mainstream' through photographs and headlines. In Roland Barthes' formalistic analysis of the press photo in "The Photographic Message",\(^\text{18}\) he dissects its constitution into three parts: "a source of emission" which consists of the newspaper staff, those who select the photo, crop it, compose captions, and so on; "a channel of transmission", which is the newspaper itself and the "medium of reception", which is the public at large. Barthes acknowledges that the reading of the press photo cannot be divorced from its sociological context that it inherently is immersed in. He speaks of this as the supplementary message, a certain "treatment" of the image as a result of the creator's action, "and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain 'culture' of the society receiving the message."\(^\text{19}\) He states,

> Like any well structured signification, photographic connotation is an institutional activity; on the scale of society as a whole, its function is to integrate, in other words to reassure humanity [...] By trying to reconstitute in its specific structure the connotation -code of a communication as broad as the press photograph, we may hope to recognize in all their complexity the forms our society employs to reassure itself.\(^\text{20}\)

The need to reassure, or to be assured, implies an existing state of being, situation or set of circumstances perceived as fluid, unstable or threatened. This state of permanent crisis, which requires an ongoing form of reassurance against economic, moral, political and religious threat from within and without is the political neurosis of Singapore. As a super hi-tech state, its public and private space is highly surveilled to achieve a condition of being "all-centre" as well as the apex, as I have mentioned earlier. The State reinvents itself as this moral and ethical apex by conflating its voice with that of the media to perpetuate this mode of thinking. This is evident in the way these agencies assume vigilante roles of "public accountability".

As Barthes states, the production of a press photo is an institutional activity. This is especially so in Singapore where the main gatherers, providers and producers of information/news are directly responsible to the Ministry of Information and the Arts.

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\(^\text{17}\) Henry Sayre, "The Object of Performance", The University of Chicago Press, [1989]: introduction

\(^\text{18}\) Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message".

\(^\text{19}\) ibid

\(^\text{20}\) ibid
Cover Page

The New Paper dated 3 January 1994
PUBLIC PROTEST

Artist Josef “Brother Cane” Ng (above) snips off his pubic hair (see bottom left of picture) in protest against media during arts performance in Parkway Parade. Upset over coverage of anti-gay court case, he then pokes a lit cigarette into his arm. Another artist forces himself to throw up as he protests against The New Paper’s “unfair reporting” of screening of censored tape. /Page 6
The State employs the press photo to "reassure" itself and its public at large by becoming the creator of "common sense" and public morality. By not offering any genuine space for alternative critical perspectives, the editorial voice does not truly speak up. Instead, it "mimes" a ventriloquised State (ment). The press photo, as I shall prove with this particular analysis, acts for not only State propaganda but also as a monitoring device to still the stammer of the visual image - in other words, it is an instrument developed to fix meanings.

In this context, photography's highly selective and discontinuous ways of "seeing" is clear. For Sontag further explains that 'the point is precisely to see the whole by means of a part - an arresting detail, a striking way of cropping."\(^{21}\) I shall lay out the way the stammer in the image is stilled by the Singapore press in the following paragraphs.

**In the Real-World**

Singapore still holds on to a history of caning gay men who are caught soliciting sex. Its penal code still retains sections 377 and 377A from its days as a British colony in which depravity and corruption shared associations with homosexuality. This shows that the State still retrieves the laws of its colonial masters to crush the bodies of its "deviants". Oral or anal intercourse between consenting adults is punishable up to imprisonment for life and as observed by Langenbach, "Every active homosexual in Singapore is technically a felon on the run".

In heterosexual logistics, it is invariably the female body that is entrusted as the site of seminal explosions. In a world that has become more sensitive to ambivalence in bodily passions, the very thought of the male body receiving emissions of sexual fluids causes a seizure in the mind-set of Singaporean conservative society. For the sealed up impermeable body of the male, which emits flow but never receives flow would then be feminized and abject. Grosz proposes,

> Perhaps it is not after all flow in itself that a certain phallicised masculinity abhors but the idea that flow moves or can move in two-way indeterminate directions that elicits horror, the possibility of being not only an active agent in the transmission of flow but also a receptacle."\(^{22}\)

The Artists General Assembly took place under such conditions of State desire for purity. It was a weeklong event that culminated in a 12-hour performance section, organized by 5th Passage and Artists Village, an arts society. Amid several performances that took place, the performance by artist Josef Ng took issue with the treatment of twelve gay men by the police and press in 1993. Ng's performance can thus be seen in the context of a country where homosexuality is a crime and where performance art is licensed under the "variety show" category. It was carried out in the 5th Passage Performance Space located in the shopping centre in Parkway Parade.

Josef Ng's performance was prepared by laying out twelve pieces of tofu in a semi-circular formation, each accompanied by a small bleated plastic bag of red chilli paste.

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\(^{21}\) Susan Sontag, On Photography, Dell Puh. [1973];

\(^{22}\) Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, [1994]:201
Wearing a black robe and trunks, Josef Ng mesmerized his audience with a series of energetic and improvised Grotowski-inspired dance movements (lasting approximately twelve minutes). He proceeded to release sudden infliction of controlled force and precision on each tofu with the cane. The impact caused them to explode and vibrate the way the flesh on the buttocks would reverberate with shock to burst open as a slit wound. The incidental contact with the plastic bags of red chilli paste also added an element of association to the rupture and flow of blood as in the actual punishment of caning. Ng then turned to the wall at the far end of the space, lowered his black trunks and used a pair of scissors to carry out what appeared to be the snipping of his pubic hair. This action was only ascertained when he brought the snippets of hair to the foreground and stated that like the hair on the head, its removal was a sign of protest. He then lighted a cigarette and burnt it into his arm.

It is important to note that tofu is the colloquial term for effeminacy in the Singapore army. In the presence of a private paying audience, Ng's performance was a protest against the media's violation of privacy in publicly naming the twelve males who were arrested and caned for soliciting sex at a beach in Tanjong Rhu on 23 November 1993. As a witness to Ng's attempt to critically perform the text in this report, particularly the caning of these individuals, I have experienced both the art and spirit of his performance, although unaware then of the press's impending dismemberment of the wholeness and integrity of his work. His is an attempt to personify and enforce a sense of the Real via the visceral and symbolic use of materials - the trauma of receiving caning as punishment through the caning of the twelve pieces of tofu.

The artist stated that the snipping of his pubic hair was a symbolic act of protest against the violation of privacy of the twelve arrested individuals in the way they were named in the press report. Conceptually and aesthetically, it is the site of ideological and personal struggle. As I have witnessed, they responded to the intensity of his caning ritual with an equally tensed silence. I believe that Josef has privileged the audience with a point of access to the Real. He has through his performance, urged his audience to reassess the value placed in the belief and practice of caning, that is of Pain being the great instructor of the "deviants" in Singaporean society.

*But how does the Image-World usurp the Real-World?*

**THE PHOTOGRAPH WITHDRAWS FROM ITS OWN SURFACE**

Though not necessarily disadvantageous, it is also the fate of the artwork and its photographic image to become the surface for the critic, curator or the State's inscription. This is the moment when the ink on the page quickens into a textual veneer that replaces or displaces the artwork. For as the photograph withdraws from its own surface, the critic, curator or the State emerges, but only after rearranging color, light and shadow to recast to each its own chiaroscuro.

We can be seduced by images with an inherently fluid quality, that is to say that they relate to their viewers in shifting levels of interpretation. It is precisely at these levels of utterance from the image, or in other words, when the image stammers with a multitude of meanings, when it fails to secure a singular meaning for the viewer in its visual communication that requires "control" in the service of State propaganda. Barthes clarifies,
Every image is polysemous; it implies a floating chain of signifieds of which the reader can select some and ignore the rest. Polysemy questions meaning, and this question always appears as a dysfunction [...] Hence in every society a certain number of techniques are developed in order to fix the floating chain of signifieds to combat the terror of uncertain signs. 23

How then are methods employed by the Singapore press to lock the meaning of a visual image into place for the reader? How then can there be no meaning to a press photo but one, as pre-ordained by the editorial? In my analysis, I will be restricting it to the performance alone even though there are numerous other inaccuracies in the press report that impacted on the art community as a whole.

The press photo of Ng's twenty-minute performance was reproduced as a male with his back turned to a wall and trunks lowered to expose his buttocks. The entire context of his installation with tofu in the foreground was cropped away. Aside from its accompanying text, captions and the full colour front page "coverage" of his buttocks, the press had endowed this image with a sea of signs. Headlined "PUBLIC PROTEST", what appears to have been inscribed with a broad round tip marker was a livid red phallic 'L' sitting atop a red arrow inserted between the letters "B" and "I". Superimposed precisely on the cleavage of the buttocks, the letter "L", was obviously intended to be part of the letter "L" in the word "PUBLIC", without which it reads "PUBLIC". It pointedly referred to the site of contestation and controversy - the public snipping of Ng's pubic hair. Short of looking literally like sign penetrating sign penetrating sign in its chain of signification, that is the red arrow insert thrusting the red letter "L" into the buttock's cleavage, this mode of graphic appendage is undoubtedly designed as an act of "penetration" by the newspaper.

