Coming into Intelligibility: Decolonizing Singapore Art, Practice and Curriculum in Post-colonial Globalization

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This study examines how select aspects of art and practice are apprehended in Singapore, in terms of how they come into being, how they are known, lived and responded to. Situated within the broader context of postcolonial globalization, the study considers how art and practice can be understood within situated conditions in Singapore as a means towards decolonizing the pre-constitution of subjectivity of Singapore art in the curriculum.

This qualitative research uses grounded theory, Adele Clark’s situational analysis and case study to examine the interviews and works of six art/design practitioners. The work draws on concepts from Karen Barad’s theory on the materialization of entities in human and non-human actions and relations, Michel Foucault’s grid of intelligibility, and Appadurai’s disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. Using these concepts, the study considers how subjectivities are made intelligible or constituted within physical-discursive conditions in phenomena. The research investigates how practitioners come to know aspects of art and practice; how they experience, enact, and act against pre-existing subjectivities embedded in structures of practice; and how they respond to these structures in and through their work. The study examines how art/design practitioners traverse and transgress pre-existing subjectivities, and reconfigured these
dynamically through splicing strategies in their ongoing becoming in the global cultural economy.
For Jason, Lisa and Matthew
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Chapter 1: Reimagining Singapore

Prologue

This is a story of a search to re-write and re-imagine a people.

At about 274 square miles (Country Facts, n.d.), or slightly more than three and a half time the size of Washington, DC (CIA, 2012), Singapore is an island state that is comparatively geographically smaller than most countries. Once, we were derisively called ‘a little red dot’, referring to how we were represented on a world map, in that we were too small to even appear, too insignificant to matter. Instead, Singaporeans have embraced and used the term as a testament to our resilience and capabilities to succeed both economically and educationally.

We are a relatively young nation with a migrant history. In 2013, we celebrated 48 years of independence. We were a British colony from 1819 to 1963 and part of the Federation of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. In the 19th century, Singapore grew from a Malay settlement to a bustling trading port that drew migrants from all over the region in search of a better life. Like most of my peers, I am Singaporean and third generation. Migrants came from different parts of Asia including Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India, Europe and other regions. Of the resident population, we are 13.4% Malays, 74.1% Chinese, 9.2% Indians and 3.3% Eurasians or other ethnicities (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2012). In 2012, Singapore had a population of 5.3 million (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2012), slightly less than half of the population of Ohio (Fact
Monster, n.d.). Of that population, 3.8 million are citizens and residents (Department of
Statistics, Singapore, 2012). The population density is 7,257 per square kilometer (or 0.4
square mile) (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2012) compared to 32 for the United
States (Country Facts, n.d.).

Singapore has always been open to Western influences while retaining its Asian
roots. The official language is English though the national language is Malay, in honor of
Singapore’s Malay origins. Most people speak English and their ethnic language in
compliance with the bilingual education policy from 1966. Though decidedly multiracial,
we have always seen ourselves as part of all the collective different cultural threads that
make us.

_I still remember how in the first two years of my undergraduate fine arts studies,
the studio tutors kept trying to engage me to talk about my paintings through Western
feminist lenses or my ethnicity. At first I thought they could not understand the work, and
were trying to find access points to describe, talk and understand. I must have been naïve
then to think that I can just paint. I painted flowers. They talked about investigating
feminist issues. They asked about flowers in Asian or Chinese culture and how that
affected how I approached the subject. I felt pressured to work along these themes. But I
only painted flowers as a way to start off my studio work. I bought a pot of flowers. It was
easier to paint from life. No, there were no issues in my work. I was only painting
flowers. Period._

_I moved away from representational work in a large part to prevent people from
reading into my work. I did not like it that my work was stereotyped by my gender and
ethnicity regardless of the visual qualities of my work. I moved on to making marks. Jibberish. Deliberately making unintelligible.

I created installations using repetition and permutations of marks and mark making. I created marks with different materials. I marked spaces. I used objects in different ways. It worked. Studio tutors talked about the works and no longer about the Chinese girl from Singapore. They talked about the physical appearance and experience of the works. They talked about the making and installation. They referred me to Western male artists working in similar veins.

I used to congratulate myself for having succeeded in creating work the way I want and getting my works interpreted on the terms I chose. When I reflected on my undergraduate experience recently, I realized that in trying to prevent being misread, in selecting a non-representational mode of working, I was really trying to gain acceptance and currency to the Western art practice. Instead of disrupting people’s notions of me and my work, which I thought I was doing, I was really only switching from one Western discourse to another. I did not disrupt anything. I was merely seeking refuge in a different arena. The arena is still Western. I did not get to choose the rules of my game. I simply chose a different game where I thought my work could be accepted on the same terms as any Western installation without or with minimal interrogation of my gender and ethnicity.

Born in postcolonial Singapore, I have always taken our sovereignty for granted. Just as I have always taken Western hegemony in academia for granted, having grown up with a Western biased school curriculum in an education system rooted in the British
colonial systems, and having attended British universities. As a curriculum planner with
the Singapore Ministry of Education, as with my colleagues from across different
disciplines, I often integrated Singaporean and Southeast Asian art and elements with
Western ones into the national art curriculum. In doing so, I thought I could elevate the
status of Singaporean and Southeast Asian art and in the process disrupt the otherwise
Eurocentric narrative in traditional art history and art education. I was not prepared for
how Asian elements can also be very easily recolonized yet again into the master(‘s)
narrative, objectified as subjects with particular subject positions, when subjected to
Western notions and language of art and appraisal.

This is the story of the beginning of a journey to find alternate ways and referents
to think and write about Singapore, about us, through our art and art curriculum.

Background

The period just before I left for my studies coincided with renewed interests,
discussions and controversies in school assessment in many parts of the world.
Assessment and examinations had always been important in Singapore and Asia. In my
various positions as art teacher, aesthetics head of department and curriculum specialist
in Singapore, I was very conscious of the role of assessment in classroom pedagogy and
students’ learning and advancement. With renewed interests in assessment, there were
increasing calls to better utilize assessment as a means to improve learning. Hence, when
I first started my doctoral studies, I wanted to research assessment as a way to improve
art curricula, teaching, and learning in Singapore.
I could still remember how the sense of déjà vu descended ominously into shock. I was reading Patricia Broadfoot’s sociological analysis of the British education, assessment and social systems in “Education, Assessment and Society” (1996) when images of Britain were superimposed with flashes of Singapore. As a former British colony, Singapore retained the structure of the British education and assessment. To date, forty-seven years after the end of British colonialism, we still subscribe to the Cambridge International Examinations. The realization that we did not, and could not merely adopt the benefits of the British curriculum and assessment without inheriting elements of the British social systems embedded within it came as a shock.

I had always believed in our Singapore system. Born of a working class family, I was proud of our meritocratic system that enabled even a butcher’s daughter like me to study overseas on government scholarships. The realization that the system was much more complex and productive of other hidden values and structures that could also be contradictory to what it espoused shook me to the core.

As an art teacher and subsequently officer with the Singapore Ministry of Education, I had always been proud of how responsive our system was, particularly in the way we learned and adapted from the best educational systems all over the world. Little did I realize that what we were adapting were really microcosms of ideologically, culturally and socially constructed beliefs and modes of thinking, acting and being (i.e. epistemologies and ontologies). While I used to think that we could retrofit different forms of knowledge and best practices into our cultural and social context to suit our
purposes, I now wonder how these forms of epistemologies and ontologies in turn, mold us into their likeness and obligate us to their authority and structures.

It was impossible to continue researching into assessment. It did not make sense to work on strengthening your own fetters.

How did we get here? How do we get out?

My encounter with Broadfoot’s sociological evaluation of education and assessment in British society was the tipping point of many other cognitively dissonant experiences I had after I came to the United States. Engaging with discussions on American art education literature with a better understanding of the historical, social, cultural and intellectual context of the literature and its effects on classroom practice, or otherwise, caused me to reevaluate how some of these had been perceived and adopted in Singapore. Questioning the dominance, authority, orthodoxy, seeming universality and effects of British and American art education literature also raised other questions. How does an English-speaking postcolonial multiracial immigrant society in Southeast Asia go about reconstructing its national art curriculum, apart from, as a part of, and in spite of, Western dominated art education discourse? How can Singapore rethink the premises of its art curriculum? What would form the resources for this rethinking to take place?

Statement of Problem – Locating Singapore

Decolonizing national art curriculum in a multiracial immigrant society like Singapore is more complicated than in many postcolonial contexts. By decolonizing, I mean the critical examination and divesting of colonial and neocolonial power structures in knowledge systems that inhibit self-determination. The decolonizing of education in
postcolonial contexts, such as in former European colonies in Southeast Asia from the middle of the 20th century, usually focused on the replacement of colonial content and/or the inclusion of indigenous/local content. More recent work in decolonizing extended the scope from content to power structures and issues of epistemology, that is, the social relations referenced within knowledge production (Kovach, 2009). This recognizes European imperialism, the undergirding logic of colonialism, as “economic expansion” and as a “discursive field of knowledge” (Smith, 1999, p. 21) and “complex ideology which had widespread cultural, intellectual and technical expressions” (Smith, 1999, p. 22). Even after the historical event of decolonization, imperialism continues to perpetuate through unequal and “enduring exploitative cultural and national relations” (McLeod, 2007, p. 7) in various guises. Instead of showing signs of abating, colonization in the form of subjugation of minds (Biko & Stubbs, 1979) and systems, expresses itself in much more complex and dynamic forms in today’s globalized networks of transnational economic, political, technological and cultural systems through commerce, education, mass media, and digital media technology (Appadurai, 1990; Balibar, 1995; Cheah, 1997).

However, implicit in a lot of literature on decolonizing is to look to certain pre-colonized or current historical, social and cultural ontologies (ways of being and relating to the environment) to provide the means to counteract or address the effects of colonization (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2009). However the claims to indigeneity, prior and/or current ontologies are problematic for Singapore, notwithstanding problems surrounding these concepts and the use of these terms. Nearly fifty years after Singapore gained independence, Singapore has developed into a stable
state with sound institutions and a thriving economy. Singapore has all the trappings of an independent state, but the notion of Singapore, or its conceptual existence, and indeed many aspects of life in Singapore are still very much bound by ideological expressions and asymmetrical international relations across various fields. Edward Said described such ideological constructions by the West of the Orient or non-Western civilizations, as Orientalism, a system of representations that depends on and reproduces the “positional superiority” (Said, 1978, p.7) and hegemony of the West (Barker, 2004; Said, 1978). In this research, the West is mainly used to refer to Europe, North America and countries with Caucasian majority, such as Australia and New Zealand. In the following sections, I discuss the problems of different aspects of subjectivity(s) of Singapore through Orientalist representations in historical, cultural and social narratives, art history, and art curriculum in Singapore.

**Singapore as Written**


The historical narrative of modern Singapore typically starts in 1819 with its founding by the British colonial administration (Hong & Huang, 2008) till its birth as an independent nation in 1965. According to colonial records, Singapore was only a small Malay fishing village just prior to colonialism. However historical evidence suggests that
Singapore was once a thriving Malay civilization dating as far back as the 14th century (Hong & Huang, 2008). The attribution of the founding of Singapore to the function of a colonial trading outpost shaped not only the subsequent narratives of Singapore but also the individual narratives of the early migrants and even current citizen population. For example, the economic opportunities available in Singapore were often cited as the reason why the ancestors of majority of the Singaporean citizen population migrated to Singapore from nearby Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India and Europe. The narratives of Singapore’s economic success today continue to reflect these ideas, reflecting Singapore’s position as one of the most open and modernized economy offering multinational corporations easy access to the rest of Asia reflecting Singapore’s colonial role as a strategic entrepôt, a trading port where goods and services are brought or imported for export.

The writing of the cultural and ethnic narratives of Singapore, too, were shaped by ethnic classifications and planning during the colonial administration and post independence nation building (PuruShotam, 1998) rather than, say, the histories of the cultures of origin. To add to this was the state’s decision to adopt English as the official language in part to allay ethnic tensions. English was then seen as a more neutral language in view of ethnic tensions domestically and in the region just prior to independence. Such colonial vestiges in circumscribing the origins, character, economic function and language of the country, align Singapore with the colonial West such that it is always already Western, but only as a vassal to the West.
Hence, the ironic truth is, given its diverse ethnic make-up, Singapore has access to a multiplicity of cultural identifications, including Western ones, and yet, as an independent sovereign state, it has claims to none. What has been identified as Singaporean such as Singlish, a Singaporean colloquial comprising mainly English with local dialects, expression and accents, and other social and cultural traits, are not sums of, but creolization of these cultural identifications (Cohen, 2007). Over the years, attempts to define what Singaporean is had often resulted in obligatory and awkward amalgamations of cultural features from the four main official race categories: Malay (13.4% of resident population), Chinese (74.1%), Indian (9.2%) and Eurasian (3.3%) (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2012). Outcomes of such cultural efforts had always resulted in the perception that there is nothing culturally unique in Singapore, a perception that has its origins in 19th century colonial anthropological notions and valuations of Other cultures. Just as while some would consider Singlish a distinct language on its own, its detractors would describe its derivative nature as a form of bastardization, an illegitimate offspring or debasement of erstwhile purer languages and cultures.

The historical construction of Singapore and Singaporean-ness questions how we come to know of race, culture and historical, social and cultural ontologies. The discussion so far has looked at aspects of Singapore and Singaporean-ness as concepts through the subjectivity(s) of Singapore, that is, how Singapore is “constituted and altered by historical, social and linguistic structures” (Clewell, 2001), or how Singapore comes to be known as an entity or subject. The examples and partial analysis above
illustrate various components of how Singapore is constituted as a Westernized Asian economy with a cultural mix. They demonstrate how aspects of the subjectivity(s) of Singapore are in part shaped by categorizations and inscriptions through colonial records, 19th century colonialist anthropological attitudes on race and culture, and concerns of nation building.

These “historical, social and linguistic structures” (Clewell, 2001) have material consequences when they bind language and practice into what Michel Foucault terms discourse (Foucault, 1972). These discourses operate discursively as they establish regulated ways of speaking about Singapore and act as the substance through which objects and practices acquire meaning, and through which further knowledge about Singapore is produced (Barker, 2004; Said, 1978). For example, these discourses, when written as texts in history, philosophy, academic curriculum, cultural and economic context and theory, just to name a few, shape not only thinking but also behaviors and policies.

In a quick survey of current representations and subjectivities of Singapore from Singaporean perspectives, I looked at how different aspects of Singapore were written in literature from Singapore. Most of the literature was in sociology on a range of topics, such as race (B. H. Chua, 1998; Mutalib, 2012; PuruShotam, 1998), multiracialism (Lee, 2011), multiculturalism, representation of national and ethnic identity (B. H. Chua, 2003; Chun, 1996; Frost, 2005; Goh, 2008; Liu, Lawrence, Ward & Abraham, 2002), and globalization (Chong, 2003; 2005; 2011; Koh, 2003). The bulk of these articles locates and examines different forms of subjectivities in and as discourse. These analyses tend to
be anchored in critical historicizing using perspectives from left wing political economy, though the degree of emphasis in this varies across writers and the other historical, social and cultural frames that they employ.

The main and common methodology is critical analyses of government’s policies within dominant (read Western) academic philosophical discourses, and an absence of empirical and/or ethnographic methods to include experiences from Singaporeans. This polarizes power as well as positionalities and in the process totalizes governmental power and silences the populace. This is not a romanticizing of authenticity and voice neither is it essentializing Singaporean perspectives erring on the side of scientism. What this demonstrates is the hegemony of Western theory and discursive practices in academia and other institutions to the extent that it crowds out other epistemological positionalities, leading to a continuous Othering and/or pathologizing (Owomoyela, 1994) of Singapore subjectivities.

How can we see ourselves other than through other people’s eyes (DuBois, 1903), language, and ways of thinking, being, and responding?

Changing discourses had been a national concern in Singapore since the General Election in May 2011, when the ruling political party lost seats due to mounting concerns in a host of domestic issues. The election period saw a groundswell of opinions, particularly on online media in issues ranging from immigration, employment, housing, transportation, and rising costs of living. Following the elections, the ruling party who won, lost no time in regrouping and acting on the changing political climate. There were discernible signs of increasing engagement with the populace in policy making and even
reversal or changes in certain policies. The government also began a series of “Singapore Conversations” to engage Singaporeans from all walks in life to share what they want to see in future Singapore. In one such conversation, participants had called for the rethinking of sacred cows in nation-building by highlighting the fabric of nation-building myths such as the narrative of Singapore as small and fragile (Ong & Goy, 2013). Participants had raised how harping on these curb Singaporeans’ imagination and ability to think big and out of the box (Ong & Goy, 2013). Journalists had also variously described the period as a search for a new narrative (M. H. Chua, 2013) and a new vision and definition (Han, 2013).

The issue of reclaiming the narratives we tell our children and ourselves, and the way we perceive ourselves in the form of our subjectivity(s) is important, if not basic, for any community. Such are the tenets of democracy espoused by champions of critical pedagogy in the likes of Paulo Freire (1970), Michael Apple (1979; 1995) and Henry Giroux (1991; 2003). While we do not disavow the histories that formed part of who we are, how do we regard them in such a way that is ethical (Cheah, 1997) and yet does not lead to subjugation? In a globalizing environment where colonizing and neocolonial influences are much widely distributed and multifarious, how do we be constantly and critically mindful of where and how to situate our subjectivity(s)? How do Singapore’s art and art curriculum, as part of the distributed field of discourses contribute or undermine the construction of a collective subjectivity?
Singapore as Painted

The issue of locating a distinct Singaporean subject(ivity) from and at the same time distinct and apart from the histories and cultures that constituted it is also played out in the writings of Singapore art. The narrative of Singapore’s art usually starts at the beginning of 20th century, with special focus on modern art, especially Western painting (Kwok, 1996, p. 8). This is despite the fact that documentation of cultural expressions of life in Malaya, of which Singapore was once a part, went back as early as 9th century (Hsü & Lai, 1999). Kwok Kian Chow, the first director of the Singapore Art Museum pronounced that “visual arts is a Western-derived practice, because, historically, the practice of painting and sculpture in this part of the world had a definite Western origin” (Kwok, 1996, p. 7). Such seemingly self-Orientalizing moves can be rationalized in terms of Homi Bhabha’s hybridity in postcolonial subjectivity where the colonized is transformed through identification with the colonizer. Art historian Kevin Chua argued that Singapore’s art has been rationalized, based on concepts and developments from Western art history so much so Western art is held as the “origin and teleos” (K. Chua, 2011, p. 469).

Even though Western art takes the place of “origin and teleos” (K. Chua, 2011, p. 469), the subjectivity(s) of art in Singapore, like that of cultural subjectivities, assume(s) blends of East and West. The appeal to notions of East and West seeks to establish and legitimize connections with both sets of traditions. While it purports to bring together the East and West in a fusion of sorts, the East-West connection also acts as a divide, ironically separating the two in a perpetual hyphenated suspension. It is as if it is itself
conscious of the empty twin signifiers for which qualifies it for no specific tradition and disqualifies it from all.

Hence, despite the probable hybridity and identification with the West, Orientalist conceptions of Singapore nevertheless exclude it from the West. Using Eurocentric definitions and approaches towards art, aesthetics, art history and criticism naturally privileges European values, decenters Singaporean ones and represents Singaporean art and Singapore through the eyes of the colonial other. When positioned this way, Singapore’s art and practice is always already perceived as lacking. Given the co-constitutive relationship between the discourses of art practice, art history, criticism and curriculum (Greer, 1984), a curriculum built on these premises will reproduce and continue to entrench such racial and cultural “ordering” (Giroux, 1981 as cited in Dei, 2011, p. 41) and hence inequalities.

**Singapore as Taught**

The narrative of the Singapore’s art curriculum in the public school system have similarly been attributed by a few Singaporean writers to have been initiated by the colonial administration (Chia, 1978; Kwok, 1996). This is despite the fact that vernacular schools, such as local Chinese schools had been teaching Chinese painting and Chinese calligraphy before art education in the European tradition was formalized in schools under the colonial administration (Kwok, 1996). Art education in schools under the colonial administration in the early 20th century, after 1923, was for “the training of observation, building up of a retentive memory, stimulation of imagination and cultivation of taste” (Kwok, 1996, p. 28). The key medium taught then was watercolor.
The Singapore school curriculum has consciously emphasized Singaporean content and nationalistic values over the years, especially with the introduction of National Education\(^1\) from 1994. The content of the art curriculum has been revised progressively to include multiple media, and art forms and artists from Singapore and Southeast Asia alongside Western media and artists. To accommodate the insertions, for example in the study of artworks and artists, the framing of art and artists had departed from traditional Western art canonic and linear chronological categorization of art movements to a theme-based approach. The design of the curriculum also broadened to take into account art curriculum literature and resources from the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

Nevertheless, the revision of the content and media are still structured using Western modernist notions of aesthetics, narrative content, criticism and notions of the artist. The art curriculum construct and model is still built on notions of art education originated from a Western context, including premises of visual literacy, psychological links between individual artistic expression and cognitive development, and traces of American Discipline-Based Art Education (Clark, Day & Greer, 1989).

The assessment of art at specific graduating levels, such as at the upper secondary (Grades 9 – 10) and pre-university (Grades 11 – 12) levels comes under the Singapore-

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\(^1\) National Education is a set of nationalistic principles and messages that teachers incorporate into the curriculum. These could be in the form of Singaporean content, materials and values. “It aims to develop national cohesion, cultivate the instinct for survival as a nation and instill in our students, confidence in our nation’s future. It also emphasizes cultivating a sense of belonging and emotional rootedness to Singapore.” See [http://www.ne.edu.sg/](http://www.ne.edu.sg/)
Cambridge examinations. In these examinations, the same criteria is applied to all two-dimensional, three-dimensional and electronic art media, including traditional Asian art forms such as batik, Chinese painting, calligraphy and Chinese seal carving. This assumes that all Western and Asian media share or can be evaluated with a single Western orientation towards inquiry and research that is based on Western studio traditions and notions of scientific methods.

Despite efforts to allay teachers’ concerns, and the confluence of a number of other factors over the years, the percentage of art coursework submissions in Asian media has declined steadily. The dominance of Western notions of art practice and assessment has impacted notions and practice of Singaporean and Asian arts not only for students and teachers, but also for the development of Singapore arts scene in general. The winners in key annual art events like the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award and the President’s Young Talents feature almost exclusively Western media.

Re-imagining Singapore

In the above sections, I have looked at how the narratives and subjectivities of Singapore, Singapore art and art curriculum are constituted by complex, interweaving and layered representations and discursive practices. As the subjectivity(s) of one aspect leak(s) into the others, these different aspects are also co-constitutive of the various discursive effects on the experiences of living, practicing and learning art in Singapore. Despite historical decolonization, these representations continue to circulate and are

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2 The Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Examinations (GCE) at the Ordinary (‘O’) level are national examination conducted in conjunction with UK Cambridge International Examinations for students at the end of their Secondary education, the equivalent of American 10th graders or 16 – 17 year olds.
prevalent and deeply entrenched in complex, multiple and distributed fields and power structures in and through engagements with global economic, educational and cultural systems and institutions.

In the current context of global transnational flows of people, finances, ideologies, technology and mass media (Appadurai, 1990), representations and subjectivities are as multifarious as the power and resistances that produce them. The positionalities of Orientalism, postcolonial hybridity and indeed, even of postcoloniality itself are now multiple and much more complex than binary and oppositional.

Hence the issue of decolonizing art curriculum is much more complex as the episteme(s) of the curriculum is layered, interwoven and intersected with that from other fields, institutions and locations. In thinking towards decolonizing or unthinking the art curriculum would involve rethinking what constitutes art and Singapore and the relationships between the two, as well as their relationships with and within the curriculum.

Current literature in various fields, such as critical pedagogy, multicultural art education, visual culture art education and postcolonial curriculum studies has tried to address power structures inherent within educational structures. However, these efforts are often blindsided by their own disciplinary epistemological constructs and their assumptions of the Other and erstwhile oppressed (Dunbar Jr., 2008; Grande, 2008; Lather, 1991 and Mohanty, 1984). At the same time, given the global transnational pressures on subjectivities, there is also a need to broaden decolonizing research and methodologies beyond ethnic, cultural and national conceptions.
How might we think about subjectivity of and in Singapore with the referents, contexts, experiences and resources used in art in Singapore such that while we acknowledge the multifarious influences and constructions, we are also not circumscribed by them?

**Research Question – Knowing, Being and Responding to Singapore**

The concerns of my research stem from a vision to reconceptualize the design and premise of the national art curriculum that will divest it of epistemological and power structures that subjugates subjectivity(s) in and of Singapore. This approach to decolonizing or reexamining the structures and premises of the art curriculum requires a reconsideration and/or reconstruction of the understanding of art in Singapore. This is tactical, if not necessary, to investigate these co-constitutive concepts in view of the historic connections between professional practice and disciplinary structures in dominant Western art curriculum studies (Efland 1990; Romans, 2005; Thistlewood, 1992). To investigate just the structures within the art curriculum alone would fail to attend to the epistemological structures on which it is built. Therefore, in formulating the research, I have chosen to focus on interviewing current practitioners in visual arts and design in Singapore and examining their work as a way to minimize reliance on secondary material and their consequent epistemological constructs.

The aim of my research is to explore alternate ways of perceiving and constituting the epistemological structures and subjectivity(s) of Singapore arts practice using first-person narratives of current arts practitioners and analyses of artworks of Singaporean artists and designers.
The key questions of the research are:

How do aspects of art and practice come into intelligibility in Singapore?
How do these come into being?
How do we know and respond to them?

**Positionings and Contradictions**

Important factors in understanding subjectification as mentioned in preceding sections are the social, cultural, intellectual and political positionality(s) and relations within which we understand, and are understood, speak and are spoken of. I am constantly aware of the contradictions of my multiple, overlapping and intersecting subjectivities as a Christian, Singaporean, Chinese, mother, wife, daughter, government civil servant, curriculum planner, art teacher, Graduate student at an American university, government scholar, and Fine Arts graduate from a British university. Each of these roles obligates me in different knowledges, epistemologies, allegiances and relationships that criss-cross various communities. How tenable is a project on decolonizing Western and other power structures by a Singaporean government civil servant who had had her higher education in British institutions, while using tools and literature from Western academia to fulfill the requirements of yet another higher degree at an American institution? How does the nature of this project also invite, solicit and provoke responses through its interpellation of different forms of subjectivity(s) in its different readers?

The mere recognition of the contradictions between these various roles hardly suffices as reflexivity. Embarking on this research will require constant examination of my personal implicit, hidden and feared values and beliefs at different junctures. Rather
than seeing my different roles as liabilities, I hope that the multiplicity of these will provide opportunities to examine the relationships between these different facets and layers and open up more interstices. My own self-reflexivity as a researcher will hopefully be an ongoing reflex and asset to expand the perspectives of the research.

The approach to the use of literature, methods and design will likewise be reflexive in adopting a stance of within and against (Lather, 1991) where concepts and their applications will be interrogated, stretched and pushed to their limits.

