



## The Naked Museum: Art, Urbanism, and Global Positioning in Singapore

Mechtild Widrich

To cite this article: Mechtild Widrich (2016) The Naked Museum: Art, Urbanism, and Global Positioning in Singapore, *Art Journal*, 75:2, 46-65, DOI: [10.1080/00043249.2016.1202630](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2016.1202630)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2016.1202630>



Published online: 08 Jul 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Downloaded by [Mechthild Widrich] at 09:45 09 July 2016

**National Gallery Singapore, facade, 2015**  
(photograph by the author)

## The Naked Museum: Art, Urbanism, and Global Positioning in Singapore

Mechtild Widrich

This article was submitted on July 31, 2015. The research was supported by a senior research fellowship from Eikones, the National Center for Competence in Research Iconic Criticism at the University of Basel, a field research grant from the Academic Society Basel, and a writing residency at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. Additional travel support came from the dean's office and the art history, theory and criticism department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

1. There were 111 entries, from which five were chosen for a second round, and three for the final. See National Gallery Singapore and Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, "Announcement of Top Three Winning Design Teams for the National Gallery of Singapore," press release, August 29, 2007, at [www.nationalgallery.sg/about/news/press-room/announcement-top-three-winning-design-teams-national-art-gallery-singapore](http://www.nationalgallery.sg/about/news/press-room/announcement-top-three-winning-design-teams-national-art-gallery-singapore), as of June 15, 2015.
2. National Gallery Singapore, "Naked Museum Building History Tours," at [www.nationalgallery.sg/see-do/highlights/naked-museum](http://www.nationalgallery.sg/see-do/highlights/naked-museum), as of July 3, 2015.
3. Performance art has been severely restricted in Singapore since Josef Ng's scandalous performance *Brother Cane* (1993), a protest of the entrapment and punishment of gay men earlier that year. See Adele Tan, "Festivalizing Performance: Snapshots of an Alternative Circuit," in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 126–28. Nora A. Taylor is currently conducting a research project on Ng's performance. She assesses the contemporary art scene in Southeast Asia with one focus on Singapore in "Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography," *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 6–23. I would like to thank Taylor for her critical feedback on this manuscript and for sharing information about her current research.

In April and May 2015, representatives of the media and a select public, chosen partly through an online lottery, were invited to visit the National Gallery Singapore before its official opening date of November 24. The tour focused on the history of the original colonial buildings that had been remodeled into a museum: the former City Hall constructed between 1926 and 1929 as an all-purpose center for the British administration, and the high-domed former

Supreme Court erected between 1937 and 1939, the last piece of colonial architecture built in Singapore. The Supreme Court was designed by Frank Dorrington Ward, chief architect of the Straits Settlements Public Works Department from 1928 until 1939, and the City Hall by A. Gordon and F. D. Meadows. The new museum is the work of the French architect Jean François Milou in cooperation with the Singapore-based firm CPG Consultants. Studio Milou won an open design competition with its respectful, subtle conjunction of the two historicist buildings, effected by a roof covering the space between them.<sup>1</sup> No art was yet on display in the "Naked Museum," as the spring 2015 events were styled, but "participants were encouraged to take creative shots of themselves at the Gallery and upload them on Instagram with #NakedMuseumSG."<sup>2</sup> The photographs chosen for the National Gallery Singapore's website are elaborately staged performances, showing chicly dressed young people—with a few ironic nods to tourist clichés—interacting acrobatically with the architecture, often in an absurdist manner. In a photo by @\_yaisyusman\_, a young man lies supine with his glasses beside him on a marble step, as if struck down—and blinded—by the weight of history, or maybe just dozing off. A group of young women in an image by @\_yafiqyusman\_ stare past the dark gulf of a pair of French windows into the black hemisphere of a security camera fixture, as if regarding themselves and their watcher simultaneously. The focus on visitors' interactions with the building, in images taken by the participants, shows that the gallery envisions visitors shaping the space by their presence, making it their own—at least in the virtual space of social media—as citizens, we guess, of a contemporary, small, but globally competitive nation-state. But what is the history of this nation-state to us, and who are we? Are we detached critics watching an audience micromanaged by the museum as *pars pro toto* of a turbo-capitalist, restrictive state system? Or the emancipated audience become artist, registering the generously interpretable notation of a performance?<sup>3</sup> Where and what is the site of this national gallery? Is the space of action here only a website?

These questions are important and typical of the concerns of contemporary art history, which is under the pressure of both a global expansion of the art market and an unprecedented integration of aesthetic contemplation and technologized leisure. I will show, however, that these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered as posed, for their stark choices only blur the complex reality of cooperation and conflict animating sites such as Singapore's new museum. This essay took shape before the opening of the National Gallery in November 2015, which I regard less as a limitation than as an opportunity. I approach the building as part of a contemporary art geography, which is not purely tied to a fixed location or time. Rather, it is a shifting and malleable construction, comprising real territory,

These questions are important and typical of the concerns of contemporary art history, which is under the pressure of both a global expansion of the art market and an unprecedented integration of aesthetic contemplation and technologized leisure. I will show, however, that these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered as posed, for their stark choices only blur the complex reality of cooperation and conflict animating sites such as Singapore's new museum. This essay took shape before the opening of the National Gallery in November 2015, which I regard less as a limitation than as an opportunity. I approach the building as part of a contemporary art geography, which is not purely tied to a fixed location or time. Rather, it is a shifting and malleable construction, comprising real territory,



**Photographs by @\_yaisusman\_ and @\_yafiqusman\_, visitors during the 2015 Naked Museum tour, uploaded on Instagram and the webpage of the National Gallery Singapore (photographs © the artists, provided by National Gallery Singapore)**

4. In 2013, the government put forth a new land use plan for 2030. See Urban Redevelopment Authority, “A High Quality Living Environment for All Singaporeans: Land Use Plan to Support Singapore’s Future Population, January 2013,” at [www.ur.gov.sg/uol/publications/research-resources/plans-reports/Concept%20Plan%202011/land\\_use\\_plan\\_2013.aspx](http://www.ur.gov.sg/uol/publications/research-resources/plans-reports/Concept%20Plan%202011/land_use_plan_2013.aspx), as of July 14, 2015. Singapore is not the only country in Asia to reclaim land, yet the proportion—22 percent of its surface—is unique. See “Such Quantities of Sand,” *The Economist*, February 28, 2015, at [www.economist.com/news/asia/21645221-asias-mania-reclaiming-land-sea-spawns-mounting-problems-such-quantities-sand](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21645221-asias-mania-reclaiming-land-sea-spawns-mounting-problems-such-quantities-sand), as of July 14, 2015.

5. More recently, geography as an art-critical endeavor has been developed in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6. The most interesting work in this vein is Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

7. Hal Foster, “Crystal Palaces,” in *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2013), 34–51. See also Gevork Hartoonian, *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012). Gevork accuses Bernard Tschumi of “turn[ing] the glass facade into a theatrical stage-set” (99).

its imagination in various minds and its representation in various media. This malleability seems fitting for an island whose shape is constantly shifting due to land reclamation, but my art geography will go beyond metaphors to show how the metaphors themselves, like the built structures, gain their effects as much from their physical as their historical placement.<sup>4</sup> While classical geography encompasses both political boundaries and geology, art geography is a perhaps unfamiliar term with a long history. *Kunstgeographie* played a major role in German art history in the first half of the twentieth century, before tumbling into nationalist or racial explanations for differences of style in the 1930s, and it has re-emerged since the 1970s under the term “radical geography” as a critique of a positivist reading of space independent of discourse.<sup>5</sup> This reemergence is a welcome development that has also informed art history, but the new critical geography of contemporary art too often trades diachronic history for a focus on synchronic development in the art world and beyond.<sup>6</sup> My starting points, then, are specificity both in place and time: the theory of site and the theory of monuments. Buildings, sites, and the activities taking place in and around them, be they curatorial stagings of artifacts, selfies and other acts for the camera, site-specific interventions, or the use of land in general, are the interrelated objects of a larger inquiry into the representation of artifacts and their institutions, from the museum to the nation, on a global stage.

