

Walking the Global City: The Politics of Rhythm and Memory in Singapore

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Abstract

This article discusses the politics of rhythm and memory surrounding urban walking in Singapore. In recent years, the developmental state has organized programs to encourage ways to walk the global city it has built in the embrace of transnational capital. In the heritage trails in the city center and the inaugural Singapore Biennale of international art, which mapped the heritage trails, the state has appropriated historical space to synchronize the contradictory rhythms of the nation and globalization to cultivate cosmopolitan subjects. I show that the Biennale artists tried to subvert the state discourse on nation and heritage but only introduced alternative spectacles enhancing the visibility of walking the global city. Finally, I look at artist Amanda Heng's work, which by tackling the very act of walking, is a critical intervention into the state's appropriation of lifeworld rhythms and memories, bringing into question the spatial production of the global city.

Keywords

walking, cosmopolitanism, global city, cultural politics, heritage, rhythm

Introduction

In Walter Benjamin's (1997) townscapes, the location of self is found in the memories of our navigation in specific places, our walking in the city. The city condenses our past into "its spatial forms, its premonitory structures". As Sontag (1997) points out, for Benjamin, "[t]o understand something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it. And to know how to get lost" (p. 13). Liberation from the architect's aesthetics or the planner's grid must come from the will to wander, to reappropriate the urban forms to know oneself and the world. In this sense, de Certeau (1984) is quite right to say that to "walk is to lack a place," as it is an "indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" (p. 103).

There are two further sides to Sontag's insight. One can *unknowingly* get lost. Lemert (2006) juxtaposes the unlikely pair of Benjamin and Emile Durkheim through the Parisian cityscape of 1907 and writes that "the city of lights was the modern city of ghostly illusions" (p. 62), which for Benjamin resulted from the contradictions of capital and its commodity fetishisms, but which

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for Durkheim resulted from an urban society that failed to regulate individual passions. One can also *fail* to get lost. There is *anomie* but there is also *fatalism*. Benjamin's (1997, p. 70) inscrutable Obelisk regulating traffic in Place de la Concorde is Durkheim's sacred totem in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*—the thing with the social mark that makes it a powerful fetish directing a people in ritualized relationships. Drawing on Durkheim's insight, Taussig (1993) sees the city as the body of the nation penetrated by state totems that include marked spatial forms directing movement and embodied representatives—state officials who do not walk, but watch, survey, and patrol.

It is to walking in the postcolonial city that my analysis addresses. Singapore is an ex-British port city where the developmental state has built a nation founded on economic growth and hybrid Asian traditions. Since independence in 1965, the postcolonial state has arduously transformed the historical spaces of the colonial town and its countryside of plantations and villages, through comprehensive urban planning and redevelopment, into what Lefebvre (1991, p. 49) terms as the *abstract space* of capital: the space of the formal and quantitative relationships between things—"glass and stone, concrete and steel, angles and curves, full and empty"—that "erases distinctions, as much those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity)." This production of space underpinned the production of abstract social labor and the national accumulation of capital that followed. Industrialization through the 1970s and 1980s in Singapore turned a whole generation of citizens into one of Asia's most disciplined workforce and the city-state into an economic miracle. Concomitantly, more than four fifths of the population were resettled, many from the overcrowded city-center slums, into suburban high-rise public housing estates.

With the population orderly stacked into high-rise flats, pinned to urban grids, serviced by state-run community amenities, and moved by well-oiled public transportation system, and with the cultural use of public space tightly controlled by the authoritarian state, walking *in* the city has ceased to be a meaningful activity. The historical and the body did not disappear in the abstraction of space, but they became immersed in the rehearsed "dressage" (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 41) of the state imposing the disciplined rhythm of directed activity, repose and entertainment in the corresponding regulated spaces of factory, flat and fairground. In Paris, Lefebvre (2004, pp. 28, 30) could look out of his balcony to see a man "who walks down the street, over there, is immersed in the multiplicity of noises, murmurs, rhythms," so as to theorize that the "interaction of diverse, repetitive and different rhythms animates, as one says, the street and the neighborhood." In Singapore, Benjamin's obelisk is distributed everywhere as cemented structures to direct walking as incidental and efficient movement between home, train, work, and mall. It is akin to Lefebvre's (2004) analogy in which under "the direction of the conductor's baton (his magic wand), a rhythm falls into place" (p. 68)—an *isorhythmia* orchestrated by the developmental state to produce the space of the postcolonial nation.