**Conceptual Framework**

The thinking, content, questions and methodology of the research is informed by literature from across a wide range of fields such as postcolonial theory, decolonizing methodologies, art education, cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and sociology. The theoretical context of study is informed by literature in postcolonial theory, decolonizing methodologies, cultural studies and art education. This theoretical context is then used as an analytic for understanding the current social historical context of subjectivities in Singapore and how current literature in art, art education and sociology, construes various aspects of subjectivities in/of Singapore. Literature in postcolonial theory and decolonizing methodologies describe the social and historical context of where Singapore came from and offer analytics for understanding its subjectivity(s) today. However, the poststructuralist analytics in postcolonial theory offer few, if any, alternatives in constructing subjectivity. Likewise, the scope of existing decolonizing literature does not address the dynamics of multiracial immigrant context in Singapore.
The theoretical tools for thinking about constructing subjectivity in a post-postcolonial global period are taken from literature on globalizing cultural economy in cultural studies, anthropology, folklore and feminist theory. Literature in critical pedagogy, multicultural art education, visual culture art education and indigenous pedagogy also informed the thinking of implications in reconstructing subjectivity(s). While postcolonial and decolonizing literature is used to identify issues of the current study, the primary frame for thinking about current and emerging context in Singapore and strategies within that context is taken from analyses on globalization and global cultural economy. This, together with feminist theory, such as concepts on performativity (Butler, 1993) agential realism, intra-activity and ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) form the core tools of analysis in this study. The discussion on the implications of the study for art education in Singapore will draw from literature in critical pedagogy, multicultural art education, visual culture art education, indigenous pedagogy and postcolonial curriculum studies.

Significance

In my work as a curriculum planner, I used to take pains to ensure that syllabi were comparable with those from across the world and based on recognized Western, if not international, research, even as they needed to be relevant to the Singapore context. My experiences in recent years had taught me that the orthodoxy of Western literature resides mostly in my mind rather than anywhere else. The importance of staying engaged in and with a globalizing context of art and art education does not have to be a snare for enslavement. However, in the absence of uniquely Singaporean representations, values
and systems of thinking about art, we will always be represented through the standards
set for us. This research marks the beginning of an attempt to unthink those existing
standards, unthink ourselves as we had been represented, by looking for alternate ways to
(re)construct ourselves from within and on our own terms.

This research does not make claims of authenticity through artists’ voices but
instead seeks to represent their practice and perspectives in their own words and through
Singapore as context instead of the existing alienating institutions of representation and
artspeak. Instead of relying on existing forms of representation residing in current
writings, this research draws from interviews with artists. However, this does not assert
truthiness through artists’ voices, but rather seeks to represent their practice and
perspectives in their own words and using Singapore as context and method. By so doing,
the research hopes to (re)connect and (re)construct representations of art and practice to
Singapore as context while questioning the asymmetrical and subjugating subjectivity(s)
of Singapore and Others’ art in existing discourse. In this way, the research hopes to
contribute to literature in postcolonial theory, decolonizing research and postcolonial
curriculum studies on empirical explorations of postcolonial subjectivity(s) in art and
curriculum.

The research examines the connections between professional art practice and art
curriculum design as well as the co-constitutive implications of those connections. While
the research uses those connections as beginning premises, it also explores the
implications of those premises and other forms of relations between art curriculum and
other components of context. The research thus serves to expand concepts of art
This research is for our students, our young, that they may understand and honor themselves in their own terms the way artists’ works are re-presented through the concerns and values in, and perspectives from Singapore. The research shows them how they can connect to Singapore and to the world in more ways than they know. That though they are in the world, they need not be subject to it but will need to actively and constantly find ways to define and redefine Singapore such that they may know, re-know and re-present themselves according to their own terms.

This research is a toast to Singapore, past, present and future. This is not the first juncture in our history where we embark on reimagining ourselves and it will not be the last. We free ourselves when we unthink the thoughts that thought us. In our reimagining, let us remember that we are our worst enemy as well as our best weapon.

**Limitations**

The research is aimed at theorizing elements of epistemological, ontological and ethical structures among current practitioners who had been recognized or had been accorded attention by different communities and/or peers. This and given the wide scope of art and artists in Singapore, it will not be possible to get a representative sampling of artists, art forms, periods and duration of practice within this project. Hence, the focus on current practice is also deliberate given its historical proximity and contextual relevance to the current study, and students’ lives and environment. The purpose of this research is to establish a framework for which future research can be built. The research
acknowledges its own ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and ethico-onto-epistemological constructs within its own time and space. As such the findings and discussion on reconceptualization of the curriculum will also be preliminary and contingent based on the current scope of participants, discussion and analysis.

**Overview of Dissertation**

This Chapter introduces the background, premises and broad goals of the research. Chapter 2 discusses some of the dilemmas brought up in Chapter 1 using literature in various fields. Chapter 2 considers various frames, ideas and approaches to similar research and discusses constructing a theoretical framework for the research. The discussion on the research framework continues in Chapter 3 as I consolidate these ideas and frameworks in the research design. In this Chapter, I discuss the rationale and situate the research in relation to existing fields. In Chapter 4, I introduce the participants, their background and the context of our encounters. Chapter 5 comprises two case studies. The first examines how one of the participants comes to be constituted as an artist. The second looks at aspects of the constitution of street art. The case studies present perspectives of participants who work in street art to provide the context and developments of the field in Singapore. Chapter 6 consolidates and discusses the analyses of the other participants and their work. Chapter 7 concludes the study by discussing learning from the research, and implications and recommendations for curriculum and future research.
Chapter 2: Postcolonial Subjectivities, Singapore, and the Global Cultural Economy

A Story of Subjectivities in Search of Culture(s) and Identity(s)

Singaporean songwriter and composer, Dick Lee, one of the keynote speakers at the Arts Education Conference held in Singapore in July 2013, recounted the early days of his career in the 1970s. During an audition for a television talent competition in 1971, he sang his original composition, “Life Story,” which was a reminiscence of his life at aged 15. He failed to qualify as a contestant but was instead invited to perform his original compositions every week as an artist during the television telecasts of the talent competition. As with “Life Story,” his many songs drew inspiration from his life in Singapore. For the finals of the talent competition, he wrote and sang, “Fried Rice Paradise,” a song with snippets of working class life in Singapore.

At the event, he drew the attention of an expatriate music producer who was reportedly ridiculed by his local colleagues for wanting to offer Dick a recording contract. Unfazed, the expatriate music producer resigned and set up his own recording company in order to do so. After the release of Dick’s first album in 1974, his song,

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“Fried Rice Paradise” was banned from the local media for its colloquial and improper use of English.

The first two verses and chorus of the song go like this:

I’ve got a friend, her name Bee Lian
She told me, she told me
That one day she would make it big
Settled down in Chinatown
Tried her luck in People’s Park\(^5\)
Selling plastic rings from China
Only ten cents, come and buy lah\(^6\)
But her products couldn’t last
Poor girl didn’t know what to do
Moved her load to Orchard Road\(^7\)
She told me, she told me
That she would try again from there
Had a fling at waitressing
Disco dancing not her thing
Every day she say “Lecheh”\(^8\),
I better find an old towkay\(^9\)”

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\(^5\) This refers to People’s Park Complex located in Chinatown. Completed in 1970, it was the first shopping center of its kind in Southeast Asia.

\(^6\) “Lah” is one of the most common particle in colloquial Singapore English, or Singlish. It is often used at the end of a sentence and performs different functions, such as to appeal (in this case), affirm, reassure or command.

\(^7\) Orchard Road is the main high street shopping belt in Singapore.

\(^8\) Malay word meaning troublesome, inconvenient or difficult.
Looked around and met a clown

Who gave her love and money too

So what did she do

She opened

CHORUS

Fried Rice Paradise

Nasi goreng\(^9\) very nice

That’s her speciality

Ninety-nine varieties

Fried Rice Paradise

“Shiok”\(^11\) is how it’s been described

booked a table? – Very wise

That is what I would do

(To jump the queue)

Discouraged, Dick subsequently performed mainly English cover songs. He went to London a few years later where a recording studio invited Dick for an audition after listening to one of his demo tapes. Dick recalled that the executives were surprised to see a Chinese man as they had expected someone white based on the tapes. They queried him on the choice of western cover songs and thought he should focus on songs that drew from his own culture.

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\(^9\) Chinese variant meaning boss and/or rich man.

\(^10\) Malay fried rice.

\(^11\) Malay variant meaning ecstasy or delight.
Dick recalled his confusion on being told to focus on his own culture.

“I was raised white.”

Having grown up in British colonial Singapore and raised on Enid Blyton and other western writers, he thought he was a white boy. Reflecting on his early songs and experiences, he surmised that in the early 1970s, barely 10 years after Singapore became independent, there was no sense of what or who Singapore was. It was only from 1985 that the organization behind the annual National Day Parade began commissioning the writing of Singapore-themed songs. The first of which, Dick noted wryly, was written by a Canadian under the auspices of an advertising company commissioned to do so.

Dick Lee continued to write and perform songs featuring Singaporean and/or Asian elements from 1980s. Though he is a household name in Singapore, it was in Japan in the 1990s that he found commercial success for his work. Since then, Dick Lee has enjoyed an illustrious career, playing many different roles in the Singapore and international music scenes, including being a judge on Singapore Idol. He penned two popular National Day Parade songs and was the creative director of two National Day Parades. In 2005, he was awarded the Cultural Medallion, the state’s highest award in the arts that recognizes individuals whose artistic excellence, contribution and commitment, have enriched and made a distinction to Singapore’s arts and cultural landscape (National Arts Council, 2013).

**Introduction**

Following independence in 1965, Singapore became known as a cultural desert in the 1970s, in part due to its heavy emphasis on industrial and economic development in
nation building. Even with the subsequent increased focus on arts and cultural
development, the question of what counts as unique Singapore culture has often surfaced
over time in various arenas and contexts. With an increasing influx of new immigrants to
complement an ageing workforce and declining birth rates in the 21st century, Singapore
continues to grapple with questions of who are Singaporeans and what makes Singapore.
Unlike the period immediately following independence where the notion of Singapore
justifies the country to other countries, the justification this time it is with Singaporeans
in Singapore.

In my project, I look for ways and referents to unthink and rethink subjectivity in
and of Singapore. Dick Lee’s account is illustrative of key concepts, issues and
conundrums in my study. These include concepts and contestations of culture, identity,
multivalencies of postcolonial subject positionings, ontological, epistemological and
ethical issues relating to decolonization, constructing subjectivity(s) and conceiving
agency. This chapter locates these key concepts and issues, through Dick Lee’s story,
across various fields, and against a dynamic and rapidly changing globalizing
environment. The fields include Postcolonial Studies, Globalization Studies, Sociology,
Cultural Studies, Education and Art Education, Feminist Studies, Gender Studies,
Decolonizing Methodologies, Indigenous Research, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism
and Agential Realism. The chapter aims to present the context of Singapore and
framework of the study by examining the philosophies and key ideas in and across
aspects of these multiple fields.
This chapter is divided into four main sections that identify theoretical framings, social, cultural and historical contexts, and the key theories and concepts undergirding the study. Section 1 is an overview of the post-colonial context and the field of Postcolonial Studies. It examines key concepts of the study, namely culture, discourse, subjectivity and identity through key theories of Orientalism, marginality and hybridity. Section 2 continues the investigation of the Postcolonial framework by examining studies on subjectivities in Singapore through the lenses of Orientalism, marginality and hybridity in Postcolonial Studies. Section 2 also identifies key issues in understanding subjectivities of Singapore by examining representations and writing in sociology, cultural development, art and art history in Singapore. Section 3 attempts to push the limits of Postcolonial Studies by revisiting post-colonial subjectivity and agency issues and theories against the backdrop of the contemporary global cultural economy. Section 4 examines Decolonizing Methodologies, Indigenous Research and notions of Agential Realism in quantum physics philosophy in proposing an ethico-onto-epistemological framework for the study. Throughout this chapter, I raise questions during the discussion of concepts and the project. While I will not answer all of them, the questions serve to ground the project, open up discussions, provide links between Sections or just act as humbling reminders of lingering questions and issues beyond the scope of this project.

Section 1: Postcolonial Moorings

Culture

The first records of the use of the word ‘culture’ are from the mid 15th century to refer to the tilling and cultivation of land (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2008;
Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The meaning was extended to nurturing, development, and growth, from the 16th century. From 17th century, culture was used to refer to “refinement of mind, taste, and manners; artistic and intellectual development” and collective “arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2008).

Culture describes the symbolic meanings that are shared within groups. Raymond Williams (1989) who is acknowledged as the grandfather of cultural studies in Britain, describes culture as “ordinary.” Culture describes the “shape”, “purposes”, “meanings” and “modes of change” of human societies (p. 4). Williams’ description was written in response to elitist notions of culture. He uses culture to mean “a whole way of life - the common meanings,” as well as the “special processes of discovery and creative effort,” such as the arts and learning that enables one to participate in “known” meanings in a society as well as construct new ones (Williams, 1989, p. 4). Similarly, James and Cherry Banks (2013), writing from the field of multicultural education, defines culture as “shared symbol systems as well as the cognitive models that make such symbol systems meaningful and intelligible,” as such “culture refers to the symbolic meanings by which the members of a society communicate with and understand themselves, each other, and the world around them” (p. 28, italics in original).

had been used, if not evoked, in a wide range of meanings and fields, such as anthropology, folklore, history, postcolonialism, cultural studies, decolonizing methodologies, multiculturalism and art education (see for example, Eagleton, 2000; Dirks, 1992; Mitchell, 1995). The wide diversity and all-encompassing meanings and use of the concept of culture leads Mitchell (1995) to declare that if culture is everything, then there is no such thing as culture, in that “‘culture’ per se does not exist” as an “internally structured, coherent realm, level, or idiom or thing” (p. 106). Similarly, the writers cited here are careful to point out against reifying and essentializing culture. That is to say, the writing about culture should avoid concretizing culture into a real or tangible entity in itself. Culture is also not to be taken as natural or inherent to all people and communities.

If there’s no such thing as culture per se, why does it matter?

**Culture as Discourse**

Issues surrounding concepts of culture, such as in the current writings in the fields mentioned above, are not so much about culture as an object of study in and of itself but discourses of and about culture and culture as discourse. Michel Foucault (1972) drew attention to how concepts and subjects are created from “statements” (1972), “pronoucements” (Fabion, 1998, p. XXI) and representations, such as in spoken utterances, written texts, codes, imagery; “conventions and habits of language producing specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings” (Brooker, 2002, p. 78). Discourse, as used in Foucault’s work, refers to these representations and their “discursive formation,” that is, the “order, correlations, positions and functionings,
transformations” governing the “system of dispersion” of the representations (Foucault, 1972, p. 38). The collusion, circulation and sedimentation of various cultural representations in and across different fields and institutions are largely facilitated by asymmetrical economic and other power structures. As such, the discourses of culture and the representation of people of other cultures are ordered according to the structures that represent, circulate and use the discourses and not just passive images of those being represented.

Dirks (1992) attributes the concept of culture to the colonial encounter with the other. Twentieth century understanding of culture as “a way of life or social environment characterized by or associated with” specified qualities and the group(s) of people subscribing or belonging to this (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2008) is a classification and ordering of difference. Culture was a broad umbrella term and category used across many fields, such as anthropology, history and literature, to explain differences, where difference is measured in terms of “deviation” from Western norms and “ideals” (Spivak, 1995, p. 27). The selection, focus and marking of particular aspects and representations of cultural differences belies the vantage point of the colonial West “concealed” by a pretense of having “no geo-political determinations” (Spivak, 1995, p. 24), through which the other is represented. The focus on particular aspects and representations objectifies these differences, that is, it renders erstwhile abstract concepts into objective reality and dehumanizes human subjects into mere physical objects.

Inherent in the discourse of culture of marked and unmarked differences in the colonial context, are binary positions and structures of power hierarchies (Shuman, 1993)

Dirks解释文化为“联盟网络过程”的产物，它产生出国家和民族，那些在基本方面将群体“区别开来，用语言、种族、地理和历史在一个概念中统一起来”（Dirks, 1992, p. 3）。正如殖民主义是一种文化形成，文化也是一种殖民形成，即嵌入到殖民征服的手段和目标中。文化作为知识的类别在殖民主义中，文化作为话语，因此是一个“控制项目”（Dirks, 1992, p. 3），其中殖民知识被用来证明行使权力和固有的权力等级在对其他人口的压迫中。在早期20世纪的殖民主义之外，文化“成为阶级社会的基础，自然化了西方资产阶级社会中的性别划分，以及发展出种族、生物学和民族概念”（Dirks, 1992, p. 4）。

后殖民主体性 – 西亚主义

1978年，Edward Said使用Foucault的概念和分析话语的方法来追踪西亚的持续性和断裂性。他的书，《Orientalism》展示了如何

Postcolonial Subjectivities – Orientalism

1978年，Edward Said使用Foucault的概念和分析话语的方法来追踪西亚的持续性和断裂性。他的书，《Orientalism》，展示了如何
“institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (Said, 1978, p. 2) produces knowledge and imaginary of the Middle East as the Orient. Said used orientalism to describe a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about non-European people. To the Europeans, the Orient represents “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1978, p. 1). What is more significant is that the representations of the Orient are signs of “European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (Said, 1978, p. 6). Orientalism is not a mere passive reflection by culture, scholarship, or institutions but a “distribution of geopolitical awareness” into different texts, an “elaboration” of unequal distinctions, and a “will” or “intention” to understand and control what is different (Said, 1978, p. 12, italics in original). It is a discourse not in direct “corresponding relationship with political power” but is “produced and exists in uneven exchange with various kinds of power” in the intellectual, cultural and moral (Said, 1978, p. 12).

In the field of Postcolonial Studies that Said’s work had spawned, scholars, most from former European colonies, examine colonial discourses and representations across various fields and their effects on different forms of postcolonial imaginary. The scope ranges from looking at genealogy of discourses in and across various disciplines, such as in literature, history and education, to examining the construction of postcolonial subject(s), imaginary, and identification.
Said’s Orientalism demonstrates how various forms of discourses of the Middle East, or colonized populations in general, coagulate across different forms of colonial documentations and institutions and create particular cultural subject positionings. These representations and discourses collectively create entities or subjects (Swann, Deumert, Lillis & Mesthrie, 2004) (See also Althusser, 1971) of particular populations that in turn further constrain, and perpetual delimiting understandings of the population in question. Subjectivity, then refers to one’s experience of who he or she is in the constant making of the subject (Swann et al., 2004). The creating of the colonial subject, or any subject for that matter, implies a “Subject” creator, albeit “concealed” by a pretense of having “no geo-political determinations” (Spivak, 1995, p. 24), and from whose vantage point the other is represented and subjected. Representation through the colonial Subject, privileges the language, history, values and framing of the colonizer thereby setting up hierarchies of standards and values through which others are ordered, or rather, marginalized. Such representations and hierarchies are reproduced through language structures, images, and institutions such as education, law and colonial administrations, which perpetuate and even naturalize the inherent inequalities.

However, this does not imply that there are unitary Subject/subject in colonial discourses, neither is there a dichotomy of positions or polarity of power between the two. Foucault (1972) states that “a single work…can give rise, simultaneously, to several distinct types of discourses” (p. 221) and that power does not only reside with a few but is dissipated and takes many different agents, forms and modalities.

Marginality
Adopting a poststructuralist feminist stance, Gayatri Spivak complicates the concepts of center-peripheral, power and agency further. Spivak questions the unitary concept and homogeneity of colonial subject(s) and expands the scope of postcolonial subjectivities and subjectification. Spivak considers the heterogeneity and unequal development of colonial subjects and draws attention to silenced groups who do not even appear in the archives or documentations. Citing Guha, she differentiates between the “elite-subaltern”, that is the group in dominance or control in colonial or former colonial territories, and the “subaltern”, the large majority of the demographics who do not exercise dominance (over other groups) (Spivak, 1995, p. 26). Spivak raised issues of representation even within the field of Postcolonial Studies. Spivak ponders on those doubly silenced subalterns, such as women in patriarchal societies and on their inability to come into speech and represent themselves (Spivak, 1995). Spivak’s work complicates the notion of singularity of power in the construction and continual inscription of postcolonial subjectivity and calls attention to the diffusion of power across social and cultural fields.

Identity

The epistemological nature of colonial discourses of other cultures and subjectivities affects the ontological experience of selfhood through its discursive practices and construction of sense of identity. This is to say that more than just representations from particular situated perspectives, discourses also regulate and give meanings to physical objects and actual practices (Barker, 2004). Discourses do not merely reflect but construct the very fabric with which we weave our very understanding
of objects, people, selves, practices and experiences. Michel Foucault refers to this as episteme (Foucault, 1971). By its very nature, discourses dictate what is knowable and how what is knowable comes to be spoken about (Foucault, 1971). Discourses establish as truth through discursive practices or ways through which institutions establish “orders of truth” stabilizing and reinforcing existing power structures, systems and values even despite contradictory discourses (Brooker, 2002, p. 79). So much so that discourses are really “more than ways of thinking and producing meaning” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). These epistemological constructions become or “constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). This is to say, discourses operate discursively by affecting how we understand ourselves, that is, our subjectivity, how we understand our being in the world, that is ontological understanding, and what and how we understand as true knowledge, that is epistemological understanding.

While subjectivity refers to the siting and construction of a subject within preexisting structures such as social, historical, linguistic and materialist structures, identity refers to the mostly internal understanding and sense of self and selfhood (Brooker, 2002) from these various subject positions (Cooper, 2005; Hall, 2000). Identity suggests an “undifferentiated unity” and “internal order” (Martin, 2005), albeit a “constructed form of closure” (Hall, 2000, p.18) (Cooper, 2005) and “limited” and “temporary” fixing of particular modes of subjectivities (Weedon, 2004, p.19) (Cooper, 2005). Conceptions of the nature of identity differ in different theoretical paradigms. For example, identity is seen as fragmentary, fluid and discursive under Poststructuralism and
feminist writings, products of interpellation within dominant prevailing ideology and class relations under Marxism (Althusser, 1971), and outcomes of (mis)identification under Freudian psychoanalysis (Weedon, 2004).

Notions of identity are also multilayered where identifications can be made via a whole host of different qualifiers, such as race, gender, class and other processes of identifications, distinctions and differentiations (Trinh T Minh Ha, 1987; Weedon, 2004). In the same way, identities can also be intersectional where different aspects meet, traverse, conflict, and negotiate. While the term and concept of subjectivity make apparent its own discursiveness and situatedness within certain relations and structures, the use of concepts of identity designates a movement of identification with existing groupings that masks its own ideology (Weedon, 2004) and hegemony (See for example, Burke, 1999, 2005, on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony). As the concepts of identity tend towards unifying, stabilizing and curtailing plural “possibilities of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field” by giving individuals “a singular sense of who they are and where they belong” (Weedon, 2004, p. 19), it also leans towards essentializing. Using a Hegelian notion of identity where the Other is critical to formulation of self-consciousness (Hegel, 1971), the definition of our own identities also necessarily meant fixing that of others, albeit within binary modes (Hall, 2000; Weedon, 2004).

**Postcolonial Identity – Hybridity**

Homi Bhabha, another key figure in the Postcolonial Studies, draws from Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, to complicate the notion of agency and relationships between the self and other by pointing to the mutually constitutive nature of colonial
S/subjects. The colonizer recognizes his own subjectivity through the other and maintains his own superiority by ‘fixing’ and perpetuating the other’s differences through stereotypes. By the same play of recognition of difference, but also coupled with identification through sameness, the elite dominant among the colonized indigenous identifies with the colonizer and desires to occupy the place of the colonizer, while at the same time is committed to his/her culture. Using a materialist framework, Franz Fanon accounted for this form of identification with the colonizers as part of the rise of the middle class and ruling class and the move towards capital accumulation through power and domination.

Bhabha writes of this ambivalence as not as a “neat division” but rather of “being in two places at once” (Bhabha, 1994, p 44). Bhabha does not see the question of identification as taking the place of a “pre-given identity,” but through a process of “production of an image of identity” and “transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (Bhabha, 1994, p 44). The movement towards “production” and “transformation” of “an image of identity” is not the attainment of essentialist “pre-given identity” but opens up an interstitial space that allows for hybridization and possibilities of forms expressions and representation.

Summation

This section reviewed concepts of culture, subjectivity, cultural subjectivity(s) and identity through colonial discourse and Postcolonial Studies. It examined the nature of discourse and the discursive practices of colonial discourse as epistemological and
ontological and the effects on the experience of subjectivities and identity in a Postcolonial context.

Section 2: Towards Defining Singapore

Introduction & Overview

Section 2 examines the ideas set out in Section 1 in greater detail through the application of the ideas in the Singapore context. Section 2 reviews different representations of Singapore in three parts. In the first part, I look at representations of Singapore in the media and sociological discourse and different aspects and different subjectivities involve in constructing Singapore. Using Postcolonial notions of Orientalism and marginality, the first part looks at how practices in history and as part of nation building, creates the cultural and geographical spatiality and imaginary of the place, nation and state of Singapore. In doing so, it also demonstrates the difficulties and constraints in defining Singapore. In the second part, I examine representations of Singapore through writings on art and art history in Singapore using ideas of Orientalism, marginality and hybridity. The third part examines the concept of hybridity.

Social Cultural Representations of Singapore as Nation/State

On popular media, such as on television shows, Singaporeans use a variety of metaphors to describe the Singaporean culture such as *rojak*. *Rojak* means “mixture” in Malay and also refers to certain local dishes that comprise a mix of fruits, vegetables and other ingredients. Singaporeans use the term and dish to represent the eclectic mix of features that we identify with. We do not just have one source of cultural influence but many, most of which still retain their own distinct characteristics despite being blended
together. Inherent within the notion of cultural mixture is the notion of choice, variability
and situatedness of the mix. One sure way that Singaporeans can identify other
Singaporeans overseas is by how we speak. Singlish or colloquial Singapore English is
English spoken with a Singaporean accent that uses expressions and syntax from a
variety of Malay, Chinese, and Indian languages and dialects as well as creolized forms
of these languages.

Even though Singapore is made up of many different races each with diverse and
distinct geographical racial and cultural histories, these individual differences are reduced
under the broad, if not, generic, signifiers of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others while
culminating in the master sign “Singapore.” In spite of its multiculturalism and
multiethnicity, Singapore is not known so much by the richness of its individual parts as
it is of the sum and mix of these various parts. The focus is on Singapore the nation as a
unifying sign.

Nirmala PuruShotam (1998) traces the present day official categorization of
Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others, to the British colonial census records on the origins
of early migrants in Singapore. PuruShotam notes that “nationality” was restricted to the
“European, American and Eurasian” while “races” referred to “the native population”
(p.61). The ordering of the list of “race” names first “gave priority to occidentals and
those closely associated with them, in descending order, reflecting perhaps the degree of
closeness to the “real” source” (PuruShotam, 1998, p.61). In her article, she also
illustrates the richness of race and cultural affiliations through place, language, dialect,
and other descriptors of early migrants that were in excess of simplified official
categorization of present day Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others. PuruShotam also highlights the ‘disciplining’ function of the use of “race” names. She notes that the Chinese perceived colonial differentiation of Chinese by dialect groups negatively as they perceived it as a British strategy for tracking gangs and secret societies as these were sometimes organized along these lines.

