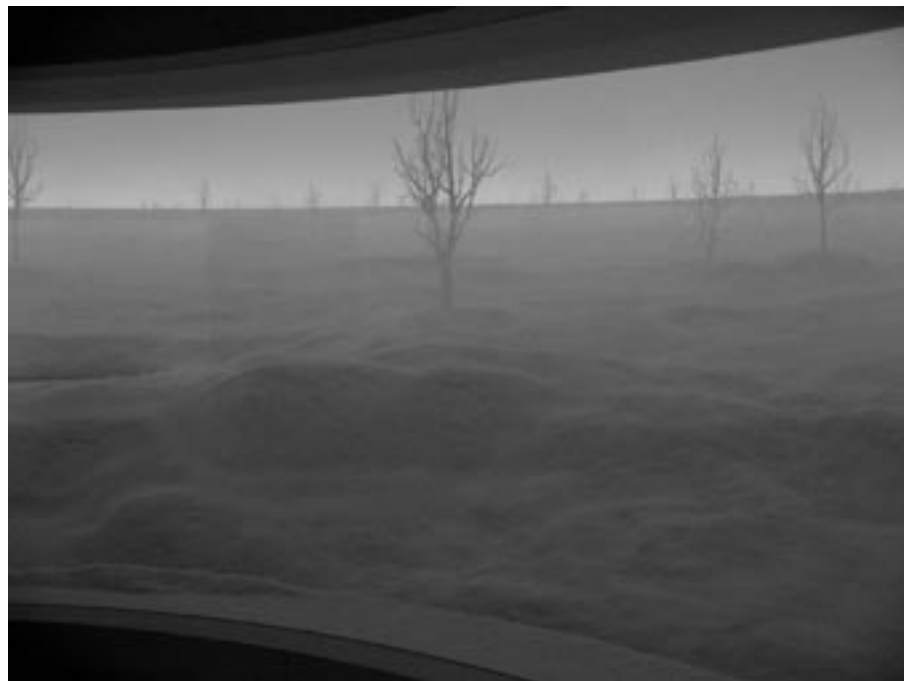




(no) space is the place



BEN SLATER

Heading to the *Singapore Biennale*, I am trying to clear my head—here, a full disclosure, I am the editor of the “two books” that accompany the *Biennale*, the guide-book and the catalogue. The latter should have been published by now. That’s unfinished business I could do without, has to be packed away. Time to think about the art. I’ve seen most of it before on the job, in passing, wandering in and out, mumbling instructions to photographers, glancing at the installations—and, truth be told, this is how I usually consume visual art—quickly and impatiently. Recall the scene in Godard’s film *A Band Apart* when Anna Karina and pals dash through the Louvre as fast as possible. Today is different. Today is all about a second, lasting look. Today the rules are—take your time, stay in the room longer, watch the videos, absorb the artwork, try and make some sense of it.

At One Raffles Quay, a deserted office complex haunted by hesitant motion-sensing escalators, and I get my first glimpse of the *Biennale* today. From across the road, the blue-brick Lego set of Shigeru Ban’s Container Pavilion looks a little shabbier than it did two months ago when the *Biennale* opened.

The site for the Pavilion, a protruding wedge of future construction space that juts out into Marina Bay is called, rather technically, the Central Promontory Site (CPS), a click away from the Business District and adjacent to a road that one day will be the artery pumping suckers to the Sands Casino Integrated Resort (IR) just around the corner. One place (the stock market) is physically linked to the other (a multi-billion dollar investment) in ways that may not feel so comfortable right now. According to Singapore’s main newspaper, *The Straits Times*, the financial crisis is causing the Sands to delay their opening by “a few months”, and if they’re saying that, then things are probably much worse.

That situation isn’t apparent today. All about us is construction. Even on a Sunday the impact hammers are thwacking out a soundtrack of steady progress. The man who’s been walking beside me dashes across the road. A truck laden with workers is parked outside the Pavilion and he’s joining them. He’s got the right idea; due to all the development the only way to the site is by dodging traffic, Frogger-style. Big irony—in order to get to see the State-funded/organised/promoted *Biennale*, first you have to break the law, even if in a small way.

Opposite the Pavilion is The Sail, a massively tall condo that’s all curves and sharp edges—seductive and deadly. I’d previously been up there with a photographer to see if we could get a good angle down upon the Pavilion, but the view was blocked by cranes. The condo itself is the epitome of the Ballardian high-rise nightmare—surgically clean, soulless and airless. Only a few hundred of its four thousand apartments are occupied. The only sign of living was a middle-aged executive couple frolicking in a jacuzzi on the 57th floor, workers beavered around them, finishing off one of several roof gardens. Would they even notice their new neighbour, this temporary house of art across the road?

