

**Authenticity, Reflexivity, and Spectacle;  
or, The Rise of New Asia Is Not the End of the World**

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**Two Anecdotes about Time**

1. Channel NewsAsia (CNA)—the Singapore television station with ambitions of becoming the CNN for Asia—is, like any other big business, predicated on manufacturing an endless stream of promotional images of itself. If, to paraphrase Guy Debord, the business of business really is the production of spectacles, it is also worth noting that a central preoccupation of management today is “branding,” which entails, among other things, the rationalization of this unbridled output. (And could there be a nation more well “branded” as a model of economic success than Singapore?) Without presuming to know the job of the well-paid corporate consultant, I’d like to encapsulate CNA by selecting a few images that are especially revealing of the desires of this government-controlled enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

At the launch of its international telecast, CEO Shaun Seow said: “We offer more airtime on Asia than any other channel. Through our unique offering of global and regional news from an Asian standpoint, we enable viewers to form their own perspectives and obtain a deeper understanding of current developments, and the impact on their lives.”<sup>2</sup> This Asian-news-by-Asian-reporters-for-Asian-viewers branding-cum-ideology was absurdly epitomized by the following commercial: a picture frame hovers over a blank white screen, inside which flash different images of “exotic” Asian women, such as the Padong of Burma who wear brass rings around their necks. The tagline: “It takes one to know one.” Then there are these two minimalist advertisements for the Web site; each stages a simple action rendered in slow motion, set against a black background. One ad begins with a close-up on a black-leather-gloved hand cocking a pistol. The pistol fires; the camera zooms out. As the bullet emerges, a white line of text appears above the pistol: “Violence breaks out in an Asian city.” The bullet traces a straight line, then stops in its tracks: “Violence reported.” The promo cuts to the tagline, “real-time online,” and concludes with an image of the logo and a sound bite of a scream. In the other ad, the object is a metal bucket, and water gets thrown: “An Asian country hit by floods”; “Floods reported”; sound bite of “hoards” drowning.

It is not just the vacuous orientaling gaze of Asian elites directed at a “primitive” and “chaotic” Asia that makes these commercials obscene, the blatant trivializing of violence as “infotainment,” or the lust for instantaneity.<sup>3</sup> Nor is it the total stylization and fetishization, the complete spectacularization of violence and power that is so vulgar. These commercials are exemplary of the covert spectacle of late capitalist society, this time laid bare in Asian cultural essentialism.<sup>4</sup> The ascendancy of Channel NewsAsia conflates with the desire for New Asia’s arrival, and this, moreover, is signified, made metaphorical, through the appropriation of “real time.”

2. In February 1994, Koh Buck Song, then literary editor of the *Straits Times*, wrote “Liberalizing the Arts Takes Time”:

People change slowly, and it is only by a long process of education and exposure that they might come to accept what they used to condemn. . . .

That is why any artist who wants to project the darker side of life and challenge social norms must take his time. . . . By going too far too soon and asking for too much at this time, the actions of Josef Ng and Shannon Tham have come as a setback to other performance artists and especially practitioners of forum theatre, who must now play by stricter rules because some of the trust for artists has been whittled away.<sup>5</sup>

Ng and Tham did performances at an arts festival co-organized by the groups The Artists' Village and 5th Passage. Early on New Year's Day 1994, Ng performed "Brother Cane," which protested the possible caning of twelve gay men convicted of soliciting. After the *New Paper* tabloid sensationalized "Cane," it became the focal point of controversy. The National Arts Council condemned Ng, who was later charged with obscenity, and, along with Tham, banned indefinitely from performing in Singapore. The government proscribed performance art as well as forum theater, claiming that because these art forms have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation, they pose dangers to public order.<sup>6</sup>

In March that same year, Koh wrote "Were the Bedroom Scenes in *Schindler's List* Really Necessary?" Steven Spielberg had refused to allow cuts to his film; consequently it was released with an R(A) or Restricted (Artistic) rating, meaning that only persons twenty-one and above could see it.

My concern is whether young people should have been so needlessly denied the chance to see the movie. . . . In the [concentration] camp scenes, the prisoners can still be shown nude and well-humiliated, but with the private parts blocked by a carefully-placed soldier's arm or helmeted head. . . . I have nothing against nudity and sex . . . but others may feel that, to a young boy, the first sight of a female breast can still have a profound impact, whatever the context. . . . I only wish film-makers would be more aware of the censorship standards and cultural norms in other countries.<sup>7</sup>

Then in April 1995, Koh wrote "Context Is Crucial in the Rating of Movies." *Nell* was screened with a PG (Parental Guidance) rating. During a session of parliament, Peh Chin Hua objected to the PG rating because of the nudity in the film, calling for an R(A) instead. George Yeo, then minister

for information and the arts, disagreed with Peh and sanctioned the more “liberal” rating. Koh explained:

All three [nude] scenes in *Nell* are fleeting and, in the context and meaning of the film, necessary. . . . Objections like those raised by Mr. Peh probably spring from a basic difference in attitudes to nudity. In the West, topless sunbathing is widely accepted. . . . Here, screen nudity that is not excessive or exploitative has become accepted by adult viewers. . . . allowing nude scenes with good reason is one way to move, gradually and responsibly, away from any uptight sexual repression of the past.<sup>8</sup>

It seems the Singapore government is not averse to liberalization per se so much as it wants to be *seen* as controlling the *schedule* of liberalization. While restrictions on performance art and forum theater continue, if we follow Koh over the course of these columns, the time it took for this purportedly conservative Asian society to change its cultural norms regarding screen nudity was little more than one year.

### The Seduction of Telos

“Anecdote,” Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*, “brings things closer to us in space, allows them to enter into our lives. Anecdote represents the extreme opposite of history—which demands an ‘empathy’ that renders everything abstract. Empathy amounts to the same thing as reading newspapers. The true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our space (and not to imagine ourselves in their space).”<sup>9</sup> To empathize—to imagine ourselves in an other’s space—is, at some level, to colonize that other space. What Benjamin seeks is the opposite: to let the other inhabit “our” space and open it up. He opposes the prevailing view of history that presumes a cumulative and progressive narrative, where time flows continuously from past to future. For Benjamin, anecdote lays bare the writing of history as a reconstruction, not of the past, but of a present;<sup>10</sup> it is the making of montage, where any moment may be juxtaposed, made suddenly *adjacent* with another.