To redesign a modern national gallery by reusing prominent buildings of the colonial administration raises issues of identity and historical consciousness. Such questions often receive a quick answer in contemporary debates. For instance, Hal Foster, in his suggestively titled book *The Art-Architecture Complex*, attacked the combination of old architecture with monumental glass refurbishing as a flattening of architecture into what the Situationists damned as “spectacle.”<sup>7</sup> The problem with this approach, when it takes the form of art history as opposed to criticism, is that it assumes what it ought to show: that history plays no role in contemporary spectacle. Without denying its force, I hope to turn aside a parallel

totalizing narrative about such flattening of an art system—embodied in institutions, objects, and interactions—in the remorseless grip of a global art and finance market in order to take an in-depth, if necessarily partial, look at how buildings are part of a performance of site rather than a static unit. The snapshots on Instagram are useful entry points into this museum-in-the-making and the spatial practices it involves; the camera lens and the computer screen are interfaces that frame these images, bringing together monumental architecture, the body, and the camera. Given this aesthetic specificity of address, the resulting geography is not entirely constructed or arbitrary; it strives to identify existing configurations of art and political sovereignty. Indeed, it focuses on artifacts, such as monuments, that mark and imbue territory with official history. As Alois Riegl first emphasized, monuments may be constructed intentionally or become monuments by historical chance; they can change meaning as they age, be reused and modified, and have—but do not need to have—art-historical value.<sup>8</sup> Their status is always dependent on the audience and highly involved in the complexities of changing historical consciousness. I extend this insight to the elements of mediation and framing for different audiences functioning simultaneously. Depending on what is being framed, and what scale is being applied—local, regional (in this case Southeast Asian), or global—what we see will differ in systematic ways. The task for the art geographer, then, cannot be to choose a local or cosmopolitan standpoint but to explain how these jointly constitute contemporary art.

## Two Buildings

The opening of the National Gallery will register a shift in the museum landscape that reaches beyond Singapore. The prominent building in downtown Padang—the great open field before the former state buildings—will showcase modern art produced throughout Southeast Asia, with one part of the museum dedicated to Singaporean artists. The contents constitute the official national collection as well as loans, and the collection will be shared with the Singapore Art Museum, which was established in 1996 to focus on art of the broader region rather than national artistic production.<sup>9</sup> Although much work went into cleaning and renovating the historical structures, the most visible new feature in the design by Studio Milou is the glass roof with aluminum inserts to modulate, or dampen, sunlight; it flares outward at the ground level in a textile-like pattern that Milou calls a “veil” facing the Padang.<sup>10</sup> With its golden glow, the veil beckons visitors into the impressive atrium that serves as the new entrance to both buildings. On a closer look, we see that Milou’s proposal uses glass to roof the entire lower structure, City Hall, and the courtyards of both buildings, but this radical enclosure is hard to discern from the ground. (The roof garden atop the former City Hall will be accessible to visitors, who will thus be unenclosed).

If the language of veils evokes obvious colonial and specifically orientalist associations, it is worth examining the more subtle yet overt built metaphors that shore up this spectacular facade. The comprehensive glass structure is reborn as a tent, suggestive of transient, nature-sensitive human settlement, and upheld by branching columns in the guise of high-tech trees, striving to match nature in symbolism and outdo it in load-bearing function. According to Studio Milou, “The roof system is supported by columns—which are kind of (like) tree

8. Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1903), trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo as “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 20–51.

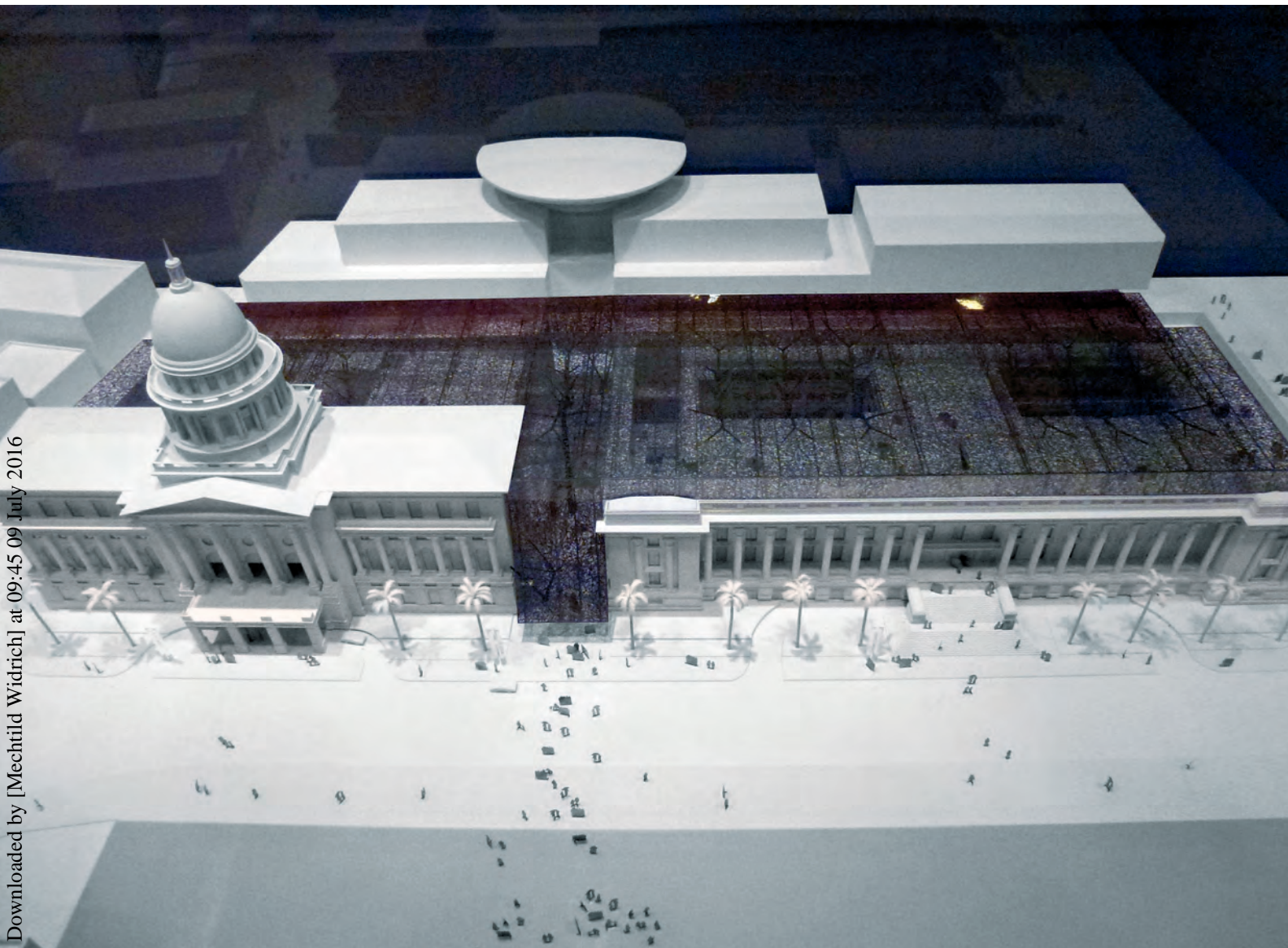
9. See Taylor, 13. In contrast with usage in the United States, regional is a more inclusive category than national in Singapore and Southeast Asia generally.