The literal text below the press photo reduced Ng's twenty-minute performance to a fractioned second of a camera click. It manipulated its readers amongst the various signifieds in the image in order to arrive, in its act of condensation and graphic embellishment described above, at a conclusion which drowns the constructed meaning (of the image) under the veneer of a given meaning.

ARTIST JOSEF 'BROTHER CANE' SNIPS OFF HIS PUBIC HAIR IN PROTEST AGAINST MEDIA DURING ARTS PERFORMANCE IN PARKWAY PARADE. UPSET OVER COVERAGE OF ANTI-GAY COURT CASE, HE THEN POKES A LIT CIGARETTE INTO HIS ARM. 24

The "reassurance" that I spoke of earlier is evident in this text. The press uses a legendary term "BROTHER CANE" to refer to the artist. It follows in quick succession with the sensational 'shot', "SNIPS OFF HIS PUBIC HAIR", thus guaranteeing an over-reaction from its readers (we are talking about Singapore). It further specifies the reason "PROTEST AGAINST MEDIA" as well as the context and site "DURING ARTS PERFORMANCE IN PARKWAY PARADE" to imply that unbeknownst to the reader, this clandestine private act took place in the mall, a public space! And all for what? Protest against the media? This must be a joke or the act of a very foolish person. Who would want to stand up against the media in Singapore, except for the owners of this instrument of power

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24 The New Paper, Cover Story, 3 January 1994
itself, the government? This is followed by describing the artist's performance as an act of
irrationality inferred by the stated reason "UPSET" and "POKES A LIT CIGARETTE
INTO HIS ARM". The following words "OVER COVERAGE OF ANTI-GAY COURT
CASE" already signals the demise of such an artist as the court is the authority of the
land. The protest is thus immediately reproduced and seen as the act of a juvenile, trivial
and yet threatening because of its homosexual motivation and also as the press found it
necessary to comment about its critic, the artist. The constructed meaning, "the champion
of homosexuality exists!" - is thus brandished as a threat to the very core a clean and good
society. This is the message that has been sent out by the press and received by the public.
Barthes explains,

Anchoring is a means of control; it bears a responsibility,
confronting the projective power of the figures, as to the
use of the message; in relation to the freedom of the image's
signifieds, the text has a repressive value, and we can see
that a society's ideology and morality are principally invested
on this level.²⁵

From this analysis of the press' visual ambush strategies, it can be seen that new methods
of escaping and undermining these operations were urgently needed to be invented by art
practitioners in order to be effective cultural workers.

Invisible Markers

It is very clear that unlike the People's Action Party (PAP)- the ruling political party
comprising mainly Western-educated Chinese elite - political opponents, artists of
'deviant' persuasions, sexualities and any other dissident cultures in Singapore do not own
powers of reproduction. Neither do they share equal representation in the press which
dominate and mediate the discourses on the political and the social.

One of the strengths and favoured strategies of the Singapore government's power
operations is to trivialize its critics, either by bankruptcy or by using the press to
marginalize these critics. Immediately following the dissemination of the press photo, it
was inevitable that there would be no due process for the "reality" of the situation to be
disentangled from the "set up" by the press. The 5th Passage gallery manager, Iris Tan,
was charged with putting on a vulgar act in public, and the former with promoting
vulgarity, under the rules and conditions of a 'variety show' entertainment licence - the
only umbrella licence for all forms of performance in Singapore. Ng was charged with
"putting on a vulgar act in public."

From then on, a domino effect unleashed itself as a perceived rupture to the moral pulse
of Singapore society is detected - parliament discussed it, State television broadcast its
condemnation of the artist and 5th Passage, public outcry in the form of letters, interviews
with the man and women in the street, police interrogation, arrests of the artist and the
gallery manager, court case hearings, legal battles, family outpouring of embarrassment,
art community's fragmented and ambivalent reaction, eviction by the landlords of the
gallery premises, the list goes on.

But was it not the media, armed with the power of technological reproduction and
extensive dissemination of a press photo altered by a rhetoric of lay-out and montage

²⁵Roland Barthes, ibid.
which was responsible for an overriding and blatant form of vulgarity, if not, pornography? Was its portrayal of an image society deemed an 'unnatural act', targeted at a readership that includes children, the very act of indecency and hypocrisy? Was its usurping of the performer and his audience's "Real-World", having witnessed and experienced art with a social conscience, replaced as it were by an "Image-World" the very act of violation? Was its appropriation of a fractioned second of a performance image, expressly to digest its moment of reality so as to regurgitate it as a remodelled content as truth, the very essence of deceit? That the image-makers, in this case, the press, having torn the performance out of context and problematised it beyond recognition the tactics of a school yard bully?

It is important to note that not a single person from the audience who saw and experienced the performance was interviewed to give an opinion in the press. The individuals who were interviewed were not witnesses of the performance but that of the manipulated image of the sign of the performance, imprisoned forever in the press photo.

Within the dynamics of this visual scam, an elaborate evidence of a "crime" was fictionally produced. The inbuilt trial, judgement and punishment had already been performed the moment the press photo and its accompanying text came off the printing press. The media had fixed the stammer of the visual image of Josef's performing body. For the improbability of a "not guilty" verdict was the overriding sign in the press photo itself. In other words, the actual arrest, trial and sentencing were merely a formality to fulfil the pre-ordained verdict within the photographic message.

If one were to follow through the legal, moral and artistic impact from this act of raid / rape on the performing body of Josef Ng (and by multiplication the collective body of performance artists in Singapore) there is clearly an overt power imbalance (State/Press versus private Individual). There is also a lack of discerning and objective voices in Singapore. This proves that Singapore is not a healthy democracy, having no inbuilt avenues for dissent in the State machinery.

The State, through its media, has harvested a collective public outcry at the "debasement of art", as concluded by the National Arts Council spokesman, Liew Chin Choy. This is another example of its rhetoric that qualifies and feminizes artistic social criticism as a form of dirt and pollution and as a sign of danger to the patriarchal constitution of the State and the people it "protects". Citing Mary Douglas who explains that the abject is not necessarily that which is dirty or impure about the body, Grosz further explains the politics of dirt,

Dirt, [...] is that which is not in its proper place, that which upsets or beffuddles order. Nothing has the intrinsic property of disrupting or disturbing but can only be regarded as such in a specific context and system where order is imposed at the cost of the elements thus ordered. Dirt signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and unincorporable always locates sites of potential threat to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematises.26

26 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies; Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Sydney, Allen and Unwin [1994] :192
In the way events have unfolded, we can see how the artifice in the "testimony" of the press photo has imprisoned and replaced the reality of the performance. That public memory has been forcefully superseded by the reconstituted press photo is a tragedy that lies in it being destined to "happen forever in that way" as imaged by the press photo which Sontag eloquently reminded us.

Following is a full reproduction of the Government's decision in the Straits Times on 22 January 1994:

[The Government] is concerned that new art forms such as "performance art" and "forum theatre" - which have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation - pose dangers to public order, security and decency, and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority.

"The performances may be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion," the [Ministries'] statement said:

The following action will be taken:

* Police will reject all future applications by the group 5th Passage for a public entertainment licence to stage any such performance without fixed scripts.

* The two men involved in the acts will be barred from future public performances. The police will reject applications for public entertainment licences for any performance or exhibition by 5th Passage or any other group involving artist Josef Ng Sing Chor, 22, and art student Shannon Tham Kuo Leong, 20.

* The NAC [National Arts Council] will bar 5th Passage from getting any grant and assistance. It will also not support "performance art" or "forum theatre" staged by other groups, but their other projects will be considered.

* Iris Tan Khic Wan, a founder-member of the group and organizer of the event held at Parkway Parade from Dec 31 to Jan 1 will be prosecuted for providing public entertainment without a licence, as the performances continued past the approved time.

* Organizers of scriptless public performances will have to provide a synopsis when they apply to the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit for a licence. If approved, they will have to put down a security deposit.

In this section, I have examined the press's reconstituted photo of a sliced moment of an art performance. What has been mobilized is an acquisition of a model of what "debased" art "looks" like. Confirmed now as filth, shit, excrement, intolerable for the body politic, which desires sanitized art and cultural production, the body of Josef Ng, is thus expelled into the margins, banned from performance for life.