In an essay called “How Close Can We Come to Admitting We’re Really Writing Mostly about Ourselves?” the art historian James Elkins raises

cautions about citing Benjamin. He notes that theorists like Benjamin are often “quoted, but they are not argued with; and most important, they are seldom related to their own social contexts. That creates . . . fragile texts, where carefully contextualized interpretations of artworks are suddenly, unceremoniously interlarded with quotations from writers who might well have startled the artists who are being studied. . . . I’m not at all sure that we’re doing Benjamin any good by citing him so frequently, and for so many purposes.”<sup>11</sup> Elkins is absolutely right about the need to argue with the theory we cite. My strategy here is less to argue with “theory” head on than to glance at it, and, in thematizing it anecdotally, to try to refract and rupture different discourses, placing them into tension through juxtapositions and playing against the ineluctable teleological tendency of theorizing. But I think Elkins fails to recognize the full implications of his main point—the short answer to his question is, yes, we really are writing mostly about ourselves, about our own times rather than past times. The very act of citing, say, a dead German critic when thinking about late twentieth and early twenty-first-century art in Asia reveals the problem underlying how to think about *any* contemporary. Who exactly are our contemporaries? How do ghosts from far away in time and space haunt us today and here? To say that the social context of Benjamin is profoundly different from ours in Singapore, and therefore we are disqualified from citing him for our purposes, is to think of history in terms far too linear and territorial. I am not advocating careless comparisons. I am arguing that to think history is already to make comparative contemporaries—each moment of time is a contemporary comprising several citations of disparate pasts and presents.

Much as I am attracted to Benjamin’s alternative historiography, the story of contemporary art and Singapore I want to tell is still conjoined with the overpowering idea of progress, an idea embedded in my subtitle. So what do I mean by saying the rise of New Asia is not the end of the world? I’m referring to a thesis various commentators on Singapore, myself included, have articulated in some shape or form:<sup>12</sup> Singapore is *Sign-apore*, a society of the spectacle par excellence, the all-appropriating agent, modernity’s idealized tabula rasa. Singapore imagines itself not just as taking the best from the East and the West—as the inheritor of the great traditions and the latest technologies—but, by offering itself as the paradigm of New

Asia,<sup>13</sup> Singapore also stakes a claim as part of the avant-garde of the next stage of global capitalism. This image, Ray Langenbach has pointed out, is a seductive one: “Your argument not only lays out ‘appropriation’ as Singapore, but your own [desire] . . . and other people’s [desire] to appropriate Singapore. . . . Singapore remains the place that everyone believes can be defined, described, nutshellled, reduced, objectified.”<sup>14</sup> My subtitle then is a slight self-parody, of being seduced by my own theorization of Singapore/New Asia as the telos of capitalism. To read Singapore as exemplary is a tendency that I want to unpack but at the same time indulge. For to tell a story about Singapore art without engaging the idea of Singapore and the ideas of the Singapore state seems untenable, given that global capitalism and the state are so predominant in all aspects of life here. Therefore, what I will attempt is to read the metonymic tensions in Singapore *art*, *Singapore*, and the Singapore *state*.

There are other axes of tensions I want to read: between different “ends” and “nows.” For Arthur Danto, what exemplifies contemporary art is its radical plurality. Anything can be, and does, get cited and re-sited as art. If art is *now* no longer framed by notions of advance or progress, then a certain history of art has come to an *end*; thus his notion of the “End of Art.”<sup>15</sup> We—a radically inclusive “we,” if this pluralism is indeed *radical*—are, as Danto puts it, in a *post*historical phase. And if I offer Singapore as exemplary of this “post” of endless sighting, citing, and siting, it is because the contradictory cultural logics of Singapore are revealing of a fundamental crisis, if that is not too strong a word, in contemporary art. Singapore appropriates plurally and radically; it is totally committed to progress and an Asian essentialism that has less to do with advocating cultural diversity than with disciplining its society to be economically competitive. The question is: can Danto’s “end/post” accommodate a theory and practice of art that is a critique of what, for the sake of shorthand, is called the “society of the spectacle”?

If my subtitle suggests progress, it also alludes to its apparent opposite. The “end” signifies not only telos, but also catastrophe. What if all of Asia were to become as developed as Singapore—would not the demands on our ecology be unsustainable?<sup>16</sup> For Benjamin, the catastrophe is not what is to come, but what is happening now;<sup>17</sup> it is because modern society is predicated on a particular kind of progress that there is crisis. In contrast, for

Francis Fukuyama, whose *The End of History and the Last Man* is ineluctably invoked by my subtitle, “the end is now” is the good news.<sup>18</sup> We—an essentially exclusive “we”—have arrived; free-market capitalism has triumphed. Then again, for someone who lived through the 1950s and 1960s in France, when eschatological themes were the “daily bread” of the times, Fukuyama’s discourse “looks most often like a tiresome anachronism.” In “Specters of Marx,” Jacques Derrida maintains that Fukuyama’s arrival has not arrived, and cannot ever quite arrive: “Those who abandon themselves to that discourse with the jubilation of youthful enthusiasm, they look like latecomers, a little as if it were possible still to take the last train after the last train—and still be late to an end of history.”<sup>19</sup>

