Charting Thoughts
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Time is active, by nature it is much like a verb, it both “ripen” and “brings forth.” [...] But since we measure time by a circular motion closed in on itself, we could just as easily say that its motion and change are rest and stagnation.

Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain, 1924

The idea of contemporary art entails, as a presupposition, the existence of an idea of the contemporary. The structure of temporality, in turn, is to be comprehended as the way time is understood, or conceptualised, and lived out in society. The contemporary is therefore both an idea of the time in which we are in and a goal of reacting more effectively to the demands of the immediate present. What then is contemporary art in Singapore, and how does it relate to the sociopolitical context within which it functions, one in which culture as a notion from the 1980s becomes more prominent?

I first want to suggest in this essay that “we” in Singapore since the 1980s, as the so-called East Asian Miracle unfolded, entered a new historical period that no longer felt a need to catch up with the paradigms of the advanced economies.¹ The result of the post-independence Singapore government’s commitment to modernising the island-state’s society and culture in the name of an export-oriented industrial modernity was that the former colony seemed to have breached a Euro-American enacted divide between First and Third World global zones. Singapore, from the late 1960s, had been among the early countries to benefit from the increasing economic interdependence of the world system, initially described in 1977 as the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) and later as globalisation.² Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flowed into Singapore, and, arguably, by the 1980s, elites in the city-state felt more coordinated with the spaces and

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time of the metropolitan West. The literary-cultural critic Fredric Jameson has noted:

It seems to me that everybody recognizes some kind of postmodern break, whatever name they give it, that takes place in 1980 or so, in the Reagan/Thatcher era, with the advent of economic deregulation, the new salience of globalization, and so on. [... I]t does seem to mark the end of the modern in all kinds of ways, from communications technologies and industry all the way to forms of art.3

The systematic subsumption of Singapore under capitalism, unsurprisingly, lead to the volatilisation of society and its culture, broadly understood as both ways of living and the arts: capitalism requires the absorption (or totalisation) of the world’s multiplicities or heterogeneities for standardised predictability.4 Consequently, I also wish to suggest that culture’s volatilisation at least partially explains the emergence of contemporary art in the city-state, as artistic space opened up for new expressions of the local that captured the effects of economic transformation—the incomplete fragments of life in the historical present wrought by rapid modernisation from the late 1960s. The 1980s increasingly see an artistic move away from the destabilised prominence (if not quite orthodoxies) of Nanyang “Style” modernism (the hybrid techniques of Chinese colour and ink and the School of Paris), social realism inspired by mainland Chinese arts developments and what might be called the Singapore lyrical exotic—paintings of the Singapore River and Chinatown.

The newer art that emerged can be loosely described as a flexible art practice that breaks with a modern art that was medium-specific and object-based to take on a transmedia or perhaps trans-category orientation. Its flexibility in engaging with the contemporary moment comes from recognising that while art is constituted by concepts, this does not mean that art’s aesthetic dimensions should be eliminated. Rather, it can lead to an expanded use of seemingly non-aesthetic material for expression and art-making. Contemporary art also drew upon what might be called an “alternative” or perhaps suppressed tradition of modernism as seen in the legacy of Surrealism, the Dada movement and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). We can say that aspects from a combination of the historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, the post-war neo-avant-garde’s revision of avant-garde devices and conceptualism were taken up in Singapore, in which the principles of autonomous art were contested in the name of connecting art with life, though searchingly interpreted for the needs of the “local” in terms of content and cultural orientation. Perhaps this was art suitable for a society in which art did not have an established role. There was no direct repetition of the avant-garde, given the pre-war avant-garde’s critique of art institutions: such institutions were weak in 1980s Singapore. More sophisticated art institutions only emerged from the 1990s.

It is with the above in mind that we can use “the contemporary” as a periodising term that enables an insight into where we “are” in matters of cultural identity and the modulating patterns of what being contemporary implies. And this brings me to my final issue: the importance of culture, broadly writ to include the arts and heritage, as part of the present that Singapore sees itself within. In 1998, former British prime minister Tony Blair wrote of “a dynamic knowledge-based economy” that is possible after traditional industrial manufacturing waned.5 Culture, combined with the stunning developments in information and technology, can contribute to a post-industrial economy in which the management of creativity, ideas and images mattered. Culture hence becomes a defining sign of the contemporary that the city-state must possess after the initial decades of pragmatic materialism. The state increasingly begins to deliver infrastructural and
monetary resources for arts development from the 1990s that was literally unimaginable in the 1970s, in spite of an ongoing regime of censorship. While this extolment of culture might seem to contrast with the tension in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s between emergent art and the state’s desire to attain synchronicity with the advanced West, this tension has not completely dissipated—even as a current public-policy goal is to be a competitive global city with edgy contemporary art.

Culture, the Arts and the Will to be Contemporary

In the revealing book titled From Third World to First, the first prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), wrote about the tight link between politics and capitalist development: “During the Cold War, when it was far from clear in the 1960s and ’70s which side would win, we aligned ourselves with the West. […] By the late 1980s, it was clear that we were on the side of the victors.” With that victory, the manifestly incomplete modernisation of a backward, colonial-era modernity also seemed to have been transcended, but some caution was still necessary: “[I]t will take another generation before our arts, culture and social standards can match the First World infrastructure we have installed.”

Culture seemed to be the last barrier to overcome the system of Otherness that emerged during the age of European colonialism. But, by 2000, when From Third World was published, culture had more than come to the fore in the Singapore state’s will to be contemporary.

In 1989, literary critic Koh Tai Ann examined how the People’s Action Party government—the party that has ruled Singapore since 1959, when self-rule was gained—changed their approach to cultural matters in the 1980s:

The official sign that the 1980s would see more emphasis on the development of the arts as a community activity to encourage individual creativity, and as part of a growing entertainment and leisure activity, came with the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee in 1980 by the [then-]Ministry of Culture. Not surprisingly, when the People’s Action Party (PAP) issued its election manifesto in 1984 called Agenda for Action … A Vision of Singapore by 1999, the catchphrase was “a cultured society” and the target “Singapore—City of Excellence.” The Agenda’s notable feature was to take Singapore beyond being a developed society in the economic sense; it is also to be “a society culturally vibrant,” “a cultured people finding fulfilment in non-material pursuits.”

