



Annual Art Journal 2021

# ISSUE 10 TROPICAL LAB



# SINGAPORE

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**Cover Image**

*Tropical Lab*, by Milenko Prvački, 2021, digital image



ISSUE is an international peer-reviewed art journal focused on exploring issues in contemporary art and culture. This annual publication is an inter- and trans-disciplinary journal that carries a curated set of scholarly articles, essays, interviews and exhibitions on disciplines ranging from contemporary art, design, film, media, performance and cultures.

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## Preface

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The issue of concern in this volume is Tropical Lab, an experimental initiative of LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. An annual residential artist camp, it is inspired by visions of sharing and collaborating over two weeks in the city-state. Brainchild of artist-educator Milenko Prvački, it is an intensive and highly engaging event, bringing together more than 20 student-artists from various internationally renowned art colleges and institutions to engage in a series of workshops, talks and, seminars guided by established international and Singaporean artists. It culminates in an exhibition at LASALLE's Institute of Contemporary Art Singapore.

The significance of Tropical Lab as a real and imaginative space for student-artists, from different cultural backgrounds to research and experiment, is heightened in a highly neoliberal and mediated art world. A world that is increasingly being defined by speed over meditation, finality over process, showcase over deliberation, and price over substance. Artists are invited to discover, collaborate and create regardless of medium, method, and approach. As a Lab (artistic, scientific, social, etc.) it becomes an informal pedagogic space with self-developed outcomes. Amidst this experimental lab, new networks and artistic strains ferment.

Essays in *ISSUE 10* are carefully curated to bring a range of perspectives to ruminate, appraise, and to reflect on the emerging new world/s of art and artist education through an incisive study of Tropical Lab. Readers will discover that there is an intimacy which the writers bring to Tropical Lab whether as an artist, participant, curator, editor or a college president. This intimacy injects profound self-reflexivity, which lends itself to building a community of advocates who believe in new approaches to artist education. The essays have also benefited tremendously from valuable feedback and thoughtful comments from independent peer-reviewers. Finally, this volume is enriched by an engaging interview with the initiator of Tropical Lab plus an exhibition titled *Interdependencies* representing its pivot in these pandemic times.



## Wandering journeys and conversations overheard: Tropical Lab, a prolegomenon on informal arts pedagogies and practices

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### Introduction

Throughout time, artists have expressed an understanding of the world and the immediacy of their lives through travel. The wandering journeys of artists shape the way the world of art is imagined, for they wander beyond physical movement: they wander existentially. A portion of the title 'wandering journeys' inherits a contradiction. Wandering presumes, to a degree, aimless meandering, while a journey is destined to a place or space. Together, they enunciate a dialectic: the artist as an observer and participant of the everyday traversing both spatial and temporal geographies. In some ways, travel enables them to work outside the rational arrangement of institutions as formalised enterprises. Perhaps there is an inner rebellion. To work with institutions and yet not within them is wrought with paradoxes. Travel shapes what artists may become, reaffirming an oft-forgotten principle that art is more than mere visual expression. It is a continuous search for a language to express one's being. While the current condition to travel is vested in social and digital media, at different stages of their travel, artists arrive and depart, enter and exit. They do so to pause and to meet like-minded artists. *In situ*, they learn, explore and deliberate.

The enabling of travel and congregation was seeded through art schools and academies in the last century to inform artist-learning through casual and informal gatherings as conducive zones of free expression and creativity. It was a fundamental place to hone one's criticality and bolster the kinds of stories they wanted told. However, contemporary expressions of travel and congregation are no longer exclusive to arts schools and academies as they have been abundantly embedded within museums, biennales and galleries and as competitive residencies and fellowships to support a growing investment in art. Amidst this broad sweep of a transformation, what kinds of new points of inquiry emerge for the artist? This essay muses on some possibilities through the study of Tropical Lab in Singapore.

### Arts Schools

We know what we are but know not what we may be.  
– *Hamlet*, Act 4 Scene 5, William Shakespeare

Arts schools<sup>1</sup> were founded on the belief that art transforms the individual, the community and society, thereby contributing to a civic and national consciousness. This is located within an Anglo-European philosophy of self-determination and self-realisation expressed most pronouncedly by the philosophical renditions of École des Beaux-Arts (Paris), Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Antwerp) and the Staatliches Bauhaus (Weimar). Across the Atlantic from Europe, named art institutions were established by individual philanthropic, business and educational magnets (Pratt, CalArts, Parsons, etc.), to blend visual and graphic arts to support a fast industrialising America that was responding to a new zeitgeist of contemporary expressions.<sup>2</sup> Asia and its myriad of artistic and creative traditions built the arts around craft, livelihood and sustainable traditions. From Istanbul to Yogyakarta and Baroda to Xi'an, artistic traditions were custodial to enshrining and preserving cultural practices through loyalty, patronage and kinship-based community systems. Modernity through colonialism, as problematic as it was, swept through Asia, instilling a pivot to artistic traditions centred on creative genius, identity formation and self-representation. Postcolonial societies cautiously embraced the potency of modernity as the rise of industrialisation was fast entrenching systems of governance, education, economy, and ways of living.

Through a sense of independence, a commitment to a philosophy of practice, a dose of maverick potency and rich culture of making and doing, arts schools remain bastions of artist journeys and facilitators of creative congregations presenting a broad menu of learning approaches to suit varied interests. They remain intense and sometimes self-inflicting while unlocking creative potential. Two examples emerge.

The Black Mountain College, USA, founded in the 1930s, is a short-lived yet potent art school. A destination space for nomadic artists who resisted increasing bureaucratisation of art and education, it became a site that birthed a new curriculum focused on interdisciplinary and experimental practices and a deep commitment to making.<sup>3</sup> The College functioned for all but 24 years—perhaps it does not matter how long one is around—and ‘graduated’ the likes of choreographer Merce Cunningham, composer John Cage and visual artists Josef Albers, Walter Gropius, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning. Their impact on the avant-garde reverberated throughout the decades and is still felt today.

On the other side of the world, Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts), founded in 1919, is located in Visva-Bharati University. Founded in the thick of British colonisation of India by the family of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, he led it to significance. Located in a remote hamlet, Shantiniketan, in West Bengal, it became a centre for thinking through a postcolonial India. It was critical to formulating a pan-national identity through an innovative new curriculum. The institution resisted the dictate of colonial education and fostered the belief that “education should not be dissociated from life.”<sup>4</sup> Economics Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, an alumnus of the school, expressly shares that “the emphasis here was on self-motivation rather than on discipline, and on fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive excellence” and that artists worldwide, particularly from China, Japan and the Middle East, travelled, resided, taught and created works, studied with faculty and explored new ideas.<sup>5</sup> World-renowned Chinese ink painter Xu

<sup>1</sup> I have pluralised the arts to be encompassing of art, design, media and performance as opposed to the ‘art school’ which historically is credited to fine arts

<sup>2</sup> Madoff, *Art School: Proposition for the 21st Century*

<sup>3</sup> Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*

<sup>4</sup> Visva-Bharati, *Annual Report*, 2013-2014, 1

<sup>5</sup> Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 114-115

Beihong was one of the first visiting artists to Kala Bhavana in the late 1930s to explore a new way of thinking about art through transnational exchanges.<sup>6</sup> The work of teaching faculty and graduates of Kala Bhavana continues to influence how transnational ideas should be central to the curriculum. These include 20th-century luminaries: visual artists Nandalal Bose, K.G. Subramanyam, Jogen Chowdhury, Ramkinkar Baij, film-maker Satyajit Ray and art historian Stella Kramrisch.

<sup>6</sup> Xu, "Discovering my Father Xu Beihong's Experience in Shantiniketan, India."

The two examples above were built upon the belief that artist learning points are dissimilar to conventional science, technology, engineering and mathematics, which builds a seamless progression of acquisitive information, synthesis and application to create an impact on society. However, modernity's cruel play on arts education, predicated on this scientific and universal mode of learning, formalised artists' continuous inquiry into modern-day lifelong learning and creative output into learning outcomes. Despite this, arts and artist education continued its transformation well into the 1990s. Artists' learning points do not progress seamlessly and sequentially but rather through a series of dense and, at times, spontaneous, informal and hybridised experiences with technique and technical skills, material study, exhibition-making, residencies, negotiated situations, walking, observing, recording, critiques, explorations and deductive applications, inquiries and post-inquiries and conversing and storytelling—all leading to developing visual diaries of new languages, practices and ideas informing art.

The rapid decolonisation of the world in the early part of the 20th century left vulnerable postcolonial societies exposed to the unfettered globalisation of their economies, cultures and systems. This bolstered the professionalisation of the arts and broadened the scope of art beyond its essential and intrinsic qualities, requiring it to extrapolate itself into another order—the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> Art, hyper-extended off artists, became custodial concerns of collectors, galleries, curators and events; and, even tradeable through crypto art-financing schemes.

<sup>7</sup> See Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty*, for an incisive study of colonial enterprise and the bureaucratisation of art

Globalisation is a double-edged sword: a contracted artist experience is also amplified with a myriad of new opportunities in fields far beyond self-realisation. Art in the contemporary world is here to stay and is all-encompassing, masterfully permeating through the everyday lives of people. The knowledge base of an emerging artist today is much broader in scope, and s/he has a deeper understanding of the economic spheres within which art finds itself. Yet, if globalisation has rendered artists speechless of their informal and experiential approaches, the arts school then becomes the enclave for them to wrest an alphabet just as a speechless Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* sought to outline the violence inflicted on her.<sup>8</sup> The arts school becomes a research and development site for the production and circulation of new beginnings and meanings while tapping on the new opportunities of the marketplace. Ute Meta Bauer cautiously opines: "Can you discuss the meaning of artistic production within the larger field of culture, or perhaps more precisely, debate what *is* culture today in such a globally expanded field of experience and how art schools have adapted to this fact?"<sup>9</sup> The reality calls for the co-existence of the market (which could potentially determine aesthetics) and the arts school, which continues to drive the discursive meaning-making sphere where the debate is centred.

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*, Act 3, Scene 2

<sup>9</sup> Bauer, "Under Pressure," 222

In an increasingly complex and highly-networked global environment that requires essential artist skills such as exploration, experimentation

and self-discovery, the arts school has had to confront the bureaucratisation of arts education and deal with demands alien to its aesthetic considerations. This is not easy and has forced artists to move out of their studio, move around and rediscover. Gielen views, “mobility and networking are today part of the art world’s doctrine,” requiring artists to disembodiment from the comforts of their studios to discover and create new networks.<sup>10</sup> As a community of artists evolves into a community of artist-scholars, artist-educators and artist-researchers, the arts school of the 21st century is also challenged by practical notions of self-sustainability and employability racing the artist from studio to gallery wall.<sup>11</sup> In response to the bureaucratisation of arts education, self-organised artist residencies, camps and inter/national exchanges have proliferated throughout the world built around collectivism, shared concerns and spaces to create.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Institutional Imagination: Instituting Contemporary Art Minus the Contemporary,” 21

<sup>11</sup> Bauer, “Under Pressure,” 221

<sup>12</sup> Thorne, *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education*

As the dictates of employability and access beckon the sustainable future of artist education, creative cities, as a feature of globalisation emerge. Cities, imbued with a rich portfolio of infrastructures from galleries, museums to performance venues, serve as cultural meeting points with a plethora of events for domestic and international workers and visitors. Arts schools, on the other hand, while sustaining themselves as a mainstay of thought, ideas and creative processes have become an important—almost crucial—talent pipeline for the creative city. Supporting a creative city and living in it are two different ideas. In an attempt to bridge liveability (quantitative and accountable) and art (qualitative and experiential), recent globalisation policy discourses have shifted to creative placemaking. As opportune as it may be, arts schools followed suit. Arts schools either moved away from remote rural and suburban sites and relocated to city centre or became infused into the city’s downtown core (e.g. School of Visual Arts, New York; School of Art Institute of Chicago; Central Saint Martins, London; and LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore). They became intertwined into the ‘soft real estate’ providing vital sustenance to energise the city. While aiding artist education to remain grounded and global and hold vigil to the varied approaches to artistic curricula, artist camps and residencies emerged as responses to creative placemaking. Here, artists no longer had a quiet meditative residency but needed to engage with a pulsating city.

## Lab Notes: Informal Pedagogies and Practices

Through others, we become ourselves.  
– Lev S. Vygotsky<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Vygotsky, “The genesis of higher mental functions”

Earlier I outlined dynamic, non-sequential and hybrid learning approaches of artists, much of which remains informal and self-directed. In a hyper advancing world where creativity is challenged to produce material outcomes, artist camps and residencies have become havens to articulate such nuanced methods of inquiry. But art practices play with ambivalence. They co-opt modernity’s scientific and universal forms of education and globalisation’s creative placemaking into their ambit and even risk being an apologist for venturing into the art marketplace without any sand to their elbows. For art is agnostic to all learning approaches and chooses to co-exist and hybridise the

space of others. Arts schools are not friend or foe to the marketplace, to modernity's pedagogy or globalisation's interests—for art is not. It is in this context that an arts school organises an annual artist camp in Southeast Asia.

Tropical Lab<sup>14</sup> is an art camp organised in an arts school located in the city-state of Singapore, known for its free trade and free movement of multicultural communities over the centuries. It pays homage to the equatorial nature of the island's location: a sleeve north of the equator. The punishing heat and suffocating humidity of the tropics and the shimmering economic wealth of the city-state form a central backdrop to the art camp. Annually, over two weeks, 20 to 25 selected participants<sup>15</sup> gather in Singapore to deliberate on a theme of the day.<sup>16</sup> The approach is technically simple but conceptually complex. The participants are practising artists enrolled or recently graduated from school, generally at the MA/MFA and even PhD level. They have a substantial body of emerging work and a keen sense of the world around them. They are nominated by their respective institutions upon an open call. Each institution can only nominate one participant, sometimes but rarely two, through various internal systems of pre-selection in which the organiser does not participate. Nominations are sent to Singapore for consideration. Selected participants pay a small participation fee while the organisers subsidise participants from the Global South countries. This is key to ensuring a culturally diverse set of artistic practices and learned pedagogies are afforded to presence themselves amidst more dominant methods of artistic traditions and learned pedagogies as valid and appropriate. Participants have to primarily self-fund their travel, while food, accommodation, art materials and local transport are covered by the organiser for the two weeks. They are also provided free studio spaces.

Participants come from all over the world from a range of institutions, and in studying their profiles, they tend to be culturally diverse even in their home institutions. For example, past participants include a Mongolian studying in the USA, a Palestinian studying in Europe and an Australian studying in Vietnam. This transnational diversity is significantly pronounced in the arts school environment, reinforcing my opening remarks regarding the artists' proclivity to traverse spaces and places. While the English language is the primary mode of communication in Tropical Lab, participants bring a rich plethora of formal languages of their cultures, enriching the camp.

Tropical Lab is organised in three interwoven yet parallel tracks that converge: sharing, learning and making.

Sharing entails two parts: A curated one-day seminar comprising papers and talks by invited artists, curators, architects, performers, theorists, scholars, art historians, researchers, etc., laying the ground for exploring the theme of that particular edition of Tropical Lab. It is also an opportune moment to understand the camp's location and the mental, creative and philosophical space within which the participants will work. Following the seminar, an intense sharing of each participants' art practice and creative journey ensues. Part autobiographical and part visual diary, it reveals the deeply held principles, concerns and convictions each artist has, providing a vital node for connectivity with

<sup>14</sup> As an artist-curated endeavour, the term Tropical Lab combines two words: tropical and lab. Tropical may simply refer to the location formed by the interlocking solstices creating the third space at the equator where the meeting point is also a site of change, of a turn, a trope. The second word lab is the short-form of laboratory derived from Latin's 'laboratorium'—a place of labour or work (Online Etymology Dictionary, etymonline.com). The principal combination of the two words portends the possibilities of the arts camp. Milenko Prvački, the initiator, says: "I chose the name Tropical Lab because, I did not want Singapore to be just identified as a very developed metropolitan country/island but a sophisticated playground for experimentation and exploration" (Email to author, 8 Nov 2021).

<sup>15</sup> With the exception of Tropical Lab 2020, 2021, which pivoted to online/digital showcases in response to the global pandemic, Covid-19.

<sup>16</sup> Urban – Non Urban (2005)  
City (2008)  
Local – Global (2009)  
Urban Mythology (2010)  
Masak Masak (2011)  
Land (2012)  
Echo: The Poetics of Translation (2013)  
Port of Call (2014)  
Island (2015)  
Fictive Dreams (2016)  
Citation: Déjà vu (2017)  
Sense (2018)  
Erase (2019)  
Mobilities (2020)  
Interdependencies (2021)

others through their practice and opportunity to be self-reflexive and learn and unlearn through others.

While learning takes place during the sharing track, learning as lived experience is organised through site visits to various types of urban, suburban and rural spaces, events and exhibitions, artist studios and gastronomic explorations. Tropical Lab takes place in LASALLE's McNally campus, a futuristic modernist architectural building notably contrasted by its location. The campus, located in the heart of the arts and civic district bordering downtown's fringe, is nested centrally amid living and functioning cultural and heritage districts, Little India, Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Armenian and Jewish centres. A confluence of multiculturalism confronts the participants as they attempt to steal a conversation between the futuristic building and the heritage districts. Adding to this layer is the introduction of food. Food is akin to 'welcome' in Southeast Asia, but more importantly, a means to build an *esprit de corps* amongst the participants. Each lunch and dinner is carefully curated to provide a complete cultural arch. To learn about food is just as important as consuming it. For instance, food as a tool of affect, particularly in Southeast Asia, stands for hospitality, care and fellowship. The participants undergo a sensory assault of art, culture and heritage, urging them not to merely collect and centralise their learning to themselves but to dis-member their learned experiences from an economy of artistic centralisation to become one with others to learn as a community.

Finally, making. The artist studio that each participant is allocated is a shared space for participants to create their response to the theme. They are encouraged, but often self-motivated, to develop a work or body of work to be individually showcased in an exhibition. The creative process confronts the Lab environment as the making unravels in full view of others. The participants work through all they have collected and experienced, unpacking objects, sites, scenes—photographed, scribbled, and etched in the mind and social media. The intensity of making for these confident artists can be bewildering as they attempt to disassociate their presence as cultural tourists into a distinctive embodied self, located in a different time, place and space. The participants are provided with a modest material fee and have the opportunity to access the college's workshops and equipment where needed. The works range far and wide in method, material and discourse, underscoring Tropical Lab's agnosticism to artmaking processes. In the artist studio, works-in-progress are sighted and critiqued and curated by the director of The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS) into a consummate public finale. The exhibition opens at the end of the camp at the ICAS' main galleries, just as the artists pack and depart. Some travel home, some stay longer in Singapore, some commence an exploration of Southeast Asia. It marks the beginning of a new connected artist collective, a tribe.

Tropical Lab may seem an oasis of informality. However, in unpacking its approach, it is both intense and dense and differs substantively from other residencies and art camps. Instead of taking the most common route of providing studio space and leaving artists to their own trajectories, here the juxtaposition of sharing, learning and making within a period of dislocation, with limited time to scope the living environment, is challenging and life-altering. This is especially so when the participating



artists work within a series of mandates: an exhibitory mandate to create and display; a social mandate to gather, socialise and explore facets of a city-state; a cultural mandate to learn the multicultural dimensions of Singaporean society; a critical mandate to unpack past learned practices and perspectives (theoretical, historical or technical) to formulate the *new*; and, a personal mandate to see and be different. These mandates form the basis for an emerging community of practice, informed by listening and visualising through others and being subjected to extreme scrutiny by others. There is a danger that superficiality or fetishisation of the overall experience can reign supreme, especially when time is of the essence. As such, preconceived ideas and predetermined approaches are kept in check at Tropical Lab through detailed, almost forensic, conversations. Commencing with a sense of informality, the participants soon realise the profound structural opportunities Tropical Lab affords as they are provided with extraordinary access to subject-specific lecturers and tutors to deliberate their findings and impressions.

