

Performance Art: Journeying Through Public Spaces in the City of Singapore

By Adrian Tan

From the creation of a creative industries framework decades ago to more recent celebration of new art spaces, global art events, and a new art biennale, Singapore's rapid urban transformation necessitated a re-direction in cultural policies in its quest to become a global city. In this report from the field, performances in public spaces are cited as examples for artists' abilities to negotiate what they can and cannot do in an evolving city. It is the directness and journeying through various parts of the city that has etched performance art's presence in Singapore, where artists have had to learn and unlearn how to balance between promotion, acceptance, and reaction to their performances.

This report from the field explores how, since the 1990s, the city of Singapore offered a fertile ground for performance art to transpire in public spaces and illustrates the critical roles artistic performances play in delicate balance with the state's cultural development narrative. While culture was being repackaged in the city's landscape and mindscape during the early days of the 1990s, art events were hosted and cultural institutions opened, forms of performance art started to traverse a rapidly urbanising city and navigate through public spaces. In the artworks cited, performance art maintains a unique position in blurring the line between audience and participant by encroaching into places deemed public and reserved for public activities or activism. Due to its ability to negotiate what an artist can and cannot do, the directness of this form of artistic practice has etched performance art's presence into the city of Singapore. This report illustrates how performance art has been balanced, rejuvenated, and expanded on differently as it journeyed through the public spaces of the rapidly urbanising city.

Culture and the Arts as Performed in the City of Singapore

In the promotion of the arts and culture in Singapore, the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee (CDC) in 1980 was timed just as the publication of an election manifesto to make Singapore a 'City of Excellence' was drafted. This marked a shift for the city-state as the rapidly developed economic society saw a need to develop into a society that was culturally excellent. The 1989 Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) report was thorough and explicit in its manifold goals of 'improving local quality of life and contributing to the nation's tourism and entertainment economies' (ACCA 12). Singapore is often perceived as a highly controlling city-state but has—since the enactment of the ACCA report—re-strategised and shifted emphasis to growing artistic practice and the arts through the emergence of a new creative industries framework and various cultural policies. During the early days of this transformation and re-direction, performance art was finding its footing in Singapore. The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) and the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a joint statement in response to some performances that took place asserting that it was 'concerned that new art forms such as "performance art" and "forum theatre" which have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation pose dangers to public order, security and decency', and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority (21 January 1994).

This was a critical moment in foregrounding the disorientation that performance artists faced in Singapore—such as prosecutions, curtailments, and funding restrictions—as there was an invisible fear that performance art could potentially disorientate its audience and seek to imbalance public order. A general understanding or representation of Singapore today is that it is a 'global stage' for contemporary art events; what has been lesser discussed however is the art originating from artists residing and practicing in this city-state. The larger aim of this text is to posit a consistent presence of performance art in the reading

of the development of the arts in the city-state, where the enactment of performance art in public spaces has a historical trajectory in Singapore.

Performance Art in and Around the Public Spaces of the City

Tang Da Wu is an important Singaporean artist closely associated with performance art and state-funded art events and festivals. His artistic oeuvre has taken him into the streets of Singapore more often than not through state-sanctioned festivals of the arts. Through his performative gestures, his pieces question and confront the deeply and delicately held social and cultural beliefs in the multicultural city of Singapore. Through his performance interventions in public spaces like *They Poached the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink* (1989–1991) and *Tiger's Whip* (1991), Tang reflexively opened up his practice to a live audience and emphasised the importance of the public space as a site for dialogue and even contestation, before performance art was recognised locally. This impetus for performing in and amongst people for Tang 'in a public space outside' is because 'it's most real, very real' (Low). Tang's collaborative street performance, *Four Men in One Suit in the Streets of Singapore* (1991), took place as part of 'A Sculpture Seminar' at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). This performance involved artists collaboratively navigating various parts of the city, encountering bus stops and train stations through this journeying into the public spaces of the city. Tang conceived the piece as a dialogical art work at a moment in Singapore's cultural history where performance art in public spaces was unheard of and scarcely noticed or written about, much less critically discussed.

What remains of the collaborative piece is photographic documentation of four artists stumbling around and traversing newly opened train stations and bus stops where 'the work activated these public spaces to depict a very specific predicament facing the everyday Singaporean, challenging authorities to rethink their modes of urban planning or lack thereof' (Tan 645). The performance and



Fig. 1: Tang Da Wu. *Four Men in One Suit in the Streets of Singapore* (1991). Image courtesy of Koh Nguang How.

its documentation were created where the self-deprecating public artists want[ed] the viewer to move away from the familiar boundary of their everyday, out of their common language and existing forms of representations to reconsider their current predicament or social situation. These walks through public spaces have in my view become important open-ended artistic commentaries of a city gradually finding its footing as Singapore's urbanisation progressed.