Since the 1990s, the state has invested much energy into planning a walkable city, as it pursued an accelerated urban redevelopment program to transform the industrial city into a global city in the embrace of transnational capital. Historical buildings and precincts were conserved to give character to the global city and adapted for new commercial uses catering to the new transnational elites, while the financial and business district expanded to produce a planned skyline of monumental towers. In more recent years, the state has organized events and programs to encourage specific ways to walk *the* global city. This has taken place in the context of greater global capital investment and flows that have seen the number of noncitizens residing in the city grow from one quarter to one third of the population in a decade from 2000 to 2010.

In this essay, I discuss the politics of rhythm and memory that accompany the state promotion of walking the global city. I begin by looking at the state promotion of heritage trails in the city center and the inaugural 2006 Singapore Biennale of international contemporary art, the

exhibitions of which mapped the heritage trails. I argue the state is attempting to synchronize the increasingly contradictory rhythms of the nation and globalization into a *eurhythmia* (Lefebvre 2004, p. 68) of cosmopolitan sensibility. The state does this through the *appropriation* of historical space, exploiting the aesthetics of “the rhythms of time and of life” of communities to downplay the *dominated* space of collusion between the developmental state and global capital (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 166). However, the appropriated aesthetics of the everyday is a double-edged sword. I turn to look at artist Amanda Heng’s walking performances and show that her work, by tackling the very act of walking, is a critical intervention into the state’s appropriation of life-world rhythms and memories, bringing into question the spatial production of the global city.

Heritage Trails and the Cosmopolitan Remembrance of the Nation

In 2004, the state’s National Heritage Board organized its inaugural annual HeritageFest. The weeklong event involving exhibitions, performances, talks, movie screenings, and games targeted at young Singaporeans was anchored in two big shopping malls bounding the downtown civic district and scattered over dozens of museums and libraries throughout the island. More interestingly, the Board organized a cultural treasure hunt called Fun on Foot in Little India. It described the ethnic enclave as “BIG on sounds, colours and aromas—a multi-sensual experience for all,” followed by a series of sensory injunctions to witness the rhythms of the enclave, “SEE the colourful fabrics and exquisite jewellery, HEAR the stirring drumbeats as the Hindu temples conduct their poojas, SNIFF out the divine curries and spices, or GAZE at the sanctuary of a nearby church or mosque,” all summarized in the calling, “Come on a walking discovery of one of Singapore’s most energetic and vibrant districts” (National Heritage Board, 2004).

Fun on Foot was so successful that it subsequently became a central feature of HeritageFest. In 2005, 2,300 people participated in a 6-hour hunt starting from old Chinatown. The 2006 Fun on Foot turned to two new “heartland” heritage trails in two of the oldest public housing estates located at the outskirts of the civic district. After flagging off the hunt, state officials were led by student guides to a trail that included colonial shophouses in a historic red light district. Fun on Foot’s theme in 2007 led explorers to “Singapore’s firsts,” starting from Stamford Raffles’ 1819 landing site, and thereby affirming the official historical narration of the nation as beginning from the colonial founding moment. “Heroes” was the theme that celebrated the nation’s champions in 2008. With the theme “neighbours,” the 2009 hunt went high-tech, integrating mobile phone technology into the race for collecting cultural snippets of people around town.

The Fun on Foot trails took their cue from the two original civic district trails launched in 1999. The primary civic district trail walks the citizen–tourist through old colonial government buildings and monuments, from Raffles’ landing site to the Dalhousie Obelisk built in 1850 to honor the visit of the Governor-General of India, ending with the old City Hall, Supreme Court, and Parliament House buildings now used as arts sites. The secondary trail takes the citizen–tourist around buildings starting from the vintage Raffles Hotel, to churches, museums housed in old school buildings, and the Freemasons’ Hall, ending with the Anglican Cathedral. This places architectural relics of the colonial state at the heart of the heritage trails, with buildings of more familiar religious, social, and cultural usage revolving around state heritage.

The cultural function of the colonial state relics is similar to Benjamin’s inscrutable obelisk. Take for example, the marker text explaining the Old Supreme Court:

The building’s colossal Corinthian columns echo neighbouring City Hall while the dome is a miniature version of the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral in London. The 13-ton panel resting in the pediment is an Allegory of Justice crafted by Rodolpho Nolli, an Italian

sculptor whose concrete columns and capitals adorned many buildings constructed in Singapore during the 1920s and 1930s.

