Practising Contemporary Art in the Global City for the Arts, Singapore

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We live in what appears to be a distinctive moment in which the contemporary arts, new museums and art biennales have become linked to what is called 'commodity reification'[1] and a near-frenzied consumerism that are part of the free-market capitalism that became pronounced after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the city-state of Singapore, *culture* once used to mean *race* and the *ethnic cultures* linked to the so-called CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) model of ethic-cultural management in the city-state.[2] Since the early 1990s, though, *cultural policy* has expanded to include the more recognisable *arts policy*. This 'moment' of culture – essentially from the 1990s for Singapore – has led to a seemingly overnight establishment of institutionalised art markets, museums[3] and performing arts centres, notably The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, opened on 12 October 2002. Such developments have contributed to transforming the puritanical and (that long-favoured People's Action Party [PAP] adjective) pragmatic city-state from a purported cultural desert into … what exactly?[4] A Global City for the Arts (the title of a 1992 policy paper)?[5] A cultural hub through which other people's cultural products flow through,[6] where sometimes expression can be a problem,[7] and where 'hip' capitalism is celebrated? Singapore wants to be *contemporary urban chic* now, replacing the old *stentorian urban modern* of the late 1960s and 1970s – an 'old' that is still not too far away in the past.

Given the massive attempts to transform the city-state, what does it now mean to practise contemporary art and to be a contemporary artist? What sorts of content and artistic

[1] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 257-66.
[2] Sharon Siddique, 'Singaporean Identity', in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. K. S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).
[3] The most important museum initiative at the present is the renovation of the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings for a new National Art Gallery of Singapore. The gallery's ambitions are not only national but transnational/regional; this is significant, given that Singapore is the only locale in Southeast Asia with the potential curatorial capacity and definite infrastructural ability to stage Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art, rather than mainly national art. The official website states the following: 'At 60,000 square metres, we will not only be the largest visual arts venue in Singapore but also one of the largest in the region when the Gallery opens officially in 2015. The National Art Gallery will focus on displaying 19th and 20th century Southeast Asian art, including Singapore art. Through a comprehensive collection, the Gallery will present the development of Singapore and regional cultures, so as to tell the story of their social, economic and political histories. While the body of works at the National Art Gallery falls largely within the area of modern art, the Gallery strives towards understanding the collection in new and varied ways – taking on a contemporary approach and interpretation of the development of Southeast Asian art. The Gallery will look beyond national and regional boundaries of art, and take on a wider ambit of international visual arts culture, research into our Asian heritage and cultural affiliations, and engage with global cultures and discourses' (The National Art Gallery of Singapore, 'About the Gallery', <http://nationalartgallery.sg/about-the-gallery/>, accessed 3 July 2012).
[4] Singapore, of course, has always had 'culture' and cultural life in the varied forms of, say, Chinese opera and an active film industry in the 1950s and 1960s. The cultural desert stereotype perhaps became more of a reality when intense modernisation built upon a basically petit-bourgeois worldview intensified from the 1970s.
[5] *Singapore – Global City for the Arts* (Singapore: Economic Development Board and Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1992).
[6] Kwok Kian Woon and Mariam Mohammed Ali, 'Cultivating Citizenship and National Identity', in *Singapore: Re-engineering Success*, ed. Lee Tsao Yuan and Arun Mahizhnan (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[7] Terence Chong, *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012).

approaches/strategies make sense now? Can artistic practice ignore or 'properly' take advantage of the new competitive and monied contexts that frame the arts? What aspects of culture are now important to artists? What sort of audience does one imagine is *out there* – in Singapore or (a word we might expect) globally? What are *positives* of the moment, and what are the *negatives*? While such questions cannot even begin to be addressed in their entirety in this issue of *Performance Paradigm*, a number of 'younger' arts practitioners were invited to reflect upon such questions, to proffer the specific concerns they think are paramount for this moment, and to write about their artistic practices. The final responses take the form of essay-statements of personal artistic/intellectual development (two are performative statements), statements of individual and institutional practice, and interviews. While not all who were invited to share their thoughts were able to respond in the end, unfortunately, this issue endeavours to offer at least *indicative* reflections on contemporary artistic practice and its context in Singapore – reflections that for the artists appear in print for the first time. The seasoned performance artist Lee Wen is the exception to being a younger artist, and his artistic practice and history have been documented;[8] but he shares with us his experiences with organising collective performance art, and the issue of collaboration is one interest that is shared by some of the contributors.

It seems necessary for this Introduction to work through the 1980s, as the pioneering artists who emerged then expanded the vistas for critical cultural expression and experimentation that benefitted the others to come. The 1980s – somewhat unexpectedly, given the dour 1970s – witnessed incrementally dynamic activity primarily in new forms of theatrical and visual arts experimentation. This dynamism, in some respects, was accompanied by tentative new state ventures in staging culture, such as the 1982 Arts Festival, though we have not thought through the exact nature of the connections between the two. While the festival had existed since 1977, when it was organised by the then-Ministry of Culture,[9] in 1982, for the first time, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board[10] became a major festival co-sponsor (which indicated an expanded conception of the audience for the festival) and there was a festival consultant (which suggested a desire for more focussed festival programming).[11] Also for the first time, international directors and choreographers were brought in to mount major theatre productions with a full Singaporean cast.[12] Then, this dynamism seemed to stumble with arts controversies that occurred at the end of 1993 and the start of 1994, with repercussions felt throughout the decade. Despite this, state-led arts development proceeded apace and state funding for the arts continued and indeed increased. The upshot was:

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[8] Singapore Art Museum, *Lee Wen: Lucid Dreams in the Reverie of the Real*, ed. Joyce Toh, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2012).

