

Jurong West Street 81: a synchronised community video project

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The project *Jurong West Street 81* revolves around the architecture and residents of a group of Singapore public Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks. The title of the work makes reference to the address of the HDB flats (Figure 1) that are the subject of this video installation. The Singapore landscape has changed dramatically over the past forty years with the rapid development of HDB estates¹ and currently, over eighty percent of the Singapore population live in public housing.

This project had an open-ended objective, to entice residents of Jurong West Street 81 to film the lives of their neighbours within a structured framework of time and space, and to see what happened after that.



Figure 1. Jurong West Street 81 Housing Estate, Singapore, 2008

¹ For the Singapore government's perspective of HDB development, see:
http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A_Brief_Background

With the help of student volunteers from Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design & Media, and over the course of several visits, we knocked on some one hundred and thirty two doors, finally persuading eight pairs of residents from sixteen flats to participate.

In a synchronised event that took place on Sunday June 1, 2008, sixteen residents in opposing flats agreed to have video cameras placed in the windows of their kitchens. The cameras were all turned on at the same time and the video recording lasted thirty minutes. For the first five minutes, residents were asked to stand in their windows so that they could be seen in their apartments. After five minutes had passed, they were asked to go about their usual business, and the video cameras were left to catch the sounds of life from within each flat.



Figure 2. Video stills from two opposing apartments

Residents were looking at each other from across a parking lot, between nearly identical structures and from flat to flat. Although the architectural forms of the HDB flats are uniform, the project exposed a rich diversity behind the facade via the simple intervention of recording sound as well as video.

After the video recording had concluded, there was a party held in the common space beneath one of the housing blocks that is commonly referred to as the void deck. Participating residents shared a meal with neighbours who had previously been strangers.

In September 2008 in a solo exhibition at The Substation gallery in Singapore the videos were edited down to 13 minutes and exhibited on podiums with the views from

each window playing in a synchronised manner. This meant that the footage recorded in one flat could be seen while hearing the sound in the opposite monitor. The sounds of the everyday lives and multiple languages spoken by the persons in each window overlapped in a cacophonous merging of public and private in the final presentation of the piece. This cacophony (as well as the variety of languages spoken) made it somewhat difficult to discern individual conversations within the different flats. Therefore, subtitles have been added the original languages and English are included on each film.

Emerging from this experiment and the simple conversations about and between neighbours, are a surprising series of funny, idiosyncratic and even moving vignettes.

Jurong West Street 81 addresses the unthinkable and unexpected. It allows HDB residents to view and be viewed, with tacit recognition and permission. It is an artwork about neighbours discovering neighbours, looking at each other from across a void.