Derrida opens his essay with an epigraph from *Hamlet*: “The time is out of joint.” In a very different context, at a conference held in Singapore called “We Asians: Between Past and Future,” Dipesh Chakrabarty evokes this same theme: “That is my argument about the plurality of the times—that the time is not one. Derrida’s argument is that the present is discontinuous with itself.”<sup>20</sup> However, as I have argued elsewhere, Singapore is the one place I know where the present feels *almost* entirely continuous with itself. Whenever I visit other places, my experience is of multiple times; there are always neighborhoods that seem significantly unchanged. In Singapore there appears to be only one time—a peculiar present, in a hurry, on the verge of tomorrow. Life may be more hectic elsewhere, in Hong Kong or New York, but I know of no other place where it feels like everyone marches in the same step. Practically everything here is subjected to economic development—hills have been flattened, cemeteries unearthed. The pace, while not the fastest on the planet, is possibly the most persistent. This relentless present is of course not entirely omnipresent; if it were, then this truly would be utopia. But in Singapore it is an intensely pervasive and spectacularized ideal. As insinuated in my anecdote about Channel NewsAsia, *now* is the time of New Asia. But what is this *now*? It is not quite the “present” itself. It is the obverse of Benjamin’s catastrophe.<sup>21</sup> Facing forward, it is what is next, the near future; indeed, there is something spectral about it. On the one hand, Derrida says: “The specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back”; on the other hand, “if there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of

presents and, especially, the border between the present . . . and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence . . . or even simulacrum in general.”<sup>22</sup> The specter of New Asia, then, is only the *next* revision of the triumphalism of free-market capitalism that Fukuyama puts forth as gospel in his *End of History*.

In his criticism of Fukuyama, Derrida insists on remembering inheritances and debts: “An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation. . . . Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit* of Marxism” (55–56). But why only now, in the face of a simultaneously celebratory and pathological discourse like Fukuyama’s, has Derrida decided to articulate a debt to Marx? Is he not also a latecomer of sorts? Deconstruction has been often criticized as being apolitical or even reactionary. Many of these criticisms, I would argue, have more to do with failed encounters than with a convincing critique of deconstruction.<sup>23</sup> While my purpose here is not to debate deconstruction, this question of its politics intersects with the question that haunts my text: How can we theorize and practice, in art, a critique of the spectacle?

There is another, particularly literal debt that Derrida cites: “All the questions concerning democracy, the universal discourse on human rights, the future of humanity, and so forth, will give rise only to formal, right-thinking, and hypocritical alibis as long as the ‘foreign debt’ has not been treated head-on.”<sup>24</sup> Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has rather different opinions about colonial legacies and foreign debts. In a *New York Times* interview reported in the local press,

Mr. Lee said that writing off or reducing the debt of developing nations . . . may only make nations look perennially uncreditworthy and unattractive to investors. Too many Third-World leaders, Mr. Lee said, had bought into fashionable theories of development that were more political than pragmatic. . . . “Somebody like Nelson Mandela should show the other way, and say . . . ‘Look, let’s work with the people who have oppressed us.’ We need them, they need us. Without them, who’s going to run all these huge, intricate corporations? But that takes courage and character, and there are not very many Nelson Mandelas.”<sup>25</sup>

If we hear Lee, the specter of New Asia is still embedded in a “not-yet-now” thinking. At the “We Asians” conference Chakrabarty spoke of the “Not Yet” version of history: “The classic exposition of this in the nineteenth century was in John Stuart Mill’s writings. . . . the argument that Mill deploys in favor of denying Africans, Indians, or other ‘rude’ nations of the world self-government, which he otherwise extolled as the highest form of government, is the fact that they are ‘Not Yet’ ready for it.”<sup>26</sup> But since when has “readiness” ever been *the* criterion for self-determination? It seems that Lee every now and then conveniently forgets that Singapore was, in his own estimation, “not yet” ready for independence when it nevertheless came.<sup>27</sup>

There is something not yet made explicit enough in the discussion above—the specters of Debord. In his critique of late capitalism, his analysis of “time” is fundamental: “The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory . . . is in effect a *false consciousness of time*.”<sup>28</sup> What makes his critique especially pertinent is that it is precariously positioned at the very edge of the possibility of the end of history: capitalism’s seemingly last stage of virtualization. While Debord’s moment was historically singular—the situation of France in the 1960s—it is also reiterable, available to Singapore now because ours is a moment that, in its claims to be the *next* stage of capitalism, in its reiteration of eschatological themes, further exemplifies the spectacle—in Anselm Jappe’s words—as “the reign of an eternal present that claims to be history’s last word.”<sup>29</sup>

So, having set the scene of a double seduction (Singapore is seduced by a certain telos, and the theorization of Singapore as telos is itself another seduction), having conjured many “ends” and “nows” and placed into sudden adjacency such different discourses—now what? While I’ve started unpacking my subtitle, what about the title? How are authenticity, reflexivity, and spectacle related to each other and to Singapore? What I will attempt next is to pursue these questions in the field of contemporary art.

## Art as Late

In Debord’s analysis, art and culture represent “the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world”; art “*always came on the scene too late*, speaking *to others* of what had been experienced without any real dialogue. . . . The

greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.”<sup>30</sup> The proliferation of art that is “explicitly presented as a moment of authentic life whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to”—and in advanced consumerist societies some of the most popular art is, unsurprisingly, that which rails against consumerism—what these “special moments” turn out to be is “merely a life more *authentically spectacular*” (112). For Debord, the function of the spectacle is “*to bury history in culture*” (137).

Again, it is tempting to offer Singapore as exemplary of these theses: the state’s self-orientalizing Asian values have been highly effective at “define and rule” and extending the colonial legacy’s disciplinary technologies precisely because of its claims to authenticity.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since the 1990s, the state has endeavored to subsume the very terms *art* and *culture* in the service of capitalism. What is next for Singapore is to become a “renaissance city.” Art and culture are coveted, but only now, in the “last phase” of national development, in order to fully arrive as a world-class society with all the trappings of “gracious living,”<sup>32</sup> and to generate a creative workforce that can compete in the top tier of the global knowledge-based economy.