This is hieroglyphics to most passersby for whom Corinthian columns, cathedral domes, allegories of Justice, and Italian sculptors have little meanings, save that they make for picturesque photographs. The inscrutable alien character of the colonial state buildings and their imposing presence in contemporary times as relics of the foreign past serve as the pledge of the state and oracle of the nation, in which an uncertain future for globalizing Singapore is tamed by the comfort that the developmental state has brought us thus far into the present against the challenges of surviving as a small postcolonial country.

Spanning across different realities—collective memories, changing urban life, individual biographies, emergent virtual reality, and its fragmented archives—HeritageFest weaves them together via the state's narration of the nation, with Fun on Foot providing the sensuous grounding through the practice of walking. Because the space of the city contains the remnants of history, heritage is transposed to memory and vice versa in the act of walking. As Lefebvre (2004) notes, rhythms “always need a reference; the initial moment persists through other perceived givens” (p. 36). Memory, as the point of reference, permits the isolation of rhythms into moments, so that one could live the present “in all its diversity, made up of subjects and objects.” But because the narrative of the nation already frames the heritage trails of appropriated historical spaces and the spatiality of the global city directs the ultimate aim in cultural consumption, memory is put into service in the making of cosmopolitan subjects.

The grounded multidimensionality of memory is further enhanced in the *MyStory* online portal, launched by the Board in 2007, for the public to contribute stories, experiences, and images of walking the heritage trails. One trail walker posted her experience, stating from the offset, “museums aren't as boring as i thought they would be.” She started from the Philatelic Museum and headed across the street to the Armenian Church. She writes,

the architecture of the church is quite beautiful. there are quite a few tombstones in the church's garden premises. the inscription on the tombstones is pretty interesting . . . and if you're really sensitive i think you might be able to sense some . . . spirits or you know . . .

She then skipped to the adjacent CHIJMES complex, a former convent school, now housing chic restaurants, and appreciated its old spiral staircase and bars with “lots of cute ang mohs [Western expatriates].” She ended her trail walking tour at the Singapore Art Museum, a former Catholic mission school for boys, where she took “a picture of a pretty cool statue of a [Chinese] coolie and his friend eating,” which made her hungry and so she went off to Raffles City shopping mall for a meal (Anonymous, 2009).

One is tempted to interpret this brief narrative as contrary to the state's didactic intent, for she appeared to have ignored the heritage signboards and refused to understand the significance of Singapore's oldest migrant church and convent school. But the state does not want a deep cosmopolitanism. The churches and museums played two narrative functions. First, they were conserved to narrate the nation's historical values of diligence and economic pragmatism, to house its old spirits of capitalism and connect them to the new cosmopolitan spirits through the hosting of commercially chic food and beverage joints and art exhibitions that transnational expatriate elites seek out in a global city worth its salt. That the trail walker was led by the sculpture of coolies to the ultramodern Raffles City mall reflected success of the state's obelisks.

Second, the heritage trails remind the citizen-tourist of Singapore's cultural pluralism, which is couched as a challenge to political and social stability at the same time that it provides resources

for a shared heritage and national identity. Two Chinese temples, a Hindu temple, the Armenian Church, and three mosques, and Muslim shrines of different Indian, Arab, and Malay origins form the bulk of the buildings for the Fun on Foot civic trail. This was the original trail that kicked off the inaugural treasure hunt in 2003, when it was organized to commemorate Racial Harmony Day, which marks the Sino-Malay riots in July 1964. The Day, as the organizers described it, is “a time to celebrate and appreciate the differences among the different ethnic groups in Singapore.” But as much as rich diversity provides cultural energies, the organizers warned, they can “also be exploited to inflame people with disastrous and tragic results.” To complete the narrative, the protagonist, the state is alluded to—

Singapore continues to enjoy peace and relative prosperity, but this did not come about through a stroke of luck. Neither is it a given. It is the result of years of efforts in strengthening the understanding among the different ethnic groups. (National Heritage Board, 2003)

This vividly expresses the form that multiculturalism takes in Singapore, as a *postcolonial* multiculturalism positing the equality of the colonially defined races, with the state selecting and deploying their cultural resources, particularly religious symbolisms and sentiments, for the cultivation of national identity and communitarian mobilization.