[9] Now the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts.

[10] Now the Singapore Tourism Board.

[11] The Singapore Arts festival, surprisingly, will not be held in 2013, as the National Arts Council wants to 'determine the event's future direction' (Adeline Chia, 'Singapore Arts Festival Taking a Break Next Year', *Straits Times* online, 6 June 2012, <http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_807636.html>, accessed 3 July 2012).

[12] Australian John Tasker directed *The Samseng and the Chettiar's Daughter* (an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* by Max Le Blond) and American David Henry Hwang directed *FOB* (Fresh Off the Boat). The Singapore director Max Le Blond was involved with both productions (see National Arts Council, 'Annex C: Celebrating 35 Years of the Singapore Arts Festival', n.d., <http://www.nac.gov.sg/docs/resources/annex-c---celebrating-35-years---highlights-of-the-singapore-arts-festival-through-the-years.pdf>, accessed 3 June 2012). Le Blond – then a university lecturer in drama – was a prominent director in the late 1970s and the 1980s in English-language theatre, and his groundbreaking work made possible for educated and colloquial Singapore-English accents and pronunciation to be heard on the stage – for local Voices and thus a deeper and more decolonised version of local culture to be represented. Prior to his work, actors had tended to speak in what is known as 'Received Pronunciation', or RP. Le Blond says that the National Arts Council has left him out as director of *FOB* – Hwang was his co-director (personal email communication to the author, 22 August 2012); this position is in accord with the author's own recollection of the play.

more outlets for the ambitions of writers, visual artists and theatre practitioners who became active in the 1990s.

This introductory essay attempts a preliminary examination, first, of how the emergence of contemporary art in the 1980s crucially broadened the context and horizons for artistic creation that present artists function within, but also exceed; and, second, of how the early 1990s setback to an earlier critical arts dynamism may represent a vital moment, a pause, before the full force of arts infrastructure and policy developments proceeded to try to facilitate and support, and also to contain (or co-opt, some people might think) what Paolo Virno would call 'communicative performance' and 'improvisation' so as to further Singapore's ambition to be a global city. This essay is a preliminary because I do not think we have been as yet able to periodise the 1980s and the 1990s, and to comprehend cogently the critical values and full significance of our immediate past; and this comprehension is key if we are to truly recognise the vitality of the work of the artists who speak in this issue of *Performance Paradigm*, and to see how their criticality may be similar to and/or different from that which emerged in the 1980s.

The Early 1990s and the Centre of Art

We begin with the first half of the 1990s, for it is then that there seems to be a shudder that trips up the contemporary arts, and yet that point simultaneously leads us to the more outwardly glittering arts infrastructural developments of the present.

1993 and 1994: Arts Controversies and the Limits of Experimentation?

From 26 December 1993 to the early hours of 1 January 1994, the Artists' General Assembly (AGA) – a week-long arts festival jointly organised by visual-arts collectives The Artists' Village and the 5th Passage Artists Ltd. – took place at the then-5th Passage Gallery at the Parkway Parade Shopping Centre in Marine Parade. Performance artists Josef Ng and Shannon Tham participated in a 12-hour new year's eve arts event. As a result, the front page of the tabloid *The New Paper*'s 3 January 1994 edition blared, 'Pub(l)ic Protest'. It carried a picture of Ng's back, with swimming briefs slightly lowered, and with the performer apparently cutting hair from his private area. On Saturday, 5 February 1994, theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS) became part of the expanding controversy when *The Straits Times* published an article by Felix Soh with the heading, 'Two pioneers of forum theatre trained at Marxist workshops.'[13] Those combined events precipitated what seemed to be a post-Cold War arts crackdown in the island-state.[14]

Coincidentally, on the same day Soh's article appeared, two of the then-editors of *Commentary* (the journal of the National University of Singapore Society [NUSS]), Lee Weng Choy and Sharaad Kuttan, had arranged for an informal meeting of as many of the arts community that could be gathered at the NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House in the afternoon to address the AGA fracas.[15] Given that the arts

[13] Felix Soh is presently the head of digital media and a deputy editor at *The Straits Times* (Singapore).

[14] Ng's performance pertained to the entrapment of homosexual men by the police. See Lee Weng Choy, 'Chronology of a Controversy', in *Looking at Culture*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan, Sharaad Kuttan, Lee Weng Choy, Leon Perrera and Jimmy Yap (Singapore: Artres Design and Communication, 1996), 63-72; and Alvin Tan, 'Forum Theatre: A Limited Mirror', in *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee's Initiative in Civil Society Activism*, ed. Constance Singam, Tan Chong Kee, Tisa Ng and Leon Perrera (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2002).

