

Audible

If the condition of an institutionalised object is defined by its muteness, then its sovereignty is surrendered to another. The label, the description, the extended text, by any other name, provides this voice. It vocalises, its words declarative, at times confessional, to assume a nakedness of meaning, wrought in a diligence for clarity, a singularity doomed to repeats, re-enactments: encounters remarkable in its narrow significance. The exhibition text is susceptible, disciplined by classification, category, pre-empted by intent, conditioned by a logic it could not resist. Site, building, institution could do no more than conspire. This is perhaps unsurprising, where aesthetic resonance is often neutralised and calibrated to ideological contingencies, and even if judicious, acknowledged to a function of its time. The task is perhaps to return the object to its proper constitution as Art, having relations to the contemporary, as consignments to an audience conditioned, but not lost to dogma: to prompt the agency of listening, to know what is not 'sayable' is audible; to stir, but not to replace dogma with dictates.

The following are selected images from current and past exhibitions at the NUS Museum, National University of Singapore. They are not assembled in this publication to propose a congruency of curatorial themes, but to allow a consideration into a textual field built around encounters, made performative as a series of fragments, from the banal to the academic, audible in their own agency and origins, but relationally deployed. It is not a matter of the contextual to limit such encounters to an exercise of comprehension, but to suggest the virtue of opacity and what it may offer as renderings that complicate.

Where necessary, texts that appeared in the exhibitions are reformatted for the purpose of this publication.

Extract, curatorial notes from "*There are too many episodes of people coming here ...*" [projects 2008-2014], 2016.
Curated by Kenneth Tay.

II.

In Jean-Luc Godard's film *Bande à part* (1964), three characters are seen running through the galleries of the Louvre. As the voiceover of the narrator tells us, they are trying to beat the record set by an American tourist speeding through the exhibits of the museum: a total of nine minutes and forty-five seconds. They shaved two seconds off. Throughout this scene, the camera pans across the galleries in line with the trio's movements. But instead of the museum's audience running, what if it is the museum's exhibits that are constantly running away from our gaze? Such that while it is easy, and it has certainly been easy, to speak of museum's audience as existing in this state of constant distraction (contrasted with that of the cinema's audience), one would need to seriously entertain the idea that the exhibits – these museumised objects – are themselves constantly flickering, even when they are physically pinned to the walls, or framed behind vitrines and Perspex sheets.]

(Part VI)

The Battle for the Minds

Cast

Announcer

Narrator

Husband

Wife

Professor

Reader

Effects

Rock and roll music

Whistle through space

Door effects

Battle effects

Transmission: 15 August 1957

Network: Radio Malaya

[191]

[...]

[MUSIC ON AND FADE]

Announcer: That was Muddy Hogroll and his Farmyard Hepcats in 'Throw me a bucket of water, mother, grandma's rolled in the horse-through again' – [...] This is Radio Malaya. Tuesday Talk. [...] Here is Professor Highbrow. He is going to give the first of seventeen talks on ideological conflicts of the twentieth century. This is the first programme in which the new populometer will be used. Just to remind listeners, this is special device at present on loan to Radio Malaya, by which we can discover how many listeners turn off their sets during a programme. Thus we are able to discover just how popular our programmes are. In this way, we can make sure that our listeners get the programmes they deserve – ah-er- Well here is Professor Highbrow –

Professor: Good evening. From the tragic experiences of our own and earlier times, men have learnt a simple yet crucial truth that tyranny is the handmaiden of power divorced from responsibility. It is the meaning and the value of democracy ...

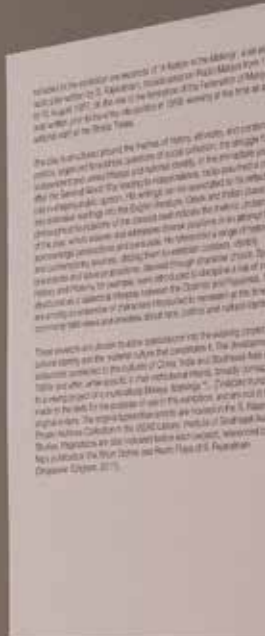
Husband: [calmly] Switch him off, dear.

