

LEE WENG CHOY IS THE ARTISTIC CO-DIRECTOR OF THE INDEPENDENT ART SPACE, SUBSTATION, IN SINGAPORE. A LECTURER IN ART THEORY AND CULTURAL STUDIES AT THE LASALLE-SIA COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, THE NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ART AND TEMASEK POLYTECHNIC, SINGAPORE, HE HAS WRITTEN FOR NUMEROUS ART JOURNALS, BOOKS AND EXHIBITION CATALOGUES, INCLUDING *ART ASIA PACIFIC* [SYDNEY], *EYELINE* [BRISBANE], *SCULPTURE* [WASHINGTON D.C.], *THE ARTS MAGAZINE* [SINGAPORE], *THE THIRD ASIA-PACIFIC TRIENNIAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART* [QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY], *FLIGHT PATTERNS* [MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES] AND *POLYPOLIS: ART FROM ASIAN PACIFIC MEGACITIES* [HAMBURG]. HE IS PRESENTLY ON THE EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD OF *ART ASIA PACIFIC* AND IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR *EYELINE*.

LEE WENG CHOY WILL BE VISITING AUSTRALIA IN 2002 TO GIVE A NUMBER OF LECTURES ON REGIONAL CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL ISSUES, HIS VISIT BEING FACILITATED BY THE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

THIS ESSAY, AS AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS FORTHCOMING VISIT, IS BASED ON A PRESENTATION GIVEN AT THE NECESSARY STAGE'S FORUM - *KITSCH AND THE SINGAPORE MODERN* [OCTOBER 2001]. THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE FORUM WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL *FOCAS: FORUM ON CONTEMPORARY ART & SOCIETY, NO. 3*, [SINGAPORE: THE NECESSARY STAGE], EARLY 2002.



'Kitsch-ification', Consumption and Singapore

LEE WENG CHOY

With all the confidence – some would say arrogance – of judgement that he was famous for, Clement Greenberg denounced kitsch. It is “the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times”, he asserted. In contrast, kitsch’s purported antithesis, the avant-garde, is a rare and difficult thing. “The avant-garde’s specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists’ artists, its best poets, poets’ poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature”. But make no mistake, while Greenberg may have been a snob, it was not simply a case of ‘high’ versus ‘low’; *The New Yorker* magazine, for instance, was, in Clem’s assessment, “fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade”.

Greenberg, like Freud, is one of those modern thinkers who are now often considered to be so wrong about so many things. Yet there are very good reasons to continue to work through their arguments. They are part of our critical inheritance. That is to say, their ideas have so stained the ideas of our time that we cannot disregard them, but if we do inherit

them, we also have the responsibility to engage them as critically as we can. If I were to pursue the possibility of differentiating art from kitsch – I no longer posit an ‘avant-garde’ as Art’s salvation, but settle merely for ‘art’ – it is that art will endure to be recuperated via a critical inheritance. This is a process that is extensive and extended; art is available not just for the moment, but for a long time. I cannot imagine recuperating, inheriting, or even remembering the stuff that your state-of-the-kitsch boy band allegedly sings – except to note it as a terrifying symptom of late capitalist consumerism.

But I cite Greenberg not to rehearse categorical distinctions. In his essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, he makes points about kitsch which remain provocative and timely. Consider, in particular, this one: “Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.” But can we, in this age of spectacle and speed, say that it is just what we overtly deem as kitsch that demands only our immediate consumption and so little of our time? What about the blockbuster museum spectacles and contemporary international art biennials and

triennials – how is the visitor expected to experience the multitude of art works other than quickly? We live in a world that is no longer delineated by the avant-garde versus kitsch, but a world where everything, even the most apparently cutting-edge artwork, can be subject to, or complicit in, the processes of ‘kitsch-ification’. When was the last time you went into a contemporary art space, and saw an audience that was truly engaged and challenged by what they encountered? Would it be more accurate to say that you saw audiences who, if they were in the know, then were almost invariably too quick to judge – to dismiss or endorse. Perhaps a certain consumerist cynicism framed the experience: this was a show that they had to say they saw. Or if the audiences were uninitiated, their responses might range from mild amusement to indifference to a downright annoyance – “you mean this is art?”. When the prevailing experiences of art today are those that are ‘watered down’ and repackaged for ready consumption as “vicarious experience and faked sensations”, as Greenberg put it, does it matter if we are talking about “art” or “kitsch” anymore?