Brigadier-General Yeo intimates us in the Straits Times on the "new" conditions of art practice that would be in place,
When the boundaries are clear, then those who act within the boundaries are free. But when the boundaries are not clear, those within the boundaries become unfree. At the end of the day, we do not want to stifle creativity.27

De-liberalization was thus put in place from henceforth with a new frame and repositioning of surveillance within which artists had to "perform". Artists began codifying their performance work under different forms of theatre, naming performance art as different forms of theatre, "dance", "standing sculptures", home exhibiting, extremely oblique titling of social critiques etc as I have mentioned. This exposure of the State's determination to sterilize all disturbing and feminizing elements in art, as I have demonstrated, also impacted as a backflow of fear and paranoia seeping into the upper ranks of institutions of art which I discussed earlier in the ARX5 (Artists Regional Exchange) event in Singapore. The censorship of the Hongkong participant Zu density Wang has resulted in rippling circles of doubt in the region about the city's ambition to be the regional art centre of South East Asia.

The desired effect following the aftermath of Ng's performance, however, has been locked into place. The methods and lengths to which the State would go to impose this internalized surveillance through the photographic document is chillingly transparent. The fact that expressions of dissent, or simply "other" views and beliefs - environmental, political, sexual or social are few and far between says more about the degree of induced "indifference" than its appearance of complacency.

What is equally disquieting is also how the State, through the press as its voicebox, has displaced the art critic and audience to insert it self as the expert interventionist and moral police. In the Singapore model, the press operates as an organ of the State's questionable moral panic - surveying, managing and muting all threatening cultures to stabilize ownership of its great monolithic structure.

The Entertainment Licensing Unit of the Police Department in Singapore is part of this great structure, with a name that belies the seriousness of its duty - to approve licence applications to all forms of public expression, including the public speeches of political parties in Singapore. It has taken on a more invested role as an extension of the State who is the Artist of all artists - to be the anal sphincter through which all shapes and forms of political and artistic abjectness will have to seek reentry into or be excreted efficiently and expediently from the phallocentric body-politic.

Having manipulated a legitimizing crisis for a life long ban on the performing body of Josef Ng and performance art, the State has also tried to neutralize 5th Passage, the only registered non-profit public art gallery that promotes work of emerging, feminist and feminized artists in the country. In other words, all signs of the feminine have been banished from visibility in the public sphere. It is clear that the press, police and the legal system represent the interests of the State; through the contexts that they shift on the State's behalf, they service the reproduction of its patriarchal image of heterosexism, perpetuating the dependencies of the public on these agencies to monitor and reorganize boundaries to repel the abject and feminized from its clinical centre. This particular analysis confirms the ownership of the State over the many organs and instruments of power which it deploys visibly for the purpose of amplifying its effectiveness. Heng and Devan points out that,

27Straits Times (Singapore), 24 March 1994
It is a post-Foucauldian truism that they who successfully define and superintend a crisis, furnishing its lexicon and discursive parameters, successfully confirm themselves the owners of power [...] the administration of crisis operating to revitalize ownership of the instruments of power even as it vindicates the necessity of their use."28

III THE PATRIOTIC WOMB

In the visual cultures of capitalist and patriarchal societies, it is the strategy to employ the image of the beautiful woman accompanying the appearance of object/s other than herself. Woven into this bombardment of images and imagery, the woman's appearance, in text or image, functions as a crushingly silent exhibit. She is designed to visually arrest her beholder, whose attention must consequently glide from her face and body onto the object she accompanies - if it is not she who is the primary object. By capturing the gaze of her beholder in person, text or image, her prerequisite beauty provokes an intense reading - with perhaps a variable degree of persuasiveness. This is intended to be the undercurrent preparation for the start of her speech - to be an object of ventriloquism not unlike the strategies inherent in visual art.

This ventriloquism has also been established in the preceding pages wherein the State controls the mime of the body and the script of its orifices to confess a text as an agent of the artist's self-annihilation. Because of the fear of reprisal, self-censorship is pervasive in many areas of expression in Singaporean society. The images produced therefore, by socio-politically conscious as well as feminized artists in such a culture of fear, stammer with warbling voices within the Self - a misrecognition of the voice which does not belong to the body as the voice belonging to that body. The ventriloquizing voice of warning therefore is mis-taken as one's own. Aside from its press, State ventriloquism ensures the enunciation of its master text through conduits of the individual and the collective. Our bodies are therefore not our bodies.

This claim is exemplified in the State's relationship to feminine pollution. Heng and Devan explains that the reproduction of a "timeless maternal essence" has resurfaced undyingly throughout the histories of countries and cultures. And this grandiose fantasy, "in ever-changing forms of contemporary power is invariably checked by a troublesome figure of difference":

Whether represented by actual women […] or 'other' races and culture whose identifying characteristics are implicitly feminized - whether that is, it is a sexual or a social body that haunts and threatens - the figure of threat, auguring economic and social disintegration, dismantling the foundations of culture, undermining indeed the very possibility of a recognizable future, is always, and unerringly feminine […] Women, and all signs of the feminine, are by definition always and already anti-national.

The body of work that I produced over the last few years testifies to this female body enacting and performing cultural regimes and nationalisms. Like China's controversial one-child policy, Lee Kuan Yew attempted, in the 1970's, to enact a law which would have allowed university-educated women, who "happened" to be a majority of Chinese, to reproduce. This would have meant that the vast majority of Malay and Indian women (poorly represented in the "educated" classes) could not, by law, reproduce.

29 ibid pg 356
30 ibid pg 356
Performance Piece:

"His Mother Is A Theatre" 1994
Surrogue Desires, Pacific Plaza
5th Passage, Singapore

human hair, baby rocker, wreaks, velvet, light bulbs, bread, fishing line

Collection: Singapore Art Museum

Photo: Simon Thong
This imposition of the "nation's" will over the rights of women to be fertile or not resulted in a form of eugenics that subjugated the bodies of women to the demands of the State. The opening and closing of wombs was subjected to the State patriarch's will for the purpose and aesthetics of his own self-regeneration. What needs also to be stated here is the emergence of a government obsessed with racial, economic and intellectual purity - Lee Kuan Yew reproducing himself through a fantasy of Chinese women as well-educated baby factories.

As such, for the female practitioner, artistic autonomy has become an incessant prospecting of the female body for what is left of the Self to emerge. The AGA controversy exposed a clear insight into the true operation of the Singapore State. The meaning of art practice for me shifted from the activity of painting within the studio to articulating and celebrating gender and cultural abjection as a form of resisting artistic and cultural sterility.

There Is No Loss, Only Seduction

As a response to the outlawed performing body, my work played within the "invisible markers" with the intention for the image to perform its "stammer".

Following the ban on performance art in 1994 to the present, I produced a body of work that was exhibited as a series of installations, three of which were exhibited in a shopping centre in Singapore. In these productions, they presented what for me was the inner theatre of "the body as female and conversely, the female as body". Comprising primarily the use of garments and text written in human hair, these installations, together with those of fellow artists, invaded and "colonized" four shop lots in Pacific Plaza located in Singapore's fashionable Orchard Road district.

His Mother Is A Theatre was created as a mis-take on the recently outlawed performing body in order to reclaim that body. To depict the naked body, I delivered an explicitly described female body that functioned as both a subversive and codified reply to the State. I felt the urgency to make a response as an artist before its new censorship policies resulting from the AGA controversy entrenched itself unquestionably. The artistic, social and political implications of this is described here by Lee Weng Choy:

By virtue of being branded by recent state actions as marginal, one might suppose that, subsequently, the only spaces these artists could inhabit would be marginal as well. But as spaces go, shopping centres in Singapore are as mainstream as they come. It is ironic, then, that art spaces in shopping centres have provided for some of the most dramatic political and aesthetic conflicts and tensions; 5th Passage's prior premise was at another shopping centre, Parkway Parade.\textsuperscript{31}

This exodus of artists and their art work flowing and draining out from within museum and gallery confines into "unofficial", and very often unintended as well as incidental spaces like shop lots and warehouses began a line of inquiry into many issues about art and the public sphere. Besides short circuiting the local gallery network, it was in my opinion a strategic way of questioning the agenda and curatorial direction of existing.

\textsuperscript{31} Lee Weng Choy, "Alternative Spaces and Radical Pleasures", Art Asia Pacific Vol 3 No2 [1996]:47
official spaces for art in Singapore - a way of challenging visibility with visibility. It was also a way of defiling and defying the place of art via a process of bringing art to the people instead of the reverse.

The nature of the relationship between 5th Passage which was invited to organize the temporary tenant project at Pacific Plaza and its Swedish landlords was a strangely symbiotic but timely one. As the artistic director of the only registered non-profit public company promoting contemporary art in Singapore, I was by then quite familiar with the intricacies of dealing with another corporate player who needed media attention and publicity for its premises through "art" promotional programs without the steep financial costs. Still, it was rather surprising to be offered prime space as it was barely one and a half months after the government's public condemnation of the AGA event co-organized by 5th Passage and Artists Village in Parkway Parade.