10. “A veil draped over the buildings, a gentle wave of light.” Jean François Milou and Suzanne Ogge, “The National Art Gallery Singapore, 2015, studioMilou documents” (June 2013, unpublished).  
17. Suzanne Ogge is head of heritage projects at Studio Milou. I thank Studio Milou for providing this material.

11. Milou and Ogge, n.p. I thank Jean François Milou for taking the time to talk to me during the building process in November 2013.
12. Studio Milou, *The National Art Gallery Singapore*, press kit, October 2012, 6. National Art Gallery was the working title, as a brochure from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts attests. It is now opening as the National Gallery Singapore. See Singapore National Heritage Board and Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, eds., *Building the National Art Gallery* (Singapore: n.d. [2012?]), chapter 1, n.p.
13. In a 2013 e-mail to me, Studio Milou wrote, "I'm not sure you'll find much in the way of references to the Paxton Crystal Palace, and suggest that proposing that there is some layer of 'Britishness' to the whole endeavour may not be the ideal starting point when meeting with a French architect." E-mail from Studio Milou, June 11, 2013. See Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851–1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970). Interestingly, given Milou's veil metaphor, Donald Preziosi, in *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), calls his chapter on the Crystal Palace "The Crystalline Veil" and writes, "The dream of a totally transparent society is, so to speak, the *hijab* (veil) of Europe's modernity" (99).
14. See Marian Pastor Roces, "Crystal Palace Exhibitions," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 50–65, in which she argues that our contemporary mega-exhibitions are comparable to the way a global city was captured under glass in the Crystal Palace. For recent museums using glass and historical structures for framing or reevaluating history, see the Frank Gehry–designed Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto and many of Renzo Piano's projects such as the expansion of the Morgan Library and Museum in New York.
15. See Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). For a contemporary review, see for example, John Ruskin, "Mr. Ruskin's Opinion of the Crystal Palace," *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 6, no. 1 (September 1851): 93.
16. William Blake, "Milton, a Poem in Two Books," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (1808; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 95.
17. Pierre Nora edited a seven-volume series, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, between 1984 and 1992 (Paris: Gallimard). See also Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24. As if to confirm its monumental status from the start, there is a time capsule in the foundation of the Supreme Court building: six newspapers from March 31, 1937, to be unearthed in the year 3000.
18. See Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

columns—which in fact are planted in an empty space in the courtyard."<sup>11</sup> Further, and tellingly, Studio Milou cites a preservationist historical motive for the tree-shaped engineering solution: "As supports, these steel 'trees' will minimize interventions to the historic structures."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the trees connote renewal and progress, as witnesses to a natural cycle, even if it is one in which they do not participate. One cannot help but think of the trees in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, built in 1851 for the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, the first world's fair, in Hyde Park, London.<sup>13</sup> The Crystal Palace is a fitting precursor to contemporary museums, in its technically ambitious presentation of the global consolidation of commerce and entertainment, as is the use of glass to frame, stage, and cover historical buildings in recent museum expansions.<sup>14</sup> It signaled the arrival of Great Britain on the world stage as an export power and not just a military giant, a protagonist of political but above all economic colonialism, at the time when Southeast Asia and the Straits Settlements in particular had become crucial to the success of the colonial venture.<sup>15</sup> The Crystal Palace stood for an accelerated industrialization that presumed not just to overtake nature in its productivity but to make peace with it by offering humans a harmonious environment to inhabit. The trees, found on the grounds prior to building and discussed at length in the contemporary press, were preserved inside the greenhouse-like structure designed by Paxton, a noted engineer of greenhouses. This strategic use of nature could be viewed as a conceptual coup in the era of growing criticism of factories, seen under the rubric of William Blake's "dark satanic mills," with their rampant destruction of landscape and workers.<sup>16</sup> It also points to the entanglement of buildings and sites with strategic uses of their geographical conditions, a tangle of nation and nature that is also significant for Singapore beyond any easily formulated critique of glass, Britishness, and empire. In Singapore, the trees, which have become products of industrialization, are not protected in a greenhouse, but themselves protect the colonial buildings, which, turned into monuments, stand in need of care and preservation.

The tension between the reuse and careful restoration of the buildings is as striking as the question of subjective involvement triggered by the trees—are they reminders of a conflict between industrialization and nature, or props for the reenactment of such conflicts? We can get beyond this apparent impasse between the historical and the actual by attending to the temporal dimension along with the spatial. On one hand, the colonial buildings are used as what the French historian Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire*, sites of political commemoration wherein an entity, geographical, institutional, material, or nonmaterial—that is, constituted through rituals—crystallizes the memory of a particular group or nation.<sup>17</sup> The 1990s witnessed a memory boom that swept both public art projects and academic discourse in Europe and the United States, as anyone familiar with the work of Nora, Françoise Choay, or James E. Young will recognize.<sup>18</sup> This shift contained a thirst for so-called authentic historical experience instead of an abstract history lesson, as well as a critical perspective on the construction of national myth while acknowledging the plurality of its audiences—often the group being addressed, along with a wider local and global public—and creators, both artists and commemorating visitors. The memory boom was accompanied by debates about the abuse of the past, as well as attempts to define ways to commemorate the inglorious parts of one's own history, balancing cathartic exercises,



**Studio Milou, model of the National Gallery Singapore, 2013** (photograph by the author)

19. See Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 5, no. 4 (December 1980): 449–74; and Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

tributes to the victims, and international stagings of penitence. It also meant a shift toward a more functional or even performative engagement with site, seen less as the bearer of transtemporal meaning than as an occasion for visitors, both locals and tourists, to symbolically immerse themselves in history through corporeal engagement.<sup>19</sup> One could talk of the activation of a historically significant place in terms of a more or less prescribed interaction, which seems apropos in a political context as highly organized as Singapore and in images as carefully constructed as those tagged with the #NakedMuseumSG hashtag.

Let us step inside the new museum and see how its spatial layout may correlate to a temporal structure of this complex colonial and national history. While the Singapore Art Museum, according to the director of the collection at the National Gallery, will focus on twenty-first-century artists, the National Gallery will exhibit primarily nineteenth- and twentieth-century works, thus at

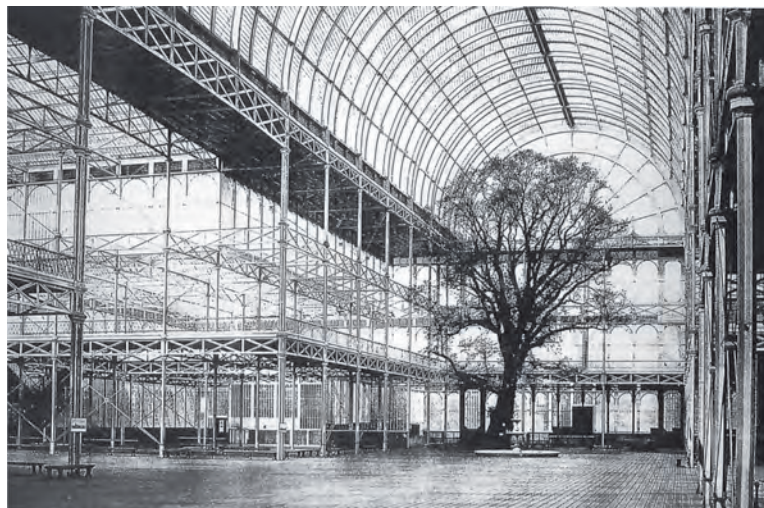


**Level 4M of the Supreme Court Wing, National Gallery Singapore, formerly the Supreme Court Terrace** (photograph © Darren Soh)