[15] This meeting, arguably, was the forerunner of the 'town hall' arts meetings of 2009, convened to discuss matters such as the new Arts Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) issue – though a pivotal difference to be noted is that the 1994 meeting was an entirely 'bottom-up' initiative (by the arts 'section' of civil society, if you like), and not one that in an indirect sense was initiated by the state, the consequence of wanting to participate in the NMP scheme. The Singapore government released the official invitation to the public on 5 April 2009 for the submission of names for possible NMPs for six 'functional groups', including the 'media, arts

and arts-related community was smaller then than it is now, virtually everyone seemed to be present – playwrights, academics, some journalists, actors, directors, sympathetic independent observers. The meeting was sober, as memories of 1987's 'Operation Spectrum' – the last time the Internal Security Act had been used in the city-state – lingered; and no one had forgotten that theatre group The Third Stage had been involved in that security sweep.[16] Even though the Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989, all were acutely aware of how provocative the term 'Marxist' still was that Soh had used in his article. As the meeting proceeded, Stella Kon, the playwright of *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1984), recommended that the community be pro-active, as the negative situation also offered an unprecedented opportunity for a united artists' stand. Take out a full-page advertisement in *The Straits Times*, the national English-language daily, she argued, and let everyone in the room put their name on it and query the present circumstances. The room seemed to surge in agreement, and the atmosphere became lighter, more positive.

Then, playwright and public intellectual Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002) rose to say that such a move would makes matters harder for Josef Ng, and that the latter had to brace himself for the storm's increasing intensity. The buoyancy disappeared, and the meeting ended inconclusively. Only the enormously respected Kuo – with the impeccable qualification of having been detained without trial by the PAP state under the Internal Security Act for four years and seven months from 1976 for his artistic activities – possessed the moral authority to deflate the collective mood with simple, unemotional statements. Criticism later emerged of Kuo's lack of support for what, in retrospect, was a point during which the Voice of the arts community could have enunciated a critical stance – one in which could have sharply delineated the role and even utility of the arts for a society which appeared to consider literature and the arts irrelevant, barely decorative. However, this criticism too easily relieves the individuals in that function room of their responsibility to disagree with Kuo – for none demurred.

What were the consequences of that unfulfilled point in what is now history for the arts in Singapore, when the role of the arts could have been firmly nailed to a masthead? While that moment has faded, and though the rest of the 1990s still was a decade of adventurous artistic movement (even while performance art could not receive public funding for a sustained period and unscripted plays became a problem for the state's licensing authorities), ongoing cautious self-censorship is one consequence that has not dissipated, along with damage to various individuals. As we look back, this meeting at the NUSS Guild House needs to be taken in conjuncture with another arts community meeting that had taken place only a few months' earlier.

1993: On Arts Centres and Sub-Centres

The first arts conference at The Substation, 'Art vs. Art', was held on 10-12 September 1993. The Substation was founded in 1990 by the late Kuo Pao Kun, and was the city-state's first independent contemporary arts centre. It became, as the arts commentator Peter Schoppert has put it, 'a [key] space for the fringe, the raw, the experimental'.[17] 'Art vs. Art' was the first of three conferences organised under Kuo's leadership.[18] They put an intellectual agenda for the arts up for discussion,

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and sports organisations' ('Embargoed until 1830hrs. on 5 April 2009', <www.ams.edu.sg/pdf/NMP_documents.pdf>, accessed 19 January 2010).

[16] See Wong Souk Yee, 'Third Stage', *S/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies* no. 6 (2010), < http://s-pores.com/2010/03/third-stage/>, accessed 2 July 2012.; and Lisa Li, 'Third Stage: Theatre Company or "Marxist Network"?' in *That We Dream Again: Remembering 1987 'Marxist Conspiracy'*, posted on 26 May 2012, <http://remembering1987.wordpress.com/2012/05/26/third-stage-theatre-company-or-marxist-network/>, accessed 5 July 2012.

[17] E-mail from Peter Schoppert to the author, 19 November 2009.

[18] The Substation website self-defines the significance of the conferences thus: 'One could characterise the Singapore arts scene in the early 1990s – with The Substation as an exemplary case – as being a time where

and thereby helped define and clarify the issues of the day.

Janadas Devan – now an editor with *The Straits Times* and the director of the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore – in a presentation entitled 'Is Art Necessary?' presciently argued that: 'Art has always been about power and glory. […] And it is precisely because art has always been about power that we are going to build for ourselves an Arts Centre. It is not an accident that the state's involvement in the arts has taken the form of a commitment to build a monument to art.'[19] Janadas refers to the proposed Singapore Arts Centre (SAC). A steering committee had been formed in 1992 to plan the project, and by 1994, the proposed centre was renamed as The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. The complex was constructed at the cost of S$600 million (then about US$400 million), and this sum had to be publicly defended by the founding chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC), Tommy Koh, in a country where few people seemed to care about the arts. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis triggered by the devaluation of the Thai baht exacerbated that situation. The results were indeed monumental beyond anyone's imagination: the philistine city-state of Singapore was to possess a major set of sophisticated venues in which to stage the most glamorous of arts performances. The Esplanade's opening festivities eight years later, in 2002, spanned three weeks and featured, as a major attraction, the London Philharmonic Orchestra.[20] One 2003 article noted the sea-change in the PAP state's attitude towards useless high-falutin' culture: 'A performing arts complex 30 years in the making puts a strictly-business city on the international cultural map.'[21]

Janadas contended that an emergent centre is not in itself a problem, for art requires both a centre and a margin:

> it is not as though you can give up one form of art – monumental art – for another – the non-monumental. You can't. … All you can do then is to keep the tension between one kind of art and another – or in practical terms, the tension between The Substation (the sub-centre) and the [proposed] Singapore Arts Centre, a tension which if it doesn't already exist, one must create and sustain. Only that art which keeps in tension the relationship between singularity and plurality will save us. Only that art … which refuses to simplify what it promises, only such art can save us. (55)

