Earth Work 1979
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Notes on

Tang Da Wu’s

*Earth Work*

— Charmaine Toh
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Notes on Tang Da Wu’s *Earth Work*

— Charmaine Toh

In April 1980, Tang Da Wu showed an exhibition titled *Earth Work* at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG).¹ Featuring land art interventions, earth installations and mineral pigment drawings, *Earth Work* was not only the earliest recorded instance of land art in Singapore, but also a literal intervention into the Permanent Exhibition of NMAG. Key works were placed on the floor, right in the middle of the gallery space, surrounded by paintings in the National Collection. (Fig. 1) The stained pieces of cloth and muddy wooden boards presented a marked contrast to the mainly abstract paintings hanging on the white walls of the gallery. Perhaps that explains why the exhibition was shut down after three days, ahead of its scheduled one-week display, by then Museum Director Christopher Hooi, and subsequently moved to the Sin Chew Jit Poh Exhibition Centre where it showed for three days. More than 35 years later, it seems apt that we revisit both the exhibition and the incident in one of the first changing exhibitions of the new National Gallery Singapore, which is the current custodian of NMAG’s collection. The first part of this essay will describe the works in the exhibition along with Tang’s process, as they have been relatively undocumented at this point. The second part of this essay will consider the position of *Earth Work* in the context of Singapore’s broader art history.

Tang has played a leading role in the contemporary art scene in Singapore, and is most well-known for his contribution to the development of The Artists Village and his mentoring of a younger generation of artists in the late 1980s and 1990s. Many writers have discussed his activities upon his return to Singapore from London in 1988, the exhibitions held at his home in Sembawang and his many performances both in and outside of Singapore. However, much less has been said about his first and earlier extended visit to his home country, from 1979 to 1980, which was no less significant. Tang had graduated from Birmingham Polytechnic School of Fine Art with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1974. He then moved to London and remained there till his return to Singapore in 1979. It was his first time home in ten years.

“I returned home and saw the earth fading away.”

Tang Da Wu, 2015²

Upon arriving back in Singapore, Tang lived on Casuarina Road. In his explorations of the area around him, he discovered a large piece of land north of Ang Mo Kio that had been cleared for redevelopment.³ Exploring the field, Tang made many studies that led to the development of new works. His attention was initially caught by the rapid soil erosion that was happening due to the clearing of all the trees and shrubs in that area. The rain had created several small gullies in the soil, as water ran unimpeded through the earth. (Fig. 2) In the same field, there were random raised areas where the soil had been covered by various objects that had been left behind, and thus protected. The soil surrounding the protected areas had been washed away, creating small bumps in the earth. (Fig. 3) In his written proposal to the Ministry of Culture requesting for funding support to exhibit his new works, Tang stated, “It is my observation of the Singapore red earth [...] I am interested in the changes of the earth due to the rainfall, the heat
and the gravity. Apart from its physiographical aspect, I am also interested in its archaeological side; I collect items from the earth. I document it with photography, drawing, writing and film.  

*Gully Curtains* (1979) was the first work to be created in the field. Selecting the largest gully, Tang positioned seven pieces of linen cloth along the crevasse. (Fig. 4) The size of the cloth ranged from about one to three metres, and Tang positioned the shortest piece at the shallow end and the longest piece at the deeper end. On each piece of cloth, Tang used black ink to trace the depth of the gully at that point. These seven pieces of cloth were left in the gully for three months, subject to the Singapore tropical weather. As rain continued to erode the soil in the gully, the muddy water stained the parts of the cloth in contact with the ground. (Fig. 5) At NMAG, *Gully Curtains* had to be displayed flat on the ground as the museum did not allow Tang to suspend the work. However, at the Sin Chew Jit Poh Exhibition Centre, Tang could suspend them the way he wanted – replicating the way it was placed in the field and creating an imaginary gully through space. When asked about the inspiration for the work, Tang referred to his oft-repeated idea of ‘play’, or as elaborated by CJ W-L Wee, “the possibility of art as an active, spontaneous and poetic process.” He spent days just observing and experimenting with the earth and *Gully Curtains* came about as a result of one of those experiments. Here, sun, rain, wind and soil became the ‘paints’ of Tang’s new palette.

Another pair of works that continued the use of the environment as artist’s brush and canvas was *The Product of the Sun and Me* (1979) and *The Product of the Rain and Me* (1979). The earth was the canvas, and as the titles indicate, sun and rain were the brushes. In *The Product of the Sun and Me*, Tang covered ten square wooden boards with mud; on top, he placed rice paper, on which he drew a circle in black ink. Left to bake in the sun, the mud cracked, forming a pattern of fissures across the surface. (Fig. 6) In *The Product of the Rain and Me*, Tang drew the circles using glue. The rain washed away all the mud that was not protected by the glue, leaving behind a thin circle of soil. (Fig. 7) Both works illustrate the natural destruction of the earth due to deforestation.

