

MORE TROUBLE THAN IT IS WORTH

What can we expect from
public art in Singapore?

a paper by Peter Schoppert
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IN 1989 I VISITED A VILLAGE ON THE SLOPES OF MT LAWU, near Sarangan, just over the border in East Java from the province of Central Java. In the town square was a large, squat statue of a rabbit, made in concrete, and adorned with the slogan that “our village has developed thanks to rabbits”. The village had evidently won the provincial rabbit-breeding contest, and as a reward, received a cash grant, a metalled road, some television sets and other assorted fruit of development. Curious, we made further enquiries, but were told eventually that the rabbits themselves were not receiving visitors. In fact, after further questioning, it transpired that there were no rabbits in the village at all. The contest-winners had been rented for the occasion, from towns across the border. After playing their part, they had been returned to their real owners. The concrete rabbit is the only one left.



VILLAGE NEAR SARANGAN,
EAST JAVA, 1989

PREVIOUS PAGE: A DETAIL
OF YU YU TANG'S *HARMONY*
(1993), WHICH WAS
INSTALLED IN RAFFLES
PLACE IN 2002.

What a rare treat: a work of public art in the ironic mood, and moreover, one that represents a triumph of local residents over the experts. Against the measure of the concrete rabbit, public art in Singapore, and most places in the world I suspect, comes off as just no fun at all.

The rabbit, if we can idealize a bit from the scant interview data, is public art of an ideal type, art which represents the values of a particular moral community. Here the community, the village, works in solidarity to play the mechanisms of the state for local advantage. The artwork binds the community together, with its references, its symbolism, a shared memory of common goals and achievements.

This ideal type still has power, as a paradigm of the possibilities of art in public places, in an art for the public. But it is a fallen ideal, honored only in the breach, at least beyond the slopes of Mt Lawu. Since the 1970s, public art is all but defined by its failure, its inability, to connect in a meaningful way with the public.

THE MAIN QUESTION

In this paper, I want to explore the dimensions of this problem in Singapore, principally by looking at way that art is presented to the public, rather than by doing ethnography on art reception. Then I would like to look at the implications of these findings, and ask whether we can expect something—anything—from our public art.

Can we expect anything from our public art? Or shall we just bear with it, as a kind of corporate adornment, grandiose bureaucratic jewelry, lipstick on the gorilla, the turd in the gallery, plop art? Can we only expect kitsch monstrosities, impositions of tastes of the powerful or the well-funded? Must we learn to treasure this art only ironically, as symbols of our own resignation?

RECEPTION OF PUBLIC ART IN SINGAPORE

Before giving my view, let me give some simple examples of how broad differences in world-views might determine reception of public art in Singapore. The readings that artists and critics debate about for a sculpture in an art gallery are shockingly narrow when compared to the readings that are possible in the wilds of public space. Let me first pick just two superficial examples of such varying readings from Singapore.

Ju Ming's *Living World* piece, originally placed in front of the National Museum, is inhabited by the spirits of people killed in a late-night car wreck that happened nearby shortly after the sculptures were installed. (In the sort of traditional Chinese religious thought not uncommon in Singapore, the floating spirits created by violent death are apt to take up residence in figures of the human form¹). To this audience, figures of the human form are likely to always be a bit sinister and threatening.

Secondly, most of us at this seminar would see Singapore's *Merlion* (1972) as simple kitsch, but there is a significant audience that sees it as a kind of lens focusing the forces of *feng-shui* along the Singapore River, forces which determine the very prosperity of the island.² Experts in *feng-shui* hold strong opinions in such matters, and are happy to suggest particular artworks for particular places.

How can we possibly represent or take into full consideration a public with such widely varying, contradictory views of the world and the objects within it? And these are simply two from a myriad available, and two from Singapore's majority community at that.

The usual answer of course is just to ignore such 'non-mainstream' views, and characterize them as unsophisticated, ignorant, irrational. But I don't think that a just society can dismiss these individual understandings of the way the universe works. Let me mention one more example, one that brings the problem to a different level than the disconnect between experts on art



JU MING'S *LIVING WORLD* (1987), IN FRONT OF THE SINGAPORE HISTORY MUSEUM, BELOW: *THE MERLION* (1972)



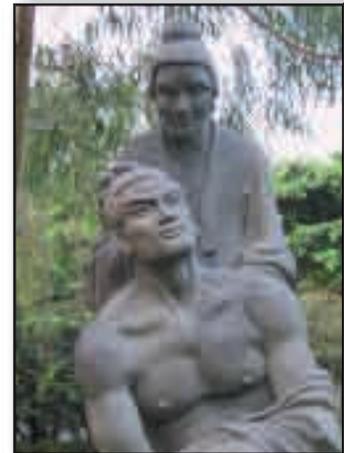
CHINESE LEGENDARY
HEROES SCULPTURE
GARDEN (1991): CONFUCIUS
(DETAIL)

and *feng-shui*.