Conversely, in post-independent Singapore, ethnic and geographic markers were blurred and diminished as part of nation building. This seeks to break down intra and inter racial divisions and tensions that marked Singapore in the immediate pre and post independence period in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, establishing political autonomy and national identity also demands the severance of ties to ethnic hinterlands (Chua, 1998; PuruShotam, 1998; Moore, 2000). Race and ethnicity was displaced by the politics of nationalism and multiracialism. In trying to homogenize or come up with common shared denominators, the multiplicity of race and ethnic identities were simplified, reconstituted and reduced synthetically into broad racial stereotypes that fit given categories (Ackermann, 1997; Ang & Stratton, 1995; Chua, 1998; Garber, 1995; Velayutham, 2007).

Ironically the ethnic erasure or conversely, a discourse of racial and ethnic homogeneity that is central to a Western conception of the nation state (Ang & Stratton, 1995) also lessens resources for construction of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983; Chua, 1998) within the Singapore imaginary. Unlike other nearby formerly colonized countries who can draw a “myth of indigenous origin” (like Malaysia) or “history of heroic struggle for independence against colonial oppression” (as in
Indonesia), Singapore as a “national imagined community” suffers from “originary identity deficit” (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 76) and lacks “ideological/symbolic resources” (Chua, 1998; p. 29).

One of the effects of the colonial imaginary is the erasure of the specificities of history and individual identity by encouraging us to think of ourselves as attached to a larger unit, such as the larger colonial administration or later as part of the Federated Malaya States or Malaysia (Ban, Pakir and Tong, 1992). The dis-attaching from Malaysia, China, and India as homelands and the originary of race in Singapore meant that we were left with the colonial legacy with which to ground our history (Velayutham, 2007; Hong & Huang, 2008). Ang and Stratton (1995) discussed the conundrum of the discursive construction of ‘Singapore’ as “both non-Western and always-already Westernized” position (p. 67). However given the exclusionary effects of the binary logic of East/West discursive dichotomy, the blurring of Singapore between and within East and West, “can only be signified negatively, as a lack, a deficiency” which excludes Singapore from either (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 71) and sometimes from both.

Rather than to appeal to the past to construct or rationalize the present (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), the government’s strategy was to appeal to a common future (Chua, 1998; Velayutham, 2007) built on economic progress. As a young nation with no natural resources other than its people, the government’s rallying call for unity was for a national identity based on a discursive grounding of survival and the pursuit of economic success (Ang & Stratton, 1995; Chua, 1998). Prominent Singapore sociologist, Chua Beng Huat describes this as the “hegemony of economic discourse”
that inscribes a logic of capital in the cultural development (Chua, 1998, p. 29). He describes four “cultural concomitants of capitalist development.” The first is an ethnos of “trust and co-operation” in industrial relationships between “labor, employer and the state in order to maximize production from the workers, profit for the enterprise and economic growth for the nation” (Chua, 1998, p. 32). The second is developing a sense of competitiveness in people for “comparative advantages in material consumption” where education is an important tool (Chua, 1998, p. 32). This is underpinned by “fairness” and a third value, an ideology of “meritocracy” (Chua, 1998, p. 33). The fourth is an “individualizing” of failures and success where the discourse of individual merit becomes part of “identity formation” of individuals, leading to a “progressive “individualization” of the self”, reinforcing the “individualism of capitalism” (Chua, 1998, p. 33).

The pursuit of economic success is not without its tensions and contradictions. Many writers have highlighted a shift towards ‘Asianization’ in official discourse from the 1980s to mitigate what is seen as the effects of Western values on Singapore society through the spread of Western media and rapid modernization (Chua, 1998; Lim, 1999, Wee, 2003). Some of the events include the promotion of Confucianism to counter the effects of rising, perceived Western values, such as individualism, the setting up of community self-help groups organized along ethnic lines, and the construction of a common set of ‘Asian’ shared values. The main shift towards ‘Asianization’ is an appeal to Asian communitarianism, or the privileging of family and community over the individual (Chua, 1998; Lim, 1999). It is supposedly distilled from Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures, and set against “Western liberal individualism” (Chua, 1998, p. 40).
Writers have commented that the appeal to a generic Asian heritage reflects a moral shift in the discursive locating of Singapore and recognizes that economic success alone does not provide “a sense of identity” needed for “a vehicle for self-representation” for a nation state (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 74). However the appeal of a non-specific ‘Asian’ location or the concept of new “Asianness” is that it both “flexible and particular”: flexible enough to “accommodate the consequences of modernization and modernity,” and particularist in how it (the ‘new Asian’) defines its boundaries against Western encroachments (Ang & Stratton, 1995, p. 84 – 85). Seen in a different way, the ‘new Asian’ continues to speaks of the difficulties of location of Singapore as well as Singapore’s problematic return to Asia or conceptions of Asia (Lim, 1999).

The debates about the definition and delimitation of race and Singapore as historical and political entity details the wider issue of constructing Singapore as a symbolic spatiality and its differentiations and relationships with other symbolic spatialities. Velayutham (2007) questions the lack of discussion in some Singapore literature on what he sees as the doxa of the nation and national identity. Velayutham ventures that the conception of nation as being achieved “when national borders are fixed and delineated” is “ultimately flawed” (p. 20). He points to the immigrants’ spatial and symbolic interconnections to other histories and locations and suggests a reinterpretation of Singapore’s history by grounding its specificities with Singapore’s links to other colonial administrative units in the region and Singapore’s past cultural links. Velayutham seems to contradict ideas of spatial and conceptual delimitation in building national identity within the confines of the state without providing alternate ideas or
models for formulation of a nation and its national identity. Nevertheless, he brings up interesting questions regarding the limits of the geographical and imaginary boundaries of histories, cultures, places, states and people, and an equally interesting proposition that these should not inhibit the construction of people’s imaginary, connections and sense of identity.

The articles reviewed here on Singapore cultural development looks at different forms of subjectivities and ways of locating and defining Singapore through its ethnic constitution, imaginary as nation, economic development, ideology, and relationships with Asia and the West. A few use critical historicizing using perspectives from left wing political economy, though the degree of emphasis in this varies across writers and the other historical, social and cultural theories that they employ. The articles tend to follow a critical paradigm in academic genre and examine Singapore using critical frames that are derived from Western models and thought. Most of the articles examine these issues and the concept of Singapore as nation and state by focusing on state policies and discourses. Their critiques are thus targeted at these, with no mention of studies on views and experiences of other people. Collectively, these articles give the impression that the state is the only source and site for defining Singapore, leading to a sense of totalizing state power.

How else can we imagine Singapore apart from nation and state? What are the limits of state cultural policies and state power in determining culture of an imagined community? How do we conceptualize a national imaginary beyond, or apart from, the boundary and power of the state?
The review of these articles and constructions also raises questions about the universalizing tendencies of academic epistemological frameworks used in the study of Singapore. Just as colonial discourse orders and evaluates other cultures on its own terms, an unequivocal use of Western academic epistemologies and research methodology will likewise lead to situations of othering and/or pathologizing (Chen, 2010; Mohanty, 1984; Owomoyela, 1994) of Singapore subjectivities. At the crux of my research is the goal to develop referents with which to represent and understand Singapore subjectivities. I will discuss this in greater detail in Section 4.

The following part continues to explore the subjectivity(s) of Singapore, this time, through the writing and representation of the history and development of art(s) in Singapore. The account uses ideas from Said’s Orientalism, Spivak’s marginality and Bhabha’s hybridity to examine the context and acts of select earlier writings, tropes and narratives that had very much set the tone and foundation for subsequent writing.

**Vignettes of Histories of Singapore Art**

**Early Inscriptions.** The beginning of the history of modern Singapore has always been officially acknowledged as 1819 with the establishment of British colonial administration (Hong & Huang, 2008). Even though documentation of cultural expressions of life in Malaya, of which Singapore was once viewed as being a part of, went back as early as 9th century (Hsü & Lai, 1999), the narrative of Singapore art usually began from the beginning of 20th century, with special focus on “modern art,” especially Western painting (Kwok, 1996, p. 8). Literature in art education has also acknowledged the British colonial and Western influence in the development of the
Singapore school art curriculum (Chia, 1978; Chia, Matthews & O’Shea, 1999). To date, Singapore secondary school and pre-university students (i.e. equivalent of US Grades 10 and Grades 12) still sit annually for the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education art examinations set and assessed by Cambridge International Examinations.

Most of the focus of the colonial documentation of art activities in the early 20th century was on organized art activities in small groups, such as art societies, art schools and individuals within these settings. The classification of the type of art activities was also drawn up along ethnic lines, a marker and mode of classification pervasive in colonial administration, such as in immigration records and town planning (PuruShotam, 1998).

In *Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* published in 1996, Kwok Kian Chow, the first director of the Singapore Art Museum, using colonial records, traces early art activities to groups organized mostly along ethnic lines. In his book, documentation of art activities from late 1800s to 1950s appears to be based mostly on quantitative data. Early Singapore art activities are associated predominantly with the Chinese migrant population, with some mention of involvement of the British colonial office, British Council and European artists, and scant mention of Malays and Indians. Colonial racial segregation and hierarchies are thus reproduced through the intertexts of colonial records and Western positivist research privileging of quantitative records (Mohanty, 1984).

In Kwok’s book, art is defined narrowly as high art practice and specifically, painting, be it Chinese or Western painting (Kwok, 1996). Right from the start, in the
introduction of the publication, Kwok states that: “visual arts is a Western-derived practice, because, historically, the practice of painting and sculpture in this part of the world had a definite Western origin” (Kwok, 1996, p. 7). The “Western origin” is usually traced to the European art education of early Chinese migrant artists, or traditional Chinese painters who have been influenced by Western styles. By taking on a Eurocentric lineage, Western European art thus dominates as the center, “origin and teleos” in the writing of Singapore art (Chua, 2011, p.469).

The focus on the Asian-Western classification and construction in Kwok’s writing was only a case in point⁵. Singapore art historian, T K Sabapathy, recounts his university Art History curriculum then under a British lecturer, in the following categories: “modern and contemporary,” “stone and metal sculptures,” “Islamic and Malay Art,” “Indian and Chinese Art,” and “ceramics from Southeast Asia” (Sabapathy, 2010, p. 6). Although Sabapathy did not give details of the curriculum, such categories are reminiscent of Western art history textbooks in the likes of E. H. Gombrich’s (1950) Story of Art. The categorization of European art as “modern and contemporary” relegates the categories of ethnic arts, such as Malay, Indian, and Chinese art to traditional and/or religious art.

Within this larger Eurocentric hierarchal framework, we can interpret Kwok’s narrative as a resistance and disruption to the larger metanarrative of Western art that marginalizes other forms of art and trajectories by inserting Singapore art within the larger Western art discourse. Similarly, a portion of the current art curriculum at the Upper Secondary level (Grade 9 – 10) fractures the traditional linear European art history by mixing and clustering Singaporean, Asian, and Euro-American artworks according to
themes. However the continual adoption of Eurocentric aesthetics and evaluation frameworks continues to lock the learning and perception of Singapore and Asian art within racialized hierarchies in Western art epistemology. In this case, using the master’s tools does not dismantle the master’s house as the tools were used in the same way the master would, and to fulfill the master’s purpose (Gates, 1992; Lorde, 1984).

**Nanyang as Trope.** The start of Singaporean art as a distinctive movement has always been traced to a group of six Chinese migrant artists, known as the Singapore pioneer artists. All except one were oil painters who did their art training in Europe. All of them taught at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the first and oldest art college in Singapore, which was founded by one member of the group. Though each of them had their own style, collectively their work encapsulates what is known as the “Nanyang style.” The Nanyang style drew from various European modernist traditions, such as Post-impressionism and Cubism, and was born in the 1950s from a “search for pictorial representation of the Nanyang culture” (Kwok, 1996, p. 40). The story of Nanyang style sounds curiously familiar – a group of male artists went to Bali in 1952, were inspired by Balinese sights and culture, did a series of works and exhibitions based on Balinese subject matter using certain stylistic innovations originating in the West. The term was then applied to their artwork that depicts Asian subject matter and color palette, and was painted in styles broadly associated with European postimpressionism and expressionism.

The term *nanyang* means “south seas” in Chinese. The term *nanyang* has been used to refer to Singapore and the South China Sea region, as well as an index to the region’s geographical and psychological associations with China. Nanyang is a popular
name for Chinese institutions and operates like a trope across various references and contexts. As a trope, Nanyang evokes a general locality, collectivism and imaginary of the Chinese diaspora within the Asian region in the early 20th century. The Nanyang trope slips between its operation as a metaphor for a unique painting style integrating an Asian vision with Western techniques, and its geographical indexing operation as metonym for Singapore. The slippage between the two operations naturalizes the Nanyang style as representative of a national Singapore art stylistic that also plays a part in framing the subsequent narrative of art.

The curious aspect about the emphasis and reproduction of familiar narratives of East and West in the Nanyang style, is that while it purports to bring together the East and West in a fusion of sorts, it ironically also deepens the rift between East and West, without even clearly defining what’s East or West. The appeal to notions of East and West in the invention of Nanyang as a Singaporean style seeks to establish and legitimize connections with both sets of traditions. The same gesture is repeated in various social and cultural arenas, such as in the state’s bilingual educational policy and the construction of a common set of Asian values. Just as Singaporean writers have written about Asia as an empty signifier within the context of state policy rhetoric, art critics also problematize the assume homogeneity in a unified notion of Asian art (Chua, 2011; Kee, 2011; Taylor, 2011). If the Asian subject is suspect, equally untenable is the notion of a unified West, as its very construction is dependent on the construction of the Other.

Disquiet Margins. Using Spivak’s notion of the silenced subjects, the “concealed, repressed or pushed away” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 38), the adoption of
a Eurocentric art historical narrative has sidelined other ethnic practices that do not fall within the definition of European high art. Art forms such as the Malay batik, wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), Chinese papercut, and Indian rangoli are ignored by the Eurocentric art history narrative but constitute a holistic approach towards life in our cultures, where art and artmaking are part of daily living and spiritual rituals. The subtitle of Kwok’s book, A History of Singapore Art can be more accurately labeled as a history of western art in Singapore.

Other critics and curators have also contributed to the writing of the Singapore art story, in the form of counter narratives. Many tend to be critical of the official discourse on art and the government’s support and role in art production. For instance, in Susie Lingham’s (2011) autobiographical account of what she calls an “unrecorded” history of art in Singapore from late 1980s, she rejects a “seamless unequivocal narrative” of a “single ‘detached’ viewpoint” (p. 55). Her account traces certain art groups, movements and key events but focuses mostly on performance art and especially political expressions in art. Of particular focus was her side of the story as one of the organizers of a series of performance art events that led to the subsequent banning of performance art in Singapore from 1994 – 2003. The subtext of her account is the role of media, government censorship and art funding in the representation and practice of alternative/experimental practice and performance art in Singapore. Lingham’s account draws attention to the issue of representation, both as a form and intervention in the (re)writing of Singapore art. Her account brings up questions of “accuracy” and “ownership” of knowledge and
“right” to represent and speak on behalf of another in the representation of Singapore art that is anything but a homogenous field (Shuman, 1993, p. 354).

Counter official narratives of art has often occupied, if not appropriated the position of marginality and the subaltern. While there is heterogeneity of art forms and practices, criticisms against the state tend to converge on issues of censorship and government support for local artists and work. These critiques by writers across many fields, many of whom are not artists but purport to write on behalf of artists, all assume a common position of the suppressed and marginalized against a totalizing State power.

These seem to enact a commodification of marginality of sorts (Huggan, 2001; Spivak, 1999) by leveraging on certain currency value of the marginal. The nature and warrants of the criticism aside, the polarization of power accords a simplistic and reductionist approach to subjectivities of artists, and limits the conception of and possibility of agency. This also sets up a divisive hierarchy of art forms and artists that is viewed through official censorship and support. Ironically, the very act of speaking for, ends up reinscribing the very divisions that the act targets. We ourselves are written in what and how we write the other.

In an ironic turn of events, and a different tale of shifting subjectivitives, Susie Lingham, the once marginalized performance artist and champion of alternative art practices assumed the directorship of the Singapore Art Museum in early August, 2013. How does one occupy different opposing subject positions concurrently? What are the ethics or responsibilities towards different subjectivities and positions?
**Bipolarity.** In fixing Singapore art as a perpetual East-West hybrid construct, Singapore art is thus beholden and subservient to Asia and the West (wherever and whatever those entities represent). The hybrid conveniently legitimizes Singapore art with the two cultural locales (albeit by essentializing) but only by fixing Singapore in a romanticized early 20th century colonial temporality. The notion of hybridity is particularly problematic given the heterogeneous immigrant makeup of Singapore. According to colonial records, Singapore was only a small Malay fishing village just prior to colonialism. The vast majority of Singaporean population now migrated from nearby Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India, and some from Europe. Even within each of these locales, ethnicity is not singular but individuated and multiple at the same time (PuruShotam, 1998). With the ease of travel and movement of people and capital in a globalized environment, the notion of the other is not static but ever shifting all the time. How does hybridity interstices account for unstable and shifting multiplicities and subjective agencies? Inherent in the concept of colonial hybridity is the desire for power, how does it take into account the intersection(s) of gender, class and social roles?

Dick Lee’s narrative described at the start of this chapter, shows that even before there was any notion of what Singapore culture is, there were indications and contestations over what Singapore’s cultural subject positionings were, should, or could be. While the British in Dick Lee’s account seemed ready to point out what was or not Singaporean, by that same gesture, they also seem quick to exclude British cultural elements from what they thought was Singaporean, hence demonstrating the power and
effects of the exclusionary nature of cultural classification. Similarly, differing responses to Dick Lee’s songs within Singapore can also indicate differences in views and agendas in the content and manner of representation of lived experiences and cultural idiosyncrasies in Singapore. The various shifts in stands, subjectivities and subject positions assumed and imposed by various parties also indicate fluidity and situatedness in these constructs.

Bhabha’s idea of hybridity suggests a certain amount of agency and freedom in the traversing and becoming of composite subjectivities. However, in Dick Lee’s account, we see how the individual exercising of that agency is not free play, but is in constant negotiation with multiple other socially, culturally, economically and politically assigned subject positions. In Dick Lee’s case, his subjectivities as positioned by others conflicted with his cultural identifications and own sense of identity.

The notion of hybridity has been used to account for cultural identities in today’s multicultural modern nation states and transnational forms of popular culture under globalization (Tomlinson, 2003). Though the use is widespread and significant, cultural sociologist, John Tomlinson (2003) pointed out the inadequacy of the concept to fully explain such multi-cultural constitution. The term has a tendency to homogenize, if not reduce, all forms of becoming and transformations as one and the same. Tomlinson (1999) also felt that “the idea of continual hybridization as the destination of global cultures may be over stated” (p. 141).

Singapore researcher, Aaron Koh (2003), de-psychologizes hybridity to some extent by positing it like a discourse in his article on identity anxieties with regard to
foreign talent in Singapore. He alludes to its limits when he discusses the resistance and tensions in the reception and integration of foreign talent against the backdrop of state discourses on foreign talent. He suggests that the state policy of multicultural ideology, which emphasizes a utilitarian unity-in-diversity, as moderating difference while at the same time, curtailing full integration in the form of hybridization. Koh’s article questions the assumption that hybridization is natural and inevitable, the extent of agency and personal choice in hybridization, and issues of desirability and effects of hybridization within established and emerging global power structures.

Scholars have variously critiqued the Postcolonial hybridity metaphor. Derived from botany, hybridity conjures up notions of ‘mixing,’ crossbreeding, and even contamination, presupposing the purity of prior cultures and societies. Hybridity suggests that there are authentic origins and where these take precedence over the hybrid, they again reinforce the colonial hierarchy of races. Hybridity as a blanket representation of the postcolonial acts as a form of foreclosure that relies on the same concept of normative culture that it rejects in the first place (Cheah, 1997). The concept is also imbued with notions of naturalizing and homogenizing (Burke, 2009), thus sidestepping issues of colonial violence. When used in Postcolonial context, hybridity ensures the longevity, if not perpetual and deterministic imprint of the colonizer, and the likewise continual subjugation of the colonized (as derivative). The idea of hybridization thus appears to erase racial, cultural, gender and power differences while exacting complicity from the colonized.
While Dick Lee identifies readily with the British culture, in a large part due to his social background, the same cannot be said of the majority of Singaporeans, or those in his generation. The brief analysis on Dick Lee and his encounters illustrates how hybridity as a form of individualized identification and transformation of cultures cannot fully account for the wider social, cultural, historical and political conditions that give rise to its own constituents and constituting.

The focus on identity issues in Postcolonial Studies in the 1970s to 1990s is hallmark of scholars in the field who were mostly from former European colonies, particularly from South Asia, and working in British and American academia. The identity issues they face and write about stem from their own traversing of racial, cultural, political and academic spaces (see for example Rushdie, 1991; Said, 1998; Minh Ha, 1987). In many ways, this project is shaped by my own crossing, straddling, or falling between places (Rushdie, 1991) in my (mis)recognitions and experiences during my studies in Britain and the United States, and my work in and out of Singapore. As I write about Singapore as a minority within Western academia, I also wonder how the milking of my marginality hides my other privileges that in turn obscures other issues that matter. Like the different conceptions of subjectivities presented so far, I remind myself that my project will be able to provide particular perspectives that are at best partial and provisional.

Critics of the field of Postcolonial Studies had pointed to the underlying premise that seems to simplistically divide the world into two halves as well as the deterministic undertones within such polarizing conception. The rise of new nation states following the
independence of former colonies, and often times the violence that accompany the transition, have led some like Fanon (1977) to liken the new states as taking over the power void formerly occupied by the colonizer. Using a materialist framework, Fanon also saw this as part of larger class struggles and capital accumulation. Such a polarizing characterization relies on the same binary logic, substitutes one totalizing system (colonial power) with another (materialist framework) and similarly apportions power asymmetrically. Focusing the critique solely on institutional power, obscures the microphysics of power (Foucault, 1977), perpetuates the silencing of the populations and in that silence, continues to cast the populations as powerless and voiceless subjects. As with the discourses discussed in Section 1, Postcolonial Studies constitute its own discourse, and as discourse, it creates and produces its own subject(s). Analyzing the representation and writing of art in Singapore using Postcolonial theory is often in danger of reinscribing colonial structures, if not, affirming its trace.

**Summation**

Section 2 continues the discussion started in Section 1 on colonial discourse and representation issues in the field of Postcolonial Studies, by examining representations of Singapore. In the articles reviewed here, Singapore is largely represented as a nation and state. While the nation is made of up various cultures, these are seen as subordinate to social and economic goals within the context of nation building. The use of dominant universalizing critical theories and modes of analysis in certain studies has a tendency to totalize state power while silencing the populace.
The second part of Section 2 presents a study of commonly reproduced representations in the writing of art and art history in Singapore using Postcolonial concepts such as Orientalism, marginality and hybridity. The study looks at the Eurocentric roots in the representation of Singapore art history. While Orientalist in shape, the study also shows how archetypes of East-West representations in art and the art curriculum could also be strategic given the historical, political, and geographical context of the country. Though potentially strategic, the empty signifiers of East, West and the larger epistemological frameworks under which such representations are submitted, exerts tensions on both the representations and the acts. The study also discusses different positions from which Singapore art has been represented and problematizes marginality and the polarization of binaries and power. The third part of Section 2 reviews the use and limits of hybridity as a concept of post-colonial and multicultural identity and its problems of foreclosure and inability to address issues and structures inherent in identity formulation.

Section 2 serves to evaluate Postcolonial Studies as a framework for the study of representing Singapore art and practice in this study. It raises issues of the deterministic tone and underlying binary structures that makes the use of Postcolonialism prone to reinscription and totalizing. One concern that surfaces from Section 3 are epistemological issues of studies on non-Western sites using models and theories rooted in the West and the continual silencing of populations and social issues even in critical studies. Given some of these issues, the study asks how we can conceive of construction of subjectivity and identity beyond the post-colonial.
Section 3: Challenges of the Global Cultural Economy

Introduction & Overview

More than forty years after independence, a good proportion of people in Singapore now have no actual memory of Singapore the British colony. Even though this does not lessen the epistemological and ontological effects of colonizing, it does call for an examination of the other conditions and structures that contribute to different modes of colonizing. As a regional transportation, trade, and service center for the region and the West, Singapore is home to many expatriate and migrant populations. As Singapore supplements its population with new migrants, it is also just beginning to recognize and make sense of the many influences that constitute its identity.

Section 3 revisits Dick Lee’s account to re-examine the changing contexts and pretexts of cultural production and cultural representation in globalization. Section 3 continues examining other theoretical frames and concepts for the current study on understanding subjectivities through art practice in Singapore. Section 3 examines social-cultural anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai’s framework of global disjunctures, and three select concepts on the construction of subjectivist within context of the global cultural economy. The concepts are Nadine Dolby’s cultural identification in post-apartheid South African, Jennifer Eisenhauer’s language beyond bombardment from Visual Culture Art Education and Judith Butler’s performativity from Gender Studies.

Global Cultural Economy

The experiences of Dick Lee as an aspiring singer and songwriter from newly independent Singapore confront the issues of identity and cultural production within the
context of global cultural economy. Dick Lee’s early songs, such as “Fried Rice Paradise” plays with ideas of local colloquial food, familiar local districts and landmarks, scenes, conversations and attitudes, and mixes these with Western popular music styles. “Fried Rice Paradise” is about the life of a working class girl, Bee Lian, who makes her fortune selling different varieties of fried rice. “Fried Rice Paradise” conjures up the stereotypical sights, sounds and characters of the Far East by caricaturizing, and is reminiscent of those used in works like the 1960 film set in Hong Kong, “The World of Suzie Wong.” “Fried Rice Paradise” was banned from being aired on Singapore media initially in the early 1970s for its use of Singlish, or Singapore English, a Singaporean colloquial language that mixes English words with local dialects, grammar and accents, and which is considered a non standard form of English. The theme of the song was subsequently developed into a full-scale theatre musical by 1991. From 1980s, the Singapore media had also begun writing Chinese serial dramas based on the history, life and cultures of Singapore. These were subsequently exported to other Asian countries where they enjoyed a good following.

Using dominant ideas in Postcolonial Studies such as colonial discourse and materialist analysis, works like “Fried Rice Paradise” I am glad that you brought this back would be decried as forms of self-othering and complicity with colonial discursive representations driven by imperialistic capitalism. How are we to understand culture and cultural production in a globalizing environment? Conversely, how can creative works provide insights into alternate conceptions and reconstruction of cultural identity within a global cultural economy? The following section will look at select features of the
multifarious phenomenon known as globalization that some say started with colonialism. The purpose of this is to chart out the terrain and context of this project.

Many former European colonies in both hemispheres have by now attained full independent statehood. Some are also influential powers in the global political and/or economic arenas. Countries such as Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, and the United States were all former European colonies. Many events, especially since the beginning of the 21st century, have also demonstrated reconfiguring of sites and flow of influence and power: September 11th, 2001, Arab Spring uprisings, global climate change, and the opening up of China, and China’s rise as a world power, just to name a few. Nations and economic structures are just a few of many sites of control.