Left: Lim Nang Seng, *The Merlion*, 1972

The Merlion image has a remote connection to legend: Prince Nila Utama of the Sri Vijaya apparently saw a strange beast as he landed in Singapore in the 11th century, and upon learning that what he saw was a lion, he named the island Singapura, Sanskrit for "lion city". The Merlion has been an emblem promulgated by the Singapore Tourism Board since its establishment in 1964. Fraser Brunner, a member of the Souvenir Committee and curator of the Van Kleef Aquarium, created the design. The statue itself was designed by Kwan Sai Kheong, then Ambassador to the Philippines and Vice Chancellor of the University of Singapore, and Lim Nang Seng sculpted and built it.



Above: *Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, Replica after T. Woolner, 1972

This statue of Raffles is sited on the spot where he supposedly first landed in Singapore in 1819. It is a replica of a nearby statue by T. Woolner [1886], and was unveiled in 1972. What is remarkable about the replica is the inscription on its pedestal, which displays no qualms about endorsing British colonialism. In all four official languages of Singapore – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, the text reads:

ON THIS HISTORIC SITE
SIR THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES
FIRST LANDED IN SINGAPORE
ON 28TH JANUARY 1819
AND WITH GENIUS AND PERCEPTION
CHANGED THE DESTINY OF SINGAPORE
FROM AN OBSCURE FISHING VILLAGE
TO A GREAT SEAPORT AND
MODERN METROPOLIS

on Singapore art is with the idea of progressive development. It is as if the task of this writing is not so much to document the changes in Singapore art, but to call forth its arrival and success. The situation in Singapore may be no different from the many cosmopolitan and want-to-be cosmopolitan centres of the globe, but perhaps it is indeed *exemplary*, since Singapore is now so visibly invested in becoming a global city for the arts, and in such a relatively short span of time.

Of all the art forms in Singapore, sculpture has, arguably, the highest public visibility. If one of Singapore's two main pastimes is shopping [the other is eating], it is also worth noting that adorning the shopping streets and centres are public sculptures of all kinds. Corporate offices, of course, have their share of sculpture, and very often of the famous international kind – a Henry Moore here, a Salvador Dali there; the same goes with upmarket hotels. And what better way to epitomize the upgrading of public housing [over eighty percent of Singaporeans live in

public housing] than to give it that icing-on-the-cake of 'art,' shaped from stone or steel or even cement fondue. Thus, like any other newly rich society that is getting richer still, public spaces are littered with art to signify the dynamism of the economy, and the arrival of a 'cultured' class. [See the accompanying images for examples of art in public and downtown spaces in Singapore].

However, I would like to shift from the more general commentary above to discuss two specific projects by The Necessary Stage [TNS], a prominent theatre group in Singapore. If sculpture has a certain pride of place in public spaces, the theatre, especially since the mid-1980s, has been the site of some of the most socially significant cultural investigations in Singapore. Moreover, my point in bringing up these two projects, after invoking Greenberg's denunciation of kitsch, is to raise a caution about contemporary artworks that deliberately position themselves as resistances to capitalist consumerism, which Greenberg railed

The world of contemporary art may no longer be driven by modernism's ideology of the avant-garde, but 'advance' and 'progress' still define its metabolism. Certainly from now on, the history of art will no longer be told in terms of a central trajectory; we are in an age of pluralism, and art develops by branching outwards. Yet for all our multi- and inter-cultural diversity in Singapore, we are still subjected to the tyranny of the new; we are locked into an economy of producing and consuming arts and culture that reproduces the logics of global capitalism. [As I have argued elsewhere, Singapore is 'Sign-apore', a society of the spectacle *par excellence*, the all-appropriating agent, modernity's idealized *tabula rasa*. Singapore imagines itself not just as taking the best from the East and the West – the inheritor of the great traditions and the latest technologies – but, by offering itself as the paradigm of 'New Asia', stakes a claim as part of the avant-garde of the next stage of global capitalism]. These days, to want art has become the same as wanting *more* art. It is as if the accent isn't on the 'art', but on the 'more' – we have to see and have and make *more* art.

Implicit in so many of the discourses on art in Singapore is this hankering after 'more'. The Ministry of Information and the Arts' 'Renaissance City Report' [2000] is an obvious example, but just as important is to see how the logic of progress and accumulation is reproduced in possibly every grant application and report submitted to the National Arts Council by every arts organisation [including 'alternative' spaces like The Substation, where I work]. And just as telling is how inflected most writing and criticism



Right: Liu Jilin, *Harmony*, 1995

This sculpture, one of an identical pair, is sited in the public plaza fronting Ngee Ann City, possibly Singapore's largest and fanciest shopping centre. Positioned between the two pieces is a fountain and a line of flagpoles. As a corporate trophy, the sculpture seems to be conspicuously trophy-like.