The second Fun on Foot trail adopted by the Board as a permanent marked trail was the 2004 Little India trail mentioned at the start. Again, religious buildings form a major part of the trail, though the streets and the Indian commercial and cultural activities that used to take place in them were equally emphasized. Other than three Hindu temples, the trail includes a church, a mosque, and two Buddhist temples. That sensory appreciation of food, commodities, and religious ceremonies and spaces in the trail walk was particularly highlighted, indicates a directed appropriation of history and culture that seeks to prevent the walking citizen–tourist from getting lost in the crowded enclave. What the Board omits from its historical treatment of the trail guides, and which any visitor will easily observe, is that, unlike the other old colonial enclaves such as Chinatown and Arab Street, Little India is still an ethnic enclave, but of a different kind. In the 1990s, temporary South Asian migrant workers flocked to Singapore for contract work in the construction, marine and service industries, building the global city that the developmental state planned. Little India has become the South Asian workers’ favorite weekend haunt, where they catch up with friends, engage remittance services, and eat, drink, cut their hair, and buy necessities from street hawkers setting up shop in open fields. At the same time, they have become the target of disciplinary practices aiming to regulate their behavior, from spatial containment strategies to antilittering and public health campaigns.

The absence of this new enclave culture in the official heritage trail makes the politics of memory and rhythm all the more conspicuous. The walking citizen–tourist is trained to experience heritage objects and space and treat the South Asian multitude as a background rhythm, so that global Singapore is defined by its fetishized external multi-culture rather than its ghettoized production. Socially disciplined South Asian workers, their behavior thus regularized, form the visual counterpart to state-dressed footwork in the Little India space—they both produce the differentiation between the meaningful cultural foreground and the natural material background. Historical Indian heritage is separated out from the new migrant workers and becomes more relevant, authentic, and real. Race is thereby tamed by its domestication as cultural heritage and walking citizen–tourists would not get lost in the questions of their privileged positions in globalization’s new relations of production. In the end, a particular kind of cosmopolitan subject is to be produced through the walks: the citizen who is able to consume the new cultural flows thrown up by globalization and integrate them into an identity that still has the nation-state at its heart.

Belief: The Singapore International Art Biennale

Lefebvre (1991, pp. 165, 166) points out, “appropriated space *resembles* a work of art,” in that it expresses “the rhythms of time and of life” of a community. It was no coincidence that the inaugural 2006 Singapore Biennale mapped the heritage trails promoted by the state. The Biennale was held to coincide with the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank boards of governors held in Singapore that year. It was the anchor cultural event for “Singapore 2006: Global City: World of Opportunities,” the state’s program to promote Singapore as a global city on the occasion of the meetings. Security measures taken were extraordinary. Street demonstrations were outlawed, international civil society representatives were banned from entering the country, and only indoor protests by registered organizations were allowed in a small cordoned-off area, thus rendering protesters into curious exhibitions themselves.

It was in this censorious political climate that internationally renowned curator Fumio Nanjo worked as the artistic director of the Biennale. The Biennale was a veritable heritage trail itself, fanning from its base in the old City Hall to churches, temples, mosques, and synagogue in the civic district. This promoted the cosmopolitan multiculturalism of global Singapore to the world, but there was another reason for distributing the exhibitions across heritage sites and compelling visitors to walk the city. As the Biennale was ambitiously launched on a nervous footing in the context of the global city’s maximum-security debut on the world stage, the anchoring of the Biennale in the state-appropriated historical spaces could serve to contain the critical political edge of contemporary art. The Biennale was themed *Belief*. Nanjo (2006) explained,

Contemporary society is marked by complex and conflicting values and a lack of unified standards of judgment . . . Singapore, although a small city-state, is a place of diverse ethnicity, religion, and language, where different communities have on one level been able to co-exist without extreme conflict. That is why it is so significant to explore the theme of belief in Singapore today. The great, perhaps naïve, experiment of the Singapore Biennale is to reinvestigate the fundamental foundations of people’s ways of life through art.

While Nanjo’s text fits into the state’s discourse, the subtext alludes to a critical questioning of the state’s appropriation of religious beliefs as positive heritage for the cultivation of cosmopolitan subjects. Visits to the exhibitions become contemplative experiences that put the national narrative into question. New works were commissioned at the heritage religious buildings and naturally ran up against the buildings as national monuments. One operation of everyday spatial practice that deconstructs the urban planner’s geometric legibility treats spatiality as *asyndeton*, which, in contrast to synecdoche, disconnects totalities “by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive,” it “cuts out,” “undoes continuity,” and “undercuts its plausibility.” Space becomes “enlarged singularities and separate islands” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 101). Nanjo and his curators have employed the asyndeton principle not only to create spaces of dissenting expression within the ambit of state sponsorship of the arts and appropriation of heritage but also to intervene into the spatiality of the global city and render the cosmopolitan subject uncertain.