Wife: But, darling. They'll find out. [...]

Husband: [...] If he talks about democracy and stuff he must expect people to switch him off – populometer ... politics ... politicians. The world would be a happier place without them. And professors for that matter. Switch him off!

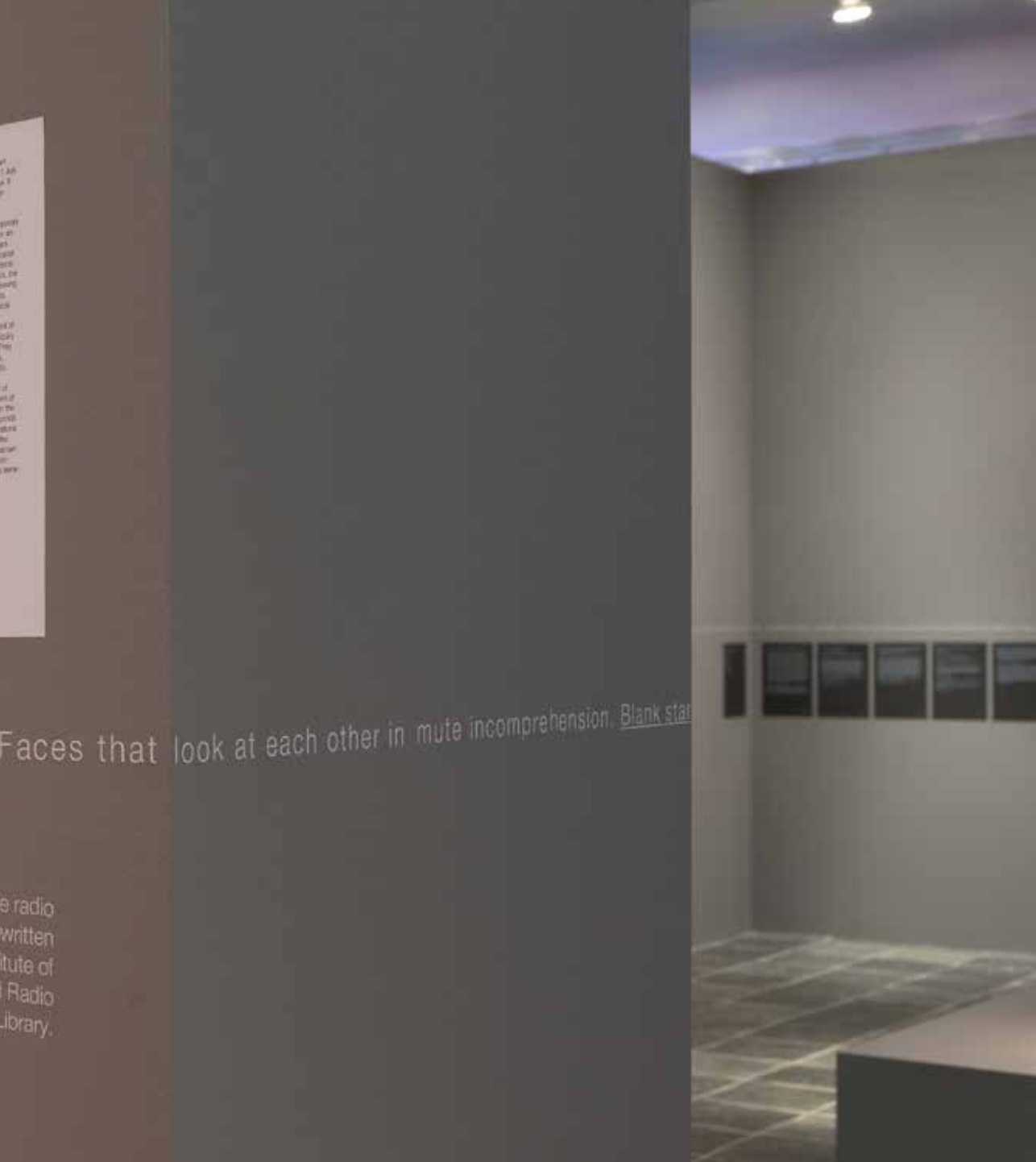
[192-193]

Fragments, texts reproduced from *A Nation in the Making* (Part VI), a six-part play by S. Rajaratnam written in 1957. These radio scripts were first broadcast on Radio Malaya from July to October 1957. The play is published in full in *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam* by Irene Ng (Singapore: Epigram, 2011).



