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## ART AND CENSORSHIP IN SINGAPORE: CATCH 22?

**SIMON FUJIWARA**, *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*, 2010, mixed-media room installation, shown in its entirety at PinchukArtCentre, Kiev. Private collection, London.

FEATURES BY SUSIE LINGHAM FROM NOV/DEC 2011

SINGAPORE

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### 2011: Pornography, Art & the Law

Singapore, known around the world for its cleanliness, social order and rapid technological advancement, has been forging ahead in the arts over the past decade. However, within this arts-forward environment, censorship remains, and there is a lingering sense of something like a quota on free expression. As in any country, relations between art, the state, censorship and the role of the art institution are often fraught with contradictions. The latest case of censorship, at the 2011 Singapore Biennale, calls to mind controversial moments over the last two decades. With the advent of policy-making to develop the arts in Singapore, it is increasingly apparent that there should be some sort of safeguarded exceptions or "immunity" in the case of artistic expressions.

The year started with a silencing at the inaugural Art Stage Singapore art fair in January, held at the glitzy Marina Bay Sands, which is also the site of one of two new casinos in the country. Indian artist T. Venkanna, represented by Gallery Maskara, did a performance work in the nude, where he sat behind a black curtain, with a Frida Kahlo reproduction in the background, and where visitors could take a picture with him as a *tableau vivant* version of the painting. Despite an advisory about content

and age restriction being displayed at the booth, the show had to be canceled due to a media outcry. The gallery's owner, Abhay Maskara, told the *Straits Times* (Singapore's main newspaper) that the gallery was asked to stop the performance, yet did not specify by whom.

Only months later, in March of this year, the Singapore Biennale opened; it was the event's third iteration but the first to have a Singaporean artist—in this case Matthew Ngui—appointed artistic director. Called "Open House," the exhibition played on the ideas of hospitality, trade, cultural exchange and "openness" to artistic processes and expression. Yet this curatorial approach was challenged within the first few days of the exhibition. The Japanese-British artist Simon Fujiwara's work, *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* (2010), was censored by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), despite appropriate advisory notices put up by the museum itself as organizer, venue provider and manager of the Biennale. More explicitly homoerotic than political in content, the work was considered to be in breach of the law on pornography by the museum, and contextually relevant gay pornographic magazines were removed from the installation without prior consultation with either the artist, biennale director Ngui or curators Russell Storer and Trevor Smith. When the curatorial team and artist were informed a little later, extended discussions followed, and the negotiations took so long that the temporary closure of the work called for by the artist became, by default, permanent, as the Biennale itself drew to a close.

During the opening weekend, Fujiwara also did a lecture performance that included reading extracts of erotica, which went on without incident. The artist's own statement describes the work thus:

*Welcome to the Hotel Munber* is a work that examines the violent oppression of human freedom and the censorship of homosexual literature under General Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship in 1970s Spain. The installation emerged from a series of short fictions and performances that was inspired by the lives of my parents who were proprietors of a hotel bar during this period.

The gallery-room-sized installation was a re-creation of the 1970s Spanish hotel bar owned by Fujiwara's Japanese father and British mother. It featured fake legs of suspended ham, suggestively arranged objects reflecting a fixation with male genitalia, a certain reference to war and violence, "naughty" collages and egg-splattered objects, as well as gay pornographic magazines. These magazines were visible to visitors, but not within reach, since they were "positioned on an elevated shelf . . . where they could only be seen reflected in a mirror," as Ngui later explained. Apparently, however, one copy was within reach on a rack near the entrance of the space, placed beneath an original 1975 newspaper showing Franco lying in state. But, as the artist explained, the magazine was tied to the rack with cord, deterring visitors from picking it up. Besides, according to Ngui, the installation was to be "carefully invigilated so that visitors could be briefed and no part of the installation was to be touched or handled." Exhibition co-curator Storer stated there were additional labels not to touch the works, a message the museum and its guards were requested to remind viewers





**SIMON FUJIWARA.** *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* (detail), 2010, sausages, a glass, napkins, dartboard and calendar, displayed as part of the room installation. Installation view at PinchukArtCentre, Kiev. Private collection, London.

of.