The sculpture seminar conceived by Tang had been an event organised by the newly opened NMAG to introduce the public to alternative modes of artistic production. This approach, attempted by the artist of embedding performance art into exhibitions and seminars, enabled the medium to become a prominent form of artistic intervention and started to gain much public attention. Despite the spontaneous nature of performative gestures, the participatory nature and directness of such an artform found bandwidth and leeway for its existence in Singapore.

Singapore developed rapidly in the 1990s to the 2000s and gradually became a dense city: dense in spatial terms and in the

weight and importance it confers on culture and the arts. The impetus to increase cultural activity in the city-state arose in the context of a slowing economy which stimulated the need to find alternatives to the industrial structure prescribed in the existing state narrative. Change became apparent in the state narrative with the emergence of a new creative industries framework and led to an increased interest in the arts as an industry, coupling it in particular with tourism and resulting in a vague collective drive towards harnessing cultural activity in the city-state's narrative. The state investigated what economic restructuring was needed to enable Singapore to be competitive and survive the economic downturn. Findings from the Ministry of Information Technology and the Arts (MITA) suggested the need to develop the creative industries as a 'pillar and strategic enabler for the Singapore economy' (MITA). Strategies were put in place to nurture Singapore's non-economic wants, culturalisation became official and strongly embedded in planning agendas to develop a culturally adept, and economically sustainable Singapore. This re-direction is key to understanding how contemporary art has been nurtured, fetishised and institutionalised in the island-state ever since. In balancing the need to promote the arts and retain economic stability, artists like Tang started to produce performance art works that did not merely break free from the dominant media of painting and sculpture, or the constraints of museums and art galleries, but they in my view began to break down barriers between the live presence of the artist and the Singaporean public.

Amanda Heng's *Let's Chat* (1996) is an example of a participatory artwork that blends performative gestures with participant interaction conducted in public or semi-public spaces. Situated around a round table and the ubiquitous activity of tailing bean sprouts (an activity commonly practiced in Southeast Asia as part of food preparation), it presented a place for conversations between strangers (participants) to ensue. As the artist partakes in communicating with her audience, the participants find themselves adopting various vernacular languages in communicating ideas about the everyday while sipping tea.

Questioning the relationship between one's selfhood as an artist in an as-yet established collateralised city and one's frantically modernising environment, the predicament facing the city was what Amanda Heng explored in her work. Everyday conversations about the state gently surfaced, were probed, and scrutinised in her form of conversational performance art. In *Let's Chat*, she invariably alluded to Singapore's 1979 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign, a government policy that promoted Mandarin's usage in a largely vernacular-dialect-speaking community at that time. This campaign came under scrutiny for its hindering of intergenerational communication and possible systemic erasure of culture. The public opposed it, but unlike the harsh response to performance art, the campaign continued for years, resulting in the usage of vernacular dialect becoming gradually forgotten and erased from most public spaces. Additionally, much of her work deals with the politics of being a woman, a criticality towards gender stereotypes that was largely not encountered in other visual art practices locally in the 1990s. Learning how to balance state support and maintaining their mode for provocation, artists in my view became important voices as they continued to expand their artistic repertoire and yet retained the criticality and spontaneity that performance art offers.

In another of Heng's seminal works, *Let's Walk* (1999), she walks the streets of Singapore and invites her participants to follow suit. In journeying around the city, Heng has broken away from the museum or the gallery site as a locale for artistic production and appreciation. Using the live presence of the artist navigating real spaces, her walks in public spaces enabled her practice to enter the larger discourse of international culture and contemporary art. At times, her use of props like tea, beansprouts, and domestic objects has become a feature of her durational performance pieces that is focused not on a traditional plot or narrative but a series of intimate gestures based on improvisation and the active participation of others discussing all things local. Through *Let's Chat* and *Let's Walk*, simple gestures involving everyday activities provided opportunities for participants to partake, exchange, interact,

and question the status quo within Singapore through her artistic intervention, led by an artist who was ethnically Chinese, female and exposed to western artistic sensibilities.