He said that what he thought bothered people about an arts centre is that there is often an assumption that the arts are inherently liberating, and that a centre would quash that spirit. Janadas reminded the audience that the Nazis who ran the death camps were cultivated and literate. The

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"new" things were emerging. Consider, for example, the first arts conference held at The Substation in 1993, "Art vs. Art". This conference brought together many of Singapore's important artists, academics, critics and arts administrators; members of the public were also key participants in this weekend event. The feeling among those who participated was that this bringing together of such diverse people to discuss the arts and the place of the arts in Singapore society was something new, and that it was a special moment in local arts history' ('The Substation/About Us/Artistic Mission', <http://www.substation.org/about-us/artistic-mission/> accessed 18 January 2010). The Substation mounts what many would take to be a reasonable claim – and regrets have been expressed at the discontinuation of the conference series after 1995.

[19] Janadas Devan, 'Is Art Necessary', in *Art vs. Art: Conflict and Convergence – The Substation Conference 1993*, ed. Lee Weng Choy (Singapore: The Substation, 1995), 54. All page citations hereafter will be given in brackets in the main text.

[20] 'Singapore Tourism Board to Distribute 10,000 Earplugs for Eagerly Anticipated Opening of The Esplanade', *Search ASIA Travel Tips .com*, 8 October 2002, <http://www.asiatraveltips.com/travelnews2002/810Esplanade.shtml>, accessed 18 January 2010.

[21] Kristen Richards, 'East Meets West on the Waterfront Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, by Michael Wilford & Partners; DP Architects; Theatre Projects Consultants; and Artec Consultants', *ArchNewsNow.com*, 16 January 2003, <http://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature101.htm>, accessed 14 January 2010.

presence of a centre in itself is not inevitably a problem. After all, if there was no SAC, then The Substation, with its 'difficult' and experimental artwork, would by default become Singapore's defining arts centre. The issue was more whether the creative tension between centre and margin, the singular and the plural, could be maintained, or whether the emergent centre would eviscerate the margin. An open-ness to the margin was necessary if art was not to be simply the uncritical reflection of the established order: 'It is not a matter of overthrowing the centre, but of re-establishing the notion of a centre that is more inclusive. That, in very practical terms, is what I mean' (66).

The acknowledged and in many respects surprising monumental success of The Esplanade since its inception has made much more discomfiting Janadas's cultural prognosis. Singaporeans get to see not only the artistically middle-brow musicals often staged in The Esplanade's capacious, 1,600-seat concert hall, but also major Western and Asian performers who in the past would never have given a thought to appearing in the city-state. There is more funding for Singapore arts practitioners, more professional theatre companies, and more well-educated aspiring poets, visual artists and theatre practitioners than before. Yet local institutions such as the Theatre Training and Research Programme (TTRP), founded by Kuo Pao Kun in 2000, had troubles staying afloat financially.[22] And now non-monumental spaces such as The Substation – and the artistic and cultural pluralism that it stood for – have since have had to work hard to meet the presence of a now-seemingly singular arts centre. (The centre, in fact, now has a prescribed space for the plural margins – I shall return to this.)

Of course, soon after the Art vs. Art conference, other events transpired: the arts controversies and the meeting of 5 February 1994, with its indeterminate conclusion. They cast a pall over the innovative artistic-intellectual activities of The Substation and the contemporary arts. These events at least partially explain why the effective engagement and the generating of a creative tension between the new centre and margin never quite came about. And yet, despite everything, the 1990s is remembered (correctly) as a decade in which the cultural gains of the 1980s were sustained and, in some ways, exceeded. In retrospect, however, we can perhaps see that the plans for a monumental arts centre inevitably placed some limits on a certain more unfettered, critical arts development that started in the 1980s, *even* as state funding meant new opportunities in the arts. But what is the relationship between the singular centre and plural margins now in the second decade of the new millennium?

Why the Contemporary Arts in the 1980s?

A prior question arises, of course: what *happened* in the 1980s? Why that decade for the more modernist-oriented, social-realist or naturalistic art practices in the visual arts and theatre to be overtaken by contemporary art forms such as devised or workshopped theatre, or installation and performance art? This cannot be easily answered, but we can start with Kuo Pao Kun's artistic directions after his release from detention in 1980 as a way of navigating that decade.

Kuo was the major enabling personality in the theatre in the 1980s. After his detention between 1976-80 for alleged communist activities, he shattered his previous prominence with Chinese-language plays and some multicultural dance work with his wife, the ballerina Goh Lay Kuan, with plays that systematically broke new ground for the exploration of culture: he examined the destruction of existing cultural formations in Singapore, given a resolute, state-led modernisation with totalising impulses, and asserted that trans-ethnic and multi-lingual relationships were possible – that a Singapore culture could be a form of *multiculturalism*, with knowledge of and interaction with each other, and not only a *multi-racialism*, surviving on mutual tolerance, which was the CMIO

[22] The TTRP has since been renamed the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI) and now offers a Professional Diploma in Intercultural Theatre (Acting); classes commenced in January 2012. For more information, see <http://iti.edu.sg/>, accessed 30 June 2012.