The final two groups of work showed at the 1980 exhibition were a selection of drawings made from natural pigments and a display of dried soil and clay. The drawings, *One Hundred Percent Old Earth* (1979), were simply the result of the artist exploring the different kinds of pigments found in the earth. Intrigued by the various colours of clay that he found both in the original site and subsequently further afield, he made multiple drawings on paper using the different types of soil or clay he discovered. (Fig. 8) These lumps of red, white, purple and ochre clay were also displayed around the gallery space, laid out on the floor at intervals. (Fig. 9) In addition, at the Sin Chew Jit Poh Exhibition Centre, Tang also displayed an installation of mouldy soil on the floor. (Fig. 10 and 11) The mould had grown and dried on the surface of the soil in the field and Tang had carefully lifted up the pieces and brought them into the gallery space. Arranged in abstract patterns that echoed its original form, the display was both beautiful and fragile, an apt reflection of the earth itself, yet made more poignant by the use of mould.

Missing from the National Gallery exhibition is a lost 8mm film titled *Earthdance*. Made at the same field as *Gully Curtains* in 1979, *Earthdance* is possibly the earliest example of video art in Singapore. Rather than simply using the camera to document, Tang was clearly conscious of the medium itself, taking it into account in the creation of the work. Using the camera’s viewfinder, Tang marked out the trapezoid area of the field framed by the
camera. He then filmed himself repeatedly running along the edge of the marked-out area, creating a furrow in the earth. The film itself captured the artist's partial body moving along the edges of the video image, shifting in and out of the frame as he circled around.8 The film is mentioned in Tang’s written records but has never been shown.9 Nevertheless, it forms an important link between Tang’s wider performance practice and the earth works. It is also the only work that touches on humanity’s direct physical impact on the environment, a theme that Tang subsequently revisits a decade later in numerous performances.

Tang also made another work, Begin from Taiji (1979), which he did not show in the 1980 exhibition in Singapore, but instead submitted to the Modern Art Society (MAS) for an exhibition that travelled to Taiwan in the same year.10 The work consists of 64 pieces of white cloth which he strung up at the rooftop of his sister’s home in Serangoon. (Fig. 12) He sewed a strip of black felt in the middle of each piece of cloth and, every day, he would take down one piece of cloth. This process lasted 64 days until the last piece of cloth remained. The sun turned the exposed white parts of the cloth yellow; the idea was that the longer it was exposed, the greater its discolouration. For its original display in Taiwan, Tang bound the cloth into two separate books, likely for ease of transport and display. In this exhibition, he has decided to show each piece of cloth separately to better see the impact of the sun on the white cloth. Similar to The Product of the Sun and Me, Begin from Taiji looks at the impact of the sun on the unprotected environment.

It is worth noting that Tang’s earth works have no anthropomorphic overtones. Instead, it is the elemental that is prioritised – the texture and colours of the earth, the impact of the sun and rain as well as the marks that are left behind. Speaking about the earth, he said, “I wanted to try to come to understand it without preconceived ideas. I am not the master of my materials – I do not wish to control them. I am interested in making a relationship between me and my material, not in dominating completely.”11 This relationship is clearly seen in the performances he made in Epping Forest, just outside of London, before coming back to Singapore. Experimental and spontaneous, sometimes alone and sometimes with a small group of students as his audience, the performances are Tang’s first explorations of the land. (Fig. 13) Different recurring motifs can be seen in the photographic documentation – the circle, the repeated movements around a fixed space and the interaction with naturally occurring elements of the landscape. When he returned to London in 1981, he continued these forest performances.

In 1978, a year before his return to Singapore, Tang had a solo show at London’s ACME gallery.12 Titled Marks – Black Powder Falling Through Muslin, he looked at the effect of black pigment powder falling through layers of white muslin. On the top layer of muslin, he would draw shapes or lines with the powder; as powder fell through five layers of cloth, the drawing would grow fainter and fainter, or even change shape completely. (Fig. 14 to 16) Two years later, he explained, “From 1974, I became fascinated with marks left by different things […] I looked at marks left by coffee cups, at foot prints and the natural marks in nature. This became an important basis for my work.”13 So while the abstract black marks on white muslin seem to show the influence of minimalism, the unpredictable outcomes in this experimental series of works also reveal Tang’s notions on material and process. Tang, himself, looks back on his early influences and approaches in an interview with Tameraes Goh in the next part of this catalogue, providing further insight into his ideas on collaboration and an open-ended practice.14
Tang’s Singapore earth works, then, show a significant development and synthesis of his ideas about art and land, and his use of fabric and ink. 