At first glance, it would read as an inexplicable move; the work of participating artists occupied widely envied prime space in rent-exorbitant Orchard Road of Singapore; the work shown enjoyed a deliriously high traffic flow; the Swedish landlords were extremely pleased with the quality as well as the amount of public and media attention that such a "novel" project attracted. However, the complex inner workings of this three-tier relationship is further decoded by Lee:

In tension with the alternative's desiring is the logic of the system. The centre cannot but be antagonistic to the periphery which seeks to destabilize it. Apart from marginalising these anarchic fringe elements, the system also successfully diffuses their instability by appropriating them. Appropriation does not imply that the system always adopts what it takes into its fold. Often the alternative is appropriated into the mainstream merely as fashion, to be forgotten with the onset of the next spectacle, although sometimes such adoptions are the rule, as in the case of western modern art, whose canon has been constructed through the assimilation of one generation of the avant garde after another.32

The participation of artists in the perpetuation of a spectacle of "freedom" - shopping being the site of this freedom (in Singapore) as well as our highest form of culture, decision making and self determination. As an agreeable national pastime, it's overstimulation, numbing and mesmerizing, additively pleasurable and liberating, befits this legoland replete with sanitized theme parks. For artists like myself, the shopping centre thus became a way of inserting ourselves, as it was, in public, luxuriating in "freedom". Peter Wollen speaks of the politics of display,

It is through modes of display that regimes of all sorts reveal the truths they mean to conceal [...] The main effect of the interminable transience of modern spectacle, as Debord noted, is to efface history and historical understanding. Each historic period has its own rhetorical mode of display, because each has different truths to conceal.33

32 Ibid
33 Peter Wollen, Visual Display - Culture Beyond Appearances. ed. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen, Dia Center for the Arts [1995]:9
Installation View:

"His Mother Is A Theatre" 1994
Surrogate Desires, Pacific Plaza
5th Passage, Singapore

human hair, baby rocker, woks, velvet, light bulbs, bread, fishing line

Collection: Singapore Art Museum

Photo: Chun Chye Teck
If we consider what the Singapore regime wishes to conceal - the lack of true democratic freedoms e.g. speech and its expressive forms as I have discussed, information (through its desire to control information flow from internet access), the linking of housing and infrastructure to voting patterns, detention and torture for "state security", the enforcement of sexual norms etc., what then is displayed? The overarching freedom to consume, albeit material goods. My work at the Pacific Plaza Shopping Centre employs the inverse of the State's strategy of concealment through display - by quoting it, that is by inserting what it conceals back into this display through a subversion of appearances.

*His Mother is a Theatre* explicitly describes a nude/naked female body, to be consumed. This body was literally written in human hair and exhibited in a space without the "immunity" or artistic licence afforded by Museums or official spaces. By removing my work from their sanctuary, I faced possible risk of arrest and censure because I have placed the testimony of the crushed abjected performing body in the heart of the public sphere of the State.

I resisted its effacement and concealment by creating a site that offered no visual pleasure (in that voyeuristic pleasure is rooted the visuality of female nakedness/nudity by challenging the "to-be-looked-at-ness" that conventionally constitutes femininity. The need to seek out a response from the State was important, for to obey and conform then, and now, based on such inequitable, misunderstood and misjudged grounds would be a greater failure and defeat.

The installation also worked as a rupture to the seamless flow of consumer culture in the shopping centre. By inserting this fairly large-scale and presumably unsellable product into a shop front, it entered into friction with the commercial sights beside it by virtue of the fact that it appeared "uncommercial". And yet, it was tempting and attempting to sell something.

As a strategy for promoting its visibility, its unexpected placement in a commercial setting succeeded in disrupting the language of aesthetics in the parade of shop fronts and tempered glass. This naturally enhanced the degree of arrest for the incidental or casual passer-by as an appearance of a "sumptuous" visual feast fitted into the surrounding shopping mall. The singularly symmetrical image of *His Mother Is A Theatre*, when confronted or stumbled upon, heightened the on-looker's momentary states of crisis - even though like many other shop fronts, the subtext echoed the female as abject object.

The use of a product of the human body - hair - to spell itself, address its own functions and declare its own presence in all its inner and outer nudity e.g. clitoris, labia, mammary glands, uterus, etc. produces a self-consciousness that probes societal limitations of the female body in relation to notions of morality, desire, sexuality, art and obscenity.

At this textual but highly virtual site, (where the conjuring of images off the read text remains framed within the reader's mind) I author the individual and collective female body. In so doing, am I at once the mother-confessor of the child/woman's secret interior? Or moralist because I avoid pornographic lingo like "tits" and "cunt"? Perhaps, I am the seducer, masquerading my flesh with text whilst baring it with hair. Or am I the friend / betrayer, prospecting the female body on the grounds of territorial feminist concerns, whilst shrugging off responsibility for the explicit constructed image in the reader's private realm.

34 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Screen Autumn [1975]
Can such a self-exonerating multiplicity of prosthetic roles, lurking amongst the wisps of hair text, obscure the reader’s attempt at fixing her/his gaze at me, a fictional exhibitionist who flaunts her sexuality and political desire only to disengage from it via a rhetoric of feminist anxiety?

Susie Lingham offers her reading,

Theoretically and consistently, whether with vegetative matter, perishable material or mechanical devices, Suzann Victor’s installations, in particular, the objects in the installations, are visual metaphors. This associative substitution of body parts and bodily processes is a display of the tendency towards exhibitionism, latent - in varying degrees - in persons, both male and female. But the results are far from gratuitous. Instead, the objectification of sexual differentiation [...] is disturbing, heightening both a sense of the uncanny and the ridiculous - in a nervous sort of way.35

Hair essentially is run by its own genetic programme of growth and renewal. Its removal is loaded with meaning ranging from social protest to the erasure of identity (e.g. Nazi camps, drug rehab centres in Singapore etc). Langenbach informs us that it is also the renunciation of sexuality in Hinduism, cleansing or mourning in various sects of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. 

In the story of Samson and Delilah, the theft of Samson’s hair is a metaphor for his loss of masculine physical might and virility. Conversely, the female nude in the tradition of western painting serves the necessary contrast to a phallicised male order that demands visual confirmation of their virility through the depiction of feminine hairlessness. (It also strikes a chord in our attempt to understand pedophilia in which bodily immaturity, or the child’s body, is relatively hairless compared with the adult). The concealment of women’s hair (on the head) and the reservation of its beauty for only the eyes of the husband is a ubiquitous sign of the responsibility and guilt of the temptress in the Muslim world. Pubic and armpit hair growth on the Muslim woman’s body, from the moment of its first appearance till old age, is devoutly arrested as they are considered unclean.

In the biblical context, Adam was vested with the authority to name and document ‘creation’ part by part. Written in the language of the monarch, the hair text in the installation contests this by ceremoniously reinscribing the female body into public imagination - announcing each of its part one by one in English. I assumed the authority to use a patriarchal and colonial language to deconstruct itself.

By outlawing the performing body and neutralizing all signs of the feminine in visual art in Singapore as I have stated earlier, the State patriarch has victimized his own ideology. By stripping the feminine/feminized into a bare and impoverished sign of nothing but a sign of his heterosexism/moral panic, he has, in his remissed state, forgotten that women and all signs of the feminine merely require a different strategy of signification. This is because she herself is an author of signs. By grooming hair (in itself a feminine activity) into a textual collage of signifiers to undress the concealment of what violence has been

35Susie Lingham, Body by Proxy, New Criteria Catalogue III, pub. by The Substation, [1995]
Installation Details:

"His Mother Is A Theatre" 1994
Surrogate Desires, Pacific Plaza
5th Passage, Singapore

human hair, baby rocker, wolfs, velvet, light bulbs, bread, fishing line

Collection: Singapore Art Museum

Photo: Artist
done to the female/feminized performing body in Singapore, I have laid out not a cliche but a non-verbal visual testimony of the brutality of this cliche that has crushed these bodies. Because the realm of the masculine maintains this exclusion of women from the production of the spoken word, subversion and seduction is realized through text.

The pronounced female body in this work was textually explicit and yet, considering the AGA controversy that just occurred, the work escaped State and societal censorship. The nude and naked performing female body in my work appeared to have slipped and slid dexterously between the crevices of Singapore's highly surveilled public space. It questioned not only acts of seeing, gazing and beholding the other, but also subjects the beholder to the gaze of the disembodied performing female. Against a commercial backdrop of sexually provocative images in the print and electronic media, what does this double moral standard mean to me?

As a woman artist, my work is an offering of visual testimonies as an embodiment of lived experience. By avoiding the construction of a coherent sentence, the textual collage performed the corporeal thresholds of the female body. As a sequence of "jumpcuts", it returns the responsibility of the image construction coherence and seamlessness to the beholder.