Pessimist: I see no Malaysians. I see men of many worlds and many nations. I see faces of all colours.

From A Nation in the Making (Part II), a six-part play by S. Rajaratnam written in 1957. These scripts were first broadcast on Radio Malaya in 1957 from July to October. The original type scripts are housed in the S. Rajaratnam Private Archives Collection in the ISEAS Library, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Excerpts are reproduced from Irene Ng, *The Short Stories and Plays of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Epigram, 2011), courtesy of ISEAS Library.



Exhibition view, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*, 2017.
Curated by Ahmad Mashadi and Siddharta Perez.
Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

Ptolemy: The story of Malacca begins in the fifteenth century with an adventurer called ... Parameswara, a Sailendra prince of Palembang. [...]

Parameswara: It was my misfortune to become the husband of a Majapahit princess whom I married on the promise that I would pay her father tribute and be his vassal. There are scribes who would slander me by saying that I fled to Tumasik or Singapore in a junk because I had earned the wrath of my father-in-law by breaking my promise. It needs more than a broken promise to cause a Sailendra prince to flee his kingdom. As a matter of fact, it was famine and civil war which recommended my departure to Singapore, where I lodged with the local chief Tamagi. I grant you he was a most hospitable fellow and a man of considerable wealth. It is true that on the eighth day I murdered him. I am sorry I had to depose of my host in this manner but consider my plight then. There I was, a refugee prince with no kingdom and only such wealth as I could carry in a junk, while my host had both wealth and kingdom. For two years I was lord of all, and governed the channel and island with a firmness which my ungrateful subjects failed to appreciate. Then these traitorous wretches rose up in rebellion and I was forced to flee. I fell in with some sea gypsies who brought me to a fishing village not far from the Muar river. Here lived pirates and poor fishermen. But it was a large and spacious place with large fields and lovely waters. I said to myself, this place is suitable for a large town. So – I made myself the chief. I taught my subjects how to grow sugarcane, how to build bigger and better boats for fishing and for attacking ships. And this place I named Malacca.

Pessimist: Not a very inspiring background ...

Spirit of History: Founders of great kingdoms and empires are rarely amiable and saintly figures. Parameswara was probably no better and no worse than most empires. [...] He discovered that instead of robbing merchant fleets on the high seas it was more profitable to persuade merchants to come safely into the port and then to levy tax on ships that passed through the Straits. [...]

[148-149]

Fragments, texts reproduced from *A Nation in the Making* (Part IV),
a radio play by S. Rajaratnam, 1957.



Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum



Exhibition view, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*, 2017.
Image features various figure drawings at Clifford Pier in the
late 1960s and early 1970s by Harry Chin Chun Wah.
Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum



Exhibition view, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*, 2017.
Image features Koh Nguang How's photo-assemblage *Untitled* (1994)
based on his trip to a temple complex in Thailand.
Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

Bekas penyolam tak dapat pisah dari makam

Former Diver Inseparable From Shrine
Berita Harian, 4 October 1987

His real name is Mr. Mohammad bin Hassan. But his friends call him the 'Bearded' Ali.

While all the villagers have moved following clean-up works of areas surrounding the Kallang River, Mr. Mohammad decides to stay.

He became the only remaining resident of a village formerly located in the Public Works Department (PWD) quarters and now resides in the 100 years old Hajah Siti Mariam Shrine compound.

For Mr. Mohammad, he is not able to separate himself from the Shrine, which he regards to be a part of him.

Everyday, after leaving work as a cleaner at a nearby Housing Development Board (HDB) estate, he will spend his night at the shrine.

Previously, he worked as a diver salvaging metal scraps from the Kallang River and the sea around Tanjung Rhu. "I was able to collect \$30 worth of iron each day," he said.