In 1991 a major public art commission brought the problem into the open. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong opened the Chinese Legendary Heroes Sculpture Garden, an emplacement of eight granite figures of Chinese “cultural heroes”, each eight feet tall, meant to help commemorate the 25th anniversary of Singapore’s independence.³ The works were sponsored to the reported value of a million Singapore dollars by a prominent local entrepreneur known as the “Popiah King”, under a tax exemption scheme. The works were created by “70 skilled Fuzhou craftsmen”. No further information on authorship was given. There was hardly any public discussion of the quality of the sculpture or details of their appearance (except that they were 8-feet tall, for good luck). In the press coverage, the sculptures were not aesthetic objects, but were intended as moral power sources: “they embodied virtues cherished by all races” in the words of the Prime Minister⁴, or as the headline of the *Straits Times* story a few days later put it “Popiah King’ Wants Statues Used to Impart Right Values”.⁵

This of course is a particular idea of the power and purpose of art as moral example, an idea that resonates strongly in Chinese rhetorical traditions of the public sphere.

In his speech at the opening of the Garden, the Prime Minister challenged the Malay and Indian communities to “Come Up with Your Models Too” in the words of the *Straits Times* headline.⁵ Interestingly the PM did mention that while “Muslims did not, as a rule, capture human forms in sculpture, ‘there might be other creative ways of presenting their legendary heroes or certain aspects of their culture’”. His interest was not just to be seen to be even-handed, his was a more active vision: “The Sculpture Garden is able to accommodate many more such sculptures...Located together, these sculptures will clearly illustrate that despite our racial and cultural diversity, Singaporeans are united and share similar basic moral values.”⁶ Left unclear was whether the heroes would be grouped together as in an HDB estate, or be segregated in their own ethnic zones, a sculptural Chinatown, Little India, *et cetera, etc.*



CHINESE LEGENDARY
HEROES SCULPTURE
GARDEN (1991):
TOP: HUA MULAN
MIDDLE: ZHENG HE
BOTTOM: YUE FAI

In the two weeks that followed, the *Straits Times* was to run an additional four stories to follow up on this theme. I cannot find another public art-related story, not even last year’s moving of the Merlion, that received this much sustained attention in the Singapore English-language press.

The *Straits Times* conducted *vox pop* interviews, and spoke as well to prominent members of the minority communities, who were interviewed for their suggestions. Indian community leaders had names to give of course, but they also suggested that art might not be a priority for their community, given various social problems and the limited resources available to tackle them. Another leader proposed a committee to select names.⁷