Perhaps more than any other arts group, TheatreWorks represents the complexities of the Singapore desire for arrival in the international arts scene. In 1996, TheatreWorks inaugurated *The Flying Circus Project* (FCP), a biennial intercultural workshop. *Lear*, one of the most widely discussed artistic productions from Singapore,<sup>33</sup> developed from this first FCP. Funded by the Japan Foundation Asia Center, it premiered in Tokyo in 1997 and has played the international theater circuit, including Singapore. Nominally based on Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Lear* was conceived and directed by TheatreWorks’s Ong Keng Sen, with an entirely new script by Japanese playwright Rio Kishida and an all-Asian cast, many of whom played their roles in the different Asian performance languages and traditions in which they were trained. *Lear*, simply named the “old man” in the script, was played by a Japanese *Noh* performer, the “elder daughter” by a Beijing opera performer, the “younger daughter” by a Thai *Khon* court dancer, and the king’s retainers by dancers versed in the Indonesian martial art of *Silat*. “Contemporary” Singapore performers played the “shadows,” and a contemporary Japanese performer played *Lear*’s fool. In Ong’s version, the text, plot, and personages are so minimized that *Lear* effectively unfolds as a series of juxtapositions of images

and oppositions—of good and silent younger daughter versus scheming and shrill elder daughter, or patriarchal old man versus next-generation female usurper.

In a documentary on the third FCP,<sup>34</sup> a participant talked about how wonderful it is to have an “Asia-for-Asians” intercultural workshop, contrasting this with the old days when the only intercultural frameworks were Western based and predicated on power—as if Japan, China, and Singapore do not exercise their power in Asia. This is not to say that interculturalism in Asia has no place in global cultural politics; Rustom Bharucha, for instance, eloquently articulates his commitments to intercultural theater.<sup>35</sup> But when it comes to *Lear*, Bharucha is critical of Ong’s unequivocal “surrender to spectacle”:

Instead of problematizing the two primary principles of his intercultural aesthetics—“juxtaposition” and “rupture”—he illustrates them relentlessly, building one image after another. This spectacle is a victim of time in its metronomic precision and carefully calculated speed. It is almost as if the production is running a race with itself. It refuses to rest till it gets to the end. Consistently mercurial, and therefore predictable, its impact also results in an impasse, which bears some resemblance to what Guy Debord has described as the spectacle’s “essential character”—“a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*.”<sup>36</sup>

For Lucy Davis, this project, which “set out to reflexively present a nuanced ‘for Asians by Asians’ representation of an intercultural New Asia,” *illustrates* “the complexities of formulating resistances within a culturalist discursive order—*Lear* illustrates the difficulties of attempting to critique late capitalist culturalisms without reproducing their very spectacular logic.”<sup>37</sup> In my own reading here, I want to go further and offer *Lear* as *exemplary*, to employ that term one last time, not only of Davis’s problematic, but of *Singapore* and *Singapore art* as well. Ong, in Davis’s analysis, responds to hegemonic Western representations of Asia by insisting on maintaining Asian differences. He rejects the universalist interculturalism of Peter Brook, whom, he contends, “demands that performers ‘strip’ their ‘own’ culturally-specific performance techniques in search for a basic universal human theater language.” At the same time, he refuses the dichotomy of Europe-America equals modernity

and Asia equals static authentic tradition. *Lear* is an attempt to advance “New Asia” as contemporary; as Ong says, “I have consciously avoided a search for authentic tradition in this production.” Indeed, those familiar with the forms that he orchestrates in *Lear* will recognize improvisations and innovations. But, as Davis astutely points out, this disavowal of traditional authenticity is displaced by an essentialism of the “new”: Ong claims to represent the new young Asian artist exploring his roots and identity through Western and Asian perspectives.

While Ong’s strategic Asian essentialism may ostensibly be articulated as a critique of Western cultural hegemony, *Lear* reproduces the same logic of appropriation and accumulation underlying the Singaporean ideology of taking the best of East and West in its construction of New Asia. Davis argues that *Lear* reduces reflexivity to a trope, to a “staged reflexivity”; it stages an intersection of mutually constitutive gazes for New Asia, from both East and West. New Asia is constituted as the latest in othering—the latest object of desire—desired by both the Asians (self-orientalizing or otherwise) who articulate or embrace it and the Westerners who desire the Asian other, but forever deny themselves any real understanding so that it always remains an other for consumption. Bharucha, speaking of another TheatreWorks production, comments on how, “ultimately, Ong would seem to accept that there is no other choice available but to ‘consume the Other.’”

To the credit of Ong and his colleagues at TheatreWorks, they have tried to respond to [the] predicament of the workers, but on their own terms. Unfortunately, the trap of self-reflexivity is so intense that under the pretext of examining the Other, the director and actors ultimately land up talking about themselves. Thus, what comes through in *Workhorse Afloat* is not so much the dehumanization of foreign labor but, once again, a coming to terms with the hybrid cultural identities of contemporary (Chinese) Singaporeans, who no longer need the “authenticity” of the mainland as a point of reference.<sup>38</sup>

In *Workhorse*, Ong reflects on his own desire and privileged gaze, problematizing them for a moment, but it is a moment foreclosed; reflexivity becomes an alibi to appropriate Asia. I would contend that in *Workhorse* and *Lear* Ong has not read anything that closely yet; that happens when the forms

and themes have been inhabited by the artist and the forms and themes have likewise inhabited the artistic processes. What Ong seems to have done with virtuosity is appropriate, not inhabit.

If one takes the participants of FCP at their word when they privilege the workshop over the production, if one even supposes the strategy was to use spectacle to fund the workshop's intimate intercultural processes, then what kind of cultural politics is this, that purportedly provides an "authentic" experience to the insider-participant-performer, while being complicit in the propagation of authenticity as spectacle for the mere arts consumer (and critic)? Further questions regarding the cultural politics of *Lear* lie in the missed opportunities that Bharucha and Davis point out. Why not problematize the techniques of juxtaposition and rupture? Why not problematize the culturalist logic that underpins this brand of interculturalism? Perhaps what is most telling about the cultural politics of New Asia is that it exhibits no indebtedness to history, no commitment to the task of critically reworking inheritances, but is content to authenticate itself through its own spectacular reflection.

