

Authenticity, Reflexivity & Spectacle: or, the Rise of New Asia is not the End of the World



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Channel NewsAsia – the Singapore television station with ambitions of becoming the CNN for 'Asia' – is, like any other big business, predicated on manufacturing an endless stream of promotional images of itself. Recently, its Asian-news-by-Asian-reporters-for-Asian-viewers branding-cum-ideology was absurdly epitomised by this promo for the channel: A picture frame hovers over a white screen, inside which flash different images of 'exotic' Asian women, such as the Padong of Burma who wear brass rings around their necks. The tag-line? 'It takes one to know one'. Then there are the two advertisements for its website; these minimalist ads stage a simple action rendered in slow-motion, set against a black background. One ad begins with a close-up on a black leather gloved hand cocking a pistol. The pistol fires; the camera zooms out. As the bullet emerges, a white line of text appears above the pistol: "Violence breaks out in an Asian city". The bullet traces a straight line, then stops in its tracks: "Violence reported". The promo cuts to the tag-line, "real-time online", and concludes with an image of the corporate logo and a soundbite of a scream. In the other ad, the object is a metal bucket, and water gets thrown: "An Asian country hit by floods"; "Floods reported"; soundbite of 'hordes' drowning.

It's not just the vacuous orientalisising gaze of Asian elites directed at a 'primitive' and 'chaotic' Asia that makes these commercials obscene, the blatant trivialising of violence as 'infotainment', or the lust for instantaneity. These commercials are exemplary of the covert spectacle of late capitalist society, this time laid bare in Asian cultural essentialism. The ascendancy of Channel NewsAsia conflates with the desire for New Asia's arrival, and this, moreover, is signified, made metaphorical, through the appropriation of 'real time'.

In February 1994, Koh Buck Song, then literary editor of the main English-language newspaper, *The Straits Times*, wrote, "Liberalizing the arts takes time",

People change slowly, and it is only by a long process of education and exposure that they might come to accept what they used to condemn... That is why any artist who wants to project the darker side of life and challenge social norms must take his time... By going too far too soon and asking for too much at this time, the actions of Josef Ng and Shannon Tham have come as a setback to other performance artists... who must now play by stricter rules because some of the trust for artists has been whittled away.

Ng and Tham did performances at an arts festival co-organised by the groups The Artists Village and 5th Passage. Early on New Year's Day 1994, Ng performed *Brother Cane*, which protested the possible caning of twelve gay men arrested for soliciting. Cane became the focal point of controversy. *The New Paper* tabloid sensationalised it, and splashed on its cover a photo of Ng's back while he was apparently snipping his pubic hair. The National Arts Council condemned Ng, who was later charged and convicted for obscenity, and, along with Tham, banned indefinitely from performing in Singapore. The government proscribed performance art, claiming that because these art forms have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation, they pose dangers to public order.

In March that same year, Koh wrote, "Were the bedroom scenes in *Schindler's List* really necessary?" Steven Spielberg had refused to allow any cuts to the film; consequently it was released with an R[A] or Restricted [Artistic] rating in Singapore, meaning that only persons twenty-one and above could see it.

My concern is whether young people should have been so needlessly denied the chance to see the movie... In the [concentration] camp scenes, the prisoners can still be shown nude and well-humiliated, but with the private parts blocked by a carefully-placed soldier's arm or helmeted head... I have nothing against nudity and sex... but others may feel that, to a young boy, the first sight of a female breast can still have a profound impact, whatever the context... I only wish film-makers would be more aware of the censorship standards and cultural norms in other countries.

Then in April 1995, Koh wrote, "Context is crucial in the rating of movies". The movie *Nell* was screened with a PG [Parental Guidance] rating. During a session of Parliament, a Member of Parliament objected to the PG rating because of the nudity in the film, calling for an R[A] instead. George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, disagreed and sanctioned the more 'liberal' rating. In his column Koh expounded upon the Minister's position:

all three [nude] scenes in *Nell* are fleeting and, in the context and meaning of the film, necessary... Here, screen nudity that is not excessive or exploitative has become accepted by adult viewers... [A]llowing nude scenes with good reason is one way to move, gradually and responsibly, away from any uptight sexual repression of the past.

It seems the Singapore Government is not averse to liberalisation per se, so much as it wants to be seen as controlling the schedule of liberalisation. While certain restrictions on performance art continue, if we follow Koh over the course of these columns, the time it took for this purportedly conservative Asian society to change its cultural norms regarding screen nudity was little more than one year.