To clarify the matter and contextualize its decision, the SAM, currently under the directorship of Tan Boon Hui, issued a statement, part of which noted:

As it was during the opening week of the Biennale, the Museum made the call to keep the installation open and hence accessible to the public but removing the magazines. The curators were immediately informed on the same day so that they could alert the artist and seek his response. Upon the artist's request, we subsequently closed the exhibit while all parties collectively discussed how it could be re-opened. On hindsight, the Museum agrees that it should have instead closed the entire work and we sincerely apologize for the distress this has caused the artist.

Interestingly, there were other works in the museum featuring nudity and sexually explicit content, all having the necessary advisory notices. However, it appeared that Fujiwara had transgressed the local law and, ironically, raised the very specter he was attempting to exorcise: the censorship of "homosexual literature." As all pornography, heterosexual or homosexual, is illegal in Singapore, the magazines were quietly removed three days after the preview weekend. This intervention could be seen as an attempt to keep the work within the law and avert the possible imposition of a fine, and/or imprisonment of the artist. However, in a work that centered around (homo)sexual oppression and censorship, perhaps the removal of the magazines became intolerably ironic for the artist.

Fujiwara's work, although premised on autobiography, heavily references the work of French writer-philosopher Georges Bataille, and seems to be an homage to his novel *Story of the Eye* (1928) in particular—a poetic piece of partly autobiographical literary surrealism that the author claimed related to memories of his blind father. Bataille's purposeful transgression was in resistance to the moral authority of the church and religion. Fujiwara replaced this "enemy" with the oppressive political regime of Franco's fascist Spain.

*Frieze* co-editor Jennifer Higgie, in her article "Censorship and the Art World," links Fujiwara's censored work with that of Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil's installation in a public square at the 10th Sharjah Biennial this year (*Maportaliche / Ecritures Sauvages* ["It Has No Importance / Wild Writings,"] 2011), whose religious references were deemed blasphemous, leading to public condemnation. Higgie asked:

choosing to present work in countries that not only have strict blasphemy and censorship laws but in which homosexuality is illegal, did the curators choose to defy local laws as a symbolic gesture or did they assume that the framework of an international art event would somehow protect them? . . . Unlike the US, both Sharjah and Singapore have never claimed to be anything but censorious.

Section 292 of the Singaporean law enumerates instances in which "erotic" material may be considered "obscene," and so "be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 months, or with fine, or with both." The

only exceptions, in which such an “object” is acceptable, are: a) when authorized by the law, and b) in the context of religion, with specific reference to temple imagery. Therefore, there should not have been any assumption that the pornographic magazines were any less illegal simply because they were in a museum and in the context of art. It is apparent that there must have been a serious gap in communication over details of the artwork, and potential legal problems, between artist, curators and museum, partners in the biennale’s organization and presentation.

The curators had informed the museum that there would be homoerotic “imagery” displayed, and since visitors were not going to be allowed to flip through them, they had, not unreasonably, assumed that the magazines would be classified as erotic images. Significantly, what seems to have been overlooked by all parties is the fact that the said magazines are 1970s vintage collectible objects. In this context, could their pornographic use value not be perceived as having transcended into erotica? As erotic artifacts of a bygone era, they have gone beyond their original pornographic function, even in countries where pornography is legal, since these particular magazines already belong to a private collector, and as such are out of circulation.

While the fact that pornography is illegal in Singapore made the installation problematic, the museum’s preemptive intervention may not have been necessary. The immunity of the museum as a specialized venue for an international art event could have been negotiated for and contextualized legitimately. For should the museum not have been allowed to defend its context as a venue for the proper presentation of artistic expression—even if not a literal “temple”? Isn’t the context of art unique and specific? Art, particularly in a secular society, should be recognized as that space of exception.