This choice of using an English text for the work is linked to another narrative of crisis detected and defined by Prime Minister Lee that involved the conjuring up of "an unresisted seduction of a vulnerable, "soft," social body feminized by language (English)." Heng and Devan informs us that this is traced back to the 50s and 60s when the terms Chinese was associated with left-wing of the Malayan Communist Party's influence in this cultural section of Singaporean society that led to the eventual closure of the only Chinese-language university in Singapore. This was as a result of the prior British administration and the post colonial governments' identification that English was the currency for progress and economic advancement then. This turnaround to the feminization of English in the 70s saw Lee revising "wholesale" the values, attitudes etc via the introduction of "Asian values" and "Speak Mandarin Campaign" to combat his new belief that a predominantly English-speaking Singapore would render it "all doors are open" (another feminizing factor in his rhetoric), and therefore, vulnerable and permeable to "foreign" invasions. Heng and Devan expounds on this "internalized Orientalism" by the overwhelmingly Western-educated political elite in Singapore who prescribed what constitutes Chineseness,

Thus simultaneously concerned with replication and containment, internalized orientalism supervises the erasure of the rich cultural resources of dialects spoken over countless generations, and arbitrarily names Mandarin the single repository of core Chinese virtues so as to facilitate cultural dissemination and bring within the possibility of governance a Chineseness that might otherwise have remained, like female reproductive habits, too resistantly diverse and prolific.

37 ibid
38 ibid pg 355
Installation View:

"Promise" 1995

Visions of Happiness – Ten Contemporary Asian Artists
Japan Foundation Asia Cultural Center, Tokyo

Human hair, baby rocker, woks, velvet, light bulbs, bureauc fishing line

Photo: Shigao Anzai
The aesthetics within my work, i.e. the exhibitionism in the display and baring all of the inner and outer nudity of the female body is shaped by another "crisis" in the history of women's performing patriotic bodies in Singapore. During this period, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also detected a reproductive dilemma in the 70's, accusing the nation's mother/machine of "willfully and irresponsibly endangering the nation's future through lop-sided female reproductive sexuality" as in less "educated" women were giving birth to more babies than "educated" women. This crisis-motivated invasion of ovarian bodies saw the launch of a form of eugenics in the guise of a financial award programme (Government's $10,000 Helping Hand for the Low Income Families) for non-graduate mothers to limit child-bearing to two children, followed by "voluntary" tubal ligation, in order to maintain a lower level of procreation from these mothers of "no education". A generous tax relief programme (plus other hospital benefits and admission priorities for their children to the best schools etc) was put in place to entice graduate mothers to give birth to more children for the national purpose of boosting its genetic pool of "naturally" high achievers.

Heng and Devan located this fantasy of impending chaos as rooted "in the intersecting registers of race and class, [...] visualized as the random interplay of excess and deficiency among female bodies, which, left unregulated, would produce disabling, ungermanable, and unsafe equations of class and race [...]." On closer scrutiny, the undesirable production of "inferior" quality babies were by a "stunning coincidence" from working class women of Malay and Indian ethnic origin - members of Singapore's minority racial groups. It thus emerged that the underlying threat was in fact the possible dismantling of a Chinese-dominated ratio "born at the cherished moment of paternal delivery" during the nation's expulsion into enforced independence from Malaysia in 1965.

An unstammering self-regenerating image of the State patriarch is thus emerging and imposing its phallocentric body politic onto the bodies of its women citizens. The dominant culture, Chinese, was seen as in imminent danger of fragmenting under the weight of being 'swarmed' and disrupted by dark Asians. This is an inverse brand of racialism attributed largely to an overly discriminating and "reticent" set of "educated" (Chinese elite) wombs versus an unruly, overproductive and "open" mass of "uneducated" (Malay and Indian working class) wombs which exists in varying degrees in Singapore till today. This detection of impending chaos, fired by a desire for "absolute mastery" in the social formation of a nation, a method of self-mirroring via the face of the citizenry pre-pictured the kind of Pauline Hanson style self-portraiture in which colour became the national prerequisite over and above any other criteria.

The imposition of this form of eugenics implemented with the support of cabinet ministers and in the face of opposition from legal scholars and professional women to legitimate the feminizing of "disturbing" elements, as Heng and Devan points out, further

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39 "If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline. How can we avoid lowering performance when for every two graduates, in 25 years' time there will be one graduate, and for every two uneducated workers, there will be three?" ("Talent for the Future: Prepared Text of the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's Speech at the National Day Rally Last Night," The Straits Times [Singapore], August 15 1983. Source: Heng and Devan, Ibid pg 357
30 Ibid pg 345
41 Ibid pg 346
42 Ibid
registers a suspicion of disapproval at "a sexuality (that was) non economic, driven by
pleasure: sexuality for its own sake, unproductive of babies, or babies for their own sake,
unproductive of social and economic efficiency".

It is imperative therefore, that my work be considered and assessed as emerging from a
political system that is not only fixated with the eradication of "feminine pollution", a
prevalent form of maintaining a desirable lack of "abjection" or its inverse levels of
"dirtlessness" but also one that reinvents its own "uterine nationalism". In so doing, it
betrays the State's "fantasy of the body-machine".43

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43Ibid
**Installation View:**

"Tintoretto's Risen Christ Arresting Lazy Susan" 1996
The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Human hair, curved walls, organza,
revolving platform, crushed glass, velvet

Photo: Artist

(next page) **Installation Context:**

"The Risen Christ" by Tintoretto
Permanent Collection of the
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Photo: Artist
Installation View:

"Tintoretto's Risen Christ Arresting Lazy Susan" 1996
The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Human hair, orgenza, revolving platform, carved walls, crushed glass, velvet

Photo: Artist
IV THE PATRIOTIC VAGINA AND "OTHER" NATIONALISMS

Heng and Devan discuss uterine nationalism as a form of submission by women to the patriotic needs of the State through the medium of their bodies. What is argued is that whereas men in wartime obviously sacrifice their bodies in the service of the State, women are forced to serve the phallocentric nation in peace as well as war time, in constant and perpetual anticipation of future threats of pollution by ethnic and intellectual "inferior" races.

This anxiety of imagined dissolution by unnameable forces, ("uneducated" women), sees the State invading the "most private medium possible" in women's bodies - the womb - to mobilize national defence in a ceaseless and ongoing war against an imagined onslaught of impurity and abjectness.

According to Heng and Devan, the Singaporean state mobilizes a language of patriotism through phallic nationalism "as patriotic duty for men grew out of the barrel of a gun" (the inscription on boys at eighteen when they serve in the army), as well as uterine nationalism "for women[,] out of the recesses of the womb" (the demands placed on educated Chinese women to reproduce). The State thus seeks to own both reproducing power as well as the power to reproduce.

This ambition of the State to ensure the proliferation of racial and therefore, intellectual superiority in the Singaporean context extends to the importing of domestic help from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka to "assist" with bringing up its future generations. Singapore and the Philippines have had a recent history of political tension over the plight of thousands of Filipino women who are employed as domestic help in Singapore. As I have observed on a recent trip, while this form of employment is a practice within Filipino culture itself, the underlying feature of this form of nationalism where women become a national export of domestic labour has more to do with class structures than economics. This subjugation of women's bodies to forms of nationalisms as cultural and patriotic duty has a parallel in Singapore as I have critiqued earlier. However, they do not operate independently of each other.

Poor women become a national export of female domestic labour as a form of national service, filial piety and an extension of the concept of the "working mother". As domestic maids in a foreign country (some of whom are themselves university-educated), Filipino women take care of the babies and homes of wealthier and even working class Singaporean families. This includes that of "educated" Singaporean mothers, who more likely than not, are pursuing intellectual, economic or artistic goals and / or are managing full-time careers as well. Poor Filipino women, obstructed from realizing their own potential (which does not preclude being mothers to their own children), perform "surrogate motherhood" nationalism for their country through injecting earnings back to their families and into the Filipino economy to service another State's (Singapore) uterine nationalism by "mothering" that State's future generation. These duties are performed without the attendant maternal, legal or financial status and involves painful long-term separation from their own children and loved ones.

As a form of resistance to the advancement and progressive feminist ideals of western women, there still exists residual traces of a nostalgic fantasy of the indebted Asian

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44Ibid
woman, eager to please, submissive, unquestioning and compliant in the form of the Filipino "Mail Order Bride". These brides cater to a market of mostly older Western white males, or divorcees. Evidently still retaining archaic expectations of gender and sexual roles, the lopsided transaction within this libidoal economy contracts the Filipino bride to a lifetime of sexual and domestic subservience in exchange for the promise of a "better" life in a more mature democracy. In many cases, these brides regularly send money to support their families back in the Philippines. This form of "matrimonial" nationalism, like the other forms of nationalisms I have mentioned that dictate and determine women's lives in South East Asia share an acute degree of pragmatic violence - that of the elision of female sexual pleasure and autonomy. (The "vaginal" nationalism of Japanese comfort women, or Karayuki-san, is another complex example of this).