Heng's keen awareness of her everyday vernacular roots played a large part in her actions as an artist where her itinerant performative gestures literally took her to the streets and were unconditionally public. In the *Yellow Man* performances by Lee Wen, another key Singaporean performance artist whose body took center-stage, cultural concerns are surfaced and observed in the artist's actions set within all-inclusive sites in a modernising city. In these journeying performances, Lee emphasised his physicality through his bodily movement and heightened his ethnicity through his partially nude body that was painted an altered intense coloration of yellowness. His nuanced movements have come to balance a work that could border on the point of absurdity. The simple gesture of walking around the streets of a city builds a dialogical relationship between viewer and artist, where one's cultural and ethnic identity were questioned through gestures, interaction, and planned and unplanned sequences (Kester 10). Lee and Heng both shared a spirit of exploration, criticality to social changes and adopted an inventive use of the body set within the public spaces of Singapore and other cities. The *Yellow Man* Series was developed from Lee's keen observation of the region around him and his life experiences. He developed a nuanced performative impulse that exaggerated the yellow Asian skin tone to a bright yellow hue as a layering of values, cultures and biases are enmeshed in his performances—where the eponymous character is seen roving with props and interacting with spaces and people.

As a result of their artistic practices, Tang, Lee and Heng became the embodiment of an artistic critique of hegemony and social biases through their performance art pieces. Varying in duration and documented in varying degrees, they pushed the medium in their far-reaching practice and were also instrumental in organising performance art events in all-inclusive public spaces in Singapore. Artists like Tang, Heng, and Lee represent a generation of Singaporean performance

artists who networked or became enmeshed or interconnected with fellow practitioners engaging in exchange and mutual participation in events, festivals, and installations. This networking is what enabled participatory, relational, collaborative, or action art to have a presence in this region manifested in large- and small-scale performance art festivals. Performance art events have done more than help performance art to grow in Singapore. They have also enabled the voices of artists to be heard outside of the country and region, inevitably balancing the state's perception of its propensity to bring about imbalance to social order. This mode of self-organisation and collectivity in and of itself has come to create meaning and significance for performance artists in the face of state-driven commodification of art, where performance art has been ever-present. The value of working in groups and travelling from country to country also enabled the criticality present in these performative works to be discussed and read by an outside audience, thereby increasing the global awareness of Singapore as a city for contemporary performance art.

Performance Art in and about Singapore

Performance Art became recognised and framed as a form of practice that was engendered by the state. Since performance works became accepted in art institutions and galleries, it started to widely inhabit a space between performative interventions and participatory formats and installatory forms. In a country that might be considered to be small, Singapore has become a global tech hub, as well as a creative global city in the decades of 2000s to 2010. The island-state's highly technologised society is characterised by a labyrinthine framework of digital connectivity. Beyond the institutionalisation and commodification of performance art during the 2000s, Several Singaporean artists were exploring technology and its embodied nature in relation to state ideologies. Ulrich Lau's *Life Circuit* series (2010, 2012) adopts the performative format. It takes the artist's bodily presence and replaces it with a technocratic embodiment,



Fig. 1: Urich Lau. *Life Circuit 2.0* (2019). Image courtesy of Jaymi McManus.

that of the video camera, projection devices, and other gadgets. Akin to Nam June Paik's controversial performance pieces that used technology, such as *Opera Sextronique* (1967) and *TV For Living Bra* (1969), Lau devised a ground-breaking electronic media performance action that commented on the development of Singapore from an island city to a highly technologised contemporary city. In various iterations of Lau's video performances, he dons wearable gadgets reconstructed from industrial safety equipment like gas masks and welding goggles, staging a 'hybrid-being' in disguise. In addition to referencing examples from new media art histories, Lau's video performances can also be seen as inverting the capabilities of these technologies and critiquing Singapore's adoption of innovations and steadfast cultural policies through his state-sanctioned pieces. His performances, of varying durations, call upon the gadgets to become the extensions of the artist, re-terrorising his bodily movement, and his overall being and self-hood. In my view, it is

in this series of performative works that Lau deftly inverted technology's usefulness by producing situations of inconvenience and impediment in order to question society's embrace of technology.

Life Circuit embodies Lau's entanglement with the state and modes of artistic expression. His performance works are actions that form a sophisticated trope of social critique, where he presents 'statements as noise' in programming computer voices to read out the National Art Council's mission statement. His bodily actions push the viewer to reflect on the mandated aims, set out like a manifesto for the arts and cultural development in Singapore. Through his usage of mechanically read out mission statements from Singapore's *Renaissance City Report* (MITA), the artist has adopted duration, the artist's body, the audience's physical presence, and the dull lull of electronic gadgets to respond to the geopolitical conditions of the nation-state. The Renaissance City Report (2000) provided a vision and plan for the promotion of arts and culture in Singapore. The report reviewed the progress made in the local arts and cultural scene since the last comprehensive study undertaken in 1989 by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA). Lau's critique is smartly veiled under state-funded festivals and events, where he produced performance actions that are critical art pieces developed from political conditions that he finds himself practicing in, a finely balanced approach to artistic production.