### ***Sarongs, Gotong-Royong, and New Initiatives***

At some point in the two weeks in Singapore, participants receive a *sarong*—a piece of tubular gender-neutral stitched fabric worn at the waist in Southeast Asia. It is a very affordable daily wear piece that is friendly to the hot and humid weather of the region. The fabric is called many different names, and its manifold manifestations can be seen throughout Asia, Africa and the Pacific islands. The *sarong* is synonymous with *ikat* and *batik* prints<sup>17</sup> and motifs. It bears multiple uses from keeping one modestly covered, keeping warm, cradling a child, carrying goods and many others. Its use-value translates into a signifier of collaboration as traditional communities weave and create together. Collaboration in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore and the larger hinterland is known as *gotong-royong*. It is a participatory strategy that helps individuals and communities to collaborate and help one another. It is an instinctual and existential practice, much of it blurred in the overt valorisation of individual subjectivity in modern society. Collaborations are as much work as fun. Each passing day is configured with activities and movement. It is exhausting and sober but elegantly punctuated with meals transforming into a bounty of joy, humour and discoveries. Here the individual emerges to just *being*, as conversations are re-rendered, becoming leitmotifs of oral histories. This is a feature of *gotong-royong*, which foregrounds horizontal alignments between communities and people—creating fluid movement between ideas, identities and experiences through conversations heard and overheard as they continuously open their borders to invite outsiders from within and without.<sup>18</sup>

*Gotong-royong* for the participants can relieve them of their anxieties around the demand to produce art. It facilitates them to explore and dispense with the centrality of their subjectivity collectively. Ultimately, though participants have collective experiences, they produce individual responses which differs markedly from their taught practices from school, as described by the volume of past participants. Many seek to return to Tropical Lab to recalibrate themselves. It would be possible to read this need to return on two fronts. First, it is a manner of recounting the experience within a congregational framework of folkloric tales, legends, art and anecdotes (e.g. the Tropical King<sup>19</sup>), thereby building

<sup>17</sup> Both *ikat* and *batik* are textile dye techniques practised in the Southeast Asian region

<sup>18</sup> There has been intense study of collaboration as a means of responding to national and global concerns. A signal of this is in the appointment of Indonesian artist collective, RuangRupa as the curators of Documenta Fifteen in 2022

<sup>19</sup> *Prvački* is eponymously called Tropical King

a tradition around Tropical Lab. It is a romantic idea—one that dangerously skirts around nostalgia and novelty antithetical to the Lab's intent to bring new and diverse individuals together. Alternatively, it could be read as the emancipated artist's mind desirous of furthering its repertoire of experiences through renewed participatory activities, inquiries and a sheer desire to meet others. Both remain valid as they speak to the formalisation of that which is informal and experiential.

Some manner of formal activities did emerge. Tropical Lab birthed two new initiatives in the spirit of sharing community practices: Baby Tropical Lab and *ISSUE*. Baby Tropical Lab takes each year's central theme. It develops into a one-week workshop for high school students across Singapore and their art teachers to explore art-making processes through collaborations across schools. Running it for more than five years has brought about students' understanding of resourcefulness and resilience and the artist journey, as evidenced by the annual feedback from the participants. Secondly, in preparing participants to come into the Tropical Lab proper, pre-reading material was provided since 2005. These pre-reading materials melded with the seminar proceedings to become a reflexive, peer-reviewed art journal *ISSUE* since 2010.<sup>20</sup> These have become anchors to this global camp.

It is essential to recall why Tropical Lab warrants study. Its approach to intensive study through informal practices and collaboration is transformational. It awaits scrutiny as a dissertation and now, at best, serves to be a prolegomenon on informal arts pedagogies and practices. While it awaits its turn, it remains of interest to the intrepid artist on a continuous search to emancipate, innovate, diversify ideas, and one who is outright curious.

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<sup>20</sup> As editor of this journal, I have taken part over the years in several seminars of the Lab, met with participants and overheard conversations between and during meals, celebrated their exhibitions and cheered them on. At each turn, I have become more curious to learn of the many different entry points from which participating artists engage with the theme put forth to them.

### **Tropical Lab 15: Interdependencies An Exhibition Tour**

Since 2005, art students from universities in Bandung, Belgrade, New York, Plymouth, Tokyo, and so on, meet each other at LASALLE, to work and live together in Singapore as part of Tropical Lab. An experiment in art education, this two-week intensive art camp was initiated by artist Milenko Prvački. In its establishment, Tropical Lab was informed by the artist's youth experience with art colonies in former Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> Such retreats that Prvački witnessed in his youth share similarities with current artists-in-residence programmes across different geographies. Irrespective of their different models and resources, these initiatives, including Tropical Lab, are driven by common beliefs. Exceptional conditions as in dedicated time, space, and new exchanges with people and places, can play a transformative and long-lasting role in an artist's practice and fulfil a clear function in an art system. Within the histories of art colonies and artists-in-residence programmes, it is not surprising that Tropical Lab is the result of an artist's vision. Artists have often taken a leading role in creating conditions for their peers to produce and display art and generate discourse. This understanding that an artist beyond one's art-making can or should operate at interconnected levels of an art ecology fuelled many of such artists' initiatives.

In a questionnaire, several artists shared that Tropical Lab made them step out of their comfort zones and broadened their perspectives.<sup>2</sup> I can testify to a similar experience curating this survey exhibition of a selection of former participants in the Tropical Lab. When I was invited to embark on this mission, I immediately agreed. I knew that in the nature of a programme such as Tropical Lab that is grounded on exchange, unexpected encounters and connectivities will arise in the process of exhibition-making: encounters that the current pandemic Covid-19 made rare and precious. I was introduced to a diverse group of 25 artists active in the field and selected by Tropical Lab faculty partners.<sup>3</sup> While this framework combined with different Covid-19 provisions in the gallery spaces (no use of headphones, for instance) might feel restrictive, it compelled me to return to the basics of exhibition-making. I had to think carefully about the triangulation between space, artwork, and visitors, patterns of access and mobility, material textures, conditions of lighting, all elements that combined together, give an aesthetic form to an exhibition. I was preoccupied with creating the right setting for each work and optimising its relation with the respective location—whether of fusion or contrast. Most importantly, the diversity of existing and new artworks in this exhibition from large-scale paintings, immersive animation, post-minimalist sculpture, wall drawing, interactive augmented reality and so on, not only paid justice to the wide breadth of contemporary art but made me consider diligently the needs of each artwork and the specific experience it entails.

As an exhibition that celebrated 15 editions of Tropical Lab and preceded the launch of a digital archive and *ISSUE*'s special volume, it asked, I believe, for a moment to ponder on the nature and value of such an artistic exchange. As such, the proposed title *Interdependencies* was less thematic and more reflective. It captured the spirit of togetherness, peer learning, and cross-pollination that defined all the previous editions of Tropical Lab. In times of antagonistic discussions around identity, it is worth returning to Edward Said's understanding of culture as a matter of "interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures."<sup>4</sup> Said rejected the assumption of such things as original ideas and indirectly of what has often been coined in relation to non-Western worlds as derivative works. He saw cultures as always permeable, "the result of appropriations and borrowings, common experiences," a process that has also served expressions of resistance and opposition to dominant structures.

In addition, the notion of 'interdependencies' spoke to the current moment. While the pandemic touched our existence in many different ways and hindered off-screen encounters, it made us all acknowledge our interdependencies as fundamental to art and life. There was no expectation in the selection of the artworks or the development of new projects to directly address the pandemic. And it is precisely the absence of a prescriptive approach that made it possible to observe how in manifold ways the pandemic did influence and permeate artistic production creating overall in the exhibition a sense of a collective experience in tune with the planetary unfolding of current events.

Lastly, the concept of interdependencies played an important role in the layout of the exhibition determining juxtapositions and associations between artistic positions and contexts of reference, as well as endowing each gallery space with a distinct mood. Of course, one might argue this is always the case of any group exhibition, in particular those of a larger size. Yet, when artists are brought together for no other reason or agenda than the quality of their practice as was the case of this exhibition, the differences between artworks tend to be less flattened and the usual search for a common denominator becomes of secondary importance. Each artwork occupies a specific position and can serve as a point of departure for a broader discussion.

As curatorial essays or catalogues often precede the completion of the show, exhibition histories tend to be short of accurate documentation. Led by this consciousness and favored by a leeway of time following the installation of the show, I transposed into a spatial transcript for interested readers, a tour of this exhibition as experienced on site by various groups of visitors.

## McNally Campus

A key aspect of this exhibition was to highlight the special relationship the artists taking part in the Tropical Lab have had with LASALLE's McNally campus, which was an integral part of their exchange, learning and artistic production. As such the exhibition stretched *in situ* across the campus, outside the three galleries: Praxis Space, Project Space, and Brother Joseph McNally. This proposed approach became more convincing during the conversations I conducted with several artists when I was pleasantly surprised that their memories of the campus felt so fresh and vivid even years after their trip to Singapore. In the spirit of interdependence, artworks were integrated within the campus—co-existing with students' activities and making use of the current infrastructure, such as existing screens.

Inside the College's Ngee Ann Kongsi Library, one of the two screens (LED TV monitors) that faces the glass entrance, played James Yakimicki's animated painting; this generated a spontaneous moment of encounter between artwork and passing students (Fig. 1). The cascading effect of the river that cuts through a landscape informed by the artist's visit to Singapore was amplified by the verticality of the screen. Liu Di's sleek and speculative digital video was hosted on a 3M screen at the Creative Cube: a multidisciplinary performance space, catching the attention of both students and the general public because of its location facing a public passageway. Imbued with a futuristic imagery, fashion and choreography, the video animated the campus and spoke to the inherent interdisciplinarity and cross-pollinations in an arts college such as LASALLE (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1  
 James Yakimicki, 2012–*RISING FALL ...* 2021–*CHEWED UP & SPIT OUT(NOTHING MATTERS)*, 2012/2021,  
 oil on stretched linen animation by motion leap, 152.4 x 200.66 cm



Fig.2  
Liu Di, *Pattern*, 2020, high-definition digital video, cinema 4D software, 2:00 mins

From various points in the campus, one would notice a large piece of tarp levitating above the ground, intermittently shaken by gusts of wind, or beginning to buckle under the force of the rain (Fig. 3). This shelter-like structure was hung outdoors in close proximity of the campus amphitheatre stairs where students often socialise, gather for lunch and meetings. The screengrab printed on the tarp was taken by the artist Duy Hoàng on his trip to Singapore in 2017 at a point when the plane was crossing nearby Nha Trang, the artist's hometown. This was the closest the artist has been home in the past two decades which made this personal experience, as suggested by the artwork title *Perigee*, match the intensity and singularity of a celestial event. The suspended tarp conveyed the elusive experience of belonging for those uprooted from "home."

Snippets of conversation punctuated with visceral and onomatopoeic sounds permeated the immediate surrounding area and became more palpable outside the entrance of Brother Joseph McNally Gallery (Fig. 4). Here the two-channel sound installation by Brooke Stamp in collaboration with performer Brian Fuata was literally suspended in mid-air. The attempt to create a psychic communion in times of isolation and distance took the form of a parallel relay communication between the two artists improvising from their respective locations. The sound flew up, shifting the visitors' gaze towards the distinctive campus sky bridge. While the bridge served as a metaphor for this experiment, the nonsensical dialogue acknowledged the difficulties, if not the impossibility of communication in these exceptional times. A sound installation of a different nature, this time linear and cohesive, was hosted in an open-access space. In this quiet and secluded space, beside Creative Cube foyer, visitors could eavesdrop on the conversation between the artist B. Neimeth and her 95-year-old grandmother. Their different, often conflicting views on dating life and gender dynamics marked a generation gap that, nevertheless, was softened by the affectional bond between the two women (Fig. 5).





Fig. 3  
Duy Hoàng, *Perigee*, 2021, print on tarpaulin, ropes, 280 x 448 cm



Fig.4  
Brooke Stamp in collaboration with Brian Fuata, *Psychic Bridge*, 2021,  
two-channel sound installation, 64:00 mins



Fig.5

B. Neimeth, *My little old shrimp woman dried up like a prune*, 2021,  
two-channel sound installation, 23:55 mins; *Erika from the Archive 4*, 1946/2018,  
archival pigment print photograph, 15.24 x 10.79 cm

## Praxis Space

From all three galleries, Praxis Space exuded a contemplative and poetic mood with a constellation of artworks providing a meditation on life, disappearance, and acts of remembrance. Visitors who entered the gallery could step on vinyl showcasing cracks onto the floor (Fig. 6). The work was based on a performance in which the artist Pheng Guan Lee rolled a 700 kg sand and wax ball across a tiled floor that broke during the process. Manipulating the documentation of this past performance into something anew, the artist highlighted that irrespective of technological accuracy and capacity, our memories are malleable and adjustable to fit desired narratives. At the opposite end of the entrance, Homa Shojaie's video proposed another form of reconstruction (Fig. 7). In an epic effort, the artist presented nine different phases of the moon, by editing frame by frame twenty-five seconds of an original video that captured the reflection of the full moon in a pool of water. A Turkish and a Cantonese pop song with a haunting melody, sounds of barking dogs and rippling water accentuated the nocturnal and sentimental tone of this devotional piece to the moon.



Fig.6  
Pheng Guan Lee, *The Spin*, 2021, digital print, 420 x 170 cm



Fig.7  
Homa Shojaie, still from *[15931 moons] (Mehr o Mah / Sun and Moon)*, 2021,  
digital video, 4:55 mins. Courtesy the artist

Tim Bailey's painting on aluminium was in equal manner the result of memories and chance. Informed by the Japanese Zen temple gardens, in particular, Kyoto's 15 stones sand garden (*Ryōan-ji*), and shaped by the interaction of materials between the non-absorbent coating aluminium and paint, this work was a reminder that the unknown is an integral part of life. In its close proximity, Ben Dunn's deceptively simple painting offered a space of observance, an intimate memorial produced in the midst of the pandemic in the United States. Made of wood from diseased trees from forests, the painting's lower curved shape held a dry pigment as an offering to materials that make art possible. High up on the wall, Rattana Salee's brass sculpture is a replica of one of the few remaining columns of the abandoned Windsor Palace in Bangkok. Its destruction speaks of the inevitability of disappearance (Fig. 8).

The long wall of Praxis Space faces the outside, benefiting from natural light and subjecting the works on display to daylight fluctuations. Shuo Yin's diptych produced a confrontational encounter with the viewer (Fig. 9). Blowing up small ID photos over 100 times, the artist conveys the process of othering that many immigrants experience. Through lack of details, the faces become blurred signalling the loss of personhood when one's existence is continuously reduced to simple identity markers, such as nationality or ethnicity.



Fig.8

From LEFT to RIGHT

- Homa Shojaie, *[15931 moons] (Mehr o Mah / Sun and Moon)*, 2021, digital video;  
 Tim Bailey, *Yellah (stones)*, 2021, oil and varnish on coated aluminium, 150 x 100 cm;  
 Ben Dunn, *Untitled*, 2020, wood and pigment, 51 x 42.4 x 3.9 cm;  
 Rattana Salee, *Old Column*, 2017, brass, 36 x 36 x 46 cm





Fig.9  
Shuo Yin, *WA and CA*, 2020, oil on canvas, 231 x 259 cm



Fig.10

From LEFT to RIGHT

James Jack, *Ghosts of Khayalan*, 2021, natural pigments, wax on wall, dimensions variable;  
 Ali Van, *The Mandarins*, 2020–21, glass, old fruit, blood, breath, moon, 2010-x, dimensions variable

Created *in situ*, James Jack's drawing on the wall was a visual diagram of the artist's long-term research on *Khayalan Island* understood as a realm of imagination (Fig. 10). Taking the shape of a fishing net, the drawing generated kinships and preserved memories between people, places, stories, objects convened in this research. An integral part of this entanglement were the drawing's colours produced out of local pigments from different parts of Singapore: Pulau Hantu (Keppel), Queenstown, Redhill and Jalan Bahar, respectively. Keeping this wall drawing company, on a low standing platform that allowed for closer inspection, Ali Van's mesmerising and fragile glass orbs containing different organic materials lay: withered flowers, dry mandarins, ashes, menstrual fluid (Fig. 11). Each orb is a capsule of time, the artist's idiosyncratic diary.



Fig.11  
Ali Van, *The Mandarins*, 2010-x, glass, old fruit, blood, breath, moon, dimensions variable

### **Brother Joseph McNally Gallery**

A constellation of artworks that tested the possibilities of sculpture or responded to climate crisis and colonial histories defined this gallery. Sarah Walker's video directly faced the visitors entering Brother Joseph McNally Gallery (Fig.12). The visitors became, as with the subjects in her film, witnesses to something unknown—a disaster perhaps that faded slowly into the background.



Fig.12

From LEFT to RIGHT

Waret Khunacharoensap, *Who is Sacrificing?* 2021, print on canvas, 60 x 100 cm;

Tromarama, *Stranger*, 2021, 3D printed resin and artwork from LASALLE College of the Arts Collection, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, unknown artist and unknown production year, both 70.5 x 15.5 x 15.5 cm;

Anne-Laure Franchette, *Travaux Temporaires (Temporary Works)*, 2021, plywood and paint, 104 x 58.5 x 170 cm;

Sarah Walker, *Ado (Pillar of Salt)*, 2019, high-definition digital video, 15:00 mins



Fig.13  
Tromarama, *Stranger*, 3D printed resin 70.5 x 15.5 x 15.5 cm

Moving further into the gallery, visitors encountered different approaches to the medium of sculpture. Anne-Laure Franchette investigates vernacular objects built by workers out of leftover materials on construction sites in the post-industrial Swiss city Winterthur. The toolbox in the exhibition was an enlarged replica of one of the transitory structures, a toolbox alongside the painted logo T.T (Travaux Temporaires/Temporary Works), that stands for artist's archive of DIY built structures, tools and materials (Fig. 12). The Bandung trio, Tromarama, were intrigued by an enigmatic work from the LASALLE's collection, a wooden statuette depicting a figure. There is no information recorded in the collection about the author of this work and its year of production. Despite the questionable provenance and its impact on the value of this artwork, the artists put the sculpture under the spotlight. Not only did they display it in the exhibition but they had also created a faithful reproduction with the use of 3D printing that sat next to the "original" (Fig. 13). Waret Khunacharoensap's print on canvas was a representation of a fictional public monument (Fig. 14). *Who is sacrificing?* asks the artist, essentially questioning how Thai monarchy reinforces certain myths through the manipulation of its public image.



Fig.14  
Waret Khunacharoensap, *Who is Sacrificing?* print on canvas, 60 x 100 cm





Fig.15

Marko Stankovic, 2020, 2021, glass, plywood, aluminium, 200 x 220 cm and 40 x 79 x 79 cm

Marko Stankovic's new sculpture was a personal response to the unfolding of events in 2020 in the formal language of postminimalism (Fig. 15). Endowed with design qualities, the sculpture blended in with the wider campus architecture. Set against the built campus environment was the abstracted landscape of Cornwall's coastline landscape explored in Laura Hopes' video (Fig. 16). The area captured by the artist is well-known for deposits of what has been coined "china clay" or *kaolin*. Since its discovery in the 18th century, it has led to the development of a global porcelain industry.



Fig.16  
Laura Hopes, *Lacuna: Colour of Distance*, 2016, high-definition digital video, 4:54 mins



Fig.17

Danielle Dean, *Private Road*, 2020, high-definition digital video, 4:00 mins

Danielle Dean's seductive and deceptive animation, added another perspective on environmental exploitation and gave an impactful aesthetic form to a political narrative. From a picturesque image of the North American forest captured in a 1965 Ford Lincoln "Continental" print ad, the artist 'drove' the viewers further and further into the forest that morphs into a tropical rainforest akin to the Brazilian Amazon. This seamless transition highlighted the invisible ramifications of multinationals and their exploitation of resources (Fig. 17). James Tapsell-Kururangi's discrete stack of posters on the floor was a gesture of resistance and position towards the pressure of high-productivity and its colonial undertones that the artist apprehended during his visit to Singapore. (Fig. 18) The statement in the poster gave voice to contestations and frictions that are inherent in any cultural exchange.

i didn't make anything  
and tried to not repeat the same  
fraught history of colonisation

i'm left with looking back  
at a time where i followed  
my mother's stories

for through these years  
i've thought about our brief time  
and the places you call  
home



Fig.18

James Tapsell-Kururangi, *Untitled*, 2021, text, 42 x 29.7 cm. Courtesy the artist

## Project Space

Project Space was tuned to a more alert rhythm. Set next to each other, two artworks produced between two distant cities, Brooklyn and Jakarta, transposed the shared experience of isolation as brought on by the pandemic. j.p.mot ~~Jean-Pierre Abdelrohman~~ ~~Mot Chen Hadj-Yakop~~ reproduced the experience of confinement in an augmented reality app made using the ceiling of his studio, photogrammetric capture, and blue corn tortillas (Fig. 19). Echoing all the video calls (which were normalised during the pandemic), this augmented reality app defied physical boundaries and teleported the artist into the gallery space. Hariyo Seno Agus Subagyo's video directly captured the experience of alienation and social isolation produced by Covid-19 in Jakarta (Fig. 20).