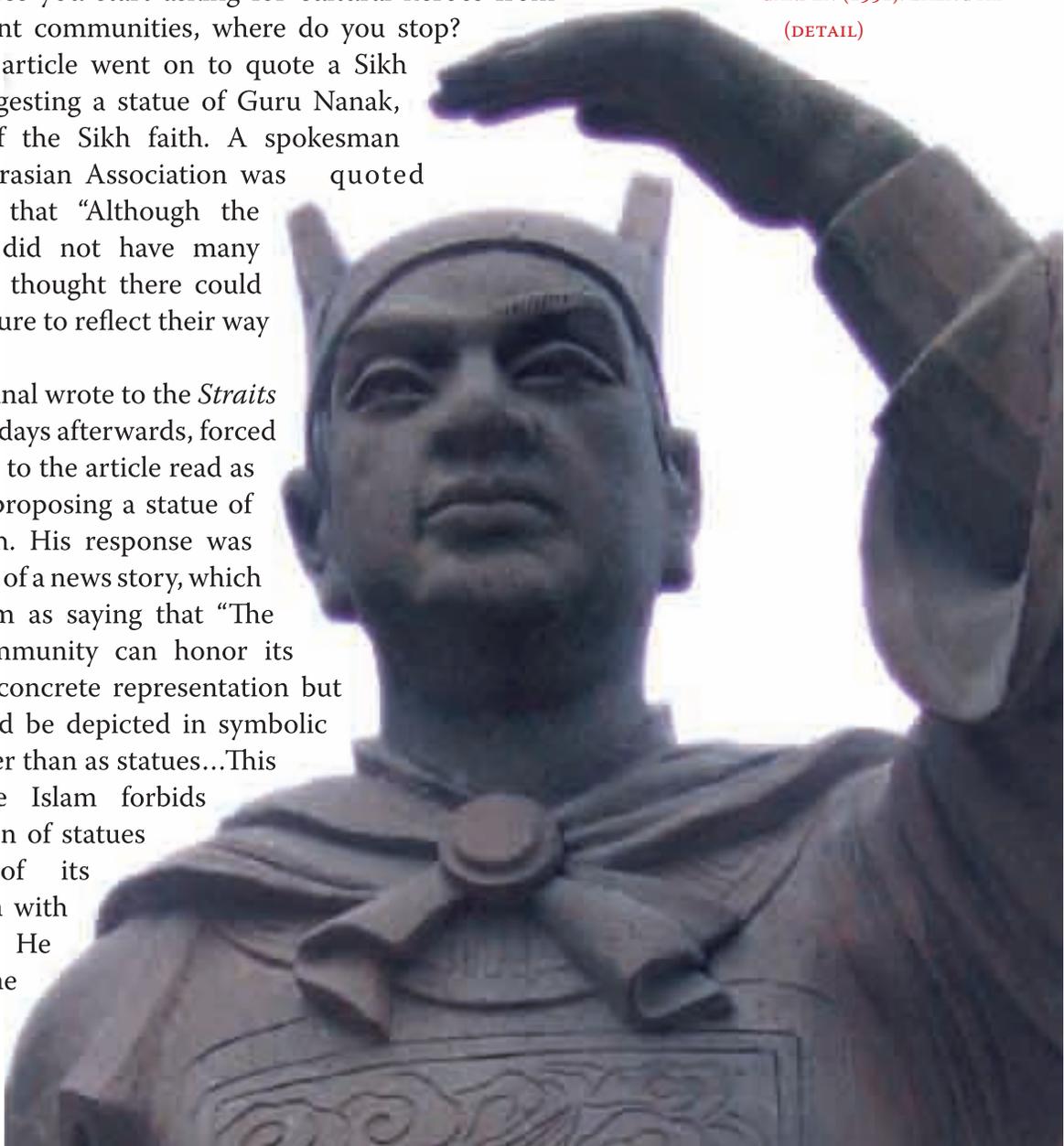
Zainal Abidin Rasheed, head of Singapore’s Islamic Religious Council (Muis) was quoted as suggesting Hang Tuah, a hero of medieval Malay literature, or Munshi Abdullah, chronicler of early Singapore, as potential subjects for statues.

But once you start asking for cultural heroes from the different communities, where do you stop?

The same article went on to quote a Sikh leader suggesting a statue of Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith. A spokesman for the Eurasian Association was quoted as saying that “Although the Eurasians did not have many heroes, he thought there could be a sculpture to reflect their way of life.”

Mr Zainal wrote to the *Straits Times* two days afterwards, forced to respond to the article read as if he was proposing a statue of Hang Tuah. His response was the subject of a news story, which quoted him as saying that “The Malay community can honor its heroes in concrete representation but they should be depicted in symbolic form, rather than as statues...This is because Islam forbids the creation of statues because of its association with idolatry.” He spoke of the “simplest

CHINESE LEGENDARY
HEROES SCULPTURE
GARDEN (1991): ZHENG HE
(DETAIL)



compromise”, whereby abstract art could be created to stand in for the Malay heroes.⁸

Clearly here we have a clash of views about public art that reveals bigger differences. One particular Chinese idiom of art as moral example and exemplary image does not quite resonate with other communities, though of course they do rise to the challenge of proposing their own heroes to match the Chinese ones. Clearly the entire enterprise is flawed, and the idea of the multiethnic sculpture garden was subsequently dropped. Whatever “basic moral values” Singaporeans might share, they did not share enough of the same ideas about art to create a multiethnic heroes sculpture garden.

Most countries have shared similar moments, when a public art commission reveals the extent of divisions in society, when an art commission damages the very social solidarity it is meant to bolster, when public art becomes more trouble than it is worth.

PUBLIC ART IN EARLY INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

The PAP government of Singapore has generally been more clear than most that it must govern a society of people with divergent world-views. Singapore is the hard-to-imagine entity, the “state without a nation”,⁹ This makes its public sphere and its public art, free of myths of nationhood, more difficult to conceive and sustain.

In the two decades after World War II, the public was mobilized as a community as never before (or since), as part of the struggle for self-determination. Judging from the few surviving public monuments of the early years of independence, there was a self-conscious, reflexive effort underway to find a means of expressing this self-determination, this moral community, through art or civic monuments, with close attention to the requirements of social justice and sensitivity to the deep divisions and diversity of world-views on hand.

