

## Conversation with Charles Lim

**Charles Lim:** One of the interesting things about water in Singapore is that we're at the equatorial zone, the temperature in the sea is almost the same as the body temperature, so people can stay in the water for a long time without getting hypothermia. If we're in the Western climate, they say it's something like, five minutes, and your life is in danger...

But here, the water has something very embryonic about it. The temperature of the water is sometimes actually warmer than the temperature outside. Life can be sustained for quite a long time in the water, so I was thinking, that could be one start. The gist of the project I'm doing, *SEA STATE*, is to inverse the way we look at water, and in relation to land. To see water as a territory, as a real space where people live, work, there's economy, there's culture, and things like that.

If you look at the land historically, when archaeologists were looking for civilisations around the Riau regions, they went to the centre and they couldn't find any kingdoms, so they thought that these people were...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** Primitive.

**Charles Lim:** But recently they found out that many of the kingdoms are along the coast, in the mangrove swamp. So it's very much coastal based.

The *SEA STATE* project is very simple – when you look at Singapore as an island, you think of the island as a territory, but I was thinking of the idea that the island is actually not the territory, [but] the static space where things don't happen. Everything that happens is in the water, there's a lot more changes there...

People in Singapore can look back at history and see that many things were happening [then], but now they are disconnected from the water because they think nothing is happening there. That's not the case at all. There's a huge industry, shipping, on the water. I think recently, the MPA<sup>1</sup> came up with this campaign, saying that Singaporeans form under 10% of the workforce in the marine industry, so the people in Singapore are disconnected from this world. The world of commerce does not connect to, or relate to the practical life.

The only way we connect with water is, for example, when we go to Sentosa, which is some sort of Disneyland, it's only for leisure.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** Yes, a kind of manufactured experience.

**Charles Lim:** Yes it's only a leisure kind of experience. For me, culture does not happen through leisure completely. It needs some sort of practicality and some sort of work around it, or some kind of utilitarian use.

So the project *SEA STATE* is about reversing the view of Singapore. For *SEA STATE 1 [inside outside]*, I was kind of interested in the coast of Singapore. The coast of Singapore is quite controversial – we have the land reclamation, we have the fence on the north, these are quite politically loaded, ecologically loaded subject matters. When I embarked on the *SEA STATE* project in 2000, there was a lot of self-censorship. I wanted to touch on all these subjects but I didn't want to say "we (Singaporeans) did all these bad things". But at the same time, as an artist I'm not really interested in that.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** Do you see yourself as an artist, though?

**Charles Lim:** There's a part of it that's actually activism. But to me, these things have already happened and we have to accept who we are, and that's what I'm more interested in. Looking at what we are, looking at the present, in a sense, and through that, analysing 'what does it make us?' And instead of thinking of the future, about how we can improve ourselves, I'm not interested in that.

The projects I did before was with tsunamii.net (with artist Woon Tien Wei and scientist Melvin Phua), a lot of it was bordering on activism and institutional critique. It was like we wanted to contain all these big subjects, to say all these things, but in the end the artwork couldn't sustain it. We spent all our time trying to explain the work, trying to find the point. I felt that it was not working. So for *SEA STATE 1*, I wanted to try a new way where I do a very simple act, and through the act, things will open up.

The act is looking in and out of Singapore. Through this rigorous act, I came up with images of buoys. A lot of people see *SEA STATE 1* as the work with the buoys, but it's not about the buoys, it's about the act – the act of being inside and outside. I did it three times, once with the images, which was through me going in and out of the border, and the other one was through the sound the VHF radio sent, which was put in the gallery. It was tuned to the ships that were entering the port of Singapore. Every time the ships enter the port, they have to communicate for permission. And the port will send them a pilot, somebody from the port, who will board the ship and drive the ship into the port of Singapore. It's quite interesting that you hear sounds of people from outside coming in.

The third part of the project was a day before the exhibition, when I was setting up, I was looking at a map and instinctively I just cut the map. To me I felt like that it was a lot more economical, but I kind of like the VHF set. The VHF set added some kind of random real-time element to it, because people in the gallery can interfere with what's going on.

To me, the images feel like a bit of a cop-out, actually...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** The images lure you in...

**Charles Lim:** Images of the buoys right? To me it was a tribute to the Bechers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, with their water tanks... So anyway I just did that because I couldn't come up with any other idea. I mean, I tried to put it up in a crazy way, but yeah, that's the first work I did.

The second work is the one we're talking about for this journal, *as evil disappears*. I always wanted to work on the subject of land reclamation in Singapore.

The tsunamii.net project first started with this thing called SEA-ME-WE2. SEA-ME-WE2 stands for Southeast Asia-Middle East-Western Europe 2. It is the longest cable in the world and it starts from South Korea and goes all the way to Scandinavia. The cable is underwater.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** What does it transmit?

**Charles Lim:** Internet signals. How the SEA STATE project is connected to tsunamii.net is through this SEA-ME-WE2 project. In 1999, around 2000, one day I found out the internet was not working. I was quite frustrated, so I called the internet company and they said the internet was just down. The next day, I did some research, and reports said that the SEA-ME-WE2 had broken. One possible reason was that a ship anchored, and there was a storm, and broke the cable. The second possibility was an earthquake, and the third one was even more interesting - [that] the cable emits some sort of a pulse which attracted some sharks, and the sharks bit and broke it.

We feel that the net is this virtual space that is not connected to the physical ground. There are many media theorists who write about the disembodiment, the flatness, the lack of gender, the lack of race, you can't see what race you are, that there's no discrimination in that space.

We started all these tsunamii projects that were testing the relationship between the physical world and the net. After that, the project stopped and Woon Tien Wei and I started p-10.