The need for individual creativity, the wish for “a cultured people” with “non-material pursuits” were to be markers of a genuinely developed society. These terms had less purchase in the decade before, when the sociopolitical and economic project of modernisation possessed philistine dimensions and the cultures it paid most attention to were multiracial cultures and inter-ethnic tensions. While art is a privileged conveyor of modern culture and values, petit bourgeois mores concerned with the disciplined manufacturing of products by multinational corporations rendered art and creativity irrelevant to economic growth.

Koh went on to note that in March 1985, the state’s Sub-Committee on Services for the Economic Committee had “review[ed] the progress of the Singapore economy and [went on to] identify new areas of growth,” envisaging that “a vibrant cultural and entertainment services industry 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.” The government had not gone soft: individualistic cultural development could support pragmatic...
(then a favoured adjective in PAP discourse) development. Nevertheless, this mix of goals—high cultural and creative cultivation combined with the ongoing emphases on ethnic cultural expression to maintain a harmonious multiracial national identity—indicate that the 1980s was a decade of adaptation for policy on culture and the arts.

Though the question of the instrumentalisation of the arts does not recede, then or now, we do witness the incremental formation of cultural policies less to do with race or ethnicity and more to do with the arts and, increasingly, with information, the media and what are now referred to as the “creative industries.” These changes have intensified since the 1980s, and have transformed Singapore from being primarily a functional city of economic development in the 1970s to becoming, by 2000, not only a global city, but an aspirational Global City for the Arts. The current National Arts Council (NAC) chair, Chan Heng Chee, has noted:

In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of the Government was on economic develop-

ment, defence, housing, healthcare and education.

The arts were not a priority, though along the way the Government built the National Theatre on the slopes of Fort Canning Hill. Visitors to Singapore saw a successful economy but a “cultural desert.”11 “Cultural desert” was an expression much used to describe the city-state in decades past.

The changing prospects for culture and the arts, we could venture to say, were enabled further from the 1990s because culture gained an enhanced role in the advanced West. In 1997, Tony Blair proposed that a “Cool Britannia” tagline be part of a national branding exercise in which the arts were repackaged with other more obviously profitable enterprises, such as advertising or writing computer software, into a category called the “cultural and creative industries”; and a Creative Industries Task Force was set up in the new Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The inclusion of the term “creativity” is to be noted, for “creativity’ escaped the snobby association of ‘culture,’ and gave more substance to the post-
industrial economy of signs and symbols.”

While artists such as playwright Mark Ravenhill criticised the superficiality of this branding, in Singapore the state followed with the articulation of its own creative city policy, the 2000 Renaissance City Report, which reinforced the position of its 1992 Singapore—Global City for the Arts report:

“We want to position Singapore as a key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century and a cultural centre in the globalised world. The idea is to be one of the top cities in the world to live, work and play in, where there is an environment conducive to creative and knowledge-based industries and talent.”

In 2016, the cultural vision for the city-state has not changed; the NAC’s website says its mission is: “To develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts.”

The key moment—now widely accepted—when the changes afoot in the 1980s came to a head, and when substantial new administrative structures were put in place by the government, is 1989, with the publication of the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. The report’s weight was reinforced by the fact that the council was led by then-second deputy prime minister, Ong Teng Cheong. This report was based on the earlier work of more specialised committees, such as the Committee on Visual Arts’ report published in 1988, which observed that thus far cultural activities had largely been left to individuals and private groups. However, as we have seen, the varied impetuses that led to the new attitude to the arts were already taking place earlier in the decade, making the 1980s a dynamic decade for cultural change, when the city-state increasingly turned away from philistine modernisation.

The times, they were a-changin’, with the prospect of reform in arts policy, and certainly some of the political elites in leadership seemed reassured that there was less need to fret over the teleological implications of 1960s modernisation theory: History had not left Sin-
Global Publishing, 2005). In terms of the visual arts, the post-war Nanyang School has received much more attention than post-war social realist painting and woodblock caricatures. This is partially due to the more politically sensitive nature of some of the artworks produced by the Social Realists. (Or, alternatively, it might be said that the project to represent Nanyang—the South Seas, or broadly speaking Southeast Asia—was less sensitive than the social realist project to represent ordinary Singapore life.) Social realist painting attempted to capture the truth of everyday life and had, at the very least, a left-leaning, egalitarian bent. For more on such visual work, see Singapore Art Museum, From Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007).

The phrase “Asian renaissance” was first used in 1996 by then-deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim; he wrote that the Asian rebirth in the wake of economic progress should concern itself with “the revival of the arts and the sciences under the influence of classical models based on strong moral and religious foundations; a cultural resurgence dominated by a re-flowering of art and literature, architecture and music and advancements in science and technology.” (Anwar Ibrahim, The Asian Renaissance (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996), 18.) This was an articulation with a stronger humanistic element than in Singapore. Singapore certainly seems to have won a reputation as a cross-cultural facilitator which could help others to navigate this “century”; see, for example, Gabriele Giovannini & Emanuele Schibotto, “Singapore and the Asian Century: The City-State Has a Potentially Vital Role to Play in the West’s Engagement with Asia,” The Diplomat, 19 February 2015, http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/singapore-and-the-asian-century/ (accessed 2 February 2016).

Singapore behind. A major sign of the times for Singapore was the final “end” of the politically and economically unstable mid-1940s to the 1960s, Singapore’s “post-war” period, it could be said. Those unsettling years saw the decolonisation of Malaya in 1957, the formal ending of the Malayan Emergency in 1960, the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and Singapore’s economic survival after it left (or was ejected from) the Federation in 1965. The challenges posed in the name of The People by the Left in Singapore (including its artistic manifestations in Chinese-language theatre and post-war social realist painting and woodblock caricatures) effectively ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the announcement of economic reforms called “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” at the end of 1978 in mainland China. 17 It is said that the events of 1989 brought the Cold War to a close, but for East and Southeast Asia (if we avoid taking a too overtly Eurocentric perspective), China’s initial economic reforms mark at least the modulation of the Cold War’s most difficult aspects.

