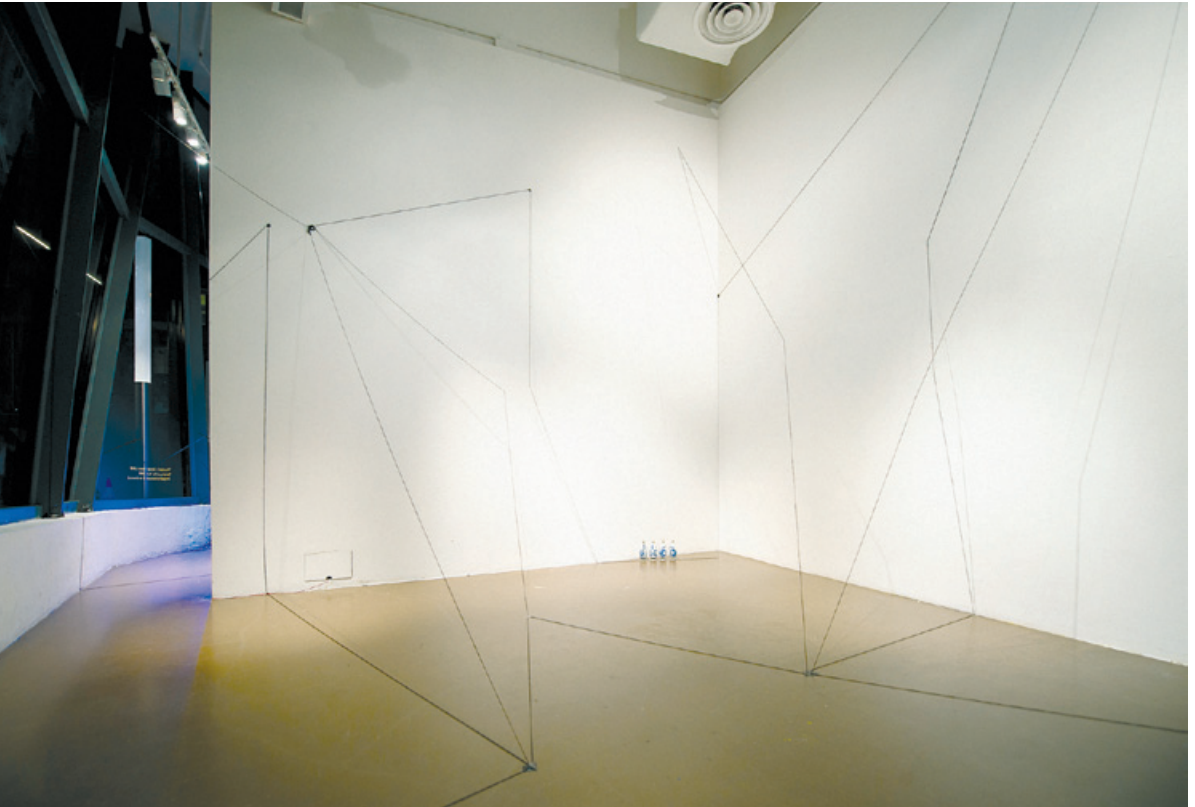


Land(scape), or what is there to see?

Exhibition: ICA Gallery 2, Brother Joseph McNally Gallery,
Praxis Space and Project Space
8 – 15 August 2012

*Before the name: what was the place like before it was named?
(Carter xiii)*



James Yakimicki: *Spatial Deviation*
String on wall, Dimensions variable, 2012

Perhaps one could be allowed a false start - even as one is reminded that the etymological root of "landscape" is less of a viewed object (as in land-scope), than one that is steeped in notions of production and mutual transformation (as in *landscapes*, derived from Old English) ("The Art Seminar" 92). Embodied in the act of looking at any tract of land is a complex mix of overlapping perceptual, psychological, emotional and conceptual registers. These registers can unfold independently of or congruently with each other - which makes the act of looking at land(scape) all the more unsettling.

Modes of looking dominate the experience of modernity, yet one's experience may be augmented and fragmented by non-ocular episodes. Following Martin Jay's schema of "the scopic regime of modernity as a contested terrain" (3), there is perhaps ample value in extending these categories of looking and thinking beyond the visual trope. Such extension and examination of categories of thought may in turn redeem one's false start and initial misapprehension by returning the passive act of looking to a more productive form of action - in thinking about things.



Billy Ward: *M.I.B.B.W.*

Two moving image sequences with one illustration, Dimensions variable, 2012

Of the three modern scopic regimes that have been identified, admittedly in a simplified manner, the most decidedly hegemonic is “Cartesian perspectivalism” (Jay 4). The primary characteristic of such a manner of looking is to confirm (and conform) one’s perception to a pre-existing mental model or representation. This act of conformity must in turn be derived from a symbolic order that is already in place and these perceptual acts further confirm the very same symbolic order as a useful, if not true, representative schema.