The *War Memorial* (1967) was commissioned on the initiative of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, as part of a wider effort to seek war reparations and to respond to the discoveries of mass graves of victims of the Japanese *sook-ching* operation from the early days of the Occupation. The government became involved, matching communal fund-raising, donating the plot of land where the monument now sits, and co-opting the publicity drive for the monument.

The monument’s design is by the architectural firm of Swan & McLaren, and I believe it is a rather effective one. It adheres scrupulously to the particular conception of the public that had come out of the political struggle of the previous decade – built upon the concern for justice and fair treatment of Singapore’s diverse communities. The Chinese community’s initial sponsorship of the monument, (and any perception of differential suffering during the war), is screened out. Singapore’s four official languages each receive equal treatment in a matter of this seriousness, the four pillars of the monument standing together. The small and intimate inner area of the monument creates a strong spatial experience, and effectively communicates the private grief



WAR MEMORIAL (1967),
DESIGN BY SWAN &
MCLAREN

that lies behind public trauma. (It is a great pity that the monument has been so badly compromised by changes in its surroundings, including the advertising video screen of Suntec City.)

To me the *War Memorial* is moving in its attempt to constitute a public, and moving for its sensitivity to Singapore as a community created in the process of efforts to seek justice.¹⁰ The effort to grapple with Singapore as a community of different world-views ends in the ‘four-in-one’ formula, Singapore as a collection of four communities, Chinese, Indian, Malay and, well, Other. As we know, this conception brings its own contradictions¹¹, as does any over-arching conception of the public, and excludes as many as it includes, those with identities that can only be imagined as, the minorities within a minority, and so on.

Aside from the *War Memorial*, I count no major works of public art created during the 1960s. The catalog of the first Sculpture Show of the Singapore Arts Society, in 1967, lists a number of murals and bas-reliefs in new buildings, the Teacher’s Training College, the new Shell Headquarters and so on, but these are less grandly public, and lacked the staying power of public sculpture.¹²

In 1970, we see what looks like a logical endpoint in the attempts to find an inclusive language of art or monument for Singapore as a moral community. The *Foundation Stone of the Monument to the Early Founders of Singapore* was simply a granite block mounted on a brick pedestal, the four faces of the stone inscribed in the four official languages. Presumably the idea was that the monument could be created later,

when Singapore as a community of values had evolved to the point that a common language of art could be used as a commemoration. For the time-being a simple stone would have to suffice to mark respect for the ancestors and Singapore’s inability to complete the task of building such a monument. To my mind this is quite an appropriate strategy, and the *Foundation Stone* is poignant in its incompleteness.

TAKE OFF: PUBLIC ART FOR THE GLOBAL CITY

The efforts of commissioners to find a language of art or design that can encompass the values of Singapore’s community falters at around the same time as depoliticization sets in, and Singapore embarks on its path of rapid economic development. Perhaps liberated from the burdens of efforts to be truly “public” and “national”, public art too “takes off” from 1972 onwards, with varying results.

The Merlion (1972) was commissioned by the Tourism Board in service of economic development, because “it was felt that Singapore needed a distinctive symbol with which it can be identified.”¹³ *Raffles*



FOUNDATION STONE OF THE MONUMENT TO THE EARLY FOUNDERS OF SINGAPORE (1970). THE MEMORIAL HAS BEEN MOVED TO THE OFFICES OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE.

(white) (1972), the copy of Thomas Woolner's bronze that sits along the Singapore River, near but out of sight of the original, came around the same time and for the same reasons. *Raffles* (white) maintains the four captions in four languages, but the Merlion dispenses with that device.

In the 1970s we begin to see more art in public places in Singapore, generally modernist, formalist works. Yu Yu Yang's *Peace and Prosperity* (1971) was placed in front of the Mandarin Hotel, (and is now all but completely dismantled). Eduardo Castrillo's *Mural* (1973) in Goldhill Plaza, and then we see the first works in public places of Singaporean sculptors: Ng Eng Teng's *Wealth and Contentment* (1974), and Tan Teng Kee's *Musical Fountain* (1974), all at Plaza Singapura. Eng Teng's work was figurative, but the others largely abstract.