I jaywalked on and decided to start my more durational approach with Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan’s *Flight* (2003/08), their forest of bamboo poles topped with translucent slippers and the occasional bow-like ‘wind harp’. Despite a breeze the harps were resolutely silent today, and a pole had toppled over. The overgrown greenery around the site was a pleasant garden for a stroll, but there was something funereal about the way the installation staked out the ground—abandoned footwear inevitably becomes a tribute to the dead. Another *Biennale* visitor with obligatory camera was shooting butterflies rather than artwork. *Flight* wasn’t something you particularly looked at, rather something you looked through. It drew the various vistas around the site together—the high-rise offices, the Esplanade theatre, the work-in-progress of the IR—billions of dollars sunk into all these structures. In contrast, *Flight* was low-cost, humble, fragile and completely overpowered, especially by the Pavilion.

The Pavilion itself has obvious symbolic value for the *Biennale*. It’s the perfect conjoining of art and commerce, city and culture, exhibition and tradeshow. Shigeru Ban is the artist the corporate world can take seriously (he makes big, functional things) and in return he’s been granted a whole bunch of shipping containers from American President Lines (APL) and the site itself. Earmarked to be part of some vast entertainment-leisure-residential-work-life environment master-planned around the IR, the Pavilion on the CPS was being positioned in press releases as a foreshadowing of amazing things to come.

The trick then, was to give the suits the scale and the razzmatazz, but to hold tight on the curatorial integrity. In terms of sheer physical presence, it certainly did the job, especially when floodlit at night. Driving by in a taxi to hit the highway home, it looked like some enormous, futurist Valhalla. But the artworks inside still had to have something, even if the Pavilion itself was sacrificed as an icon for how government and big business ‘do Art’.

After *Flight* I watched *Floating* (2000), Yuan Goang-Ming’s video which had been placed inside a shipping container—it was the only artwork actually in one of them (APL had a showcase in one, and Club 21 were flogging T-shirts in another, but no other ‘art’). The confined space suited the claustrophobia of the video—a camera-locked to a small boat as it rocks itself into collapsing and flipping under water. To be inside a container was exotic. Normally, they are kept away from us civilians. Obstructed by airport security, we see them only from the road or as we pass by the docks, vessels waiting to be filled or emptied, containing what? Food, consumer goods, machinery, toxic waste, weapons, or as Season Two of *The Wire* would have us believe, Eastern European sex slaves. The containers may signify Singapore’s A-list status—“world’s busiest port”, but they also tap into the hidden, the unseen, the ‘passing through’, ask no questions, just let them unload, load up and be gone tomorrow. Like thieves (or artists) in the night. Then, when watching this video simulation of near-drowning, one can’t help thinking of them as industrial size coffins. More death in the Pavilion.

Forget ‘Wonder’ (caught between the exclamation and the question mark, where else can you go?), ‘Transportation’ emerges as a connecting force here. Hans Op de Beeck’s *Location (6)* (2008) promised a momentary trip into a chilly snowscape, but instead, we’re sitting under a pathetic, domestic fan that does little to cool, looking at a well-constructed fake fairy tale tableaux of snow and trees. The beautifully detailed documentation of the installation may have raised expectations, but lingering there for longer, I felt that the work required the visitor do the transporting, not the other way round. The imagination is teased by the view, but to really go places you have to half-close your eyes and dream of elsewhere. A projection not dissimilar is required by Emilia and Ilya Kabakov’s *Manas (Utopian City)* (2007), installed nearby, a scaled down ancient world, with the viewer now represented by tiny (dead) wooden figures, placed in positions of silent, inert contemplation—the ideal art-goers. Deliberately and nerdily complicated in terms of its detail and exposition—tunnels, stairways, viewing platforms and arcane technologies—it reminded me greatly of the brilliant but terminally uncool 1990s computer game *Myst*, where you wandered alone around a clockwork island, looking backwards and forwards in time. But if you just wanted to totally lose yourself, without straining the imagination or solving puzzles, Anthony McCall’s *Between You and I* (2006) was the ‘real’ thing—a visceral, slow-monochrome, psychedelic dream-machine that guaranteed a hallucinogenic good time.

I get a lift to City Hall, the next *Biennale* site, with Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan, the artists behind spell#7, who along with sound designer Evan Tan, have made *Sky Duet* (2008) a melancholic, alternative audio-commentary for The Singapore Flyer, the enormous slow-moving tourist revolver that conveniently overlooks Marina Bay, including the Pavilion. Paul insists I do it “properly” (I’ve only done test versions) before the end of the day.