Pornography may be censored and hence inaccessible on Singapore’s streets, in bookshops, and on the country’s Internet, but tech-savvy locals are able to circumnavigate these restrictions, making the regulation of access to pornography increasingly irrelevant. Another moot point: Section 377A of the Penal Code deems sex between men a crime, but apparently the law in this instance may not necessarily or actively be enforced—the homosexual lifestyle is of course not at all uncommon in Singapore.

#### **1994: The Expression of Oppression**

In 1994—before the present drive to bolster the arts, when the public was generally uninformed about contemporary art—the gallery manager of the artists’ initiative 5th Passage, along with local artist Josef Ng, who had just done a performance at 5th Passage’s art space, were both prosecuted by the Singapore High Court. In what is one of the darkest moments of Singapore’s contemporary art scene, the artists’ initiative was charged for breaching the conditions of the Public Entertainment License it had lawfully applied for, the *only* type of license available for any performance genre at the time. And this despite the group having taken its own initiative to put up a clearly visible advisory and a disclaimer, as co-organizers of a ticketed event in a designated art space. The artist, Ng, was also charged for committing an

(Above and below) Video stills documenting ZUNZI's *Lee's Garden*, 1998, a political cartoon featuring caricatures of then prime minister Goh Chok Tong and minister mentor Lee Kuan Yew, being removed by officials from the Singapore Art Museum. Video by Jeremy Hiah, stills courtesy Ray Langenbach.

“obscene act in public.”

The performance was part of the Artists' General Assembly (AGA), a weeklong event jointly organized by 5th Passage and the Artists Village. Ng pleaded guilty, was fined, and banned for his performance, *Brother Cane*, which was a sensitively aestheticized protest against the violation of the right to privacy of 12 homosexual men, whose identities were published in *The Straits Times* and whose police apprehension was by purportedly dubious means, though details still remain uncertain. Particular homosexual acts were, and still could be, regarded as criminal offences, and transgressors then were subject to caning by the state. Ng's critical performance—in which he was not at any time completely naked—“re-created” this mode of punishment by cane. It ended with the media-sensationalized moment of “protest,” when Ng trimmed his pubic hair (with his back turned to the audience). *The New Paper* tabloid report zoomed in and blew up this image, which was accompanied by a report that was provocatively headlined and riddled with factual errors.

No wonder, though, that the incident was pursued all the way up to the High Court to be made an example of: *Brother Cane* could be seen to be an artistic critique of the police, the role of the press, and the law. So, for a decade afterward, performance art itself was effectively banned: funding ceased and there was the imposition of a prohibitively high cash deposit before any performance could occur. 5th Passage was blacklisted and, due to the negative publicity generated, evicted from their premises.

It is significant that, 17 years later, the latest art censorship controversy spins once again around homosexuality, male nudity and the notion of obscenity, yet contextually is altogether different. Post-1994, after years of negotiations and conversations between the Media Development Authority and the artistic and academic communities, Singapore finally forged a more nuanced license for artistic performance that takes the special contextual conditions of artistic practice into consideration. But there is always the lingering question of when the law will or will not be enforced.





### **1998: Censored Caricature, “Insensitivity” & Diplomatic “Disaster”**

However, the real taboo in Singapore thus far has been political dissent and not sex or nudity per se. Criticism of the government and its policies, even in jest, has been seriously and consistently suppressed, and self-censorship is prevalent. In 1998, the SAM, then with director Kwok Kian Chow at the helm, hosted ARX 5 (Artists’ Regional Exchange), a long-running program initiated by Australia, involving 15 artists from Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Yet, what happened raised diplomatic hell: the work of Zunzi, a well-known Hong Kong artist and caricaturist, was removed from the museum’s walls by its staff (again on instructions from a quarter that remains vague), and put into a rubbish bin. Needless to say, the artist was not consulted, and no negotiations took place at all. The incident unleashed mutual accusations of diplomatic and cultural “insensitivity” between Singaporean authorities and the Hong Kong artist, with repercussions in the Hong Kong press and elsewhere.