The current globalizing environment is characterized by accelerated movements across national and regional barriers of economic goods, such as people, products, tangible and intangible forms of capital, like technology and control of assets (Pieterse, 2009, p. 17). Many have argued that colonialism was the earliest form of globalization (Mcleod, 2007). In such an environment, traditional geographical, political, social, cultural and economic barriers and hierarchies break down, aided by technology. As connections, interconnections, interconnectedness, interactions and interactivity increasingly flatten, influence and control are also constantly being redefined and reconfigured. The concept of center-periphery had also exploded into multiple centers and networks setting into motion a reverse movement that “projects elements of the periphery” into the societies of the former center (Balibar, 1995, p. 52). The globalizing environment had led to a compression of the experience of world, such as in the social
and cultural arenas, and a simultaneous intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole (Pieterse, 2009, p. 17). Such experiences brought about by an ever-increasing acceleration of exchanges of information and human travel also caused many to focus on globalization as a unifying movement towards convergences and homogeneity.

Against this backdrop, Amin and Thrift (2009) defines the global cultural economy as one that “sees economy as a cultural act and culture as an economic act, so that meeting material needs and making a profit or earning a living can be seen as part and parcel of seeking symbolic satisfaction, pleasure and power” (p. 129). Horkheimer and Adorno heralded the concept of culture industry in 1944. Jameson, in his exposition on the cultural logic of Postmodernism, describes it as where “aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production” (Jameson, 1984, p. 56).

Over the years, Singapore’s cultural desert has been transformed with aspirations towards becoming a regional arts hub with plans to develop local creative industries in arts, culture, design and media. The Singapore Art Museum, Singapore’s first museum dedicated to visual arts, opened in 1996. It strives to be the regional center for Asian art through its active collection and scholarship of Asian contemporary art. The country has also held three incarnations of the Singapore Biennale since 2006, showcasing international contemporary art. Singapore was also one of three Southeast Asian countries to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. In addition, the country has also attracted international art galleries, international auction houses, such as Sotheby’s, to set up regional branches in the country. In 2015, the country’s second national museum of art, The National Art Gallery of Singapore will open its doors. Indeed, in recent years,
Singapore has progressively created a physical arts infrastructure similar to major cosmopolitan art cities in Europe and the United States. Yet even as recent as the mid-1990s, Singapore’s efforts in arts development was described as ‘hegemonic’ (Kawasaki, 2004) and “colonialist” (Taylor, 2011) in the context of the region.

How are we to understand the relations between culture, subjectivity, subjectification, and identity in this milieu? Specific to my project, how do we understand one’s subjectivity(s), and the construction or production of subjectivity(s) in the representation of one’s artwork or practice?

Global Disjunctures

In the global economy of culture where national and geographic boundaries recede, contrary to what many imagine, globalization does not signal seamless convergence and homogeneity. There is also no easy split or distinctions between the local and global (Shuman, 1993) but a meshing of different aspects of the two into global assemblages (Ong & Collier, 2005). Appadurai (1990) highlights the tensions as that between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. Appadurai describes these tensions as disjunctures between five dimensions of global cultural flow in ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes. These interrelated and overlapping ‘scapes’ are like landscapes forming “imagined worlds” (p. 222) in various virtual and actual spaces across geographical, economics, political and psychical boundaries. These ‘scapes’ comprise landscapes of people, technological capabilities, fiscal and investment flows, media and mediation of representation, and ideas and ideologies, as well as the effects they have on one another.
Appadurai’s (1990) concept of disjunctures and difference counters the homogenizing narrative in discourses on globalization of the cultural economy. However the concept of disjunctions is not a focus of difference in the expense or exclusion of sameness. Rather, it is the contest of both difference and sameness, the cannibalization of one by the other, leading to the hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular.

Appadurai’s framework highlights key ‘scapes’ and flows that impinge on experiences of the contemporary transnational global, and re-maps the world not by state boundaries but redefining power as multivalent, multi-layered and multi-directional. It recognizes and circumvents the tensions between the nation, as “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) and the state (government), and the unstable hyphen between the two in transnational global flows. More importantly, it reconfigures the binary logic in power structures left behind from the colonial world order, between colonizer and colonized, as well as those in postcolonial nation states, between the state and individual.

What this signals in terms of identity formation, is that the global cultural economy and its various permutations through visual culture and various forms of mass communications, aided by technology and capitalist logic of consumption, have provided alternate means to assimilate as well as create. Unlike the conception of hybridity that suggests some form of movement towards bringing together, if not reconciliation and stability, Appadurai’s concept of disjunctures lays bare the dissimilarities and contradictions and the dynamism interaction between different cultural and materialist structures. The different components of Appadurai’s model also provides greater scope
for looking at identity formulation within a postmodernist characterization of contemporary consumer societies that is pluralistic, aesthetically populist, has a weakened sense of historicity, and also that subscribes to depthlessness and patiche (Jameson, 1984).

In the case of Singapore, a collective of people from various cultural localities, there is no unified sense of cultural historicity and imaginary, apart from the historicized memory of the birth of the nation and nation building. The challenges of understanding how we understand, use, construct, or are placed in our various cultural subjectivities as collective and individuals are manifold. The first of which would be to recognize that there would be just as many different ways of constructing as there are people.

The following section explores some concepts for understanding construction of post-colonial identity(s). The concepts are selected based on the context and focus of these studies and their relation to and possible application for the current study. I will first look at Nadine Dolby’s cultural identification, Jennifer Eisenhauer’s proliferation of subjectivity, followed by Judith Butler’s performativity.

**Taste Practices & Cultural Identification**

Nadine Dolby, in moving away from the essentializing trappings of culture, provides a different way of thinking about representing cultures and cultural affiliations by using Bourdieu’s notion of “taste” and Clifford’s notion of “processes” of identity (Dolby, 2001, p.16). Dolby demonstrates how race and identity construction can be discursively conceived of in terms of affiliations through “taste” practices in her exploration of South African students’ conception of racial differences in the 1990s
By so doing, Dolby detaches race and geographical spatiality from identity formation and questions essentialization of race and culture as bounded concepts. Dolby considers how popular culture has become an increasingly important site for identity formation where identity is wielded as cultural and social capital within the global cultural economy against a post-apartheid South Africa. She examines how high school students use fashion, music and dance preferences and practices, and resources and opportunities available, to indicate identification and solidarity with and within particular social and racial groups. In post-apartheid South Africa, where race continues to be an important issue, Dolby suggests that students create such forms of identification as markers of friendships, compatibility, as well as signifier and practice of race as creation of their racialized selves. Dolby examines how such practices constructs race, while defines gender and gender roles, selves, and differentiates others.

By contrast, most conceptions of the global cultural economy, visual culture and mass media are portrayed as normative, reflective of dominant culture, deceptive and lulling people into submitting to the status quo (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). This stance also characterizes critical pedagogy, multicultural (art) education, and visual culture art education. Dolby sees popular culture as resource and likens cultural identification to tools and strategies for practices of selves. For proponents of critical pedagogy (such as Paulo Freire, 1970 and Henry Giroux, 1991), and multicultural (art) education (see for example, Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, Banks & Banks, 2013; Nieto & Bode, 2012) textual and social cultural literacy are tools both for understanding and overcoming social and materialist structures.
**Proliferation**

Jennifer Eisenhauer (2006), writing from within the field of visual culture art education, likens the onslaught of visual culture to subjectivation via bombardment in which viewers are discursively constituted via normative and dominant representations. However, she also points out analogous subjectivation in visual culture art classroom pedagogies that presumed students as homogenous passive consumer subjects, in a way resonating Atkins’ notion of pedagogized subject in art curriculum materials and pedagogy (Atkins, 1995; 2001; 2002; 2008). Eisenhauer cautions against binary and “presumed categorical homogeneity of producer/consumer” (p. 165) in the conception of visual culture pedagogy. She calls for a reexamination of presuppositions of concepts, such as the coherence of power, subjects, actions, and objects, as well as the reexamination of the positioning of categories in relation to other categories. She poses this as a challenge to highlight the importance of visual culture discourse without using and hence reinscribing the subjectification, that is the “limiting relationships between subjects, interpretations, texts, and cultures” (p. 166). She advocates a pedagogy that emphasizes questioning that opens up proliferation of meanings and meaning making. Using the work of artist Cindy Sherman, Eisenhauer illustrates the breakdown of binary positions of subject/object, active/passive, interiority/exteriority (2006) and demonstrates the avenues for play and creativity within visual culture production and pedagogy.

Dolby and Eisenhauer present different approaches towards global cultural economy in the construction of individual subjectivity(s). The South African students in Dolby’s study situate themselves as consumers of popular culture. Instead of being
passive manipulated consumers, Dolby shows how the youths select, mix and appropriate signifiers and concepts of popular culture, identity, identification and race to suit their own purposes, and context in their own construction even though these acts are not outside of gender, race and cultural politics. Similarly, in Eisenhauer’s study, she sites agency within the producer-consumer hyphen rather than producer/consumer binary that confounds and subverts subject categories within cultural economy. Underlying both Dolby’s and Eisenhauer’s studies is the concept of performativity.

Performativity

Judith Butler’s (1990a) notion of gender performativity had been widely adapted into various studies on identity issues and provides a way of thinking about how subjects are formed and the nature and extent of their agency. Butler questions the consistency and continuity of subjectivities across historical periods, cultural sites and contexts and attributes politics of identity to prior politics of subjectivity (Brady & Shirato, 2011).

Butler’s concept of performativity builds on Lacanian psychoanalysis, phenomenology, structural anthropology and speech-act theory where social reality is not a given but created through “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (Butler, 1990b, p. 270) (Brady & Schirato, 2011; Felluga, 2011). Just as a speech act accomplishes what it says rather than represents, like the pronouncement at a wedding ceremony, a “performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 13), by reference to the law or normative standards which is cited or repeated, hence performed, in the pronouncement (Felluga, 2011). In the same way, the reiterative citation of conventions, norms and ideologies, such as in
speech, enacts that reality with and in our bodies. The performances of these conventions, or the enactment with our bodies, bring subjectivities to life, so to speak, which also affect our lives and bodily selves in physical material ways.

Butler’s performativity theory of gender identity rejects individual gender identities as biological, essentialist, pre-existing, stable and homogeneous, even within categories. Citing Nietzsche, just as “there is no doer behind the deed,” Butler states that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender (1999, p. 33). Subjects emerge following the enactment or performances of normative subjectivity categories. Under the Orientalist conception, subjects are discursively produced in and through discourse and we come into being by fitting into pre-existing predetermined subjectivities. For Butler, the performativity, or iteration of actions expected of the normative categories constitutes the subject. However as the performing of subject or doing of gender is different for every individual, the constitution of subjects is different each time. Hence, agency lies in the performativity and becoming of the subjects, or in acts confounding normative categories, in the becoming of other subjects. Butler contends that subjectivity does not drive actions but that our sense of individualized, self-willed subjectivity is a retroactive construction from our enactment of social norms (Felluga, 2011).

In a way then, normative categories and subjectivities, instead of being rigid and pre-deterministic, become resources and referents, without which, identity acts, including acts of transgressions, would be meaningless. The concept of agency is, in this
formulation, situated at the individual acts of performativity and not at altering larger normatives.

Subjectivity is multiple, dynamic and situated. Identity can be expressed via series of cultural identifications via physical acts. Subjectivity may not be unique but the acts of expressing these offer scope for creativity, questioning, intervention and/or subversion. Interestingly, while these acts acknowledge preexisting social cultural structures, some use them as poststructuralist modes of inverting subjectivities and turning them into avenues for intervention or subversion. In these various conceptions, agency is sited at the act of appropriating, reconstituting and meaning making within certain pre-existing subjectivities. What is significant is the reconstitution of relationships and terms of engagement with/in the environment, communities and existing structures.

Summation

Section 3 reviews the characterization and effects of globalization as social, cultural, political, and economic contexts for the project. This section seeks to locate frames that could address some of the issues about Postcolonial Studies that were brought up in Section 2. Within the context of a global cultural economy, issues of culture, subjectivities, and identities are even more entangled as the boundaries of each blur within the participation of an enlarged transnational exchange and movement of people, technology, finance, media and ideas. This exchange also brings a reconfiguration of power and social structures, and new forms of subjugating subjectivities and new modes of subjectification. While this breaks down the binary structure underlying certain conceptions in Postcolonial Studies, it does so by multiplying it at various levels and
through different modes. Intervention into subjectivities does not lie in changing existing structures and cultural representations but in the very acts of appropriating and subverting erstwhile subjugating subjectivities and in the process reconstituting one’s relationships with these structures.

**Section 4: Towards an Ethico-Onto-Epistemological Framework**

We look at each other. But she cannot find the words. And I cannot say them……

“No,” I said. “I am looking for a goddess that nobody knows. Maybe she does not yet exist.”

*Amy Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife, p. 413, 1991*

**Overview**

In Section 4, I look back at the premises and the epistemological and ontological commitments of Postcolonial Studies. I examine my own challenges of decolonizing while working within a Western academic framework.

In this section, in wanting to break the epistemological structures, I consider alternate ontological frames in Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research. I also look at Barad’s (2007) ideas of Agential Realism in quantum physics philosophy. Using some of these ideas, I formulate the beginnings of an ethic-onto-epistemological framework for the research.

**Introduction**
Many critics have pointed to the problem of culturalism (Hall, 1996b) or textualism (Eagleton, 1998) in Postcolonial Studies. They have highlighted the field’s focus on identity and colonial discourse analysis, instead of advancing other political agenda on issues of social justice (Hall, 1996b). At the same time, the field’s particular focus and perspective from select authors working in established American academic institutions also causes some to describe the field as a “predominantly Western phenomenon confined to Western institutions” (Young, 1998, p. 6). The cultural project of Postcolonial Studies has also been criticized as essentially focusing on the West albeit detoured or presented through the postcolonial. Leftist critics have also decried the complicity of the field with capitalist ideals in its failure to engage with materialist structures in their analysis (see for example, Eagleton, 1998; Hall, 1996b). Ironically, just as Postcolonial Studies have reinscribed the divisions it writes against, criticisms against it also seem unable to move away from similar binary power structures.

Such focus on identity issues across various fields subscribing to Postmodernist and Poststructuralist thinking, of which Postcolonial Studies is one, has been termed the ‘cultural turn’ in Western thinking which also has its roots in the ‘linguistic turn.’ The ‘linguistic turn’ was premised upon a situated understanding of language that dispels the notion of transparency between language and what it represents. The implication on Western thought and philosophy is the dissolution of reality or the real. Everything we know is structured by language and likewise, our perception is structured by the differentiation in meanings in language, so much so that there is nothing outside of language.
In the context of my current research and institution, “language” refers to English. In the context of Singapore, the language, English, is also that which co-opted us.

BG Yeo recalled that when he and a group of Singapore Armed Forces scholars were studying in Britain, a British Army major who had overheard them speaking in English at dinner had remarked that they were “a well-colonised people”.

“It was an acid remark and I do not think I will ever forget what he said for the rest of my life, not because it was an insult, but because it came so close to a very painful truth.”

For, however much Singaporeans learnt about the West, and however well they spoke English, they were not European or American. And yet, when they visited China or India, they did not feel fully Chinese or Indian either.

The Straits Times, August 22, 1993, p. 26

Brigadier-General (Reservist) George Yeo, Singapore’s former Foreign Minister, shared the above encounter that he had while he was studying in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. He was not just talking about language. Like the claims about ‘linguistic turn’ enmeshing the epistemological and ontological with the linguistic and discursive, sealing the fate of any decolonizing project even before it even began, he describes the ‘painful truth’ that there is very little space, if any, outside of what I’m critiquing. How do you work on a project on decolonizing Western epistemologies with frameworks and tools with the same origins? Can you dismantle the master’s house only with the master’s tools? (Lorde, 1984; Gates, 1992)

Decolonizing Methodologies
Linda Tuhiwai Smith, widely acknowledged as the lead campaigner for Decolonizing Research, and other proponents (see for example, Chilisa, 2012; Grande, 2008; Kovach, 2009), have highlighted epistemological issues as a primary concern in Western scholarship and research about other cultures (1999). Not content with notions of postcolonialism as a misnomer that suggests that colonialism is a thing of the past, Smith’s call is for taking an anti-colonial stance that focuses on decolonizing. Smith (1999) and Postcolonial feminist researcher, Chandra Mohanty (1984) highlights the discursive epistemological structures underlying Western originated research methods that had been inscribed with particular colonial relations of power. These could include issues underlying the always already constituted research subjects, uncritical use of methodologies in proofing universality and cross-cultural validity, cultural biases in the frames of analysis (Mohanty, 1984; Smith, 1999), knowledge bases, and ways of relating with research participants, and political and ideological differences in research agenda (Grande, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). Building on Said’s work, Smith and Mohanty show how colonial knowledge, research, structures and attitudes continue to infect and shape academic research and knowledge today through epistemological and methodological structures (Mohanty, 1984; Smith, 1999).

Most theorists who focus on epistemic decolonization, do not see decolonization as a total rejection of Western theory but rather a different engagement with it, such as writing against dominant theories at the margins, challenging, disrupting them from within (Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1993). These scholars perceive decolonization in terms of
renegotiation of (power) relations in various contexts and a reconstitution of subjectivities (Chen, 2010; Spivak; 1993; Grande, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999).

The epistemic renegotiation with Western theory and concepts require a move away from a binary notion and position of power, and the privileging of Eurocentric concepts and its inherent hierarchal power structure. Rather than seeing Europe as the center of power and knowledge, Chakrabarty calls for a provincializing of Europe that levels it as just one of many systems of power and thought (2000). For example, Tlostanova and Mignolo see de-colonizing in terms of de-linking questions of ‘representation’ and ‘totality’ from Western modernity and epistemology, and to pay attention to a colonial matrix of power that controls economics, authority (in political, financial, legal and military), public sphere, and knowledge (2009). Margaret Kovach also discusses a scalar or measured engagement with Western theory that also takes into account indigenous knowledges (2009).

Most post-colonial scholars employ deconstruction as a tool to demystify and understand the processes, relations, power structures and even arbitrariness underlying the construction of colonialist ‘truths’ and ‘knowledge.’ Spivak (1976) sees it as a process to locate marginal texts, to disclose the signifying processes and structures, “reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed” (p. lxxvii).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith underscores the critique of colonial history and the revisiting and reclaiming of history as essential to decolonization. She describes this as part of the “critical pedagogy of decolonization” that provides alternative histories,
alternative knowledges to “form the basis of new of alternative ways of doing things” to transform “our colonised views of our own history” (Smith, 1999, p. 34). For scholars from indigenous populations, their relationships with their culture and epistemologies provide important resources for reconstituting their histories and subjectivities. More critically, their cultural and historical experiences and worldviews offer alternative frames for their approaches to decolonization and engagement with Western theory.

**Indigenous Research**

Similarly, indigenous pedagogy is a body of research on modes of agency and acting upon the world based on the centering of concerns, knowledge, perspectives, and agendas from indigenous people. Indigenous research and methodologies focus on (re)claiming indigenous epistemology, research and pedagogy. Indigenous research, together with those in feminist research and critical race theory, highlight issues with seemingly (neo)colonialist universalizing tendency of positivist methods rooted in Western notions of Enlightenment that fail to pay attention to the particularities of context (Mohanty, 1984) and sidelined the concerns of minority populations (Grande, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). It questions the metanarratives of Western bias research (Dunbar, 2008; Smith, 1999). It rejects the blanket universality of the categorization of Third World and the indigenous and emphasizes the “particularities” (Chilisa, 2012; Grande, 2008; Hall, 1996b; Kovach, 2009; Mohanty, 1984; Smith, 1999).

Sandy Grande’s proposition of a Red pedagogy illustrates this and at the same time highlights differences in taking a decolonizing agenda rather than a Western conception of critical pedagogy that also sees itself as emancipatory. In Sandy Grande’s
exposition of a Red pedagogy rooted in indigenous American Indian ontological values, she examines the theoretical commitments of McLaren’s and Farahmandpur’s (2001) ideas of revolutionary critical pedagogy. She highlights the tensions between the inherently Western paradigmatic framework of critical pedagogy in its root constructs of democratization, subjectivity and property, and the presumption of the “individual as the primary subject of “rights” and social status” (Grande, 2008, p. 238). She evaluates these in light of the American Indian concerns, such as the centrality of place and land in the construction of subjectivity and sovereignty, rather than a Western concept of democracy that presumed liberated self. She highlights the privileging of the class struggle and assertion of the totalizing effect of capitalism underlying critical pedagogy. She reflects that while leftist theorists expose important links between colonialisat forces and capitalist greed, these issues do not, in and of themselves, represent an emancipatory politics for indigenous people (Grande, 2008, p. 243). She foregrounds the need to articulate an indigenous agenda in indigenous critical education that uses one’s own cultural referents as well as “dethinking” notions such as sovereignty and education from Western, colonialist contexts (Grande, 2008, p. 244).

Grande’s analysis underscores the dynamism of context and the multiplicity of relationships between theoretical paradigms, histories, goals within synchronic and diachronic elements in decolonization from indigenous perspectives. Grande’s analysis highlights the criticality to pay attention to the historicity of the constructs we base our work on as well as the need for self-reflexivity in the construction process itself.
Smith (1999) situates decolonizing research in the intersections of imperialism, knowledge and research within the context of research of indigenous populations. Decolonizing involves designing methods in collaboration with indigenous communities that originate from the values and worldviews of people in the research. From setting research agendas to adopting processes that emphasize “valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies,” (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. 22) Smith writes of decolonization as going beyond mere deconstruction of Western interests and ways of knowing to praxi (Lather, 1991; Smith, 1999).

**Asia as Method**

Kuan-Hsing Chen in his book, *Asia as Method* (2010) discusses effects of colonization and the concepts and meanings of decolonization in Asia. He describes decolonization as the “attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically” (p. 3). He considers the colonization of Taiwan, China and Korea and other parts of Asia and the respective colonial histories and relations of these countries with former colonizers, Japan, China and United States, against the backdrop of the Cold War. Chen makes his arguments using historical and political events, giving greater focus to East Asia, and in particular Taiwan, where he is based. He raises several conditions for decolonization, namely the need to de-imperialize and de-Cold War. In raising the need to re-examine the domination of models, knowledge, theories and epistemologies from both the Western and Asian colonial powers, Chen also highlights the Cold War legacy of reducing and polarizing governing systems and economic structures. So much so that the world is
divided into either democracy or socialism, capitalism or Marxism, with just as polarized
good or bad value judgments on each of these, played out in the mass media, political,
avademic and other arenas (Chen, 2010). Such dominating worldviews and value
judgments have continued to affect relations and the conduct of affairs among nations in
Asia. Decolonization has to take place at both the sites of the (former) colonized and
colonizers (Chen, 2010). In the case studies he gave on Asian countries, decolonization in
this respect would involve (former) colonizers acknowledging and assuming
responsibility for events and acts during the colonial history, as a step towards
normalizing of relations. Epistemological and political decolonization is thus necessary in
order for Asia to begin to formulate its own referents, that is, to use Asia as method for
the study of issues in Asia (Chen, 2010).

While Chen is talking about epistemological decolonizing from a wide and long
view on international relations and relating, he demonstrates that decolonizing is not seen
as a complete rejection of the colonial but an ethical consideration, negotiation and
erasure of colonial inscriptions. In my earlier evaluation of Postcolonial Studies, I
brought up the perpetual trace of the colonial and the troubling binary. Chen’s exposition
exposes multiplicities within the seeming binaries and the need to pay attention to not
that the entities at the different ends but the différences between and among them. In this
formulation, the binary is not the structure. The construction of the binary itself obscures
other more deeply embedded structures. Chen’s work opens up the ethical as a site for
decolonizing acts that entails a “rigorous responsibility to a condition of miredness”
(Cheah, 1997, p. 322).
From these various anti-colonial stances and decolonizing approaches, we see a mixture of strategies targeting the epistemological while addressing ontological values and ethical concerns. In these examples, we see a clear unanimous stance against (neo)colonial epistemologies. These include criticality towards (neo)colonial metanarratives, philosophies that continue to marginalize the communities in question, even supposedly emancipatory ones (Barad, 2007; Grande, 2008; Lather, 1991). (Neo)colonial epistemologies in post-colonial period in this case, refers to knowledge and systems of knowledge that restrict or are counter to the goals of the communities’ pursuit of self-determinacy. These typically fail to address the past and present colonial histories and structures still subjugating the communities and which do not serve an agenda of justice in areas valued by the community. Some of these writings, in universalizing struggles against oppressive structures sidelined issues that are pertinent to post-colonial communities. What is worse, these universalized and hegemonic writings could well co-opt aspects of the struggles of post-colonial communities into its fold while subverting the values of the communities by advocacy of its own values, thereby potentially hijacking the struggles of post-colonial communities. Equally suspect are research methods and protocols that serve research/academic institutions instead of honoring the code of conduct, relations of the community that the research is intended to serve.

While Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research share similar strategies with Postcolonial Studies, such as deconstructing and revising histories and representation, the former group counter (neo)colonialist encroachment by positing their own knowledges. In the cases of indigenous populations, the populations’ ontological
philosophies and values serve as a counterpoint and resource to the reconstruction of the epistemological. In indigenous research, indigenous ontological values and modes of relating and relations become another premise or referent instead of Western epistemologies and pedagogy. Rather than appealing to pre-existing static indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, working out these understandings with participants in the processes of collaborative research ensure that they are dynamic and relevant to communities and individuals involved. In this work, decolonizing research means using research as intervention, as praxi (Lather, 1991). It can be a research act, conceived and carried out with research constituents to reclaim the past and/or redraw the future based on values and knowledges and systems of knowing that had been otherwise suppressed. In all of these, the specifics of decolonization are drawn from the agenda, purpose and goals of decolonization and are historically localized. Ethics in these research would comprise the research(er)’s acknowledgement of past and present injustices, and responsibility and commitment to the populations and their causes. Ethics would require the research goals and processes to be respectful towards the population’s epistemological and ontological values, be responsible in the use of research, and reciprocal in ensuring the research benefit the population or their causes (Chilisa, 2012; Grande, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Lather, 1991; Smith, 1999).

Notwithstanding the tenuous differentiation between the epistemological and ontological, the common call in decolonization is towards an ethical reconstitution of the context, referents, premises, relations based on certain shared memory, context, goals or other ways of understanding. This is a challenge for Singapore where ethnicities are
themselves constructed given the context of the imaginary of Singapore as nation within a larger geopolitical context of Asia and the world beyond. What we share is the historicized memory of Singapore as nation and aspects of psychological, emotional, geographical and physical spatialities of Singapore as home in the present and as future. Depending on each of our backgrounds, current status, and where we see ourselves in the future, each of us may stake different claims on that shared memory and spatiality. What can we use as resources for referents that are based on or derived from within Singapore? Learning from the review of existing sociological research and writings on art in Singapore, we see that the adoption of existing epistemological structures or existing discourses as origin and teleos, inevitably obligates and binds us to their terms. What form can we give to the physicality of art making and practice in Singapore that put us in dialogic relations with existing epistemological constructs? What can we offer as alternative, supplementary or dialogic ways of knowing about art making and practice in Singapore that is also ethical towards given ways of knowing?