In the show Visions of Happiness - Ten Contemporary Asian Artists at Tokyo's Japan Foundation, I reproduced His Mother is a Theatre into the Japanese national flag. This time the focus was on the concentric circles of red hair text "bleeding" on a white ground that repeated the red sun motif in the Japanese flag. While making the work, my intention was to retell the until then, hidden history of the Karayuki-San. Before leaving for Tokyo, I was concerned with a form of "vaginal nationalism" that shaped the lives of the Karayuki-San. This was the term of reference for Japanese and Korean comfort women who were stationed as prostitutes in brothels in Singapore to supplement the funds for the Japanese war effort in during World War II. At the time of the exhibition, there were emotional and courageous demands for an apology and compensation for some of these women who were still alive today. Thus, the installation became for me, a bloody symbolic re-enactment and reminder of the sacrifice and denial of ownership of women's bodies in that society. In his book Ah Ku-San and Karayuki-San, James Warren Francis states that the contribution of these women in sustaining Singapore's pre-war economy and society has still not been fully recognized, or for that matter, faced up to by both Singaporeans and Japanese alike.

The underlying point in both the works I have described is the absence, and for that matter, the removal of pleasure in both forms of nationalisms. In considering my work, the curator Shimizu Toshio inscribes,

The installation is a device for calling out the spirits of sorrowful mothers. Singapore is a model state for the future. Perfectly controlled individuals live orderly lives under the national flag and work hard at producing things and more human beings [...] It is utopia where everything is perfectly controlled and life is carried out in an ideal fashion. Victor points out however, that it is dangerous to take the city envisioned in Civitas Solis as a model for the vision of happiness. Modernist ideology is supposedly based on the equality of human beings, but sooner or later, the weak are abandoned ...

Due to the evolving nature of the concept for this show, the change I had made and therefore, its symbolic, cultural and political meaning changed as well. My intention, by displaying this truth in Tokyo itself, was to unveil and reinsert that secret history, in

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45 James Warren Francis, Ah Ku and Karayuki-San
Installation View:

“Third World Extra Virgin Dreams” 1997
Sixth Havana Biennial
Cuba

Glass, magnifying plastic squares, human blood, wire clips, ice, cables.

Photo: Artist
particular, the Japanese women's roles in WWII and thus, by implication, their perceived role and status in Japanese society then.

CIRCUMCISING ZONES OF INTENSITY

The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane in 1996 was a project that showed an earnest intention to open up opportunities for dialogue to take place in this region. My work, which was included in this event was unintentionally site-specific.

In this work, donated hair was "de-culturalised". By this I mean that the natural pigment in the hair was bleached and dyed scarlet red. The hair spelt out female bodily seepage. They were sewn onto the outer circumference of a pristine white translucent dress. Supported by an unobtrusive wire armature, it stood in the middle of a revolving platform. An enclosure created by three curved walls measuring surrounded the stage with three interrupting breaks. These spatial intervals served as viewing positions for the visitors.

When the visitor stood at any of the three designated viewing positions, red hair text consisting of words such as "menstruation", "placenta", "fæces" and "amniotic fluid" etc were continually served up to the audience in a clockwise direction on what looked like a huge "lazy susan". This ubiquitous serving equipment that occupied centre stage on every table in Chinese restaurants became the signifier of the Chinese culture to which I belong. In this configuration, the work addressed beliefs and superstitions that surrounded cultural attitudes which ostracise the menstruating female body from any proximity to religious altars. For example, the Hokkien dialect term for menstruation is literally the "coming of dirt". This is a cultural equation of menstrual bleeding to abjection and religious pollution. Part of this social and religious ostracism of women is also a moral one - that of the "dirty woman", which refers to the "other" woman as a vessel for the seminal emissions of someone else's husband. The adulterous "Other" woman is thus a threat to the legitimacy of her marital status, which really reads as her rightful privilege as the legitimate vessel for her husband's seed.

The space in which my work was sited in the gallery was back to back with Tintoretto's painting "The Risen Christ" which belonged to the permanent collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. Having grown up with Christianity in a post-colonial country, I was naturally interested in the proximity of this religious aesthetic element. I was using the curved walls which were originally created for the display of this painting and decided to title the work "Tintoretto's Risen Christ Arresting Lazy Susan".

In this painting, the dominant figure of Christ, in what appeared to be a flowing cape, rises and hovers over the tomb. From his hands, chest and feet, blood trickled. What struck me about this painting was the widely accepted religious and cultural glorification of Christ's bleeding. Yet, the production and seepage of menstrual blood from the female body produces social, psychological and religious anxiety. Its proximity to the painting as its context therefore questioned and threw into sharp relief the contrast between the iconic significance of the menstruating orifices on the palms, chest and feet of the Risen Christ and that of women's.

Lazy Susan was a reprise of the representative construction of Christ's body, in particular the contradictions between that body and the female body. By shedding blood, an essentially feminine quality, Christ, with this blood, nourished another feminine attribute. In her essay on the relationship between the bleeding and the dying body of Christ and
Installation Detail:

"Third World Extra Virgin Dreams" 1997
Sixth Havana Biennial

Cabaña Fortress, Havana, Cuba

Glass, magnifying plastic squares, human blood, wire clips, bed, cables.

Photo: Artist
that of the body of the female medieval worshipper following the codification of transubstantiation in 1200 AD, Jennifer Ash predicates that Christ’s suffering body, while represented as male, was thought of and discussed in fundamentally feminine and maternal terms. She explains,

The fleshly matter of incarnated Divinity was inherited from His Mother Mary. Christ’s flesh was Mary’s flesh, was quite literally feminine fleshiness; for Christ’s conception was without the participation of earthly paternity: in the bodily being of Christ, the Divine met with woman without masculine mediation. And in its bleeding and feeding, the male body of Christ participated in the bodily functioning of the feminine and the maternal.47

In the discursive construction of Christ within visual texts and textuality of this period (including religious prose and poetry), Christ was related to and portrayed as both lover and mother, wounded and bleeding, capable of nurturing and feeding the supplicant. While attributing these qualities to a Divine masculine, the seepage out of the margins of the female body (blood and milk) are abject in the feminine. So the basis of Christian aesthetics and representations of Christ returns to bleeding as female. The body, when it is permeable and unsealed, even if it is a male body, is therefore female.

The bleeding wound in Christ’s side functions as a lactating breast. Bleeding is lactation... According to scientific theorizing in the Middle Ages, breast milk was actually blood; the blood of the mother which was used to nourish the unborn child in the uterus was after the child’s birth, converted into breast milk [...] The agonizing pain of the crucifixion, the side of Christ in His passion, was the suffering, the passion "of a woman giving birth".48

My work grew into a response to this bleeding male/female body. Each organ displayed behind glass, carefully sealed from the viewer, was made from crushed broken glass; a material which cuts and penetrates. Each glass organ is encased in a blood red environment, made from crimson red glass, encased in a blood red environment. The three curved walls, each with two window inserts displayed these female organs resting on velvet pillows. The installation became a stage on which Woman divested herself of her organs, and correspondingly she is divested of power by displaying these organs as ‘circumcised’ zones of intensity - beating heart, bleeding uterus, peeping clitoris, feeding nipples, laying ovaries, ventrilouising tongue.

Revolving endlessly on a huge lazy susan, the words repetitively confront the blind spot in our perception of bleeding, and through this work I ask - whose prerogative is it to bleed visibly, gloriously, universally and most of, meaningfully?

At the Triennial, it was irresistible to read signs of self-exoticism and political "laundering" that appeared to predominate the works curated into the exhibition. By this I am referring to the visual declarations of oppression, phallocentrism etc in the

47 Jennifer Ash, "The discursive construction of Christ’s body in the later Middle Ages: resistance and autonomy" [1990]:90
48 ibid pg 86
Installation View:

"Third World Extra Virgin Dreams" 1997
Seith Havana Biennial
Cebania Fortress, Havana, Cuba

Glass, magnifying plastic squares, human blood, wire chips, bird, cobwebs.

Photo: Alvin Reamillo
works shown, including my own. However, I would like to perceive these positions as ways of engaging and problematizing the respective State oppressions that participating artists hope to convey through a form of exhibitionism that subverts the penetrating and threatening gaze of the State.

