

# Parergon

Over thirty years ago I discovered Southeast Asia, for an equatorial Christmas and New Year. Prior to this I had been traversing the expected Australian traveller destinations – Great Britain, Europe and North America. After my first visit to Singapore in 1988, I returned to live there in 1990. Numerous colleagues, and others, declared this bizarre, not only in Singapore but elsewhere. Why would you want to live *there*? In 1986 I had been asked would I travel to Southeast Asia, to which I replied, why would I want to do *that*?

In 1990 I stayed with a Eurasian family in a post-war, airless walkup-HDB (Housing Development Board) apartment in Lloyd Road, close to the shopping nirvana of Orchard Road, around the corner from the nation's founding-father Prime Minister Harry Lee Kuan Yew's Oxley Road house at one end, guarded around the clock by ever-watchful Gurkhas, and at the other, the historic Killiney Road Kopitiam founded by Ah-gong in 1919, staffed by (at the youngest) octagenarian Cantonese daily astonished at the audacity of this *gweilo* sauntering in for *kopi* and *kaya* toast. The family's absent father had served as the head of Singapore's post-independence Civil Service, during which time, as Minister for the Interior, he assisted in setting up the Singapore Army and the intelligence unit. My next door neighbour was an emerging Chinese fashion photographer, whose future wife was a model and rising pop star (friends for the duration of my stay and since, and sufferers of *my* photography).

My time in Singapore, living as an artist, was bookended by attending the Australian and Turkish governments' 75th Anniversary Commemoration of the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign as a member of the International Press Corps, Australian Media Serial No. 016 (a poor impersonation of Dennis Hopper with a necklace of half a dozen cameras), and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, at which 'Singapore International' all but shut down (then, at my third and last interview for a senior position with Singapore's premier advertising agency). Every two weeks I presented myself, amongst an assemblage of regionals as the only *gweilo* (or, if you like, *ang moh*), at the Immigration Department waiting-room for an extension of my two-week visa (four, if asked felicitously). Questioned each time at the unyielding *gahmen* window how I might financially support myself I held up in one hand my passport and the other a newly minted credit card. *Can!*

After Nassim Road, of mostly embassies and consulates; Lloyd Road; River Valley Road, here living solo, brazen at the time, reinventing an empty apartment into a studio, the kitchen and laundry into a darkroom, the soundtrack: Ryuichi Sakamoto ('Chinsagu No Hana', 'Forbidden Colours'), Lou Reed and John Cale ('Songs for Dreller'); and after Broadrick Road, Katong, towards Changi Airport, like all of Singapore the area historically resonant, viz. the Second World War, with another extended Eurasian family, where I read under a tree in the front garden British journalist Dennis Bloodworth's 1987 encyclopedia if not bible, of post-war Southeast Asian history, culture and politics, *An Eye for the Dragon*, I stayed in Yong Siak Street, Tiong Bahru, a sedate 1920s art deco housing estate constructed by the British colonial authority's Singapore Improvement Trust for the provision of mass public housing. To the natives at the corner *koptiam* I was the *gweilo* staying with the Malayali/Iban family across the road – the entrepreneur husband, the son of a soldier of the INA, the Indian National Army led by Chandra Bose, that rebelled against the British and sided

with the Japanese after the Fall of Singapore in February 1942, ending badly for all; and the wife, an offspring of headhunting tribes from the mountains of western Borneo. After some weeks of making a social mark through my morning ritual of drinking *kopi* and reading *The Straits Times* (despite Singapore's well-known post-independence censorious relationship with print media, then and now, there was something to read in it those days) I was asked by one of the chicken-rice hawkers for an explanation as to my community membership: "*what you do lah?*" The reply of artist was deemed just as absurd as my living with them in their suburban oasis – to which he replied, "*You no work ah!*" The notion of being a *photographic* artist wasn't volunteered.

Singapore in 1990 was slightly less than that envisioned by Paul Theroux in his 1973 book *St. Jack*, an acerbic obituary of the last seedy gasps of colonialism and early days of independence, when traditional life was being rapidly supplanted by the nation-state's striving for, amongst other desires, squeaky-clean, ordered modernity (subsequently made into a clandestinely-produced film with a faux script in 1978, by Hollywood new wave director Peter Bogdanovich). But it was substance for William Gibson's (*Wired* magazine) soon-to-be caustic and infamous 1993 essay, 'Disneyland with the Death Penalty', asserting amongst other sins that the city-state was authoritative, sterile and cultureless, absent of any sense of creativity, authenticity, history and underground culture: the book, the essay and the film sustaining longterm *gahmen* enmity and suppression. Nor was it (quite) yet the hegemonic nation-state of effective rule articulated by Yao Souchou in his books *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity and the State in Southeast Asia* (2001), and *Singapore: The State & the Culture of Excess* (2006). And it had not yet sustained its global city transformation through the Renaissance City Plan whereby the *gahmen* strategically envisioned the promotion of arts and culture to establish Singapore as a global arts city conducive to creative, knowledge-based industries and talent, and to strengthen national identity by nurturing an appreciation of shared heritage. But it was certainly a work in progress, a twenty-four hour building-site (it still is) in a ceaseless marathon transforming an uncongenial past into a perpetual modernization of ever-accumulating monuments of glass and steel, erasing its old world of colonial shophouses and five-foot ways (sheltered walkways), godowns (warehouses), black-and-whites (colonial bungalows), Singlish (a fusion of English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and Tamil) and anything else that represented anti-modernity. Some of that old world consciousness remained though – open-mouthed gawking at my street photography in overt Chinese-only turf, the apogee of which on one occasion saw an arched gob of sputum splattering at my feet in a sunny, dusty Chinatown marketplace, projected by an old man with, apparently, a long memory; and my Tiong Bahru family restraining me from living in an open second floor shophouse flat in Chinatown's infamous Keong Saik Road, fearful at the prospect that I would be diced and stir-fried in one of the secret society-run restaurants amongst the many upstairs brothels, for the simple transgression of my *ang mo* presence. Apparently, unlike the rest of the city-state, and contra Gibson, this red-light district had plenty of underground culture.