**Agential Realism**

These epistemological, ontological and ethical issues in my research thus preface my introduction into Karen Barad’s (2007) work. Feminist physicist Karen Barad, writing in the nexus of science studies, philosophy and quantum physics, discusses the entanglement of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other practices. Citing actual and theoretical physics experiments, she illustrates how knowing is not separate from the knower or what we employ (material
and otherwise) in the practice of knowing, thus emphasizing and the fundamental inseparability between epistemology, ontology and ethics (Barad, 2007).

She addresses issues of representationalism in physical and social sciences, and philosophy, and the emphasis on representations, such as theories, ideas, and perhaps even language, over things. By representationalism, she means the ontological distinction between representations and that which is represented, as if these are two distinct and separate entities, and that what is represented is separate from the practices of representing. She refers to this as a Cartesian legacy. She highlights the problem of representationalism as a practice that brackets out the significance of practices, in that representationalism fails to account for how representations themselves are produced.

She uses a post-humanist notion of agential realism to explain how matter comes to matter, that is, how matter becomes matter as we perceive it, and metaphorically, how something gains significance. In Barad’s agential realist account, matter is entangled with or is part of the environment, an indiscernible mess, so to speak. Every material object or entity emerges or comes to be apprehended, through its intra-active becoming, or iterative performativity, or acting in relation to its environment. Boundaries do not naturally exist between different entities, as we are so accustomed to thinking, and that these are only enacted or that these cuts are only made in intra-activity. She conceives of differentiating as not about radical exteriority but rather about intra-action, or agential separability, in that matter differentiates from other matter from how they intra-act.

Barad uses the example of light behaving like wave and particle under different conditions. Theoretically speaking, wave and particles have very different qualities and
constitution, therefore, at certain points in the history of physics, it was believed that both were mutually exclusive and no matter can possess both. However, using different premises, experiments, conditions, apparatuses and modes of measurement, it was possible to show in different settings that light can be wave or particle, though not concurrently both. Experiments trying to prove that light is concurrently both light and particle are unsuccessful as the set-ups were only capable of measuring either one, but not both, given their very different nature.

She uses this and other examples to show that matter is not inherently bounded and separate, each with its own essential set of properties but that matter behaves differently given different conditions. This form of agential realism, or crudely speaking, agency of matter, is demonstrated through its performativity and intra-activity in phenomena. Objects (or subjects, for that matter) are differentially constituted through specific intra-action. Humans too, are part of, constituted by, and constitutive of phenomena through our own intra-actions and interventions through the material. By this, she shows that knowledge are not forms of independent reflection by external human observers of observable verifiable truths but that knowledge, knowing, the known and the knower all constitute and are at the same time constituted by the phenomena.

Just as instruments of measurement intra-act and intervene directly in the phenomenon as part of the practice of knowing, humans too are also responsible for the knowledge we generate in our intra-action in the phenomenon and practice of knowing. Barad thus demonstrates the inseparability of epistemology and ontology and discusses the ethical implication of being responsible for the knowledge we create and for which
we are part of (the phenomena). She advocates a framework of ethico-onto-epistemology that unites responsible and mindful knowing and being that sees knowing as a material and distributed practice that includes us as part of the larger material configuration of the world and its ongoing open-ended articulation.

Karen Barad’s (2007) framework and other concepts in her work had been receiving increasing attention across many different science and social sciences disciplines especially those focusing on post humanist phenomenon. Some of her claims may sound familiar, such as representations obscuring their own discursive practices, premises and presuppositions. Her concern is to avoid the excesses (and exclusionary) of representationalism, performativity and other systems of thought, and from the point of a physicist, to provide an enlarged conception of philosophy that not only includes but also connects the humanist with the material.

Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology provides an interesting alternate post-humanist model for thinking about referents of/for artmaking and art practice in Singapore. By focusing on the phenomenon in question, it potentially breaks away from structural binarism and epistemological presuppositions in research relating to the colonial by opening up different questions, forms of questioning and discussions. It potentially reduces the dominance of the colonial by sizing it in relation with the material and other factors thereby performing one form of decolonizing in itself. At the same time, the inclusion of the researcher(s), knower(s), knowing and in the investigation also broadens the scope for epistemological, materialist and ethical investigations. The physicality of art as products and artmaking also lends itself to this framework. While it retrieves
Singapore, as place, site, space and other forms of material mattering, it still provides scope for examining structures, ways of knowing and being, as well as modes of knowledge production. In this way the framework offers scope for reflexive investigation in the conceptual, spatiality and physicality of Singapore and likewise retrieves it from being purely a figment of imperialist imaginary.

Barad (2007) generates her framework by building on the work and perspectives of a wide range of theorists across different science, humanities and philosophical disciplines. While she is able to develop the framework by building on the insights of so many different thinkers, what perspectives are needed to develop insights into phenomena? What do we need to apprehend all or aspects of intra-actions and intra-activity within phenomena? Can it be that the framework, like what she was addressing through it, hides its own presuppositions? Despite its seemingly all-inclusive framework, what might be suppressed or excluded in the framework, especially if viewed through other cultural ontologies? As the structure of this chapter has demonstrated, the theoretical framework for my project is derived from different aspects of different theories and ideas that addresses (neo)colonialism or subjugating subjectivities. In drawing from ideas from Postcolonial Studies and Decolonizing Methodologies that are generally humanist in nature, how will the use of this Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology balance or throw off the project? How does the use of such a framework affect the political commitment(s) of the project, be it post-colonial, anti-colonial or decolonizing?

Towards a Theoretical Framework
In the review of the various frameworks in this chapter, Karen Barad’s (2007) ethico-onto-epistemology provides an overall framework for the approach of the project. It addresses the epistemological, ontological and ethical concerns as well as trappings associated with research addressing the (neo)colonial in Postcolonial Studies, Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research. The framework suits the historical and cultural context of the research site, Singapore, as well as the nature of the focus of the research on art practice. Though the framework had been cited and used in various degrees in research across science, humanities and social sciences, I have yet to come across any in research addressing the (neo)colonial. The post-humanist approach of the framework is potentially antithetical to the humanist or culturalist concerns associated with Postcolonialism, Decolonizing and Indigenous research. However, I hope that using Barad’s framework in this project with the concerns and agenda of Postcolonialism, Decolonizing and Indigenous research, in a site like Singapore, will provide diffractive readings of these different groups of research. Through it, I hope to develop alternate referents for thinking and imagining Singapore and art in Singapore beyond current research and epistemological frameworks. In the process, the research will also provide an avenue for rethinking the current approaches used in Postcolonialism, Decolonizing and Indigenous research.

In addition, the research will draw on Michel Foucault’s ideas on grid of intelligibility (1978) and Appadurai’s global disjuncture (1990) to extend the perspectives and enrich the analysis. Foucault’s ideas on the topic lends themselves to the research question. His focus on discourses and discursive practices will be able to complement and
provide a form of theoretical triangulation to Barad’s focus on physical material. As Foucault’s ideas of discourse analysis and ideas on grid of intelligibility has also been used widely in poststructuralist and postcolonial research, using his ideas together with Barad’s will create dialogue with the current field even while I explore new analytics. Appadurai’s conception of the global cultural economy suits the context of Singapore. His conception of locus of power and change is line with Foucault’s notion of microphysics of power, and Barad’s ideas on agential realism and (re)configuration of space, time and matter. Using Appadurai’s broadened scope of dynamism and power will serve to push the frames of thinking in Postcolonial and decolonizing research. I will elaborate on the design of the research using these theories and in the following chapter.

**Overall Summation & Conclusion**

This study focuses on artists’ practice(s) in Singapore and the construction of subjectivity in and through their practice, as a means towards reconceptualizing the art curriculum to address discursive representations of Singapore. This chapter explored key concepts, contextual frameworks, research ethos and approaches, and strategies across various fields that undergird the thinking and designing of this research.

Section 1 and 2 laid out the background and context of the study. Section 1 introduced the Postcolonial as background for the study and attendant key concepts of culture, discourse, subjectivity, identity, Orientalism, marginality and hybridity. Section 1 discusses these concepts in literature in Postcolonialism, Cultural Studies and Feminist Studies, in relation to issues of representation, discursive practice, subjectivity and identity in post-colonial context and Singapore outlined in Chapter 1. Section 2 folds the
discussion of these issues into the context of Singapore and examines representations of Singapore and Singapore art through presentations, writings and discourses on Singapore history, culture, sociology, identity, art, art history and art curriculum. Section 2 elaborates the issues touched upon in Chapter 1 and locates the study within the particular social, cultural and historical context and developments in Singapore.

While the background of the project can be traced to Singapore’s history as a former British colony, evaluation of ideas from Postcolonial Studies in Section 1 and 2 have revealed the limits of Postcolonialism for the project. The use of deconstructionist tools of Postcolonialism, such as analysis of colonial discourse through concepts of Orientalism and marginality, have yielded insights into the formulation of representations of Singapore art, such as the East-West signifier, mainstream and alternative art positioning. Possible attempts to intervene and subvert Eurocentricism and power structures are limited as long as the epistemological framework of art in Singapore remains orbited around the West. This underscores the significance of the research to explore referents for thinking about subjectivities and art practice in Singapore beyond the current representations. The tools offered under Postcolonialism are however insufficient in themselves to think about subjectivity construction beyond the colonized-colonizer binary. Section 2 also examines the concept of Postcolonial hybridity and finds it lacking in accounting for identity formulation in Singapore, given the migrant and transmuted nature of cultural identities within the historical and geopolitical context of the nation state. Even though hybridity is widely used, it has tendencies towards reductionism and homogenization of identity formulation as well as obscuring the
structures of its own formation. Even though the project acknowledges the colonial roots of the project, siting the project as a purely Postcolonial project also fails to take into account the multifarious global transnational exchanges that characterize Singapore today.

Section 3’s review of globalization, the global cultural economy, and its disjuncture, serves to refresh the context for the project. Transnational exchanges and movements of people, technology, finance, media and ideas have now reconfigured the Postcolonial world of two asymmetrical halves into multiple centers and networks. The global cultural economy marks the blurring of distinctions between cultural production and economic acts, destabilizes notions of culture and identity and delinks these from physical localities, national boundaries and ethnic markers. Section 3 looks at subversive strategies for negotiating and reconstituting subjectivities with the structures of a global cultural economy. These include cultural identification, appropriation and disruption of subjectivities, and notions of performativity, that transform discursive subjectivities into resources for reconstituting subjectivities. The study of these strategies examines sites of contention within various social, cultural, pedagogical and discursive arenas. The study situates locales of agency in acts that focus on reconstituting relationships with and between subjectivities, and that which redraw the terms of engagement with(in) the environment, communities and existing structures.

In building a theoretical framework for the study, Section 4 examines and compares various groups of research that addresses (neo)colonial issues, namely Postcolonialism, Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research. The section
starts off by looking at the criticisms of culturalism and textualism levied at Postcolonial Studies and reflects on the field’s epistemological and ontological referents that possibly undermine certain political expectations of Postcolonialism. This section explores the practice of Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research and their strategies for circumventing (neo)colonialism by positing their own indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, purpose and agenda. This section also highlights different ethical considerations and commitments in decolonizing research. Just as decolonization is not a total rejection of Western epistemological frameworks and structures, the process of considering and negotiating these also entails exercising responsibility towards given cultures and our entanglement with and in them (Barad, 2007; Cheah, 1997).

Given the nature and mix of different migrant cultures in Singapore within the nation state imaginary where indigeneity is not an option, this section examines Karen Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology as an alternate framework for the study. Barad’s framework encapsulates the epistemological, ontological and ethical facets of knowing and knowledge production. The framework not only decenters human as subject, it also entails attentiveness to the physical and material and the intra-action and intra-activity in these various forms as entangled phenomena. The framework not only addresses the Cartesian epistemological and ontological divides within and across Postcolonial Studies, Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research, it also confronts the binary drawn up between Western research and research of other cultures. Barad’s posthumanist framework encompasses broader notions of the ontological that includes the physical and material. This suits the focus of the study on art, artmaking and art practice as well as
allows for a much needed empiricist perspective into the understanding of Singapore as physical and not only psychical and/or national spatiality. Most importantly, Barad’s posthumanist framework brings together and has the potential to resolve certain contradictions and tensions within and across Postcolonial Studies, Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research.

The study started out with concerns for decolonizing and straddles between and within Postcolonial and Decolonizing research. Though it draws its anti-colonial agenda from these fields, this study is also distinct from these in terms of its focus and outlook. Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology forms the backbone for the theoretical framework and approach of the study. Postcolonial analytical tools, in particular, Foucault’s ideas on the grid of intelligibility (1978), are used in the deconstruction of representations of Singapore and provide the background for understanding historical and discursive constructs of Singapore. Studies on globalization and global cultural economy, and Appadurai’s concept of global disjunctures (1990) sets the current context for the study whereas strategies used for construction of subjectivities provide the tools for analyzing and thinking these issues in the study. The bricolage framework brings together and is united by anti-colonial concerns, concerns against issues of injustices, be it of misrepresentation, subjectification, subjugated knowledges, ways of knowing and being. The following chapter will discuss in detail the methodology of the study and the use of the framework and concepts discussed here.
Chapter 3: Performing Diffractive Methodology – Singapore as Method

Re-capitulation & Introduction

In the first and second chapters, I presented the palimpsestic writing of Singapore as a post-colonial nation state in the folds of the 21st century global culture economy. The fact that Singapore, as a country made up of different migrant cultures from Asia, has chosen to follow a more Western and modernized form of development, further problematizes its already multiple cultural heritage and identity (Ang & Stratton, 1995). The representations of Singapore in historical, social and cultural discourses, including art history and art curricula, are often represented through the structures and values of dominant epistemologies rooted in other cultures and histories. Collectively, these various forms of representations discursively produce Singapore as marginal and lesser in many aspects of cultural identity and production (Ang & Stratton, 1995). This not only undermines the valorization of Singapore art and culture but also affects the foundational imagining of Singapore as a nation and community (Anderson, 1983; Ang & Stratton, 1995; Chua, 1998; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

In my research, I explore ways of understanding art in Singapore using experiences and resources in Singapore. I use the research as a means to think with, and to reconceptualize knowledge and knowledge making about art, and other aspects of Singapore, in the curriculum. This chapter consolidates and discusses my research
rationale, situating, approach, and methods of the research. The first part of the chapter will present the rationale, research paradigm and approach of the research. From there, I move on to research methods, including ethnographic data collection, grounded theory, situational analysis, and qualitative data analysis.

**Locating the Research – Rationale and Goals**

The goals, design, and theoretical framework of my research are influenced by my personal and professional experiences, existing research in the fields where I site the research, the perceived issues and needs in these fields, and potential future application. In this study, I examine examples of how certain aspects of art come into being, and how they are known, practiced, and valued within situated conditions in Singapore. These conditions, in turn, reveal larger entanglements with other ongoing, dynamic influences in a globalizing environment. The study seeks to understand the epistemological, ontological and physical material constituents of knowing, practicing, and valuing art. Through it, I explore options for formulating situated knowledge and ways of knowing art in Singapore. These insights can help reevaluate the basis and representations of art in the ongoing decolonization and (re)construction of the curriculum.

Cultural representations in texts and discourses have actual real-life consequences through their discursive operations (Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1987). For instance, seeing and measuring the self through other people’s eyes (Dubois, 1903) or dominant structures affect individual and communal perceptions and imaginary. This translates to various relational and structural inequalities (Foucault, 1972, Barker, 2004, Brooker, 2002, Said, 1978, Weedon, 1987), particularly in knowledge and cultural production (Gates, 1985;
1992). Some of these effects are illustrated through the story of Dick Lee (Chapter Two), and my own experiences as a fine arts undergraduate in the U.K. (Chapter One). As the primary subject that develops students’ visual and cultural perception and meaning making (Walker, 2001), it is imperative that the art curriculum acts against such discursive production, to equip students to identify, and reject these inequalities, so they may (re)construct their own imagery (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1991).

Art curriculum, through its layering and connections with knowledge from different disciplines – including art practice, art history, aesthetics, criticism, visual culture studies, and philosophy – is itself subjected to various epistemological and ontological frames. The epistemological structures and values privilege certain ways of knowing, forms of knowledge, and art, while subjugating others. These structures operate under the cloak of the assumed universality of disciplines in dominant academic systems. To address the issues of subjugated identities and cultures, knowledges, and ways of knowing and valuing, various subfields in education, including art education, advocate critical pedagogy (see for example, Apple, 1979; Atkinson, 2001, 2002, 2008; Freire, 1970; 1998; Giroux, 1991; Greene, 2003; McLaren, 2003) and social reconstruction approaches (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

Critical pedagogy, as proposed by Paulo Freire (1970), emphasizes engaging with learners dialogically to bring about understanding of the discursive forms of representations in texts. Learners are co-constructors of their own learning, and participate in the planning and decision-making. This learning also involves equipping
and empowering students to (re)construct their own representations and/or take steps to act against the social, cultural and/or materialist structures they were subjected to.

Similarly, in Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr’s model of the social reconstruction approach to multicultural art and visual culture education (2001), learning about art is situated within a socioanthropological framework. It emphasizes aesthetic production within larger social, cultural, economic, and political systems, and uses art learning to critically investigate issues in different cultures and broader visual culture. The goal is to engage students in social issues and enable them “to practice democratic action for the benefit of disenfranchised social and cultural groups”, and to effect social justice beyond the school (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001, p. 9).

Critical pedagogy, social reconstruction approaches, and other frameworks that shares similar emancipatory goals are very influential in many areas of educational and curriculum studies. These areas include curriculum studies (see for example, Asher, 2010; Grumet, 2010; Pinar, 2005), multicultural education (see for example, Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Banks & Banks, 2013; Garber, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2012), semiotic pedagogy (Smith-Shank, 1995; 2007), and visual culture art education (See for example, Anderson, 2003; Smith-Shank, 2003).

However, none of these models offer a ready solution for the Singapore context, due to differences in values, concerns and social, cultural and historical developments. As research is inevitably written through its own situated worldviews and concerns, its goal and values, when reduced, universalized and applied to other contexts, can potentially obscure, if not displace, other more pertinent concerns. For example, critical pedagogy is
premised upon exercising individual freedom and democracy. However, in terms of
development and reconstruction, various formerly colonized communities often grapple
with challenges such as self determination, cultural erosion, and land claims that require
communal identification and activism (Ballengee-Morris, Sanders, Smith-Shank,
Staikidis, 2010; Grande, 2008).

Other issues that surfaced in response to emancipatory work involve the problems
of constituting the very subjects that it helps (See for example, Atkinson, 2002;
Eisenhauer, 2006; Ellsworth, 1989; Stringer, 2007) and the deepening of power
inequalities, both of which are connected to claims of empowering and speaking on
behalf of research participants and other populations (see for example, Ballengee-Morris,
Sanders, Smith-Shank, Staikidis, 2010; Ginsburg, 1997; Lather, 1991; 2001; Stringer,
2007). As a result, such work, including critical pedagogy, is often in danger of
perpetuating the subjectivity(s) and inequalities that it aims to act against (Ellsworth,

Most of the critical pedagogical approaches presuppose repressive structures, and
works with people in those situations to address pre-existing and current conditions
(Ellsworth, 1989). In my project, I reject the current already constituted subjectivity(s) of
art in Singapore, as well as the epistemological basis governing that constitution. The
study posits that the use and existence of current structures and discourses constrain the
conception and constitution of Singapore art. Further more, given the close, co-
constitutive epistemological relations between the curriculum and the knowledge about
ways of knowing in various (art) disciplines, the re-examination of subjugating structures
will need to address the constitution of art as concept and practice. It seeks to look for ways to un-think and rethink current formations and not ways to act against given repressive structures. While the study works with existing conceptions of social, historical, materialist, and art-related structures, in a postcolonial global context, it also pushes their limits. The study achieves this by foregrounding practices, context and experiences in Singapore and investigating the physical-discursive aspects of the site to question and disrupt preexisting stereotypical notions of art in Singapore.

Having established its relations to current art education research, I now relate the study to Postcolonial Studies and decolonizing research. In Chapter Two, I highlighted issues of culturalism (Hall, 1996b) or textualism (Eagleton, 1998) in Postcolonial Studies arising from the field’s focus on cultural identity issues through Western discourse and discursive practices. These studies draw on poststructuralist theory of language and discourse, but the most influential studies were written by South Asian researchers working in Western academia. In critiquing Western scholarship and discourse, these scholars also foreground them as concerns in their field, leading to a seeming neglect of practical social justice issues in post-colonial societies (Hall, 1996b). Research on decolonizing written by indigenous researchers working within their own communities, by comparison, redresses continuing colonial epistemological structures and dominance by positing culturally and ontologically relevant epistemologies. These focus on efforts to establish a field of research that restores and reconstructs indigenous ways of life, in part to address the historical and cultural erasure that had taken place over the course of colonialism. Such contrasts in concerns and methods, as other scholars have argued,
show how the research in these fields are shaped by where the researchers locate themselves, their work, the beneficiaries of their research, and their audience. This is an issue pertaining to research that had often been pointed out.

The writers of the literature on Singapore reviewed in Chapter Two are mostly based in Singapore, with some based in other parts of Asia or Asia-Pacific. However, even though they focus their studies on Singapore, their theoretical framework, methods and analyses are based on Western philosophies and critical theory. Most of these studies carry out critical analyses on official discourses without offering perspectives on lived experiences or responses from the population. As a result, their writings end up totalizing governmental power while portraying the population as powerless and passive. In the case of Singapore art curriculum as illustrated in Chapter Two, the history and study of Singapore art is presented through Western epistemological structures, aesthetics and values. In these examples, though existing mainstream Western theory yields particular insights into the Singapore experience, the issue is in the way they were used, and the power relationships and subjects created in that process.

In many of the studies, the authors do not specifically acknowledge the theory, method or epistemological frameworks used, such as certain underlying beliefs about discourse, democracy, or capitalism. This suggests a certain presumption of universality of the theories and epistemologies used, while perpetuating their dominance. The studies also oscillate between being critical, and being self-othering or ‘pathologizing’ (Owomoyela, 1994). Some of the studies focus more on theoretical or philosophical discussion, and less on examining the impact and practical issues in real-life, or how
theory can address issues in lived experiences. But while some decolonizing research that
draws from indigenous ontological and epistemological frameworks, Singapore, as a
multicultural migrant society, does not have similar pre-existing or homogeneous
frameworks, apart from the common identity of a postcolonial Asian nation. As such,
notwithstanding issues of essentializing, research about Singapore that uses any other
ethical, ontological and/or epistemological framings without recognition of its own
referents, will inevitably position Singapore as a lesser other.

Taking these issues into account, in my research I am not only keen to bridge the
epistemological and ontological, but also to explore alternate means of understanding art
in Singapore that takes into account lived perspectives and experiences in Singapore. To
paraphrase Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), the project explores how we can use aspects of
Singapore as method, or epistemological-ontological pivots in research on Singapore art.

The research shares similar goals and research paradigms with post-colonial
decolonizing research (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). It is a qualitative study that draws
from constructivist, critical, and feminist poststructuralist research paradigms (Lather,
1991, 2006; St Pierre, 2000). However, the study also aims to push the scope, context,
perspectives, and tools of current post-colonial and decolonizing research. Post-colonial
literature had largely approached post-colonial cultural issues via discourse analysis and
psychoanalysis. Literature on decolonizing in post-colonial societies has also been mainly
written from the perspectives of indigenous populations, and addresses culturally
homogeneous communities and/or indigenous issues. My study on Singapore art and
curriculum highlights issues in post-colonial urban communities in Asia, particularly
those rooted in multicultural migrant populations with heterogeneous cultural identifications. The study brings attention to an under-researched demographic profile and topic in the literature on decolonizing in post-colonial nations. As migration continues in the ongoing globalization, and populations in and beyond Asia grow to be increasingly diverse, the issues covered in this project will be relevant to many different communities.

In thinking towards decolonizing the art curriculum, I do not mean eliminating existing knowledges and their frames. Similarly, the fact that I am undertaking decolonizing research from within an academic institution in the US, as part of the fulfillment of a PhD degree, has certainly shaped the framing and design of my study. I struggle with the fact that post-colonial and decolonizing literature was circulated through Western academia, and that I too, came to know it through a Western frame. I recognize not only the interconnectedness but also the co-constitution of different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. I acknowledge that there is no outside position to write from. By decolonizing, I refer to how we can critically review and (re)negotiate our relationships with the various epistemologies and ontologies we are part of, as part of the development of alternate modes of creating knowledge in and about art in Singapore. In decolonizing, I consider how we can not only responsibly account for our given cultures (Cheah, 1997) but also create spaces for the ongoing (re)creation of our current and imagined selves, apart from and in spite of given cultures.

**Theoretical Framework**
In reviewing and considering the theoretical framework for this research, I consider the philosophical and theoretical bases of the literature, along with the relevance and scope of possible applications to the Singapore context. I also consider how different studies complement and dialogue with one another under the overarching goal of decolonizing. The context of the research is framed by studies in post-colonialism and decolonization within broader globalization. The study considers existing strategies in various fields and contexts that address subjugated and/or (neo)colonialist knowledges and identities. These include poststructuralist strategies in Postcolonial Studies (Spivak, Chakrapty), theories of performativity in Feminism (Butler, 1990a; 1990b; 1993), and theories for emancipatory identity and social (re)construction and proliferation (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Eisenhauer, 2006) that are related to critical pedagogy and multicultural art education (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). In addition, the study also looks at the approaches of decolonizing research.

In assembling the design and theoretical analytics for the research, I consider the status and gaps of current research. I noted the reliance on Western epistemologies, and the focus on Singapore as discourse in the existing research on Singapore, and wanted to explore other aspects of knowing, being, and responding apart from or in spite of Western epistemologies. I was thus attracted to Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism because it conjoins ethics, ontology, and epistemology (2007), which are the three major areas of concerns in the literature on decolonizing and reconstructing post-colonial entities (Cheah, 1997; Chen, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). In particular, the post humanist theory’s focus on the physical material is also suitable to consider the physical aspects of
art and artmaking, and of Singapore as place and physical environment. In addition, I draw on Foucault’s concept of the grid of intelligibility (Foucault, 1971) as both an analytic and reflexive tool for the study. While Foucault’s analytics and notion of grid of intelligibility is used mainly in discourse analysis, and was used in Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), I use it in conjunction with actions, phenomena, and discourse, to analyze how all three coagulate in the becoming of knowledge. I also use the concept to check the epistemological frames I use during the course of the research. To better apprehend the phenomena of Singapore art, not only within its own situatedness but also as part of the globalizing context, I will also use Appadurai to consider the effects of various aspects of global exchanges on issues of intelligibility.