Because of the clean up of the Kallang River and its vicinities, Mr. Mohammad no longer undertake this work.

His unique ability as a diver has also been useful to the Marine Police, based near his place of residence. For example, when equipment is lost to the sea, he will be called upon to dive and locate them



Exhibition view of fragments from a former Muslim shrine that once stood on the banks of the Kallang River, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-membering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*, 2011.

Curated by Shabbir Hussein Mustafa, Nurul Huda Rashid and Teren Sevea.

It was re-presented in *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.

Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

My name? Surely you already have my name. Okay, Eric [Ronald] Alfred [b. 1931] speaking, former, founder curator of Maritime Museum that was set up in Sentosa in the 1970s. It's been quite sometime. I can't recall most of the things that were happening. You have to prompt me along the way so that I can give you a meaningful interview. Is there is a particular time or period? Well, I did an honours degree in zoology at the University of Malaya. It was known as the University of Malaya at that time as it was the only one university in the whole of Malaysia and Singapore. So I gained an admission there and I completed an honours degree in zoology, and having done that, ... while I was a student I was introduced by one of my lecturers to the Raffles Museum as it was known. I was asked to go there and consult some of the publications. That was when I met Michael [Wilmer Forbes] Tweedy -- he was the director -- and my future boss Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, I didn't know it at that time. But that was long time ago, and I was encouraged by Michael Tweedy to apply for a job when I graduated, which I did. I applied [for] the job as curator of zoology of the Raffles Museum [in 1957]. I spent, something like twelve years there, doing things diligently. I was in charge of this huge zoological collection. This was a large collection which anti-dated me for more than a hundred years. Collections not just of specimens but also quite a wonderful library, [including] 18th century publications which made them valuable if anybody wanted to research. I took care of all of these, and there were researchers from the university or from overseas wanting to see specimens, consult publications. As a consequence, I became very knowledgeable on many subjects, not because I was particularly intelligent but because of frequent associations with these ... So I get to know quite a lot about things that are not quite zoology including ... that's how I picked up my knowledge about prahus and boats, and eventually ventured into the maritime field. [Initiated around 1969 and publicly announced in 1972] The Port of Singapore Authority [PSA, now Maritime Port Authority of Singapore] was thinking of establishing a maritime museum. The chairman himself approached me, a personal friend. He said, 'hey, can I buy you lunch' or something like that. He showed me the whole of PSA and he said 'we want to set up a maritime museum on Sentosa, how about it?' So I said I'll have a go.!

oo:oo My Name?

Extract, transcriptions of Charles Lim's interview with Eric Alfred, *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.

I was working at the Maritime Museum minding my own business when somebody from PSA [came], "Hey Eric, we found this guy milling around, he came to PSA looking for a job, we can't fit him anywhere and see what he can do? He can't even speak good Malay." Then I said ok, let me try [him] out. Aley [bin Amat] turned out to be a boatmaker who had lived on Pulau Semakau [having moved from Riau Islands, and later Pulau Bukom]. He was not only a boat maker but he repaired all the prahus of all the people in Singapore. He was very well known. I put him on the staff [in 1976]. [That was] the only way to get him on, so he became a member of the Museum staff. Then, quite by accident, the Penghulu [village head] of Pulau Brani was a boat repairer, so I also put him on the staff. So I had two boat people on the staff. So I got hold of them as carpenters. And this boat building shed was built by Ahamad [bin Osman], the boat repairer. We built a contemporary Malay house on two-thirds scale. It looked like the real size but it was two-thirds scale, people could go in and stand there and take photographs. It was down in the gallery, a watercraft gallery. He [Aley] was an excellent craftsman, rule of thumb, and he can produce very good Malay *prahus*. One day to test him, I asked him to build a, you know, dragon boat; they were doing dragon boat racing in Singapore. I said, "Can you make this?", and he said "*Boleh* [can]". [A] month later, he said "*Sudah* [ready]", a full sized dragon boat. I don't know where to put it, but we never put it into the water. It was built by Aley, quite a versatile fellow. He probably passed away, but he left a legacy of a collection of prahus. There is a photograph he shows, a *kolek Johor* [Johore boat] he made. That is the story of Aley and Ahamad, Ahamad the Penghulu of Pulau Brani. He was also the *Bilal* of the mosque, so his word is quite important you know.