While I feel that artists do not just cross borders, the dynamic of host and guests at the Triennial was carried through multiple levels without any declared intentions for reciprocity (which in contrast, is keenly anticipated in ARX5 as I have explained earlier). There was no visible scope for sustained dialogue amongst the participants post-event. It was left to the initiative of the artists. The psychology of Brisbane as the power base was thus clearly defined. In effect, this dynamic is visibly and formally entrenched symbolically, financially, institutionally and even politically in these events. As such, these postures divide and deepen the etching of boundaries in powerful and disquieting ways as it encompasses varying degrees, voluntary or otherwise, of setting artists up in roles as "ambassadors / representatives" for countries or systems to which they are at best ambivalent about and for which they are now emissaries, thus producing an ongoing tension and disempowerment.

It would also be important to note that the invisibility of pollution anxiety and threat was limited to the confines of the Australian customs and excise department where art works coming into the country were vigilantly scrutinized and examined. Given that the Australian environment is precious to its people, and rightly so, this exercise has and would (in the 1999 Triennial) ensure another form of "sanitized" art entering into and subjecting itself under the aura of the Queensland Art Gallery.
Installation View:

"Expense of Spirit (and the) Waste of Shame" 1994, 1999
Pacific Plaza, Singapore
Artpace, Sydney
Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
John Curtin Gallery, Perth

Baby rocker, mirrors, cables, light bulbs, crushed windshield glass, charcoal, aluminium rods.

Photo: Pete Smith
For the Sixth Havana Biennial in Cuba, which for the first time included an Asian section, I installed the work Third World Extra Virgin Dreams at the historical site of the Cabania Fortress. That it was a fortress demonstrated its show of strength as a symbol of power, defence and protection. But implicit in this display is weakness, for the impregnable needs no defence.

Yet again, I found myself in an architecture that was haunted with a colonial past, reconsigned as it were, to house art of mainly Latin America. I used an object that functions metaphorically as a site of both beginnings and endings, birthing and death, sex and sleep; solid and physical, yet vulnerable and abstract - rest and restlessness; a place of pleasant dreams and fevered nightmares - an object that is permanently imprinted with the human form - a bed.

Our sentient bodies imprint the bed with corporeal thresholds marking bodily events. In return, we imbue its surface and depth with the flushes and seepage emanating from our interiority - a silent witness to our confessions, betrayals, desire and woundability.

As a young Chinese girl, the patchwork quilt, made of remnant pieces of fabric, has existed as a sign of poverty and female labour in Asian society. My response to this sign, however, was to monumentalize it whilst retaining a desirable quality of fragility. Unlike quilts made traditionally, I chose glass to produce a ten metre quilt, and was assisted by both male and female friends in the course of its production in Sydney. In Cuba, I embarked on a process that encompassed the exchange of political and social memory with the Cuban family that chose to house me. This process entailed the donation of blood by a representative of the family which, together with mine, was used in the work.

The ten-metre glass quilt cascaded onto the floor, symmetrically from both sides of a single metal bed that was suspended at two metres above ground level. The bed appeared to levitate towards a skylight in the centre of the vault's elongated dome ceiling. This site was chosen because of the way the bed could be configured to allow the viewer to project a scene. In the imagination, the bed was either ascending into, or descending out of a hole that obviously could not fit it. Thus the positioning of the work allowed for a whole other narrative - of either a penetration of the architecture by the bed or an expulsion of the bed by the architecture through its orifice - the skylight. Because it was a fortress, the strategy of ambiguity in the works I discussed before, is present again, functioning simultaneously as both "escape" and "invasion".

Made up of almost three thousand glass slides, each displayed a drop of blood sandwiched between it and a much smaller magnifying plastic square measuring one and a half centimetre square. A small quantity of red wine was added to the blood mixture to help preserve it. Each drop of blood spread out like calligraphic brush strokes, arbitrarily limited and directed by diagonal hatchings on its underside.

My starting point when envisioning the piece was to manufacture the process of an imaginary collection of hymeneal fluid. The reflected light appeared to liquefy, falling from bed to ground. The architecture itself became a screen for the shadow of each drop refracted onto the ground without any need for hi-tech lighting or showy effects. For me the transfixing quality of this work is the way the object becomes part of the architecture in encompassing and transforming the whole space. The transparency of the glass quilt appeared to hover between states of appearance and disappearance; visibility and invisibility; intrusion and expulsion; suspended in a limbo of sleepless
Installation Detail:

"Expense of Spirit (and the) Waste of Shame" 1994, 1999
Pacific Plaza, Singapore
Artspace, Sydney
Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
John Curtin Gallery, Perth

baby rocker, mirrors, cables, light plus
crushed windshield glass, charcoal, aluminium rods.

Photo: Artisi
dreaming, a glass quilt descending from an ascending bed, the installation operated within the surrealistic grammar of the dreaming state.

Third World Extra Virgin Dreams appeared to have a quality of anonymous subjectivity in each glass that enacted a subtext of objective observation in the manner in which the blood appeared to have been collected and displayed. It is as if, each child/woman, as signified by a single glass slide, has been reduced to her most "valuable" commodity - a single drop of virginal blood - the ultimate essence of desirability/use value in a patriarchal society. Irigaray clarifies,

*The virginal woman [...] is pure exchange value.* She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange[...] The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by the violation of an envelope: the hymen, which has taken on the value of taboo, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from the exchange of men.49

Irigaray sums up that the roles of mother, virgin and prostitute are socially imposed on women. But in the context of what I have discussed in this paper, the State transforms them into nationalisms - uterine nationalism, vaginal nationalism, surrogate motherhood nationalism, matrimonial nationalism, and in the case of Thailand, the pimp circulates extremely young girls literally with certificates of "virginity" in an economy of poverty which requires the female to perform "hymenial" nationalism.

As we can see, whether it is a social or patriotic role, woman, as Irigaray has pointed out, have no right to her own pleasure.50

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49Irene Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, pub. by Cornell University [1985]:186
50Ibid pg 187
Expense of Spirit & A Waste of Shame comprises forty light bulbs engrossed in narcissistic fascination with their own mirrored selves. Each lighted bulb sits at the end of a lengthy black cable. Presented in sets of ten, they are in turn collectively suspended from a metal rod hanging parallel to the ground at a height of 2.2 metres. Individually paired with vanity mirrors, the lighted bulbs languishingly hover and gaze at “real time” portraits of themselves, “rendered” in an illusion of ovoid deep space - that is until the motors they are connected to is activated. Then with unresisting mechanistic drive, persistence, faithfulness, repetition and manic gentleness, they unashamedly perform what appears to be attempts at penetrating their own reflection. With each slippery contact between full-blown glass bottom and flat mirror surface, a high pitched chant of fragile clinks proclaim witness to each and every attempt. As the curtains of black cables heave and sigh in echo to each dip and rise of these infatuated lights, the bed of crushed glass on the ground glint laterally, alerting the viewer to its potentially injurious boundaries.

Upon closer scrutiny of these eroticized objects of the everyday, these fat-bottomed globes mimic the gesture of clitoral stimulation on its own reflected image. But which is stimulating which? What is "pleasuring" what? Who is looking and who is being looked at? Who is the seer and who is seen?

In his unfinished work The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau Ponty resurrects us the chiasm in chiasms - the rhetorical term for the trope of "mirroring" in which he reflects on the two-way migratory essence of the seer and the seen (the subject and the object):

Since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees; there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity - which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism; not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.51

Expense of Spirit controls a libidinal space that generates a desire for me to return to it (like a fetish) but also to look away from. Its libidinal economy works at always coming, but its arrival constantly and ever deferred. For "I" am a picture of promised peripeteia, a pregnant moment never achieved. Is it the Real that rubs the Image or the Image rubbing the Real? In its public display of mechanistic onanism, sexual tension is always, and already dissipated. "I" am the self-surveilling woman, all picture and composition. "I" am all potential, feigning pleasure for the pleasure of you, the seer. The degree of "my" pleasure and self-absorption is bound up in the intensity of your love for "me", the pleasure you take in "me". "I" am, and always, appearance and apparition. "I" am the non-narcissistic narcissist.52

51Maurice Merleau Ponty, "The Visible and the Invisible", Evanston, Northwestern University Press, [1968]:139
The speculum is not necessarily a mirror but a trope, disguised as a probing device to extend the scope of the eye in its speculative intent of woman's secret interior. In order to understand the enigma of the feminine, the project of the late nineteenth and twentieth century has returned to the female body as an enduring site of inquiry - to prod, to probe and study what it is that makes up Woman in order to grasp what her sex is.

Like the lighted bulbs that cannot help but return to their reflection only to misrecognise themselves, Expense of Spirit is a collection of objects, which, in a secondary reading, could signify the subject's formative idealization of coherence in the mirror. Lacan posits the gaze as the "outside instrument" with which the subject constitutes itself internally - "first through the mother's look as it facilitates the 'join' of infant and mirror image, and later through the many other actual looks with which it is confused."\(^5\) So the installation could also be read as a model for these external agents, while the bulbs become autonomous little subjects dancing in their own reflected light of misrecognised mastery and plenitude.