The 1980s thus inaugurated the city-state’s post-war as well as post-independence period. Arguably, at this juncture, the “old” phase of Singapore’s recent modern history is left behind, and in place we see a strengthening will to being contemporary. The developmental goal then was to be a top player within the “Asian renaissance” in the much-ballyhooed “Coming Asian Century,” a phrase that could smack of triumphalism, and that, not accidentally, first occurs in the 1980s. 18 The global system of Otherness that colonialism created was substantially weakened during the height of post-war decolonisation, but the question of economic equality was still a thorny matter. The appearance of the world market intensified the two-way interpenetration of First and Third World such that countries like Singapore wanted to obliterate the non-synchronous socio-economic temporalities that the poles of London and Singapore represented.

The 1980s economic game was different from the one played during the modernising haste of the 1970s. With “the end of an essentially modernist field of political struggle in
which the great ideologies [such as nationalism] still had the force and the great authority of the great religions,” and with less-modernised states like Singapore seeming less the past of modern states in the West, it might also seem time to proclaim the “disappearance of History as the fundamental element in which human beings exist.” However premature such proclamations seem, the attention that international media paid to the collective economic success that the four Asian mini-dragons of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea had attained by the 1980s implied that Singapore and some parts of East Asia were inhabiting at least more of an equally shared present with the advanced economies.

The above in itself does not mean that economic insecurity was left behind: staying contemporary, like becoming modern, feels like a race run on a treadmill. The island-state now had to be more of a transnational space than when it was an early beneficiary of outsourcing during the pressing nation-building phase of the late 1960s and 1970s. Capitalism had penetrated social forms (“national communities,” “societies,” “cultures”) and consequently, global and regional economic interdependence was a reality, meaning that the older modern idea of self-sufficient nation-states went out the window—this was the cost of existing in the same time zone, as it were, with the market-oriented Anglo-American West. The game was upped such that economies should not just make things for export, using other people’s technology and business models (which worked in the 1970s), but had to be creative and innovative. And here art had a role: its very uselessness and perceived autonomy became component parts of a model of creativity, and in keeping with what was transpiring in cutting-edge metropolitan centres, state policy and rationality no longer negated autonomy but employed a “new systemic functionalization of autonomy itself,” as the philosopher Peter Osborne puts it. During the phase of industrialised modernity in the advanced West, the “principle of idealistic aesthetics [regarding the work of art]—purposefulness without a purpose”—was replaced by exchange value,” which itself was part-and-parcel of the “commercial system.” Now, in post-industrial contexts, creativity and autonomy are taken to drive new commercial innovation.

The three key art institutions of note to emerge since the 1989 Advisory Council report are the Singapore Art Museum (SAM; 1996), the Singapore Biennale (2006) and, the most recent, the National Gallery Singapore (2015), brought into existence at the cost of

24 As has been observed, “Transnationality is the putative socio-spatial form of the current temporal unity of historical experience.” (Osborne, op. cit., 26).
an astonishing S$532 million (then approximately US$370 million). The first and third institutions showcase historical modern and recent contemporary art from Singapore and Southeast Asia, and the second—the premier globalised exhibition form—offers themed exhibitions that bring in the newest of emerging experimental art from the immediate region. Collectively, the three institutions interpret and present the inter-regional diversity of social experience as embodied by art within novel cultural spaces committed to the exploration of multicultural similarities and differences. Such forms of social experience, from where some still consider the semi-periphery of the advanced capitalist world, have been presented within the framework of a common world only recently. Thus, the three institutions are at least partially de-bordered or post-national spaces that present the complex and even disjunctive, multicultural contemporaneity of Southeast Asia. They are poster children of the city-state’s will to contemporaneity even while they simultaneously serve to articulate non-metropolitan representations of “our” own modernist and contemporary art.

The presentation of contemporary art necessarily entails the possession of a domestic contemporary art to showcase as well—or else it may seem that the cultural desert still exists. Ironically, if contemporary artists such as the near-iconic Tang Da Wu (b. 1943) and those who were part of the artists’ colony he was so involved with in 1988, The Artists Village (TAV), said to embody “alterity” in art, had not existed, arts policy would have had to invent them. Curator Russell Storer assesses the significance of TAV in the city-state’s recent cultural history thus: “With an emphasis on performance and installation, artists at TAV experimented with forms and ideas with a new level of criticality and openness, with Tang acting as a mentor figure for many of the younger artists.”

While contemporary art has benefited from increased state funding, the interactive conditioning of state-linked cultural institutions and artwork became more pronounced only from perhaps 2002, the year that the arts complex, Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, was opened. The signature arts centre, now a literal and symbolic centre of the arts in the city-state, was constructed at the cost of S$600 million (then approximately US$400 million) and had to be defended by NAC chair, Tommy Koh. Koh was the founding chair of the NAC, and served from 1991–1996.
of stern modernisation and less with art institutions; Singapore is in the position of having had artistic margins with avant-garde inclinations that presumably wanted to question artistic authority and conventions ahead of the authoritative arts-institutional centre that could sanction and canonise art.

**Contemporary Art’s “Arrival” and Flexible Postconceptual Art**

It has been argued, as I have noted, that from 1980 or so, capitalism more and more becomes “an omniscient form of our existence” that affects communication technologies to art forms. The question then arises of whether this is another Eurocentric statement: if capitalism is everywhere, is it really quite the same thing everywhere even in a relatively small region like Southeast Asia? I think we can say, in a qualified way, that yes it was everywhere in the region because of the Cold War; but we must add that it appeared with different accents in different locales.