I wanted to introduce Singapore through an anecdotal detour. For Walter Benjamin, anecdote represents the opposite of conventional historiography – i.e., a cumulative and progressive narrative, where time flows continuously from past to future. Anecdote lays bare the writing of history as a reconstruction, not of the past, but of a present; it is the making of montage, where any moment may be juxtaposed, made suddenly adjacent with another. Much as I am attracted to Benjamin's alternative historiography, and his critique of modernisation, the story of contemporary art and Singapore that I want to tell is still conjoined with the overpowering idea of progress, an idea embedded in my subtitle. So what do I mean by the rise of 'New Asia' is not the end of the world? The phrase refers to a thesis various



Above: Postcards of Channel NewsAsia advertisements for their website. The television news network is Singapore's answer to CNN

commentators on Singapore, myself included, have articulated in some shape or form: Singapore is Sign-apore, a society of the spectacle par excellence, the all appropriating agent, modernity's idealised *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', Singapore stakes a claim as part of the avant-garde of the next stage of global capitalism. My subtitle is a slight self-parody, of being seduced by my own theorisation/critique of Singapore/New Asia as the telos of capitalism. To read Singapore as exemplary is a tendency that I want to unpack, but at the same time indulge. For to tell a story about Singapore art without engaging the idea of Singapore, and the ideas of the Singapore state, seems untenable, given that global capital and the state are so predominant in all aspects of life here. Therefore, what I will attempt is to read the metonymic tensions in 'Singapore art', 'Singapore' and the 'Singapore state'.

There are other axes of tensions that I would like to read: between different 'ends' and 'nows'. If my subtitle suggests progress, it also alludes to its apparent opposite. The 'end' not only signifies telos, but also signals 'catastrophe'. What if all of 'Asia' were to become as 'developed' as Singapore, wouldn't the demands on our ecology be unsustainable? However, for Benjamin, the catastrophe is not what is to come, but what is happening now. It is because modern society is predicated on a particular kind of progress that there is crisis. In contrast, for Francis Fukuyama, whose *The End of History and the Last Man* is ineluctably invoked by my subtitle, that 'the end is now' is the good news. 'We' have arrived; free-market capitalism has triumphed.

Then again, for someone who lived through the 1950s and '60s in France, when eschatological themes were the 'daily bread' of the times, Fukuyama's discourse "looks most often like a



tiresome anachronism". In 'Specters of Marx,' Jacques Derrida maintains that Fukuyama's arrival has not, and cannot quite arrive: "those who abandon themselves to that discourse with the jubilation of youthful enthusiasm, they look like latecomers, a little as if it were possible still to take the last train after the last train – and still be late to an end of history".

Derrida opens the essay with an epigraph from Hamlet, "The time is out of joint". His argument is that the present is discontinuous with itself. But as I have claimed elsewhere, Singapore is the one place I know where the present feels almost entirely continuous with itself. Whenever I visit other places, my experience is of multiple times; there are always neighbourhoods that seem significantly unchanged. In Singapore there appears to be only one time – a peculiar present, in a hurry, on the verge of tomorrow. Life may be more hectic elsewhere, in Hong Kong, Tokyo or New York, but I know of no other place where it feels like everyone marches in the same step. Practically everything here is subjected to development – hills have been flattened, cemeteries removed. The pace, while not the fastest on the planet, is possibly the most persistent. This relentless present is of course not entirely omnipresent; if it were, then this truly would be utopia. But in Singapore it is an intensely pervasive and spectacularised ideal. As insinuated in my opening anecdote about Channel NewsAsia – now is the time of New Asia.

What is this now? It is not quite the 'present' itself. Facing forward, it is what's next, the near future; indeed, there is something spectral about it. Derrida says that "[a]t bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back". The spectre of New Asia is on the one hand the next revision of the manic triumphalism of free-market late capitalism that Fukuyama puts forth as gospel in his *End of History*...

In 'Specters of Marx', Derrida articulates his debts to the eponymous critic of capitalism, but these arguments I cannot broach here. Let me, however, point out another, particularly literal debt that Derrida cites: "all the questions concerning democracy, the universal discourse on human rights, the future of humanity, and so forth, will give rise only to... hypocritical alibis as long as the 'foreign debt' has not been treated head-on".

Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has rather different opinions about colonial legacies and foreign debts. In a *New York Times* interview reported in the local press,

Mr Lee said that writing off or reducing the debt of developing nations... may only make nations look perennially uncreditworthy and unattractive to investors. Too many Third World leaders, Mr Lee said, had bought into fashionable theories of development that were more political than pragmatic... 'Somebody like Nelson Mandela should... say... Look, let's work with the people who have oppressed us. We need them, they need us. Without them, who's going to run all these huge, intricate corporations?

