

Making a Difference

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.¹

¹ 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).²

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

² 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.

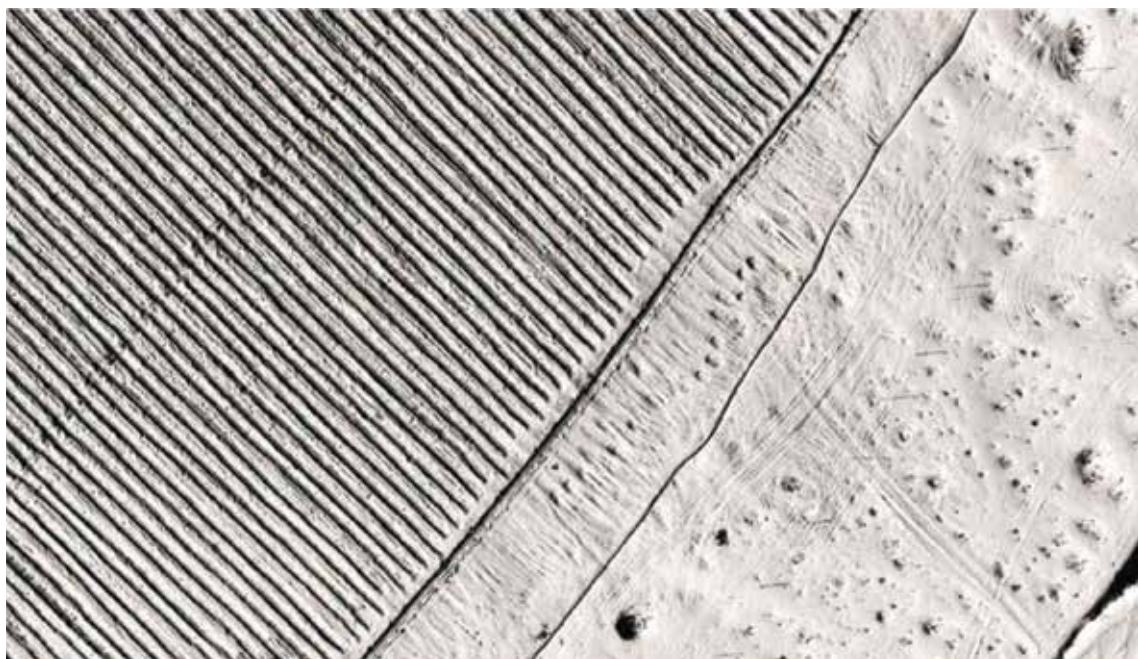
Later, I would contribute “Forgetting Russia: Tarkovsky” for *ISSUE 6: Fictive Dreams* (2017) in which I explored the work of Andrei Tarkovsky’s films and the sense of his motherland Russia that increasingly haunts his work. This was followed in the next year with “The Fact Remains” for *ISSUE 8: Erase*, (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.³ 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*.⁴ 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!

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

³ 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.

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





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 Abraaj 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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