**Interior of the National Gallery Singapore, detail of the tree structure, 2015** (photograph by the author)







**Joseph Paxton, The Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, London, 1851** (photograph in the public domain)

least implicitly reflecting narratives of colonialism and national consolidation.<sup>20</sup> The concept is to juxtapose Singaporean art (or Singapore art, as the adjective is usually declined, as if to ward off the image of a monolithic ethnic identity) with art from the Southeast Asian region, which is in turn grouped not around national boundaries but through institutional and identity-political categories.<sup>21</sup> This might prove an ambitious way to register ambiguities and transcultural transfer, overlap, and cultural hybridity, and we will see how this plays out in the museum's curatorial practice. Yet spatially, a separation will definitely hold: Singapore art will be housed in the architecturally simpler City Hall, whose muted interior decoration can be easily adapted to a modern white cube. The Southeast Asian collection, on the other hand, will be shown in the Supreme Court, with its carefully restored, sumptuous wood paneling and rooms that range from neutral exhibition spaces to historicist backdrops for showcasing art and historical events. This spatial separation makes for a conceptual shift, one that can be read temporally: the historical-looking Supreme Court as the heritage, with the white cube standing for Singapore, which in turn stands for the present, even though the chronology of the works exhibited in the two venues—art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with strong links to the present—overlaps. Before the opening, it is my impression that the Singapore part will show the works of the avant-garde with little restriction or censorship, making the case for a prolific, distinct art scene with a critical attitude, while the Southeast Asian exhibition will illustrate historical encounters that explain the region's politics and history as well as explore works that affected (art) history polemically. These are two distinct art-historical approaches—in fact, the exploration of different conceptual and physical territories—and they might sit uncomfortably with the huge amount of space dedicated to the historical relevance of the buildings: reconstructed holding cells, or the “Chief Justice's chamber,” which includes the original furniture. While this would still leave room not simply for a chronology culminating in the white cube, but also for a potential rooting of Singapore in Southeast Asia, the art of Southeast Asia, thus historically qualified, would be given less agency than symptomatic value. A lot will also depend on the temporary exhibitions, which might allow more flexibility in curatorial strategy.

20. See Bharti Lalwani, “The National Gallery Singapore: A Conversation with Low Sze Wee,” *ASEF Culture 360*, August 14, 2014, at [www.culture360.asef.org/magazine/a-conversation-with-low-sze-wee-about-the-new-national-gallery-singapore/#sthash.KDASHdwj.dpuf](http://www.culture360.asef.org/magazine/a-conversation-with-low-sze-wee-about-the-new-national-gallery-singapore/#sthash.KDASHdwj.dpuf), as of September 3, 2015.

21. Author interview with Low Sze Wee, October 8, 2013.

22. Ministry of Information and the Arts, *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (2000), at [www.nac.gov.sg/naccorp/dam/jcr:defaf681-gbbb-424d-8c77-879093140750](http://www.nac.gov.sg/naccorp/dam/jcr:defaf681-gbbb-424d-8c77-879093140750), as of July 3, 2015. See also Kenneth Paul Tan, *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 3; and K. C. Ho, "The Neighbourhood in the Creative Economy: Policy, Practice and Place in Singapore," *Urban Studies* 46, no. 5/6 (2009): 46, 1187. Ho criticizes the ideological binding of the arts to the economy and argues that in coexistence with this top-down strategy, there is plenty of bottom-up movement.
23. There is a large literature on this periodization, but a classic text that still repays attention, not least because it makes clear the politically contested nature of the concept, is Erwin Panofsky, "Renaissance and Renaissances," *Kenyon Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1944): 201–36. Of course, there have been many Renaissances not concerned with Europe: the American Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance spring to mind. But the role of the Italian Renaissance as a standard for flourishing in the metaphor continues to stand.
24. *Renaissance City Report*.
25. Lily Kong and Brendan Yeoh argue that there was a shift from "systematic amnesia and the erasure of the past" to a reclamation of "Asian roots" in the 1990s as Singapore embraced globalization. Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of a "Nation"* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 131. See also Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space': A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 3 (1993): 342–58. For the official narrative, see Lee Kuan Yew, *From the Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). See also C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–1988* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). An important mid-1990s text from an international architect is Rem Koolhaas, "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis," in *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli, 1995).
26. See Alvin (Peng Hong) Tan, "Managing Monuments and Appraising Attitudes: Singapore's Preservation of Monuments Board (1958–1992)" (master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2010), Annex [appendix] C. This was first proposed in 1974 (Tan, 104–5). I would like to thank Tan for discussing the history of preservation in Singapore with me in November 2013, as well as via e-mail, and for providing a copy of his highly informative thesis. The status of Singapore in regard to history, shopping, and progress in the 1990s is assessed in David Turnbull, "Soc. Culture; Singapore.," in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 227–40.
27. See Tan.

## The Sites

Time and succession are inherent factors for museums, and exhibitions invite us into different temporalities, most often through reflections on their objects. In this case, authentic remnants of different past narratives find themselves together in structure and display, framed and conserved by a glass enclosure. How does this relate to the temporal structure of the museum site and the broader (art) geography of Singapore? In 2005, when the government first announced the use of the two official national monuments for the museum, turning them from their differentiated administrative uses to the common purpose of culture, the decision could only be read in concert with the official branding of Singapore as a creativity-driven economy set in a "Renaissance City."<sup>22</sup> The choice of term is fascinating; Renaissance, a word coined in the nineteenth century as an allegory for the revival of interest in Greek and Roman culture in fifteenth-century Italy, does not just stand for a fruitful collaboration of art and science, of pleasure and progress, obvious concerns of the ministry, but also for the myth of a successful look back—toward Europe in the original usage—which still floats uncomfortably in the background of contemporary appropriations of the term.<sup>23</sup> What kind of look back is being proposed to ensure "active citizens who build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore heartbeat," and how is it connected to a changing attitude toward the spatial structure of the city?<sup>24</sup> Prior to the 1990s, indeed since shortly after the change to self-governance in 1959, Singapore pursued rapid industrialization and urban development, clearing slums and building factories and public housing in a continuous process of what some historians have called "systematic amnesia."<sup>25</sup> The City Hall and Supreme Court became national monuments only in 1992, which is understandable if we consider the role of monuments in a city-state where history as a subject has been, at times, eliminated from the school schedule in favor of the inculcation of moral conduct.<sup>26</sup>

The National Monument Board of Singapore, founded in 1970, did not concern itself with colonial architecture at first, but mostly with religious buildings that were still in use—partly because the government had no wish to inhibit urban development by turning bulky, unused buildings into heritage sites.<sup>27</sup> The shift to valorizing built remnants of British colonialism, such as the original, oft-modified Raffles Hotel—to my knowledge, the first colonial building put under monument status, on March 6, 1978—as important signposts of Singapore history dovetails nicely with the patrimony debates in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. It also corresponds, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century, with Singapore's turn away from industrial development to an economy of culture and technological innovation. To fend off possible misunderstanding about the reuse of colonial architecture: the buildings are icons of the city center, so it may seem inevitable that they would be adapted. My point is not that colonial buildings are used at all—a good portion of art and culture institutions in Singapore are housed in colonial structures—but to draw attention to their centrality in the symbolism of the new museum and their official status as monuments, as well as their unusually careful restoration.

The Singapore Biennale, inaugurated in 2006, has been part of this integrated strategy. The Gillman Barracks are a notable recent addition; the former colonial military complex from the 1930s was turned into gallery spaces in 2012,

with the Centre for Contemporary Art as its intellectual center. It opened in October 2013 under the founding director Ute Meta Bauer in cooperation with Nanyang Technological University, where Bauer was appointed professor in the School of Art, Design and Media.<sup>28</sup> There are as many players in this new art geography as there are sites, with the opening nights at the Gillman Barracks full of art professionals who traveled for the occasion from the broader region, yet only a trickle of daily visitors from the city itself.