The act of naming a place or features of a landscape, such as that traced out by Paul Carter in the early colonial interventions in Australia, can be understood as a variant of “Cartesian perspectivalism”. Naming unfamiliar terrain becomes an attempt to mark what is alien as already-known, hence already-understood (Carter 60). Billy Ward in his work *M.I.B.B.W.*, presented at the Tropical Lab 6 exhibition, seems to perform a similar gesture in the juxtaposition of a hasty, dyslexic scrawl: “Singabore”, alongside two animated / documentary sequences with inter-changed audio channels. The slippage in naming becomes an intentional affirmation of the perception of a place that is verging on being a mistake, while the visually displaced audio tracks are jarring at times, yet cynically and effectively reinforcing the (mis)conception of a banal state of affairs already inscribed.

The ideological underpinning of a preconceived symbolic order in such representations can only be

understood as *necessary* even as that representation seeks to critique the very nature and structure of the symbolic order. This leads to a strange loop of critiques as affirming the very state of affairs being criticised. In Lai Chee Kien’s remarks during the introductory seminar to the Tropical Lab 6 workshop, the notion of a central void – in the form of a vacant site set aside for the purpose of a periodic enactment of shared nationalistic identity – is considered a crucial component in the ideological formation of the (Singapore) nation-state. Such a void could also be understood as akin to the notion of “lack” in the formation of desire and its manifestation. And into such a void or lack, a critique can arise, not as reversal but as affirmation.

In Valérie Wolf Gang’s *Freedom 2.0*, the sense of social and ideological alienation is played out through careful visual choice of materials and reconstructions. Yet, an emerging divergent sense of resistance made possible through the execution of the presented work shows up the very irony embedded in the constraining conditions of freedom – not as the presence of coercion but its absence. The very ideological condition of such symbolic production or representation becomes its very own success – in what is represented, and demise – in what cannot be represented. And in *Freedom 2.0*, one is made aware of the instability of the larger ideological or symbolic order through the actual material configurations being presented – that things can be about something else other than what they are made out to be.



Sina Wittayawiroj: *IML*
 Digital print and animation, Dimensions variable, 2012

Simply Looking At Things (Looking)

Thinking from the viewpoint of “objects”, Graham Harman had surmised:

[...] that insofar as something is present to consciousness, it is merely present-at-hand (vorhanden). But what is present to our minds in this way is only a tiny proportion of the entities with which we are involved. (174)

What can be apprehended sensuously is a facet of an object that does not and cannot exhaust the entire meaning and existence of that same entity. This object-oriented ontology approach brings to mind an alternate scopic regime that Martin Jay described as “suppress[ing] narrative and textual reference in favour of description and visual surface” (12) – or, more than mere description, favouring an autonomy given over to the existence and insistence of (collection of) things. Muhammad Akbar’s *1000 Singapore’s Cigarette Butts* and James Yakimicki’s *Spatial Deviation* are such curious objects in themselves – the former as a Quixotic attempt to record, order and present, literally, a larger-than-life reality of cigarette butts; while the latter activates the intangible spatial relationships of things, space and thoughts by means of a barely-visible thread that shifts in and out of an all-too-fragile human-centered perception.

A slightly different manner of understanding objects can be discerned in Erika Norris’ *The Geographer Library* which hinges upon what cannot be seen as the central conceptual underpinning

of what is seen. The selective removal and paring down of a seemingly coherent collection of magazine images to a few pages of free-standing remnants points to a deep-seated desire to know images as both material and conceptual things. As Charles Merewether pointed to, in his reading of the modernist engagement of the notion of “land” through the technological advancement of aerial photography (with the increasing circulation of a disembodied view-point of large areas of land), the development of abstraction could then be realised not as detachment from reality but as a renewed means of perceiving and, hence, understanding reality. This desire of knowing is made possible by what can be seen (presently), which in turn is determined and driven by what is not seen.

Charles Lim in his introductory seminar presentation suggested a single-mindedness that drives his projects toward a manner of over-turning commonly accepted norms of discerning categories – sea / land; in / out; above / below; stasis / flow. It is a manner of working, or an ethics of art-making, which seeks to reclaim both literally and metaphorically a suppressed condition that might have been hiding in plain sight all along – or a simultaneous actualisation of the (not)-seen. The notion of “plain sight” is further taken up through Sam Rains’ *it’s kind of like patchwork*, in which one has to constantly switch mental registers between a tangible physicality and an intangible representation that are intimately dependent on each other. The succession of projected digital architectural models in turn elicits pangs of recognition of Singapore’s urban landscape, tinged



Sam Rains: *it's kind of like patchwork*
Video projection, Dimensions variable, 2012

with the recognition that the selected sequence of vantage points, though perfectly plausible, cannot be normally experienced.