Fig.19  
j.p.mot Jean-Pierre Abdelrohman Mot Chen Hadj Yakop, *I love hummus*, 2020,  
Augmented Reality app and Maxon Mills Ceiling RM.6, [41.8058° N, 73.5606° W],  
print, 111.76 x 88.9 cm



Fig.20  
Hariyo Seno Agus Subagyo, *Alienation*, 2021, digital video, 1:31 mins



Fig.21

Kay Mei Ling Beadman, *Dress Coded*, 2021, 5 photographs, 87.5 x 58.4 cm. Photographs by Lin Jun Lin

Two other works in this gallery were grounded on biography. Drawing on her Chinese and white English mixed-race identity, Kay Mei Ling Beadman's work is an inquiry into the complexities of identity formation and constructed racial hierarchies. The silver and golden metallic cloaks in the five performative photographs are markers of identity that question the problematic ideas of the 19th-century treatise *Datong Shu* by Kang You Wei. Despite progressive political views, the scholar proposed a eugenic super race of Chinese and white mixedness (Fig 21). Christine Rebet's jarring animation delved into the psyche of her father, a former soldier who fought in the Algerian war. The war which unfolded between 1954-1962 was well-known for its guerrilla warfare and acts of torture. Disrupted figurative imagery, splashes of colour and piercing sounds translated for the screen the trauma of the war (Fig. 22).





Fig.22  
Christine Rebet, *In the Soldier's Head*, 2015, animation, ink on paper, 4:24 mins

The tour ended or could start right here.

Thank you to the artists and everyone who made this exhibition possible:

Tropical Lab:

Milenko Prvački, Founder and Senior Fellow, Office of the President  
Sureni Salgadoe, (Projects), Office of the President

The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS):

Ramesh Narayanan, Manager (Operations)  
Mohammed Redzuan Bin Zemmy, Executive (Exhibitions)  
Sufian Samsiyar, Senior Executive (Exhibitions)

Production (new works):

Jezlyn Tan, Project Manager, Circus Projects

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> "During [Josip Broz] Tito's time, art camps functioned as a refuge from political control. They were isolated, mostly in nature, historical locations or monasteries. Artists from Yugoslavia and international artists will be in residence for one to two weeks and communicate, debate, exchange, experience. I did visit many of them in Počitelj, Mileševo, Ečka, Bečej. I was running Deliblatski Pesak." Milenko Prvački in conversation with the author, September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> This questionnaire was conducted for the Tropical Lab Archive.

<sup>3</sup> The selection of artists for this exhibition was done by faculty members from the following art institutions that partnered with Tropical Lab over the years: Institute Technology of Bandung, Columbia University, Zurich University of the Arts, University of Washington, California Institute of the Arts, Victorian College of the Arts–The University of Melbourne, Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, Pascasarjana Institut Seni Indonesia, Tokyo University of the Arts, Massey University, RMIT, University of Plymouth, University of Arts in Belgrade, Silpakorn University and LASALLE College of the Arts respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Said 261, in Said, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, 1993.

## Social Distance

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*If you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours...*

The tagline of countless motivational posters or staffroom mugs; words perhaps repeated before pulling on the Mickey Mouse hat for a day's work at Disneyland. Despite the queasy overtones, the phrase sticks in my mind as the innocent, authentic exhortation of my father. My father—the inveterate hugger, scooper-up of lost souls, listener, counsellor, feeder, dragger of people on long walks.

My barometric measure of hospitality is calibrated to the weather my father created—the noisy, rambunctious melee into which solitary individuals would be ushered, another chair entering the ring of light, forcing the circle of seats ever further back from the dining table. My mother would eke out the meal and another blinking participant would be made warm in the glow of this generosity. Family legend also describes the way my sister once hissed to my mother that “Daddy has invited back the *whole* orchestra.” This type of largesse so lavishly unleashed is mostly perceived as a forcefield of good intent, a warming welcome, a show of acceptance of those beyond our ken, our kin—a flattening of difference. It is societally valorised to be seen as a ‘good host’ and rare to find a dissenting viewpoint. We have likely all at some time been the subjects of good hosts, felt the hand on our shoulder indicating acceptance, tasted the symbolic water or tea or wine, or broken the bread that signifies reception. We might well have been provided with a bed for the night, and offered company and safety in an unknown land.

The halo of nostalgia accompanying my childhood recollections diminishes with an investigative trawl through personal experiences of being a guest. Viewed both empathetically and retrospectively, the dazzled muteness of those on the receiving end of the ‘guesthood’ bestowed by my father may actually reveal annoyance or an acute discomfort of personal boundaries overstepped or individuality ignored. This threshold of hospitality, of bodies and places and perspectives, is a shifting and mutable territory, and as I revisit similar scenes, I recognise how nuanced and fickle these experiences are, how internally and subjectively such a public exchange is perceived, and how inadequate any universal notion of hospitality was.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 35, 37, 113, 115

Perhaps we ourselves have inhabited that role of the cherished guest, whose gratitude is warmly anticipated by an attentive host, and we have felt that debt of appreciative gestures, correspondence, and gifts?

The weight of this expectation colours and alters the guest's behaviour as they strive to adhere to the cultural, performative and aesthetic expectations germane to 'guesthood'. The labour to maintain the pliancy and bonhomie of this state can be overwhelming and exhausting on both sides, either to scurry to offer relaxation, or to visibly demonstrate the accepted levels of relaxation and to sensibly decode the degrees to which the offer to 'make yourself at home' really pertain.

Despite his own enthusiastic sense of hospitality, another one of my father's maxims, "Fish, friends and family go off after three days," is echoed by Lorenzo Fusi in the text which accompanied the 7th Liverpool Biennale.<sup>2</sup> He describes the temporal problem implicit with many forms of hospitality: the implicit agreement that the guest will, for a short time, excitingly disrupt the equilibrium of the host's domain, and then leave in a timely (three-day) fashion.<sup>3</sup> This time limit would seem to me to be generous to both host and guest, providing a structure around which the rituals and spaces of hospitality can unfold, and the implicit message that the adrenaline required to inhabit this shared liminal space is finite.

So, what about that other guest? The guest who will not conform to unspoken rules, the one who will not leave, who seems not to notice your stifled yawns or the rumbling undercurrent of friction broiling in their wake. We can probably all remember guests such as these, whose innocent gestures, humour or even their apparel can seem designed, over time, specifically to madden and infuriate. The question "How long can you stay?" is charmingly uttered with a strained lilt at the end of the sentence and eyebrows smilingly raised in false accommodation. Overreaching hopes of hospitality and entitled expectancy create a chasm of misaligned intention, which the lingering guest ushers in and illustrates to an almost ecstatic degree of tension. The equal and opposing forces of guest and host each illuminate the other, and the equilibrium presupposed in the paradigmatic model of guest and host shifts dynamically whenever one party shifts to and fro along the spectrum— either failing to meet or exceeding the tacitly pre-agreed expectations existing in either party's head. What it is, to be a guest or a host, and all the vagaries between the possible polarities of these positions will form the multiple perspectives of this piece.

I wanted to draw upon my own experience as an artist to reflect upon hospitality—both given and received—and to then use this example to unfold the metaphor of hospitality into a consideration of the political, social and environmental tropes of hosting and 'guesthood'. I will be using the model of Tropical Lab as a lens through which to unpack artistic notions of 'guesthood', hospitality, and temporary community and to reflect upon the delicate and authentic welcome offered through the structure of the Tropical Lab international artistic residency, established by its host, Milenko Prvački. Tropical Lab is a residency programme which offers an atelier or hosting space within which artists from around the world can create, collaborate and share praxis, a literal laboratory for experimentation, an "annual international art camp for graduate art students" which I attended in 2015. The two-week period for which we artists were invited to make home at LASALLE College of the Arts overstepped the three-day temporal boundary in a manner exercised by countless artists embarking on international residencies. We brought, and were encouraged to bring with us, any tool literally or metaphorically required, our research and practice methodologies,

<sup>2</sup> Fusi, *The Unexpected Guest: Art, Writing and Thinking on hospitality*, 10

<sup>3</sup> Fusi 10. Fusi writes: "According to an old Italian saying, after three days a guest starts to smell of rotten fish. Italians are generally considered to be rather hospitable people, certainly more than most, but this proverb reminds us that even among the friendliest of folk, hospitality has its bounds. Time is clearly one of the yardsticks by which it is measured, perhaps the central one. The presence of a new guest may be welcomed at first precisely because it disrupts the monotony of daily life. Routines and schedules are destabilized, creating a sense of excitement and novelty for the host as well as guest. This temporary 'state of emergency' must be brought to a close relatively quickly, however, to avoid undermining the equilibrium upon which the household is founded. It is down to the guest to recognize when it is time to leave and release the host from his/her duties. Prolonging a stay shifts a mutual agreement built on generosity and gratitude into an altogether different social and psychological realm. An extended visit sets new parameters that highlight the asymmetric relation between the host and guest. After a while (three days, according to the Italian maxim), there can be only feelings of imposition, unease and annoyance. The contract enters a critical phase when the guest is unable or unwilling to leave at all."



Creating work during Tropical Lab with help from Marko Stankovic, University of Belgrade, and Victoria Tan from LASALLE College of the Arts. Photo courtesy of Kay Mei Ling Beadman, City University Hong Kong, 2015

a propensity for porosity, collaboration and participation, as well as a readiness to produce artistic outcomes emerging from this experimental period. The hidden 'baggage' that undoubtedly trailed us around baggage reclaim and the arrival lounge was a certain sense of entitlement and privilege—that we were *invited*.

Singapore struck me, during my time there, as a demonstrably cordial location, vivid with the industrialisation of hospitality, bestowing international largesse as a form of statecraft. From my arrival in Singapore's luxurious Changi Airport, I was then smoothly whisked to the hostel which would house us for our stay. We were welcomed by student ambassadors who soothed our technological anxieties and led us to SIM card purveyors, then fed, watered, welcomed, entertained, sheltered. We were assured, through the internationally industrialised hospitality structures, of our guest status, and our roles as hosted participants was refined through the institutional introductory activities held at LASALLE. Beyond these formalised modes of exchange, however, we were enveloped in the warmth of Milenko Prvački's, the ambassadors', LASALLE's and the wider city's welcome. I was unaware at that time of the *Singapore Kindness Movement*, launched by the Singaporean Tourism Authority, which I first encountered in Irina Aristarkhova's book *Arrested Welcome*.<sup>4</sup> She describes similarly the overwhelming experience of arriving at the airport which, with its orchids, butterfly gardens and swimming pools, seems to be determinedly aiming for the very pinnacle of international air hospitality. She describes the city's state-

<sup>4</sup> Irina Aristarkhova 5; ch. 1

sponsorship of the tourism sector through the Economic Development Board and its goal of becoming the most welcoming international travel hub. She describes too how as a white woman she “benefitted from the racist and imperialist legacies of Singapore’s colonial history as part of the British Commonwealth, as well as from its postcolonial and authoritarian present, when tensions and inequalities around race were being managed by the government from the top down.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 4; ch. 1

When I first arrived in Singapore, in July 2015, it was approaching the 50th anniversary of the city-state’s founding and there were abundant celebration plans afoot. My practice research is usually rooted in a geological, archaeological, historical enquiry and as such, during Tropical Lab I decided to build on previous research into the triangular trade routes of the Atlantic slave trade in the 17th Century. I was intrigued by the implicit role of the East India Company in this trade and their entanglement, through the import and export of cotton and other goods from India, via trading ports such as Singapore, to destinations such as Liverpool and Bristol, where they would then continue their journey to West Africa to be commodities traded in exchange for slaves. Plantations in the Caribbean were then worked by these slaves until the Abolitionist and Slave Uprising movements, whereupon indentured workers or *coolies* would then be brought in from India and China. Singapore was ‘settled’ by the piratical Sir Stamford Raffles on behalf of the East India Company, himself born on a boat off Jamaica, and it seemed to me that the ghostly traces of these trade routes clearly lingered, echoed in the business and busyness of Singapore’s international flight trajectories and shipping channels.

While in Singapore, I became acutely aware of the *lack* of visible history, but also the heritage traces which had been maintained, and preserved. Patrick Wright describes poignantly the view that “heritage is the backward glance taken from the edge of a vividly imagined abyss,”<sup>6</sup> and it seemed to me that Singapore had inverted this western obsession with heritage and had, in the abyss, found its *modus operandi*. My fellow Tropical Lab alumnus, Singaporean Patrick Ong, spoke of how the number of storeys of each building had exponentially grown during his lifetime, each decade doubling, from four to eight to 16 and so on. The lack of nostalgia, my coming from a Britain that is both romanced by and myopically unaware of its own past, was refreshing, yet oddly haunting, as I hunted for any patina that might indicate past lives. At the same time, the throwback vision of the last-remaining *kampong* (traditional village) on the island Pulau Ubin, a “window into Singapore’s past,”<sup>7</sup> and Raffles Hotel Singapore, “a heritage icon, whose storied elegance, compelling history and colourful guest list continues to draw travellers from around the world,”<sup>8</sup> provided a fascia almost more sanitised than the version of Singapore that Resorts World™ Sentosa offers.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *On living in an old country*, 70

<sup>7</sup> SG Passion Made Possible, *Pulau Ubin*

<sup>8</sup> SG Passion Made Possible, *Raffles Hotel Singapore*

It appeared that in the same way that capable hosts provide the most sterile, edited and curated version of their homes for guests to appreciate, so too Singapore was tidying up and repackaging any messy or inconvenient histories into tourism packages.

A bewildering array of over 40 *Passion* tours are available through the official *Visit Singapore* website—focusing on food, action, socialising and ‘culture’. This catch-all term offers insights to the lives, among many, of those in Singapore’s Malay and Jewish communities, Chinatown, the



*Feeling Raffled*. 2015. By Andy Kassier, digital photograph on Dibond, 115 x 175 cm  
Photo: LASALLE College of the Arts

Chinese cemetery, Little India, and more. If I were to undertake the *Unity in Diversity* tour, I would “get a better understanding of the racial mix in Singapore as you learn the different lifestyles and practices of these communities.”<sup>9</sup> This well-meaning sentiment tries hard to offer a glimpse into the complexity of Singapore’s cultural and racial make-up, how these communities co-exist and feed into the global outlook of the nation state. The patchy reality I encountered in the run-up to the 50th anniversary celebrations was disorienting, vibrant and exciting, but troublingly asymmetric in the distribution of wealth. As a casual observer, the inequities woven into the East India Company’s historic ruling structure remained as visible stitches within the patchwork of the city.

<sup>9</sup> SG Passion Made Possible, *Passion Tours*

As part of the Tropical Lab residency, I decided to make a sculptural ‘map’ of this multi-scalar, multi-temporal and multi-spatial web, perhaps a chaotic visualisation redolent of Benjamin Bratton’s theory of “the Stack,”<sup>10</sup> a multidimensional computational model described by cultural theorist Jacob Lund as “the development of planetary-scale computation...which interconnects a number of different layers and facilitates interpenetration between digital and analogue times, and between computational, material and human times—bringing into being a kind of planetary instantaneity in which everyone and everything takes part.”<sup>11</sup> Planetary scale computation would seem to be the material or immaterial equivalent to the East India Company’s trading goods, be they human, mineral or vegetable, and an equivalent too to the globalised transportation of goods as witnessed in Allan Sekula’s *Fish*

<sup>10</sup> ‘The Black Stack’ in *e-flux journal* #53 (March 2014)

<sup>11</sup> 17



Allan Sekula, *The Forgotten Space* (2010). Installation view in *Allan Sekula: Fish Story, To Be Continued*, 3 July–27 September 2015.  
Photo: LASALLE College of the Arts

*Story, To be Continued* which I was able to encounter at NTU CCA (Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art) in Singapore during the residency.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Allan Sekula: Fish Story, To Be Continued* Exhibition Guide

The use of an industrial material redolent of a colonial past such as rubber, with its global history of imperial theft and colonisation of the landscape, seemed an apt vessel to carry these traces of cargo routes, inscribed with ongoing human loss. To source the rubber required—an inch-thick metre square slab, the tools and sacking material to print on—I repeatedly trawled the streets of Little India’s industrial vendors, a tall pale woman walking the humid streets in the midday sun, visibly adrift in this scene. Despite my solitary roaming and dishabituaton in an urban environment, I always felt safe. This is afforded, in part, by Singapore’s famous civic ‘safeness’, of which it is justly proud, a companion to its legendary cleanliness and stringent legislation concerning the disposal of chewing gum. These urban ‘myths’ come to be true for many guests to the city-state, through their repeated tellings and experiences, but just as my children are exhorted to be on their best behaviour when guests arrive, this impression may extend only to certain groups or circumstances. During my long walks around the less pretty areas of Singapore, I knew that while the security, curiosity and hospitality I was experiencing was an incarnation of what I came to know as the Singapore Kindness Movement, I felt, too, a certain privileged entitlement to safety because of who I, as a white woman, was.



I remember as a callow youth spending a year teaching English (rather badly) on an island off the northern coast of the Central American country, Honduras. Ranked as a country with one of the highest murder rates per capita in the world, during that year, I vacillated between being bizarrely nonplussed by the ubiquity of firearms and being horrified by the associated fatalities and injuries among the community of which I had become a part. Throughout that year, despite the incredibly close shaves I encountered and survived, I felt myself insulated from real harm because of a (probably) misplaced confidence in my own importance. Surely these local 'rules' and dangers did not apply to me? Was this the safety promised by the offer of hospitality, or was it my privileged position as a white person, with the scrutiny of the charitable organisation I volunteered with and a powerful national embassy which scaffolded the precarity of my stay? The unevenness of this recollection brings into focus the key differences in expectation between being a guest and being a neighbour. Despite the year-long duration of my stay in Honduras, far in excess of three days, on reflection, I never truly troubled the definition of neighbour, despite superficially fulfilling Aristarkhova's definition, that neighbours are demarcated by "their proximity in space (living near to one another) and time (being together in the same moment)."<sup>13</sup> The temporary condition of my time there was always a given, there was always an end point in sight, akin to that moment of exhalation for a host when a guest leaves, the instance when the guest can resume his or her own routine and ritual. This mutability of time and space, between 'guesthood' and neighbourliness, resonates strongly with my experience of Honduras, and my impressions of Singapore. I strongly recall the lines of guestworkers queuing to return to their home countries as I departed Changi Airport at the end of my stay, this international limbo being something many of us have witnessed at other travel hubs around the world.

<sup>13</sup> Aristarkhova 5; Conclusion

'Guest' is a term that can hide subtle violences: it can connote the idea of being detained, in the UK, 'at her Majesty's pleasure' in a prison institute. The term *gastarbeiter*,<sup>14</sup> which I came across as a German-learning teenager, also withholds the welcome that hospitality might be expected to convey. The term, meaning guest worker, emerged under a policy, which was developed in the 1950s following a series of treaties between Germany and other countries in which migrant workers to Germany were invited with the implicit expectation that when the required work was done, the guest workers would return to their homelands. The imaginative failure lay in Germany's inability to anticipate that the temporary nature of the invitation was not made explicit. Germany's Federal Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble said: "We made a mistake in the early 60s when we decided to look for workers, not qualified workers but cheap workers from abroad. Some people of Turkish origin had lived in Germany for decades and did not speak German."<sup>15</sup> The uneasy accommodation arrived at in this scenario of free(-ish) movement speaks of a failure of hospitality, or what Aristarkhova terms an 'arrested welcome'. The state, in this case Germany, 'generously' offers hospitality, on their own terms, to their benefit, in the process making the assumption (probably drawn from their own privileged experience of being hosted) that it will naturally come to an end. The offer turns out to be hollower than expected—the terms perhaps unclear, or perhaps the opportunities available become too great to ignore and the stereotyping, the lumping together of inanimate groups of 'others' who 'take advantage', incrementally

<sup>14</sup> Rudolph 287-300:

"The policy's characteristic features (of permission to stay being dependent on a work permit; this being limited to a certain period and linked to the requirements of a specific employer) [imply] that the *gastarbeiter* regime is a low cost means of increasing flexibility in cases of regional and/or sectoral bottlenecks in the employment system as well as a way of 'exporting' problems..."

