

Project Time Revisited: Thoughts on Skin Therapy, Urban Planning and Singaporean Angst

Joyce Beetuan Koh
jbktkoh@free.fr

PerMagnus Lindborg
permagnus@ntu.edu.sg

In *Project Time, A Theatre of Music*,¹ we examined ‘time’ as the domain where the old and the new coexist in Singapore, articulated through the meeting of Indian and Chinese drumming with interactive computer sound transformation. It examines three perspectives: chronological time, through-time and outside time. A three-pronged metaphor relating skin, urbanism and immortality is proposed as a dissection tool to discuss the individual’s response to physical change, a society’s attitude towards change and depersonalised memory’s way of dealing with experience.

The most visual physical trace of an individual’s relation to time lies in the ageing skin. The process is accentuated, paradoxically, by the obsession of wishing to reverse irreversible time by seeking ways to appear younger, live longer and stay healthy. This urge of the individual is cunningly manipulated by the commercialised cosmetic world of skin creams and face lifts. Kundera writes in *Slowness*:²

“[The] word ‘imagology’ finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many names: advertising campaign managers, designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment... stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey.”

Underlying consciousness and unconsciousness of daily life is our reliance on the exterior; an image based on a notion of beauty shaped by the advertising media. The relationship an individual has with her appearance is similar to society’s relationship to urbanism. As pointed out by Koolhaas,³ Singaporeans’ relationship with their physical surroundings can be exemplified by the land — and cityscapes of the island having been the object of drastic and conscious plastic surgery over more than four decades of ‘urban renewal’ programs, seen as ‘nation building’. Conscious in the way of ringing the centre of the island — the rain forest is one of the world’s ecological treasures — and drastic in the speed in which

newer buildings replace older. The former preserves the identity of the physical spirit of the society and the latter suggests a mentality, the attitude that new material is always better than the old.

Herein lies fundamental questions: What is being displaced and eroded when the process of tearing down ‘old’ buildings to be replaced by a ‘new’ building? What happens when the replacement becomes a perpetual momentum? Is ‘urban renewal’ a renewal of the old or through the new? What is the culture of immediate gratification from new physical things doing to us? Memory lives outside time. Is time the sensation when we see a change? Is time the moment when we remember? Or is time the speed of forgetting?

Overlaps and congruencies between these perspectives on skin, urbanism and memory are explored in *Project Time* through juxtaposition of text and music quotes. There are four actors-performers, who vocalise and play drums and electronics. The narrative perspective is coloured by real-time sound transformations of their voices. The performers speak and deliver the text while playing on their instruments. These live sounds of the voices and drumming are in turn manipulated digitally. Koh’s libretto is a collage of texts by Koolhaas, Kundera, Lee Kuan Yew⁴ and commercials. Three brief examples illustrate intentions and processes relevant to the metaphors discussed above.



The first is a dramatic uncovering of a sail (“*take off that skin!*”), which marks a tonic accent in the dramaturgy. Human skin is an exterior similar to the ‘skin’ of urbanism, which, when stripped off, exposes society’s core spirit.

The second is a dialogue of rhythmic patterns, vocalised and played by drummers. The salient feature shared by both drum languages is their onomatopoetic character. The Chinese biangu drummer recites a *luogu jin*, which the tabla player realises on his instrument, before linking it up to a bol, to which the biangu responds. The process intimately problematises issues central to a polyglot cultural landscape (“*We did not have a common language... we did not speak dha-dinh-dinh-dah!*”).

The third example shows how text and music interact by means of real-time sound treatment. The prosody of a voice (“*greening raised the morale of people and gave them pride in their surroundings*”) is shaped by the biangu drum’s amplitude.

What has changed in Singapore since 2001? Would we deal with the topic of Singaporean Angst — a materially motivated spirit of life — in the same fashion today? Rethinking the context of Project Time has provoked surprisingly consistent reactions. The rampant proliferations of the spa industry, the property developers, the integrated resorts and so forth only strengthen the metaphors around which the piece was built. The state of perpetual momentum, relentlessly dominant, still rings in an exclamatory computer voice solo quoting Lee⁵: “*Being first is second nature! Being rooted in the cultures of our ancestors! Being a unique ecology of the contemporary!...*” in which the difference between political and marketing slogans is minimal.

The central question, however, is as loud as silence is expensive: What is being constructed? What is being eroded in the process of ‘renewal’? We negotiate spaces and expressions between the private and public, new and old, fast and slow in our memories. These negotiations create tension as well as a dynamic we can choose to change, to forget, to remember or change again. Herein lies our imprint of transcending time where the notion

of immortality lives. Borrowing lines from Koolhaas and Kundera,⁶ *Project Time* ends in a solemn exchange between three voices: the first a superego, the second a good citizen, the third a ghost of memory:

computer: If there is chaos, it is authored chaos... it is designed ugliness... it is willed absurdity.

electronist: What gives it power is our retrospective knowledge of its effects.

computer: The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting. There is no greater horror, no greater punishment than turning a second into eternity... Imagologues create systems of ideals and anti-ideals... which influence our behaviour, our political opinions and aesthetic tastes, the colour of carpets and the selection of books.... There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside time. Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless.

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- 1 Koh, Joyce Beetuan. 2001. *Project Time, a Theatre of Music*. Commissioned by Singapore Arts Festival and first performed by Koh, Jatin Bedi, Quek Ling Kiong and PerMagnus Lindborg. See <http://www.jbtkoh.tk>
 - 2 Kundera, Milan. 1995. *Slowness*. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 34–5.
 - 3 Koolhaas, Rem and Mau Bruce. 1995. “Singapore Songlines, portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis...or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa.” In *S,M,L,XL*. New York: Monacelli Press, pp. 1010–89.
 - 4 Lee, Kuan Yew. 2000. *From Third World to First, the Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. Singapore: Times Media, pp. 13, 202, 757.
 - 5 Lee, Kuan Yew. 2001. “Imagination and vision: ‘to carve out future’”, an interview by John Thornhill, Rohit Jaggi and Sheila McNulty, *Financial Times* (London), 11 April 2001.
 - 6 Kundera, Milan. 1991. *Immortality*. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 4, 127, 129, 326.