The trend was no doubt driven by the example of the decade-earlier revival of public art in the US.¹⁴ In addition to setting this example, US-based architects came to Singapore and commissioned public sculpture for their local projects. The grand modernist buildings of the global city looked good with abstract art in front of them. Singapore's Henry Moore, the *Reclining Figure* (1938) was brought to Singapore in 1983, placed in front of the OCBC Building at the insistence of I.M. Pei, displacing Tan Teng Kee's

Endless Flow (1980). This trend gained force with the commissions of foreign artists by John Portman and Pontiac Land for Marina Square, and by I.M. Pei for Raffles City, in the mid-1980s. Local artists protested, quite vociferously, the number and size of foreign commissions¹⁵, but it was not only an imported game. The 1983 Asean Sculpture Symposium brought modernist sculpture from the region to Fort Canning.

Such works are not generally meant to be site-specific. The purity of their modernist formalism requires that affective content be driven as far as possible below the surface, and that includes any meaning that can be derived from placement or context. Site was at best the ground, upon which the figure could be seen. But this high modernism floundered after a while. It simply was too hermetic, too removed from the concerns of the public.

The commissioning of prestigious modernist sculpture in public places continues around the world and in Singapore, despite public indifference, and at times, downright hostility. As Miwon Kwon put it

*“the art work's seeming indifference to the particular conditions of the site and/or its proximate audience was reciprocated by the public's indifference, even hostility, towards the foreignness of abstract art's visual language, and towards its aloof and haughty physical presence in public places.”*¹⁶

RESPONSES TO MODERNIST PUBLIC ART

In the US, the reaction to this indifference or hostility was an effort to



TOP & MIDDLE: MURAL (1973) BY EDUARDO CASTRILLO, EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR VIEWS
BELOW: RECLINING FIGURE (1938) BY HENRY MOORE; THE WORK WAS PLACED HERE IN 1983.

create work which was site-specific (a requirement for Federal funding from 1974). Patrons sought a more thorough-going collaboration between artists and architects, or reconceptualized art as being “of use”, an amenity in a public space, playground equipment, street furniture or fountains. The whole debate reached its peak in the rejection by residents, and politicians, of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, a rather brutal work placed in the Federal Plaza in New York, and removed in 1989, after ten years in place.

By the time of the removal of *Tilted Arc*, artists and funders sought an “art in the public interest”, art which engaged local communities and involved them in the creation of works that could be said to further their social agenda. But even the most sincere and thorough experiments in using the public art-making project to empower, involve and rally local people seem to founder on the impossibility of gathering in all the



JOYOUS RIVERS (1987) BY
ELSIE TAN

diversity of senses of identity and taste, of forming a community that is not gendered, that does not exclude in some important way.¹⁷

In the US at least, the strategies of creating public art that will be received by “a public” seem to have run into dead ends, as the notion of the public seems to dissolve once any pressure is put upon it. Let us return to the case of Singapore.

abstract public art in Singapore

In Singapore, there was little public backlash to abstract art. But I do see a more subtle reaction to problems created by public response to the indecipherable quality of modernist abstraction. This reaction begins in the mid-1980s but hits its stride around 1987.

In that year Elsie Yu received the then largest-ever commission to a local artist, some S\$ 200,000 for a work to commemorate the cleaning up of the Singapore River. *Joyous Rivers* is a formalist work, an abstraction along nautical lines, but it carries a label that explains the work as having a very clear meaning, the 60° angle of its lines “symbolizing Singaporeans striving with one common purpose towards a better tomorrow”. I think

it is worth quoting the label at length:

This sculpture, Joyous Rivers, epitomizes the eternal flow of live-giving water. Meandering and interlocking patterns of rivers and catchments are captured on its base, whilst joyous, dancing waves, frozen in motion, portray the abstract form of mass celebration of a happy event. The waves surge forward in one direction, at a 60 degree angle, symbolizing Singaporeans striving with one common purpose towards a better tomorrow. Night lights enliven the liquid forms with an animated, shimmering glow.

The public that was so hard to represent in the monuments of the 1970s is here represented by, of all things, a 60° angle. That the public could be so glibly represented (as digits?) shows how much had changed between 1967 and 1987.

The label surely is a response by Singapore Airlines (the ‘sponsors’ of *Joyous Rivers*) and the Clean Waters Commission to the problem of public reception of modernist art. The label devises a meaning for the abstract art, a meaning that is as concrete as possible, and which bolsters state narratives to boot. In an earlier paper I characterized this impulse as a kind of kitschification of abstract art, but I too was indulging in the act of labeling.¹⁸

the joys of labelling

Joyous Rivers was not actually the first local sculpture to have such an explanatory caption. Tan Teng Kee’s *Endless Flow*, when it was moved to Bras Basah Park in 1983, was accompanied by a plaque which names the work, the sponsor, and the date of its placement, and which goes on to say “It symbolizes an endless flow of people and money, in short it means good fortune.” Such brevity was not often adopted as a strategy for these labels thereafter.