<sup>15</sup> Elliot and Kollewe, *The Guardian*, 18 Mar 2011

mutates into state-sponsored communal inhospitality.<sup>16</sup> The grey area or threshold between hosts' and guests' expectations once again comes into question as does the scenario outlined by Lorenzo Fusi, as he states: "As for the household, so for the nation state." He goes on to describe the conundrum for the civil state: "How can we articulate, politically, and demonstrate the notion of hospitality to those seeking shelter if hospitality is supposed to be temporary?"<sup>17</sup>

This state-sanctioned fear of the 'other' rejects Derrida's notions of "unconditional hospitality" (described in Greek as *Oikonomia*) and interrogates the etymological roots of the words host and hospitality. The terms home and hospitality signal a shared commonality within a space and an implied generosity to outsiders, but we tend to, in the words of Derrida, attempt a difficult distinction between:

the other and the stranger; and we would need to venture into what is both the implication and the consequence of this double bind, this impossibility as condition of possibility, namely, the troubling analogy in their common origin between *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy, between hospitality and hostility.<sup>18</sup>

The derivation of the Latin root word *hospes*, can be translated severally as either host, guest, or stranger, even enemy, meaning that the act of hospitality often remains simultaneously alert to the foreign, the dis- or mis-placed. Just as invasive species such as *buddleia* is the first pioneer plants to colonise the ruins, it is sometimes depicted in the right-wing media as 'invasive', with 'flooding' tendencies that may begin to make a home in the ruins. Homes can be welcoming (*heimlich*) but can also signify exclusion that their owners may exert: a controlling and undermining hospitality, creating boundaries between who belongs or who doesn't (Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny* or *Unheimlich*).<sup>19</sup> As with *hospes*, *heimlich* and its antonym *unheimlich* also share a fugitive meaning, which slips between polarised positions.<sup>20</sup> Homeliness resonates strongly with themes of *oikos*, the Greek term denoting family, property, home. This basic unit of Greek society, the root of the terms eco-nomy and ecology which have always been the twin catalysts of social human life on Earth, is now sharply whittled into competition as protagonists within the theatre of the Anthropocene, performing an embattled version of living in the ruins. This is endorsed in the writings of Achille Mbembe:

In most of the major urban centres faced with land problems, distinctions between "indigenes," "sons of the soil," and "outsiders" have become commonplace. This proliferation of internal borders—whether imaginary, symbolic, or a cover for economic or power struggles—and its corollary, the exacerbation of identification with particular localities, give rise to exclusionary practices, "identity closure," and persecution, which, as seen, can easily lead to pogroms, even genocide.<sup>21</sup>

We are witnessing a global convulsion of a 'new' form of racism,<sup>22</sup> distinct perhaps from the 'traditional' forms invoked through colonisation and the transportations of humans through plantation-based slavery, engendered by nationalistic kneejerk reactions towards economic or refugee-induced migration. The widespread sentiments towards the 'Other' to "go home," completely ignorant of the histories of settlement or community-building, are vividly active around the world and feed

<sup>16</sup> Aristarkhova 1; Conclusion

<sup>17</sup> Fusi 10

<sup>18</sup> Derrida "Hostipitality" 15

<sup>19</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny" in *Art and Literature*

<sup>20</sup> Freud 340: "the uncanny is that class of the frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."

<sup>21</sup> *On the Postcolony* 87

<sup>22</sup> Fusi 12:

"Étienne Balibar's analysis is illuminating in this respect. He maintains that we are currently experiencing a race-less racism, which has shifted its attention from the notion of race as expressed before and during the era of the bourgeois nation state. Instead, this new version is intimately connected to nationalism, in that race has been replaced by the category of immigration: 'It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism that, at first, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but "only" the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, incompatibility of lifestyles or traditions: in short, what P.A.Tanguieff has rightly called a *differentialist racism*. In other words, we have entered an era of 'racism after race relations' where 'the Other of immigrant origin occupies within Europe a social position which exposes the limits of bourgeois democracy, as well as the effect of racist exclusion.'"

into the distancing narratives between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The negatively associated language used in such instances, such as alien or asylum, reinforce any perceived difference, and if guests can be said to hold up a mirror to the hosts’ own selves, what monster is it that is reflected? As David Scott points out in a conversation with Stuart Hall:

The idea of hospitality (thus) puts in discursive play a number of cognate concepts, among them tolerance, generosity, diversity, that are central to the contemporary self-image of the liberal democratic state. The foreigner, holding up a mirror to the host, enables or provokes a deepening transformation of the self of the host.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hall and Scott 291

This externalised viewpoint was one that I held during my stay in Singapore and is reflected in the way that the city-state seriously considers the image that it wants to convey. The *Passion Tour* which celebrates Singapore’s cultural diversity is a slight contortion to eliminate any negative accusations of ghettoisation within the city between ethnic groups, instead converting it into a positive affirmation of porosity and cosmopolitanism (after Kwame Anthony Appiah).<sup>24</sup> Fusi states that: “By being positioned outside the rule (the house/the state etc.), the guest is not excluded by or from that rule as such, but rather defines it...while remaining outside its internal logic.”<sup>25</sup> Inhabiting that wide threshold that hospitality creates, operating within a rule system while aware of its machinations and its temporary minimal hold, is a luxury that is unavailable to many; in the words of Aristarkhova, to the “uninvited,” the “existentially unwelcomed,” it is a “hospitality withheld.” The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced a further layer of fear of the Other, a mistrust of proximity which goes beyond what Aristarkhova has considered when she describes her involuntary facial distortion after a man joins her in a Moscow lift and his subsequent response:

“Are you afraid of me?”  
I replied honestly, “Yes.”  
No other word was exchanged between us.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*

<sup>25</sup> Fusi 13

<sup>26</sup> Aristarkhova 10; ch. 6

She goes on to interrogate her internal assessment of her own sense of safety and to pick apart whether or not he had a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ face. When we are all masked, our intimation of danger seems that much higher. I recently re-entered the university library for the first time, during the Covid-19 era, to collect some titles that I was unable to access online. The library was quiet and empty, late on a dark afternoon. I waited for the lift and jumped back in fright as the door opened, seeing a young woman in there. We had an awkward conversation about the etiquette of lift sharing, if she minded that I joined her, and so began our journey in tense and slightly embarrassed silence. My fraught response to such an innocent presence later made me laugh at my response, and to evaluate how I judged her to be ‘safe’. I clearly followed the set neural pathways that instantly judged her to be no risk, but how would it feel to be always deemed a risk, to be Other, foreign, uninvited?

This year, a time of pandemic, of global human rights demonstrations and of Black Lives Matter protests, has shone a harsh light on the ‘existential unwelcome’ so many people experience on a daily basis. Hospitality and its conventions and gestures are not meaningless, and institutions and states are still made up of humans who can be *humane*.

To paraphrase Fusi, the question is whether we are politically and psychologically able to behave as neighbours, rather than act as hosts,<sup>27</sup> and if hosts, hosts who do not make a demand of gratitude. The moral imperative is made plain when Aristarkhova quotes Dina Nayeri, the author of the novel *Refuge* and a former refugee herself:

It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don't give you sugary success stories. Even if we remain a bunch of ordinary Iranians, sometimes bitter or confused. Even if the country gets overcrowded and you have to give up your luxuries, and we set up ugly little lives around the corner, marring your view. If we need a lot of help and local service, if your taxes rise and your street begins to look and feel strange and everything smells like turmeric and tamarind paste, and your favourite shop is replaced by a halal butcher, your schoolyard chatter becoming ching-chongese and phlegmy 'kh's and 'gh's, and even if, after all that, we don't spend the rest of our days in grateful ecstasy, atoning for our need.<sup>28</sup>

Echoing Nicholas Mirzoeff's *Right to Look*,<sup>29</sup> Fusi reiterates that the "right 'to be' cannot be mistaken for an act of generosity."<sup>30</sup> This surely has to be the take-home message from any model of hospitality: you can offer 'service with a smile,' and if you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours, but really, if you must give, give without expectation of gratitude, and give space for equality, for a 'right to be.' Smiling in this way can, after all, be a political act.<sup>31</sup>



"Singapore 'smiley-face' activist in one-man protest."  
Photo courtesy of Jolovan Wham/Instagram, 2020

Perhaps the equilibrium between host and guest and a possible dissolution of that terrain was an area that was most explicitly explored during Tropical Lab—a microcosm of the wider context of Singapore as an equivalent social experiment. The exchange and creation of ideas, and the cross-pollination of practice occurred, during Tropical Lab, without an expectation of guest-ly gratitude and offered a paradigm of Appiah's cosmopolitanism where differences are recognised, valued and accommodated. Prvački's subtle and generous model of *host-age* informs and is applied to the ethos of Tropical Lab and to an extent provides a postmodern metaphor for the structural reality of Singapore itself.

<sup>27</sup> Fusi 11

<sup>28</sup> Aristarkhova 10; Conclusion

<sup>29</sup> Mirzoeff 486:

Mirzoeff describes three main complexes of visibility, each originating in a particular temporality and power structure, yet overlapping and conspicuously unfinished. The first system he describes as the 'Plantation Complex' (1660-1865), symbolised by the overseer, the second the 'Imperial Complex' (1857-1947), embodied by the missionary, and finally, the 'Military Industrial Complex' (1945-present), personified in the counterinsurgent. These complexes signally align visibility to power structures, from the panoptical overseer (alluded to previously) of labouring slaves on the plantation, to the military endeavours that cartographically visualise the battlefield

<sup>30</sup> Fusi 15

<sup>31</sup> Ratcliffe, *The Guardian*, 24 Nov 2020

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## Making a Difference

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The editors wrote that their aim for *ISSUE 10* was to open a discussion on artist education and that Tropical Lab could be seen as such an environment for that purpose—imagining it as a form of classroom:

Artist learning and practicing environments have historically been defined around concepts of an atelier, which is not merely a hosting space but one that embodies practices, conversations, critiques, references, and histories. Contemporary artist learning environments have evolved to encompass found and transitional sites and group gatherings and activities to facilitate continuous learning towards formal and informal pedagogies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Extract from *ISSUE 10* invitation brief, 8 Apr 2021

Dialogue and collaboration characterises the interaction of much of contemporary art practice. This was once also the domain of some avant-garde modernist movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism and later the Situationists. However, nowadays those domains have broadened, and is not strictly aligned to art movements. These encounters and exchanges create meaningful exchanges between artists. Exchange becomes a part of learning and, in turn, gives rise to the possibility of community and a place where democratic values can be articulated and shared.

The question of the significance contemporary art practice could have in relation to such values has been explored by Nicolas Bourriaud with his concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ and the response by Claire Bishop amongst others, since the late 1990s. This too is precisely the place where an artistic laboratory belongs, a space of learning and practice “that embodies practices, conversations, critiques, references, and histories.”

In 2005, Milenko Prvački, a Serbian-Singaporean artist and former Dean of Fine Arts, now Senior Fellow at LASALLE College of Fine Arts in Singapore, initiated an annual workshop he named Tropical Lab. Conceived as an international art camp, it is held over a 14-day period at LASALLE College. The art camp brings together more than 20 postgraduate student-artists from various internationally renowned art colleges and institutions. Every year Milenko proposes a topic or theme. Ranging across different countries and cities, these student-artists is recommended by colleagues in those respective countries, then finally selected by the College. Over the 14 days, the students engage in a series of workshops, talks and, seminars. These are hosted and guided by established international and local artists living in Singapore, many of



Merewether (far right) with Lab participants

whom are teaching and working at the College. As an artistic laboratory, these workshops investigate an issue or subject, corresponding to the topic or theme of the year. The very process of exploration, discovery and innovation was as important as any subsequent result. In other words, the Tropical Lab became an extended studio and place of experience through a process of sustained engagement, collaboration and creative thought. The final work by these student-artists would then be shown in an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary arts (ICAS).<sup>2</sup>

I had joined LASALLE in 2010, serving as director of ICAS. Milenko had quickly become a good colleague and friend. We shared a passion for contemporary art and its commitment to experimentation, to questioning and proposing a different and distinct perspective on engaging with the world.

The concept of an artistic lab had been explored in the 1960s, albeit slightly differently given the period, with the *Arts Lab* based in Drury Lane, London, founded in 1967. This then inspired the growth and emergence of some 150 arts lab across the UK, such as the *Milky Way/Melkweg* in Amsterdam or more recently the *Lab'Bel* project. Founded in Belgium in 2010, *Milky Way* (owned by a milk company until 1969) had spaces for varying genres of music, a cinema, a restaurant and an exhibition space. *Lab'Bel* developed a series of exhibitions out of a process of collaboration and experimentation across Europe. In

<sup>2</sup> A curatorial division of LASALLE College of the Arts, <https://www.lasalle.edu.sg/institute-of-contemporary-arts-sg>



principle, Tropical Lab bore the same principles as these projects. As Audrey Illouz, art critic, curator and Director of the *Micro Onde Art Centre* in Vélizy-Villacoublay, France, wrote in regard to the *Arts Lab*:

All of these experiences are the fruit of what is now a long-term collaboration, where energies come together, and encounters and actors increase over the course of the various projects, each offering the possibility of renewal. After all, a laboratory is primarily a place of discovery, where imagination and experimentation can give rise to the most fortunate strokes of luck.

The organising concept of Tropical Lab was new to me curatorially. My prior experience had been based on a process of understanding an artist's work and practice and then making a selection for a proposed exhibition, individual or group. Sometimes, I would include new work but, the concept and material base of it had already been generally agreed to, if not sketched out. I remember that in 2013, we organised an exhibition of Tang Da Wu at the ICAS. Da Wu is a major artist in Singapore who had not shown in the country for some years. I had confidence he would produce something significant and challenging. The experience of Tropical Lab had convinced me it was possible for an artist to rise to such an occasion. Together with Da Wu, we reviewed his past work then agreed to show three new installation works. These would occupy the two main exhibition spaces of the ICAS. The only request he made was that he could work at any hour of the day or night in the exhibition space over the two weeks allocated for the installation preparation of his work. This was agreed to and over those days and nights he made his three new works. The result was extraordinary, creating a powerful and provocative exhibition.

Working with participants of Tropical Lab was a rich and rewarding experience. There was nothing except their previous work to indicate how the student-artists might respond having come empty-handed to a foreign country (Singapore) and then, creating and exhibiting a work made from scratch in a few days.

Such an undertaking recalls the days, more than 100 years ago, when artists and students would go outdoors to make studies and sketches of the landscape or observations of nature. And even today, many art residencies are still predicated on the idea of being located in an inspiring or new countryside location and environment. However, the organisers of Tropical Lab chose themes, topics or concepts that were culturally broader and provocative, such as *Erase*, *Sense*, *Fictive Dreams*, and not confined to landscape or place. Participating student-artists could work collaboratively with other invited student-artists and, while some of these students had experienced something equivalent to this process, most had not. For those student-artists this project was a challenge they could not resist undertaking. Resourcefulness and inspiration together with improvisation and inventiveness were key elements.

Milenko invited me to co-curate *Tropical Lab 4: 'Urban Mythologies'* in 2010 and *Tropical Lab 5: 'Masak Masak'* in 2011. In Malay language, *masak* meant 'to cook' and Adeline Kueh—an artist born in Sarawak, Malaysia, and one of the Fine Arts lecturers at LASALLE—took the lead. We all worked together over those two intense weeks with lectures, discussions, workshops and individual guidance. At the time, I proposed



Masak Masak 2011

to Milenko that a new journal to accompany the workshop might be an invaluable addition. We decided to call the journal simply *ISSUE*, and to publish it at the same time as the workshop. The subject would be the same as Tropical Lab's, so that the publication could serve to augment the artists' experience and work in the lab, giving it a broader context for critical reflections and a community of exchange. Moreover, the value of *ISSUE* could be seen, in other words, as providing valuable research material for the participants of Tropical Lab. Deciding on a topic would then be curatorially conceived as a starting point for the invited student-artists on the one hand and as a point of departure and reflection for the invited writers on the other. It was in this context, that I conceived of a publication *Glossary* (Vol.1, 2012 and Vol.2, 2014) that would serve as a critical account of some of the highlights of ICAS's exhibitions and encounters the preceding year.

In 2012, I co-curated *Tropical Lab 6* and the first edition of *ISSUE*—both around the concept of 'Land'—and contributed an article on the Iraqi-Irish artist, Jananne Al-Ani. I had seen her work in *Home-works*, the annual workshop and exhibition, organised by Ashkal Alwan and founded by Christine Tohmé in Beirut. Al-Ani was living and working in London at the time. Using photography, film and video, she had engaged with the landscape of the Middle East, its archaeology and its visual representation. Recalling aerial photography first used in World War One, everything on the landscape from its human inhabitants, buildings and natural forms had been dehumanised, abstracted, reduced to a sign. After 2012, the possibility of contributing to the journal *ISSUE* was always a welcome intellectual challenge, insofar as responding to the guiding

concept of the year, with a subject that might resonate with one or more of the student-artists of that year. As such I elaborated on the subject through the work of an artist, filmmaker from elsewhere, such as my essay “All the Same but Nothing” for *ISSUE 3: Islands* (2014). The article was about Darwin’s research and findings in the Galapagos Islands that, as the editors of *ISSUE* had suggested in their proposal, confirmed John Donne’s poem “No man is an island.” This became for me, in a sense, the basis for Darwin’s experience on the Galapagos and his theory of evolution. Many years later the Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn was reading Darwin’s account of his trip and saw the drawings of one of the four Fuegians that the Beagle had captured and taken on board back to England. Dittborn subsequently produced a series of *Airmail Paintings* that included images of the Fuegians, in particular Jemmy Button. The idea of exile as an allegory of these works related to the notion of displacement and that of travel. One of the critical values of Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings* was the restoration of their subject. By transferring the images from one referential field to another, Dittborn makes the source of these found images interconnected, recombining their link with history, redressing the official archive. The idea of transit becomes the possibility of the subject’s survival. Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings* put back into circulation images of subjects condemned to forgetfulness.

Later, I would contribute “Forgetting Russia: Tarkovsky” for *ISSUE 6: Fictive Dreams* (2017) in which I explored the work of Andrei Tarkovsky’s films and the sense of his motherland Russia that increasingly haunts his work. This was followed in the next year with “The Fact Remains” for *ISSUE 8: Erase*, (2019) in which I traced the modern discovery of rubber, the material first used for the pencil eraser and used by artists. Rubber had been an integral part of Asian and Latin American colonial economies, especially in Southeast Asian countries close to Singapore such as Malaysia, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Indonesia (Java), or Brazil and Nicaragua. Ilya Ehrenburg’s novel *The Life of the Automobile* (1929), traces this development of the rubber industry during the colonial period.<sup>3</sup> His novel is a story of rubber sap taken from Malaysia to Europe, and tells of a Frenchman who, on driving his new Citroen experiences the modern thrill of speed, only to then crash his car, ending in a fatal accident. I then tell of two studies that characterise well this gap between an event and evidence; that is, the ‘conscious’ erasure of what has actually passed which is another dimension of the process of forgetting. This does not happen as a natural process of memory but as a calculated, if not willful, act of eradicating something in existence. It is not simply to conceal or obscure but to eradicate it as if it never happened. David King explored what took place under Stalin in the Soviet Union in his book *The Commissar Vanishes*.<sup>4</sup> King found photographic records documenting public events and leaders of the revolution. Often the same event was photographed twice or more. But, in comparing photographs, King found systematic changes in which individuals had been erased from the photograph. He shows for example group photographs of Lenin with Trotsky or Lev Kamenev (a leading member of the Bolsheviks), and then those photographs again in which Trotsky and Kamenev had been erased, as if they were never there!