A brief comparison of how contemporary art “arrives” in a few Southeast Asian countries from the 1970s will indicate the distinctiveness of Singapore’s relation to capitalism—owing to its deliberate capitalist self-subsumption—and the resulting specificity of its contemporary art. What also arises as a question—one that cannot easily be avoided—is: what does it mean when art travels? Do we speak of a Singapore contemporary art or contemporary art in Singapore? The same type of question could be applied to, say, the Philippines or Indonesia.

Such questions, though, should not presume any essentialist conceptions of contemporary art. The flexible art practices of the 1980s employed a number of post-formalist strategies in art-making. Drawing upon the practice of conceptual art, broadly taken, the strategies used were based on the understanding that art derived its critical meaning not from external aesthetic dimensions of the artwork, but from its internal structure. However, the understanding that art need not be aesthetic unexpectedly freed up the thought parameters of what constituted “artistic material,” resulting in what has been described as the “postmedium condition” of art. In Singapore (and around the region) medium-specific and object-based art are reincorporated as component parts of an expansive artistic practice that, following Peter Osborne, can be called postconceptual art. Singapore art thus went beyond the thoroughgoing anti-aesthetic of a purist notion of conceptualism, towards being an expanded art that featured, in particular, performance and installation sculpture blended (or co-existing) with painting and drawing—within which, in both latter media, figuration might appear; while oil painting or easel painting lost its position of primacy, painting did not disappear as it should have, if we follow the theorisations of art development undertaken decades ago. The blended art practices facilitated engagements with the contemporary fragments of life that were part of the Singapore condition of rapid modernisation.

**The Contemporary Arrives—and Takes Off**

How art travels and is reshaped is not a predictable business. Historical contexts are different in various locales, and the lineaments of a Euro-American art history—often an art history seen from the point of view of institutions in the United States that have been dominant since 1945—unsurprisingly do not apply in a neat way to Southeast Asian contexts. Further, even the geopolitical term “Southeast Asia” cannot be invoked easily as a destination for art, given the cultural differences between the Malay Archipelago or maritime Southeast Asia (e.g. Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines) and mainland Southeast Asia or Indochina (e.g. Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam).

If we stay with the Philippines and Indonesia, we might generalise that the 1970s witnessed the near-simultaneous appearance of:
two broad approaches [in art-making]—conceptualism and statement-making[,] as well as realism [in more established medium-based art] and forms of activism. However, these approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but instead as trajectories founded upon shared contextual concerns.\textsuperscript{30}

That is to say, conceptually oriented work coexisted or even combined with realism to give rise to the plural or even eclectic practice of contemporary art that may not be easily recognised as such in the metropolitan centres. The overarching shared historical-contextual concerns for the 1970s were the Cold War that framed the results of decolonisation from the 1940s to the mid-1960s and the question of how national identity and culture should be expressed in a tumultuous region. Artistic experiments had to ascertain what the “post” in “postcolonial” implied for artistic processes. This was the crucial factor that mediated the post-war regional practices of both modern and contemporary art. The quasi-authoritarian governments that arose after the colonialists left, and were tolerated by the United States of America because of their anti-communism, complicated artistic-cultural thinking.\textsuperscript{31} Two brief examples illustrate the regional “art world’s overlapping—because combined and uneven—modes of production,” as art historian Patrick Flores phrases it.\textsuperscript{32}

On 8 September 1969, the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP), constructed with financial support from the United States, was opened. As the nation lurched towards the declaration of martial law in 1972, the CCP was taken by some to be a cultural expression of the Marcos regime. Artists such as Pablo Baen Santos (b. 1943), one of the founders of the Kaisahan (Solidarity) Group of realist painters, were committed to the urban poor; for him and those likeminded, “[r]ealism was deployed in order to critique the state’s patronage of the arts through such institutions as the CCP, which tended to favour abstraction and conceptual practices that for many appeared artificial, mannerist and overly indexical of international movements.”\textsuperscript{33} In this case, modernist abstraction and contemporary conceptual practices, though considered incommensurate as visual arts practices, were yoked together as parts of an international culture some saw as antithetical to a more genuine or representative national culture.

In contrast, we can take the artists linked with the New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, GSRB) in Indonesia. After the
fall of Sukarno and the suppression of communism, with Suharto’s New Order set up, art and cultural expression were depoliticised. In this environment, abstraction, combined with work that referenced spiritual expression and decorative local motifs and patterns, flourished. In 1975, the GSRB was established by FX Harsono (b. 1949) and others, and championed a pluralism of artistic expression that influenced younger artists such as Dede Eri Supria (b. 1956), with the result that the use of ready-mades, found objects and site-specific installations spread, becoming an art that was executed with local sociopolitical concerns and historical contexts kept in view.34

In both instances of national artistic development discussed above, art is politicised. The geopolitical realities that avant-garde and conceptualism elsewhere understood to concern itself with questions of autonomous art and the expressive artist—or also “the oppressive values of modernism as reflected in the policies of art institutions,” as the Indonesian critic–curator–artist Jim Supangkat puts it—are transplanted into different cultural and political registers.35 The Cold War, authoritarian anti-communist regimes and the fears of the Free World were inescapable in the region—though at the same time, we want to avoid implying that art from developing societies only deal with sociopolitical content.36 Arguably, the sociopolitical complexities of 1970s Southeast Asian contemporary art act out, in unexpected combinations of forms and styles, the possibilities inherent within “the more socially and politically complex perspectives of the historical avant-gardes”—but we might observe that such “perspectives” were “also revived” in the 1960s and 1970s by a range of work [in the advanced West], which was either directly political in character, had strong anti-art elements, or embodied art-institutional and social
If contemporary art with realist dimensions in Southeast Asia cannot be understood as truly sharing a contemporaneous moment with some of the neo-avant-gardes in metropolitan West in the 1970s, the difference would seem to lie in Southeast Asian societies’ apparently laggard positions in modernisation’s telos. As happens when thinking of non-metropolitan modern and contemporary art, the issue of their “belatedness” arises (or their “particularity,” versus the “universal” art of the Euro-American centres). The art historian James Elkins acknowledges that: “Belatedness is a prickly concept: it forecloses sympathy and prohibits dialogue by offering a value judgement as a description. It trails a string of problematic concepts with normative implications, including the avant-garde, influence, originality, and precedence.”