### Looking about Singapore

In representing *Lear* as both exemplary and spectacle, in representing the spectacle as representative of Singapore and vice versa, I have meant to maintain a tension. If I have spoken the language of the exemplary, if I have risked essentializing the spectacle as the ultimate abstraction, it is, on the one hand, because I am sympathetic to Debord—for whom the only option was to struggle to speak an outside or other while being within the spectacle, of "talking its language to some degree"<sup>39</sup>—and, on the other hand, it is in order to maintain a tension between the exemplary and the anecdotal.<sup>40</sup>

I would like to draw to a close by juxtaposing this image that I have been repeatedly invoking, a New Asia as the telos of late capitalism, with other images. The contradictions are not just in the relentless appropriations and strategic New Asian essentialisms, the claims to authenticity and staged reflexivities, or the apparent lack of plurality of Singapore time and the unwavering commitment to globalization. I would like to deepen those contradictions, multiply those representations. It would not suffice to juxtapose

a New Asian *Lear* with one other artwork, but perhaps two might set in motion a process, and that is about all that I can offer in this remaining space—two anecdotes. In writing about a work of art, my hope is to put into crisis the concepts and arguments with which I approach an interpretation. Such a crisis may not happen here in this essay. Still, another crisis may be at stake—again, if that is not too eschatological a word to describe the condition of contemporary art.<sup>41</sup> To reiterate the question that has haunted this text: How—in a time when everything can be art, when history is rendered abstract through endless appropriations and citations—can art resist becoming part of the constant “negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*”?<sup>42</sup>

1. Amanda Heng was part of a triple bill in the September 2000 session of the program series [*names changed to protect the innocent*], The Necessary Stage’s platform for experimental performance. An audience of around forty gathered at the theater company and, escorted by staff, ambled toward the nearby Parkway Parade shopping/office complex and hawker center/food court.<sup>43</sup> I am sure that many, like myself, while not terribly eager with anticipation, were curious about what was going to happen. Since the piece was part of the series *Let’s Walk*, there was an expectation that it would involve, obviously, some walking. (In an earlier piece, Heng, with the aid of a mirror, walked backward around the LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts with a shoe in her mouth.) I think it’s safe to say that everyone was surprised, when we arrived at the busy hawker center, to find Heng laying pink tablecloths on the normally unadorned, plastic-coated tabletops. Some of the hawker center crowd must have been wondering what this woman was doing; I am certain no one knew her as a “major” contemporary artist.<sup>44</sup> Then the two groups of people recognized each other. The hawker center crowd saw “us,” the just-arrived art audience, and we saw them, as *already there, already looking*. Some of the art audience began sitting down. Heng finished covering tables and proceeded to serve food. She asked a member of the art audience to cut through her T-shirt and retrieve a packet, inside which was some money, and she repaid members of the audience the price of admission for the evening’s performances. Finally, she led us back to The Necessary Stage, laying a long strip of red carpet on the ground for us to walk on.

For me, that moment of arrival at the hawker center revealed so much that is at stake in “looking” in art. The audience sees itself looking, and sees another “audience,” this one unmarked as an audience, let alone an “art” audience, which then also sees itself looking. It was a moment in which a slightly odd gesture of “adding value for the consumer”—an unexpected gift or present—is revealed to be a work of art, and both the art audience and the hawker center crowd see this transformation happening then and there. A fine moment that cuts between—yet at the same time welds—public and art spaces, everyday objects, moments, and crowds, and the complex game of looks, frames, and privileges that is art. But then, for me at least, the rest of Heng’s performance diffused that moment. When she began serving us free food, it seemed that her “performance” had started. And her repaying the admission price seemed less a continuation of the gift, or even the repayment of a debt, but instead split the “audience” from the “crowd.” If she had stopped when she finished laying the last tablecloth, perhaps the “performance” as a separate thing would never have materialized, and there would not have been that split. But, for a moment, everyone would have been intersected by mutually constitutive gazes—each group recognizing itself as the other’s other, and each group’s space inhabited by the other’s.<sup>45</sup>

2. While she now lives in Sydney, Australia, Simryn Gill’s “hometown,” as it were, has always been Port Dickson, Malaysia. She was, however, born in Singapore, and for a time in the 1990s this was where she lived and practiced art—for instance, her first major work employing photography, *Forest* (1997), a series of large black and white photographs of installations, was partly produced here.<sup>46</sup> (In citing Gill as part of my story about contemporary art and Singapore, a number of issues surface: once again Gill’s “biography” and “location” are points of consideration; then there is the matter of Singapore and Malaysia being each other’s others, as well as their intersecting colonial pasts being their present-day others.<sup>47</sup> While I cannot elaborate on those topics here, one issue is pertinent to my purpose—that of locating Gill’s presence in my narrative through an anecdotal link. This is also to argue that “inhabiting” isn’t about an essential connection to that which is inhabited, but about commitments and meaningful encounters.)

*Forest* itself could be seen as part of a photographic series; it was followed by *Vegetation* (1999), then *Rampant* (1999), and, recently, *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (see color plates 5 and 6). Exhibited at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in early 2001 as a set of type-C prints, each about thirty-six by thirty-six inches, *A Small Town* was published in late 2000 as a limited-edition book by the Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan (the photos in the textless book are a little smaller than four by four inches). Shot entirely in Port Dickson, each photo is of a single person, a pair of people, or a small group of friends, relatives, or acquaintances, standing or sitting portraitlike in their homes, by the seaside, in a parking lot, rubber plantation, golf club, coffee shop, or some other spot in or about town. The subjects pose facing the viewer—as if “they” are looking right back at “us”—the only thing is that their faces are obscured by masks constructed from tropical fruits: mangosteen, durian, rambutan, pineapple, and so on.