Up until now, the works of Tang, Heng, Lee, and Lau discussed in this text represent unique moments of collaborative gestures with the public, the state, and other governmental bodies involved in sanctioning artistic interventions. The creation of networks among artists, their performance art, and art spaces in Singapore have been part of a schema towards the conditions artists find themselves making art in and for. More recently, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017) by Seelan Palay exists as a form of walk that explored performative tropes in a tangential way. Seelan performed *32 Years* during the year of his 32nd birthday to Dr. Chia Thye Poh, the world's longest-serving

political detainee, who was forced to spend 32 years in jail and house arrest, without trial, by the state for alleged pro-communist activity. The performer has made his own definition in the very process and manner of execution, where the journeying has been provocative and stands as key to this investigation about how performance art has been a balancing act in Singapore. The artistic performance was shaped from the visual realities of an artist residing and making art in the duality of Singapore's consumerist, capitalist, and globalised ecosystem. A contemporary of the earlier generation of Singaporean artists, Palay is, in my view, an artist who is deeply attached to community through his other forms of artistic endeavors. He sees the core fundamentals of performance art as a connection not just to his reality but the reality of those residing in this city, much like the previous works cited in my text. In this piece, the artist carries the portrait of political detainee, Chia Thye Poh, and journeys from the Speakers' Corner to the National Gallery and finally to the Parliament House. In the actions taken by the artist, 'at every single point, the state was an active participant in this performance' ('Performing Without Acting'). The artist, proceeding with his intended procession, carried with him the probability of being stopped by the police at any juncture, where the journeyed locations held significance for his performative gesture. Heightened by this likelihood, in his itinerant and contemplative performance, Palay made a speech, unrolled a banner, and held up a mirror to the National Gallery. The banner read 'Passion Made Probable', a response to the Singapore Tourism Board's slogan 'Passion Made Possible' which was a catchphrase to market Singapore as the global creative city. He navigated these public spaces prior to his final action when he was in front of the Parliament House. There he was arrested and subsequently charged for violating the Public Order Act, and ordered to either serve a two-week jail term or pay a fine of \$2,500 Singapore dollars. Palay chose to serve the jail term and contended that the whole process was part of his performance.

32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror is a performance art work operating firmly outside of the art gallery, the mechanics of the state-endorsed art institution, and stands as a reflection of the critical boundaries of performance art amidst the state's rational view of cultural development. One can almost say that this work tips the balance of what is performance art and what is civil activism. This itinerant performance offers a stark contrast to the text's earlier examples and presents an opposing instance of disequilibrium in the state's tolerance for performance art. The walk has taken several forms in this report, and this latter example is a critical vehicle in expressing a contested mode of expression and aesthetics contrary to the state's rational order.

From the 1980s to now, there have been many moments of state intervention in cultural development that can be traced to geopolitical events, government policy implementation periods, and large and widespread changes to our social and spatial configurations. This movement from the rural to the urban was topped off in the late 1990s where cultural policies were mooted to engineer or foster a development of the arts. It is through this backdrop of systemic changes that we map artists who respond to and produce performance artworks that react, critique, and raise questions in and through the expressive language of action and modes of collaboration. The creation of performance artworks in the public spaces in Singapore should be read more critically in relation to the city that they exist in. The examples explored and examined here are, in my view, important schemas in the reading of the conditions artists find themselves making art in and for. It is a complex situation that artists find themselves in when making performance art in the present-day, globalised society in the city of Singapore. So how and where can performance art be located in Singapore? What can or cannot be performed? From the emergence of a creative industries framework decades ago to the more recent celebration of new art spaces, global art events, and a new art biennale, performance art sits at the periphery as a form of artistic expression that is often curtailed by the perceived

dangers it poses to the state, even as the state transitions to a smart nation. In this report from the field, a reading of performance art by five Singaporean artists, an understanding of how performative works have been conceived, nurtured, and even institutionalised in Singapore in my view reveals a delicate 'balancing act' in how the art form continues to maintain its revolutionary potential in the face of social, cultural, and technological changes.

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