At the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, which is also believed to be the first electrified building in Singapore, Japanese-born Indian artist Ashok Sukumaran routed the public lighting of the church to be controlled by two switches, one up-close at the gate named “Electricity from the State” and the other across the street named “Electricity from the Market.” Successful operation of the switches was however programmed to be random and thus unreliable, with the “State” switch less reliable than the “Market” switch. The work is titled *Everything is Contestable*. The play with light is obvious in the artist’s intervention into the connection

between the Illuminator, the historical electric first of the building, and the public lighting of a national monument. However, at another level, the viewer standing on the street was invited to reflect on the question of social power manifested in spatial practice, as indicated by the manipulation of electrical power, the title, and the names of the switches. Less apparently, connections are made between the paternalistic Singapore state and its power to memorialize an extinct commercial community while embarking on massive urban redevelopment. By highlighting these invisible forces at work, the church lost its innocence as a national monument and became a problematic site isolated from fraternal buildings in the state's heritage trails.

Some of the artworks at other religious sites drew viewers into heritage buildings and invited them to contemplate on questions of everyday life. At the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, which is narrated in heritage trails as popular with locals seeking blessings from its efficacious Goddess of Mercy, Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai wrote the *Lotus Sutra* onto lotus seeds, roots, and flowers placed as temple offerings that would decay and onto living lotus flowers planted in an installed pond in the temple to highlight the ephemeral nature of human existence. At the Masjid Sultan, which is the national mosque, Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi interfered with its "clinical" tenor by projecting ornamental images of madrassa floors with rich sounds of water ablutions and painting intricate "nonfunctional" foliage patterns all over the rooftop walls, floor, and shelter (Hashmi, 2006, p. 44).

In these two instances, the artists intervened in the religious life taking place in the building by pointing out contradictions between core beliefs and popular practices, as Tsai did at the Buddhist temple, or relativizing it by introducing elements of practices of the same religion from other parts of the world, as Imran did at the Sultan Mosque. The state was implicated, remotely, through its deity-like status of efficacious provision of material success and its austere maintenance of religious harmony. These on-site artworks, having to tread sensitively in sacred spaces, subtly jarred the uncritical consumption of the religious beliefs and practices found in them. The citizen-tourist who stepped into the altered sacred space from the street was no longer able to consume the space and the religious practices as they "naturally" were, but was asked to consider their multiplicity, complexity, and authenticity. While the innocence of the Armenian Church as national monument was lost through the intervention on the building itself, the artistic interventions into the sacred space disrupted the religious meanings intrinsic to the heritage narrative. While the former worked on the physical signifier, the latter interrupted the signified, producing the same effect of isolating the building and tearing it from the symbolic firmaments of the nation.

At the City Hall, artworks involving more secular interventions into the meaningful relationships of state, nation, and history were found. Singaporean artists with critical voices were concentrated here—an arrangement that parodied the boxed-in indoor demonstrations at the IMF–World Bank meetings. Directed at the aesthetic state apparatus, Amanda Heng's *Worthy Tour Co (S) Pte Ltd* presented a travel agency promoting a tour of Chinese-Singaporean cultural collections that have been relocated to other cities in the region. In a regime where criticisms of the judiciary are severely frowned on, Ho Tzu Nyen's video installation, *The Bohemian Rhapsody Project* used the iconic pop tune to reenact a parody of a trial in an old courtroom. Donna Ong's *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis (19-22)* consisted of assemblages of uncanny objects, laboratory equipment, pictures, mirrors, light, and movable parts that transformed the judge's chambers into a surrealist dream-like space of fantasies, delusions, and nightmares. Jason Wee's multimedia installation *1987* entwined the personal event of his great-grandmother's death and Operation Spectrum that saw the extra-judicial detention of social workers and activists accused of organizing a "Marxist conspiracy" against the state, both coincident that year.

Non-Singaporean artists also posed similar questions from other social contexts in the City Hall exhibits, thereby engaging the Singaporean artists in a global dialogue counterposed to the

IMF–World Bank meetings. South African artist Jane Alexander’s *Verity, Faith, and Justice* posed life-size anthropomorphic monsters trying three hooded child-sized figures standing on explosives in a courtroom. British artist Jonathan Allen’s *Tommy Angel* series consisted of intense black-and-white pictures of his alter-ego as evangelical preacher and magician placed in darkened passages in “response to the historical context of City Hall and the seat of Singaporean nationhood implanted within its own maze of walls and corridors” (Pereira, 2006, p. 64).