The Renaissance Singapore project encompasses an even greater transformation of the urban landscape. It goes hand in hand with the reclamation of land for residential and office space, particularly around the Marina Bay, an extension of the downtown where theaters and event spaces coexist with hotels, casinos, restaurants, and the taming of nature in the Gardens by the Bay. The highly synthetic construction of a nation is present even in this transformation of the environment, with its official national narrative of Asian heritage, a multiethnic society of Chinese, Indian, and Malay descent, pitched against the less hospitable view of Singapore as the home of Western-style aggressive industrialization and ethnic hierarchies.<sup>29</sup> In policy making, the multiracial approach determines ratios on official boards and in the way culture is parsed. Critics claim that there is no room for the considerable and quickly growing number of people with multi-racial identities in Singapore, and too little reflection on the implications of these classifications in the colonial past. To forestall misunderstanding: official discourse rests on multiethnicity, yet it is envisioned as individuals belonging to distinct cultures: much less provision is made for individuals belonging to more than one culture. This two-edged pluralist attitude extends beyond the classification of humans into the way nature is configured; the landscape architecture of the Gardens by the Bay, a park adjacent to the downtown Marina Bay, has been aptly described as a futuristic “sci-fi botany fantasy and botanical super-garden.”<sup>30</sup> The creation culminates in plant-covered supertrees, monumental structures made of concrete and steel that mimic and supersede the function of their name-givers—they cool, collect rain water, and generate solar energy. This ingenious combination of the functions of a nature resort, sculpture garden, and entertainment park in a structure as dense as the nearby urban fabric also raises the theme of an opposition between science and nature, resolved in the victory of science, which need not destroy nature but comes to its aid. Practically, the garden combines political with ecological and entertainment functions, with hefty fees for entering the supertrees or the glass houses—which are cool, not hothouses—giving some credence to complaints that the gardens reflect and enact Singapore’s neoliberal power.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the freely accessible heritage garden with Chinese, Indian, Malay, and colonial sections is a carefully orchestrated narrative of the heritage and history of a “natural” island as a coherent and successful entity. One may be critical of the implied essentialization of ethnic identities in such botanical curating, but the naturalizing of culture goes both ways: if cultures are equated with flora, nature itself is acculturated and impressively shown to be shaped by human culture, in a public installation that dispenses with the for-profit sensationalism of the supertrees.

The rationale of the heritage garden then complicates the symbolic tension that informs the sites of Singapore’s expansion; culture and nature are not the only poles of identity, for between them we can conceive perpendicular tensions

28. I would like to thank Bauer for interviews on various occasions between 2013 and 2014. I also thank the Singapore-based curator June Yap for discussing the situation of contemporary art in the area with me in November 2013. In April 2015, five of the seventeen galleries operating in the barracks shut their Singapore operations. See Deepika Shetty, “Nearly a Third of Gillman Barracks Galleries Have Decided Not to Renew Their Leases,” *Straits Times*, April 11, 2015, at [www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/nearly-a-third-of-gillman-barracks-galleries-have-decided-not-to-renew-their-leases](http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/nearly-a-third-of-gillman-barracks-galleries-have-decided-not-to-renew-their-leases), as of June 25, 2015.

29. See the chapter “A Time of Crisis, a Time of Opportunity (1965–70),” in Tan, 50ff. I would like to thank Yeo Kang Shua of the Singapore University of Technology and Design for discussing the general urban development as well as the current state of preservation in Singapore with me in October 2013.

30. Eng-Beng Lim has elaborated on the entanglement of particular (post)colonial ideas of nature, neoliberalism, and the Gardens by the Bay in the enlightening essay “Future Island,” *Third Text* 28, no. 4–5 (2014): 443–53.

31. *Ibid.*





**Supertrees at the Gardens by the Bay,**  
Singapore (photograph by the author)

**Signage in the Heritage Gardens, Gardens  
by the Bay,** Singapore, 2015 (photograph by the  
author)

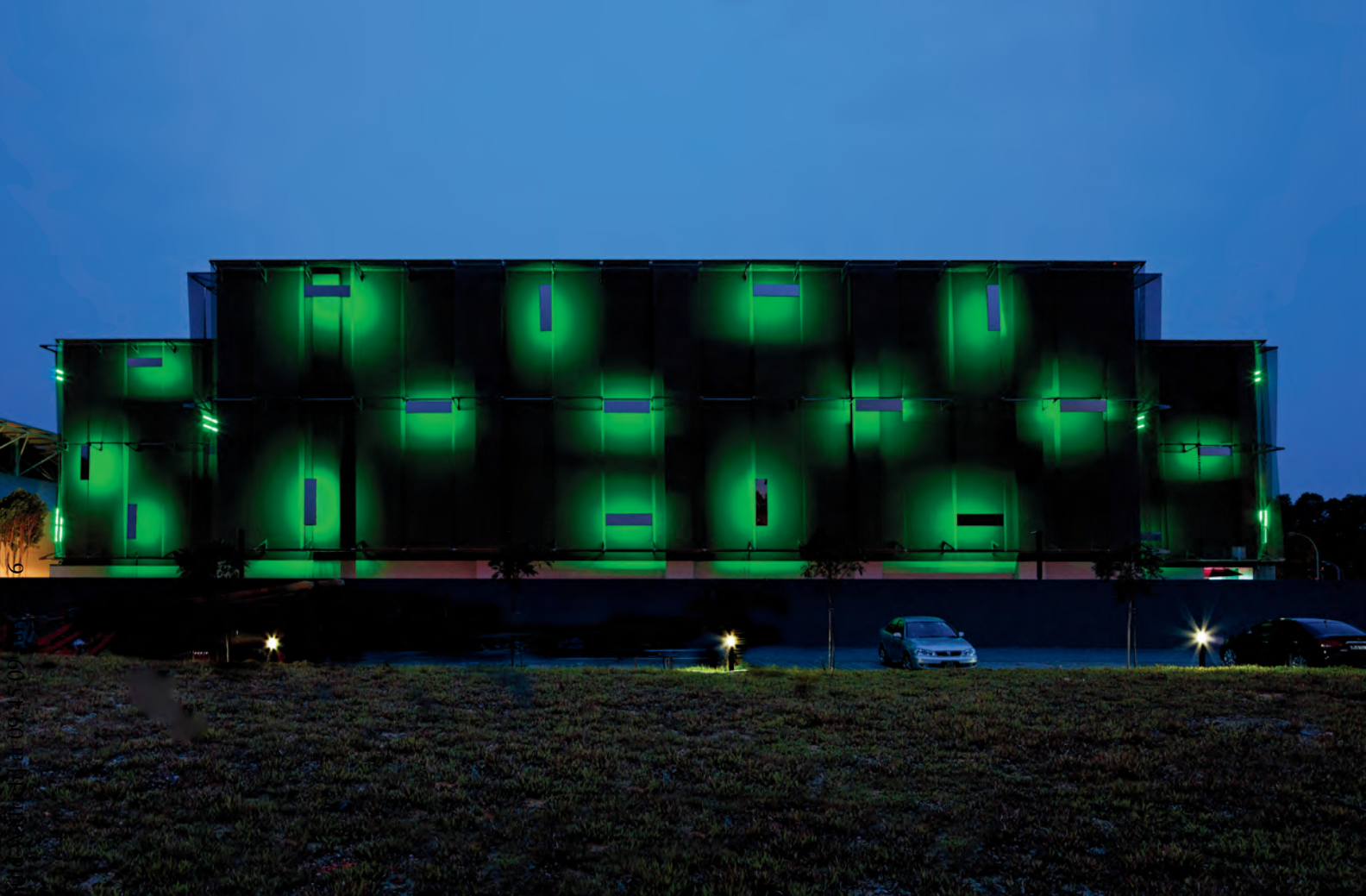
between nation and nature, and nation and culture. Can we find correspondences with the display regime at the National Gallery in these shifts in the actual and symbolic geography of the city? Nora Taylor has observed that the current Singapore art scene “do[es] not need the validation from the West”—it has a relative self-sufficiency whose complement is the focus on regional cultural capital and transfer.<sup>32</sup> Taylor’s assessment is correct, yet at the same time there are layers of global cultural networks at play in the production and reception of Singapore art and of art from elsewhere in Singapore. Even if their influence on art production is easily overstated, especially by Western critics unfamiliar with contemporary Asian art history, they are part of the way culture is being used to secure economic predominance, hence, the broader geographical structure.