Upstairs, in the judge’s restaurant (the ultimate gentlemen’s club), Pham Ngoc Duong’s broken *Maggots* (2004) are being fixed by a *Biennale* staffer. A pair of Euro-tourists look slightly horrified, “Is that it?” says the woman pointing at a maggot, “Is that the whole exhibition?” I tell her there are forty artworks upstairs, a slight exaggeration, but I want to quickly counter her mortification. She doesn’t look thrilled at the prospect. She and her husband are here on business, with a free day to walk around; they like the sound of the South Beach site because its near Raffles Hotel and they can get a drink there first—I’d wager they never made it further than the Long Bar. The room we were standing in had, a month earlier, afforded good views of the track when Singapore hosted the inaugural Formula One night race. It had taken at least a decade to negotiate, but the world’s most expensive ‘sport’ finally made it to Singapore, turning the downtown area into a dinky, twinkling Scalectrix set for seventy-two hours of conspicuous speed and excess.

The first *Biennale* in 2006 had materialised as a side-effect of the International Monetary Fund/World Trade Organisation meetings and became the core event in an elaborate showcase of Singapore’s best and finest (good food and bad theatre), but very few delegates had actually stepped foot into the exhibition at the securely fenced-in City Hall. This year the fences were back, conveniently separating the baseball cap and money-belt crowd from the possibility of stumbling across some art. Not surprising attendance figures for the exhibition over the race weekend dipped dramatically. It was the second time the *Biennale* had tried to ‘synergise’ with a Big Money Event, and while these alliances may be declared officially successful, it always seems that art suffers, getting tarnished by an association with Singapore’s infamous protest ban in 2006, or drowned out by the roar of engines in 2008.

In the space where E. Chen’s whimsical woollen sculptures are slowly being unravelled, a guided tour is just wrapping up—“Just remember,” she says forcefully to a dozen or so of her guided, “when you look at the art it’s good to ask as many sceptical, healthy questions as you want.” The visitors nod appreciatively. “Any questions?” she asks. Silence.

I’m running out of time, and head straight to the videos. They all seem fascinated with space, the quiet emptiness of rooms and buildings, even when they have people in them. Deserted hotel rooms in Apichatpong Weerasethukul’s *Morakot* (*Emerald*) (2007), houses lived in and abandoned in Yuan Goang-Ming’s *Disappearing Landscape-Passing* (2007), profoundly alienated Singaporean interiors in Sherman Ong’s *Banjir Kemarau* (*Flooding in the Time of Drought*) (2008), fantastical chambers in Clare Langan’s *Metamorphosis* (2007). This room-fetishism wasn’t reflected in the ways the works were presented. In 2006, the novelty of showing artworks in the preliminary courtrooms (smaller versions of full trial courts), led to a number of memorably site-specific pieces. This year, three out of four courtrooms were blacked-out for video projection. Only one of these referred directly to the space, Sergio Prego’s *Black Monday* (2008), a ‘time-slice’-style video composed of still images taken at 360-degrees around several controlled detonations made in the same courtroom. The light from the screen illuminated a patch on the floor where the ‘bombs’ had gone off, a mark you could see in the video. This was the best place to stand while you watched, retrospectively absorbing the dark energies of the blast itself.

This space shunts me back to the opening night of the *Biennale* at South Beach Development, when the security detail for guest of honour, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong (the second Prime Minister of Singapore), disassembled part of Shubigi Rao’s installation, *The Tuning Fork of the Mind* (2008), in order to determine whether her ‘brain machine’ might be a suspect device. This damage was just a foretaste. Over the opening weeks of the exhibition, taking their lead from the plainclothes men, the Singaporean audience over-enthusiastically ‘investigated’ with the art—breaking bits off, smearing charcoal, trying to take things, gate-crashing into no-go areas. The artworks and their sites became passive victim to hordes of uncouth Singaporeans (patronisingly educating the public as to how to behave at art events is a staple of *The Straits Times*, in this case it seemed to have failed). Surely, it was logical that the post-museum ‘freedom’ that the *Biennale* offered (to explore, to be in places you don’t normally visit, to see new things, to see not be stifled) was grabbed so forcefully. Give or take some better signage and more vigilant staff, the art should be able to handle it, bite back and even occasionally, explode in our faces.

Before I leave the building there is one more work to see, *Singapore* (2008), an installation by Wit Pimkanachapong in the hallowed space of the central Chambers. The work, a blown-up Google map laid across the entire floor with blank stickers for people to write what they want and stick them wherever they chose, was a simple, low-tech piece of unfettered interactivity. Exactly the kind of thing that people can fuck around with all they want. Aside from the numerous “I live here, I think” notes and some low-level complaints about the government, the most interesting contributions were those that tried to re-imagine the city as fiction—a ‘Nuclear Test Site’ had been located out west in Jurong (I hope that’s fiction), and ‘Happiness Town’ (later amended to ‘Penis Town’) could be found near Sentosa Island to the south of Singapore.