Interventions on the City Hall building itself were also made. Japanese artist Takafumi Hara’s *Signs of Memory: City Hall Pink Windows* transcribed his interviews of Singaporeans from different religious and ethnic groups together with naïve drawings inspired by the interviewees onto pink boards that covered the front windows of City Hall. However, the project was only allowed on the condition of government screening of the questions and editing of the text. Nevertheless, the transfigured façade littered with censored voices colored pink not only affected the cityscape at the heart of the civic district but also transformed the key signifier of the city–state into a childish cliché that clashed with the monumental façade, indicating Singapore’s ambivalent place in the world (Pennell, 2007).

New Zealand artist’s Daniel Malone’s *Steal this Smile! :*) transposed Abbie Hoffman’s radical cultural politics to Singapore, borrowing the title of Hoffman’s famed *Steal This Book* in an allusion to the state’s Four Million Smiles campaign to welcome the IMF–World Bank delegates. For the public art project, Malone brought together volunteers to hold hands and surround City Hall in an attempt to levitate it through sheer willpower and belief, just as Hoffman and antiwar protesters famously sought to levitate and shake the Pentagon by meditation in 1967. Of course, the City Hall would not be lifted. But in light of the government’s draconian security measures, Malone’s project was as close to a street protest as it got and the City Hall was at least shaken from its symbolic foundation, its heritage of colonial violence and authoritarian rule exposed.

I highlight one last artwork that shows how the Biennale’s asyndeton spatial practice undermines the geometric totality of the state’s heritage trails. The Biennale did not involve walking as much as interfering with the process of walking. As I have argued, this is achieved by disconnecting and isolating heritage buildings and city streets from meaningful discourses through symbolic interventions. I add here that the interventions ultimately located the buildings, the streets, and the city in the circulatory matrix of modernity as capitalist and state fetishes, as Benjamin’s obelisk. For the Biennale’s opening events in the Padang, the stately field outside City Hall, Jonathan Allen planted in the pockets of the unsuspecting crowd American-style banknotes emblazoned with “gospel magician” and Tommy Angel appearing as President. Curator Sharmini Pereira (2006) writes, “Through their circulation, the notes recall the calculated strategies powerfully inscribed across the histories of Christianity and magic to promote belief” (p. 64). Individuals would discover the note only later, perhaps as they walked away into the city. Nevertheless, the moment of their standing in the Padang, the City Hall presiding over them, would be put into perspective by the parody of capitalist and state fetishes they had just discovered—the City Hall ceased to be the symbol of the nation, becoming instead the sinister incarnation of the global political economy.

Walking the City Backwards

In the first instance, the state’s heritage trails connected lifeworld practices and sentiments to produce a multicultural unity to materialize a cultural resilient nation. Unlike Benjamin’s and Lefebvre’s Paris, the state no longer merely injects its fetishes into the planned urban fabric to regulate walking. It now seeks to direct the walking itself, as though it has discovered the secrets of mundane urban traversing and its subject-forming effects that Benjamin expressed through

his townscapes. It wants the citizen-tourist to knowingly get lost in the city, only to be found on the tracks of its trails, in the only plausible narrative that elevates itself as the inscrutable obelisk.

Disrupting the walk, the Biennale artists isolated each heritage building to point to the constructed and contested nature of the nation in the incessant flows of accelerated globalization. They seek to tear the heritage building out and lose them in the cityscapes again, so that we would not surrender our will to wander. The art trails disrupt the heritage narrative by interjecting into the visual field, but in many cases they had not been able to displace the spectacles that make up the visual field and sometimes augment it instead with alternative spectacles. For example, as night fell on the opening party of the 2006 Biennale at the Padang, fluid towers of colorfully lit helium balloons controlled by the participating public rose against the backdrop of skyscrapers. The intention of Usman Haque's *Open Burble* was to democratize the visual field of the global city, to challenge the skyscrapers visually through a moving sculpture directed by the masses (Haque, 2006). However, the alternative spectacle invited spurious comments from the master of ceremony, who led the crowds in screams at the rising burlbles and projected his fantasies of love-making rabbits and condoms unto the shapes they made (Nesnesnes, 2006).