Singapore at the Crossroads (1986), a commission of the Port of Singapore Authority, by Sim Liang Huat, actually is accompanied by a diagram that points out the abstract work’s references. Not only does the work “symbolize Singapore’s strategic position at the crossroads of world shipping” and reflect “the port’s contribution to Singapore’s development”, but the label identifies which parts of the sculpture resemble the prow of a Chinese junk, which bits its rudder, and so on.

Today more than 40% of the sculptures in public places in Singapore have explanatory labels that go to equal rhetorical lengths to pin down meanings in their abstraction. This is not simply a matter of particularly clumsy commercial patrons. Even the artworks in the headquarters of Singapore’s Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts have such labels.

Another curious aspect of these labels is that they celebrate the achievements of the art they accompany. The label on Sun Yu Li’s *Dancer*, (1990) says of itself “The work is a liberation of the body and soul.” Elsie Yu’s *Colours of the Wind* (2000) characterizes its own sculptural achievement as “a majestic act of synthesis”.



A SAMPLING OF LABELS,
FROM TOP: JOYOUS RIVERS
(1987) BY ELSIE TAN;
ENDLESS FLOW (1980)
BY TAN TENG KEE, BUT
PLACED IN THIS POSITION
AND LABELLED IN 1983;
DANCER (1990) BY SUN
YULI; COLOURS OF THE
WIND (2002) BY ELSIE TAN.

I should point out that this desire to turn abstraction to a more easily comprehended statement of certain values is not solely a Singaporean phenomenon. In 1986 George Rickey's *Triple L, Excentric Gyrotory, Gyrotory II* was renamed by its purchasers (perhaps understandably!), as *Leadership*, as it was placed in front of the postmodern façade of the reception building of the headquarters of the CocaCola Corporation in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. An accompanying color brochure makes all the connections:



"We have selected this sculpture because of the evocative connection between the three L's forming its main motive and LEADERSHIP the name by which we know it. Leadership distinguishes our company: leadership in people, leadership in products, and leadership in integrity..."

HOMAGE TO NEWTON BY
SALVADOR DALI (1985).

And so on. The awkward rhetorical appropriation of formalist art to corporate needs is not confined to Singapore. But I would argue that only in Singapore is this appropriation so thorough, so widespread, and only here are artists so much complicit in this operation. The CocaCola explanation, which a commentator describes as 'offensive corporate appropriation' was printed only in a pamphlet, not in a permanent label attached to the work.¹⁹

labels and non-abstract work

And what is more, in Singapore the strategy is not restricted to formalist abstraction. Here is the text that accompanies Salvador Dali's *Homage to Newton* (1985, but I am not sure when the current label was put in place).

"Salvador Dali, one of the most important surrealist artists, takes the liberty to go even further in paying homage to Newton by opening up the torso of the figure and suspending the heart to indicate 'open-heartedness'. The open head represents an 'open-mind'. These are two necessary qualities for the discovery of important natural laws as well as for success of all human endeavors."

Dali's project of liberating art from language, of using the power and violence of the most dramatic religious imagery, to access the power of the subconscious, all these attempts have been bowdlerized here. Perhaps Dali or his estate were complicit in supporting such readings.

So far has this culture of "labelism" gone in the commissioning of public art, that even the most realistic of artworks are accompanied by descriptive and interpretive texts. When this happens you get a stunning kind of obviousness. Here is one example, accompanying Lee Yun Lung's *Street Hawker* (1999):

"This sculpture shows a hawker selling homemade noodles with fish

balls, a dish that remains popular to this day.”

So strong is the label habit that even mimesis seems not to be recognized!

While the impulse of explaining and connecting is hard to criticize, such labels actually undermine the art they are meant to support. Singapore art patrons have solved the problem of reception of public art simply by telling Singaporeans how to receive it.



SO WHERE IS THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC ART?

LEE YUN LUNG'S STREET
HAWKER (1999)

Back to the original question. Can we expect something, anything, of our public art?

Western commentators have linked the difficulties and discomfort with finding an adequate basis on which to commission public art and public monuments in the Western democracies to the post-modern crisis of democracy. Habermas, to take one of the more optimistic analysts of this crisis, sees the liberalism of Rawls as the end point in philosophy's response to a globalizing, rapidly changing world, where world-views proliferate and are diverging as much as converging.