This study examines the coming to intelligibility of several aspects of art in Singapore. To define intelligibility, I look at how aspects of art in Singapore come to be, and how they are spoken, known, and responded to. I examine these in terms of Barad’s idea of intelligibility, which emphasizes how entities are distinguished one from another (2007), as well as in terms of Foucault’s concept of intelligibility as a grid, or system of order of similarities and differences, that make naming, speaking, and thinking possible (1971).

As interpreting and analyzing during the course of the research will inevitably draw on existing ways of knowledge, and given the focus on coming into intelligibility, I draw on Foucault’s concept of grid of intelligibility (Foucault, 1971) both as an analytic and reflexive tool. While Foucault’s notion of grid of intelligibility is used mainly in discourse analysis, and was used in Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), I use it in
conjunction with actions, phenomena and discourse, to analyze how these coagulate in the becoming of knowledge. I also use the concept to check the epistemological frames I use during the course of the research. To better apprehend the phenomena of Singapore art not only within its own situatedness but also as part of the globalizing context, I will also use Appadurai (1990) to consider the effects of various aspects of global exchanges on issues of intelligibility.

However, I pay closer attention to expounding Barad’s ideas as they are relatively less familiar and not used widely in postcolonial and decolonizing research. Barad’s work addresses the ethics and the ontological-epistemological connectedness of knowledge making. Barad addresses the flawed perception of scientific knowledge as reflection of an objective world, and uses examples in physics to show that there is no inherent fixed quality or boundary, even for seemingly inanimate matter. She demonstrates that what we know, or what becomes knowable, is co-constituted by selection and application of existing available knowledge, and by the actions of humans, physical objects, and materials.

In Barad’s post-humanist account, even seemingly inanimate objects act on their environment and effect changes on other objects or forms of matter. Thus the term agential realism refers to the actions of humans and non-humans that impact physical reality. She calls such actions *intra-actions* to refer to the actions that matter enacts. She distinguishes intra-actions from interactions, as interactions presuppose boundaries and separateness of entities, whereas intra-actions, describe actions of matter as part of entanglement in a phenomenon. Through this model, she demonstrates that boundaries or
separateness – in other words, the identities of entities – are formed only in actions in relation to other entities. She thus confounds the notion of causality and the predetermination of subject-object relationships. She advocates an ethics of knowing and knowledge making that makes explicit or is cognizant of, the ontological and epistemological constitution, as well as our actions and role in the constitution. She calls this ethico-onto-epistemology.

The research uses Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology, or agential realist framework to apprehend the actions and relationships between practices of being, knowing, and responding within the phenomena known as Singapore art. In using Barad’s framework, the research posits art and art practice in Singapore as phenomena comprising practices of being, knowing, and responding which are entangled. The notion of agential realism does not presuppose subject-object ordering but instead focuses on agential intra-actions within material and human in the constituting of specific phenomenoa. In using this approach, art and other practices are posited not only as discourses but also in their material, physical, situated, and embodied manifestations. While this approach acknowledges the discursive practices used in the representation of art and art practice in Singapore, it also opens up different ways of understanding that focuses on particularities of meaning making, being, and valuing connected with and in relation to the physicality of art practice and conditions in Singapore. In so doing, the approach enacts a form of decolonizing, by dislodging representations of Singapore art practice from a totalizing conception of discursive epistemological practices rooted in Western discourses.
In examining current art practices, I am interested in how these various factors are lived, embodied and come into play in the constituting of different aspects of art, and in how individuals and their work make sense of, relate to and respond to them. The study considers the entanglement of various aspects – material, spatial, temporal disciplinary, professional, legal and cultural – and their forms of (re)configuration. Barad situates the coming to matter within particular (re)configurations of space and time (2007). Her concept of spacetimemattering speaks of the dynamic entanglement and contingent conditions of / in knowledge making. There are no pre-constituted entities in a phenomenon. Entities, or matter are co-constituted in intra-action in phenomena. They come to matter, or become distinguishable as entities, separate from others, through intra-actions in phenomena. Barad’s notion of intra-action also means that the coming to matter, the coming to intelligibility of entities, also signals, (re)configuration(s) of space and time. By space, she does not mean a bounded marked container in which events take place, but specific marking of space rather than in space. Analogously, time is not an external parameter or container but is intra-actively produced and subject to reconfiguring. Markings of time are neither chronological nor linear, but are rather reconfigured periods, breaks and discontinuities. Figure 1 illustrates how I conceive of space, time and matter as essentially dimensions in phenomena. As dimensions in phenomena, the model also corresponds to existing conception of art practice as historically and geographically situated, even as it attempts to peel away the always already discursive in existing historical and geographical situating. This model forms a basic frame for the research that I will return to and elaborate in the following chapters.
While this study acknowledges our post-colonial past, the study situates it in the present, as part of the dynamic global web of influences that Singapore is currently part of and becoming (Appadurai, 1990; Chakrabarty, 2000). In the study, I consider the multivalence of certain historical, cultural and epistemological influences across various temporal and spatial configurations in aspects of Singapore art as manifested in the coming into intelligibility of artworks, practice, and artists. The study explores the reconfiguring of given cultures, histories (Cheah, 1997) and/or epistemologies in/as situated phenomena in Singapore art (Barad, 2007). In the process, the study highlights
disjunctures (Appadurai, 1990) in different forms of (neo)colonizing global structures, and the reconstituting of the subject-object positionalities (Barad, 2007; Dolby, 2001; Eisenhauer, 2006) related to art and curriculum in Singapore.

**Situating Myself**

While the study cannot be completely devoid of Western epistemological influences, I try to exercise reflexivity in my use of them. My engagement or entanglement with the project matters at a number of levels. As a researcher, I am the instigator, advocate, questioner, as well as the main instrument, if not apparatus, for the research. Barad charges that the “range of possible responses that are invited, the kinds of responses that are disinvited or ruled out as fitting responses, are constrained and conditioned by the questions asked, where questions are not simply innocent queries, but particular practices of engagement” (Kleinman, 2012, p. 81). According to Barad, the questions and conditions and practices of engagement give rise to “conditions of possibility of response-ability” that “include accountability for the specific histories of particular practices of engagement” (Kleinman, 2012, p. 81). The use of Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology also requires me to recognize my various ways of being, knowing, and responding; and how these set up, delineate, intra-act with, and constitute the research; and how I too am, in part, constituted by various aspects of the research. Using an ethico-onto-epistemological framework acknowledges and makes explicit the bracketing of ethical, ontological and epistemological conditions that lead to knowledge or meaning making.

**Reflexivity**
Within qualitative research, this form of critical self-reflection or self-inspection is referred to as reflexivity (Schwandt, 2007) and is described as researchers “engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project” (Dowling, 2008, p. 748). Dowling lists four types of reflexivity in qualitative research: methodological, epistemological, critical and reciprocal. The form of reflexivity used is dependent on the methodology adopted. Reflexivity can focus on methodological decisions; for example, researchers can keep a diary of thoughts and feelings that influenced their methodological decision making during the process.

Epistemological reflexivity involves the researchers questioning their methodological decision-making and epistemological decisions regarding the research and its findings, and can be documented by means of a journal to aid in the understanding of their “prior assumptions, beliefs and attitudes” (Dowling, 2008, p. 748). Critical reflexivity goes beyond the use of a journal and comprises the examination of the political and social issues underlying the research process. Reflexivity that is reciprocal focuses on the researcher-participant relationship where both parties become partners in the research. It challenges the notion of neutrality and involves both parties exercising reflexivity in the understanding, exchanges and engagement in the research process.

Within the fields of Decolonizing Methodologies and Indigenous Research, reflexivity is a critical act within the research process. Margaret Kovach (2009) talks about the necessary embodiment of decolonization within the lives of indigenous researchers and the context of decolonization within the context of colonized learning. She explains decolonizing in terms of exploring one’s own beliefs and values about
knowledge and how it shapes our practices. Implicit in these interrogations are the examination of the researchers’ own race, power (Kovach, 2009), and implicatedness in their colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed roles (Asher, 2010).

In thinking about situating myself and related issues of (self)reflexivity in this project over time, I have shifted between and around positions of ambivalence and schizophrenia in postcolonial angst, anti-colonial separatism, decolonial militancy, multiplicity, proliferation, and difference. I enact multiple performatives as Christian, Singaporean, Chinese, mother, wife, daughter, friend, government civil servant, curriculum planner, art teacher, graduate student at an American university, government scholar, and Fine Arts graduate from a British university. Each of these roles situates me in different knowledges; epistemologies; values; ways of knowing; being, and valuing; and relationships that criss-cross various communities and contradictions. Embarking on this research required constant examination of my personal explicit, hidden and feared values and beliefs at different junctures. At the same time, I hope that the multiplicity of these subjectivities will provide opportunities to examine the relationships between their different facets, layers, and interstices, as well as to facilitate reading through different insights in the findings. Where my own self-reflexivity as a researcher is lacking, I hope the performative use of diffractive methodology will open up different readings and readings of difference that are situated, various, and dialogic.

**Design of Study**

This study examines how aspects of art come to be known and responded to, through the work of select artists and designers in Singapore. The study uses
ethnographic methods to collect narratives and data on practitioners’ work. The analysis makes use of modified grounded theory, situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and a case study.

Participants

The research evaluates the representation and concept of art by investigating how art is known, practiced and valued, through the dynamism of different physical-discursive aspects in Singapore. As mentioned earlier, this focus on art and practice is deliberate due to its co-constitutive role in the subjectivity of the art curriculum. In this respect, the research approaches current art in terms of its investigative nature (Gude, 2004, 2007; Walker, 2001, 2003) and as process and practice for knowledge making. As curriculum too, is itself a knowledge making practice, the investigation of art practice in Singapore can also be potentially revealing to the review of the practice of art curriculum.

To be able to explore these processes in their construction in Singapore, I focused on current practitioners at the time the research was carried out. This enabled me to access other physical-discursive elements that contributed to the understanding of these practitioners’ work and practice, within the time and space of the research. Such multi-perspectival investigation, for example considerations of the physical, would be limited if more established work were used. The choice of current art and practice is also strategic, given its historical proximity and contextual relevance to students’ lives and environment, and hence its germaness to curriculum consideration.
I conducted nine interviews with eight visual artists, designers, curators, and an art critic from August 2012 to March 2013. The duration of each interview ranged from about 40 minutes to more than two hours and the interviews totaled more than 11 hours. I approached practitioners who were active and practicing artists, designers, curators, and critics whose work was recognized by members of the art/design community(s).

I used a variety of strategies to identify potential participants who fit the above criteria. Some participants were identified from snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a technique of gathering participants through the identification of initial participants who are able to suggest other participants in their social networks, thereby creating an expanding network of participants. The technique is useful for identifying small or hard to access populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2004).

The list started from preliminary conversations with an artist-teacher friend and a curator. From the two separate conversations, three to four names surfaced. A few were approached based on their prominence and profile in the Singapore and international art scene, and because they were often cited in publications and events. A few had recently won local awards, nominations or media attention for their work, while others surfaced consistently across the different selection strategies listed above. One is a personal friend, and I share mutual friends with another. Apart from one, all the participants are Singaporeans. All participants are between the ages of 20 and 49. Of the nine participants, four are Chinese females, two are Malay males, and three are Chinese males.
In considering potential participants, I weighed the recommendation and description of their work by the participants who recommended them, the type of recognition accorded to their work, the type of artwork produced, and their potential contributions to the range and mix of participants in the study. Given that the study focuses on select current practices and that the nature of the study is cumulative rather than representative, the selection of participants is not intended to be representative of the spread of ethnicities, genders, classes, and genres of art practice in Singapore.

I contacted potential participants through existing contacts or by email, social media or phone. I approached some participants through face-to-face interactions during arts events. All but one of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Singapore, either at cafés, or, in one case, at the participant’s office. One interview was conducted online over Skype as the artist was doing a residency overseas.

The interviews cover a range of topics on the practitioners’ background, entry into the field, working processes, influences, context, ideas and concepts in their work, and how they situate themselves as practitioners in Singapore (see Appendix A for a sample list of interview questions). A discussion of copyright and attribution issues emerged during the interviews, and other questions were raised about identification of the artists based on the description of their work and/or the use of images of their work. Participants were asked if they wished to remain anonymous. All participants consented to the use and publication of their names for this research.

**Other Data Sources**
When available, I attended exhibitions featuring the work of the participant artists and designers. In addition, I looked for images and publications of and on their work in print and online media. The participants’ art and design works and/or visual images of their work are included as data for the study.

I also attended numerous public art and design events organized by the Singapore Art Museum, DesignSingapore, the National University of Singapore, Singapore’s Ministry of Education and ArtStage Singapore. These events included exhibitions, talks, and forums by artists, designers, curators, critics, and/or researchers. While these visits and talks do not form the core data used in the study, collectively they contributed to building my understanding of various aspects of art and design practice in Singapore.

**Research Tools**

I audio-recorded all but one of the interviews and transcribed the interviews with the help of Dragon NaturallySpeaking 12.0 dictation software. The transcripts were then coded using grounded theory, aided by MAXQDA 11 software. I coded the contents of the interview that was not audio recorded using the notes I made during the session. I will elaborate on the coding process in the analysis section.

The schedule of the research is as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>Preliminary discussions and pilot-testing of interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March – June 2012</td>
<td>Refining of study and methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>Institutional Review Boards Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>Preliminary interviews and data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – March 2013</td>
<td>Interviews and data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May – July 2013</td>
<td>Re-submission for Institutional Review Boards Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – November 2013</td>
<td>Transcription &amp; data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2013 – April 2014</td>
<td>Writing up the report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member checks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Research Schedule.

The project first began to take shape in March 2011. While researching assessment, I realize that issues reside further upstream, and that I needed to examine the epistemological structures, ontological bases, and conditions for ethical responses (Barad, 2000; 2007; Cheah, 1997; Kleinman, 2012) in curriculum (see notes from research journal in Chapter 1). As part of the conceptualization of the research design, I conducted a preliminary interview with an artist teacher in March 2012, and pilot tested some possible interview questions. I also started participating in artists’ talks and forums on art in Singapore, and initiated conversations with various practitioners. During these
preliminary interviews, I noted how practitioners talked about their work and art in general, particularly that they used terms and vocabulary from existing and dominant Western-biased art epistemologies. The experience from the preliminary interviews and conversations gave me a feel for the possible scope of the project. From March to July 2012, I worked on the theoretical framework and methods for the research.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, I started the interviews from August 2012. The bulk of the interviews were conducted from January to March 2013. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed progressively after March 2013. When I revised my IRB submission between May and July 2013, I further refined the focus, methods and use of literature. I started working on initial chapters concurrently with the transcribing, starting in March 2013. As I was writing the dissertation, I also verified certain details of the conversations with select participants.

**Methodological Tools for Analysis**

The following section will discuss grounded theory and situational analysis, and the study’s use of these methodological tools in conjunction with agential realism in the research.

The promise of grounded theory to theorize from empirical research without being overly bound by *a priori* theory makes it an attractive research tool. It mitigates some epistemological concerns underlying the use of Western theories (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, like all research methods, grounded theory has particular epistemological structures. The following segment discusses the premises of grounded theory, alongside a
regenerated version of grounded theory, known as situational analysis and the use of both tools in the present research.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory has been rationalized as being rooted in symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is based on the understanding that humans apprehend collective social definitions through socialization processes in which symbols, such as language, play an intrinsic part (Goulding, 2002). It focuses on the nature of the individual, his/her interactions between individuals within society through the meanings of symbols, and “relationships between individual perceptions, collective action and society” (Goulding, 2002, p. 39).

Grounded theory was constructed as a means to systematically collect data that can then be interpreted and developed, or theorized, through a process that also provides for the verification and validation of findings (Goulding, 2002). A theory posits a set of relationships or the “best comprehensive, coherent and simplest model for linking diverse and unrelated facts in a useful and pragmatic way” – that offer a plausible explanation of the phenomenon under study (Morse, 1994, p. 25 – 26, cited in Goulding, 2002, p. 45). The theory evolves during the research process as a product of the continuous and parsimonious interplay between analysis and data collection through processes of interpretation, abstraction, conceptual identification, and of course theorizing. Data is iteratively analyzed through successive levels of coding during which it is broken into smaller units, such as phrases, and concepts or interpretations about what is happening in those units are identified (or coded). There can be different ways of looking at data using
different matrices and different approaches to coding, depending on the researcher’s purposes. The theorizing process also involves memo writing, where the researcher captures thoughts and ideas during the analysis process, and theoretical sampling, where the researcher samples data to try out or develop tentative theoretical categories. Theoretical sampling continues until theoretical saturation, when the properties of a theoretical category are saturated and gathering more data sheds no further light on the properties of the category (Chamaz, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory plays an important role in the history of qualitative research, as it articulates how systematic theorizing can take place in an era of positivism that privileges quantitative research. Despite its popularity, however, grounded theory has been criticized widely, for issues such as for its mechanistic use of coding. Adele Clarke (2005), highlighted the following issues with traditional grounded theory: a “lack of reflexivity about research processes and products, including a naïve notion of giving ‘voice’ to the unheard from ‘their own’ perspective,’ oversimplifications that emphasize commonalities and singular rather than multiple social processes, interpretations of data variation as “negative cases”, and a search for “purity” (p. 11 – 12).

**Situational Analysis**

Clarke sets out to “revise and regenerate” traditional grounded theory (2005, p. xxxiii). Primarily, she enhances and rearticulates its “always already present” but “muted postmodern capacities,” and supplements its traditional root metaphor of “social process/action” with an “ecological root metaphor of social worlds/arenas/negotiations/discourses (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxiii). By so doing, she retools
traditional grounded theory with poststructuralist Foucauldian concepts and analytics, and supplements the traditional analysis, which that tends to focus on a key social process or action, with a multiplicity of alternatives based on “cartographic situational analysis” or maps of key elements (Clarke, 2005, p. 86). She articulates three main types of maps: situational maps to articulate the elements in the situation and relationships among them, social worlds/arenas maps to chart the “collective commitments, relations, and sites of action,” and positional maps to plot “positions articulated and not articulated in discourses” (Clarke, 2005, p. 86). With this reframing, she opens up grounded theory to facilitate multisite research that examines multiple kinds of data, such as “discursive textual, visual, and archival historical materials and documents,” ethnographic transcripts, and field notes, to account more fully for the complexities of postmodern life (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxiii).

Clarke offers situational analysis as a comprehensive methodology, and as one among a range of stances within grounded theory. She provides a multi-layered and pragmatic approach to guide the research design, data collection, and analysis processes within a situated social research context. Her situational matrix, maps, and analyses provide a focused and seemingly comprehensive approach to grounded research within a poststructuralist frame, by articulating broad categories of possible areas, sites or perspectives for investigation. The maps can be seen and used along a continuum of complexity, and act as frames or matrices for collection, coding and analysis of data.
In articulating situational analysis with poststructuralism, especially Foucauldian analytics, she reformulates what was known as data under traditional grounded theory, into discourse(s) for analysis and deconstruction.

**Analyses of Discourse.** In Clarke’s (2005) regeneration of grounded theory through a postmodern poststructuralist and Foucauldian frame, she shifts the focus from social action and/or interactive acts to discourse (Strauss, 1964). While she admits that these are not equivalences, she argues that both frames interrelate in their focus on the regimes of practices. She introduces Foucauldian concepts of discipline, subjectivities, power, resistance, and conditions of possibility through his concept of discourse. What is seen as neutral and objective data, such as narratives and texts, under traditional grounded theory is implicated with dynamics and asymmetries of power, always already constituting the phenomenon under study. Interestingly, even as she pushes Strauss’s strand of grounded theory through postmodern and poststructuralist Foucauldian framing, she does not replace grounded theory with situated analysis. Neither is she asserting for some “dialectical synthesis” of the two, but rather she emphasizes the interconnections, the use of both analytics (Clarke, 2005, p. 59).

By centering discourse as a key site in situational analysis, the mapping and analysis of discourses becomes central in situational analysis, even though Clarke asserts that discourse analysis is but one of the many analytic options available. She defines discourses as “‘language in use’” (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, p. 1, cited in Clarke, 2005, p. 148), including visual images, symbols, nonhuman things/material cultural objects, and modes of communication. Modes of communication are culturally and
historically situated, and multiple modes are typically combined in any given discourse. Discourse encompasses purposeful, persuasive features of language, visuals, and various artifacts, such as choice of words, arguments, warrants, claims, and motives. Accordingly, discourse frames debates, influences perceptions, creates objects of knowledge and reifies forms of representation.

Discourse analysis examines the relationships between the discourse and the social context in which they are constructed and how they both reflect and shape the culture in which they are situated (Allan, 2008). Discourse analysis is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of methods with different foci, directed at different kinds of discourse. Clarke’s four main foci of discourse analysis are rooted in different theoretical traditions and comprise different methods. They focus on form or the formal analysis of the organization of speech and conversations, on discursive interaction (how discourses enter into the social action/interaction), on subject making (how discourses produce identities and subjectivities), and on the situation of production (how discourses produce power/knowledge, ideologies, and control).

Clarke notes that Foucault has been criticized for focusing on dominant institutional discourses. The seemingly lack of the subject’s agency in Foucault’s early work and the characterization of discourses as “technologies of the self” in his later work both problematized the notion of agency in his work (Foucault, cited by Clarke, 2005, p. 175). Clarke distinguishes situational analysis of discourse from a Foucauldian one in that the process of situational mapping seeks to chart all the major discourses related to the situation under study, not just the dominant one. This makes visible and
draws attention to the lesser discourses, and better represents sites of differences and resistances in the situation. The three types of situational mapping – situational maps, social worlds/arenas/discourse maps, and positional maps – can also provide for integrative and/or comparative mapping and analysis. A situational analysis of discourses thus opens a range of discourses for multifaceted and richer analysis. In a way, then, one can argue that Clarke’s integration of Foucault’s analytics with sociological mapping mitigates the weakness of Foucault’s analytics by enlarging and supplementing it with the analytic frame of sociological mapping.

**Discussion – Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis**

The explicit articulation of ecological social realities and the social as discursive practices leaves a certain mark of determinism on situational analysis as an approach and methodology. This also lies at the heart of the debate between Glaser and Strauss who subsequently advanced grounded theory differently after having developed it together. Their ground breaking book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, was founded upon a “positivist empiricist philosophy” that adopted an “inductive process of ‘discovering’ theory from data” (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2003, p. 627). Glaser favors a flexible, emergent and inductive approach where the research focus is looser and more open. He advocates focusing on what is actually happening in data (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2003), “‘letting the data speak for themselves’” (Glaser, 1992, cited in Clarke, 2005, p. 17) and contends that the “theory should only explain the phenomenon under study” (Goulding, 2002, p. 45). Strauss on the other hand, takes on a stronger interpretivist approach. In Strauss’s developments of grounded theory, he develops coding matrices in the belief that
the “developed theory should have conceptual density and meaningful variation” that will enable conceptualization beyond the immediate field of study (Goulding, 2002, p. 45). Clarke shares this position as well. While there are issues with the positivist basis of Glaser’s position, I heed the need for parsimony between data and theory, and for attentiveness to research participants’ perspectives. I also do not see the two positions as necessarily polarizing, but rather as points on a continuum.

Clarke’s situational analysis provides a useful structure for the discursive practices of discourses on subjectivities of the post-colonial, as well as subjectivities within the global cultural economy. However, I am wary of how these frames might conceal other elements that are in excess, just as the lack of one obfuscates them. In the same way, I am just as wary of how the categories used for the matrix and mapping can be equally constitutive in shaping interpretations and analyses.

While grounded theory provides a systematized way to sort data, its tendency to categorize and put things into patterns seems to run counter to the intention of agential realism, which focuses on how the intra-activity of different factors bring entities into discrete being in phenomena. Similarly, Clarke’s (2005) mapping of situations, social worlds/arena maps, and positions could also be deterministic, if not undermining. Accordingly, in this project, while I use the sorting tools associated with grounded theory and situational analysis, I use them as placeholders rather than categories in themselves. The focus is instead on the intra-activity leading to the materialization of these placeholders. I outline how I use them in the following section.

**Description & Discussion of Use**

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In this research, I used aspects of the tools of grounded theory and situational analysis in conjunction with Barad’s (2007) agential realist framework. I first looked at the interview transcripts for big ideas and general descriptors. By looking at the transcripts and focusing on what they describe, and seeing these as descriptors, and thinking of words to describe these particular segments, I hope to avert, to some extent, the issue of using data to fill pre-existing categories instead of the other way round.

Using the MAXQDA 11 software, I coded the interviews into broad categories, for example, education, beliefs, interests and place (see Figure 3 for sample of screen shot on coding of and codes for interview transcript). I wrote memos for these categories, detailing meanings and various aspects of the categories as they surfaced. Some of the memos record details from the transcripts and thoughts I had as to how the categories came about. The memos also included ideas about the codes that linked them to other descriptors, to different parts of the same transcripts, or to different transcripts (see Figure 4 for sample memos on aspects of a code during the coding process). In this way, I used memoing to meet the excesses of the conversations that coding left out. By focusing on the developments, links, and engagement between different descriptives and different parts of the conversations, I hope to be attentive to the intra-activity, relationships, and differences among different elements of the conversations. The memos for these descriptors were further developed, refined and added to, throughout the coding process. New descriptors were also developed and expanded with the coding of every new transcript.
Figure 3. Sample screen shot of coding and codes used for transcribing interviews using MAXQDA11 software.
After all the transcripts were coded, I examined the descriptors and the portions of the transcripts that had been coded with each descriptor. For each of the transcripts, I picked out the descriptors that were most frequently used and examined the links between and among these more frequently used descriptors. I also did the same across the various transcripts.

The final list of descriptive codes includes: professional subjectivity, subjectivity in relation to others, cultural subjectivity, culture, description of process, description of work, context, questions, influence, education, beliefs, ethos, concepts in work, function, role, aesthetics, materials, communication, definition(s), boundaries, categorizing.
Singapore, place, situating, space, money, selling, buying, and time. Some descriptors form related conceptual clusters, such as place, situation, and space and money, selling, and buying. Others, such as descriptions of work, aesthetics, and materials are not mutually exclusive, and many overlap. The descriptors emerged after careful reviews of the transcripts, and the list of codes grew progressively larger during the review process. Due to the present study’s focus and research questions, the most frequently used descriptors are professional subjectivity, subjectivity in relation to others, place, situation, space, and description of process.

Using the frequency data generated by the software (see Figure 5 for sample screen shot on frequency data on codes used in transcription), I then looked for big ideas in the content of the transcripts. I paid particular attention to how the big ideas emerge qualitatively in the transcripts. This could be in terms of the development of the conversation threads, how I ask and how the practitioners interpret the questions, how the conversation relate to recent events in Singapore or art scene, or events in the practitioners’ lives. I also compared these big ideas with images of the artists’ work. I then looked across transcripts to trace the differences in terms of the spread of different descriptors, i.e. to attend to descriptors used infrequently or used unevenly across transcripts. I used the same procedures to look at the intra-activity of these less frequent descriptors to attend to the suppressed and silenced in the transcripts. In these ways, I then worked to construct the ethico-onto-epistemological phenomena in which the artists situate themselves and their practice, such as in terms of the media, materials, concepts...
they use, influences behind the thinking and selection of these materials and concepts, and how these are engaged with their environment, philosophy, or beliefs.