21:26 Aley and Ahamad

Extract, transcriptions of Charles Lim's interview with Eric Alfred, "*There are too many episodes of people coming here ...*," 2016.

From 1952, the artist began to work on a series of drawings and paintings that explored the human condition, often focusing on the themes of aging, memory, and the passage of time. His work is characterized by a delicate, almost ethereal quality, with a focus on the textures and contours of the human face and body. The artist's style is highly detailed and expressive, capturing the subtle nuances of human emotion and experience. His work has been widely exhibited and is highly regarded for its profound impact on the viewer.





Charles Lim and Eric Alfred
Interview
Interview with Eric Alfred
Interview with Eric Alfred



Charles Lim and Eric Alfred
Interview
Interview with Eric Alfred
Interview with Eric Alfred



Charles Lim's interview with Eric Alfred, originally presented in *In Search of Raffles' Light: An Art Project with Charles Lim*, 2013 (curated by Shabbir Hussein Mustafa), re-presented in *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ..."*, 2016.
Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

Fragment, "Raffles' instructions to the Land Allotment Committee and the Town Committee, November 4th 1822," reproduced in full in *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, From the Foundation of the Settlement under the Honourable the East India Company on February 6th, 1819, to the transfer to the Colonial Office as part of the Colonial Possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867* by Charles Burton Buckley (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 81-87.

To Captain C. E. Davis, President.

George Bonham, } Esquires, Members.
 Alex. L. Johnston, }

Gentlemen,—The extent of the native population which has already accumulated at Singapore and the rapidity with which it daily increases, render it expedient that in providing for its accommodation a timely attention should be paid to its future regulation, with reference to the circumstances of the place and the peculiar character and institutions of the several classes of inhabitants of which the society will be composed.

1. It has been observed by the Supreme Government “that in the event of Singapore being permanently retained, there seems every reason to believe that it will become a place of considerable magnitude and importance, and it is essential that this circumstance should be constantly kept in mind, in regulating the appropriation of land. Every day’s experience shews the inconvenience and expense that may arise out of the want of such a forecast” and in this respect an economical and proper allotment of the ground intended to form the site of the principal town is an object of the first importance, and one which under the present circumstances of the Settlement will not admit of delay.

2. In order to provide for this object in the best and most satisfactory manner which our present means admit, I have appointed you to be a committee for the purpose of suggesting and carrying into effect such arrangements on this head, as may on the whole appear to be most conducive to the comfort and security of the different classes of inhabitants and the general interests and welfare of the place, and in the performance of the duty you will be assisted by the Assistant Engineer and Assistant in the Police Department, and guided by the following instructions.



British Museum
The Great Court



Exhibition view, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*, 2017. Image includes paintings by amateur artist, merchant and colonial administrator Charles Dyce, completed during his stay in Singapore during mid-19th century. Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum.



Exhibition view, *"When you get closer to the heart, you may find cracks..."*

Stories of Wood by The Migrant Ecologies Project, 2014.

Curated by Kenneth Tay and Jason Wee of Grey Projects,

featuring artists Lucy Davis, Shannon Lee Castleman and Kee Ya Ting.

It was re-presented in *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.

Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

MALAYA'S RESOURCES.

To the Editor of the Straits Times.

Sir,—In the recent Federal Council meeting, I see it was stated that measures are now being taken to exploit the forests of Malaya. Regret is expressed that such measures were not taken years ago, and it is aimed at starting a new export industry, namely, the export of valuable timber.

It is very disquietening to read such statements. At the recent Malaya-Borneo Exhibition there was no department more thoroughly set up and managed than the Forestry Section. It is that we were told that the forests were sufficient to last, for our own requirements and at the then rate of usage, a period of 96 years.

We have therefore approximately 96 years' supply of timber available, on the basis of consumption of some 5 years ago.