How did Singapore compare with its surrounding environs? The expression of contemporary art in Singapore was rare in the 1970s, becoming more pronounced by the late 1980s. Despite this, the city-state shared artistic orientations in common with the region, and it is the PAP government’s success in engineering rapid growth that accounts for artistic differences. The commitment to rapid growth represented a choice of capitalist development with revised (and attenuated) social-democratic forms over even a “hard” leftism. Sociopolitical discipline and social engineering would create the culture to transform society. These choices made the city-state stand out in relief against the other national-cultural ideals that surrounded them.

The upshot of the above leads us to the broad proposition that contemporary art arises, erratically and symptomatically through the 1970s, in varying degrees of reaction to the volatilisation of society and culture by a wrenching catch-up modernisation—which also entailed intense urbanisation, with the entire island losing the inherited division between town and country from colonial times—and to the search for new artistic means not only in the visual arts, but also in theatre and literature, that allowed sharper engagements with sociocultural engineering. Artistic changes in the metropolitan centres from the 1950s–1970s, when many artists seemed determined “to locate their art as closely as possible to the boundaries between art’s traditional domain of imaginative perception and the base materiality of one’s means of signification,” then offered options by which artists could adapt to create an art that foregrounded the present’s fragments.

Such matters formed the thematic core of an exhibition in 1990, Urban Artists: 25 Years of Singapore Art, curated by Susie Koay, then a curator at the National Museum Art Gallery (N MAG), and, later, the deputy director of the new SAM. The NMAG, established in 1976, was a cultural institution that exceeded the historical and ethnological orientation of its parent National Museum (with origins in 1849) in its commitment to visual art, until the opening of SAM in 1996 as a full-blown art museum. The exhibition is valuable as an authentic representative voice from the end of the 1980s that captures artistic transitions in both aesthetic media and content.

In the exhibition booklet, Koay writes that the pre-independence environment of Singapore was ineluctably transformed after independence on 9 August 1965, and that art changed with it. Already, in 1960, the PAP started “a drive towards industrialization and rapid urbanization,” and because of “its sustained and ofttimes [sic] ruthless urbanization programme, by the year 1988, a total of 86% of the population lived in these subsidized skyscraper towns.” The exhibition offers four categories of artists in examining the relationship between art and “the current culture”: first, artists who directly transcribe the environment into their work; second, artists who indirectly or unselfconsciously utilise elements from their environment; third, artists who “isolate themselves to create an inner world within the urban setting”; and finally, those whose work is
in touch with the current environment [...] utility services compare favourably with those elsewhere [in the more advanced world]; [and] where the URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority] attempts to preserve [...] the old Singapore with as much earnestness [the] HDB [Housing and Development Board] had earlier displayed in demolishing and rebuilding.\(^44\)

That is, in a Singapore that felt itself caught up with metropolitan norms, the aim to wipe the slate clean of all history and cultural forms inimical to modernisation has been moderated, and a will to be contemporary has, in turn, fostered artwork that also wishes to be contemporary. This is the category most pertinent for my argument.

One pronounced reaction to modernisation was nostalgia. By the 1970s, the depiction of tropical landscape was established in Chinese xieyi-hua-style painting, which attempted to capture the essence of a landscape or birds using rapid brushwork. As urbanisation progressed, the “[d]epiction of recurrent themes such as the old Chinatown and the Singapore River can be seen as escape avenues from the current plastic age,” according to Koay’s essay.\(^45\) She points out both the nostalgia and sense of loss embedded in such artwork. The Singapore River was a favourite of watercolourists, so much that in 1986, the Arbour Fine Arts Gallery featured younger artists in a private exhibition (infamously) entitled Not the Singapore River.\(^46\) Given the seemingly unavoidable presence of the Singapore River, Koay offers, as part of her second category of artists (those who indirectly register their environments), a 1975 oil painting done by Nanyang-style artist Liu Kang (1911–2004), Life by the River (fig. 18.1). The artist is regarded as a “pioneer” artist whose work combined Post-Impressionist technique with Chinese ink styles in depicting scenes of Bali or Singapore. Liu Kang’s painting offers a brightly coloured realist (though not naturalistic) scene of a village with a river going through it, with a variety of everyday life presented: people talk, wash clothes on the river bank, push their boats in the river, etc. The presence of community bonds is patent. Koay conjures up what is not in the scene: “Liu Kang’s works can be interpreted as an unconscious reaction to the regimented society of schematic HDB flats which dominates [sic] the Singapore skyline of the 1960s and 70s. His figures are not individualized, purposely lacking distinct features that identify them, emulating the monotone of rows upon rows of flats.”\(^47\) Already, by the mid-1970s, the force of a gathering modernisation is felt.
But of course not all rejoinders to modernisation are in the form of nostalgia embodied in the adapted modernism of the Nanyang Style or traditional visual languages. Those who “isolate themselves to create an inner world” (the third category in her catalogue) include a diverse set of artists—abstract painters, Chinese-style ink-and-colour painters and even, we might be surprised, transmedia artists. Koay brings up an art exhibition/event of 1988, *Trimurti*, as one example of this third category. Three younger artists, S. Chandrasekaran (b. 1959), Goh Ee Choo (b. 1962), Salleh Japar (b. 1962), staged a collaborative work at the Goethe-Institut that combined painting, installation sculpture and performance art, unified by the Sanskrit term *trimurti*, used to define a manifestation of three forces: creation, preservation and destruction. Hindu, Chinese divinatory as well as Malay-Muslim cultural and religious elements are explored by each artist, in the name of how such differences could also embody the unity of multiracial identities in Singapore.

The three artists performed individually on 7 and 12 March 1988, during which they worked and reworked the central installation in the hall. Koay sees the event as part of a larger artistic trend, regardless of whether it appears in pictorial or transmedia guises: “the use of negative space was important and meaningful in experiencing the beautiful as the forms themselves.”