To look at Gill’s photographic artwork, from *Forest* to *A Small Town*, is to encounter the simultaneous singularity and multiplicity within the photographic image. Her *mise-en-scènes* are staged, to be sure; they are documents of painstakingly constructed installations. In talking about her coming to photography, after years of practice in other media, Gill recalls how a photograph always seemed so complete in itself, as if it were confirming some natural truth about the subject in the picture. Then when she started taking photos, the endless possibilities became sometimes daunting. For Gill this only revealed that the essential constructedness of pictures is nevertheless consistent with their appearing whole.<sup>48</sup> Or perhaps rather than a consistency, what is at stake is a tension between the singular apparent completeness of the image, and the radically multiple possibilities of its construction. Gill’s photographic works hitherto have employed a common structure: a particular intervention is repeated in different places. Why the sets of repetitions? In my reading, what happens is that through repetition, first a pictorial grammar is established, and then a tension is maintained between each individual image and the whole set. It is as if the repetitions were an absurd attempt to naturalize an absurd intervention. The question of number becomes crucial: after how many repetitions is the tension no longer maintained, but dissipated? Furthermore, I take this tension to suggest that Gill’s photos, which can evoke so many narratives—anthropological,

ethnological, colonial, postcolonial, national, racial, class, botanical, nostalgic, and personal—do not so much accumulate to become a counternarrative, but, like anecdotes, the images comprise and refract and possibly even rupture these larger narratives.

Besides repetition, scale plays a key role in all Gill's photographic work. In *A Small Town*, the masks block out every portrait sitter's face and gaze, thus partially erasing their identities, but it is as if the exotic variety of the masks then perversely overethnicizes these subjects. If the scale of the images were much larger, their subversive humor—which, among other things, pokes fun at anthropology as taxonomy—might be undermined and the series susceptible to looking like a spectacle of the artist as ethnographer. But presented in a small book, their diminutive size gives them a lightness; they are like puns with all the gravity of throwaway family Polaroids. Peering into the pictures may seem like an act of intruding into the spaces of these fruited people, but photography often works by the paradox of seeming to allow us entry into an other space, only to put that other into our space, especially when the pictures are in a book in hand. And, of course, the book is the exemplary form of narrative. Gill's book, however, is punctuated by erasures; the question is are these erasures like openings, or are they made seamless by the very spectacle of photography? My incomplete answer is framed by my reading of how Gill's pictures deal with the dimension of time.

*A Small Town* refers not just to the latest, but, at particular moments, is haunted by the previous turn of the century as well. The work spans both ends of a century; it looks backward and forward. Indeed, a certain desire for “the future”—that characteristically modern fantasy of a distant tomorrow as a better if not outright utopian place—is a peculiar blend of nostalgia and historicism. It is a dreaming for what is to come that belies a dreaming of what is to come back. We may recognize that “progress” has its social and ecological costs, but underlying our pact with modernity is a desire that some day in “the future,” there will be a time when the unity of life will be restored. This “unity” is only conceivable to us now, in our epoch of speed and spectacle, as an idyllic longing. Benjamin says that “historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past.”<sup>49</sup> Chakrabarty argues that historicism persists; the nineteenth century is not gone; the relationship between the “Not Yet” and the “Now” is not a binary opposition, an “Either/Or”; rather, it is an “And.”<sup>50</sup>

Gill's pictures represent the multiplicity of our present time by conjoining the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Yet precisely because of this multiplicity, there is a certain time-out-of-jointedness about *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century*. Derrida begins "Specters" by "maintaining now the specters of Marx. (But *maintaining now* . . . without conjuncture. A disjointed or disadjusted now, 'out of joint,' a disjointed now that always risks maintaining nothing together in the assured conjunction of some context whose border would still be determinable.)"<sup>51</sup> Gill's pictures also evoke a singularly, radically open time: a now without "and" or "end."

## Notes

I would like to thank Rustom Bharucha, Kevin Chua, and Ray Langenbach for their comments on the text.

- 1 In a news telecast on September 28, 2000, Channel NewsAsia reported that "Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is confident that Singapore-grown news channel, Channel NewsAsia, has what it takes to make it in the region despite doubts some may have about its editorial independence. . . . General Lee said: 'Some might harbor doubts about Channel NewsAsia's editorial independence, given that it is a subsidiary of MediaCorp which is wholly owned by the Singapore Government. We plan to list MediaCorp soon and subject it to the discipline and rules of a private company.'" The report is available at [www.channelnewsasia.com](http://www.channelnewsasia.com).
- 2 See "Asian Official Launch of Channel NewsAsia (International) Achieves Phase One Objective of Reaching 5.5 Million Households in Asia," September 28, 2000, at [www.channelnewsasia.com](http://www.channelnewsasia.com).
- 3 As Debord once said: "The administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such 'instant' communication." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), 19. He also noted that "the reality of time has been replaced by its *publicity*" (113).
- 4 My use of the term *covert spectacle* derives from Ray Langenbach, an American performance artist and theorist who has been based in Malaysia and Singapore for over ten years. Langenbach uses the term to describe the already-gazing-at spectacle of late capitalist propaganda. By explicitly shouting at you that it is propaganda, it becomes, paradoxically, invisible; it becomes even more sophisticated propaganda. In Singapore, the ultrapanoptic state is likewise always already looking at you before you look at it. Singaporean propaganda, by an almost ridiculous self-evidence, interpellates an ironic recognition that this is propaganda, while nevertheless remaining a blind spot in the subject's imagining of his or her own identity.
- 5 Koh Buck Song, "Liberalizing the Arts Takes Time," *Straits Times*, February 8, 1994.

