



up against the world

YISHAN LAM

I.

If you were to drive down the East Coast expressway towards the city, crossing the Singapore River you would see to your left the Singapore Flyer—a one hundred and sixty-five metre-high observation wheel—the world's largest, and according to its website, set to become one of Asia's biggest tourist attractions—the latest of urban iconic gestures rearranging the face of the city.

My first experience in a Flyer capsule is with Kaylene Tan and director-academic Paul Rae—from the local performance company *spell#7*—and Evan Tan, a sound artist and frequent collaborator. They have come to observe, in the process of constructing their project for the 2008 *Singapore Biennale*, an audio guide work entitled *Sky Duet*. It is the fourth in a larger series of *Duet* performances revolving around the notion of the relationship between dual entities.

In a capsule to ourselves, we sit quietly. It's an interestingly reticent and thoughtful experience, as we don't have to suffer the ubiquitous rampant tourist picture-taking of countless others, nor the physical exchange of a *spell#7* performance workshop. This time an experiment is being conducted—the *spell#7* protagonists will sit fixed to one spot in the capsule, and on its second revolution, they will move around for different points of view. Wondering what might result from this I do the same, observing the ascent, as the welcome announcement passes. We have our headphones plugged in, to drown out the capsule muzak. Since the objective of the experiment and resultant work is an audio guide, I select the tracks on my music player with some degree of experimentation and aural relevance to set off the view below us. With the stillness inside the capsule and the visibility of the city becoming increasingly apparent, we 'butoh' along with the Flyer, carried along its measured, ambulatory pace, getting higher and higher.



II.

The Flyer operates within the context of numerous city-State initiatives designated to propel Singapore's economy to the next level—being international and cosmopolitan. From the capsule there is a Flyer's eye-view of the outcomes of that agenda—the steady excavation and construction transforming the reclaimed land of Marina Bay into the city's new urban financial centre. Cranes, workers, excavation, scaffolding, trucks, mud—all signal the future "Integrated Resort", that is, a casino, with its double helix bridge, open gardens, art park, boutique hotels and office spaces. From above in the Flyer everything is miniaturised. This is our toy town, our visual art exhibition, opening soon in a skyline near you.

Like other national landmarks the Flyer is intended to boost tourism, to gain international recognition for the city, make money, and signify the notion of progress. It is another example of a number of landmarks that serve the dual purpose of generating national pride and of identifying a city, like the Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building and the London Eye (the Flyer's predecessor), and the future observation wheels slated to successively outdo each other in Beijing, Berlin and Dubai from late 2008 onwards. These are sites from which a city can wonder at the image of its own development.

It is within this context that the 2008 *Singapore Biennale* operates, straddling objectives of national marketing and the provision of a public space for introspection and aesthetic encounter, in the same way as a gain in altitude affords one a different perspective and sense of the world. The extent to which it will succeed on both counts is right now literally up in the air. But it has, in a sense, become a biennale proper. Having made its debut in 2006 in conjunction with the World Bank/International Monetary Fund annual meetings, the *Biennale's* second version has the theme of 'Wonder'. With the economic and political imperatives that surround the structure of such large-scale international art exhibitions, perhaps the notion is that art can serve the function of eschewing those imperatives, and present the possibility of shared poetic experience.

III.

Against a backdrop of all the potential metaphors the Flyer presents, spell#7 takes a different spin. Their practice tends to occur, in contrast to their ascending *Biennale* site, relatively close to the ground. In a city-State characterised by high-rise communal living, husband-and-wife team Rae and Tan have been bottom-dwellers, working in a street-level shophouse in Little India for many years. spell#7's performances often flow out from everyday life. Watching one is akin to stepping out of the house for a walk in the park—the difference in this instance is that it is their house and for a time you walk with them seeing what they see, thinking about what they think, exploring an unexpected terrain of insights and connections.

Since setting up spell#7 in 1999, and being joined by former associate director Ben Slater in 2002, Rae and Tan have worked closely with a range of collaborators to devise and perform theatre pieces, sound works and participatory public events, covering a range of topics in response to the happenings, demands and objects surrounding their immediate lives and socio-political contexts.

Recently they have grafted the cultural significance of trees onto larger meditations on colonialism and memory in a piece entitled *Tree Duets*; and in *National Language Class*, a performance based on Chua Mia Tee's iconic 1959 socialist realist painting, they conducted a bilingual Malay-Mandarin lesson with an audience to explore the gaps between language, ethnicity and national identity. Serial collaborators with artists, musicians and designers in the local community, they have worked with Ho Tzu Nyen on his *The King Lear Project* which premiered at the 2008 *Singapore Arts Festival*. "A majority of our work has the theme of wonder in it", says Tan. Speaking with reference to *Desire Paths*, an ongoing audio tour of Little India created in 2004, Tan explains that it is about "finding things that are not usually visible, the little things that create an alternative perspective on the space." As a form of urban *dérive* in an enduring neighborhood in Singapore, one is led through the alleyways of Little India, discovering its secrets alongside a narrative of two lovers and the traces they have left behind.

Contrastingly, *Sky Duet* is a departure from other audio works (both Tans also directed the National Museum of Singapore's audio guide) in that there is no walking component or interacting with the environment, streets or objects in a gallery. For the viewer, who is removed from the context of daily pedestrian life and carried in a capsule with a predetermined trajectory over the course of half an hour, the work has the potential to be much more intense an experience and paradoxically more subtle at the same time.

While street audio guides tend to deliver the world twice over (as Paul Rae notes, "it intensifies a person's experience of being in a particular place"), the challenge in this instance is to create an additional flooding of the world upon the viewer, which is less literal, and not referential to the landscape. Thus, in the (access/refusal) tension created between the provision of a premium view of the city—to which the spectator (in an air-conditioned capsule) is however denied access—lies the creative possibilities of stretching the medium of the audio-guide.

Sky Duet is a sonically rich, verbally dense ride into streams of consciousness of an old, immobile man and a woman of indeterminate age, whom you accompany for the duration of the ride. A dispersed narrative running the gamut of human experience from the everyday to the transcendental, *Sky Duet* takes us the breadth of the extremes of quiet and loud, inside and out, the living of life and its cessation, from youthful exuberance to the body's atrophy, man and machine, and eternity and the blink of an eye. The other players in this scenario are the surrounding elements—sky, earth, sea and wind—the stuff that Rae says, "you don't often see in Singapore because you're too busy looking at the buildings and monuments and things in the shopping malls". The audio guide is simultaneously an amplifier for the world outside the capsule and a stethoscope for the world within the body, playing on thoughts that could be someone else's as well as one's own.

The themes and issues inherent within the work are drawn from their personal lives, such as the effects of Parkinson's disease on a loved one, and the experience of raising two young daughters. It is emblematic of the larger *Duet* project, which has seen Rae and Tan attempting to make a performance every April, in which they gather together the various strands of their lives, the life of the place where they live, and whichever idea of the future is foremost in their minds (and in the papers) to "make a show that's continuous with their lives".

Ultimately, its proposition is as Rae describes, that "it is possible to go on the Flyer and have an experience that hasn't already been bought and sold a couple of times over by the time you've got there".