model of cultural management that came about during a time of crisis.[23] While that last statement now sounds like a cliché, it was fresh in that decade, and still remains only partially realised as a socio-cultural possibility. Kuo was a natural institution builder able to link different arts practitioners, and was able to help pioneer an emerging multi-disciplinary contemporary arts scene. As visual and performance artist Amanda Heng, a founder of The Artists' Village, has said to me, Kuo's networks were extensive, and he had a good sense of cultural activities in different linguistic and social realms. His idea of an arts community was one in which linguistic, ethnic and class lines were crossed. To be sure, it was a community largely composed of those with a *contemporary* arts orientation, though one with an openness to various traditional art forms; it had its boundaries.[24]

Kuo continued to speak up for the arts throughout the 1990s, and The Substation was an important intellectual space and literal staging ground for the experimental visual, performing and literary arts. Kuo's own pre-detention work from the 1960s and the 1970s had been agit-prop theatre in the modern Chinese line from the May Fourth Movement that believed art must be deployed in the larger national and community interests, though Chinese activist theatre's social-realist edge was aesthetically modified because he was influenced by Bertolt Brecht.[25] Among his early plays were *The Struggle* (1969) and *The Sparks of Youth* (1970); the very titles of the plays speak for some commitment to the 'general interest' (the country, a fair economy) and some version of socialism. What had happened, we might ask, that resulted in a transformation of Kuo's art from the 1980s, such that the general interest became *expanded* to encompass a larger plurality of heterogeneous subjects and concerns? This question is important as his artistic innovations in the contemporary helped open up the directions that younger artists in the 1980s could take, and these directions in turn become a framework or a set of suppositions for the next set of young artists – to be exceeded or transcended.

Contemporary art became the *sine qua non* for Kuo in the 1980s because, arguably, Kuo came to see that blunt third-worldist approaches to cultural production were no longer feasible. While the Cold War did not end until 1989, the 1980s East and Southeast Asia that he re-emerged into was experiencing certain breaks with the pre-detention world. In Singapore, the formal political opposition to the PAP had been vanquished: the left-wing Barisan Socialis (Socialist Front), a

[23] Multi-racialism had been a key part of the foundation ideology of the ruling PAP. Kuo's collected plays are in the process of being published. His pre-detention Chinese-language have been published as Kuo Pao Kun, *Plays in Chinese 1 – The 1960s and the 1970s: The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun, Vol. 1*, ed. Quah Sy Ren and Pan Cheng Lui (Singapore: Practice Performing Arts School and Global Publishing, 2005); the English-language plays will be published in 2012 as Kuo Pao Kun, *Plays in English: The Complete Plays of Kuo Pao Kun, Vol. 4*, ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee (Singapore: Practice Performing Arts School and Global Publishing, in press).

[24] The exact definitions or understandings of the 'contemporary' and the 'contemporary arts' are complex and contested, and cannot be considered in this Introduction; see Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). A distinct feature of Kuo's contemporary art was the role for the traditional – but the use the traditional was not for him an exercise in nostalgia but undertaken in order to counter the historically homogenising and Westernising tendencies of modern culture and art, and indeed of modernisation as a larger socio-economic phenomenon; see C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Introduction: Kuo Pao Kun's Contemporary Art', in Kuo, *Plays in English*.

[25] Kuo's 1960s and 1970s theatre practice was a radicalism driven by the notion that art was 'useful'. The Brechtian 'alienation effect' served a pedagogical purpose – to cool down the emotions so that the audience could be clear in assessing the current socio-political circumstances that framed their lives. See Yu Yun, 'The Soil of Life and the Tree of Art: A Study of Kuo Pao Kun's Cultural Individuality through His Playwriting', trans. Kuo Jian Heng, in Kuo Pao Kun, *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays* (Singapore: Times Books, 2000), 22. For one recent examination of Kuo's 1960s-1970s plays, see Clarissa Oon, 'Reading Kuo Pao Kun's Early Leftist Plays', *S/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies* no. 6 (2010), <http://s-pores.com/2010/12/reading-kuo/>, accessed 2 July 2012.

breakaway faction of the ruling party, had boycotted Parliamentary elections in 1968, and when they returned to contest the 1972 general elections and subsequent elections, they failed to win any seats – arguably, a social compact had been achieved by the ruling party with enough of the Singapore population that politics could be traded for stable economic development.[26] State-supported capitalism had won. In economic affairs, academics and politicians alike in the West and in East and Southeast Asia were starting to speak about the economic dominance of Japan and the Asian Miracle Economies[27] – this in turn leads to talk of 'alternative' Asian modernities and Asian values and 'economic (vs. individual) rights', discourses that would have been impossible in the 1960s.[28] In regional political-economic matters, one consequence of the demise of the Cultural Revolution was the Chinese economic reform that started in December 1978, led by Deng Xiaoping: what are we to do with third-worldism when there is a communist-capitalist China coming into being? In the West, a post-Fordist paradigm of labour had started to emerge that, in Paolo Virno's thinking, 'mobilizes all the factors that characterize our species: language, abstract thinking, disposition toward learning, plasticity, the habit of not having solid habits':

> These experiences outside the workplace become afterward, in the production system known as 'just in time', authentic and proper professional requirements. Great European thought, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, described the 'nihilism' that characterizes the forms of life outside the stringent rationality of the productive process: instability, disenchantment, anonymity, and so on. Well, with post-Fordism, the nihilistic mentality enters into production….[29]

National economies were now increasingly part of a more networked global economy – a process in which Singapore was a harbinger – and the strict rationalism and the specialisations of the impersonal mass-production system were also transforming into something more 'flexible'. The importance of the 'immaterial' production of information and services, as part of the new production system, also was increasing.