A dramatic example of how global positioning inflects the sites of art in Singapore handily sidesteps the thorny, generally irresolvable issue of artistic influence. Adjacent to the airport, the recently built Freeport was funded and is managed by the Swiss art dealer Yves Bouvier and specializes in the confidential, secure storage of art objects and other commodities like wine and diamonds. The building, not coincidentally designed by the Swiss architecture firm Atelier d’Architecture 3BM3, is jacketed with metal curtains, and in the evening, a light installation by the artist-architect Johanna Grawunder gives the building a green glow, which makes it resemble, as a Swiss architecture magazine suggested, precious “gems,” if not indeed the Emerald City of Oz.<sup>33</sup> Imaginary geographies of money and safety and the persistent description of Singapore as the “Switzerland of Southeast Asia” make clear that the result of such exchange of cultural capital is not global interchangeability. Rather, specific stereotyped political attributes of Swissness, such as financial security, are featured as part of Singapore’s own national identity, conveniently interwoven with the connotation of Art Basel as the most important art fair, with international offshoots in Miami and Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup> Success in such a venture does not depend on essentialist fantasies of the uniqueness of a culture, but on a skilled balancing act between the local and

32. Taylor, 8.

33. “Schweizer Superbunker: ‘Graues Wunder’ von Changi wächst,” *Baublatt*, January 13, 2014, at [www.baublatt.ch/aktuelles/schweizer-superbunker-graues-wunder-von-changi-waechst](http://www.baublatt.ch/aktuelles/schweizer-superbunker-graues-wunder-von-changi-waechst), as of July 22, 2015.

34. I hope it is clear from my invocation of Swissness—an echo of Roland Barthes’s *italienité* or Italianness—that it is a fiction of essential national attributes that is at stake here. I am not imputing any such qualities to Bouvier or the artists and architects working with him. It is no accident that the Singapore branch of Le Freeport opened just as Swiss banks faced pressure to disclose information on international tax dodgers, or that its building is far more impressive than the discreet warehouse structures in Geneva or Basel. Cris Prystay makes both these points in “Singapore Bling,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2010, at [www.wsj.com/articles/SB1000142405274870369180457525551995870746](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1000142405274870369180457525551995870746), as of July 22, 2015. The phenomenon of freeports and art is treated more generally in Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux*, February 26, 2015, at [www.e-flux.com/journal/duty-free-art/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/duty-free-art/), as of July 22, 2015.



**Atelier d'Architecture 3BM3, Singapore Freeport, 2010**, with light installation by Johanna Grawunder (photograph by Luca Frascini)

particular on one hand and the distant and general on the other, powered by the international coverage of art-market events that gives such symbolism an audience and a practical economic purpose.

### The Nation

That Singapore, in its art scene, art market, and sites of heritage and tourism, manages to evoke both Europe and Southeast Asia while underlining its exceptionalism as an island state may dismay readers who expect the nation to subside at the hands of multinational corporations and trade agreements.<sup>35</sup> Given the understandable focus in Singapore on regional prestige and global visibility in both rhetoric and planning, it is surprising to see that the sense of it as a nation emerges as strong as ever, and not just in Singapore. The question might be, who is the audience for this intricate mix of local, regional, and global references—the nation's own citizens, or global bystanders and consumers? Useful answers are likely to be specific, rather than sweeping pronouncements about the global art market. Accordingly, the most useful lens for mapping the aesthetic construction of nation in Singapore is the Singapore Biennale—an institution contemporary with the planning of the National Gallery, and often criticized for catering to a global art audience and tourist economy.

35. An internationalist tone has colored Marxist theory from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* to the work of Antonio Negri; it is not just opposition to capital, but capital itself that is supposed to make established forces like the nation melt into air.

Structurally, the complicity with money was conspicuous of the state-initiated biennale in 2006, as its launch was purposely timed with meetings in Singapore of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This resulted in police surveillance and the restriction of public space—demonstrations were not permitted, for example—but also spurred a widely felt need on the part of many participating artists and the international curatorial team to deal with the foreseeable instrumentalization of the biennale by the state and multinational corporations, whose sponsorship of the event played a significant role.<sup>36</sup> The curatorial focus was on site, which some saw as in line with and not a critique of a milieu obsessed with spatial ownership, but it also allowed engagement in the gap between what James Meyer has called the “literal” and the “functional” site, by which Meyer means a discursive formation that is responsive to the history and social life of a place that “may or may not incorporate a physical space.”<sup>37</sup> In Singapore, the gap between the often highly compressed real space of the city and the biennale and the sweeping plans of the administration made for some dramatic encounters.

On one hand, Singapore’s “heritage trails” were included in the biennial program, and historically significant buildings, such as the Armenian Church built in 1835 as the first Christian house of worship on the island, served as venues.<sup>38</sup> This kind of cultural education, aimed at biennale visitors more than at locals familiar with these spaces, might seem to blur the boundary between tourism and site-specific curating, but the geography also served as critique. The New Zealand artist Daniel Malone used the City Hall facade for a reperformance of an act of political humor planned by Abbie Hoffman in Washington, DC, in 1967. As part of antiwar protests against US involvement in Vietnam, protesters marched to the Pentagon, then gathered around to levitate the building through meditation. Malone’s *Steal This Smile!* :) (2006) was not a mere restaging; the title pokes fun at the state-ordered friendliness and restrictive social codes in an act of overaffirmation. Posters were circulated to invite “everyone” to gather at the “Padang fields” to hold hands, reminding them, somewhat casually, that the biennale was part of the Global Cities Initiative that included meetings of the IMF and World Bank “in the same building.”<sup>39</sup> Lee Weng-Choy reports that the volunteers were mostly schoolchildren and that the hand-holding crowd was displaced after several days “by a shiny new metal fence,” before the building closed to the public for the IMF meetings. Reading the two events in temporal succession, Lee adds that “Malone’s work vis-à-vis the fence became one of the more memorable juxtapositions of the biennale.”<sup>40</sup>

Given Lee’s judgment of the effectiveness of Malone’s work together with the ensuing government intervention, we may ask how much of the allusion to Hoffman’s action can such semi-reenactment carry, and to whom was it addressed? As I have argued elsewhere, reperformances tend to rely on the two-dimensional quality of an iconic document that is reenacted, together with narratives and snippets of information that we know about the event, which, with the restaging, creates an ever-evolving work that we accept into our (art-historical) accounts.<sup>41</sup> In Malone’s case, the elevation of an inaccessible building dominated photographs as well as live street viewing of the event. Average citizens rarely entered City Hall and the Supreme Court—the fencing-off of the buildings for the World Bank meeting might have reminded passersby in Singapore of this

36. See Jeannie Tang, “Spectacle’s Politics and the Singapore Biennale,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 3 (December 2007): 365–77; and Pamela M. Lee, “The 2006 Singapore Biennial and the 6th Gwangju Biennale,” *Artforum* 45, no. 3 (November 2006): 289–91.

37. James Meyer “The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,” rep. *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 24. The most important book on site-specificity remains Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

38. Daniel P. S. Goh, “Walking the Global City: The Politics of Rhythm and Memory in Singapore,” *Space and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2014): 16–28. In a 2001 article, Joan Kee points out earlier projects that engaged with the reuse of colonial buildings. Kee, “Envisaging Hollowness in Contemporary Singapore,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 73.