![Figure 5. Sample screen shot on frequency data on codes used in transcription.](image)

I used the ideas of situational analysis, such as the conceptual mapping of situations, social worlds/arena maps, and positions as counterpoints to then (re)consider the construction of the ethico-onto-epistemological phenomena and artists’ practice in it. The conceptual mapping of situational analysis articulates well with the ideas discussed in Chapter Two. I transposed Appadurai’s (1990) idea of global disjunctures and different
notions of subjectivity construction into the conceptual mapping of situations, social worlds/arena maps, and positions to consider how ethico-onto-epistemological phenomena could materialize differently.

**Case Study**

Apart from using content analysis to derive descriptive data, my research also features a case study of one of the participants, to more fully describe the context, series of events and actions constituting her work and status. The case study will complements the grounded theory and situational analysis by providing insights on various aspects of the case, enhancing methodological triangulation.

In a way, all forms of research are case studies. A case is a unit of analysis, a bounded system of interest, or a way of organizing social data to preserve the unitary character of the object under study (Gromm & Hammersley & Foster, 2000; Ragin, 1992). Case studies are sometimes used when the distinctions between the context and the action or phenomenon under study are blurred (Gromm & Hammersley & Foster, 2000; Ragin, 1992). Case studies in social science tend to feature naturalistic enquiry, using descriptions that are “complex, holistic and involving a myriad of not highly isolated variables” from data gleaned from “personalistic observation” (Gromm & Hammersley & Foster, 2000, p. 24). There are many types of case studies, depending on how they are used and positioned in relation to theory or theorizing in the research. Case studies range from those that are largely descriptive, providing insights into the relationships among the component elements in the case, but not easily leading to theoretical interpretations, to those that are used to interpret, develop or test theory
Gromm & Hammersley & Foster, 2000). The primary discussions on case study methods have to do with the conditions and extent to which theorizing can take place within case study research – not unlike that for grounded theory.

The inclination towards description via content analysis and case studies at this point may be due to an apprehension about the fracturing effects of coding, not having done any grounded theory research myself. Microanalysis through the coding of data breaks data into smaller units of events or insights. I am also suspicious of the reliance on a text-based approach and on language in situational analysis. For example, the use of codes and categories can be potentially reductionist, not to mention subjectifying. Beyond just using the form of case studies for the presentation of the research, I also hope to use them as a means to draw attention to the subjectivities of people and discourses, and to differences in their subjective experiences. As a form of methodological triangulation, case studies open up different ways of understanding the situations, and help to mitigate the possible convergence during the theorizing process.

Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the participants. Chapter 5 will present case studies on street art and Chapter 6 will discuss my observations and analyses using grounded theory and situational analysis.
Chapter 4: Practitioners in Singapore

Recapitulation & Overview

From March 2012 to March 2013, I interviewed eight art professionals, in an effort to understand the subjectivity(s) of art practice in Singapore and how the participants make sense of their individual practice(s). Most played multiple roles in their respective fields and fit into more than one professional category. Five of the participants self-identified themselves primarily as visual artists, one as a designer, one as a full-time curator, and one as an art critic. As this research considers how current artists curate their practice, I approached active practitioners whose work was recognized by members of their respective art/design communities. I used a variety of strategies to identify potential participants who fit these criteria. This chapter introduces the participants and presents data from conversations with six of the eight participants, all of whom identify themselves as artists and/or designers.

Alongside this data, I discuss the participants’ work, both in terms of process and product. The duration of each interview ranged from about 40 minutes to more than two hours, generating more than 11 hours in total. Our conversations yielded incredibly rich data. Any re-presentation of the data, given the focus of the research, is only a snapshot: an interpretive sampling of everything the participants generously and openly shared.
As the research involved using images of artworks that allow the participants to be identified, during the planning process I asked each participant’s permission to share his or her work and to identify him or her by name. All six participants agreed: Sam Lo, Hans Tan, Gek Lin Tan, Zul Othman, Donna Ong and Michael Lee. Accordingly, this first section introduces each artist, and provides an overview of the composition, sites, context and texture of the research activities and data. In this section, I also present the background and nature of my engagement with each individual, as a means to contextualize their sharing. More importantly, this opens up my role and other interpersonal and contextual factors for discussion, as part of the broader constituting of subjectivities of in this study.

The second half of the chapter presents general observations of the participants’ subjectivities and how they situate themselves, to provide context for understanding their work. This will be followed by select summaries and re-presentations of individual participants’ narratives and works. Finally, toward the end of the section I discuss these observations and the participants’ collective sharing.

**Participants’ Profiles**

The following profiles use background information I gathered from our interviews, as well as materials gleaned from print and online publications, including websites set up by the participants themselves.

**Sam Lo aka SKLO**

Sam (or Samantha) Lo became (in)famous in June 2012 in Singapore when her work was hotly debated in mass media, social media, art and legal circles, to try and
determine whether it is art or vandalism. The significance of these debates lies in the issue of *if* and *how* she would be prosecuted, given that the punishment for vandalism in Singapore carries with it jail time and caning (for men). Sam, who goes by the moniker SKLO, was behind a series of stickers and spray paintings around the Singapore city area in May 2012. Her stickers were written in English using very typical Singlish-- colloquial Singapore syntax and words. The slogans include “press once can already,” “press until shiok” (*shiok* is an expression of sheer satisfaction or pleasure), and the self-parodic “anyhow paste kena fine” (*kena* in this case is used as an auxiliary to mark the passive voice, and is used in negative situations) (Figure 6). Most of these stickers were sized to fit just above the push buttons on traffic light poles at pedestrian crossings. Depending on how the phrases were read, they have the effect of warnings, snide remarks, instructions, or scoldings. However, because of the explicit use of Singlish and the unsuspecting settings, these phrases humorously expose and capture (Althusser, 1971) different characteristics of Singaporeans, by targeting common thoughts and observed behaviors at traffic junctions.

![Figure 6](http://sklo.com/)

After her identity was made known in the press, journalists traced her to the website RCGNTN (pronounced recognition) (http://www.rcgntn.org/), which she ran and which had been showcasing local art, design and music by young people since 2009. Sam was convicted of committing mischief, and on May 8th, 2013, she was sentenced to three months of Day Reporting Order and 240 hours of community service. Under the Day Reporting Order, she had to check in regularly to a reporting center for supervision and counseling (Chong & Lim, 2013). Though virtually unknown to the public or in mainstream art circles before her arrest, in 2012 local English papers declared Sam one of the top 20 movers and shakers in the arts (Chia, 2012). Intrigued by the person behind the stickers and curious about the work of RCGNTN as it seemed related to elements of my research, I contacted Sam through the website in August 2012, to request interview for this research.

**Hans Tan**

I met Hans Tan at a presentation by the awardees of the 2012 Singapore President’s Design Award, on January 28, 2013. His *Spotted Nonya Collection* was one of nine winners for the design of the year award. *Nonya* is a feminine form for Peranakan Chinese, or Straits Chinese: descendants of Chinese immigrants in parts of Malaysia and Singapore who had been indigenized or assimilated into local communities. According to the *OED*, Peranakan also refers to indigenization of other ethnicities, usually through mixed marriages (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2005). A *Nonya* is also a Peranakan woman. Hans’ collection was a set of commercially produced Nonya porcelain ware that
had been overlain with vinyl dots, and then sandblasted to remove the parts of the glaze not covered by the dots. The outcome is a series of vessels with spotted designs (Figure 7). The first set of the Spotted Nonya was awarded Les Découvertes (Most Innovative Product Award) as part of the Now! Design à Vivre show at the fall Maison et Objet 2011 in Paris (DesignSingapore, 2012).

Figure 7. Hans Tan, Spotted Nonya collection, 2011, Sandblasted ceramic.

Note. From http://hanstan.net/ Copyright 2011 by Hans Tan. Used with permission.
Hans lectures in the Industrial Design department at the National University of Singapore, his alma mater. He also holds a Master’s degree from the Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands. In addition to his own design studio, Hans is also involved in other design companies in various capacities.

**Gek Lin Tan**

I knew Gek Lin from a church I used to attend, where she is known as a creative person and designer. We hardly spoke at church. My deepest impression of her then dates to 2003, when I found out from the papers that she was one of nine protégés of Singapore’s master potter and Cultural Medallion Awardee, Iskandar Jalil, whom he was grooming to take his place (Teo, 2003). After several years, we bumped into each other by accident and reconnected in January 2013.

Gek Lin is a freelance designer who took up ceramics during evening classes when she was in the UK in 1997, and started studying ceramics under Iskandar in 2003. Her works are exhibited and sold at commercial spaces such as galleries and bookstores. She also teaches ceramics at schools and through private lessons.

**Zul Othman aka ZERO**

I learned about Zul from Sam. Zul lectures at the LaSalle College of the Arts, one of two art colleges in Singapore, where he also received his Fine Arts degree. Prior to the degree, he studied design at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the other art college in Singapore, and worked as a designer. Zul has been variously referred to as a street artist, graffiti artist, and urban artist. He is part of the collectives ARTVSTS (pronounced Art-ivists) and RSCLS (pronounced Rascals). His works can be found in abandoned buildings
in Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, and commercial corporations in many parts of Asia. He is widely cited in the media about issues of street art, graffiti and urban art. He works with spray paint, paint, digital media, and other mixed media, covering a range of local and international social issues.

**Donna Ong**

Donna Ong works with mixed media, mainly in the area of installation, though she has also worked with sculpture, film and photography. Her earlier works, i.e. those from the second half of the 2000s, feature ensembles of objects and images put together in dreamlike and phantasmic settings. On several websites, Donna describes her work as a way to remember “what it felt like to be a child – to dream and invest in the imaginary, the fantastic, the impossible” (Ong, n.d.).

Donna has one degree in architecture and another in fine arts, both from the UK. She is a prolific artist who has done a number of local and overseas residencies, and is often cited as a contemporary artist in Singapore. Her name came up in a few conversations during arts events I attended while preparing for this project. Her works are exhibited and collected internationally, and she is represented by a number of local and international commercial galleries. She won a number of local and international scholarships and awards, including the 2009 National Arts Council Young Artist Award, and was nominated for the 2009 President’s Young Talents. I met her through mutual friends a few years ago, and even then she was a rising star.

**Michael Lee**
Michael Lee is another name that is frequently mentioned in conversations, presentations and publications about contemporary artists in Singapore. On his website, Michael describes himself as “an artist, curator and publisher based in Berlin and Singapore,” and classifies his works as Object, Diagram, Situation, Curation, and Text. His work includes prints, photography, mind maps, infographics, diagrams, objects, book sculpture, handmade books, film, installations, situations, architectural proposals/design/drawings/models, curating exhibitions and events, writings, and editorial projects. Michael explores philosophy, psychoanalytical theory, desire and space in his work. I contacted Michael via the email on his website and we spoke over Skype, as he was based in Germany during the period of this research.

Subjectivities & Practice

The following subsection specifically examines how artists in Singapore curate their own subjectivities and those of their practices, with the former offering a context for understanding the latter. I will first look at the different ways the artists in this study formulate their subjectivity.

Background and Narratives

All of the artists in this study play many different roles in the art and/or design fields. Hans and Michael curate and write. Hans, Zul, Gek Lin and Donna teach. Sam manages a site showcasing local art, design and music by young people. All of them also move across many different professional circles and social worlds, even across different countries. The art and creative work they do also change with each site.
The conversations vary in terms of the work participants do and the field(s) they are involved in. Participants also hold different attitudes toward their artist/designer identity. When taken collectively, some of the differences in attitudes appear to be differentiated by gender. All the men’s narratives tended to display independence and decisiveness in choosing art/design as their profession. Their choices seemed a natural extension of their interests and strengths. By contrast, all of the women’s narratives reveal that the artists went through periods of deliberation and resistance, as they rationalized the term ‘artist’ and its identities to themselves. It usually started with people around them applying the term ‘artist’ to them. While some of the women were aware of their strengths in art, they were less sure about assuming the identity of an artist. The women went through times when they tested and tried on the concept before accepting, embracing and working towards it. The women’s narratives also seem to suggest that there were more circumstances or push factors involved in their becoming artists, whereas the men’s narratives focus more on their personal decisions and actions. In Sam’s case, for instance, she never saw what she did as art, much less saw herself as an artist, until she was labeled one. After her case was reported and debated in the media, with the overwhelming outpouring of petitions and other support, she felt obligated to take on the honor, and now, to live up to its expectations.

The narratives from both genders also suggest that there is a slight difference between the responses to and adoption of designer and artist identities. Participants tend to assume designer identities more readily, as they entail less discussion and controversy: designer identities seem tied to specific definable tasks that they do, whether they get
paid or not. When participants talk about their work as designers, or as ceramicists for that matter, there also seemed to be clearer expectations and boundaries as to what it entails, the materials and resources used, and even the kind of working approaches and processes.

The adoption of an artist identity seems to indicate a change in status, though just what that involved differs across participants. Important to this study is that the understanding, expectations, and status of art and artist change across different specializations, and also at different points in the participants’ development. For example, Donna talked about how being an artist in this generation working with objects and installations required her to work with many different networks of people, at different locations. This, she noted, would have been different for earlier artists, given the developments in the infrastructure for the arts in Singapore.

One participant specifically wondered about the administrative use of artist as one’s vocation and its material implications, as if listing one’s occupation as “artist” would imply that art brings in more income than other sources, which unfortunately was not the case. Another participant also brought up how one’s independent or freelance status in certain arts vocations is not perceived as full-time employment, which has certain administrative implications, such as resident status for non-citizens.

In response to questions about how they started making art, most participants talked about their education in schools, personal aspirations, family influence, and significant events. Half of them did not have significant exposure to or training in art/design while they were in school. One did not have formal training in her current
field. For those who were influenced by their tertiary education, they were influenced by certain content, philosophy, and ways of working acquired during that period. However, negative experiences during tertiary education also had an impact, by strengthening the impetus to work in response to or reaction against those experiences. Those who did not have tertiary education in art would work in the field for a while, usually in their free time, learning on their own. In some of these cases, their learning was within the context of a community of learners/practitioners with whom they belong or identify. In these cases, participants would draw on their training, background, and experiences in other non-art fields, and on other perceived experts or role models, even as they learned about becoming artists.

In our conversations, participants talked about the approaches, processes, and type of work they engaged in. Though not explicitly, participants usually linked these to particular notions of artists in relation to their chosen field and the sites where they operate, and to the expectations those bring. Select snapshots of all the interviews are attached at Appendix B. These summary snapshots are provided to paint a more holistic view of each participant. The following two chapters will analyze issues on the coming to art in participants’ work through specific case studies and comparisons.
Chapter 5: The Case of the Sticker Lady and Street Art in Singapore

SKLO & ZERO

Among the participants, the most striking events that distinguish one’s work as art, and one as artist, have to be those for Sam Lo, SKL0, or the Sticker Lady. As the Sticker Lady incident touched on several issues in this research: such as the Singaporean identity, what makes something art, and what makes someone an artist; it presents itself as an interesting case study for this project.

This chapter examines the case of the Sticker Lady using Karen Barad’s notion of intra-activity (2007) to consider how different aspects act on one another, become intelligible in the co-constitution of entities, and how these constitute the knowing, being, and responding within the ongoing becoming of the phenomena. I constructed the case study from my interview with Sam, articles from newspapers, journals, online news sites, web blogs, and my personal understanding on the developments and context of Singapore. In particular, the chapter looks at the constitutive role of materials and space. In the later part of the chapter, the discussion also extends to street art in Singapore.

The follow section will first present some background about Sam, describe the events leading to her being charged, and the responses from different quarters and the existing structures that were enacted in the phenomenon. Specifically, the following section will focus on how the work came to be art. Using Barad’s ideas on the
posthuman, this section will also pay attention to the constituting role of physical and material entities.

**The Sticker Lady: Background, Events & Debates, Media & Background**

Sam said that she had never seen herself as an artist prior to the case,

I never really saw myself as an artist. Everyone knows that I think I didn’t see myself as one either. It’s only after this whole case came up that, people actually said you are an artist. They put art or vandalism. It became an idea in people’s heads that I was an artist, a street artist. I was like, I never set out, I didn’t….I never asked for it, so I just wanted to do something that was meaningful to me and put it out. I didn’t think, I didn’t put a term to it. I don’t even dare put myself as an artist because there are people out there who are really artists, who are really artists, and, it’s eh, the only way I can explain myself is someone who just wants to make things that are meaningful to herself, just want things to… to really make sense. That’s why I do things, like, interventions, in that sense. (personal communication, August 8, 2012)

Her initial involvement in art was through her contact with people she met who created artwork, design, music, and graffiti. They formed part of a “subculture” rather than “mainstream” art and design fields (personal communication, August 8, 2012). She started the RCGNTN website (http://www.rcgntn.org/) to showcase the work of these people whose art she thought had been marginalized by mainstream (arts) institutions. She sees her website as providing a platform and opportunity to showcase local creative workers, and as a site for engendering pride in local works, culture, and the Singaporean
identity in the face of a bias for foreign art and design. She uses a digital platform because she sees it as the medium that people from her generation are most familiar with. These are the people she wants to reach with her work. She describes herself as not having any background in art and design, but that she picked up whatever skills she needed along the way to set up and maintain the website. Though she does not see herself as an artist, she is part of the street art collective RSCLS started by Zul Othman, an often-cited street artist and another participant in the research.

When Sam created and used the stickers, she conceived of it as an intervention. She wanted to get people to think and respond. She speaks of street art as reclaiming spaces. Her work addresses what she sees as apathy and lack of dialogue on what it means to be a Singaporean (Sarvananda, 2013). Sam’s designation as a street artist in the public domain came about through a whole host of dynamically intra-acting factors. The deliberate selection of local colloquial, along with the design, materiality, and placement of the stickers, attracted much attention. Further, Sam pasted them in strategic locations on traffic lights in suburban shopping districts, the busy central business district, and historic civic district, for example near the Supreme Court and Parliament House.

The anonymity of the act, quirkiness of the text, and nature of the stickers intra-acting with various structures, disrupted people’s physical experience and expectation of the spaces. The nature and materiality of the stickers opened discussion about the nature and definition of art and vandalism. Her spray-painting work on roads and buildings was less publically debated. Her self-conscious and witty use of Singlish, usually seen as more informal and of lower status, and the direct way that the phrases address or capture
bystanders, disarm and turn a common daily situation into a comically self-deprecating act. Many people who saw the stickers say they made them smile (Goh, 2012). In cosmopolitan Singapore, where 1.5 million people (close to a third of the population) are foreigners, not counting permanent residents and new migrants, the Singlish phrases address Singaporeans but exclude people not familiar with it. The deliberate use of Singlish within these sites makes apparent the cultural and class topologies of the space.

The stickers first appeared and were reported in the press in November 21, 2011 (Wee, 2011). The media reported on them again in June 2, 2012, after they seemingly surfaced again in the first quarter of 2012 (Goh, 2012). A day after the newspaper reports, Sam was arrested at her home (Durai, 2012). In almost every report, the newspapers carried warnings from the Land Transport Authority which cited the punishment for vandalism. From our conversation, Sam seemed aware of the legal implications of her act but never expected the extent of public attention she got. The coverage by print, TV, and online media, along with her elusiveness and absence, elevated her to celebrity status. Except for a few photos the media managed to get hold of from the Internet, and her expression of thanks to her supporters on Twitter shortly after her arrest, Sam was absent from the public eye, fuelling the mystery behind the Sticker Lady. The name ‘Sticker Lady’ was picked up by the news media the following day of her arrest, after netizens use it in blogs and comments and started ‘Free Sticker Lady’ campaigns (see for example Lee, 2012; http://twibbon.com/support/free-sticker-lady; and http://izreloaded.blogspot.com/2012/06/singapore-sticker-lady-is-arrested-free.html).
Perhaps it was the familiarity of the phrases, or their tongue-in-cheek appeal, or the directed interpellation that triggered public interest, or perhaps it was simply due to the strategic locating of the work in public venues that garnered curiosity and attention. In any case, the event was widely debated. Members of the public, with different relations to and affinities for the matter, art, and/or the law, expressed their opinions in various news, print, online, and social media. The stickers, spray painting, and her arrest sparked a series of public and media debates on the nature of art, differences between art and vandalism, freedom of artistic expression, the need for impartiality of the law, who gets to define art, and why we could not just laugh and let the matter rest.

To understand the gravity of these phenomena, one needs to understand the history of vandalism and the Vandalism Act in Singapore. The Vandalism Act was passed in 1966, a year after independence, against a backdrop of heightened political tensions and activism in both the regional and international arenas. The event was set against the backdrop of the Cold War tensions, the Vietnam War and the rise of socialism in the region. Parliamentary debates on the Act highlighted the anti-social and anti-national nature of vandalism in the form of political writing, drawing, painting, and marking on public and private property, as well as the costs incurred in their removal (Chan, 2012). In modern day Singapore, vandalism is also antithetical to Singapore’s image as a clean and green city. The punishment for vandalism is a fine of up to S$2000 (around US$1,600) or imprisonment of up to three years, and mandatory caning of between three and eight strokes if the perpetrator is male and indelible substances are used (Singapore Attorney-General’s Chambers, 2013; Chan, 2012). Upholding the
Vandalism Act has also come to be seen as the immutability of the rule of law in Singapore, since Singapore (in)famously caned and jailed an 18-year-old American, Michael Fay, for vandalizing cars in 1994. In 2010, Swiss national Oliver Fricker was also caned and jailed for spray-painting graffiti on a Mass Rapid Transit subway car. In recent years, vandalism in Singapore has been commonly associated with illegal moneylenders or loan sharks, who vandalize borrowers’ or public property to shame and intimidate borrowers. Many of Sticker Lady’s supporters, arguing for her work to be seen as street art, petitioned for a lesser charge of “causing mischief,” which carries a fine of not more than S$1,000 (around US$800) (Feng, 2012). However, others warned that doing so risks trivializing her work (Huang, 2012).

Citing the law casts her as either a vandal or mischief-maker, legitimate or felonious, right or wrong, good or bad. Recalling past high profile cases on vandalism involving foreigners also conjures up the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ divide. Applying a different measuring instrument, seeing the act as art does not obliterate it totally from the eyes of law but hopefully reduces the criminal intent, and hence the charge.

Opinions about the stickers’ artistic merit were divided. Some members of the public, who wrote in to forum pages in newspapers or called in on radio chat shows, did not consider her work as art. Some felt that such judgments were subjective and should not be used as cause to lessen her sentence if indeed the act had broken the law. These people also felt that such positions could also set a precedent that could be open to future abuse. Some felt that the work is by nature transgressive, suggesting that it is both art and vandalism. From our conversation and Sam’s subsequently published interviews, she did
not conceive her work as an artistic act at the onset. The ensuing debates about the nature of her work did not stop different groups from using Sticker Lady and her work for their own goals. Her case was used to frontline concerns against censorship and freedom of expression, thus casting her as martyr for the state of art in the country.

At a townhall-type open discussion of the case organized by two theatre practitioners, and conducted in Sam’s absence, members of the arts community sanctioned her work as art. An organizer disagreed with how the matter had been presented in the media, in that the issue at hand was not just a cognitive dispute on whether the act was art. He wanted to move beyond the art versus vandalism discussion to issues of how the arts community should organize itself in its response (Danker, 2012). A veteran artist pointed to issues of attitudes and how the majority of citizens had misunderstood art through the ages, and as such the majority’s view was not a good gauge whether the act was art. During the meeting, the media was also blamed for the way it reported the case (Danker, 2012; Tan, 2012). This prompted a series of debates in the newspapers that questioned how art is defined, art circles’ claim to the definition of art, and the lack of critical discussion of the topic. The lack of critical discussion would in turn lead to the other extreme, where it would be left to the law enforcement agencies to decide what art was (Oon, 2012).

Nevertheless, the debates and the numerous petitions supporting her signaled an eagerness to accept the Sticker Lady and induct her not just into the mainstream art fraternity, but also to sanction her in all things Singaporean. Singapore’s main independent contemporary arts space, The Substation (http://www.substation.org/),
invited her to do a work on their façade soon after her arrest (see Figure 8). Likewise, Singapore’s main resort island, Sentosa (http://www.sentosa.com.sg/en/), commissioned her to do a series of works in celebration of National Day (Huang, 2013; Teoh, 2012) (see Figure 9). Sam’s work is thus set as alternate art, celebrated as Singaporean, and equated with good, clean, and now sanctioned, fun. In these various intra-actions, the drawing of lines as to what is in, what is part of ‘us’ and what is not, shift dynamically and contingently, co-constituting not only the Sticker Lady but the sponsoring organizations and their related spatiality as well.

While the stickers were open to a wide variety of responses, there was no frame of reference as to what they were initially. Or, in the language of Barad’s agential realism (2007), there were no immanent boundaries to begin with. Some thought they were part of a publicity gimmick in light of a past campaign12. The placement and siting of the stickers, and the selected Singlish phrases, invite particular responses and even respondents, each within a particular space, time, and material configuration. Even before there was any inkling of the origins of the stickers, the placement of the stickers on what is deemed public property enacted the material-discursive – in this case, the law. In every newspaper report, even before any person or intention was linked to the incident, the media regurgitated the punishment for vandalism (Wee, 2011; Goh, 2012). This marked the act as transgressive right from the beginning. When the person behind the act was arrested, the media soon traced Sam to the RCGNTN website and her involvement with

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12 Singapore postal company, Singapore Post, ran a publicity campaign in January 2010 for a post-box art competition that involved a masked man openly defacing post boxes with graffiti. Members of the public were upset at the supposed vandalism. The publicity campaign backfired and Singapore Post was criticized for sending out the wrong message.
arts and design organizations, including the new National Art Gallery (Durai, 2012). An online petition urged the authorities to recognize her work as art and change her charge from vandalism to miscellaneous offences, or to public nuisance (Lee, 2012; Choy, 2012). It garnered more than 15,000 supporters by the time it closed. The follow up newspaper report referred to Sam as a “young artist,” and associated her work and arrest with the ongoing debate on graffiti as vandalism or art. The application of art to the situation thus appears to be an intra-action of association, approximation, description, and sedimentation over reiterative production. Sam was associated with art through her links with various aspects of the art and design scene, and through the reiterative description, categorization, and production of her sticker intervention as art, even though she had never exhibited or had a portfolio before the case:

However because of this new title that people have put on me….I feel if so many people associate me with that, and also appreciate my style, I have to live up to that, right?....I know I don’t have to, but if so many people actually recognize it and like it, that means everybody like what I do, and I think this is actually probably what I have to do, it’s probably…and I enjoy doing it, people like it, why not do it? And that’s the direction I’ve been doing. I’ve been trying to embrace this whole title a lot more now. (personal communication, August 8, 2012)

Even though the act was initially conceived as an intervention, rather than an artistic act per se, Sam was quickly labeled an artist. With the recognition and overwhelming support, Sam seems obliged to continue with the label.
The name Sticker Lady captures the material of her work and her gender, two very important aspects of the phenomena that differentiate this case from other vandalism acts. The focus on stickers emphasizes and reiterates the fun and temporariness of her work, as opposed to her other spray-painting works that are indelible in the eyes of the law. The emphasis on the sticker element is thus not only strategic but also indicates what people find memorable about the episode. Her gender gives her immunity from punishment by caning. The classed connotation of the word lady, and its discrepancy with her tomboyish image, stretches the limit of the label and person, while at the same time it brings them together in a strategic pivot. Through the nickname Sticker Lady, both the work and person were mutually and co-constitutively marked, and yet reconstituted as inseparable entanglement, through the relations formed in the phenomena, or in Barad’s words, relata-in-phenomena (2007).