As Tang (2007) notes, in her Debordian analysis of the Biennale, most artists were caught up in the state's artistic populism and "spectacle's politics." In terms of Benjamin's (1968, p. 241) critical theory, alternative spectacles such as the burlbles serve to aestheticize politics, substituting the masses' political rights and procedural politics with "a chance to express themselves," here, temporarily against the visual field of the global city. Such spectacular expressions inevitably give rise to the carnivalesque and all its energy. Indeed, the spectacle and the carnival are inseparable in the state's appropriation and domestication of their effervescent visual and corporeal energies for culturally molding the ideal citizenry (Koepnick, 1999, pp. 53-82). Thus, the Biennale opening party's master of ceremony would unconsciously "subvert" Singapore's prudish norms on public sexual imagery and speech. Yet because the authority of the state is written into the spectacle, he quickly realized his *faux pas*, asked whether the Minister who opened the Biennale had left and apologized to laughter from the crowd.

The problem is that the Biennale does not challenge the very thing itself: the walk. The rhythm of walking remains appropriated, presenting the metropolis as a natural reality for consumption and narrativel expression and which would be remembered as such. It does not call into question the metropolis itself, the memories and cosmopolitan subjectivity formed in it by the agency of the state and the social inequalities that prescribe whose memory is dominant in the sensorial field of the city. Unlike the spectacular populism of the Biennale art, which in the final analysis fails to subvert the acting of walking the global city, artist Amanda Heng's performance art piece, *Let's Walk (Backwards)*, seeks precisely to intervene into the rhythmic heart at the core of the politics of memory.

Heng is a veteran artist whose penchant for politicizing her art with questions of gender, racial and class inequalities situates her at the margins of the local art scene awash with government funding. Born in 1951 to a Chinese-speaking family, Heng began practicing art in the 1980s after working for 7 years as a government officer. Her visual and performance art pieces deconstruct the feminine body, often using her own, at the nexus of world history, national imagination, state authority, traditional Chinese patriarchy, everyday life, and personal memories.

On a Sunday afternoon in August 2009, Heng performed *Let's Walk (Backwards)*, which involved her leading a traffic-stopping procession of participants through the downtown civic district. The piece, approved by the police at the last minute, followed the route of the *Let's Walk Some More*, performed a month earlier, which linked razed or threatened heritage buildings and those lost to commercial or state museum uses. *Let's Walk (Backwards)* was the latest piece in her *Let's Walk* series, which began in the late 1990s when the government banned art studios from exhibiting performance art. Inspired by the ban, Heng brought performance out into everyday

space, turning the walk into “a moving stage” just as the state was starting to appropriate walking for its purposes. The first incarnation of the walking performances saw Heng walking backwards around an arts college with the aid of a vanity mirror and a high-heeled shoe in her mouth. Subsequent renditions saw her taking a chained artist stool for a casual walk in the city center and leading a group of audience from a community theater to a food hawker center in a suburban public housing estate. For the latter, she laid pink tablecloths at the food center, served food to the seated audience, got a volunteer to cut through her T-shirt to retrieve a bloodstained packet of money, which were the admission fees for the performance that she returned to the audience, and finally laid a long red carpet to bring the audience back to the theater.

Lee (2011, p. 31) writes that Heng’s works often exploit the gaze, by getting people to look at the spectacle that she is producing, so that the audience and the incidental everyday crowd would be caught up in moments of recognition in “the exchange of mutual glances.” But as I have argued, with regards to the Biennale’s spectacular politics, such interjections into the visual field only has a limited effect in calling into question the dominated and appropriated spaces of the global city produced by state and capital. Heng’s work, I contend, goes further and deeper than glances, by using walking to disrupt the rhythm of the state-appropriated spaces—walking as *arrhythmia* (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 68) to dislocate the visual field.

That Sunday afternoon in 2009, around 30 participants gathered at the independent arts center, the Substation, to reenact the original walk, this time as a collective. Heng said little in the introduction, noting that there would be a discussion session when the group returned at the end of the walk. Her instructions were clear: take off your shoes and socks, put a high-heel shoe into your mouth and grip it with your teeth, hold a mirror up to see where you are going, and follow her as she walks the city backwards. Heng walked with determination, never once taking her eyes off the mirror, which reflected part of her face, the street behind her, and the heritage buildings and skyscrapers in the background. She drooled, long strands of saliva dripping from the high-heel shoe sticking out of her mouth. The participants could not keep up. Most were frustrated by the insecurity of walking backwards and the discomfort of drooling and walking barefoot on hot pavements and the harassment of staring onlookers. A few fell out of the strange procession and left. Many reverted to walking forward intermittently. Some found the comfort of benevolent authority by appointing themselves safety wardens to guide persistent backward walkers.