The hybrid installations of objects and video projections presented in Jying Tan's *Future Wanderland*, Ika Yulianti's *On The Land* and Alice Theobald's *New Age Lament* bring into sharp relief the ambiguity of the screen as an indeterminate object, as part-thing, part-thought, and – by extension – a tacit reclamation of things as more than thoughts, and perhaps even more necessary than thoughts. This reclamation is not to be confused for a romantic return to a prior or given meaning of things, but a tacit acknowledgment that things are, perhaps, always and already what they are, in their multi-faceted meanings and possibilities, or – despite what they are made out to be – in their singular and distorted clarity. The defiant sense of things asserting a larger existence and meaning can be glimpsed through Lizzy Sampson's *Walking (to find a food source)*; even as the objects are intentionally collected, modified, arranged, aligned, rotated, lifted, piled, scattered, weighted and bounded, they elude any final state of significance in so far as the viewer is concerned. It is as if these things are staring back and saying something else altogether beyond a human-centered intention.

"In every landscape are ongoing dialogues; there are no 'blank slate'; the task is to join the conversation." (Spirn 45.)

In accepting a non-human-centered approach of looking at the world, one might also then accept the world as already teeming with possibilities: a fullness that is not exclusionary but inclusionary and ever-expanding. As such, the productive work to be done is to add to this proliferation and overlapping of meanings, akin to the final schema in Martin Jay's broad account of scopic regimes, that is, "[...] the baroque [connoting] the bizarre and peculiar, traits which are normally disdained by the champions of clarity and transparency of form" (16).

The resultant opacity does not stem from an intention to obscure but from a demarcation of the possibility and limits of thought. It is an admission that it is not possible to know all things; even the familiar can and will become unfamiliar. Both of Minha Park's works, *Praxis of Patriotism* and *08/09*, carry an understated awareness of the complexity of nation and land through the complex prism of identity – the acquisition of language in the former; and the displacement of language in everyday experiences in the latter. Kim Thorton's *Warrior I* performs a similar displacement in its poignant reminder that one's association with a place has significant yet invisible ties to notions of territory, labour and violence. It is an awareness that comes from an unfamiliar encounter of a familiar situation resulting in unequal bursts of sombre recognition and amusing disorientation. It is an after-effect of (not) knowing things.

This echoes Venka Purushothaman's earlier admonishment, in the introductory seminar, to be a foreigner in the internal terrain or land of ourselves, which can be construed as making anew every encounter to the point that assumptions break down and wash over as just a few more things in the larger schema. The ensuing productive work and mutual transformation would return the notion of "land" closer to "scipe". Sina Witayawiroj's *IML*, perhaps comes closest in demanding such a rethink of one's relationship with one's perception of land and the various attempts to represent it. Facing an incessant invitation, by way of an instructional animation, to add to and reconfigure cut-out cardboard pieces of what is already present, one might also face the realisation that there is land ... and then, there is land, depending on how one is looking or doing or not.



Jying Tan: *Future Wanderland*
Video projection, Dimensions variable, 2012

Note

Tropical Lab is an annual international art workshop for students, organised by LASALLE College of the Arts. For the sixth cycle in 2012, the programme started with an introductory seminar (moderated by Adeline Kueh, Senior Lecturer, LASALLE College of the Arts) on 27 July with presentations by Dr Lai Chee Kien (Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore), Dr Charles Merewether (Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts), Charles Lim (Artist and Cinematographer) and Venka Purushothaman (Vice President (Academic) and Provost, LASALLE College of the Arts). This was followed by visits to various venues around Singapore, interspersed with studio work, culminating in an exhibition of artworks (from 8 - 15 August) presented by the following participating artists:

Muhammad Akbar, Adi Brande, Daniel Dallabrida, Hili Greenfeld, Hua Xi Yu, Lydia Keith, Molly Lowe, Natalie Madani, Connor McIntyre, Kassia Ng, Erika Norris, Minha Park, Sam Rains, Lizzy Sampson, Emily Shanahan, Jying Tan, Alice Theobald, Kim Thornton, Tina Tomovic, Ayumi Wakita, Billy Ward, Sina Wittayawiroj, Valérie Wolf Gang, James Yakimicki, Ika Yulianti, Zhu Pei Hong.

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Alice Theobald: *New Age Lament*
Fiber optic plant, paper, shell, video; Dimensions variable, 2012



Erika Norris: *The Geographer's Library*
National Geographic magazine, tape; Dimensions variable, 2012