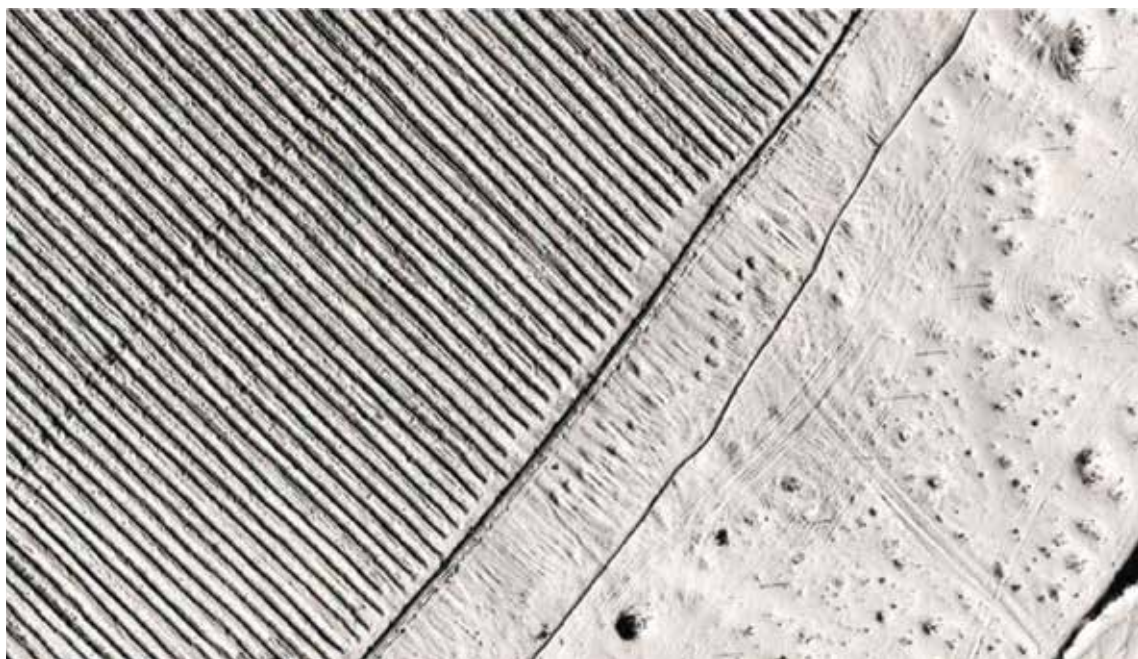
<sup>3</sup> In the course of this story, drawing it together as the source for the material base of a modernity that characterises the movement of *factography* in Soviet modernism in the early 1920s.

<sup>4</sup> *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia*

Returning to Tropical Lab reminds me of the necessary trust one should have in an artist. This was evident in the structure of postgraduate seminars at LASALLE, in which we discussed in depth the work of each of the students amongst the Fine Arts faculty staff. We would sit around







Clockwise from top left:  
*Aerials II, IV, V and III*

2011

Production stills from *Shadow Sites II*

Single channel digital video

Courtesy the artist and Abraj Capital Art Prize

Photo: Adrian Warren

and the postgraduate students would bring in their work individually and together we would talk about it, proposing ways forward. What was being formed, although without any suggestion of permanence, was a notion of community. We came together to openly discuss, to debate, and disagree if the occasion arose. This seems almost 'natural' to the structure and ethos of an art school, but the character of Tropical Lab made this process an even stronger part of art education at the College.

I wonder, now looking back, whether Milenko's own past has had some shaping influence on all of this. Born in Pančevo in the province of Vojvodina, his Yugoslavian background represented a time under Josip Broz Tito and his version of socialism, in which the concept of community was integral, regardless of ethnicity and difference. Following the death of Tito in 1980, provisions of the 1974 constitution provided for the effective devolution of all real power away from the federal government to the republics and autonomous provinces in Serbia. The result was the Yugoslav Wars which had been a series of separate but related ethnic conflicts of independence and insurgencies fought from 1991 to 2001. This led to the breakup of the Yugoslav federation in 1992. Its constituent republics declared independence due to unresolved tensions between ethnic minorities in the new countries which had fueled the wars.

In that period, Milenko had gone to Romania to study at the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest and subsequently, with Delia, also an artist, and their young daughter Ana, moved to Singapore in 1991. By this time Slobodan Milošević had well and truly assumed a ruthless presidency in Serbia, while Eastern European communism had collapsed and those countries would slowly move towards democratisation and independence. Nevertheless, the lessons of Yugoslavian socialism under Tito had had a residual effect on the citizens of what was possible. Integral to Socialism had been its appeal to community as a foundational value. In many respects, Milenko's life in both former Yugoslavia and Serbia and in Romania was the experience of 40 years living under socialism.

I am reminded of G. A. Cohen, a Canadian political philosopher, who wrote a short book *Why not Socialism?* published in 2009. In it he wrote of how the spirit of equality and community are essential traits of socialism. Socialist philosophy provides a more nuanced historical understanding of the individual. He refers to Albert Einstein who wrote in his 1949 essay "Why Socialism?"

The individual is able to think, feel, strive, and work by himself; but he depends so much upon society—in his physical, intellectual, and emotional existence— that it is impossible to think of him, or to understand him, outside the framework of society. It is 'society' which provides man with food, clothing, a home, the tools of work, language, the forms of thought, and most of the content of thought; his life is made possible through the labour and the accomplishments of the many millions past and present who are all hidden behind the small word 'society.'

The individual is, in other words, embedded in social relationships. This interdependence, in fact, enables our individuality to be nurtured, shaped and to flourish. The ethos of Tropical Lab is founded on this principle of a community that fosters each participating individual.

Each individual artist is neither dependent on nor subservient to that artistic community but rather, is supported by an environment of critical exchange, collaboration and support. For each artist the outcome will be different. The process is of the essence, bringing these student-artists together not only with different approaches but, from different cultural backgrounds, age and gender. This continues to be the inspiring essence of Tropical Lab.

*Except where stated, all images courtesy of LASALLE College of the Arts.*

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## Making Sense of Art in the Tropics

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Tropical Lab is an art camp where a group of graduate art students from around the world convene for 14 days on the island city, Singapore. The word ‘camp’ emphasises the distance and temporality of ‘being away’ from home, sharing new insights with strangers within scheduled events. At the art camp this often combines activities in the form of seminars, excursions, studio practice, dinner parties and an exhibition to mark the end of the visit. The camp is also a form of introduction to Singapore—a modern city with a relatively short history—itself a kind of cultural gateway and environment professing curiosity due to its combination of self-contained efficiency amidst restructured nature, groomed as part of the island’s aspiration of being a garden city.

*Eden, Metropolis, Bauhaus, Arcadia, Shangri-La*: stories about islands, the sun, moon and sea serve as archetypes ready to greet the impending arrival of fresh art graduates from around the world. Apart from major cultural cities with a longer history of art discourse, what is it like to experience art in this place? Assumptions between Western idealisms and Asian traditions are unpacked and put on hold as everyone focusses on the reasons to ‘why they make art.’ In graduate school, the emphasis to ‘study’ art reinforces the ‘making’ in art as a way to articulate perspectives and positions of what we know, think we know, and do not know about the world. The frustration, or if one is fortunate, the surrender to the realm of the unknown in life is often the reason we make art. This is akin to seeing reality dissolving while experiencing another form of its incarnation evolve and appear. Could this be the axis, the reason for adventure and experimentation to exist? If so, then where and when does this happen in an art school? What is the right environment to stimulate such experiences? Tropical Lab intends to provide this stimulus for a moment in time when the worlds of young artists come together.

One may ask what kind of art emerges from the heat of the equator within a community of visitors? There are two words which make up a concept of this environment: that of ‘tropical’ and that of ‘lab’. ‘Tropical’ is caricature and phenomena—of sun, trees, foliage, moisture and leave of absence, where the output of sweat, euphoria of exhaustion, the swatting of mosquitoes and consumption of prickly fruit provide fuel to the delights of artmaking whether as an individual or as a group; the ‘lab’ serves as a physical and mental space given to each graduate to stimulate creativity generated from the two-week time frame, reinforcing the nature of a new pattern to everyone’s ‘home’



East Coast Lagoon: 1730 hours

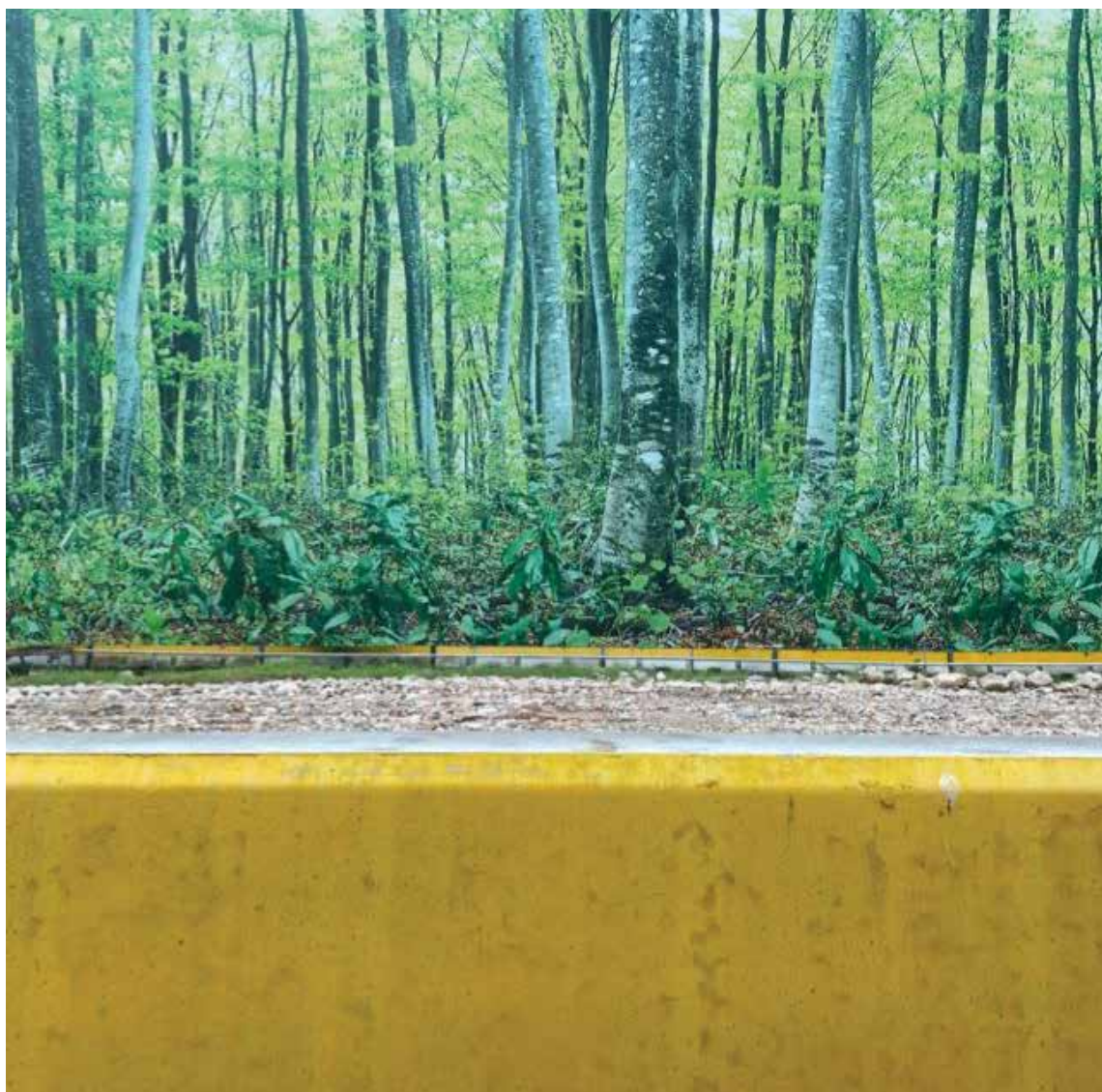
routine. In line with the temporal nature of Tropical Lab, this studio is 'makeshift,' often situated in an open space that is unused during the semester break of a local art school. Graduates inhabit this space openly, together with the rest of the participants—a form of transparency which suggests a mode for possible collaboration, encouraging physical, visual and conversational pursuits as they make their work. The example of collaboration is a sort of vehicle that unpacks and intensifies life's complex instructions between and among people. This setting promotes an acknowledgment of 'the social' among the graduates. One of the aims of Tropical Lab is to break down the barriers between identities, as well as artistic and national subjectivities. In a sense, perhaps by the very act of collaboration, the 'lab' attempts 'for a moment in time' to restore the history of global miscommunication among us. The 'lab' is also housed in a school compound named LASALLE College of the Arts—an art school started in 1984 by its Irish founder Brother Joseph McNally, who is associated with the DE LA SALLE Brothers. the College itself has a history of art making, collaboration, study, exhibition, management and performance. Artists both local and around the world have had their share of memories and experiences as visitors to this campus: a constant site for discussions and presentations of art in forms both of the past and present, ignited as the contemporary.

The etiquette of discourse and exchange ensues the start of every Tropical Lab's schedule, where the practice of introduction, presentation, lecture, enquiry and moderation play host to every new visitor in the form of a seminar within a venue. Most artists do not like to speak, simply because it is not their strength. It is common understanding that artists often find it hard to talk about art because of its elusive nature. But it is in these lectures that assigned interpreters of art, culture and language steer and guide our visitors to overcome this anxiety with textual topics; summaries; aims and timelines, engaging and preparing them mentally for Tropical Lab's fully charged activities of varying temperaments. Its aim? To play, feed and indulge the senses.

*Masak Masak* (Malay for 'to play around'), *Urban Mythologies*, *Land, Echo: The Poetics of Translation*, *Island, Dreams*, *Citation: Déjà vu*, *Sense, Erase*, *Mobility* are Tropical Lab's survey of themes since its inception in 2005. These themes highlight ways in which we as beings make sense of this world in relation to our feelings towards our conception of differences, interpretations, disappearances, consciousness, space and movement. What have these themes got to do with the island of Singapore, where the old and new, rural and urban contend for significance visually, mentally and spiritually? Everything. From its 'various beginnings' as a trading port and colonial administration to its independence as a modern state of economy and investment, Singapore encompasses all of Tropical Lab's themes associated with origins and change. Singapore's origins in multiculturalism with the influx of traders and merchants within Southeast Asia highlights and indicates its significance and early success as a trading port, attracting movement of people from the continents risking their lives to be part of the zeitgeist, to innovate with new skills of trade, establishing a pollination of businesses where language, food and technology serve as prominent ingredients to the early communities of the four races.

Food and community are an important part of Tropical Lab's daily activities, whether the graduates are eating from packets of prepared food or dining at someone's home. Keeping one's appetite and stomach filled with appropriate amounts of rice, vegetables, sugar, salt and spices, nourishes and fuels the mind, body and soul of our visitors, energising them as they partake on research and work in the studio, notwithstanding the excitement to the given schedule of daily outdoor excursions negotiated by foot, bicycle or bus. Chicken Rice, *Nasi Padang*, *Char Kway Teow*, Fish Head Curry, *Odek Odek*...names of food repeat as mantric whispers of what not to forget. Food in Southeast Asia after all is an important topic, you will find people often have a discussion about food even after they have had their lunch or dinner. Perhaps it is an outlet for all things repressed—food as a metaphor for people's deepest desires and fantasies. Speaking of desire, the characteristics of the *durian*, the king of fruits in Singapore is akin to a form of secret and myth, where one hears about its stench and prickly husk while discovering hidden within it, moist flesh that is ultimately creamy in its taste and texture.

The past of Singapore as environment is best experienced away from the city where, the reclaimed and constant constructions of new roads, complexes, old and new extrications take place. Ubin Island is not far from Singapore, where the remnants of the past and unkept nature can be found. It is a rural specimen for visitors to feel what it is like to live



The Yellow Beam

in the tropics within self-contained shops and restaurants. Coconut, seafood, a Chinese opera stage that I have never seen open and an empty basketball court are just a few makings of Ubin that I remember. To know Ubin, one needs to ride a bicycle, so as to roam the steep loops and valleys as one discovers the delights of reservoirs, coastal forest and mangrove swamps. The tour of this island is accompanied by guides made up of the host and ambassadors from LASALLE. Besides the visits to the designated attractions of Singapore, these selected graduates often introduce our visitors to the vicinities, familiarising them with the locals in relation to their everyday needs. Then there is also the adherences to the laws of Singapore, where guidelines to visual permissibility; social commentaries or expressions concerning degrees of nudity of the human body need to be respected. It is a thing that most of our guests comply with, though not without frustration and questions. So with an

added pre-camp warning by organisers, the artists are reminded that they are 'visitors' to a country they do not live in, and above all, that they are accountable to their expressions of art (the outcome of the camp) as representatives of the universities they come from.

The expression of art in Tropical Lab acts as ways to bring together art graduates from around the world while exposing two key aspects of what it is like to communicate as an artist: being able to deal with inherent readings of artworks as both a subjective and objective position concurrently. Where ultimately the struggles of understanding the context of viewing and experiencing art both as a maker and an audience is every artist's uneasy task to negotiate. This can be challenging, especially among the diverse range and levels of disciplines inherent among the visitors, where introverts and extroverts exist in the form of personalities, speech, action and artforms. An example of such a comparison is that of the disciplines of performance art and painting, the first involves one's faculties being present in the moment while the second, that of the accumulated past as action and image. As mentioned earlier, a lifespan of two weeks for an art camp means that the inner life of each artist has to play background to the exterior condition of subject matters that are more immediate. This does not mean that the work should not aim for complexity, but rather that form may need to be directly relatable before the fluidity of things is brought forth.

Despite the seemingly packed schedule of Tropical Lab, the camp environment suggests an atmosphere that is relaxed. This condition is perhaps cultivated by the camp leader Milenko Prvački, an artist and educator at LASALLE since 1994. The combination of seminar, physical activity, party, set up and presentation go hand-in-hand with the basic needs of eating, drinking, thinking and sleeping. Then there are the gaps in between, where 'hanging out' becomes just as important to cultivate the exchange of creative ideas. This is akin to '*nongkrong*'—an Indonesian phrase for 'chill out', where the mind and body has no agenda but to be calm and relax. It is often associated with drinking tea and chatting without formality and agenda. In Singapore, this can be a gathering to 'space out', tea time' or 'a smoke break' to clear the mind from thinking about an idea for too long a time, like in art practice, when looking at and working on a work to the point of fatigue inhibits fresh ideas and effective decisions.

Teaching, learning art or art in the realm of academia is a balancing act, incorporating time lines, structured criticism, rubrics and numerical grades yet always empathetic to the intuitive, the reflexive, play and if appropriate, irony and subversion. Tropical Lab attempts to work with the above essentials gathered with the unification of a chosen theme as a guideline to situate the imaginary among the participants. One example of the imaginary in art is akin to thinking of the studio or lab that the visitors use as a brain. The brain, as mental or embodied state acting as metaphor of change; pumping one idea in and coming out with another. It is simultaneously allegorical, rational, scientific, metaphysical, chaotic and irrational at different times. Something complex can be formed from a source that is often simple like a sign, a quote from a conversation or a symbol. Ideas are like seeds, or dots that emit change as you stay and observe them. Then they may start to frustrate you, especially when you are getting close to an outcome. What is this outcome? Could it be the result of a momentary glimpse when each of us start to understand the





East Coast Lagoon – Visitors

systems of life before it vanishes? This is the elusive search in art making, for self, for all and for those waiting as an yet unknown audience.

Then comes the exhibition that invites all who have pondered, desired, seen, remembered, encountered and discovered to present their works in LASALLE's gallery spaces. These spaces are a combination of white cube, rectangular and L-shaped configurations that allow the artists to situate and locate their art objects, pictures, screenings and projections as things in or within space, whether framed as pictures, or negating it as suspension. Here, the graduates work and discuss their intentions among themselves, supported and led by the gallery's technical crew and curator to ponder and resolve solutions. This culminates in the final experience of being together where an emotional mix of familiarity and nostalgia lingers with the presentation of everyone's artworks, perhaps as individual symbols of a goodbye letter to the island of Singapore and its people.