- 6 For a discussion of the controversy, see *Looking at Culture*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan et al. (Singapore: independently published, 1996). The publication of *Looking at Culture* itself generated a small controversy. Originally intended as a special issue of *Commentary*, the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) journal, the NUSS management committee decided to scrap it, “fearing that its latest issue would annoy the government” (*Straits Times*, October 29, 1994). The editors, of which I was one, went on to publish the volume independently. Popular fiction writer Catherine Lim referred to *Commentary* when she wrote in the *Straits Times* about the political climate in Singapore (November 20, 1994). Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s response to Lim was swift and severe; he said she should either join a political party or shut up, as she had no place attempting to “set the political agenda from outside the political arena” (*Sunday Times*, December 4, 1994). To his credit, Koh Buck Song defended *Commentary* (*Straits Times*, November 14, 1994), saying that the journal made a genuine contribution to debate on social and cultural issues.
- 7 Koh Buck Song, “Were the Bedroom Scenes in *Schindler’s List* Really Necessary?” *Straits Times*, March 31, 1994.
- 8 Koh Buck Song, “Context Is Crucial in the Rating of Movies,” *Straits Times*, April 10, 1995.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Richard Sieburth, “Benjamin the Scrivener,” in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 23.
- 10 Benjamin writes: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit].” See “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 261.
- 11 James Elkins, “How Close Can We Come to Admitting We’re Really Writing Mostly about Ourselves?” lecture given at the College Art Association meeting, New York, February 2000. It is posted on the author’s Web site, [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com).
- 12 See, for instance, Lee Weng Choy, “McNationalism in Singapore,” in *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Yao Souchou (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), 95–116; and “Just What Is It That Makes the Term Global-Local So Widely Cited, yet So Annoying?” in *Flight Patterns*, exhibition catalog, ed. Cornelia H. Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 134–43.
- 13 “Singapore is New Asia” is a slogan for the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and the National Arts Council (NAC). Tourism, of course, plays a part in all nationalism, but in Singapore the STB wields enormous power over the country’s cultural development. A case in point: when the Chinatown district was earmarked for redevelopment, it was not the National Heritage Board, or the Ministry of Community Development, but the STB that was responsible for envisioning a revitalized Chinatown. The consequence, as critics of the STB’s plans contend, is that Chinatown will be turned into a theme park of itself. As for the NAC’s formulation of “New Asia,” a recent brochure for promoting local performing arts proclaimed: “Singapore is New Asia, a thriving Asian city with a busy arts scene influenced by the traditional Asian

- heritage of its multicultural population and the contemporary beat of a young cosmopolitan city. Emerging from this confluence is a dynamism of artistic energy where tradition and modernity both co-exist and fuse in fresh and exciting forms of dance, music and theater.” From *New Asia on Stage: Performing Arts Singapore* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2000).
- 14 Langenbach, quoted in “Just What Is It,” 141–42. In my citation for the present essay, I have substituted my word “desire” for his word “need.”
  - 15 See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), and *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste* (Amsterdam: G& B Arts International, 1998).
  - 16 In the early 1990s, Singapore’s leaders and various other pundits entertained the fantasy—expressed in the discourse of Asian values—that this island city-state might be *the* model for China’s future. For a discussion on Asian values, see, for instance, “Asian Ways: Asian Values Revisited,” ed. Raul Pertierra, special issue of *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 14 (1999).
  - 17 Benjamin: “The concept of progress should be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things ‘just keep on going’ is the catastrophe. Not something that is impending at any particular time ahead, but something that is always given.” See “N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress],” in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 64.
  - 18 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
  - 19 Jacques Derrida, “Specters of Marx,” *New Left Review*, no. 205 (1994): 33–34. See also *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).
  - 20 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Opening Keynote Address,” in *“We Asians”: Between Past and Future*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon et al. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 39.
  - 21 In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 257–58, Benjamin provides a caption for Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*: “His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”
  - 22 Derrida, “Specters of Marx,” 36.
  - 23 For a discussion of the failed encounter or “faux bond” between Derrida and his critics and a general investigation of his Anglo-American reception, see Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
  - 24 Derrida, “Specters of Marx,” 58.
  - 25 “SM Lee Cautions Developing Nations on Pitfalls of Debt Relief,” *Straits Times*, October 17, 2000.

- 26 Chakrabarty, "Opening Keynote Address," 23.
- 27 Lee Kuan Yew argued in favor of merging with the peninsula during the struggles for independence from Britain and has asserted that Singapore's separation from Malaysia was at first unimaginable for him—it was not yet ready to face the world on its own, without a domestic market for its economic output. Of course, Singapore since independence has proved otherwise, thriving on the basis of its export-oriented economic growth. See the first volume of Lee's memoirs *The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998). For a discussion on the importance of "forgetting" in Singapore nationalism, see Janadas Devan, "My Country and My People: Forgetting to Remember," in *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon et al. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), 21–33.
- 28 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 114.
- 29 Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 34.
- 30 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 131–33.
- 31 Janadas Devan argues that Asian values constitute "an ideological machinery that is continuous with the Orientalism of imperial metropolitan powers. Singapore, indeed, may well be the most perfect modern fulfillment of the Orientalist project—conceived and executed, this time, by 'Orientals' themselves. No other Asian country has created as efficient a mechanism for selecting, defining and controlling an 'Asian' identity that is so fully consonant with the requirements of a modern market, even as it sets aside as waste what it deems decadent and dangerous in the West. . . . The logic is impeccable: Singapore fears becoming like America, not because it fears losing its Asian soul, but because becoming like America will weaken its ability to compete successfully in the global market, become a full-blown developed economy, and thereby become like America. Singapore, in other words, has to remain Asian in order to become Western." From "Strange Bedfellows: Lee Kuan Yew and Samuel Huntington" (unpublished essay, written in 1997). My formulation of "define and rule" and claims to authenticity derives from Lucy Davis, "Making Difference—So Easy to Enjoy So Hard to Forget," her dissertation on culturalism, visual culture, and political-aesthetic strategies in Singapore (Roskilde University, Denmark, 2001).
- 32 For a discussion of Singapore's fixation with becoming world-class, see, for instance, Lee, "Just What Is It." As for *gracious living*, the term has been used by everyone from the prime minister to advertisers of private condominiums to denote the recent national emphasis on becoming a "global city for the arts"—yet another popular catchphrase that signifies the aspirations of a newly wealthy Singapore. Victor R. Savage, for instance, notes that "as Singaporeans climb the development ladder, arts programming has to be positioned for better-educated, wider-experienced and articulate communities looking to 'gracious living' and expanding social participation." See Savage, "Renaissance City: Crossing Boundaries for the Arts," in *inform.educate.entertain@sg: Arts and Media in Singapore*, ed. Koh Siong Ling et al. (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000), 20.