And therefore the three, while unusual in their attempt to blend Asian religious cultures with installation and performance art, “practise the same form of escape from the urban environment” as others. Artistic pluralism is a sign of an artistic transmutation.

By the time Koay reaches her fourth category—“works [that] are inspired by the current environment”—the urge for artistic pluralism is more marked for both younger and older practitioners, even as the general artistic support for diversity is not unqualified.

Performance artist–painter–installation sculptor Tang Da Wu is in this fourth category, as is Teo Eng Seng (b. 1938) and younger artists with links to TAV. She brings up Teo’s *The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River* (1986, *fig. 18.2*) as an example of the artist as “educator” who “recontextualizes the realities of society and projects or magnifies the interpretation for the benefit of the viewer.” While she does not say more than this, Teo’s work is both an experiment in material and a reevaluation of key Singapore art content. *The Net* is an installation comprising a fishing net mounted and stretched out on a wall with variously coloured pulped paper as sculptural elements figuring as debris or detritus “caught” in the net. Teo, who had abandoned painting in 1979, calls this medium “paperyesculp.” The
work questions both the use of conventional art media and the cliché image of the Singapore River to represent local identity, given how polluted the river had become by 1986. But while Teo is anti-conventional, he is no avant-gardist trying to eradicate art’s aesthetic difference from life. When interviewed in 2001, and asked to comment on the increasingly visible artistic diversity by the 1980s, he acerbically replied that this “diversity” was partly the result of poor art education—a lack of sufficient technical training—starting in the 1960s, and going into the 1970s, when “[f]resh idea[s] came in and what is that fresh idea—talk. Talk a lot? Come out with very big words.”

Koay’s emplacement of Teo alongside committed experimental artists such as Tang Da Wu is significant for its answer to the question, why does the contemporary take off? Even if Teo was critical of the perceived lack of conventional skills in contemporary art practices, he still found in some of the new ways of art-making a renewed critical capacity to engage with present-day concerns without resorting to nostalgia. With the above in mind, we briefly can revisit three contemporary art events that were symptomatic of artistic dissatisfaction in order to bring out a number of common points in diverse arts practices that make them “contemporary.”

In the first of these events, Cheo Chai-Hiang (b. 1946)—a member of an art group that privileged abstraction, the Modern Art Society—in 1972 submitted a proposal for the Society’s annual exhibition by mail for an artwork to be titled *Singapore River.* (He was then living in Birmingham in England, where he was in an art school.) The proposal was for a work, measuring 5 feet by 5 feet, to be drawn partially on a wall and partially on the floor of the exhibition hall. It not only brought up the question of art’s materiality but also questioned how the Singapore River might be reconceived, given both its importance in Singapore’s history as an entrepôt and its multitudinous (and cliché) appearance in nostalgic and touristic visual renditions of Singapore. The proposal was rejected.

Curator Low Sze Wee notes that “there is some contention [as to] whether [the proposal] was in fact rejected. Some contend that it was left out of the exhibition due to [an] administrative oversight.” (Personal communication with the author, 27 February 2016).
home of roughly 30 of his Constructivist-styled metal sculptures and 30 abstract oil paintings. This event is now referred to as *The Picnic* (1979). He also painted a 100-metre long painting entitled *The Lonely Road* that, unpredictably, he offered to cut up into smaller and more affordable sizes. Even more unpredictable, T.K. Sabapathy opines, “was the incineration of his three-dimensional constructions [at dusk]; [... Tan] embarked upon an action which completely undermined [...] the existence of a work as an object. As a phenomenon it is singular in Tan’s artistic career and unique in the story of art in Singapore.”

The curatorial text for a 2016 exhibition that featured Tan reads: “*[The Picnic]* has been described by art historian T.K. Sabapathy as the first ‘happening’ or performance event to be held in Singapore. Yet the exhibition came about by circumstance.”

While recognised as “the first event of its kind in Singapore,” as curator Russell Storer notes, it remains hard to justify an appellation as specific as a “happening” to an event that was singular, sponsored by a cultural organisation and had art for sale. Nevertheless, the event signified an eclectic and exploratory chaffing at conventional artistic restrictions, even as there is no complete forsaking of art’s aesthetic dimensions.

And in the third event, Tang Da Wu, after art studies in England, presented, in 1980 at the NMAG, works from 1979, arranged as an environmental installation exhibition titled *Earth Work* (fig. 18.3) that piqued curiosity among art audiences. The exhibition included *Gully Curtains*, a set of seven pieces of linens that he had hung in a gully over three months at a construction site in (what was then semi-rural) Ang Mo Kio, and *The Product of the Rain and Me*, square wooden boards covered with dried mud in the shape of circles, held in place by glue while the rain had largely washed away the mud that surrounded the circles. (The circles referred to the idea of infinity from the *Yi Jing* (or *I Ching*), the ancient Chinese Book of Changes.) Drawings made using earth pigments also were displayed. The very title that Tang chose deliberately invoked and indicated his artistic reworking of 1960s land art, or earth art, for his own purposes. A 2016 restaging of *Earth Work* featured a letter that Tang wrote to the then-Ministry of Culture, dated 27 March 1980, requesting a grant-in-aid for the exhibition:

*[The proposed exhibition] is my observation of the Singapore red earth, it is very special. I am interested in the changes of*
the earth due to the rainfalls, the heat and
the gravity, apart from its physiographical
aspect. [sic] […] My way of working
isn’t scientific, it is very much philo-
sophical, base[d] upon my “zen” studies
and influence[d] by “Tao” and “I Ch-
ing.” 60 I am also making a [sic] 8mm film
call[ed] “Earthdance” as complementing
to “Earthwork.” 61

An experimental and a putative transmedia or
trans-category art practice is wedded, through
Tang’s plain, ingenuous and idiosyncratic rhet-
toric, to an environmental awareness inspired
by Chinese texts and ideas, using earth from
a construction site that was the result of the
state’s ongoing urban development. It is worth
noting that Tang, like Cheo, had been a member
of the Modern Art Society; he appears to
follow Cheo in pronouncing, implicitly, the
end of “the sovereignty of [modernist] paint-
ing, institutionalised by exclusionary aesthetic
values and positions,” while simultaneously
delivering a quiet critique of urbanisation’s de-
grading environmental impact, with no recon-
ciliation offered between the value of the red
earth and the urbanisation that has exposed it
erosion. 62 The result is an artwork in which
the historical present of fracture and fragments
is privileged, and this presentism is not vitiated
by the “philosophical” studies undergirding the
circular shapes used in it: the Chinese cultural
texts are not marshalled, as they might be, to
valorise a timeless realm.