*All images courtesy of Ian Woo.*

## Cocktail Lab: Milenko Prvački's International Art of Mixology

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### Aperitif

Hear no evil, speak no evil, and you won't be invited to cocktail parties. —*Oscar Wilde*

Since this journal edition is dedicated to Tropical Lab and its name will reoccur, for the sake of variety and comic effect I am taking the liberty of retitling it 'Cocktail Lab'. The annual international art camp brings together around 25 gifted postgraduate students flown in from all around the globe, and operates for its participants like a heady cocktail. Landing at Singapore's Changi Airport, giddy and jetlagged, and for some their first ever flight, Cocktail Lab provides a potent mix of ingredients that come together in delightful and surprising ways, with effects that are intense and intoxicating.

It was founded by Milenko Prvački specifically as a 'laboratory', where experiments take place and, traditionally, chemical compositions are mixed together in large glass jars to create mysterious new potions—precisely how cocktails are made. Mixology, the art of combining different drinks to concoct a cocktail, is highly fashionable nowadays. Singapore boasts some of the world's finest bars, where mixologists continue the furtive traditions of their medieval alchemist predecessors in hidden underground laboratories. As Peter J. T. Morris recounts, while these ancient alchemists ran secret lairs filled with furnaces and bizarre contraptions, chemistry was the first noble science to be openly afforded a room of its own; the histories of laboratories and chemistry are inseparable.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Morris, *The Matter Factory: A History of the Chemistry Laboratory*, 2015

There are some notable differences between alchemy and cocktail mixology, not least the former's quest for magical, real-world transformations of matter. But the most dedicated mixologists may argue their goals are the same, and that they share a quasi-mystical devotion in seeking to create potions that are (or at least taste) miraculous and transcendental.

The Getty Research Institute's 2017 exhibition *The Art of Alchemy* explored the close links between alchemy and art, and highlighted that important inventions originally born from alchemist laboratories range from oil paints to metal alloys for sculpture, and photography's chemical baths. Its catalogue reflects insightfully on their common themes:

Long shrouded in secrecy ... Alchemists were notorious for attempting to make synthetic gold, but their goals were far more ambitious: to transform and bend nature to the will of an industrious human imagination ... unlocking the secrets of creation. Alchemists' efforts to discover the way the world is made have had an enduring impact on artistic practice and expression around the globe. ... [It] transformed visual culture from antiquity to the Industrial Age, and its legacy still permeates the world we make today.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Getty Research Institute 2017



Alchemists at work, from *Mutus Liber*, a 'Mute Book' of illustrated plates (with no written text), 1677.

The mixological trial and error nature of both chemistry laboratories and cocktail creation is key to Prvački's vision and methodology. He tries to get the chemistry right, by liaising with the Professors at partnered institutions to choose one postgraduate student who is ideally suited to the experience. Not their 'best' student necessarily, but an interesting one with something to say and share, and someone who *wants* to share; not a loner or worse still an egotist, but a companionable and convivial giver. Personality, enthusiasm and collegiality are key to the 'Milenko Mix'. Once chosen, these creative 'spirits' from different



countries are intertwined, and collaborate together under his guidance. He encourages them, like the alchemists, to discover and experiment with new ideas, ingredients, concepts, tools and media; to think afresh about the world, and to work outside their comfort zones.

To return to cocktails, mixology's interplays with powerful chemicals renders it a laboratory process fusing the arts and sciences. Like with art, some excellent creations come about in *eureka* moments, the product of luck, instinct, inspiration or a *muse*. But others are hard won: the product of rigorous reworking, like Frank Auerbach's paintings, its thick pigments applied and scraped off, then reapplied and scraped off again, endless times over months or years. Mixologists seek perfect formulas in much the same way as chemists. But perfect formulas are not as rare as you might think in cocktails. Books on the classics reveal hundreds and thousands of them, and with some creative adaptation and improvisation you can make up some delicious originals yourself.

There is a second reason why I will dub the art camp Cocktail Lab: my main contribution to the annual gatherings is to invent cocktails reflecting the year's chosen artistic theme. These are mixed and served at a cocktail party for all the participants, hosted by my wife Prue and I at our home. It is held on the eve of the exhibition that marks the climax of the fortnight's activities, when the students have finished all their work and can let their hair down. They arrive in a gaggle, the wide-eyed young artists, their sarongs tied in wayward and irregular ways, leaving shoes in an abandoned pile. First orders, laughter and later...dancing.

### **For the price of a beer in Singapore...**

I was never interested in cocktails until I came to Singapore. But 10 years ago, I arrived here for the first time in my life for an interview to be President of LASALLE College of the Arts, and stayed in a nice hotel. The interview went well and as dusk settled, I went up to sit by the rooftop pool and looked over glittering Marina Bay, thinking "I'll have a beer." On consulting the menu and the price, I fell off my chair. But on remounting, with stoic determination to have a drink nonetheless, I was fascinated to learn that for just a few dollars more I could get a champagne cocktail. It tasted magnificent, and with such price differentials, I've rarely drunk beer here again. Therein began a fateful love affair with two things that remain precious joys: LASALLE...and cocktails.

Cocktails have inspired many artists, including writer Ernest Hemingway who created a devastating one, *Death in the Afternoon* (1 part Absinthe, 3 parts champagne) and helped invent the best ever version of a daiquiri cocktail (2 white rum, ½ maraschino, ½ grapefruit juice, ¾ lime), which is named in his honour.<sup>3</sup> But in celebrating cocktail consumption I must also sound a serious cautionary note on the need to act moderately in doing so. Famously, alcohol had a devastating effect on Hemmingway's life and familial relationships, while Jackson Pollock perished as a drunk driver aged 44, and historically too many artists and non-artists alike have been victims of alcoholism.

In 1932, novelist and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre had an epiphany with an apricot cocktail. He was drinking it in the Bec-de-Gaz, a bar on Rue

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Hemingway Champagne, it shares the same name as Hemingway's non-fictional book, *Death in the Afternoon*, Scribner's Sons, 1932. His daiquiri recipe is known variously as Hemingway Daiquiri, Hemingway Special and Papa Doble.

du Montparnasse with his friend Raymond Aron, who was enthusing about a new philosophy. “If you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!” he declared, and Sartre literally turned pale.<sup>4</sup> He gave up his teaching job, pored over phenomenology books and within a year had come up with his own version: existentialism. It was grounded in the phenomenological reality of life while seeking a type of transcendence from it through individual freedom, self-determination and originality—messages worth considering for any young artist:

<sup>4</sup> Bakewell 3

There is no traced out path to lead man to his salvation; he must constantly invent his own path. But to invent it, he is free, responsible, without excuse, and every hope lies within him.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sartre quoted in Bakewell 10

The Cocktail Lab party drinks I create and serve (at my own expense, I should add) are hopefully existentially free and original, and include some that surprise participants with equal delight and horror. For the theme of *Port of Call* in 2014, for example, came the following concoction with ingredients in relative measures:

***enDURIANce***

3-inch piece of *Durian* fruit

2 Tequila

1 Spiced Rum

dash of Grapefruit Bitters

*Put ingredients into an ice-filled shaker, shake and strain*

For the *Island* theme in 2015:

***Isles of Hallucination***

¼ Absinthe

1 Lychee liqueur

1 Pernod

½ Dry Vermouth

2 Wheatgrass juice

*Stir with ice and strain, then*

*top with a little lemonade*

While the theme of *Fictive Dreams* in 2016 brought with it, topically

***BREXIT Nightmares***

Sour grapes

2 Black Cherry Vodka

1 Gin

3 Cranberry juice

½ Gran Classico

¼ Lime Juice

*Serve with ice in a metal, prison-style cup and garnish with a piece of old, dry white bread, to visually reflect the probable consequences for the British economy*

One drink that always remained on the menu was a tribute to the “Tropical King”—an affectionate nickname bestowed on the Lab’s founder and chief. Its ingredients were the same—as shown here—but its name changed according to the year’s artistic theme: Pulau Milenko, Milenko Memories, Milenko is a Dreamboat, etc.

**MILENKO'S MISTAKE**  
 ORANGE 1½  
 1  
 1  
 (6) 3  
 Gin  
 Campari  
 Sweet Vermouth  
 Grapefruit juice  
 Lemon bitters



**ASIA ERASURE**  
 CHILI  
 Sake  
 Ginger-infused Tequila  
 Elderflower liqueur  
 Jasmine Green Tea  
 Lemongrass  
 Chili



**ACCIDENTALLY DELETED  
 (in pink and blue)**  
 LIME 2  
 1  
 3  
 ½  
 Blueberry-infused Vodka  
 Cointreau  
 Cranberry Juice  
 Lime Juice  
 Rhubarb Bitters



**ERADICATING ORCHARD  
 ROAD**  
 APPLE 2  
 ½  
 2  
 (4) 2  
 Pear Vodka  
 Cointreau  
 Orange Juice  
 Apple Bitters



**Cocktails for Tropical Lab 13**  
**31 July 2019**  
**at Prue and Steve's place**

Photo by Steve Dixon

The 'behind the bar' menu, with scribbled reminders of garnishes and ratios of ingredients, for the *Erase* 2019 cocktail party. *Asia Erasure* lacks ratios as it had been pre-mixed and infused for six hours with chopped pieces of ginger and lemongrass. For reference, its ratios were: 2 Sake, 1 Tequila, 1 Elderflower liqueur, 3 Green Tea, ½ Lemon juice: serve on ice with a slice of red chilli.

## Mixology and Metaphors

As part of the wider cocktail mix, every year the Lab took a different theme as a point of departure and source of inspiration. A theme can be interpreted literally, in concrete ways, but the guidance given, and the tendency with which the participant artists were to use it, was more metaphorical, associative or abstract. Each theme also provided food for thought for me, to reflect upon in preparation for speeches I would make either to welcome the throng or to launch the opening of their final exhibition.

Most of the themes are simple single words, but they hold much power and provocation, providing a small kernel from which grander things will grow; as Nicholas Cook notes, “Words function as...[art’s] midwife.”<sup>6</sup> The topical words provide a sense of focus, harmony and unity for the participants. But they are also mixological, since each student’s expressive transmissions and individual translations of them reverberate and resonate with one another in unexpected and sometimes contrary ways. Like the process of inventing cocktails, exploring themes leads to free associations and proliferations of ideas, and I’ll now offer some of my own about the year-by-year topics and the idiosyncratic results they inspired.

### *Echo 2013*

The 2013 theme brings to mind the echolocations of bats and submarines—which send out signals and sonar pulses that bounce around, and then resonate back. The signal returns transformed, in a slightly altered form, which reorients the understandings and perspectives of the receiver. Cocktail Lab works in the same way. Students are sent out from around the world and arrive at LASALLE where they bounce around, colliding with other things: new people, places, objects, experiences, ideas. They then return from whence they came, transformed (we hope), in a slightly altered form, and with new bearings and viewpoints.

Their artistic projects responded to the *Echo* theme with great vision, offering up vivid explorations, including subtle plays on ideas of translation and doubles. They worked from many angles: visual, aural, textual, conceptual. The contributing writers to the accompanying *ISSUE* journal edition responded to the theme equally memorably. Darren Moore mused on echoes in music as “a continuum of practices and belief systems” activating improvisation, re-contextualisation, adaptation and evolution<sup>7</sup> while Venka Purushothaman evoked Walter Benjamin’s comparison of an echo heard in a forest to the notion of translation:

the echo is not the original sound, and the copy not the original. To investigate this, we need to resuscitate the flailing nymph Echo pining for the love of Narcissus, and one has to return to the primordial scene: the sighting.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Moore 95

<sup>8</sup> Purushothaman 9

## ***Port of Call 2014***

*Port of Call* prompts considerations of destinations that may prove lasting for the visitor but are more likely to be fleeting: sites of transit. Used colloquially, a port of call may be anywhere, including somewhere landlocked, but the idea of a nautical port catalysed research on Singapore's longstanding position as an international trade hub. The Lab was given special access for an excursion into the heart of Singapore's container port, one of the largest in the world. It was an extraordinary foray into a dense, seemingly endless labyrinth of stacked steel boxes and looming giant cranes, a monumental metal maze of geometric grandeur. The Italian Futurists would have loved it.

Space and time are intimately connected, indeed insoluble, and ports of call are transitional places experienced in between other places at in-between times. In a seminar I gave for The Lab I discussed how we may experience a different temporal sense in such spaces, as we do during long transits in port-of-call airport terminals where time seems simultaneously achingly absent yet thunderously omnipresent—the 'extratemporal'. This sense of being and living outside-of-time is what anthropologists describe in relation to ancient and primitive cultures that do not recognise time in relation to the micro-chronologies of clocks, but rather the macro-chronologies of larger cycles: diurnal sunup to sundown, phases of the moon, the seasons etc. Aesthetic sensations of the extratemporal can be deeply affecting, and have been explored by artists in different ways. Think of the temporal manipulations and repetitions of Ho Tzu Nyen, the slowed down films of Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon and Ulrich Lau, Cornelia Parker's exploded garden shed, frozen in time and floating eerily in space—each conveys an experience of placement *outside of time*.

Ports of call may prove magical places, crossroads that change lives. The sense of dislocation, transit and *extratemporality* can lead to an awakening return to oneself, or spark new creative inspirations and personal directions. The *Port of Call* that is Cocktail Lab has prompted many of its artists to be struck by the muse, to think anew and to reinvent their ideas or themselves: "out of reflection we receive instruction."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 340

## ***Island 2015***

The 2015 edition interrogated the nature of islands, including field trips to the lush island charm of *Pulau Ubin* as well as *Sungei Buloh* Wetland Reserve, at the watery fringes of the isle of Singapore. Islands are separated by, yet inseparable from, water. Water gives permission to land. It surrounds and contains, and island dwellers are drawn to their land's edge to marvel at it, relax, bathe and cast their gaze on it. They stare out to the flatness of the horizon, the seeming meeting of ocean and sky, two great unknowables. This watery-air meeting place is distant and yearning-filled, illusory and ungraspable—an end of a rainbow that can never be reached. The actuality of an island is its placement within a surrounding territory that is not actual, but virtual: its circle of horizons.

For islanders, to leave *terra firma* and set sail for the horizon is always a leap of faith and voyage toward the horizon of the unknown. There

is no beckoning bend in the path, no receding perspective, no forest to cut through nor mountain to conquer. It is a challenge for both body and spirit to set sail towards and beyond nothingness. Oceangoing always holds risks, but artmaking holds similar, if not so mortal perils. Artists cast their gazes into the distance, drawn to unknowns and uncertain places.

“No man is an island” wrote John Donne, and a lone traveller reaching an island’s edge can go no further alone: the seashore marks the limit of the walking body’s capabilities, and humans are ill-adapted to swimming very far. To go forward the help of others is needed and, for islanders, leaving home is a task best managed as a joint undertaking. Preparations are made: a boat is built, a crew is mustered and plans are mapped.

For most artists too, the quest is not a lone one, and the Lab ensures the emerging artists work, play and learn together, nurtured and supported by extraordinary professional artists whose expertise make their journey memorable. Island people since ancient times have been proud to honour their visitors through codes of hospitality, and LASALLE is very proud to continue that tradition.

### ***Fictive Dreams 2016***

John F. Kennedy helps us segue from 2015’s horizon-gazing into the *fictive dreams* of 2016:

The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men who can dream of things that never were, and ask why not. [10. Kennedy 1963]

He spoke the inspirational words on 28 June 1963 and two months later to the day, Martin Luther King Jr answered the call with the greatest speech of all time. “I have a dream,” he kept repeating, in a stirring mantra announcing a transcendent vision of equality and freedom. It remains as crucial and urgent a dream as it ever was.

Dreams are one thing everyone has in common; they bind us together, and Shakespeare insisted we are made of the very “stuff” of them. They can be experienced while asleep or envisioned while awake. Dreams are endless repetitions not only of our own, but the collective subconscious. Like great art, they express and embody our unique and individual personalities while simultaneously expressing universal ideas, hopes and fears. Dreams are profound, confused, fragile and scary expressions of what it means to be human. They conjure the darkness and light of life and death.

Artists have explored them for millennia, from the Byzantine depictions of Jacob’s Biblical dream of an angel-filled ladder bridging heaven and earth, to the seductively beautiful but ominously sinister dreamscapes of surrealists Giorgio de Chirico and Paul Delvaux. Lucy Powell has observed that “Like a dream, art both is and isn’t true. Both offer a challenge to the tyranny of realism, replacing what is with what might

be. Both generate an altered state of consciousness removed from the humdrum—and both lend themselves to interpretation.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “In the night garden: a brief history of dreams” in *The Guardian* 2013

All dreams are fictive dreams and all dreams are real. Somnambulantly, we reach out into the ether to commune with fantastical worlds and to drown in the oceanic imagery of our imagination. We freeze time and traverse space. We dream alone, yet we all dream together; let’s try to dream more beautifully and lucidly. As Jorge Luis Borges asked:

Who will you be tonight in your dreamfall  
into the dark, on the other side of the wall?<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Dream” in *Selected Poems* 1999

## *Déjà Vu* 2017

The theme of *Déjà Vu* reached out for the capricious—that strange sense of a return or re-experience, and that paradoxical feeling that some place or thing is eerily familiar and half-remembered, yet finally elusive, ungraspable. I recall the final exhibition encapsulated exquisitely these complexities around the palpable but indescribable. When we’re struck by *déjà vu*, it’s a kind of revelation: a startling flashback to remind us of the centrality of time to human experience. *Déjà vu* excites an out-of-body experience: a potent and important *reminder* of where we’ve come from, who we *were*, and who we are now.



A 16th-century Greek fresco depicting the Old Testament dream story of Jacob's Ladder at the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos. 79

It is the subject of one of the most delicate and affecting moments in literature. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1919) explains that a feeling of *déjà vu* is invariably linked not to any deliberated thought but rather to 'physical sensations', particularly tastes and smells: "the greater part of our memory exists outside us, in a dampish breeze, in the musty air of a bedroom or the smell of autumn's first fires."<sup>12</sup> In the sequence, he dips a *petite madeleine* cake into a cup of lime-blossom tea and takes a sip. A sudden reminiscence makes him physically shiver with the 'precious essence' of a long forgotten memory, but agonisingly he cannot bring it back. In three pages of sublime writing he grapples to recall it and finally does, recounting the *déjà vu* place he once was, in a breathless torrent, like a seer:

<sup>12</sup> Proust (1919) 222

...immediately the old grey house on the street, where her bedroom was, came like a stage set...and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square, where they sent me before lunch, the street where I went to do errands, the paths we took if the weather was fine...all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne, and the good people of the village and their dwellings and the church and all of Combray and its surroundings, all of this which is assuming form and substance, emerged, town and garden alike, from my cup of tea.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Proust (1913) 50

## **Sense 2018**

The rousing of Proust's senses brings us neatly to 2018's explorations. *Sense* is an enticing theme, since for many artists it is *everything*, and one so rich with possibilities in Singapore, where senses are in overload. Arriving at LASALLE, sensory exuberance greets the visitors everywhere they turn, from the visually spectacular campus with its Grand Canyon-shaped glass walls, to a pungently fragrant durian stall on the corner and the mouthwatering hawker food centres nearby.

Every year, the Lab is an intensely sensorial experience with an array of activities and stimuli, from gamelan jam sessions to boat trips around the islands and visits to colourful temples, markets, museums and galleries. For the *Sense* Lab, fieldtrips included the taste experiences of a sustainable vegetable farm, the smells of a perfume laboratory, and the visual splendour of the surreal 1930s Chinese mythology statue park, Haw Par Villa. It is my very favourite place of all in Singapore, and I have filmed its dioramas as part of my video *Revisiting T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, discussed later.

All Labs have in common the sensory stimuli of thought-provoking seminars, artist-led workshops, and the collaborative mounting of an exhibition. As is fitting in Singapore where food is king, the smells and tastes of communal meals remain a perennial highlight. They range from Japanese bento boxes and Hainanese, Indian, Malaysian and Peranakan lunches, to dinners hosted at the homes of artists and art lovers, and legendary barbeques with Milenko and his wife Delia at their fantastic art studio.