South Beach Development used to be South Beach Camp, an art-deco colonial-era military base. The ‘D’ word has been appended by its new corporate owners, who are promising the usual kind of glass-encased foliage-soft leisure-lifestyle-work utopia that seems to be in vogue in Singapore at the moment. When I arrive the exhibition was entering its last hour. With a check-list of things to see on the run, it felt like an art version of the American television game show Supermarket Sweep (a quintessential *Biennale* experience perhaps?). Ah, *September Sweetness* (2008). The sugar-moulded sculpture of a Burmese pagoda was exiled in a far corner, kept away from most other artworks like a naughty child. A newspaper letter-writer had complained earlier about the sculpture, indicating that without proper warning her young son might have either eaten the thing (which had quickly turned unappealing yellow with a fetid aroma), or been consumed by the bees and flies that orgastically feasted on it during the opening (finally, an artwork that bites back). The artwork was, we were told, a metaphor for the repression by the junta in Myanmar, but the way this performed was far from straightforward. The pagoda itself, for those first heady days, became a grotesque death-machine, luring insects into an uncontrollable frenzy that could only end one way. Not long after the letter, at least one nearby bees-nest was removed; then a sign was put up, warning people about the bees. They needn’t have bothered. By the time I returned all the insects were dead and mysteriously, no more had come to join them. The sculpture had mostly collapsed because of rain, and the narrative of the bees and the sugar, was clearly over. Had the metaphor been mutated, disrupted or accurately enacted?

If City Hall’s exhibition structure of moving around the building and coming back to where you began gave the show the feeling of coherence, this site was a far choppiest experience, full of dead-ends, empty rooms and bits and pieces located here and there. Tang Ling Nah and Willie Koh’s charcoal drawing and video piece, *Every Time I Say Goodbye* (2008), situated in several rooms, was another work that thrived on and tracked through space. At the back of one of its spaces was a barred doorway, which opened out into another series of unreachable rooms, a ‘Muslim cookhouse’ (according to a sign), and two trashed spaces exposed to natural light; on the walls of one the word ‘Wonder’ had been spray-painted sarcastically. In the South Beach site there was always a feeling of spaces (and entire buildings) unseen and unused just out of reach.

Heman Chong, like Tang and Koh, had been given several rooms to work with, but his were located in the more recently ‘upgraded’ Block One. Chong’s work had caused a minor ruckus on the *Biennale*’s official blog site when there seemed to be a consensus amongst volunteers running the blog and one enthusiastic commenter that it was a load of crap. Someone posting as “mrchong”, whom we have to assume was the artist himself, took aggressive umbrage to this. Responding to criticism of oneself online always reminds me of the Ferenc Molnar dictum: “Don’t touch shit even with gloves on. The gloves get shittier, the shit doesn’t get any glovier.” Perversely, I was determined to get something out of Chong’s much maligned work, even if it meant that the snoring site officer I passed on the way in had to throw me out at closing time.

Chong eschewed any attempt to make the rooms’ lighting ‘atmospheric’; the fluorescents burned away, exposing everything. Each room was decorated with a different pattern of coloured stickers on the walls and thousands of pieces of cut-up black card were scattered on the floor, creating an ad hoc carpet that crunched underfoot. In some rooms, people had kicked it up, tried to push it all into one corner. Each element was titled, some simply (*Starburst*) (2008), others fiendishly, parodistically complicated (*A short story about an unknown organism from Australia that is bent on infiltrating a given space as told by a geomancer [I’d like to die without feeling any pain]*) (2008). Outside, through the barred windows, you could see his billboard style artwork, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2008), the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s most famous book. Chong had said it was simply a reading recommendation, but it felt more heartfelt than that—a stark declaration of feeling. Inside the rooms, I sloshed through the floor-cards thinking about science fiction. A few rooms away Su-Mei Tse’s neon *Swing* (2007) cut through the air creating a ghostly light-sabre sound effect; in the other block the walls of Soren Dahlgaard’s *Breathing Room* (2008) dilated like a rejected test-model for the end of Kubrick’s *2001*. Chong (a big sci-fi fan) had also dressed his spaces like a set, but for a more low-budget, disturbing episode—where you find yourself imprisoned for a hundred years in a sequence of overlit rooms, trying to figure out who or what has left the messages on the walls. It’s dark outside and bright in here—I want to leave now.

They are shutting down as I exit the site. Up above The Singapore Flyer, a destination that I won’t reach tonight, is flickering and moving in the distance, and I remember some lines from spell#7’s *Sky Duet*—“From here...”, Tony Yeow can be heard saying in his deep, resonant voice—long pause, “you can see too much.” I’d seen enough.