If we hear Lee, the spectre of New Asia, on the other hand, is still embedded in a not-yet-now thinking. At the conference, *We Asians*, held in Singapore in 2000, Dipesh Chakrabarty spoke of the 'Not Yet' version of history: "the classic exposition of this in the 19th century was in John Stuart Mill's writings... [T]he argument that Mill deploys in favor of denying Africans, Indians, or other 'rude' nations of the world self-government, which he otherwise extolled as the highest form of government, is the fact that they are 'Not Yet' ready for it".

There is something not yet made explicit enough in the discussion above – the spectres of Debord. In his critique of late capitalist society, his analysis of 'time' is fundamental: "The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralysed history, of a paralysed memory... is in effect a false consciousness of time". And what makes his critique especially pertinent is that it is precariously positioned at the very edge of the possibility of the end of history: capitalism's seemingly last stage of virtualisation. It is tempting to offer Singapore as exemplary of Debord's theses: the state's self-orientalising, self-colonising and neo-colonialist mechanisms are highly effective at 'define and rule' and extending the colonial legacy's disciplinary technologies precisely because of its claims to authenticity. The rhetoric of 'Asian Values' was highly effective in legitimising the state, until its promulgation subsided in the wake of the economic crises of the late 1990s. Moreover, the state endeavours to subsume the very

terms of 'art' and 'culture' in the service of capital accumulation. What's next for Singapore is to become a 'Renaissance City'. Art and culture are coveted, but only now, in the 'last phase' of national development, in order to fully arrive as a 'world class' society with all the trappings of 'gracious living', and to generate a creative work force that can compete in the top tier of the global knowledge-based economy.

But in representing the spectacle as representative of Singapore and Singapore as exemplary of the society of the spectacle, I have meant to maintain a tension. If I have spoken the language of the exemplary, if I have risked essentialising the spectacle as the ultimate abstraction, it is, on the one hand, because I am sympathetic to Debord – for whom the only option was to struggle to speak an outside or Other while being within the spectacle, of 'talking its language to some degree' – and, on the other hand, it is in order to maintain a tension: between the exemplary and the anecdotal. Or, in other words, between what the French call the *grand récit* and what Joel Fineman calls the *historeme*, "the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact." In 'The History of the Anecdote', Fineman proposes that,

the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely lets history happen by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity.

What I would like to do now is juxtapose the image that I have been repeatedly invoking, a New Asia as the telos of late capitalism, with other images. In a time when everything can be art, when history is rendered abstract through endless appropriations and citations – can art make a difference, and resist becoming part of the constant 'negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself'?

Amanda Heng took part in the September 2000 session of The Necessary Stage's platform for experimental performance. An audience of around forty gathered at the theatre company, and, escorted by staff, ambled towards the nearby Parkway Parade hawker centre/food court. I'm sure that many, like myself, while not terribly eager with anticipation, were curious about what was going to happen. Since the piece was part of the series *Let's Walk*, there was an expectation that it would involve, obviously, some walking. [In an earlier piece, Heng, with the

aid of a mirror, walked backwards around the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts with a shoe in her mouth]. I think it's safe to say that everyone was surprised, when we arrived at the busy hawker centre, to find Heng laying pink table cloths on the normally unadorned, plastic coated table tops. Some of the hawker centre crowd must have been wondering what this woman was doing. And then the two groups of people recognised each other. The hawker centre crowd saw 'us', the just arrived art audience, and we saw them, as already there, already looking. Some of the art audience began sitting down. Heng finished covering tables, and proceeded to serve food. She asked a member of the art audience to cut through her t-shirt and retrieve a packet. Inside the packet was some money, with which she repaid members of the audience the price of admission for the evening's performances. Finally, she led us back to The Necessary Stage, laying a long strip of red carpet on the ground for us to walk on.

For me, that moment of arrival at the hawker centre revealed so much that is at stake in 'looking' in art. The audience sees itself looking, and sees another 'audience', this one unmarked as an audience, let alone an 'art' audience, which then also sees itself looking. It was a moment where a slightly odd gesture of 'adding value for the consumer' – an unexpected gift or present – is revealed to be a work of art, and both the art audience and the hawker centre crowd see this transformation happening then and there. A fine moment that cuts between – yet at the same time welds – public and art spaces, everyday objects, moments and crowds, and the complex game of looks, frames and privileges that is art. But then, for me at least, the rest of Heng's performance diffused that moment. When she began serving us free food, it seemed that her 'performance' had started. And her repaying the admission price seemed less a continuation of the gift, or even the repayment of a debt, but instead split the 'audience' from the 'crowd'. If she had stopped when she finished laying the last table cloth, perhaps the