After nearly 2 hours of walking, a reduced group returned to an air-conditioned room for the discussion. Heng recounted her experiences performing the piece earlier in Paris, Madrid, and Jakarta, making explicit and implicit comparisons with the walk that just took place. Paris was cold even in the summer, while Singapore’s pavements were surprisingly hot. It was all muddy in Jakarta, but at least one could feel one’s way through barefooted. People joined in spontaneously in Madrid and created a huge procession while the Singapore procession shrunk. She started to wander to keep the procession going in Madrid and got herself lost, quite deliberately. In Singapore, memories got in the way of getting lost. Responding to a participant, she explained the high-heel shoe was inspired by her reflection on society’s objectification of feminine beauty and its silencing effect on women. She stated the mirror was symbolic, without explaining further, and added a footnote that it was practical as well, though one relied more on the other senses. As the participants began to talk about the frustrations and difficulty of walking backwards, Heng talked about concentrating on one’s senses rather than relying on the route assistants and that, once we slowed down our pace, at some point we would find the walk meditative and enjoyable.

Then, a young Singaporean asked with all seriousness, prefacing that he could understand the parts of the performance but not the totality, what was Heng’s intention behind the piece? Heng stumbled through her response, repeating that it was part of her explorations in bringing

performance art into everyday spaces. Unsatisfied, the young man asked, why was this the most effective way of conveying the message on the objectification of women? Heng's reply is very instructive. She replied that she was not making a specific statement. The walk was her way of reflecting on the issues she was currently thinking about and helped her to *visualize* the issues before she could *say* something about them. Heng was deliberately reconfiguring *the way we walk the city* to understand political issues, imagine possibilities, and invent new ways of talking about them. Cultural memories, religious prayerfulness, and artistic sensibilities were thus combined in a potent mix to imagine possibilities beyond state heritage narratives and the visual field of the global city.

Another young Singaporean spoke of feeling tensed and constrained, in contrast to his previous experience in another piece by another artist where they walked aimlessly in the city in pairs. He found the other piece liberating and was charmed to find that participants always ended up walking to places that were meaningful to them and stopped to soak in the memories. To this romanticist critique, Heng explained that she invited participants to join her because she liked that people had the courage to participate without knowing what they were getting into. She concluded by talking about a restaging of *Let's Walk Some More* in a week's time, where she would exchange personal memories with participants at the lost heritage sites to create new memories. In other words, there is to be no discourse to follow, no walking along unconscious routes to recover one's cosmopolitan subjectivity. One's memories, intuitions, and gait are not to become part of the spiritual traffic around the obelisk, but basic elements for the formation of new, coming communities.

Conclusion

To return to the opening sequence of Benjamin's cityscapes, what has *fin-de-siècle* Paris got to do with Singapore a 100 years on? Both are urban spaces produced by capital in different modes of geopolitical articulation. The former was imperial and Western in its cultural manifestation, the latter postcolonial and hybrid Asian in its appropriation. For Benjamin, the figure of the *flâneur* loomed large in the urban dialectics. By the time of Lefebvre's postimperial Paris, the rhythms of the everyday have already been seized by the dressage of capital at its peak and therefore amenable to the *rhythmanalysis* of the reflexive voyeur standing in the balcony looking out into the streets. In Singapore, the synchronizing of space, time, and memory is only in its infancy and already contested, as the developmental state juggles the cultural heritages of the postcolonial nation and the economic imperatives of global city making.

In Singapore, the state has seized on the very act of walking to encourage the eurhythmia of nationhood and globalization, only to find the artists it has invited to boost the global city's cultural capital attempting to dislocate the eurhythmia by isolating the heritage buildings from the state's nation-world spatial meta-narrative. But it is in the walking that matters. The static spatiality of the artists' insurgency only plays into the spectacular politics that the state enacts for both the domestic and international audience using the city as the stage. A lone woman walking barefoot backwards in the city and with a high-heeled shoe in her mouth has shown, it is through the arrhythmia of walking that the urban horizons of the global city are called into question and memories are reoriented toward the new possibilities of spatial production reclaiming the city for the pedestrian citizens.

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