

## Engineering Perspectives

### Interactivity, the gaze, and *Construction Site 2016*

In his TED talk, engineer-artist Golan Levin discusses his artistic work, which are tied together by his interest in two underlying themes (TED 2009). *Interstitial Fragment Processor* and *Re:MARK* feature audience interaction, where each viewer defines his or her own unique experience with the artwork, to a much greater extent than possible without current computing technology. Building upon the idea of interactivity, Levin then constructed examples of what he calls “art that looks back at you,” such as *Opto-Isolator* and *Snout*, examining the idea of the gaze, and challenging its conventional position as exclusively directed from the audience to the artwork.

Levin does not claim that his ideas form a theory of art, nor even that other artists should agree with him about the two aspects of art central to his work. Many contemporary pieces of art, such as the installation *Construction Site 2016* by Delia and Milenko Prvacki in the concourse of the Esplanade, feature neither technological innovation nor googly eyes. However, keeping Levin’s ideas in mind while engaging with artwork such as the Prvackis’ installation creates opportunities for new insights that were previously inaccessible.

At first glance, *Construction Site 2016* looks exactly as advertised – like a work in progress. Mounted on a plywood base 15 metres wide, angled towards the viewer, the installation features a collection of disparate objects, such as large rusting metal chains, arrays of bricks and roof tiles, and fragments of ceramic in varying colours and textures. On closer inspection, the meaning behind the layers of visual metaphor starts to reveal itself – irregular wooden structures as kampung houses and skyscrapers; beams of diverse lengths and materials placed together to mimic a city skyline; and the two spheroids in the background, which surely represent the Esplanade itself. We deduce, as the

artist statement confirms, that this installation symbolises the construction of modern Singapore, presented like a scene in a play.

We can discern both of Levin's ideas in *Construction Site 2016*. Firstly, Levin's interactive works can be seen as a response to the question: to what extent should the audience be involved in the creation of an artwork? In Levin's own works, the viewer is almost completely responsible for his own experience. On the other end of the spectrum, in artworks that are totally non-interactive (eg. a Renaissance painting), the audience's role is trivially reduced to constructing a mental representation of the piece, and subsequent aesthetic judgement. In questioning whether the same is true of the Prvackis' installation, whether the viewer only passively receives the work as presented by the artist, we realise that in fact we do have some form of indirect agency in this work. If the Esplanade, where the viewer is located, is represented in the installation, then we must be part of the installation too, if only abstractly. The landscape of Singapore does not construct itself; the viewer is also part of the process. Such reflexivity prompts the audience to raise the natural question of his own role in the stage-play-cum-construction of Singapore.

Levin's works on the gaze are equally about considering different perspectives, in particular that of the works of art themselves. What does the eye in the box, or the googly eye on the robotic arm, see? Here Levin directs us to consider new perspectives the artwork provides us, similar to how mirrors allow us to look back at ourselves. Levin's ideas give new significance to the curved mirrors installed above Prvackis' piece, which might initially be dismissed as incidental to the location. Though viewers cannot see themselves in the mirrors, they are given another angle from which to look at the piece, though this top-down view is severely distorted. To an observer looking up at the mirrors while walking in front of the work, the cityscape/construction shimmers in waves, giving the viewer a sense of unreality. Is a bird's eye view of Singapore necessarily inaccurate? If a mini-me in the installation were to look up, what would he see?

We have considered a few lines of inquiry concerning *Construction Site 2016*, made possible by considering the piece in relation to Levin's ideas about art. As such, I believe that Levin's ideas, though they do not form a complete theory on their own, have wider implications in the world of art for both art critics and artists, and merit serious consideration in relation to other artwork as well.

(730 words)

### **Works Cited:**

"Golan Levin makes art that looks back at you." *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 30 July 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G0MzlfMPuM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G0MzlfMPuM).

Prvacki, Delia, and Milenko Prvacki. *Construction Site 2016*. 2016, mixed media, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.

## Supplementary Pictures