The world progresses, science progresses, and nowhere more so than in an exceedingly rich country like Malaya. One would, therefore, be only on the safe side if one allowed that the 96 years' supply would dwindle to about 60 years. No one will anyhow gainsay the fact that the population of this country, what with the Naval Base, etc., is bound to increase enormously during the next 20 years.

I ask then, "How is possible that we are contemplating export of what comparatively little timber remains"? What will the result be? At best it will mean that we shall be later importers what we export during the immediate coming period, and probably pay three times the price for it.

Recently a large Company was formed to exploit timber in Dutch Borneo. I believe this timber is for American and Australian requirements. The area allotted was enormous, some hundreds of thousands of acres, I believe.

It is as certain as anything can be that a world shortage of timber will eventuate, probably during the lifetime of some of us now living and working in East. When such takes place, it will be useless to look to others for supplies, whatever we are prepared to pay. Other countries will prohibit export, and it is not difficult to realise the position in which we shall find ourselves. There is practically no re-afforestation here, as in for instance, the case in the Dutch East Indies where large areas of teak were planted a very long time back, a great deal of such belonging to the Dutch Government.

It is also doubtful if areas planted up now, say, would be sufficiently matured to tide us over the beginning, anyhow, of the shortage period.

It is surely not difficult to realise that with the enormous increase in the population of the towns, the progress that is bound to come in countries like China in the near future, and the quicker method of transporting and preparing timber, the world supplies are being rapidly exhausted, and will be much more so in the future.

One has every reason to doubt whether we shall do any more than scrape through, by commencing re-afforestation and prohibiting export, now.

We have been advised to "hold on to restriction with both hands." That simile may very well apply to the case of our forests, and as much so, if we can undertake to look ahead just a little. For, in this case, there will be no rectifying any blunder we may make. Fifty years and more will not suffice to give us back a portion of what we shall have lost.—Yours, etc.,

1896 ARRIVAL.

Johore, Nov. 26.

The Straits Times, 29th November 1927,
from "When you get closer to the heart, you may find cracks..."
Stories of Wood by The Migrant Ecologies Project re-presented in
"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...," 2016.

Southern Islands were inhabited with various people, you know. I used to visit them: Semakau, there was a school on Semakau [opened in 1951]. The kids used to come around, solid building. Pulau Seking was another Island, inhabited. Most of the islands were inhabited. I used to visit them regularly to see what was happening. Along the line I took lots and lots of photographs. Unfortunately I left them all with PSA. Whether they kept them or threw them away I do not know. I did not keep any unfortunately because they were done with PSA cameras. I had one of the technicians doing the photography. I knew many of these people would be resettled so I took photographs just for record. I don't know what happened. I think it [the resettlement] more or less began after I was there, then they have a programme to work on resettling the people. As far as I know it began after I joined the Museum. I wasn't involved in it. I was there on the sidelines watching it, other museum staff [were] involved in doing this. PSA had a huge team, those were the guys involved in liaising with HDB [Housing Development Board], getting flats, checking the people concerned, getting them resettled. This happened quite nicely I think. Of course there was one family who had no identity cards, don't ask me how [that is so]. That was the problem: they had no ICs. They were kept for last, [but] eventually they were housed. They lived in Sentosa without identity cards. That's the sort of situation which you have to use your brains a bit.

38:17 Vacating the Seas

Extract, transcriptions of Charles Lim's interview with Eric Alfred, *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.



Exhibition view, *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.
Image features a disassembled *kolek*, which formed part of Dennis Tan's investigations into boat-making in the Riau Islands.
Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum



Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

Excerpt of text on wall:

Pessimist: I see no Malayans. I see men of many worlds and many nations. I see faces of all colours. Faces that look at each other in mute incomprehension. Blank stares. Because they don't understand each other. They don't understand each other's religion. [...]

Optimist: No. I'll show you in a moment. But as I was saying – nationalism itself is a pretty new idea you know. New even in Europe.

Pessimist: Well?

Optimist: Loyalty to nation was a feeling which people cultivated only during the French Revolution. The nation state is very new in the history of the world. [...] it didn't become a force in Asia till the thirties. India and China were—and in many ways still are—very diverse – they contain huge numbers of people and hundreds of different languages. And yet, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Tse-tung have generated and focussed nationalist feelings in their own lifetime. Now we are so much smaller, and our standard of living so much higher than India and China – surely we don't have to fumble and stumble towards a Malayan nation?