This work captures the moment when mirroring spies on itself - a signifier of knowledge, light, and a symbol of mimetic representation - the mirror, turns back on itself in a masturbatory, jittery installation of desire and unfulfillable lack. A desire that is aggressive and yet so easily repelled.

I have been caught seeing myself being seen.

CONCLUSION

The State is the Artist of all artists. This thesis has shown that because it treats art as a vivid medium for mirroring itself, a form of narcissism surfaces. In requiring that art reflects this Self as a picture of glory, it asserts that art can be acquired as part of its political arsenal. Women as well as artists can be redesigned into labourers of prefabricated cultural production and as cooperative vigilantes of censorship. I have also shown that in Singapore, cultural production has entered into a subsumed role under the entertainment industry, literally policed by the police. I have shown that as the Artist, the State values art as polite vision and light distraction far more than art as critical/intellectual discourse and empowerment. The concept of the Individual or the notion of private and peripheral vision is thus jeopardised.

I have discussed how my practice acts out of a need to retain my own boundaries in order not to be absorbed into a nationalistic agenda that places art within its projection of good governance and its desire for acceptance into the world stage as a nation that has "arrived". In sanitizing art for this purpose, the State has shown that it can never accept a challenge, demonstrating thus, a heightened awareness of the gaze of an Outside World. This is even when it is performing economically or technologically. As such, the work I produce and which I have discussed in this paper perform as visual testimonies as well as devices which subject the State to the gaze of the abject object of art.

I have inserted myself and my work into the Singapore government's own binary - an opposition between purity and the common good versus abjection and individual creative freedom so as to dissolve the onslaught of a fixed and self-contained national identity imposed by the State. I have shown that the subjective bodily intensity I propose in my work operates as an Other to power, as a surplus of the abject that disturbs its immaculately groomed image.

I have employed the positionalita afforded by abjection itself to maintain the integrity of the individual through the use of theories set out by Kristeva, Douglas and Grosz. I have demonstrated how the State uses these very codes to contain, marginalise or expel its critics, dissidents and artists alike and that the oppression of the female and the feminized are thus even more codified than ever in this region today.

The first section has dealt with the way in which the State mobilizes itself as the pinnacle of purity and how anything critical of it is seen in diametrical opposition and by implication, as abject. I followed it up with a historical moment in which the State feminized its male artist-critic and his opposition in terms of homosexuality. The paper has also contextualized one method of marginalization in which the State's press is used as a mouthpiece for ventriloquising the supplementary message within the photographic message, techniques that were theorized by Barthes and Sontag. What is illustrated is how bodies are articulated by the State as digits within this national identity where it will not hesitate to invade and colonize the secret interior of women for cultural and racial reproduction of superiority - that even wombs and bowels have taken on a national identity.

Having also briefly compared nationalisms around the region, the paper has also looked at how women's bodies have been intersected by "Other" nationalisms aside from the uterine nationalism in Singapore, in particular, Japan and Philippines, - vaginal nationalism, surrogate motherhood nationalism and matrimonial nationalism.
The reflections in this paper also include a recognition of the dominance of the phallocentric body and how it is primary and normalized as such, even when that body takes on feminine qualities of bleeding as menstruation or as Ash has shown, bleeding as lactation. Lastly, I have interfered with the State's desire in terms of its narcissism by using my own work to navigate and sexualize this as a form of disruption.

As such I see my work as characterized by a quality of politicizing, sexualizing and engendering objects, allowing them to stammer with a multitude of competing meanings as opposed to the singular quest for a meaning as the State so badly desires. Each installation has a monumental fall of material, fabric or glass, allowing the spectator to imagine a languid drop from one state into another. As allies or adversaries, these ceremonies for "bodily" events or disembodied performances that I insert into public spaces attempt conspiracies with the spatial dynamics and contextual significance of the given architecture. In Singapore, it entered into the spectacle of material consumption in the public sphere as visual appearances of truths that society conceals through these very modes of display.

Privileged with degrees of proximity to the cultural contexts I been invited to show in, my emphasis has been to make works that create a space which recognizes, welcomes and celebrates the symmetries that dominate difference; a space where one can enter into an equation of vulnerability; a space in which we can, and are willing to be vulnerable to one another. My work has also focused on being inclusive of the potential of the viewer, by producing images that can give rise to or redeem even more images for the spectator. These opportunities have attuned me to a process of discernment - of listening to the body "belonging" to the voice.

Given enough space, male slides into female and vice versa as in His Mother Is A Theatre. Punctured with enough holes, the male body mimics the feminine, as in Tintoretto's Risen Christ Arresting Lazy Susan. Endowed with an orifice, penetration collides with expulsion as in Third World Extra Virgin Dreams. And a patchwork of glass slides becomes the emblem of two thousand faceless women as well as a pair of glass supports for a frail bed inside a forsaken fortress - a collective female voice resounding in a male tower.

In ever-decreasing circles, the flow of history, truth and power returns to the body as an enduring site of inquiry. The other body is still spinning in this vertigo of discipline, reward, punish, constrain, release, confine.

This condition of a ravenous centre, ever liquid, splendidly fluid, constantly shifting grounds, magically swallowing circumstances at will, procreating new ones by remote, leaves no space whatsoever for an inviolable private universe. In one breath, it creates proximity and distance, organizing a periphery of the female and the feminized.

Functioning as high contrast, she services the accentuation of his contours by the exposure of her underside. She is consigned to float in the negative space of his self-portraiture, dressed in erect nipples and hairlessness. Her liquid placenta seeping in circular time. Waiting.

She is delayed by her own image, her peaks and intensities attuned to pre-selected channels. As parchment, she continues to receive the lashes of truth and the etchings of power that registers in depth the print of history with a pre-ordained text. As repository,
her secret interior is entrusted as the site of seminal explosions - the one-way flow that rules heterosexual logistics.

He forgets that these are the temperatures that stir her inner theatre into a seizure of crimson speed,rupturous as the moment Moses part the Red Sea.

He forgets that as periphery, she defines the limits of the centre.

Relegated to the edge, she engulfs it.

Out of the way, she envelops it with all the viscosity and stickiness that he fears -

semen, saliva, menses, milk, phlegm, tears, placenta, amniotic fluid, sweat, shit, pus and piss.
Museum custodians cleaning drainage space between glass panels and balcony balustrade of the Singapore Art Museum.

Photo: artist
Bibliography


NOTES


3 The ARX5 programme, predating the Brisbane-based Asia Pacific Triennials (APT) by more than a decade in vision, posed participants from Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia with the rare attraction of being involved in a project that is committed to a shifting psychology of power bases, from Perth in Western Australia to the two countries mentioned over a one year period, aside from working on "homeground", to test notions of cultural permeability, or conversely, opacity, in contexts and constituencies other than the familiar and the comfortable.


6 ibid

7 Chee Soon Juan, To be Free, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University [1998]:270-271.


9 ibid


11 Chee Soon Juan, To be Free, Monash Asia Institute, Monash, 1998 University [1998]:266

12 Victor Burgin, In/Different Spaces, University of California Press 1996 :257

13 The other performance in this space is that of the custodians of the Museum, who entered into this narrow space and with restricted bodily movements, ritually clean, wash, unblock the drains and polish the glass panels faithfully every week.

14 Ray Langenbach, "Atropia", unpublished paper


16 Susan Sontag, On Photography, Dell Pub., [1973]:168


19 ibid

20 ibid

21 Susan Sontag,

22 Elizabeth Grosz,
23 Roland Barthes,

24 The New Paper, Cover Story, 3 January 1994


26 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism, Sydney: Allen and Unwin [1994]:201

27 Straits Times (Singapore), 24 March 1994


29 ibid pg 356

30 ibid pg 356

31 Lee Weng Choy, "Alternative Spaces and Radical Pleasures", Art Asia Pacific Vol 3 No2 [1996]:47

32 ibid

33 Peter Wollen, Visual Display - Culture Beyond Appearances, ed. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen, Dia Center for the Arts [1995]:9

34 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Screen Autumn [1975]

35 Susie Lingham, Body by Proxy, New Criteria III Catalogue pub. by The Substation, [1995]


37 ibid

38 ibid

39 "If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline. For how can we avoid lowering performance when for every two graduates, in 25's years' time there will be one graduate, and for every two uneducated workers, there will be three?" ("Talent for the Future: Prepared Text of the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's Speech at the National Day Rally Last Night," The Straits Times [Singapore], August 15 1983. Source: Heng and Devan, ibid pg 357

40 ibid pg 355

41 ibid

42 ibid pg 345

43 ibid pg 346

44 ibid

45 ibid pg 347