While Kuo in 1980 may not have been directly reflecting on the emergence of post-Fordist production and what eventually will be called 'globalisation' (though he does so by the 1990s), and while he was still committed to the general interest and to strengthening the virtues of community in Singapore, as in his pre-detention days, he apparently came to feel that there needed to be room for the individual and individual critique, given the danger of mind-numbing ideologies.[30] The violence of the Cultural Revolution had testified to him of the reality of this danger. Another way of phrasing this is to say that the individual with his or her autonomy, and the autonomy of the art they produced, had become a point of painful *arrival* rather than departure for Kuo. There was no direct embrace of bourgeois or liberal notions of the self or individualism by him in this valuation of autonomy – another continuity with his past. But an *autonomous* art, paradoxically, could become a more *committed* socio-cultural resource for Singaporeans of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. Singaporeans increasingly shared a modern capitalist culture fostered or socially engineered by the

[26] See, for example, Chan Heng Chee's well-known essay, *Politics in an Administration State: Where has the Politics Gone?*, Occasional Paper no. 11, Dept. of Political Science, University of Singapore (Singapore: Dept. of Political Science, University of Singapore, 1975).
[27] See, for example, Peter Drucker, 'What We can Learn from Japanese Management', *Harvard Business Review* 49, no. 2 (March-April 1971): 110-122; and Ezra Vogel, *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[28] C. J. W.-L. Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).
[29] Branden W. Joseph, 'Interview with Paolo Virno', responses translated by Alessia Ricciardi, *Grey Room* 21 (Fall 2005): 29, 30.
[30] Yu, 'The Soil of Life'.

PAP state – a culture that increasingly threatened the homogenisation of both the multicultures and the cityscape of the city-state. The 'univocal synthesis'[31] that that state had wanted to create from the late 1960s to the 1980s actually posed a danger to a genuinely dynamic society, for the homogenised Singaporean would not, Kuo would come to argue by the late 1990s, even be a creative person.[32] Art must be free from political dictates to modernise – whether leftist or capitalist – if it was to engage effectively with people's life worlds. Indeed, given the reality of truncated cultural resources in the city-state, he went on to argue that Singaporeans should even consider producing 'a new cultural parentage for themselves' by incorporating cultural and artistic resources from *elsewhere* as well: 'History has proved that there is no way [Singaporeans] could reconnect to their parent cultures per se. However, having lost their own – cut loose and therefore set free – they have thus become natural heirs to all the cultures of the world.'[33] A more fluid, globalised world with intensified communications technology that enabled networking and easier access to knowledge had its advantages, for it opened up the world to Singaporeans.

Artistic experimentation of course was also taking place in other artistic realms in the city-state. The late 1980s saw dynamic experiments in conceptual art, performance, installation sculpture, figurative painting that had German expressionist antecedents, pop art and 'happenings' among artists linked with visual and performance artist Tang Da Wu and the Artists Village.[34] Kuo Pao Kun both witnessed and was party to these vital experiments; by the start of the 1990s, The Substation, under his direction, contributed directly to supporting interdisciplinary explorations in the arts. The environment, sexuality, violence, identity and feminism became valid areas for enquiry. The overall creative release brought critical judgement into the aesthetic-cultural realm. The 1990s saw artists attending each others' performances and exhibitions, and a general dialogue was maintained between artists, arts professionals, journalists and academics so as to see how the profile of the arts could be raised.

The arts in the 1980s led to the formation of a new public sphere, in which the experimentation with content and form were part of a wish to re-think what else a philistine modern capitalist Singapore culture might be, and it arose because the old standards (such as they were) of theatre and the visual arts from the immediate post-independence period seemed inadequate. The identitarian discourses that arose as part of this re-think was influenced further by new art, 'new' social movements, and postcolonial and multicultural theory in the Euro-American West. Tang Da Wu, the founder of the Artists Village, for instance, only returned to Singapore in 1987, after sojourning in England for 20 years – and those years had seen the appearance of black consciousness and, in 1980, the Black Art Movement.[35] The art critic Kobena Mercer has contended that 'the shifts brought about by identity politics in the 1980s, and global trends in the 1990s, have affected the art world

[31] Joseph, 'Interview with Paolo Virno', 28. The term is Virno's.
[32] Kuo Pao Kun, 'Uprooted and Searching', in *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*, ed. John O'Toole and Kate Donelan (Brisbane: IDEA Publications, 1999).
[33] Kuo Pao Kun, 'Contemplating an Open Culture: Transcending Multiculturalism', in *Singapore: Re-Engineering Success*, ed. Arun Mahizhnan and Lee Tsao Yuen (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61.
[34] Kwok Kian Woon and Lee Wen (eds.), *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009); and C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Christianity, the Work of Wong Shih Yaw and Contemporary Art', in *The Inoyama Donation: A Tale of Two Artists*, ed. Low Sze Wee, exhibition booklet (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006).
[35] Tang knows Rasheed Araeen, the artist and the founder of the important journal, *Third Text: Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Art and Culture*, and the curator of the ground-breaking *Essential Black Art* exhibition held at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 1988; for a recent set of studies on the Black Art Movement, see David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (eds.), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

just as all other areas of cultural and social life have been affected'.[36] The result: a 'global turn' in art programming with an interest in curating and representing non-Western and minority artists in the metropolitan art world. As art historian Julian Stallabrass (drolly but accurately) observes, 'The shift [towards the multicultural-postcolonial] was prepared for by postmodern critique which, in a complex series of theoretical moves, affirmed what the market had slowly sanctioned, unveiling the white male "genius" skulking behind the universalist façade of high culture.'[37] Singapore, we can see retrospectively, participated in the 'shifts' Mercer and Stallabrass outline.