It also points the way forward to his more elaborate performances in the late 1980s and early 1990s dealing with the environment, particularly *They Poach the Rhino, Chop off His Horn and Make this Drink* (1989), *Tiger’s Whip* (1991) and *Sorry Whale, I Didn’t Know that You Were in My Camera* (1996), all of which deal with the killing of endangered species of animals. These works and more are elaborated on in the essay by fellow artist Chng Seok Tin, which looks at Tang’s practice in detail from the late 1980s to 1999. However, while important, I wish to leave aside considerations of the Anthropocene for now and, instead, consider these works within the context of modernism in Singapore.

“The tools of art have too long been confined to ‘the studio’. The city gives the illusion that the earth does not exist.”

Robert Smithson, 1969

On hindsight, the disruption of the permanent display at the NMAG could also be seen as a disruption into the high modernist narrative of art in Singapore. It was certainly the first time works of this nature were exhibited in NMAG. Formed in 1976, NMAG was the sole custodian of the National Collection at that time and the permanent display presented highlights of the collection in the form of abstract paintings and sculptures. The dominant style in Singapore during the 1970s, abstraction was first championed by MAS in the 1960s. Their exhibition catalogue from 1969 categorically stated: “The main concerns of modern artists are the beauty of form, harmony of rhythm and creativity […] ideas (were) only of subsidiary importance.” Abstraction was also strongly promoted by the Alpha Gallery, which regularly featured artists such as Thomas Yeo, Teo Eng Seng and Eng Tow, who were also present in the permanent display.

Tang, himself, was a member of MAS, yet espoused markedly different views. In an interview with *New Nation* about *Earth Work*, he stated, “An artist should introduce to others what he sees and learns of something. His works should provoke thoughts, not to please the eyes or to entertain, much less for decoration.” In another interview with *The Straits Times*, he added, “I have no desire to make works for people to decorate their walls. What activates me is my own discoveries and my own understanding of nature.” Interestingly, the work he submitted to MAS for the exhibition in Taiwan was the most ‘formalist’ of the earth works he made, possibly indicating a sophisticated negotiation with the ideology of MAS. Later in his life, Tang would stop showing with MAS and go on to co-found The Artists Village at his home at Sembawang, pushing the development of conceptual art and performance in Singapore, and facilitating the presentation of art outside the white cube.

Were the cracks and corrosion of the earth also the fissures of modernity? In their survey of abstract art of the 1970s, Low Sze Wee and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa have suggested that the “‘mediums and materials of the artwork were by themselves the reality and that a work of art ought not to refer to anything other than itself […] These ‘new’ artworks were stripped-down and made of materials with smooth, shiny surfaces such as steel, cement and fabric.” Artists felt that their artistic language had to reflect the rapid industrialisation of Singapore in a mode that was sometimes described as the ‘international style’ or a universal formalist...
visual language. If modernity was reflected in the technologies of production and the figure of the artist in the studio, then were the ochre stains on the linen of *Gully Curtains* the ‘rust’ of the industrial? The presence of mould in the gallery also takes on a different significance vis-à-vis the conditions of its surroundings. And what do we make of the original site which was cleared to make way for the construction of public housing?

The product of simultaneous destruction and creation, Tang’s earth works signal an early shift in the art discourse of Singapore towards the post-modern. The polished surfaces of the steel sculptures by his contemporaries such as Kim Lim and Anthony Poon stand in stark contrast to the rawness of Tang’s process-driven and often temporal works. Returning to the earlier quote by Smithson, Tang has brought the earth into the city and, in the process, challenged the city’s attendant modes of art production and consumption, both closely linked to the existing ideas of modernity. A thorough examination of *Earth Work* reveals it to be a significant event, yet one that has been largely overlooked by art historians and curators thus far, possibly due to the short exhibition period and being overshadowed by the later and more controversial happenings around The Artists Village. Through Tang’s 1979 works, one can clearly see the re-evaluation of art-making in Singapore, thus offering us a better understanding of the shift from the abstract practices of the 1970s to the conceptualism of the 1980s.

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End notes

[1] The exhibition has sometimes been referred to as Earthworks. In this essay, I have chosen to refer to the exhibition as Earth Work in accordance with the exhibition posters. I use ‘earth works’ as a generic term for the artworks.


[3] More specifically, the field was behind the old Ahmad Ibrahim Integrated Secondary School.


[5] There are conflicting accounts of how long the cloth was placed in the gully. Journalist Gan Soh Eng reports that Tang left them there for ten days. See “Tang sees the world in a lump of clay,” New Nation, 9 April 1980, 19. However, Tang remembers leaving them in the gully for three months.


[7] The original works have been destroyed. The artist recreated them in 2016 for this exhibition.


[15] Tang’s ink practice requires much further research. However, it is important to not overstate the link of Tang’s ink practice to that of traditional Chinese ink practice. Instead, Cai Heng has suggested that Tang’s ink works simply show the possibilities of ink in relation to the contemporary. See Cai Heng, “Tradition Unfettered: The Story of Singapore Ink,” in Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 84.


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