“Surveying the rubble of philosophical attempts to designate particular ways of life as exemplary or universally obligatory, Rawls draws the proper conclusion: that the ‘just society’ ought to leave it to individuals to choose how it is that they want ‘spend the time that they have for living.’ It guarantees to each an equal freedom to develop an ethical self-understanding, so as to realize a personal conception of the ‘good life,’ according to one’s own abilities and choices.”²⁰

This realization would seem to threaten the very idea of public art. Without commonalities of world-view, common symbolic vocabularies, some basic level of education in aesthetics, a shared sense that we should spend some of our “time for living” on art, how can one create works of meaning for an audience of the public? More concretely, how do we justify public resources for those works?

Our shared social, cultural and political life can no longer aspire to the sort of community of belief in common ideals of the life well-spent. This should also mean that the community of those sharing an educated good taste is equally far out of reach, if we accept that taste is something that comes from values and world-view, more than any value-neutral technology of aesthetic effect. Any conception of the/a public on the basis of a community of values will inevitably be excluding someone.

Habermas would caution us from giving up on the idea of the public just because of our inability to recreate a community of around certain values. “Philosophy no longer has the right to intervene in the struggle of gods and demons” as he puts it, but it doesn't mean that we cannot apply to our lives an ethical philosophy, grounded in communicative

rationality, creating communities organized around justice and civic common sense.

I believe that this confusion about how we constitute the public is common, and is an important source of confusion in thinking through the question of public art. It is the sort of problem that causes artists or educators to pose education as the solution to poor reception of public art, to wish that the public was “like us”, had the proper values. An article in the *Straits Times* that talks about vandalism of public art, provides just one example:

In the case of the Esplanade, about \$5,000 has been spent on repairs. The sum is almost negligible for such a big-budget arts centre, but what it really points to is the lack of respect that Singaporeans have for the artworks. As Ms Lim Shing Ee, 27, director of gallery space Plastique Kinetic Worms, says: ‘It says something about the importance of proper upbringing as well as the lack of sincere appreciation of public art.’ Ms [Bridget Tracey] Tan echoes the sentiment: ‘The best prevention is to teach the value of the artwork so that people respect it and its space.’²¹

Perhaps by “teaching the value of the artwork” Ms Tan means we should put on it a big price tag to show how much it costs. If it’s broke, you bought it! Teasing aside, I don’t think we can expect to educate people “to appreciate”, to recognize value in artwork in this way, certainly not an artwork that has just been imposed on the public by experts to whom they are expected to kow-tow. Of course we can expect the public (ourselves) to have a basic respect for the property of others (Ms Lim’s “proper upbringing”), and we can expect artists, curators and arts venues to have a basic tolerance for the liberties the public may take with something they have been told they should enjoy but which gives them no pleasure or access.

To my mind, the public is properly constituted using ideas of justice, of the project of communicative rationality and common sense, not from communities thought to share certain world-views or values of the life worth leading. Perhaps it is a pretty dry conception of the public. To paraphrase Habermas this may be unsatisfying, but who today can object to such reluctance?

But can it lead to art? Can we create art for a public constituted in this way? Can we reconcile our own expectations as individuals and experts with our particular world-views (we know what we like), and as individuals seeking to identify a fruitful and equitable approach to choosing, appraising and commissioning public art in our communities? How do we commission art for a public when we begin from the fact that our public (and our artists!) have wildly varying world-views? This question would seem to be particularly relevant for Singapore.

ART FOR THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC

This paper is coming to a close just when the hard questions arise. But I will have a stab at answering, no matter how preliminary, inadequate and scattered these answers might be.

First of all, I think our common sense approach is very helpful in focusing us away from trying to achieve some sort of moral messaging, “inculcation of values” and so on in our public art. Once we give up on the project of trying to bring people round to particular world-views, then we can look more directly at art in a functional and formal light (by which I do not mean to restrict our choice to formalist or functionalist works). Once we get away from “what art says”, we perhaps look more clearly at “what art does” in particular spaces and contexts. (Perhaps we need to think like those Javanese villagers, and appropriate content or meaning like they did rabbits, not being afraid to release it back over the border once we’ve achieved our goals.)

Perhaps I can refer to Lim Tzay Chuen’s public interventions in this context. His work pays close attention to the formal operations of public space, of the state of “being in a public place”. Lim looks very hard at how space is perceived and experienced, and so opens a common ground of publicness that can be the site for art. Lim constitutes a public from the ground up as it were, by taking the public, and public space, as the subjects of his art.