Pessimist: But what about the deep-seated race consciousness here? How do you propose to persuade Malays, Chinese, and the rest to give up all their prejudices and preferences and adopt what you call 'Malayan consciousness'?

Optimist: Ah. Now I think we are getting somewhere. [...]

From *A Nation in the Making* (Part I),
a radio play by S. Rajaratnam, 1957.

I warned you I had to speak elliptically. And yet I haven't - not altogether. I have indeed all along been speaking about Singapore - allegorically. I have also been speaking about the United States, France, Great Britain, India, China, Japan. I have never left off speaking about the present even as I invoke the past - as a warning, as an admonition to ourselves. Art will not save us - not unless we learn to read, seriously, the name of this conference Art Vs Art. AllI have done, elliptically, is to emphasise the necessity of choosing between Art, within Art; and the stakes involved in that choice - at the limit. The limit case is Nazi Germany.

I repeat: Art will not save us. But Art can - another art. Which art? And how - in Singapore? I told you -I will say it again - I have never left off speaking about Singapore.

But I must do it elliptically - circuitously - for I cannot say this straight. So I will tell you again, plainly. The aesthetic, art, is primarily a political model. Despite all attempts to deny it, the term 'aesthetic state' - what Schiller, the German romanticist who invented the term, called '*Aesthetischer Staat*' - that term means precisely what it says. The 'state' that is referred to is not just a state of mind or soul, but a principle of political value and authority. As Paul de Man reminds us (himself not free of guilt), the 'state' in the term 'aesthetic state' refers to the political state as we have known it. That is why art is crucial to the state. That is why the state patronises the arts. Art - at least one kind of art - is the state. [...]

[Janadas Devan, "Is Art Necessary?" in *Art vs Art: Conflict & Convergence, a Conference Organised by the Substation, 1993*]

Janadas Devan, "Is Art Necessary?" in *Art vs Art: Conflict & Convergence*, a conference organised by the Substation, 1993.



Exhibition view, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art, 2017*.
 Image features reproductions of Jimmy Ong's personal collection of photographs from the
 late 1980s to early 1990s, entry-points into the formative.
 Photo: Geraldine Kang © NUS Museum

Working in the PSA had opened my eyes to many things I would never have seen. I saw the shipping revolution: the first container ship that arrived, and subsequently all the normal types of ships. In the early days ships have funnels in between at the top and they gave out smoke. They were of mixed [use]. They carry cargo and passengers, and those ships gradually vanished. These well known shipping lines like Blue Funnel and [?], they have all gone out of the picture, and eventually you have new shipping lines like the Neptune Orient Lines coming up, huge ships being built, supertankers. I saw them coming in one by one. I saw the shipping revolution, it happened right in front of me. Working in PSA did broaden my knowledge. You have got to keep your wits about it, you take things for granted if you don't look. Singapore initially was well tuned, functioning as an entrepot port, that means it accepted all the little ships, small steamers from the little ports from around the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, dropping their goods, unloading their cargo and the twakows [bumboats] coming up the Singapore river, having [their cargo] sorted out there, and eventually going out again, being shipped out on ships to Europe and Japan [belonging to] big shipping companies like the Nippon Yusen Kaisha, Lloyd Triestino. These were the big shipping companies that were coming in you see. Then you have the first container ships, all the passenger-cargo ships became redundant, you saw them vanishing one by one, all the little coastal ships vanished. Eventually all you did see are huge tankers out there, still there, huge supertankers, small sized tankers, you go to [today's] Marina South and you stand near the jetty and look. You can see a whole lot of workboats. These are boats that either carry crew, cargo out to the oilrigs, Then you see other types of specialized vessels, just working anchorage. You don't see warships there. There is a cable ship there, ASEAN Cables. They still use underground cables for communications. What else do you see? That's about it.

56:27 Revolution at Sea

Extract, transcriptions of Charles Lim's interview with Eric Alfred, *"There are too many episodes of people coming here ...,"* 2016.