The three works or events display the
embryonic elements that become character-
ised as contemporary art in Singapore by the
late 1980s and may be thought of both as a
transmedia enterprise and art that will treat the
incomplete fragments of historical contempo-
rary life. Together, these events are a proleptic
index of what will emerge in 1980s Singapore
as the contemporaneity of contemporary art.

It would appear that the destabilisation of the
entire city-state in the modernisation drive
also made the Nanyang Style or the Singapore
lyrical exotic less feasible as artistic-cultural re-
sources to engage with the present.
Contemporary Art and Flexible Postconceptualism

If the 1970s offer the tentative appearance of contemporary art, the late 1980s offer both more artists and artists engaged in pluralistic or heterogeneous art exploration. The question here is whether there was any understanding—if only tacit or implicit—as to what contemporary art’s remit was to be; and given what was being said of the new art’s “alterity” and agenda of aesthetic transgression, how firmly alternative was this art exactly?

These questions are raised in a subtle and searching essay, “Regarding Exhibitions,” by the long-time observer of Singapore art, T.K. Sabapathy. When TAV was established in their founding premises by Tang Da Wu and his artist wife, Hazel McIntosh, in a village in then-rural Sembawang in June 1988, it became a magnet of what was regarded as the alternative in not only artistic but larger cultural terms: the Village’s notoriety in art circles also drew non-arts attention.

Sabapathy tells us that the ten artists who participated in TAV’s inaugural show—Tang himself, Amanda Heng (b. 1951), Vincent Leow (b. 1961) and Baet Yeok Kwan (b. 1961) among them, all of whom have since progressed to various levels of distinction—had uneven art practices, and were attracted to TAV by particular interests, and undoubtedly, by the prospects of working with Tang.

What was the general lure of the Village? Sabapathy suggests the following: openness and space for advancing individual practices, combined with collegial yet competitive interaction; “provision of a milieu that was physically expansive and psychologically salubrious as it was set apart from the uniform, restrictive and reductive urbanization of Singapore in the late 70s and throughout the 80s”; and “non-dogmatic operatives—although methods for producing and thinking on art were steered along reflexive paths.” The Village embodied in its rural location the (at least temporary) ability to escape the disciplined homogenising modernity of the city-state, with its uniform slab- and tower-blocks of flats. TAV both signified and gave literal space for critical reflection.

As the Village was claimed to be, as Sabapathy writes, “a pre-eminent site for prospecting alterity, it is tempting to cast it as a radical agency; in which circumstance, its radicalism is posited in terms of subverting or transgressing […] prevailing conventions, systems and institutions by advocating activist strategies. Nothing is further from the case.” The last phrase does not mean that Sabapathy dismisses the significance of the work and the artists associated with TAV, but emphasises that its artistic “radicalism” was not as thoroughgoing as it might appear, even if its larger sociocultural impact drew “watchfulness or surveillance.”

He offers his reflections on two exhibitions that took place in 1989 for which he was present: the inaugural Open Studio Show (in January) and the Drawing Show (in December).

That the inaugural show was staged in a literal village meant that art escaped the exclusionary confines of a high-cultural space, and could be “diffused” and “dispersed”: the very mode and location of its exhibitionary condition signified freedom for both artists and audience. This also transgressed curatorial norms: the audience interacted with the art in a non-hierarchical and non-ritualised manner, with the result, Sabapathy observes, that art’s autonomy was not “sequestered.” However, to his surprise, the show included some paintings and “sculpture-like formations” that possessed “continuing or residual affiliations with prevailing modern conventions,” even while other works showed clear conceptivist inclinations.

Tang displayed his own drawings and paintings; “interest in engagement with painting as such was not trivialized,” as one might expect. Amanda Heng even had six drawings of male and female nudes on display, “rendered brusquely, violently, and as a partial entity,” and “the body is seen as invasively manipulated, even abject.”
Gender issues are foregrounded, but while the drawings are hardly conventional, they were executed while she was a student at the then-La Salle School of Art.\textsuperscript{71} While the drawings, in retrospect, help us to see the continuity in Heng’s work as it develops in the 1990s and later, when she starts practising performance and installation art, life drawings undertaken in an academy nevertheless “lodged oddly with anticipations of TAV as a site for alterity.”\textsuperscript{72}

The co-existence of apparently incompatible art forms, even if laced with subversive or unusual content, also occurs with other youthful artists with partial or no affiliation with TAV. Sabapathy brings up the four-artist show, \textit{Man, Objects and Images}, held at the NMAG in August 1988. There was a willingness, as in the inaugural \textit{Open Studio Show}, to break with the “[…] curatorial operatives […] customarily seen in art galleries here.”\textsuperscript{73} Tang Mun Kit (b. 1955) coordinated the exhibition “and articulated their aims or premises.”\textsuperscript{74} The title chosen for the show, in eschewing “metaphorical associations,” signalled an interest in presenting how both more conventional art forms (paintings as done by Wong Shih Yaw [b. 1967]) and found objects (Tang’s “rehabilitated discarded materials and found things […] [which] were cool, unostentatious, yet sustaining”) could be pressured to offer “fresh thinking” on art.\textsuperscript{75} Artistic “impurity” appeared also in the heterogeneous form of artist-organised shows. What, as such, is the “contemporary turn” we witnessed in the late 1980s, when the conventional and the various anti-formalisms are yoked together, Sabapathy suggests, with “distinctiveness”?\textsuperscript{76}

Sabapathy’s critical queries make clear that the contemporary turn actually was not keen on the absolute anti-aesthetic of a “pure” conceptual art. The issue of art’s necessary constitution by concepts is accompanied by, minimally, a practical understanding that all art requires some type of materialisation and presentation. Arguably, that which was initially thought of in the 1960s as “post-formalist” strategies offered some Singapore artists the idea of the anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic and non-aesthetic material to engage with questions of art-making in particularly unprecedented areas of investigation such as: the environment and modernisation; gender and sexuality issues; cultural and ethnic identity—concerns not exactly addressed by abstract pictorialism or, in fact, by any of the forms of historical modern art in Singapore.