The Arts Become Relevant…?

By the late 1990s, there was a sense that the dialogue among artists and interested parties and persons was becoming a rehash of an old yet unresolved topic: artists' desires to be autonomous and to provide beauty, provocation and insight in exchange for some tolerance and support from state coffers. This was a desire that drew upon the Western European model of cultural support, but of course there is no history of sustained high-cultural development in relation to the state in Singapore, either in its pre- or immediate post-independence phases, that bore a similarity to that European historical development. And, as the artists who were in their late teens and twenties in the late 1980s became older, attention and energy flagged, and some artists such as TheatreWorks' director Ong Keng Sen started creating work overseas. People also simply tried to get on with what they felt they had to do artistically. Kuo Pao Kun's untimely demise in 2002, at the height of his intellectual-cultural capacity, seems now to mark the winding down of a remarkable period of artistic growth.

Artists like director Alvin Tan of the theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS), who co-operated with those sympathetic to what could be called public socio-cultural work, continued to toil tirelessly at keeping the public sphere of the arts connected with larger social issues and the agendas of new civil society groups. He has observed that:

> The arts, particularly theatre, had an early start in [developing a non-state led way of building civil society] … in the late 1980s. An increasing number of arts practitioners left their mainstream jobs and accepted reduced incomes to work in this sector full-time, fuelled by the call of vocational passion. However, these opportunities were put in place for this sector because the state had set its mind to developing the arts in Singapore.[38]

As Singapore entered the new millennium, the context that framed artistic growth had changed, and Tan's comments give us an inkling of these changes. The pumping of money into the arts by the state – effectively the collapse of economics into culture – may mean the *reduction* and not the expansion of civil society. In November 2009, at TheatreWorks' 'Expo Zéro' by Museé de la Danse, I heard an actor-director active since the early 1990s comment that artists and arts groups now seem more self-absorbed and therefore less likely to attend performance or arts events not linked to them in some way. Competition for local and international recognition and competition for state funding has become more the norm.

The beginning point for the arts becoming more 'relevant' comes about in 1989, with the formation of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. The Council's recommendations resulted in the creation of the NAC in 1991. Other changes ensued, such as the starting of the National Heritage Board in 1993 to promote Singapore's artistic and cultural heritage – and the Board was responsible

[36] Kobena Mercer, 'Introduction' to *Cosmopolitan Modernism: Annotating Art's Histories*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005), 7.
[37] Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.
[38] Alvin Tan, 'The Working Committee Process: Building Trust', in *Building Social Space in Singapore*, 142.

for opening of the Singapore Art Museum in 1996, which mounted two illuminating inaugural exhibitions, one of them on modern and contemporary Singapore art, and the other showing that the ability to curate modern Southeast Asian art existed in the city-state.[39]

A notable nuancing in the state's cultural policy transpires in the early 2000s, with the articulation that the fostering of the Global City for the Arts now was to be inserted inside a larger creative industries dimension. What are the creative industries, we may ask? An accepted understanding is that offered by the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sports in 2001:

> We define the creative industries as those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property. This includes advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer games, television and radio.[40]

Singapore follows the UK in their understanding of the creative industries and has three clusters of such 'industries': arts and culture; design; and media.

The state convened the Economic Review Committee (ERC) in 2001, and one of the seven sub-committees was the ERC Sub-Committee Workshop on Creative Industries (ERC-CI). Significantly, the final report published by the ERC in 2002 frames 'the vision of making Singapore into a city for the arts … *within* the creative industries context' (emphasis mine).[41] This position is an intensification of one taken in the earlier *Renaissance City Report* of 2000, which had contended that what was to be valued in a work of art was the ability to imagine the new, and that the state's facilitation of arts development was a key way of facilitating creativity as a whole. What is problematic in the 2002 'advance', as the sociologist Ooi Can-Seng sees it, is that 'Singaporean authorities acknowledge the importance of the arts in Singapore and in their contributions to the creative industries but they also want artists to move away from their "art for arts' sake" mentality'.[42] The point of the danger of commodification is well-taken, though in a sense this is a misunderstanding of what an artwork is: it *is* of course a commodity, to be printed or painted, and then sold or distributed; but it is at the same time never *purely* a commodity, like a decorative print. This is the danger Ooi highlights.[43]

What had transpired – and at a pace that in many ways caught arts practitioners and perhaps even many Singaporeans off-guard – was the state's hope to possess what, somewhat clumsily, can be described as a 'cosmo-urban globality' and the autonomous productive capacities of a post-Fordist economy, with its emphasis on services and information production, led to the 'relevance' of high culture and cultural institutions. The arts, museums and lifestyle consumption, taken *in toto* as a form of symbolic action in which (to quote Situationist Guy Debord's famous aphorism) 'the

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[39] Singapore Art Museum, *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

[40] Department of Culture, Media and Sport, *Creative Industries Mapping Document* (2001), <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative_industries/>, accessed 4 July 2012; cited in part by Can-Seng Ooi, 'Subjugated in the Creative Industries: The Fine Arts in Singapore'. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 3 (2011): 120.