To reclaim public art, and a public for art, we must also find a way of talking about art as aesthetics and expression, but also as a communicative act, part of a process of inter-subjective communication which has some level of increased understanding as its implicit goal.²²

In Singapore, projects like *Plastique Kinetic Worms’ Deriving Spaces* at South Bridge Rd in December 2001 opened up a promising vein of interaction with public authority. Projects that require and make use of engagement with the institutions of the state would seem to open a public space, the common space individuals share as subjects of public institutions, at a minimum. This is one reason why Christo’s interventions work and gained reasonably widespread support in their communities.

Naturally an approach based on our community of justice would argue for more openness in the process of art commissioning. Lee Weng Choy has written that “there is a correlation between the underdeveloped state of civil society in Singapore and the unhappy state of its public art”,²³ pointing to the lack of an independent curators among the group that looked after a recent major commission. But replacing one set of presumably non-independent curators with another more independent batch would not seem to solve the greater problem, though it might result in work that independent art professionals like better. A more thorough-going change in process is required, and a first step is to publically share in more detail the deliberations of the art commissioners, with something approaching frankness.

Even on Mt Lawu, I suspect that there are people for whom that concrete rabbit is a reminder of everything wrong with their community and their lives, the cynicism of their leaders, the feebleness of the state. Or maybe they just miss the rabbits and want them back. But public art is not necessarily art that everyone likes. Not all communal memories or experience are happy ones, and community living is about compromise.

When we release ourselves from the expectation of false unity of art appreciation, we can learn to value compromise, to give each other public space.

Constituting a public for public art clearly requires a great deal of effort, and perhaps there are other more important agendas. Public art often looks like more trouble than it is worth. But I worry that abdicating from attempts to create better public art implies giving up on whatever commitment we feel to find better ways to live together.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Tan Khoon Yong, *The Secrets of the Five Dragons: Feng Shui and Singapore's Success*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2003
- 3 Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli cover this episode in their excellent article on the contradictions involved in creating national heroes in Singapore, though I believe their reading doesn't quite get to the root of this particular case. Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, "The Scripting of Singapore's National Heroes: Toying with Pandora's Box", in Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, eds., *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Singapore: Singapore University Press and Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003, p 221.
- 4 "Come Up With Your Models Too", *Straits Times*, 19 September, 1991
- 5 "'Popiah King' Wants Statues Used to Impart Right Values", *Straits Times*, 22 September, 1991
- 6 "Come Up With Your Models Too"
- 7 "Malay, Indian Statue Ideas, But It's Not Top Priority", *Straits Times*, 29 September, 1991
- 8 "Statues Are Out for Malay Heroes: MUIS Chief", *Straits Times*, 3 October, 1991
- 9 C.J. Wee Wanling, "Economic Development and National Narratives in Singapore", in Abu Talib and Tan, pp 151-167.
- 10 Others may remember the way that Pan Shou's planned inscription for the memorial was blocked. See C. M. Wong's translation of the memorial as published in the *Journal of the South Seas Society*, referenced in its online version on February 10, 2004. <http://www.knowledgenet.com.sg/singapore/shf/e_journal/articles/EJV1ART005.htm>.
- 11 See Geoffrey Benjamin, "the Cultural Logic of Multiracialism", in Riaz Hassan, editor, *Singapore: Society in Transition*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp 115-133.
- 12 Choy Weng Yang, *Sculpture '67: Singapore Art Society - First Sculpture Exhibition*, Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1967
- 13 from the website of the Singapore Tourism Board, referenced in 2001
- 14 Interestingly, two Asian-Americans were at the forefront of this trend, I.M. Pei as architect and Isamu Noguchi, with his many commissions from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the early 1960s. Noguchi traced his interest in art in public spaces from his time in Beijing in 1927.

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- 15 Peter Schoppert, "Singapore Sweepstakes: Foreign vs Local Art", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 3, 1988, p. 27.
- 16 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 65.
- 17 See Miwon Kwon's discussion of John Ahearn's South Bronx Sculpture Park, 1991. Ahearn had lived in the neighbourhood for many years, and created works of individuals from the area. After protests from some residents, he removed the works, leaving their empty plinths.
- 18 Peter Schoppert, "Kitsch and Singapore Public Art", *FOCAS: Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, No. 3, January 2002
- 19 All from Harriet F. Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation and Controversy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. She calls this "offensive corporate appropriation of art".
- 20 Suhaila Sulaiman, "Barbarians at the Gate", *Straits Times*, 15 February 2003
- 21 Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, p. 4
- 22 The ability of Habermas's philosophy of communicative action to deal with art and aesthetics is a key test of its usefulness. See Pieter Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics: the Limits of Communicative Reason*, London: Polity Press, 2003.
- 23 Lee Weng Choy , "Modernism without modernity: new public art in Singapore", manuscript version provided in personal communication.

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