

Notes

for

the

Future

Green Zeng:
A Review 2010–2020

I don't know what Green expected from me when he asked me to write an essay for his up-coming artist book. To tell the truth, I first said yes because I could not say no.

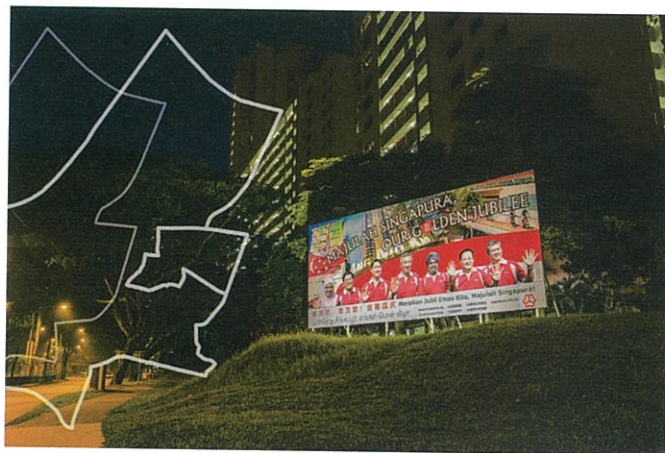
A couple of weeks earlier, he had generously entertained my request to collaborate on a project meant to be my artistic farewell to Singapore after living here for 40 years. The evening turned into a joyful and slightly anarchic burst of creativity, graced by contributions from his wife and work partner, June. It was a dynamic process of true artistic dialogue which I had brought with me from Marseille; and which he acknowledged, upon leaving, as one of the freest and most inspiring moments he had experienced in a long time. That must be why he thought of me for his own project. I was crawling under a long list of things to do, but the time had come to reciprocate.

I was asked to write about the *Shifting Dioramas* series. I remember that one — I was there for the opening at Chan Hampe Galleries in 2016. But the question remained, what to write about it? Especially considering my current state of mental exhaustion. I would have to rely on a trick — create a diversion, take the topic to where it was not meant to be — the surest way to remain mysteriously relevant while hopefully looking insightful. As we all know, it is all about horizon and perspective.

I guess that this is what Green's work is mostly about — using history to put the society and political life of Singapore in perspective, with a cool-headed, factual and analytical approach that engages in commentary while carefully never crossing the thin line of opinion. It so happens that I am not really interested in politics as such. Or rather, I never believe it could ever fulfil its grand idealistic mission, as its dynamic of action is nothing more than the endless interaction of two fundamental concepts that has made the world go round since the dawn of time, both in physical and cultural forms: the Yin and the Yang, the constructive and the destructive, the conservative and the progressive, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Vishnu and Shiva, etc. I am also a stranger in a strange land, a half-baked citizen, a Permanent Resident. As such I am warmly invited to make myself at home and enjoy the Singaporean lifestyle to the fullest, but to also remember never to venture into the internal affairs of this city-port state. So what can I reasonably write about this body of work, the narrative of which is clearly concerned with a defining aspect of the democratic process in Singapore's general elections: the nature of the constituencies whose elected members of parliament in turn elect the prime minister. As suggested by Green's prominent use of the constituency outlines, their configuration is a source of controversy as are the occasional arbitrary amendments made to fit demographic evolution and election data — definitely an out-of-bound topic for the neutral spectator that I am meant to be. I could write about Green's choice to shoot the brightly coloured national day billboards at night, in a

strikingly deserted urban landscape and comment on the artistic effectiveness of this approach in conveying a clear message, yet one that is left to the viewer to articulate. But the message being one of disempowerment, I am better off not dwelling on a topic that insidiously calls for an opinion, and risk departing dangerously from the fundamental neutrality of my status without even realising it.

So, at first sight and as far as my writer's perspective is concerned, *Shifting Dioramas* seems as sterile as the scenery it eloquently represents. Clearly, I need a trick — something to take the topic where it is not expected. A possible change of perspective could be to say that these billboards, so prominently located on major traffic junctions at the entrances of every HDB town, are not that sterile after all? In fact, the reassuring regularity of their rhythmic repetition along roads across the country is a sure way to navigate the city without knowing it too well. Whenever one ventures into an unfamiliar part of the nation, we can rest assured that the billboards will be there, telling us where we are, and welcoming the stranger with a bouquet of smiling faces floating from a cloud of white correctness and an appropriate cultural greeting befitting the time of the year. At last there is a thread to follow. This is when inspiration emerges out of an intuitive moment of remembrance: an insignificant memory recalling a moment of no interest at all, yet one that has remained with me since the early 1980s — waiting in the midday heat for the touring Chingay Parade's cortege of floats, at the junction of Ang Mo Kio Avenues 6 and 5.



I have absolutely no idea why I remember that moment so clearly. I guess that the characteristic sterility of this nondescript HDB town junction and its utter emptiness had left such a strong imprint on me. I now realise that this had also been my subconscious experience on the opening day of *Shifting Dioramas*. That is what I had seen in Green's photos. The Chingay cortege turned out to be a complete non-event but I remember that when trying to locate its route on a map, I noticed how it followed a rather complex itinerary in order to bring its vacuity around the country. This memory in turn recalled my experiences of travelling around Singapore sitting with the devotees of my brotherhood on the back of a truck during the Nine Emperor Gods Festival. Our itinerary was equally zigzagging, up and down, north and south, south and west, round and round. In fact, these twists and turns in and around the restricted space of Singapore feel as irrational and meandering as some of the most twisted GRC boundaries.

A sure way to change perspective might be then to see these shapes as itineraries, the poetical outlines of journeys to nowhere, around which is built local political life. This in turn makes me think of the inevitable meandering I end up doing whenever I try to go to a new place in Singapore — by first looking at the map and then mostly relying on my sense of direction. I normally have a rather good sense of direction. I can arrive in a new city and within a couple of days know how to move around it. But Singapore is a totally different story. I realised at an early stage of my life here that I inexplicably end up lost when driving around. The only explanation I could come up with eventually was the monotonous uniformity of the urban planning, especially in the 80s-90s when the new towns had yet to define their respective characters. But it does not quite explain why it feels at times like a disorientating drawing of architectural wonderment by Herschel. As I am rather good at producing twisted itineraries when trying to go somewhere by losing my way, at some point I realised that these patterns were reminiscent of the results produced by a successful situationist *dérive*. Guy Debord devised a powerful exercise in existential consciousness in the 1960s as a practice to help change how one relates to the everyday environment. If done correctly, it produces the most irrational, senseless patterns as a form of perceptual practice in a city space. So irrational and senseless are these patterns, that one is tempted to focus on the way they reproduce to perfection the shapes of the most bizarre constituencies, a rather surprising conclusion.

The closing epiphany thus consists in the mind-blowing realisation that the unexplainable complexity of the circumvolutions of some GRC boundaries can only reflect the secret meanderings of expert situationists!

Who would have guessed... hidden deep in the Singaporean political machinery, there must be a situationist office in charge of election *dérives*!

Now what? A revolution?

Hope Green likes this unexpected insight of mine.