- 33 In addition to Rustom Bharucha and Lucy Davis, whom I cite in this essay, other commentaries include C. J. W.-L. Wee, "The 'New Asian' Modern in the Theatre: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear," Center for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. 29 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2001); a dissertation by Lee Chee Keng (National University of Singapore, 2000); and Lee Weng Choy, "Ong Ken Sen's *Lear* and the Appropriate 'New Asia,'" *Substance* (May–June 1999): 13–15.
- 34 Aired on MediaCorp TV 12 Arts Central, February 25, 2001.
- 35 Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theater in an Age of Globalization* (London: Athlone/Continuum, 2000, and Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).
- 36 Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of Lear," Center for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. 21 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2000), 37.
- 37 Lucy Davis, "Making Difference"; all citations are from sec. 2, trope 1, chap. 2.
- 38 Bharucha, "Consumed," 44–46.
- 39 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 15.
- 40 Or, in other words, between what the French call the *grand récit* and what Joel Fineman calls the *historeme*, "the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact"; see Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Vesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 57. Fineman proposes that "the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports" (61). However, I have been using the word *exemplary* in a different sense than he has: I do not mean, as he does, what is historically significant and representative. For Fineman, the purpose of an anecdote is to single out an exemplary event, since not all events are equally representative or significant. In contrast, what I mean by the exemplary is that it is essentially teleological; it is singular not so much by being interesting or typical or contingent, but in signaling the narrative closure of a telos, it both telescopes and collapses time into a singularity. To write history in terms of the exemplary is to predicate history on the teleological, which is the opposite of what I want to do in telling this story of contemporary art and Singapore.
- 41 Fineman notes that Thucydides conceived his history based on the model of the medical case history, where the notion of *crisis*—a technical medical term for the moment when a disease completes its predetermined and internally directed course—translates into a dramatic climax of events. The purpose of the medical case history was to enable physicians to predict prognoses of an illness before it ran its full course and thus treat the disease. Not surprisingly, crisis plays a fundamental role in Singapore's imagining of itself. Former minister for information and the arts George Yeo has said: "There's always a certain anxiety in Singapore that our

geographic, economic, and political positions are vulnerable. This anxiety is also a galvanizing force. . . . Our success is the result of anxiety, and the anxiety is never assuaged by the success” (quoted in Louis Kraar, “Singapore—A Model for the World?” reprinted in the *Straits Times*, July 15, 1997). Sanjay Krishnan writes: “These are fast times. Singapore has openly come to see itself as expecting the worst. Thus it constantly subjects itself to change in order to anticipate and prevent the worst from happening. We are obsessed with maintaining our ‘cutting edge,’ fighting ‘complacency,’ and being ‘the best.’ . . . These developments, and what I have called the philosophy of ‘speed,’ are part of the logic of progress that we have used to define our primary objective as a nation. . . . But the success of speed or progress is based on the idea of perpetual crisis (that is, phenomenal profit is the only thing that keeps away ‘starvation’) which, because it believes itself permanently threatened, will not allow us to consider our present and immediate past as a basis for genuine communal and social understanding.” See “Two Stories at the Cost of One City,” *Commentary* 10 (1992): 79–87.

- 42 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 14.
- 43 Hawker centers are the cheapest and most popular places to eat in Singapore; they are sheltered food courts with several stalls and a common eating area with basic tables and stools, often affixed to the ground, lined in rows. Many of the old hawker centers have been torn down to make way for more modern, air-conditioned food courts.
- 44 The term *major artist* certainly needs unpacking, but if being “major” means participation in a number of international art exhibitions like the Fukuoka Triennial, the Havana Biennale, or the Queensland Art Gallery’s Asia-Pacific Triennial, and appearing in international art publications, then Heng fits the bill. For more about Heng, see Natalie King, “Performing Bodies,” *ART AsiaPacific* 3 (1996): 81–85; and Susie Lingham, “In Her Image,” in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalog (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), 128.
- 45 But why dispose of what seem like moments of weakness in the work? Aren’t the contradictions what make it possible to speak to the work critically in the first place? Moreover, why privilege only one reading of Heng’s performance? There were other negotiations besides the different looks between the hawker center crowd and the art audience—for instance, the negotiations between Heng and the theater company, between her and the people at the hawker center, her and the passersby on the walk back to the theater, and so on. Nevertheless, in this case, I believe that the most interesting rupture was at the level of the performance as spectacle—the issue of the look. Still, the point is that too often interpretations offer a single reading of a work—and shouldn’t the purpose of an interpretation be to open up multiple readings of a work? These questions are also questions about how to write anecdotes, how to single out and emphasize, but they are questions I can only leave open for now.
- 46 The thirty-odd installations photographed in *Forest* are of bits of text embedded in vegetation: various books cut up and pasted together into long strips hanging like aerial roots from a ficus tree, or torn into shapes and grafted onto leaves. The photographs are on a large scale; in

every case one can always read some of the text. Kevin Chua's essay on *Forest*, "Simryn Gill and Migration's Capital," *Art Journal* 61 (2002): 5–21, offers an excellent reading of the work.

- 47 See Lee Weng Choy, "Local Coconuts: Simryn Gill and the Politics of Identity," *ART Asia-Pacific* 16 (1997): 56–63, for a critique of the biographical approach to Gill's work: "Provide an interpretation of the art, then tie it to biography—a significant proportion of writing about Simryn Gill makes the point both to explain her biography and use it as an explanation. She is of course not the only artist to get such treatment. . . . The return of biography's authority . . . has become symptomatic of a larger turn in contemporary social discourse, where identity and culture have subsumed everything political. Politics has become reduced to the performance of representations [and, one might add, location]. My own discussion of Gill attempts to problematize this politics of representation. Rather than use her to represent postcoloniality, yet again, my aim is to examine some of our presumptions when we project this function onto her and her work" (58).
- 48 From an unpublished MFA thesis draft by Simryn Gill, University of Western Sydney, 2001.
- 49 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.
- 50 Chakrabarty, "Opening Keynote Address," 26.
- 51 Derrida, "Specters of Marx," 31.