Zunzi’s wrath-incurring caricature was called *Lee’s Garden*, and from accounts of those who saw it before it was swiftly taken down before opening night, it appears to have been an enlargement, pieced together from A4-sized ink-jet printouts, of a caricature of then prime minister Goh Chok Tong wielding pest-control gear, with senior

minister and former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew patting him on the back. The image apparently alluded to the fact that Singapore was a controlled environment, and that the prime minister was still being directed by the ex-prime minister. Whether defamatory, or merely inflammatory, it was political commentary, and had crossed an invisible line of transgression.

Whether Zunzi was in effect ventriloquizing common Singaporean sentiment, and whether the censorship only proved him right, *all* the artists were asked to sign a “Contractual Agreement,” drawn up between ARX and SAM. It was entitled “This agreement for Engagement of Artist,” dated September 10, 1998, and included:

(a) the work produced and presented . . . will not be defamatory, offensive or obscene or contravene in any way the law of the place where a Residency occurs.

Muzzled by this contract on artistic expression, Zunzi can be perceived to have been, provocatively or otherwise, attempting to push the boundaries by presenting a political cartoon. The nature of the reaction though was certainly not merely objection to “cultural insensitivity,” as was the refrain. The artist should have been allowed to take responsibility for his expression and given the opportunity to explicate and rationalize his work.

### 2008: Commissioned & Conspicuous

In stark contrast to these recent and not-so-recent events, in 2008 the National Museum of Singapore commissioned the Indonesian sculptor Titarubi to create a work for the rotunda of its magnificent classical colonial building. The artist constructed a monumental replica of Michelangelo’s *David* (1501-04) in fiberglass, clad it in a tight skin of pink batik-like floral fabric and called it *Surrounding David* (2008). Conceptually, the commissioned work was richly and provocatively allusive, even as it referenced recognizably “classical” precedents. The Asian female sculptor ironically “clothed” and yet exposed the Western icon’s male homoeroticism, thereby making more apparent its maker’s homosexual orientation, and, at the same time, iconoclastically feminizing *David* through the visual association with Asian womanhood.

The work was breathtaking for many reasons—chiefly, for *where* it was. The moment you stood outside the grand entrance of the museum, you were confronted by an enormous pair of stocking-clad male legs in a familiar pose framed by the arched doorway; and as you entered, you raised your eyes to behold the naked yet “clothed” and very recognizable *David*, his genitalia looming florally above. It loomed thus for five months, admired by the public, which presumably included hordes of school children arriving in school buses, foreigners and locals who were thrilled to see Michelangelo’s *David* in a new light, as well as the many Christians in Singapore who would, naturally, hold the Biblical figure in high regard. No issue: *Surrounding David* seemed to have delighted everyone. Singapore seemed to have come a long way, and museums were allowed to do their thing. So why do the old patterns of censorship and control over artistic expression keep recurring?



**TITARUBI.** *Surrounding David*, 2008, fiberglass and fabric sculpture, height 8.5m. Courtesy the National Museum of Singapore.

### 2011 & Beyond: What Lies Ahead?

The sociopolitical climate in Singapore is changing, however slowly. The vanity magazine *Cosmopolitan*, banned in 1982, is now available everywhere. And in the last few years, not just one but two grand casino-resorts have sprung up: Resorts World Sentosa and the luxurious Marina Bay Sands. They are magnificent monuments to the recognition that some human drives are irrepressible, and may even be detrimental if suppressed, and so might as well be “managed.” Politically conservative since independence, now for the first time in decades May polling results this year reflect radical shifts in the levels of silence that will be tolerated in the face of unilateral policy-making by the dominant party. The opposition parties are making their presences felt, and the disparity in votes for opposition and incumbent representatives has narrowed in key constituencies island-wide.

And as for art? Art is what makes us human—or at least allows us to ask and understand what it *means* to be human. Art, as well as its sanctuaries, need to be recognized and safeguarded as that necessary space of exception: the safety valve of expression in any society. No stranger to the state as stern and unavoidable bedfellow, art is *necessarily* an ingenious, inconvenient paradox.

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