Besides repetition, scale plays a key role. In *A small town...*, the masks block out every portrait sitter's face and gaze, thus partially erasing their identities, but it is as if the exotic variety of the masks then perversely over-ethnicises these subjects. If the scale of the images were much larger, their subversive humour – which, among other things, pokes fun at anthropology-as-taxonomy – might be undermined, and the series susceptible to looking like a spectacle of the artist-as-ethnographer. But presented in a small book, their diminutive size gives them a lightness; they are like puns with all the gravity of throwaway family Polaroids. Peering into the pictures may seem like an act of intruding into the spaces of these fruited people, but photography often works by the paradox of seeming to allow us entry into an Other space, only to put that Other into our space. Especially when the pictures are in a book in hand. And, of course, the book is the exemplary form of narrative. Gill's book, however, is punctuated by erasures; the question is, are these erasures like openings, or are they made seamless by the very spectacle of photography? My incomplete answer is framed by my reading of how Gill's pictures deal with the dimension of time.

A small town... refers not just to the latest, but, at particular moments, is haunted by the previous turn of the century as well. The work spans both ends of a century; it looks backwards and forwards. Indeed, a certain desire for 'the future' – that characteristically modern fantasy of a distant tomorrow as a better if not outright utopian place – is a peculiar blend of nostalgia and historicism. It is a dreaming for what is to come that belies a dreaming of what is to come back. We may recognise that 'progress' has its social and ecological costs, but underlying our pact with modernity is a desire that some day in 'the future', there will be a time when the unity of life will be restored. This 'unity' is only conceivable to us now, in our epoch of speed and spectacle, as an idyllic longing. Benjamin says that "Historicism gives the 'eternal'



Simryn Gill, *A small town at the turn of the century*, 1999–2000
Photos courtesy Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney, and the artist

'performance' as a separate thing would never have materialised, and there would not have been that split. But, for a moment, everyone would have been intersected by mutually constitutive gazes – each group recognising itself as the other's Other.

While she now lives in Sydney, Simryn Gill's 'hometown', as it were, has always been Port Dickson, Malaysia. She was, however, born in Singapore, and for a time lived and worked here. Her photographic art work, *A small town at the turn of the century*, was published in late 2000 as a limited edition book by the Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan; the photos in the textless book are a little smaller than four by four inches. [It was exhibited at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in early 2001 as a set of C-type prints, each about 36 by 36 inches.] Shot entirely in Port Dickson, each photo is of a single, a pair or small group of friends, relatives or acquaintances, standing or sitting portrait-like in their homes, by the seaside, in a parking lot, rubber plantation, golf club, coffee shop, or some other spot in or about town. The subjects pose facing the viewer – as if 'they' are looking right back at 'us' – the only thing is that their faces are obscured by masks constructed from tropical fruits: mangosteen, durian, rambutan, pineapple, and so on.

In talking about her coming to photography, after years of practice in other media, Gill recalls how a photograph always seemed so complete in itself, as if it were confirming some natural truth about the subject in the picture. Then when she started taking photos, the endless possibilities became sometimes daunting. For Gill this only revealed that the essential constructedness of pictures is nevertheless consistent with their appearing whole. Or perhaps rather than a consistency, what is at stake is a tension between the singular apparent completeness of the image, and the radically multiple possibilities of its construction. Gill's photographic artworks hitherto have employed a common structure: a particular intervention is repeated in different places. Why the sets of repetitions? In my reading, what happens is that through repetition, firstly, a pictorial grammar is established, and, secondly, a tension is maintained between each individual image and the whole set. It is as if the repetitions were an absurd attempt to naturalise an absurd intervention. Furthermore, I take this tension to suggest that Gill's photos, which can evoke so many narratives – anthropological, ethnological, colonial, post-colonial, national, racial, class, botanical, nostalgic, and personal – do not so much accumulate to become a counter-narrative, but, like anecdotes, the images comprise and refract and possibly even rupture these larger narratives.

image of the past". Chakrabarty argues that historicism persists; the 19th century is not gone; the relationship between the 'Not Yet' and the 'Now' is not a binary opposition, an 'Either/Or', rather, it is an 'And'. Gill's pictures represent the multiplicity of our present time by conjoining the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Yet precisely because of this multiplicity, there is a certain time-out-of-jointedness about *A small town at the turn of the century*. Derrida begins 'Specters...' by "Maintaining now the specters of Marx. [But maintaining now without conjuncture. A disjointed or disadjusted now, 'out of joint', a disjointed now that always risks maintaining nothing together in the assured conjunction of some context whose border would still be determinable]". Gill's pictures also evoke a singularly, radically open time: a now without 'and' or 'end'.

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