Photo by Steve Dixon

Haw Par Villa provided my inspiration to make a film interpretation of T. S. Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* (1922). While largely set in London, the poem frequently alludes to Asian cultures and religions, and the theme park's dioramas offer perfect backgrounds to a number of stanzas. Here, a statue of a fleeing woman in Haw Par, is juxtaposed with one of the poem's characters who is struggling with trauma, played by Kristina Pakhomova.

## **Erase 2019**

This Lab was the 13th to be staged, a number many cultures consider unlucky, although others see it as highly auspicious. So it proved, with remarkable conviviality and collaboration, *Erase* was one of the most dynamic and interesting Lab exhibitions to date. It told captivating stories of erasure both personal and global. They included investigations of how society's forgetting, omission and deletion of information impacts on understandings of truth, and the insidious emergence of a so-called post-truth. *Erasure* has never been more topical and vital than in our age of digital realities, and the artists' takes on the subject shone penetrating light into these murky shadows. The exhibition was an enthralling mix of poetics, socio-political critiques, humorous offerings and some downright scary shit.

Famously, in 1953 a young, then-unknown Robert Rauschenberg turned up unannounced on the doorstep of a then-very-famous Willem de Kooning. He asked him to give him a drawing, explaining he would erase it. De Kooning kindly obliged, but since the sketch was in ink, crayon, pencil, and charcoal, it took Rauschenberg months and many erasers to rub it out. When he exhibited it with a few smudgy marks remaining, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) caused an uproar, but has since taken a revered place in art history.

The joy of the piece rests, of course, in its anti-art provocation. The most ground-breaking works challenge, ask questions and make us reassess:

“How an artist functions, and what the artist’s role is, the parameters of art, the nature of art. What is the bottom line? What is the least thing you need? What can you get rid of and still have a work of art? He initiated those things.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Craig-Martin in Tate, *Rauschenberg/Tateshots* 2017, 00.29/05:15

### ***In Spite Of 2020***

In the face of the 2020 pandemic and categories defining ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ workers, there was a spirited debate in Singapore’s newspapers on whether artists might constitute the ‘least-essential’ category of all. Artists argued their case in a noble and convincing counter-attack, but I was left reflecting on whether the whole ‘essential’ paradigm was suspect. We make art not because *it* is essential but because we are—we’re human, and want to express and connect with each other (which is essential). In times of crisis, art is what anchors us to our common humanity, reminds us that we’re not alone, and gives us hope. Nothing will stop us from making art.

The 2020 *In Spite Of* theme exemplified this stance, and provided a digital alternative to the usual physical art camp, with past participants coming together with LASALLE staff and alumni to share their creative responses to the pandemic. The online exhibition curated by Milenko includes my first artistic contribution to the Lab beyond inventing drinks: a video trailer for a film made with Singaporean composer Joyce Beetuan Koh interpreting T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). It will be released in time to celebrate the poem’s centenary in 2022 and features a cameo by Milenko playing a murderous sailor who snarls like a dog.

Revisiting *The Waste Land* underlines its currency and potency for our own time. Eliot’s bleak yet beautiful meditations on isolation and alienation take on whole new meanings a hundred years after he penned them. He grapples with themes that echo uncannily with the anxieties surrounding the pandemic, from feelings of melancholy, loss and longing to the fear of death and the promise of renewal and rebirth.

For centuries, ‘In Spite of’ everything from plagues to world wars, artists have continued making art and, significantly, art has tended to make conceptual and aesthetic leaps in the wake of calamities. World War I (1914-1918) heralded the birth of the 20th-century *avant-garde* in Western art with Dadaism, Surrealism, Constructivism, Bauhaus and more. At seismic moments, artists are grounded in a brute reality while being fuelled by dreams of a better future, and united with others towards a common cause. Today, as a pandemic forces us physically apart, we witness artists everywhere activating their communities and forming ever stronger bonds.

### **Digestif**

LASALLE is soon to be elevated to become part of Singapore’s first university of the arts, and as the College is less than 40 years old, it’s a remarkable story and achievement. The stellar rise has come about through hard work, high aspirations and a collective vision, first conceived by its formidable founder, the late Brother Joseph McNally (1923-2002). Like Tropical Lab, that grand vision is mixological,

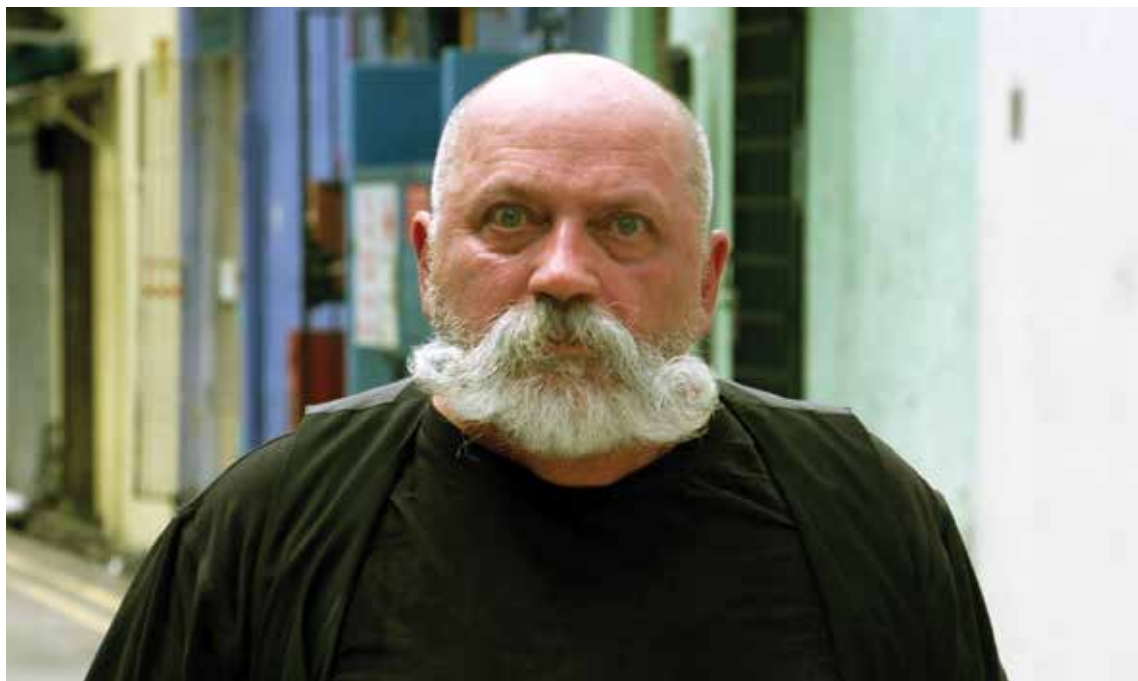


Photo by Steve Dixon

The Tropical King, Milenko Prvački, acting in another role—as the psychotic sailor, Stetson, in *Revisiting T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*.

laboratorial and international: blending together dynamic faculty hailing from all four corners of the earth, promoting experimental art practices that fuse the most exciting ideas from global cultures, and collaborating enthusiastically with some of the world's finest arts schools.

Today, the College has many high-profile international projects and collaborations, but Tropical Lab was the first, the most pioneering and the longest lasting. It helped establish LASALLE and put it firmly on the international map; without it I very much doubt we would have become a University quite this soon. Long may it continue.

Viva Milenko! Viva LASALLE! Viva Cocktail Lab!

Cheers

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## Echo of Tropical Lab: Peter Hill in Conversation with Milenko Prvački

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Peter Hill      When did Tropical Lab come into existence, and what were its founding ambitions?

Milenko Prvački      As an artist and active citizen, I have always tried to create a special environment, a platform, a stage for artists to extend their own practice out of the comfort zones, in their studios—a communal experience linked to politics. Much of this relates back to my own experience, and memories of my former, native Yugoslavia, and its history.

From 1970 to 1991 I participated annually in one of the most important art symposiums in Yugoslavia. I found it appropriate for that historical moment—a place where artists could create, communicate, share experience, and debate in a friendly environment without judgement of politics and control by politicians.

As such, Tropical Lab grew into a creative Paradise Island with shared commonalities.

After arriving in Singapore 30 years ago, and teaching at LASALLE for the last 27 years, and being totally involved in the twin activities of education and creating art, I began to be continuously preoccupied by the question—how do we create a different space from a traditional art school studio. How do we subvert the traditional curriculum with different activities, and invite outsiders into our Tropical Lab?

Peter Hill      I sense, like me, you like to break down academic hierarchies and also value learning from mistakes. I think playwright Samuel Beckett summed it up best when he said, “Try again, fail again, fail better.”

Milenko Prvački      I can probably best extend these thoughts, contrarily, by first listing what I don’t want Tropical Lab to be: a comfort zone with traditional teaching and a curriculum; a place where assessment is graded; with traditional classrooms and studio classes; a place where the creative process is not valued highly enough.

And here is a list of what I do want Tropical Lab to be:

- An intentionally displaced situation
- An experimental space
- Condensed and stimulating activities
- A sophisticated playground



Participants gathering at Prvački's studio, 2019

- A learning environment
- A dialogue
- A collaboration
- A place where innovation is foregrounded
- A group of collectivists that brings individuals together
- A networking hive
- A research hub for knowledge surrounding Asia and Singapore
- A focus on teamwork-driven research
- An annual, peer-reviewed journal of art and ideas that became *ISSUE*
- Constant Exploration
- A place where 'mistakes' are viewed positively

Peter Hill

I guess Tropical Lab then becomes a launch pad for the candidates' future, creative careers, rather than an end-point in their education.

Milenko Prvački

Yes, as a practising artist and educator, I was thinking more about the independent Masters and PhD students, graduating and leaving school forever and starting independent practices without curriculum, teachers, roles, grades, and assessments. It is a great beginning.

I wanted to create a platform for exceptional students who needed more than the ordinary art curriculum that is all too often offered to them, in art schools around the world.

Peter Hill

So how has Tropical Lab, from your initial vision, evolved and expanded over the years?

Milenko Prvački

With the same enthusiasm. I agree with the use of the word 'evolving', and I'd add to that: 'developing' and 'extending'. I had to learn from my own mistakes too. And I have learned so much from the participants over the years.

After the exhibition we always do a review, a survey with the participants, collecting information and data about their experience during the art camp. This is valuable information that we will apply and practise in subsequent years as Tropical Lab continues to grow.

I find advice from participants to be very important and it is very welcome. We have to pay attention to source not only good students but students with good communication and collaborative skills.

Connections with government organisations have been crucial too, including the Singapore Tourism Board, Land Transport Authority, Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore and others. They gave us access to visit and explore interesting and relevant sites in Singapore. Because of that relationship, we have been able to explore underground train tunnels—100 metres below street level—that were still under construction; container terminals; and the undeveloped island (Pulau Ubin). We have also been to the astonishing Haw Par Villa, which I know you regard as a wonderful Southeast Asian Superfiction.

Peter Hill

What are your hopes for the forthcoming edition of Tropical Lab?

Milenko Prvački

First, that Covid-19 will end! It is the first requisite to allow us to continue. I am very sad about this current situation. We are doing our best to extend the life of Tropical Lab art camp, and we are missing the participants very much.

Peter Hill

Have you developed any strategies to deal with this?

Milenko Prvački

At the moment, we are creating a web archive which is historically very important. We are doing a retrospective exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS), curated by Anca Rujoiu (and this is being presented in this edition of *ISSUE*). We are interviewing relevant people, curators, artists, and seminar speakers. The current slowdown has become our period of retrospective thinking and reflection. But I do hope we will do it again next year physically, on campus. That will be of benefit to all, and will lift everybody's spirits.

Peter Hill

I have a particular research interest in new models of Art Education and alternative forms of knowledge transfer—usually with creativity as its central core. This is why your vision of Tropical Lab has always excited me so much. I especially like those situations where hierarchies are broken down and new models of running, funding, and administering art schools are explored. I'm thinking of Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU), a free art school in Brooklyn, and Turps Art School in an old, brutalist housing estate near Elephant and Castle, in South London. They also produce the excellent painting magazine *Turps Banana*. This art school focuses on the expanded field of painting and is co-directed by Peter Ashton Jones and Marcus Harvey, whose portrait of moors murderer Myra Hindley caused such a sensation at the Royal Academy in 1997. BHQFU also have a winter school in Miami and often drive across America in a bus, a bit like Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, stopping along the way to work with children and young adults on spontaneous art projects. What these two revolutionary art schools have in common is that each evolves its own philosophy. How has your philosophy of both Tropical Lab's theory and practice influenced its evolution over the years, and this edition of it in particular?



Peter Hill at seminar presentation during Tropical Lab 2019

Milenko Prvački

The only fixed criteria relates to its functioning structure, and the number of invited universities and participants. Everything else is flexible and ever-changing. Firstly, there is the topic and the team. There are two components related to the Tropical Lab art camp: Tropical Lab and our in-house journal *ISSUE*. We started *ISSUE* art journal as a research tool that serves as an introduction to the next Tropical Lab, *before* all participants arrive in Singapore. We invite important and relevant writers, artists, curators, historians, architects, theorists to tackle particular themes. Theory and practice are part of this, not in an educational way but in the professional development of the creative art practice. We do not prescribe any preferred proportion between theory and practice, but we offer options.

Peter Hill

I very much like the non-proscriptive nature of the word “options”. We should always offer options, and the flexibility for change that goes with it. So tell me, how would a particular edition of Tropical Lab unfold?

Milenko Prvački

The first day of the Tropical Lab schedule offers seminars, where we invite local and international speakers to present around a set theme. Ongoing dialogue is a very important introduction to the programme as much as is *ISSUE*. The second day is allocated for participants’ presentations about their own practices, ideas and concerns. It is also the first opportunity to better know each other. On the third day, participants go on field trips around Singapore—journeys which are organised around and relevant to the set theme of that year. At the same time, they get to know Singapore better. The days follow on with studiowork that culminates in an exhibition at the ICAS, located at LASALLE.

We do not set any restrictions with regards to the ideas, medium, or chosen working methods.

This project fills up a great gap that the educational system does not address. We do not sharpen artists’ ideas but encourage them to be independent and create their own work without educational restrictions and conditions. There may be failed projects, but there are no victims. This leaves plenty of opportunities for self-discovery and learning.





Studio time at the very first Tropical Lab in 2005

Peter Hill

The publication, *ISSUE*, like the conference, is always based on a theme. Can you sketch in briefly some of the topics you have covered over the years?

Milenko Prvački

Having only two weeks, we have to be very focused. Do not forget that all participants are coming here from different universities, different cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as from different continents. Most of them have never been in Asia; some may have passed through. We create topics based on actuality, relevance and interest. We try to avoid conformism, banality and trend. We are very careful.

Peter Hill

Who else works with you on the programme?

Milenko Prvački

Usually, it is a process that evolves between Dr. Venka Purushothaman and myself. This involves a long preparation and an analytical effort to define and hone the research topic. It must be related to the original idea. It must honour the concept and its universality. It must be relevant to all racial and geographical territories, and of course, to Singapore.

It will contribute to the conceptual core of each Tropical Lab edition, although we do not reject nor try to steer artists' responses—they are not restricted in any way. Here are the themes we have engaged with since 2005:

Year	Theme
2005	Urban – Non Urban
2008	City
2009	Local – Global
2010	Urban Mythologies
2011	Masak Masak



Cruise and learning journey to neighbouring islands of Singapore during Tropical Lab, 2019

2012	Land
2013	Echo: The Poetics of Translation
2014	Port of Call
2015	Island
2016	Fictive Dreams
2017	Citation: Déjà vu
2018	Sense
2019	Erase
2020	Mobilities

As you can see there is a great diversity of topics, and plenty of room for improvisation, like a good music set. Every theme was relevant to the year in which it happened. We also invite relevant writers, researchers, artists, and curators to write for *ISSUE*, which as I have said before, is a very important part of Tropical Lab's research profile. Importantly, it serves as an introduction and stimulus to every camp's specific theme.

Peter Hill

Tropical Lab brings many critical thinkers and creators to LASALLE in Singapore. Does Tropical Lab also go out into the world, and if so, how does this manifest itself?

Milenko Prvački

Each participant carries away Tropical Lab's values after returning to their own space, their own country and their own art community—which of course includes the social media spaces. Collectively, they are the best communicators for what we do. After 14 years, the Tropical Lab echo is still resonating in many countries, universities, art schools and languages. We are connected with over 30 of the most important art schools in the world, from America, United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa.

We are also connected to some of the world's most significant art events, including *documenta* at Kassel, the Venice Biennale, the Istanbul Biennale, and REAL PRESENCE, Belgrade. Participants get the opportunity to meet and work with great artists, writers, curators and educators in different capacities. These have included Rirkrit Tiravanija, David Thomas, Peter Elis, Sam Durant, Biljana Tomić, Tony Godfrey, Charles Lim, Dobrila Denegri, Dr. Charles Merewether, Robert Zhao, Bjørn Melhus, Dr. Rhett D'Costa, Anca Rujoiu, Vera Mey, Prof. Chua Beng Huat, and yourself.

We have collaborated on similar projects with universities at Kassel, Belgrade, Beijing, as well as at the Istanbul Biennale and the Venice Biennale.

Peter Hill

I'm keen to hear about your own research interests—both solo works and in collaboration.

Milenko Prvački

This needs a separate chapter (haha). It had been a full 45 years of intensive practice and research. In brief, I started as a figurative, socio-politically engaged painter after graduation in the mid-seventies. However, I realised very soon that I couldn't compete with much faster, speedier working methods like photography, video, film, and new media. I couldn't compete in unfolding narratives and in storytelling. My native tongue is Serbian and my second language is German. I studied in Romania, even though I did not speak the Romanian language when I enrolled at their art University. When I arrived in Singapore, I did not speak English; the dictionary was my best friend for years.

I wanted to create works with that structure, the structure of the dictionary. I wanted it to be like a book where the most important notions are in one place—but without stories, without a narrative. It offered me an opportunity and freedom to manipulate visual elements in my own way with my own language. This decision was crucial for me.

In conclusion, I do not have limitations around topics or issues with which I would like to engage. I have no restrictions with regards to the media and the working methods. I am free. I apply this system to my drawings, paintings, prints, collages, sculptures, and installations. The approach to artwork of this nature is very easy to be adapted to collaborative projects. I do these occasionally with my wife Delia, and with musicians and theatre practitioners. But even a two-person exhibition in a gallery is a collaboration, which I might do with a great artist-friend like Ian Woo.

Peter Hill

Can you tell me some of the more memorable times from past Tropical Labs?

Milenko Prvački

Every year is different: different participants, different universities, different interests, different characters, and finally a different look. It is not predictable. So every year is different. *Land*, *Masak Masak*, *Echo...* or showing different sites to participants. I have learned about the geography and history of Singapore from this: Bukit Brown, Pulau Ubin, Container terminals, underground infrastructure—each of these phrases brings back rich memories.

But this should be a question to the artists involved. It was not all smooth sailing; there were a lot of managerial issues that we had to troubleshoot.

Peter Hill

What are your future plans for Tropical Lab?

Milenko Prvački

Primarily, to resume it as soon as possible. Covid-19 stopped any activity for two years.

Tropical Lab is a space that offers an extensive two weeks' camp of experimentation, exploration, communication, dialogue and after that—it is about growing the network. It never stops with the final exhibition or after they fly back to their own country. After two years of void, I am even more passionate and excited to resume, and can't wait to encounter again the expectant and happy faces of the participants.

Peter Hill

Finally, I would like to learn a little more about your own history, you have already touched on some of it—from your very un-tropical Serbian beginnings in Eastern Europe, through your journey to Singapore with your talented wife Delia, and the years you have dedicated to energising and inspiring the Singapore art scene.

Milenko Prvački

I was born in a country that does not exist anymore, the very un-tropical Yugoslavia in the time of Tito. I did my Masters in Art in Bucharest, Romania, in the time of Ceausescu in Eastern Europe. Delia and I moved to Singapore in 1991. In this time of transition, my country disappeared in a bloody civil war, and I was left holding a passport to a country that no longer existed. Brother McNally, who founded LASALLE College of the Arts in 1984, invited me to teach there in 1994.