Within this *mise en scene* – its citizens constantly focused by Harry LKY's sustained lecturing (hectoring), that "Life is a marathon, without a finish line", that they should work towards long-term national outcomes rather than sprint to short-term personal goals (widely acknowledged as the five Cs: car, cash, credit card, condo[minimum] and concubine) – Singapore was seemingly artless, cultureless. But this was not quite so – the Goethe Institute was one of a few exhibition venues (here, Jimmy Ong, and an exhibition of forgotten Turkish art) complementing persevering colonial cultural assertions through the British Council and Alliance Francaise (here, showing English film director Derek Jarman's 1983 rumination on art, sexuality and identity, *Caravaggio* – assuredly subversive

given that a group of adults were sitting in the dark being entertained by violence, murder and homosexuality, all illegal of course); the occasional empty shop in Orchard Road office towers presenting traditional ink landscapes; Empress Place next to the Singapore River, being a jumble of Chinese furniture shops and an exhibition venue of sorts (here, a performance by Tang Da Wu, an installation by Chandrasekeran; perhaps Goh Ee Choo and Tang Mun Kit); the current National Museum, the original structure reopened after restoration (a Borobudur-like sculpture, again by Chandrasekeran, perhaps also Salleh Japar); LaSalle College of the Arts, founded in 1984 by Joseph McNally (here, surprise at students still in their studios at 6pm on a Friday instead of drinking or playing in a rock band at the union bar); the kampung-sited Artists Village at Sembawang (founded in 1988 by Tang Da Wu, with Vincent Leow and others); The Substation, launched about the time of my exit by influential dramatist and arts activist Kuo Pao Kun; the Singapore Arts Festival (instigated in 1977), and my first sighting of the internationally renowned Japanese butoh dance troupe Sankai Juku, plus a public performance (four years before being banned by the *gahmen*) by Tang Da Wu and Vincent Leow in Raffles Place, both wearing shirts and ties sans trousers, standing in plastic rubbish bins reading aloud articles from *The Straits Times*, a metaphor apparently for Singapore's office culture; and the unassailable, ubiquitous ex-Berkeley University, cricket-loving sage and cultural provocateur Thiagaraja Kanaga Sabapathy, ostensibly the local, if not regional, lone rider historian/academic/educator/curator/writer (still), who mentored my unschooled assertions and quandaries about whatever it was I thought I was doing as an artist in his country, combined with an invitation to talk to his students at the National University of Singapore about, me, photography, Western art? (and who at a later date, given my affinity with all things the region proposed that I must have been born Chinese in another life). Amanda Heng, Zai Kuning, Lee Wen, Simryn Gill, the 5th Passage and others were soon on the horizon.

At the beginning of this cultural odyssey I undertook my first journey post-Gallipoli to Istanbul, then closer to the sombre, grainy, monotone photography of Ara Güler, the 'Eye of Istanbul' (1928-2018) and Orhan Pamuk's evocative *Istanbul—Memories and the City* (2005), than its contemporary Erdoğan/AKP condition. This artless venture bisected Istanbul's first *Biennial* in 1989, and Vasif Kortun's *Production of Cultural Difference* in 1992, his theme synchronously apropos to the 75th Anniversary Commemoration's precarious oscillations of decorum and goodwill. Then, the historic site of Gallipoli was 'sacred turf' to the antipodeans (only), the indigenes still viewed speciously with historical animus. The Istanbul university students who acted as translators did not know their own history (at all, so I became *their* educator and guide for the duration) and challenged our impertinence, as did others; their national demeanour now having sustained a paradigmatic shift, the expressions of which are manifest in Köken Ergun's film *Heroes/Şehitler*, evaluated in this edition. As to Turkey's art and culture nearly three decades later, I refer the reader to the first issue of this journal as a starting point, of Erman Ata Uncu's text, 'The Grey Zone: Censorship Disguised'.

Singapore has developed, especially since the mid-2000s, an infrastructural platform that has set a benchmark for its emulators, such as Hong Kong (a close adherent), Shanghai, and further west, as corporate-state/cultural-tourism mimeos, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. I proposed just over a decade ago that its ambition to create such a dynamic would become, for its art historical and contemporary cultural distinction, an assured regional, if not global, lighthouse. Immersed in the region—living in and through extended research visitations over thirty years, a history of experienced time—has deeply informed this chronicler and partner, of a phenomenal generational evolution and the lead challenger for culture's hearts and minds in the greater Asia-Pacific neighborhood.