

## NOTES FROM THE SINGAPORE ART BIENNALE 2008

A component of predictability has long gone hand-in-hand with the aspect of everyday living in Singapore, a country which continues to enjoy a international reputation for its upstanding pragmatism, both in terms of its bureaucratic infrastructure as well as its meticulously-planned urbanism. With an abundance of well-maintained public areas and an appallingly efficient subway system at one's disposal, a brief sojourn in the city often proves to be a much-welcomed respite for globetrotters who have temporarily grown weary of anticipating the unexpected over an exhaustive period of journeying through strange foreign lands and having to spontaneously adapt to strange uncustomary customs. Bearing all this in mind, I arrived in time for the opening of the Singapore Biennale 2008 (SB2008) filled with a sense of self-assured ease.

[...]

Hastily depositing me at the entrance of one of the first skyscrapers he came across, my cab driver was clearly thwarted by my ambiguous directions to the Central Promontory site as well as my obscure description of the venue: a temporary installation by the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban assembled out of 150 twenty-foot long shipping containers and 34 ten-metre recyclable paper tubes called the *Containart Pavilion*. Clearly the crown jewel of the SB2008, word of Ban's highly anticipated creation had widely circulated amongst international art and architecture circles prior to it having been built. Having never laid eyes on the *Containart Pavilion* at that point, doubts of its existence began to uncomfortably surface in my head. Luckily, my fears were dissuaded mere moments later as prominent sections of paper tubing and the bright blue stacks of the Neptune Orient Lines (NOL) shipping containers happily leapt into view, braced against the backdrop of bustling dockyards and towering cranes as well as Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's haunting work, *Flight*, an outdoor installation composed of bamboo and 4000 rubber thong slippers which draws on personal issues relating to memory and social displacement. Inside, Ban's unusual pavilion proved to be as visually striking as it initially appeared from the window of a speeding taxi, having been designed to spatially house substantial indoor installations by the biennale's participating artists; namely, Hans Op de Beeck, Anthony McCall as well as the iconic Russian duo Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Whether it was in contemplatively mulling over an artificial, snow-laden landscape within the cozy enclosure of Op de Beeck's *Location (6)* or weaving through a darkened room to have an encounter of another kind with the smoke-infused light spheres of McCall's film-inspired spatial work *Between You and I*, wonder – the central theme of SB2008 – indeed hung on the lips of the journalists who surveyed the works on display with gaped-mouth curiosity.

Determined to ride on the success of the previous biennale, SB2008 has pulled out all the stops in an effort to captivate onlookers and enhance visitor

attendance at this year's event. The aspirations of its organizer, the National Arts Council (NAC), ultimately coincides with the city's overall mandate to promote itself as an upcoming hub for the international creative community. A prime objective of the event is to enable the global public a more eclectic perception of the city that is far less connected with the pragmatism and analytical mindset driven by an programmed hankering for consistent economic growth and more at one with a culturally-conscious society which is fast developing a flourishing connoisseurship for authentic output that grapples directly with the concurrent zeitgeist. At the SB2008 press conference, Low Kee Hong, general manager of the biennale, attributes Singapore's current "hunger for contemporary art" to the city's infusion of ethnic and cultural groups which has helped pave the way for increasingly globalized tastes as well as a heightened awareness of one's aesthetic environment. While diversity – and the wide range of languages it plays host to - does present its fair share of obstacles in terms of devising a coherent way of properly communicating the art work to everyone from all walks of life, it seems that Low and the SB2008 team have braced themselves for the challenge. " Singapore is a very complex society with people coming from many different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. While English is the language of business, it doesn't mean that it is the language of social connection. " Low maintains, adding that solutions were "invented" to keep on par with SB2008's objective to break past language barriers.

In an effort to establish more of a presence with potential art lovers who tended to display more dexterity in communicating in local dialects, the GM stresses that guides fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and Tamil will be made available to audiences for the duration of the exhibition. In addition to devising a savvy promotional strategy, it has been duly important for organizers to succeed in outfitting SB2008 with a visual presence which is strong enough to achieve the attention that they crave from the public. For all the obvious reasons, it certainly doesn't hurt that biennale has been allocated expansive display areas within the most frequented districts of the city; namely, Marina Bay, South Beach Development and City Hall. Further enhancing the international appeal of the event is the participation of an all-star cast ranging from the recruitment of Ban for the design of the ContainArt Pavilion to the appointment of Fumio Nanjo – a familiar figure in the art world circuit widely acknowledged for his work as the director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo since 2006 - as its artistic director. Joselina Cruz and Matthew Ngui, both seasoned veterans in the field with accomplished credentials, were also accordingly enlisted to combine their expertise as the main curators for SB2008.

[...]

The intrinsic connection between the dilapidated setting of South Beach Development, the reemerged tabula rasa of construction-laden Marina Bay and the austere authoritarian atmosphere of City Hall is distinct enough. What these spaces ultimately have in common is that they have been respectively revitalized, using informal means, to depict an illusion which unveils an extraordinary insight about the ordinary. For the duration of the biennale, the

overall sensibility as well as the associated functionality of each site has deliberately been nullified and inverted much like in Chuang Tzu's butterfly dream which Nanjo metaphorically referred to in his attempt to describe wonder's ability to induce questions about one's own existentialism. The in-situ projects, temporarily housed within the deteriorating premises of South Beach, illustrate that the implications of turning reality on its head with the use of ephemeral objects and symbols are more often than not, fraught with a contradicting combination of malaise and hope.

Heman Chong, a Malaysian-born artist based simultaneously in Singapore and Berlin, 'infected' various rooms with his sticker pieces - a series of sprawling, gestural works quietly laying siege on the stripped space by regurgitating abstract narratives which, one imagines, are procured from the complexities of the artist's own internal landscape. One is made to feel overly aware of one's own physicality while enclosed in *The Breathing Room*, a sculptural installation by Danish artist Søren Dahlgaard in which pliable, PVC-taut walls contract to emulate a breathing movement eerily coinciding with the viewer's own bodily exhalations. Felice Varini's flamboyant installation, *Drill Hall*, experiments with spatial illusions by incorporating a flat, graphically painted shape into the arched confines of the old South Beach drill hall, playing up the dynamic between architecture and painting. Meanwhile, within the walls of City Hall, Rachel Goh's photographic work, *Who is this Family?*, garners its share of bemused laughter from onlookers. The piece by the Singaporean artist, a self-declared "explorer of the real-world," offers a humorous critique of stereotypical familial roles taken on within the context of an archetypal Singaporean household; in a series of studio portrait photos, Goh and her family posed and swapped outfits in a clockwise manner wherein father becomes daughter, son becomes mother and so forth, allowing one to formulate questions surrounding the pre-existing framework of identity. Somewhere along the Fullerton Heritage, an area within a short distance of City Hall, a mother intently observes her small daughter gingerly balancing on the curved seat of one of Jeppe Hein's modified benches - a public work commissioned for the biennale. For a moment, instinct compels her to lift the child up from the precarious-looking work. However, she finally hesitates upon watching her daughter gleefully utilize the slanted seat of Hein's creation as a slide, enabling her to assess that, underlying its sculptural nature, the bench harbored a functionality which wasn't immediately apparent. On the mother's face, the ensuing reaction is that of relief, amusement - and yes, wonder.

*Published in Blueprint Asia magazine, September/ October 2009*