Although this was an inciting incident for this tsunamii project, I also wanted to make a project about this. I went out to the sea looking for this cable and I found out that there were many interesting things going on about this cable. There are always funny things going on in the sea in Singapore! That was when I started 'seastories'.

What I find most interesting about 'seastories' is... I have a history of working with the sea, I used to sail. And I've been looking at artists like Tacita Dean and Simon Starling, their works are about the sea. I like their works very much, but the works are very much psychological. They romanticise the sea, and I feel that there is a danger to this line of thought, because one would then see the sea as this infinite space when it really is not. The sea has been mapped out, divided and quantified.

And they always keep saying that man cannot conquer the sea, but when I go in the sea, I don't see that happening. The sea has become a political space, a very dominated space and all sorts of things are going on in there. But it's also become the non-space, but it's actually *not* non-space.

People go out to sea and they always think it's no man's land. There's something quite romantic about it, but the dominant powers of say, the U.S., dominate the sea. And they use the sea to dominate other people...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** In limiting travel, limiting trade...

**Charles Lim:** So I was thinking that I wanted to do something more rigorous. Allan Sekula is making works like that, *Fish Story*... He was in Documenta 11 (Kassel, Germany, 2002). I needed some sort of way in so I thought I should pull out my past stories. When I was learning to sail, the coach used to tell me that if you could sail out to this place in the sea, it's called a seafix... To me it's always represented this place that's really far and a kind of a milestone for me. Now, the seafix has ceased to exist because we have reclaimed the land. It's really incredible. It's like for some *towkay*<sup>2</sup>, to have a Porsche or a Mercedes is the ultimate goal, and then the next day he finds out all the taxis are also Mercedes... And that kind of feeling happened to me.

So I emailed MPA. I wrote an email, I'm a local artist and I'm looking for this seafix and I know it doesn't exist... I was thinking that maybe they still have the seafix, I can take it and use it for an installation. That would be really nice.

Amazingly they wrote back to me, and told me that the seafix has disappeared, has been demolished. It's gone. This is related to reclamation. They showed me pictures of this seafix. When I was a kid, when I looked at the seafix it looked like a robot. Also, they provided me with maps of the area where the seafix was. When I was looking at the maps, I was thinking, what was this thing here – a straight line? So I went out to sea to look for it and I found this thing – it's actually a wall in the sea.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** What's the wall for?

**Charles Lim:** HDB<sup>3</sup> made this wall. They were given this space in the sea, and they made this sign. It's ridiculous. It's like, you take your boat and when you approach the border of Singapore, it becomes The Truman Show...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** But what purpose does it serve?

**Charles Lim:** It's a prime example of demarcation [of property], and people who think land-wise. HDB normally works with land, so when they were given a piece of the sea by the government – to them, they felt the need to demarcate it. So that's what they did.

<sup>1</sup> Maritime and Port Authority, Singapore

<sup>2</sup> Prominent business owner; boss (Hokkien dialect)

**Jessica Rahardjo:** So the wall is only on a single side...

**Charles Lim:** It's a very long wall. For the show, I took people up on the wall. I did a lucky draw and took some people up to see it. So this became a work.

The second one was *inside outside*, my tribute to the Bechers. Then comes the [Pulau] Sejahta project.

Here is the old map, and here is Pulau Sejahta. I've got satellite maps with the islands. What happened is, the island has been reclaimed, and the islands are not reflected in the new maps. So I looked for this island, and I found it. I did more research on these islands and I found out that Singapore has reclaimed and dredged so much that seven islands in the Riau regions disappeared.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** And nobody protested?

**Charles Lim:** Indonesia has banned the sale of sand to Singapore since 2007 because of this. I need to verify the names of the seven islands. Another interesting thing about land reclamation in Singapore is that although there are other countries like Dubai doing crazy stuff, the nature about land reclamation here is cross-border. In a way it's land-moving. Like country-moving...

I also have other thoughts. I received an email... It was from the Manifesta one actually, I was thinking of the process of cleaning. The idea of cleaning and how Singapore is quite obsessed about it. Why we're obsessed about cleaning and why we're afraid of old things. Maybe it's because things don't age very well in Singapore, in the tropics, like biscuits that go *lao hong*<sup>4</sup>. Things will break down and decompose very fast. The idea is we don't like old houses...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** Some kind of aversion to entropy?

**Charles Lim:** We tend to think that there's some kind of disease inside. Perhaps we connect diseases or ill health to some sort of bad experience. We associate old things with bad experiences. We don't like old things because they are historically loaded and it might transfer to us. This is superstition. I'm trying to look at our superstitions from biological...

**Jessica Rahardjo:** From a rational perspective?

**Charles Lim:** I want to see if there's some connection. The idea that we think we cannot modernise Singapore if we have all these things that are breaking down all the time... So we need this space of clean-ness, we associate clean-ness with something that has no history.

It's like when you want to put an artwork in the jungle, it's practically impossible. You need a white

cube. Even artists are guilty of this, in a sense, because we need the clean context. They also talk about that in American history. I'm trying to associate this with the idea of the tropics.

I was thinking that we have this island, and this island is 'evil' (See page 34). The island's history is intertwined with the process of reclamation, and this reclamation process can be seen as a way of cleaning history. Singaporeans are somehow afraid of land which has a history. To them, reclaimed land has no ghosts. There's no problem here as there's no history. The reclamation process is a very comforting thing for us as Singaporeans... And when you look at Robert's [Zhao Renhui's] work, this land can even be romanticised.

**Jessica Rahardjo:** In a way, reclaimed land is an urban utopia.

<sup>3</sup> Housing and Development Board, Singapore

**DANGER**

**PROHIBITED ANCHORAGE AREA**

**HIGH VOLTAGE CABLES**