The contention that Peter Osborne offers us that contemporary art is postconceptual art is helpful in siting the indigenous and indigenised re-formations of contemporary art in Singapore. We can begin with the “failure” of conceptual art:

It was the ironic historical achievement of the strong programme of “analytical” or “pure” conceptual art to have demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a necessary, though radically insufficient, component of the artwork through the failure of its attempt at elimination.\textsuperscript{77}

Osborne then adumbrates upon this “ineliminability”: “The aesthetic concept of art […] mistakes art’s necessary aesthetic appearance for the ground of its apparently autonomous, and hence infinite, production of meaning, which is in fact historically relational, rather than ‘positive’ in an aesthetic sense.”\textsuperscript{78} That is, while art is constituted by concepts, it also must have some “felt, spatio-temporal” presentation, and therefore materiality is ineliminable in that sense; this in turn leads us to the “critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials,” which then further leads to an “expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art.”\textsuperscript{79} There is no problem of artistic unity posed in this expanded field of art production, for the “unity of the individual artwork [is distributed] across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time.”\textsuperscript{80}
While the visual-artistic situation in Singapore did not participate in quite such a complex discourse on contemporary art, an understanding of the issues Osborne sets out reveals how re-energising and, for some, liberating the postconceptual was as it offered fresh critical means for the exploration of the present condition of Singapore in the 1970s and the 1980s.

**Conclusion: And the Contemporary Now …?**

The contemporary as a goal is shaped by the particular relations to the immediate past and to a desired future. For 1980s Singapore, the contemporary was affected also by the sense of possibly “finally” living in the same historical moment as the advanced West, in contrast to its neighbours’ slower economic development—and therefore in contrast to the region’s more “backward” time. Through the concerted focus on export-oriented industrialisation (EOI), the city-state sought to escape the fear that “geography is destiny.” One Malaysian cultural-political commentator, Karim Raslan, has characterised Singapore’s post-independence development as one in which there is “a deliberate de-emphasising of the [peninsular Southeast Asian] region—in terms of language policies, culture and politics”:

The [Singapore state’s] fixation with the global agenda has made many [younger] Singaporeans [especially] lose sight of the imperatives of geography, turning their backs on the region. The [regional] hinterland is steadily being forgotten […]. For example, less and less Singaporeans can speak Malay—even pasar [bazaar] Malay eludes them.81

The differences in Singapore contemporary art from that of Indonesia and the Philippines in the 1980s can be accounted for, to a reasonable extent, by the developmental and global agenda of the PAP government.

The contemporary in the first quarter of the 21st century must not be assumed to be the same as that of the 1980s–2002. This essay in fact could be said to have asked, “What was the contemporary and contemporary art in the 1980s?” The 2000s witness a turn in the others — a

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71 From 2007, the school became known as LaSalle College of the Arts.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Sabapathy, “Regarding Exhibitions,” 9. At this juncture, we can also recall Trimurti, which was brought up by Susie Koay in her catalogue essay referenced earlier: there too we see a clash of elements—religion and essentialised cultural-ethnic identities are explored in the name of a harmonious multicultural identity that (admittedly) seems to remain more a series of juxtaposed multi-racial identities, which are hardly the predictable contents of contemporary art.
77 Osborne, op. cit., 49.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 48.
80 Ibid.
contemporary moment, one in which the experience of the global city becomes filled not only with shopping centres but also possesses museums turned into almost mass-popular spaces—in a time when the beautiful, in an image-driven, mass-mediated culture, no longer has quite the same capacity to undermine or surprise, as it did in the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries.

A major issue now, given that the city-state has become global and informational in form, having used its economic capacity to create art institutions still not quite possible elsewhere in the region, is whether Singapore contemporary art is able to practise a double-coding in which its own artistic significations are maintained even as they are situated in the contemporary art museum or the Singapore Biennale and accrue new collective sociocultural meanings—and also benefit from the sizeable funding the state puts into the arts.

There is, therefore, also the major art institutions to think about. The emergence of East Asian and Australian biennales and museum exhibitions from the 1990s showcasing modern and contemporary Asian art, alongside Singapore art institutions, indicate that self-reflexive investigations have emerged on how “the rest of the world” produced and still produces its modern culture out of related quasi- or directly colonised experiences, whatever the limitations in funding and other institutional capacities.82 The relationship of artists in the region to art institutions is not necessarily one in which, as Jim Supangkat observes of Indonesian artists, “like many contemporary artists worldwide, were questioning the authority of art institutions”: modern Indonesian art museums “hardly exist at all,” and that “has created the general impression that the status of modern or contemporary art is not understood by the Indonesian people. As a result, all artists in Indonesia—even the most radical—hope for the greater development of art institutions.”83

Singapore art institutions need to negotiate the politics of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) regionalism and postcolonial nationalisms to curatorially write over older and newer contemporary art’s own significations to project the utopian horizon of sociocultural connection, while struggling to not allow such projections to take on only the dystopian form of the market. The contemporary now poses new conundrums that could not have been fully anticipated in the 1980s.

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18.1  
Liu Kang  
*Life by the River*  
1975  
Oil on canvas  
126 x 203 cm  
Gift of the artist  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

18.2  
Teo Eng Seng  
*The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River*  
1986  
Paperdyesculp and net  
350 x 350 cm  
Gift of the artist  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

18.3  
Exhibition poster of *Earth Work*  
1980
18.2

18.3