39. Daniel Malone, *Steal This Smile!* :) poster. There was much discussion about the success of the piece. Given the political situation, Daniel P. S. Goh concedes it was “as close to a street protest as it got.” Goh, 23. See also Lee Weng-Choy, “Singapore Biennale 2006: Belief,” *caa reviews*, April 12, 2007, at [www.caareviews.org/reviews/964](http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/964), as of July 10, 2015. The Global Cities Initiative is cosponsored by JPMorgan Chase and the Brookings Institute.

40. Weng-Choy, n.p.

41. See Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014), in particular chapter 1; and Widrich, “Is the ‘Re’ in Re-enactment the ‘Re’ in Re-performance?” in *Performing the Sentence: Research and Teaching in Performative Fine Arts*, ed. Carola Dertnig and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).



**Daniel Malone, *Steal This Smile! Invitation to Participate, 2006***, screenprint on newsprint, 23¼ x 32⅞ in. (59 x 83.6 cm) (artwork © Daniel Malone; photograph provided by the University of Auckland Art Collection)

**Daniel Malone, *Steal This Smile!, 2006***, performance (photograph by Hyeyim Lee)

fact.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, given that the target was not militarism but the corporate control of public life, participants in *Steal This Smile!* :) wore uniform vests with a pictogram on the front and lettering on the back, thus carrying the project's corporate identity on their bodies.

Whatever the net result of Malone's intervention, we should resist the temptation to see the site, and its situated spectators and participants, as a passive context to be activated by an artist, usually from the outside. On the contrary, such projects are interesting and complex to the extent that they exploit the complexity and dynamism of those very sites. In the national imagination, the two great official buildings on the Padang are best known for their dual facade, used as backdrops for graduations and weddings, and featured in historical photographs, the most important perhaps being the capitulation of the Japanese in 1945, staged on the steps of the British administrative building that would become City Hall.

The Padang is also the climax of the National Day Parade and of most official public events in Singapore. Its combination of a large open space and a recognizable, historically significant backdrop is unique in Singapore. The National Gallery's curatorial director Low Sze Wee confirmed this function of the facade to me in an interview. During the Formula One races, he said, the whole world watches; whatever is mounted on the museum's facade, be it a sign for a temporary exhibition, a site-specific project, or mere decoration, is broadcast globally.<sup>43</sup> This state of affairs is not to be dismissed cynically—and generically—as a matter of capitalist expediency immune to artistic reflection. In 2011, the Singaporean artist Amanda Heng relaunched her ongoing project *Singirl* on the internet, supposedly in order to form a collective to participate in the National Day Parade. Started in 2000, the early incarnations of the *Singirl* performance featured the artist greeting the camera in various locales around the city in the not-quite-traditional female dress worn by Singapore Airlines hostesses, which the airline still unabashedly identifies with its advertising ideal of the Singapore Girl.<sup>44</sup> While her street performances deal with gendered stereotypes feeding into Singaporean national identity through the airline's publicity, Heng's *singirl.net* project alludes to representations of the nation in the era of the Naked Museum. Heng invited women into her studio to photograph their naked behinds to celebrate National

42. See T. C. Chang and S. J. Lim, "Geographical Imaginations of 'New Asia Singapore,'" *Geografiska Annaler, Human Geography* 86, no. 3 (2004): 165–85.

43. Author interview with Wee, October 8, 2013.

44. "The epitome of Asian grace and hospitality, the Singapore Girl has been synonymous with Singapore Airlines since her creation in 1972, an enduring symbol of our impeccable service standards—service even other airlines talk about." Singapore Airlines, "Singapore Girl," at [www.singaporeair.com/en\\_UK/flying-with-us/singapore-girl/](http://www.singaporeair.com/en_UK/flying-with-us/singapore-girl/), as of July 30, 2015. The uniform is a formfitting update of the *kebaya* or skirt-and-blouse combination common throughout the region.





**Amanda Heng, *Singirl* online project, 2009–ongoing**, mixed-media installation with online component, installation view, *Amanda Heng: Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, Singapore Art Museum, 2011. Collection of the artist (artwork © Amanda Heng; photograph provided by Singapore Art Museum)

**Amanda Heng, *Singirl*, 2006**, embossed lithograph, 24 x 28 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (61 x 72 cm). Collection of Singapore Art Museum (artwork © Amanda Heng; photograph provided by Singapore Art Museum)



Day. In contrast to the smiling faces on the Padang, the photographs of the bare bottoms, printed in color or monochrome in oval, floral frames, were arranged in a formally brittle hanging at the Singapore Art Museum. The showing of the hidden backside of formal representation was accompanied by interviews in which the artist calmly and politely explained that butts are relevant parts of human bodies.<sup>45</sup> While it may be an overstatement to call *Singirl* a direct reaction to the Padang elevation consisting of the former Supreme Court and City Hall, its indexing to the National Day Parade, however seriously intended, opens a critical space for a discussion of bodily and national identity. Like Heng's earlier performances dedicated to preserving the memory of heritage sites fallen prey to development, the 2011 version of *Singirl* exists in close symbiosis with the monumental identity of the city.

45. See for example, "Bare your butt for art (Amanda Heng The Singirl Pt 1)," video, 5 min. 27 sec., posted by SPH Razor, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-eVW6ocZPmc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-eVW6ocZPmc), as of July 23, 2015. The artist reiterated these concerns in an interview with the author, November 26, 2015.

Heng's and Malone's projects both preceded the opening of the National Gallery, but not its announcement. These projects, with all their contrasts, demonstrate that contemporary national museums, despite having new goals and audiences, are no less engaged in a national project. While in the nineteenth century a national identity was needed to create new national citizens in their new nation-state, national identity is now projected on a global scale.<sup>46</sup> All these elements partake in a dynamic of creating, showing, or altering a site, or rather, as I prefer to look at it, they are part of an art geography that maps the dynamics of local, regional, and global claims on shifting ground. Contemporary artists take on the markers of the narratives, monuments, and monumental representations, showing the back side of development, be it global, regional, national, or local. To succeed in doing this, it does not matter whether the artists are local, regional, or flown in from Berlin or New York for a week. What is relevant is how geographical specificity is brought to bear on artworks, whether it is a superficial analogy with the public space of the Washington Mall in Malone's work, or Heng's more subtle play with the mixture of exoticism and global reach that has been a part of Singaporean policy since long before the Renaissance City. The more interesting work is aware of the multiplicity of audiences at global, regional, national, and local scales, and is transparent in the sense and to the extent that it allows for reflection on and between these various levels, as opposed to a naive confidence either in local particularity or the unimportance of local distinctions.

### Its Nature

These frictions and their thoughtful thematization can be seen in moving from performances and buildings to museum and curatorial programs, even within the art institutions of Singapore, and I am sure they will be visible—possibly even be made visible—in the curatorial decisions at the National Gallery. In Singapore, with its monitored public sphere, ambivalences abound for the informed where things seem perfectly in place at first sight. The National Museum of Singapore on Stamford Road, initially opened under Stamford Raffles with a focus on zoology and biology—a classic instance of the colonial endeavor to justify colonialism scientifically—is now embracing an opulent national historical narrative. Yet the museum's 2013–14 exhibition *A Changed World: Singapore Art 1950s–1970s*, began with a 1967 canvas by the figurative painter Liu Kang depicting the Supreme Court and City Hall bedecked with flags for National Day. The curators, Szan Tan and Daniel Tham, paired the painting with a quote by Benedict Anderson about the constructed nature of nations, given in the form of a definition: “The Nation. It is an imagined political community because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion.”<sup>47</sup>

Is this classic text of postcolonial theory used here out of context to aid in national self-fashioning? Anderson, who also wrote on the role of the museums and their images in the colonial period, is aware of the scope for such affirmative use of his social-constructivist view of national ideology.<sup>48</sup> But in Singapore, with its fine line between affirmation and its subversion through irony, one cannot be sure that critique does not hide between the lines of the most apparently dispassionate definition. For the Singapore Biennale 2013, entitled *If the World Changed*,

46. The relationship between museums and national identity has been the topic of several seminal books and articles. Besides the work of Duncan, Wallach, and Preziosi cited above, see Annie E. Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities,” *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (1988): 57–68; and Sharon J. Macdonald, “Museums, National, Postnational and Transnational Identities,” *Museum and Society* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.

47. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, 2006), 6. The exhibition organizers omitted Anderson's first sentence: “In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” They cite the date of the quote as 1991, the year *Imagined Communities* was reprinted with additional chapters.

48. In the chapter on the dissemination of *Imagined Communities* appended to the 2006 edition, Anderson admits that although his book was enthusiastically received on the Left, it could also take on “royalist” tones in a monarchy like Thailand. Anderson, 224.



**Installation view, *A Changed World: Singapore Art 1950s–1970s***, National Museum Singapore, 2013, with Liu Kang's painting *National Day*, 1967 (photograph by the author)

Erica Lai's *The Old Man and the Sea* (2013) consisted of eighty deadpan photographs “styled by Lai after Romantic works by artists such as Casper (sic) David Friedrich,” sand in jars, and a single-channel video projection.<sup>49</sup> The photographs showed children standing by the marina, symbolically returning to the sea small parcels of reclaimed land on which their schools had been built. Lai is a local artist, well aware of and troubled by the state's hunger for space and the tensions this creates with neighboring countries. Formally, the work oscillates between an ordinary educational project, including research about the buildings and an exhibition of well-behaved children—neither uncommon in the domain of propaganda—and pointed critique. The allusion to German romanticism, which was a reaction to the threat of industrialization and associated with revolutionary utopianism, adds to the bite while seeming innocuous. How should we read these photographs from the various contexts? At first glance, I dismissed them as kitsch, but they work patiently in affective and geographic registers, at least for viewers not versed in Singaporean land-use politics. The content is not just urban planning and the submission of nature, but also, it seems, the difficult labor of activating a critical public, critically engaging with history, and navigating the aesthetics of representation both locally and globally, inside and outside the gallery space. The question of how to write history, and what objects can do this for what audiences, remains central.

How then should we interpret the staging of the architectural past in the new National Gallery? The Crystal Palace effect of the atrium is more than the promise for a harmonious management of Singapore's colonial past: it is a prediction for the harmonious meeting of the challenges facing Singapore, from the instabilities of global markets to the small state's ambition to both exploit and preserve its natural habitat. This does not fit perfectly with the Asian heritage approach, but Asian heritage is itself just one part, albeit an official one, of Singapore's political culture. True, there are less sanguine associations that one

49. Quoted from the wall text at the Singapore Biennial 2013.



**Erica Lai, *The Old Man and the Sea*, 2013**, mixed-media installation, installation view, Singapore Art Museum, 2013 (artwork © Erica Lai; photograph provided by National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board)

50. Terence Lee, "Industrializing Creativity and Innovation," in *Renaissance Singapore?*, 47.

51. Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, 165. In the concluding interview with Richard Serra, the artist seems to resist Foster's suggestion that he handles experience "at a critical remove" (229).

52. Tan, 23.

53. The conflation is famously made in Guy Debord's thirty-fourth aphorism in the 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* [1967]: "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image." (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 24, emphasis in original.

can make between the new Singaporean culture industry and the island's past. In a critical assessment of the recent economic development in Singapore, Terence Lee points out that "the concept of the creative industries has its formal origins in the United Kingdom in 1998 as one aspect of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's economic revitalization strategy, and has since been adopted by many developed countries."<sup>50</sup>

Lee's observation is acute, but I still do not think we should sum up the architectural program in Singapore as a shift from spatial environment to its global image, the loss of space to commercial surface. Glass, which features so prominently in the appearance but also in the very structure of the new museum, is metaphorically apt for such a narrative of the fall from reality to appearance, given its well-rehearsed history as a medium of consumption and commodity fetishism. In this spirit, we may return to Hal Foster's demand for "a layering, not a collapsing, of different spatialities and subjectivities, in a way that allows the complexity of experience to be sensuously retained."<sup>51</sup> Foster's criticism of the new glass architecture is quite compatible with the criticism of the way heritage is managed from above in Singapore, turning the past, as the historian Alvin Tan charges in his carefully researched but unfortunately unpublished master's thesis, "into a commodity intended for mass consumption."<sup>52</sup> But while complexity is certainly to be preferred to flattening, I want to point out the problematic conflation of commodity status with the image, whether it be the image of public life staged behind a glass facade or the photographic image of star architecture floating free from its site.<sup>53</sup> If this study of the reception of the space and the history

of the Padang, both in the National Gallery and the work of artists independent of the Singaporean state, has shown anything, I want to affirm, against the puritanical criticism of all images moving through time and space as culture-industrial commodities, that an image can give rise to interaction as much as a physical object, and can be as flexible in its use. In Singapore, the use of glass makes the two buildings into a stage and a monument at the same time, a mediator between action in the present—the museum with its users—and political history. Glass has played a crucial role in modernist discourse since the Bauhaus, but in Singapore, where it is interspersed with aluminum rods to control the climate and light levels, it diffuses and becomes reflective. Its appearance accords well with the work of theorists such as Anthony Vidler, who have accused modernists of developing a myth of transparency that ignores the ambivalence of the material.<sup>54</sup> Put briefly, glass can, and in fact always does, offer more than capitalist reification or utopian candor. Glass is transparent, but it also frames and limits our view; it mediates and controls access between an institution and its outside. Glass can showcase or mask a historic structure, and it can give us space or block our access to it. Above all, it must always be considered in relation to its environment and as both a material in itself and a transitive frame, a surface through which we see other things. What we see through the glass in Singapore is literally the refurbished colonial courthouse and city hall linked into one structure—not a piece of conscious historicism or architectural program but a piece of Singapore's history, framed and up for debate in the embodied structure of the museum as much as in artworks like Malone's or, more incisively, Heng's and Lai's.<sup>55</sup> The national in the National Gallery will continue to be debated, probably inside the institutional administration as much as outside, through exhibition programs and future artistic interventions, and even though the plurality of its geographic scales—local, regional, global—will cause friction with the concept of national identity, it will play a substantial part in making that identity aesthetically concrete. In short, the nation asserts itself not only on a local but also on a global scale, and not only through its economic and political power but through the art it brings forth, even when that art is critical of the nation.<sup>56</sup>

The National Gallery Singapore, complete at the time of writing but not yet opened to the public, has not functioned as a museum for a duration that would conclusively show what glass as container and mediator of the past can mean there. Depending on the curatorial program and what artists and audiences make of it, the architecture and the institution could come to function in quite different ways, and it would indeed be surprising if they did not. What we can do is try to think through the temporal and spatial shifts in the way objects and places are conceived and received, reinvented and submerged, made visible and veiled.

Mechtild Widrich is an assistant professor of art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the author of *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester University Press, 2014). Her research focuses on the intersection of art and architecture, on performance, and on global art geographies.

54. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Compare Jose Quetglas, "Perdida de la síntesis: el Pabellón de Mies," *Carrer de la Ciutat* 11 (April 1980), trans. Luis E. Carranza as "Loss of Synthesis: Mies's Pavilion," in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 382–91.

55. One also sees, with an unobstructed view, Norman Foster's new Supreme Court (2002–5), whose unloved, flying-saucer-like tower deserves many of Hal Foster's strictures.

56. I am indebted to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's fascinating account of the porous nature of local, regional, and global dynamics as well as to her fine way of balancing research on the ground with theories of globalization. See Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connections* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).