[41] Ibid.: 124.

[42] Ibid.: 127.

[43] We can recall Theodor W. Adorno's assertion that: 'Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through' ('Culture Industry Reconsidered', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M Bernstein [London: Routledge, 1991], 86).

spectacle of culture is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image'[44] can bolster the city-state's economic attractiveness and contribute to a diversity that can even stimulate the creative industries. The 1980s had seen Singapore become a modern but uni-functional premier 'world city' that was a business centre in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, one with a puritan work ethic. The 1990s and the early 2000s saw the state moving on to further rework the city-state into a multi-functional and metropolitan centre like London, given increased regional and international competition from other aspiring global or world cities in the region such as Hong Kong and, increasingly, Shanghai and Beijing. There were significant infrastructural, institutional and educational investments in arts and now creative industrial development.[45]

The challenge for the arts in Singapore (and not only here, but in many locales worldwide, though the challenge is acute in Singapore because its small size complicates manoeuvre and negotiation) is that the market and governments have been relatively quick to understand that the key values of the contemporary arts – cultural heterogeneity, pluralism and the very artistic autonomy that the late Kuo Pao Kun valued – can become resources to support and deploy (and also to contain) for post-industrial economic development.[46] While at a fundamental level, the old 'pragmatic', petit-bourgeois values embedded within the state itself that drove 1970s economic development have not fully been transformed, there are enough changes in the state's expanded notions and management of culture *simultaneously* to offer genuinely new choices in the arts and to constrain the advancing of critical arts discourse. The monumental centre has not only weakened the margin, as Janadas Devan cautioned it might, but now actually *celebrates* the fringe, the raw and the experimental.

To Conclude …?

The noticeably larger numbers of Singaporeans involved in the contemporary arts at this point in time inevitably means that the culturalist political edge that existed in the 1990s has been blunted. Artists who became young adults in the late 1990s and after obviously do not necessarily subscribe to the socio-cultural imperatives of the 1980s and the earlier 1990s – and why should they, as they have to be given pertinent reasons for such subscription. They may also possess more professionalised attitudes towards the arts. While Singapore is not quite as yet a Global City for the Arts, certain forms of public rhetoric notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the arts are now normalised and more accepted. In such a context, a critical arts discourse that does not fully address the way contemporary capitalism – with its East Asian dimensions – now relates to the arts and culture will not be able to sustain interest. Concerns have been expressed that many Singaporeans beyond a point cannot or will not come to grips with the forces that shape daily life in Singapore, and given the rapid transformations in culture and capitalism since the 1980s, one wonders how effectively the arts community can come to grips with these forces.

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[44] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (orig. 1967; New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 24.

[45] It is correct, as Ooi contends, that while the arts receive less financial support than the other creative clusters or domains of design and media, and that the state's authorities for the arts prefer a less 'arts for art's sake' mental set, the arts still have a place in the contemporary urban chic of the global city of Singapore (Ooi, 'Subjugated': 126-27).

[46] George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). What Paolo Virno has to say about artistic autonomy and capitalism is of pertinence here: 'First and foremost I think about the autonomy that is functional in creating surplus value, the autonomy that is essential to innovation and to the optimization and development of collaboration. This is a patented and therefore a regulated autonomy, which is absolutely vital when labour has become linguistic and communicative. At that time, speaker-workers must be permitted autonomy. … However, I do not share the view that the present context includes more freedom and prosperity. A grinding poverty reigns in post-Fordism. The worst poverty you can imagine, for it is communication skills themselves that are claimed, exploited, and as capital, too' ('The Dismeasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno', *Open* no. 17, n.d., <http://classic.skor.nl/article-4178-nl.html?lang=en>, accessed 2 July 2012).

It us in this regard that the thoughts, reflections and artistic practices (individual, collective or institutional) presented in this issue of *Performance Paradigm* matter. A previous public sphere connected with the arts and culture that emerged in the 1980s is now weakened, overtaken by newer socio-economic and other contexts. And so, the question is how does a new public sphere which has less to do with the state come into being? The art of the 1980s proved the inadequacy of modern art of the previous decade through the examination of more sensitive content in new and adapted forms of traditional and contemporary art, and those artistic-cultural inventions gained the form of a new public sphere (if limited in numbers) – for these inventions also constituted a search for new or revamped standards of what could be regarded as society and cultural relations. These investigations in multiculturalism, Singapore identity, gender identity, social identities and language usage taken together were a general feeling that preceded a possible reconstitution of the national self/selves and culture.

The artists who represent themselves in this journal have their strong connections with diverse parts of Singapore's multicultures: they have ties with the larger collective and with general society, including one theatre artist who is a transplanted Englishman. We see this when we read their contributions. There are contributions from: visual and video artist, Ho Tzu Nyen; theatre and performance artists, Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan; performance artist and Artistic Director of The Substation, Noor Effendy Ibrahim; theatre artist and Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, Zizi Azah; theatre artist and Artistic Director of Cake Theatrical Productions, Natalie Hennedige; and performance-visual artist and performance organiser, Lee Wen. They deal with issues of history and cultural identity, the mundane and the understanding of home, the problem of singular cultural identity and the need for artistic process and interdisciplinary arts practices, and the significance and difficulty of collaborative work. The issues spillover from one to another, and these artists' search for valid artistic form and content, we dare to hope, will lead also to a newly re-formed public sphere.

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