So for the past 27 years, I had stayed in the field of education, and still continue to practise intensively, as I had been doing, along with Delia, my wife who is also an artist, for the last 45 years. As I did in former Yugoslavia (now Serbia) I continue to create projects and platforms for students and artists to develop their talent, to collaborate, as well as to network.

I have been a fortunate witness to the speedy art development in Singapore, and very happy to see the sort of growth that is not usual in the world. As a teacher, nothing makes me more satisfied than to see *dependent* students coming to LASALLE, then graduating and becoming *independent* practising artists. They do not need me anymore. Bravo!

I still get excited looking at other artists *creating* exceptional and valuable artworks. I am there for them to help *recognise* their potential and quality. That is of great cultural value. Finally, we are here to also highlight and preserve those values.

*All images courtesy of LASALLE College of the Arts.*

**Tim Bailey** (UK) is an abstract artist whose process-driven paintings hover ambitiously between image, narrative and object. He completed his MA Fine Art at the University of Plymouth in 2018 and went on to hold a solo show at White Moose Gallery and was further selected for the Wells Contemporary Art Awards. Tim's recent group exhibitions include the Pacific Design Centre, Los Angeles, and Holly Hunt Showroom, London. He is now represented by Richeldis Fine Art London.

**Kay Mei Ling Beadman** (UK) is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice uses her Chinese and white English mixed race as an autoethnographic springboard to explore aspects of complex dual identity formation, drawing on embodied aspects of lived experience amid socio-politically and culturally-constructed assumptions. She has exhibited in Australia, China (*1st Shenzhen Biennale*, 2015; *Silk Road: Portal to World Imagination*, 2017), Hong Kong, Serbia, Singapore, South Korea and Sri Lanka. Kay has lived and worked permanently in Hong Kong since 1999. She co-founded Hidden Space, an independent artist-run space in 2017, and is currently pursuing a practice-based PhD at City University, Hong Kong.

**Danielle Dean** (USA/UK) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work explores the geopolitical and material processes that colonise the mind and body. Drawing from the aesthetics and history of advertising, and from her multinational background—born to a Nigerian father and an English mother in Alabama, and brought up in a suburb of London—her work explores the ideological function of technology, architecture, marketing and media as tools of subjection, oppression and resistance. Danielle received her MFA from California Institute of the Arts. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Trigger Torque* at The Ludwig (Germany), *True Red Ruin* at

the Museum of Contemporary Art (Detroit), *Landed* at Cubitt Gallery (London), and *Focus: Danielle Dean* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (New York).

**Ben Dunn** (USA) lives in Macon, Georgia, where he directs The McEachern Art Center at Mercer University and lectures in the department of fine arts. He holds a degree in Philosophy and Great Books from Mercer, and an MFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of Washington, Seattle. Between these degrees, Ben co-founded Lucky Prints, a commercial screen printing company in Chicago. Ben has exhibited in Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle and Singapore amongst other cities. He has undertaken residencies at the Vermont Studio Center; LASALLE College of the Arts; the Hambidge Center; and Ossabaw Island.

**Anne-Laure Franchette** (Switzerland) studied Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts, stage design at the University of the Arts London and Art History at the University of Paris 10. She is particularly interested in urban nature, industrial materials, the question of transience and the in-between. Since 2018, she has been part of the interdisciplinary research group TETI which explores textures and experiences of trans-industriality. She is co-founder and artistic director of VOLUMES, a non-profit organisation dedicated to art publishing, and also initiated the Zurich Art Space Guide and the BadLab collective.

**Hariyo Seno Agus Subagyo** (Hariyo SAS) (Yogyakarta, Indonesia) actively participates in and initiates art exhibitions in Yogyakarta. Besides being an artist, he is also active in teaching at an art polytechnic in Yogyakarta. In addition to new media art, he produces paintings and graphic designs.

**Duy Hoàng** (Vietnam/USA) is an interdisciplinary artist born in Vietnam and is currently residing in New York City after receiving his MFA at Columbia University. His practice focuses on our relationship to the minutia around us, in connection to the much larger environment we are inherently part of, while searching for our placement within that spectrum. Some of his notable exhibitions include Kleine Humboldt Galerie in Berlin, Festival Images Vevey and Thomas Erben Gallery in New York. Duy is currently working towards solo exhibitions at the Atlantic Center for the Arts and South Dakota State University, happening this fall and early next year respectively.

**Laura Hopes** (UK) is a multidisciplinary artist whose Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded PhD, *Being Vulnerable: Distances of the Sublime Anthropocene*, develops from a methodology built around the idea of the 'vulnerable practitioner' who is open to failure, seeking collaboration and acceptance of unknowns. Her practice has become, through extensive collaboration within the collective Still/Moving and with academics and experts in diverse fields, a process where assumptions are constantly challenged. Her expanded practice encompasses writing, conversations, film, performance and installation.

**j.p.mot Jean-Pierre Abdelrohman Mot Chen-Hadi Yakop** (USA) is a conceptual artist born in Montreal and living in Brooklyn. His eclectic body of work incorporates but is not limited to in-site creations, found objects, kinetic sculptures, performances, hacking, interactive art, digital media and prints. He completed a BFA in Visual and New Media Art in 2009 at the University of Quebec in Montreal and received an MFA in Visual Art in 2015 from Columbia University in New York. He has been supported by the Quebec Art and Letter Council, the Canada Art Council, the NARS Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Art, the Foundation for Contemporary Art in New York and the Asian Art Archive in the US. His work has been shown in Quebec, New York, California, Mexico, Reykjavik, Chiang Mai, Beijing and Singapore.

**James Jack** (USA/Singapore) is an artist who engages layered histories tied to place as a way to concentrate on instances of positive change achieved through community-led initiatives. His work is devoted to reflecting upon the impact we can have on our environments while decentralising authority and human-centric consciousness. He has developed socially engaged art works for exhibitions at Setouchi International Art Festival, Busan Biennale Sea Art Festival, Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, Tokyo

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Honolulu Museum of Art, Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore and Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art. He completed a PhD at Tokyo University of the Arts and was a Crown Prince Akihito Scholar in Japan, Georgette Chen Fellow in Singapore and is currently a Senior Lecturer at Yale-NUS College.

**Waret Khunacharoensap** (Thailand) graduated with a Bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University. Majoring in sculpture, Waret is interested in how power structures work and have focused his practice into investigating how power cultivates and accumulates in systems such as schools, religion, public monuments, media and literature.

**Pheng Guan Lee** (Singapore) is a visual artist with a Masters in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts and a degree in Fine Arts from Goldsmiths University of London. Practising primarily in the media of video, sculpture and installation, Lee also includes performances in his work as he examines the ephemeral nature of human existence coupled with personal and collective memories. He has exhibited locally and internationally and had his first solo show *Weight/less* in 2015 at the Institute for Contemporary Arts Singapore. More recently, he participated in the Asia Culture Centre Arts Space Network Residency 2019 at the ACC ASIAPLEX Studio in Gwangju and held his second solo *GRAVITAS* at Supernormal, Singapore.

**Liu Di** (China) is a new media and surrealist artist whose work gives people a strong sense of visual impact, while at the same time encouraging them to think about the current situation. He believes that "by violating the rules of common sense, we can break the hypnotic trance induced by familiar reality." He graduated with a Master's degree majoring in photography from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, in 2019 and a year later, he won the Lacoste Elysee Award from the Elysee Museum in Switzerland for his Animal Regulation series. He is represented by Pékin Fine Arts.

**B. Neimeth** (USA) is a Los Angeles-based visual artist and educator whose work locates the home, family and body as both physical and psychological. Through the archive, photographs, writing and sound, she explores the flexibility of memory and its connection to space. She has shown internationally and domestically at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore), the Center for Sex and Culture in San Francisco, as well as the American Jewish University and ROSEGALLERY in Los Angeles. Her works have been published in the

*Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal* and her books are part of the collections in the California Institute of the Arts and Yale University Libraries.

**Christine Rebet** (France/USA) is an artist whose work is based on drawing and develops into forms ranging from animation, installations and performance art. At the heart of her practice is the elaboration of historical traumas in the context of a personal reinterpretation and a consequent reanimation. Christine received her MFA from Columbia University and her BA(Hons) from Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design. She has exhibited and held performances in various international contexts including Human Resources (Los Angeles), Kunsthal KAdE, (Netherlands), Grieder Contemporary (Zurich), AlbumArte (Rome), Unge Kunstneres Samfund (Oslo), the Cartier Foundation (Paris), Parasol Unit (London) and Taka Ishii Gallery (Tokyo). Her films have also been screened at various events and festivals such as the Berlinale Short Film Competition, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Kassel Documentary Film and Video Festival, Kochi-Muziris Biennale and London Film festival. She is represented by Bureau.

**Rattana Salee's** (Bangkok, Thailand) debut solo *Shell(Shocked)* at Thavibu Gallery in 2010 consisted of an atmospheric sculptural installation comprising metal and plaster architectural structures. She graduated with an MFA in Sculpture from Silpakorn University and participated in many international group shows such as the Taehwa River Eco Art Festival 2019 in South Korea and Memorial Sculpture Project *Reviving Humanity* in 2018 in Egypt. She was also selected by House of Dior to participate in the *Lady Dior As Seen By* exhibition in 2018. Rattana held her next solo *Suspended Memory* at People's Gallery, Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre in 2018, and in June 2021, unveiled a new exhibition, *Unreal Monument*, at La Lanta Fine Art.

**Homa Shojaie** (Iran) is an artist whose practice is concerned with space, image and their intersection with materiality and perception. She received a Bachelor of Architecture from the Cooper Union and a Masters in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts. She has taught at Pratt Institute, Illinois Institute of Technology, School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was a visiting artist at Arts Letters and Numbers. She has exhibited in Chicago, New York, Detroit, Izmir, Kashan, and Singapore.

**Shuo Yin** (Beijing, China) received his MFA degree from the School of Art + Art History + Design at the University of Washington, where he also received his BFA in Painting and Drawing. Working with both

historical references and contemporary influences, Shuo Yin examines the issues of identity from a combined perspective of a Chinese immigrant and Asian minority in American society today. His practice focuses on the struggles of an individual's adaptation to a new social environment in order to address cultural indifference.

**Brooke Stamp** is an Australian-based performer, choreographer and researcher. Her career spans two decades of inquiry in dance bridging visual art, sound performance, writing and dramaturgy, exploring the creation of conceptual spaces for shared meaning and social engagement. Brooke has a MFA from the UNSW Faculty of Art and Design, and is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music. She has performed throughout Australia and internationally with artists including Adam Linder, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Sally Smart and Phillip Adams Balletlab.

**Marko Stankovic** (Serbia/USA) is a Serbian artist based in Los Angeles, California. He mainly works in the media of sculpture, focusing on the variability of the art object with the aim of discovering new relationships between space and object, and their implications. He earned his MA degree and PhD from the University of Arts in Belgrade, Faculty of Applied Arts.

**James Tapsell-Kururangi** (New Zealand) is a Maori artist who graduated from Massey University with a Bachelor of Design in 2017, and a Master of Fine Arts in 2019. He is the inaugural 2020–21 Curatorial Intern at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, where he is responsible for the programme at Papatūnga, an independent art space operating from the platform of the Parnell Station. His work was included in the group show *How to live together* at ST PAUL St Gallery, Auckland in 2019, and his first solo exhibition, *He waiata aroha*, was recently staged at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, Wellington in 2021. His writing has been published in *Lieu Journal*, *Pantograph Punch* and in *As Needed, As Possible*.

**Tromarama** (Indonesia) was founded in 2006 in Bandung. The trio engages with notions of hyperreality in the digital age, exploring the interrelationship between the virtual and physical world. Their works often combine video, installations, computer programming and public participation to depict the influence digital media has on society. Channelling language, text, wit, sequence as well as interaction through their varied practice, Tromarama reflects on the cornerstones of Indonesia's political and cultural environment, a form of perceptive engagement that applies globally.

**Ali Van** (Minnesota, USA/Hong Kong) practices axiology. In motions of love, she finds absolute through living architecture, gastronomic ancestry, silent geography, and manner song. To promulgate admixture, she archives homonyms of a visual field to incubate cognitive time, purposing tactile exegesis for essential variance and open interaction. She has presented in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Slovenia, USA, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong. In a wilderness she settles, eclipses, and dreams.

**Sarah Walker** is an artist, writer and photographer based in Geelong, Australia. Her art practice uses comedy, narrative and speculative fiction to create surprising encounters with tensions around death, disaster and catastrophe. She works particularly with immersive binaural sound works, video and text-based installation. Graduating with an MA Fine Arts from RMIT (Melbourne), she was a finalist in the international MTV RE:DEFINE 2019 award and the 45downstairs Emerging Artist Award 2019. She has taken part in residencies across Australia and Asia, and is currently working as a lead artist with The Unconformity, Chamber Made and Geelong Gallery. Her first book, a collection of essays about bodies and control titled *The first time I thought I was dying*, will be published by the University of Queensland Press in August 2021.

**James Yakimicki** (USA) is a visual artist who earned a BFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder (2007) and an MFA from Columbia University in the City of New York (2012). Inquisitively expressive and resistance to academic structure from an early age, painting and drawing have always been essential elements for James to process auditory information. His improvised approach is rooted in the erasure of lecture notes, rearranged into aerial map-like mazes, and blending pages of math and cursive font handwriting exercises into multi-levelled landscapes. He currently maintains studios in Colorado, Indiana and New York City.



**Steve Dixon** (UK) is President of LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. He is an interdisciplinary artist working across media including installations, video, telematics and multimedia theatre. Recent projects include *Virtually No Exit*, a VR interactive live theatre experience for solo audiences. He has published on subjects spanning both the arts (on theatre, film and visual arts) and the sciences (on Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, robotics and science fiction). His research into the use of computer technologies in the arts include as co-Director of the *Digital Performance Archive* and co-founder and Advisory Editor of the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* (Routledge). His 800-page book *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art and Installation* (MIT Press 2007) is the most comprehensive study of the field to date, and has won international awards. His latest book, *Cybernetic-Existentialism: Freedom, Systems and Being-for-Others in Contemporary Arts* (Routledge 2020) re-examines and compares the two titular disciplines, and fuses them together to propose an original aesthetic theory of contemporary arts. He is currently working with eight UK performance companies on *Telepresence Stage*, a Covid-19-related research project funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (UK). It is developing affordable techniques to connect theatre and dance performers from their separate homes and place them within virtual sets to create, rehearse and perform together online as if on a real stage. [www.telepresencestage.org](http://www.telepresencestage.org)

**Peter Hill** PhD (UK) is an artist, writer and independent curator. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, to an Australian mother and Scottish father, in non-Covid times he works between Berlin, Melbourne, and Edinburgh. He has exhibited his *Superfiction*

projects in the Sydney Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, and numerous commercial and public galleries. His book *Stargazing Memoirs of a Young Lighthouse Keeper* won Scotland's main literary prize, a Saltire award and was read on BBC Radio4 as Book of the Week by actor David Tennant. As an art writer, he has contributed to *Frieze*; *Art Monthly*; *Studio International*; *artpress* (Paris); *ARTnews* (New York); *Times Higher Education*; and *The London Review of Books*. Peter Hill is an Honorary Enterprise Professor at the University of Melbourne (VCA).

**Laura Hopes** (UK) whose current Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded PhD, entitled *Being Vulnerable: Distances of the Sublime Anthropocene* develops from a methodology built around the idea of the 'vulnerable practitioner' who is open to failure, seeking collaboration and acceptant of unknowns. Her practice has become, through extensive collaboration within the collective Still/Moving and with academics and experts in diverse fields, a process where assumptions are constantly challenged: obstacles to be unpicked. Her expanded practice encompasses writing, conversations, film, performance, installation and multi-disciplinary exchange.

**Charles Merewether** PhD (UK) received his BA(Literature) and PhD in art history at the University of Sydney. He taught European modernism at University of Sydney (1981-84); Universidad Iberoramericana, Mexico City (1986-88); and Universidad Autonoma in Barcelona. He received a research fellowship from Yale University (1991), was Inaugural Curator for the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico, (1991-1994); Curator at the Research Institute, Getty Center, Los Angeles (1994-2003) and taught at the University of Southern California. He was Artistic Director of

the Sydney Biennale (2004-2006); Deputy Director of the Cultural District, Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi (2007); Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore, (2010-2013); Visiting Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2014) and Baptist University, Hong Kong (2015). He was Curator of Contemporary Art, National Art Museum in Tbilisi, Georgia (2016-2018). His books include: *In the Sphere of the Soviets* (2021); *State of Play* (2017); *After Memory: The Art of Milenko Prvački* (2013); and *Under Construction: Ai Weiwei* (2008). He was co-editor of *After the Event* (2010); editor of both *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan 1950-1970*, (2007); and *The Archive* (2006).

**Anca Rujoiu** (Bucharest/Singapore) is a curator and editor currently living in Singapore. As curator of exhibitions and later head of publications (2013–18), she was a member of the founding team of the Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA) Singapore contributing to the institution's numerous exhibitions, public programs and publishing projects. Rujoiu was the co-editor of several publications including the artist books *Thao Nguyen Phan: Voyages de Rhodes* (2018) and *Simryn Gill & Michael Taussig: Becoming Palm* (2017). In 2019 she was the co-curator of the third edition of the *Art Encounters Biennial* in Timișoara, approached as a one-year institutional programme. As part of the curatorial initiative, *FormContent* in London, she worked on a nomadic project, *It's Moving from I to It* (2012-2014) that took the format of a script comprised of 17 "scenes": exhibitions, workshops, commissioned texts, and the like. In 2013, she was co-curator of *Collective Fictions*, one of the selected projects in *Nouvelles Vagues*, a programme by Palais de Tokyo in Paris dedicated to young curators. She is currently a PhD candidate at Monash University, Melbourne. Drawing on feminist methodologies, her PhD research, *First-Person Institutions* focusses on institution building, artists' archives, and transnational imaginaries.

**Ian Woo** PhD (Singapore) is an artist influenced by perceptual abstraction and the structures of music improvisation. Woo's work is in the collection of major institutions such as ABN AMRO, Facebook, Singapore Art Museum, The Istana Singapore, National Gallery Singapore, Suzhou Center, UBS, and the Mint Museum of Craft & Design, USA. His paintings are featured in the Phaidon publication *Art Cities of the Future: 21st Century Avant-Gardes*.

**Milenko Prvački** (former Yugoslavia/Singapore) graduated with a Master of Fine Arts (Painting) from the Institutul de Arte Plastice "Nicolae Grigorescu" in Bucharest, Romania. He is one of Singapore's foremost artists and art educators, having taught at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore since 1994. He was Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts for 10 years, and is currently Senior Fellow, Office of the President at the College. He also founded Tropical Lab, an annual international art camp for graduate students. He has exhibited extensively in Europe and USA since 1971, in Singapore and the region since 1993, most notable of which was the Biennale of Sydney in 2006. He has participated in numerous symposiums and art workshops worldwide, and acted as visiting professor at Musashino Art University in Japan; Sabanci University in Turkey; and University of Washington School of Art + Art History + Design, USA. He is Adjunct Professor at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from France in 2011, and Singapore's Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts in 2012. In 2020, he was awarded the National Art Award, Serbia.

**Venka Purushothaman** PhD (Singapore) is Deputy President and Provost at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. He is an award-winning art writer with a distinguished career in the arts and creative industries in Singapore. He speaks internationally on transformative art and design education and works to enable the development of cultural leaders in Southeast Asia. Venka holds a PhD in Cultural Policy and Asian Cultural Studies from the University of Melbourne. He is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art, (France/Singapore), Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (UK), University Fellow, Musashino Art University (Japan) and member of the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany).

**Susie Wong** (Singapore) is an art writer, curator and artist. As writer, she has contributed to several publications, artist monographs and reviews in Singapore. She was a regular art reviewer in the 1990s for *The Straits Times*; a regular art feature writer for magazines such as *The Arts Magazine* (Esplanade); *ID* (Metropolitan), and *d+a* (Key Editions), on architecture and design, among many others. She has written for publications such as *Southeast Asia Today* (Roeder 1995); *Liu Kang: Colourful Modernist* (The National Art Gallery Singapore 2011) and *Histories, Practices, Interventions* (Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2016).