The evocation of the law with every mention of the act defined the act, and is itself productive of the phenomena. The marking of the act as vandalism, mischief, or public nuisance, and how the act came into intelligibility through the intra-action of the law, form the crux of the various extensive discussions on the matter. The issue of whether the work is art was used by different groups of supporters to co-constitute the act in relation to the law. Supporters of the Sticker Lady had argued for her work as art in the hope that it would reduce her sentencing. However, others had warned that the lesser charge of mischief likewise diminishes the impact and intention behind the work. Still others had argued that any petition should be to change the law in regard to artistic work rather than to ask for a lesser charge. Hence, though the law criminalizes the work, to a
large extent it also gives meaning to and even decides the gravity and potency of the work.

The boundaries of the case and the constituents of the phenomena are constantly and dynamically redrawn and reconstituted, as different factions weigh in on the debates. Freedom of artistic expression; the integrity and robustness of the content and practice of art; the identity, unity, and cohesiveness of the arts scene; personal and civic freedom and space; and the rule of the law are just some of the different ways the phenomena had been differentiated. While Barad (2007) argues for the necessary entanglement between the ethical, ontological, and epistemological, their linking also presents tensions; these tensions generated the debates about the case. While the work is intended to be transgressive, the full extent of the punishment by law will hurt the person and her work, as well as cripple the cause of artistic freedom. The case of the Sticker Lady as phenomena in its entanglements and becoming reveals various forms of co-constitution. Yet ironically, the co-constitutions present themselves or become differentiated in the processes in the form of exclusive and seemingly opposing positions – vandalism versus art, us versus them.

**Boundaries Ma(r)king – Co-constitution**

In the analysis of the materialization of the Sticker Lady, I looked at actions of various material aspects of her work, her gender, sites where her works cohere, circulate and were contested. Contestations from her supporters, the arts community, the media and legislation constantly shifted the boundaries and meanings of her works and her status. In the same debates, her works and status, once enacted as objects, are also
subjects acting upon other agents, implicating definitions and limits of art, legislation, and the institutions that exercise these. This does not mean that these ever shifting subject-object positions are dichotomous in nature. The actions suggest complex forms of co-constitution that continue to be entangled and reconfigured in the ongoing becoming of the phenomenon, to the point where the two are symbiotic.

In the phenomenon of the Sticker Lady, the debates on where the various lines of demarcation are drawn outweigh discussions on the purpose, nature and content of the act itself. The demarcations of art, legislation, artist, vandal, art, vandalism, activism, public, civic, us/them, have physical and material effects on people directly involved, and on the spatiality and practice. These include the space and practice of (street) art(s), scope and extent of public debate and engagement in issues of public concern, interpretation and exercising of the law. The casting of Sticker Lady as a street artist did not depend as much on the nature of art (whatever it may be), and the content of the works, as it did on the effects where distinctions were drawn.

Though practitioners and supporters of street art lament the restrictions in space that curtail public art practices, there is a connection between it and vandalism laws. For example, the well-known British street artist Banksy, was wanted by the New York authorities for vandalism. The cat-and-mouse games between the elusive Banksy and the authorities only fuel the aura of the artist and value of the work. While vandalism legislation outlaws street art, it also helps to define street art’s subversive and/or activist edge. In Singapore, working within spaces provided for street art legitimizes particular forms of artistic practice and their practitioners.
Streets Art – Tensions and Contradictions

By comparison, Zul lives and even thrives on some of these tensions. As a graffiti artist, he sees negotiating spaces as significant to his practice. He jokes about how public spaces in Singapore are cut up and where different parts come under different agencies:

“the grass belongs to National Parks Board,… the longkang (drain in Malay) beside it belongs to the Public Utilities Board,… once you reach the bus-stop, it’s the Land Transport Authority’s, but before that, it’s town councils’… so which is yours?… So what is public space?” (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Given the restrictions on space to work, Zul shared how his graffiti artist counterparts in other Asian cities had questioned the opportunity to practice graffiti art in Singapore. He acknowledges these constraints, but he also points to them that this is what set his work apart. Unlike in other cities, Zul points out that in Singapore there is no “wild abandonment”: “we have to strategize…you have to contextualize your work, you have to be sophisticated about your practice…you need some restraint. Restraint actually gives you certain new insights” (personal communication, January 30, 2013).

From his early days as a graphic designer, to graffiti/street artist, to fine art student, to current art college lecturer, Zul’s graffiti/street work always seemed to place him apart. As he traverses across these various spaces, institutions, and demarcations, he finds himself confronted with different norms and expectations. Even while identifying as a graffiti and street artist, his other paintings have found their way into the Singapore Art Museum’s collection. As artist working on themes on consumerist issues, he has also been commissioned by private corporations to create works. He underscores the
importance of practice rather than demarcations of spaces where he works. He went back
to get his fine art degree not so much to improve his work but to honor his family,
because getting a degree was an issue of family pride in Asia.

When he first started creating works, Zul “really didn’t call it an artistic practice.”
He “just wanted to paint and do art”,

So me and my fellow NAFA friends started the collective. That was when I
started my own artistic practice. I really didn’t call it an artistic practice…I just
wanted to paint . . . .and do _art. But of course, you know, being young, the only
place you could express yourself was the streets. Then you put things on the
street, you paint on big pieces of paper and leave it on the road lying down like
that. (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

He does many different things, such as painting, sculpting, and making props and
objects as part of his practice. He sees practice as reiterative learning and making.
Whereas a career marks out specific levels of attainment, there is no such schema for
practice. An artist constantly learns, relearns, and practices and re-practices. It is a
process of (re)discovery where the artist is the artwork and everything else a byproduct of
the practice. He practices and makes art to get “peace of mind,” to articulate his opinions
and those of others in the face of current issues (personal communication, January 30,
2013). To him, the quality of an art practice is more important than what field the practice
is in, or how the field defines or what it expects of the practice. The work is thus defined
by its creation and phenomena, and the quality of actions and relations rather than
predetermined categories.
Figure 8. Sam Lo's larger than life sticker at The Substation, 2012.

Note: From http://skl0.com/ Copyright by SKL0. Used with permission.
Zul’s first access into the Singapore Art Museum was when he and his collective ARTVST were invited as intervening artists in 2004. Though their works were not part of the island's National Day celebrations.

Note. From http://skl0.com/ Copyright 2013 by SKL0. Used with permission.
the main exhibition, as intervening artists they were invited to make works in response to the main exhibition “SENI – Home Front” (*seni* means art in Malay). He mentions putting money into his art and his willingness to invest in it, as long as it educates people on certain issues and causes. He comments how when he started out, there were very few resources, particularly books, on street art. When he was researching street art as a student, books on the topic were like “picture books” with very little discussion or commentary. He notes that Banksy’s renown came after “they made money out of him.” He brings up the irony of how graffiti art, a fringe movement, has been used by commercial companies for branding purposes and to sell their products (See Figure 10). The increasing popularity of street art has also seen these works gaining wider acceptance. Sam, after her case, was commissioned by several agencies to make art (See Figures 8 and 9). She also issued a set of what she calls a “street pack” of her signature stickers. The traffic crashed her website and the stock was sold out within the first ten minutes of its online launch.
Figure 10. Some work done by Zul and his artist collectives. Left: RSCLS' work at the Olympus Graffiti Battle, 2012, where they also judges. Right: ARTVST was invited for live painting at carmaker Citroen's Showroom Opening.

Note. Image on left from http://antz-gks.blogspot.sg/2013/02/rscls-x-cathay.html Copyright 2013 by ANTZ. Image on right from http://artvsts.blogspot.sg/ Copyright by ARTVSTS. Used with permission.

Figure 11. Zul Othman, Pseudo Branding Series, 2010.

Note. From http://www.zerostarrfighter.blogspot.sg/ Copyright 2010 by Zul Othman.
Zul also brings up issues of generating value through patronage, support and recognition. He notes that collectors in Indonesia and Malaysia are willing to spend money on younger artists as well as older masters. He laments how certain established artists and even masters are not supported or widely recognized in Singapore. He gives the example of performance artist Lee Wen, who is widely recognized in his field and documented in histories of performance art around the world. He points out, “we need to give credits to our artists....we need to put them on par with the rest of the artists” (personal communication, January 30, 2013).

Different forms and sites of art create their own subjectivities of the audience. In the accounts of graffiti and street art, we see how marginality and fringe status can be appropriated and commodified (Huggan, 2001; Spivak 1993) in a marketplace of subjectivities disguised as products (we think) we need. Commodification of street art invests something that is offered freely to all with exclusivity, ownership and desirability. While the physical or visual representation of street art can be bought and sold, how do you price activism and subversion, the motivations underlying street art? How do you price freedom? In the exchange logic of the market place, what do we give in exchange to buy or sell a piece of subversion?

Over time, while bringing recognition and even endorsement for street artists and the organizations involved, it also reconfigures the spatiality of the practice of street art and its meaning in Singapore. In Zul’s instance, the contradictory positionality(s) can prove productive for one’s practice as he works with, and sometimes against the issues, tensions and contradictions of the conditions. In his practice, he constantly reconfigures
the subject-object positioning by making transparent and querying some of these issues, and their lived contradictions (See Figure 11).

The problem with institutional demarcating of spaces is how people begin to look to these and rely on them as conditions of practice. As from the case of the Sticker Lady, legislation was evoked in order to describe, make intelligible, and position the works in different ways. While the arguments by different factions demonstrate openness in the interpretation and application of legislation, the question is how practice(s) can be otherwise configured and defined apart from the law. How might different actions reconfigure the phenomena differently? What actions would it take? What openings might there be for differential agential in entanglement in/of phenomena? Some of Sticker Lady’s supporters have called for a change of vandalism laws to take account of street art. Others called for a clearer articulation of art. Still others, like Lithuanian street artist, Ernest Zacharevic, saw this as an opportunity in his work in Singapore, to explore the confusion in the legal system and people’s minds over what constituted vandalism and street art (Toh, 2013). While ambiguity causes anxiety, all these events also suggest that the indeterminacy, the lack of resolution, could also be a more productive and generative space.
Chapter 6: Coming to Art, Being Artists and Responding to the Global Cultural Economy

Overview

Using aspects of grounded theory and Adele Clark’s situational analysis (2005), this Chapter discusses my observations and analysis of the work of the participants in the study. The Chapter begins by outlining the analytical methods; subsequent discussions are organized using themes that I drew from the data in relation to ideas from Barad (2007), Foucault (1978) and Appadurai (1990). I will then look at the formation of notions of art and practice in Singapore, and the relationships between physical material, discourse and exchanges in globalization. The discussion covers notions of Singapore as place, the effects of space, and issues on culture and ethics.

Method

The discussion presented here was derived from three main stages of reiterative data sorting, interpretation, and analysis. Interviews transcripts from were first coded and analyzed using grounded theory. During this first stage, images of the participants’ work were analyzed in terms of the materials, techniques, visual qualities, and content. In the second stage, the coded transcripts and emerging themes were examined using situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), in terms of the discourses enacted. The artworks were also examined in relation to the discourses. At the third stage, the interpretations and preliminary analyses were analyzed again using ideas from Barad (2007), Foucault
(1978) and Appadurai (1990). These three stages were neither strictly sequential nor were they mutually exclusive. They were layered as such so that greater attention was given to the interviews and other data at the initial stages before applying pre-constituted categories, discourses, and a priori theories.

**Coding**

After the interviews were transcribed, I coded the transcriptions using qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA 11. Coding here refers to describing the conversations part by part. The codes, or in this case descriptors, describe the content, quality of expressions, and in some cases, key words that were used, along with possible purpose(s) underlying parts of the conversation. During the process, I also recorded memos on reflections, elaborations, and specific examples of what the descriptors cover. Examples of descriptors are professional subjectivity, subjectivity in relation to others, cultural subjectivity, culture, description of process, description of work, context, questions, influence, education, beliefs, ethos, concepts in work, function, role, aesthetics, materials, communication, definition(s), boundaries, categorizing, Singapore, place, situating, space, money, selling, buying, and time.

Some codes form clusters of descriptors – such as *place, situation, and space, or money, selling, and buying* – rather than individual ones. Similarly, descriptors such as description of work, aesthetics, and materials are not exclusive, and many overlap. I came up with a few initial descriptors while reviewing the transcripts, and progressively added more descriptors during the coding process. Each transcript was coded separately as the purpose of coding is to sieve out similar content across the transcripts for comparison and
analysis. Due to the focus of the study and the questions posed, the most frequently used descriptors are professional subjectivity, subjectivity in relation to others, place, situation, and space, and description of process.

**Analysis and Discussion**

The discussion in this section will bring together the various stages of interpretation and analyses. The analyses will focus on issues of intelligibility and subjectivity in boundary ma(r)king, situating, ethics, and the art market.

**Subjectivity as Boundary Ma(r)king Practices**

In the previous Chapter’s case study on the Sticker Lady, I looked at how various physical and material aspects, including the physical sites of her work, generated interests about her case in online and print media. The art and persona of Sticker Lady were co-constituted by a host of factors such as contestation over public spaces, public opinion and debate, and legislation on vandalism. The debates about her work using existing discourses in law relied on a series of binary categories that also co-constituted the work as art. The case shows how the work can easily fall into either category of the legal line that separates them. It also illustrates the notion in Karen Barad’s agential realism that there is no immanent boundary: boundaries are drawn through the actions of different entities creating relations with others in phenomena (2007).

In the case of the other participants, though categorizing of their work as art was less controversial, what that means differs for each participant, his or her work, and the fields in which he or she is situated. Equally hard to determine is the labeling and categorizing of artists. From participants’ conversations, the way they talk about
themselves and their work indicates that there is no singular and fixed boundary to art and/or artist as concept, practice, and spatiality. Even for different individuals, their relationships to these concepts and the form of the actualization shifts dynamically, due to changes in physical-discursive conditions. These may include changes in the materials and processes used in the making, exhibiting, disseminating, and selling the work, and even in the circulation of the terms and concepts of art, artist, and practice. In this chapter, I examine my conversations with participants to understand how different aspects of art become apparent and the participants relate to these understandings. In the analysis of our conversations, I am interested in how art comes to be known, distinguished and valued as such.

Participants typically discuss their work with reference to areas such as materials; resources; processes; education; work ethos; philosophies; beliefs; influences; established and/or popular concepts; modes or practices in their fields, communities, social, and institutional structures; physical and psychical space; and people, such as family, collaborators, audience, clients, and critics.

**Coming to Art**

Five of the six participants had university education in their current fields or a related field. Two were only clear about the nature of what they were studying and their art/design vocation choices during their years in university. Three of the five also had Masters degrees. Of these, three had part, or all of their training in Europe. Three of the five did art or design in schools when they were in upper secondary (i.e. 15 to 16-year-old, or equivalent of US 9th to 10th Grade), pre-university, or equivalent (i.e. 17 to 18-
year-old, or equivalent to US 11th to 12th Grade). Of these three, two had wanted to pursue art or design since they were in school at a younger age, though their understanding of what that entailed also developed over time. The rest had very scant recollection of art lessons in their primary and secondary schools. In considering how participants come to art, and vice versa, I was interested in how participants perceive art, and how art materialized in their experiences and different settings, and how they know art as art.

For at least three of the participants, their contact with art started early when they were young. For two participants, responses, expectations, and/or support from families also play a part in formulating their relationships to what they do. For Zul, it was his exposure to crafts and drawing at home since a young age, and people’s response to his drawings, that encouraged him. Even though he was punished for drawing in class, his teachers also affirmed of the quality of Zul’s drawings in the process.

… my Mom has always been [doing crafts] … and I saw my uncle drawing portraits, … I saw it as a source of inspiration… I grew up drawing a lot of comics, cartoons. It’s a natural progression. Of, course [a lot of] practice. Started off like picture books, then I’ll take carbon paper and trace it out. Mainly a lot of it is self-taught… self practice. And then after high school, I mean like, even in high school, I was always caught for always doodling in my textbooks… I remember my first ever sketchbook. It’s a plain book. was confiscated by my discipline.

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13 In Singapore national school curriculum, art is compulsory for the first eight years of schooling from primary to low secondary levels (i.e. Grade 1 to 8). Beyond these years, most schools also offer art to students as one of the subjects in the GCE ‘O’ or ‘A’ level examination. Opting to do art would indicate some level of early interest, aptitude and/or choice.

14 High school in Singapore refers to secondary schools, for ages 13 – 16 or 17, or Grades 7 – 10.
master... when they confiscated my textbooks and my sketchbooks, . . eh, I think he started passing it around, and it became something that they like to look at (laughs)...I started drawing, started doodling in my textbooks again. They’re not going to confiscate my textbooks. . . (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Though Donna’s father was an artist, she only started taking art during her pre-university education. She describes how she recognized her strengths through her engagement with media and materials during that period,

I must say I was quite bad when I first started. I couldn’t really draw. I’ve never done drawing before. I’ve never drawn from life. It was a struggle at first. I went for many, many life-drawing classes just to build up sketching habits...how to draw properly...I try painting. But then I went into sculpture, and actually I felt that sculpture was my forte...It just felt very natural to me the first time I touched it. I felt I knew what to do. It felt very natural. (personal communication, January 28, 2013)

In Zul’s case, for example, what was intended as punishment can also be a moment of affirmation and a memory of pride, and even of continual defiance. For Donna, the differentiation between different media came after a period of handling them, and the connected experiences of touch, creating, and self.

For participants whose university training was directly related to their current field, their frequent references to what they learn, and to their university experiences suggest that there were aspects of their training that established notions for them of what vocation in the field entails, or does not entail. For half the participants, their university
learning provided some form of practical simulation for their subsequent work in the field. Hans, who had no background in design prior to university, only found out what design was at university,

I only learn about design when I got into NUS [National University of Singapore] because I didn’t have any background in art or design or anything like that…I just chose it without knowing anything. It just looks interesting because at that time the course was advertised as a course that has not only design but...also encompasses aspects of engineering and business…two aspects…I was interested in a bit more...For me, design wasn’t clearly defined then, so…I just took the plunge and I applied…I really learnt about what design was when…school started…I don’t know, I think it was a gradual process throughout my years of study. But I think it was when I was in my third or fourth year that it was quite certain that it was this something that I want to do. (personal communication, February 14, 2013)

Hans refers to his undergraduate and graduate studies as his formative years. He acknowledges that there is no one way to design and that the process is different for every individual. Personally, he found that the act of reading itself, regardless of what he reads, helps him in the gestation process. Another important experience was his Masters studies in Hanover, Netherlands,

I was in the Netherlands for my Masters program. I think that was the time when…we were kind of, in a way forced to anchor ourselves, in our beliefs…because…in the course, they did a lot of contextual and conceptual
design. And our teachers were practicing artists, practicing designers and critics and historians, so we were really pushed to find our own identity and beliefs. So you know, for once it wasn’t about being, apathetic to other people, you know how we were trained in typical industrial design. It was…a lot about what we, as individuals believe in…we would be questioned about it. Because sometimes when we were proposing some ideas and concepts, because of this, because we believe in this and this, we weren’t allowed to change our beliefs but we can change our ideas. Sometimes because of the idea…we would change our…brief to fit the idea, formulate our opinions to fit the idea…but in those formative years, really we were…grilled. We would be questioned, “how come three weeks ago, this was something you believe in, and you were trying to find a way out a solution in this area, so what have you done this week? This doesn’t, fit into what your belief system is and what you’re passionate about.” So, yeah, some ways because in Europe, the sense of self-identity is very strong and especially because some of our teachers were artists as well, so that helps, that kind of inevitably got instilled into students, or at least into me. So that was what I felt strongly about. So it was bad that I started, kind of like asking, myself. So as a designer or artist or as a person, what is my mark? What sets me apart from other people? You know? It’s only when I can, I wouldn’t say, answer that, it’s only when I’m pursuing that, when I can make things that are new and…have a communications story with my whole body of work. So it’s not only pieces that I design but when everything comes together, it kind of gives a new perspective holistically.
That was what I was searching for. And I believe there was something I will always be moving towards, searching. (personal communication, February 14, 2013)

Over the years, Hans has also developed his own approach to design. He uses design as a medium to ask “fundamental questions”, redesigning concepts of objects, as opposed to designing objects per se, so as to question and change “fixed perceptions” of our daily lives. He describes his design as “contextual” and “self-aware” (personal communication, February 14, 2013).

However, the agreement or convergence of external and/or personal factors is not unidirectional, nor does it necessarily lead to corresponding events. The participants’ coming to art is still situated within each individual’s larger social-cultural context. From the participants’ accounts, conflicts between different aspects can also open up spaces for deeper realizations, new insights, and altered ways of relating to concepts and practice of craft and self.

Despite her perceived strengths in art, particularly in sculpture, positive feedback from teachers and peers, and positive external affirmations such as winning school prizes, Donna first opted to pursue architecture in university, as it seemed to offer better career prospects. However, in spite of the often touted similarities between art and architecture, it was the differences between the two that made her understand the nature and requirements of both fields, as well as her own strengths and subjectivity in relation to them.
There was a friend who used to do art with me in college, at A levels, and we used to be in the art room together a lot…[once] she met me and she asked me what I was doing. And I said, “Oh, I’m doing architecture.” And then, she said, “Oh, how can you do architecture, because art’s your ethos. It’s your spirit, you know, it’s who you are.” And that really stuck with me as well. When I was doing architecture, even though I tried really hard, I realize that you really need to have a talent for it and that I could try really hard and I have some affinity towards it. But I wasn’t like super talented the way that some of my other friends were. And in art, it came very naturally/ architecture was always a struggle, you know, to get anywhere. I realize that there are things that you are better suited for and things that you’re not. (personal communication, January 28, 2013)

While participants accept many aspects and external expectations of their work, there were also instances of dissonance in terms of their engagement and relationships with particular physical and discursive materials, ideas, processes, expectations, tutors, peers, audiences, and/or clients. In architecture school, Donna discerned the different ways artists and architects engaged with materials, processes, and outcomes, and why they did so, and she weighed her performance in these against established forms and standards.

I was struggling in architecture. I was not naturally suited to being practical. Architecture is a very practical subject. It’s about finding solutions. It’s about seeing things in a certain way, you know, we have to be creative but also extremely practical and sensible as well. And I was not a naturally sensible person
and certain things in architecture I just found difficult to deal with, whereas art
was as natural as breathing. It felt easy sometimes when I did it, …it was always
very easy to draw, and enjoyable as well. (personal communication, January 28,
2013)

In Donna’s accounts, she emphasizes certain elements of naturalness, ease, and
even enjoyment as criteria, with her body as the main instrument, to measure her
understanding and relating to materials, processes, and objects in the different fields. In
her engagement with sculpture, there seems to be an apparent seamlessness between her,
the physical materials, knowing what to do, and doing it. Along with this connectedness
and oneness, the phenomena exhibits potential and dynamism in the becoming. When it
comes to architecture, there is not only distance but also clear demarcations of what
architecture is, and by that same act of differentiating, clear, and almost antithetical,
subject position(s).

In the accounts of Hans’ and Donna’s training, both recall tasks and situations
intended to prepare students for similar encounters in the profession, as if through some
form of collusion between academia and industry. But is it preparation or perpetuation of
dominant social structures? In certain narratives, the training emphasizes particular types
of content, resources, processes or methods of using materials, particular values and
standards, and specific ways of perceiving, speaking, relating, and evaluating. In short,
situated behavior and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) (re)produced
pedagogized identities (Atkinson, 1995, 2001, 2002; Bernstein, 2000) and predetermined
subjectivities.
Though Zul knew he wanted to be an artist since youth, his first training in art school was in design, having been influenced by others’ insistence on the need to secure a livelihood. After a few years of working as a designer and graffiti artist, he went back to art school to get a degree in fine art, mainly to make his family proud\textsuperscript{15}. Having exhibited in museums and galleries and worked with major museum curators, he thought he had the requisite experience. When he applied for a fine arts degree program, he was told to start at the final year of the diploma program, before proceeding to the degree program, as the college deemed his experience as ‘not enough’. To add to this, he was bewildered by the conflicts between his experiences and what he was expected to learn in art school.

…my first six months of fine arts…because before that I was self-taught, you know, \textit{I} studied design, I had a lot of issues pertaining to…maybe being in an institution. Because I’ve always been working on my own, doing whatever I wanted to do, and then now, you know, lecturers come to you and give you all these references, come up with all these names, these terminologies, academic terminologies. Then my work changed. I see less of my \textit{graffiti} characters. I try to do it, works that I don’t feel anything…even at that age, I was already like twenty-five or something, maybe being in a new environment…it was like, everyone \textit{was} looking, wah, the canvases look so clean \textit{laughs}, back then, the trend was like, minimal, even the references that they gave, you know, like Yves Klein \textit{laughs}...and all these contemporary modern art people. All my references

\textsuperscript{15} In Asian societies where education is valued highly, one’s academic qualifications are often a source of family pride. Zul was the first person in his family to have a diploma qualification (in design) and the first to get a degree. In Singapore, diplomas are awarded at institutions of higher learning, such as art colleges and polytechnics, where the emphasis is more vocational.
for myself were like graffiti artist, Banksy [laughs]. All the ones I see on the street that I got from the internet…so it became quite difficult for me. Then for six months, I did work which I wasn’t really happy about…I tried to make it look contemporary. I don’t really understand what the hell was contemporary [laughs] you know they always keep talking contemporary, “It’s not contemporary.” Is it? Okay...after the 6 months...my second semester, then I went back to my old works. This time round [I can say I] played by my own rules, I tell my lecturer, these are my own references, you may not know them because you are stuck in this institution for so long. At the end of the day, I mean, honestly I feel they should pay me for educating them, because I bring something new, cos, at the end of the day, I am contemporary, I am now. I am present. Street art and graffiti is rising in its popularity. Back then, Banksy wasn’t even famous when I mentioned to them...You know, I mean, it became like, so they accepted me and my works as part of it. (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

In the above narratives, we see how different notions of art materialize and are contested at different sites, levels, and modalities – for admission to the art school; in the language, vocabulary, definitions, and lesson content; in the focus, standards, materials and resources; and on the interaction between students and teachers. At the separation of every sliver of significance, one falls through the cracks into preexisting subject positions, usually at opposing ends of the chasm. The conflictual notions of nonlinear time and contemporariness set up in his fine arts lessons also disrupted Zul’s understanding of his experiences of work, and of his achievements over time in different
spaces. Prior to his fine arts course, Zul had worked as a graphic designer and graffiti artist, and exhibited at the Singapore Art Museum and Shanghai. Though the assignment of subject positions according to preexisting categories and structures of work challenged Zul for a while, Zul eventually defied them to reclaim the physical and psychological space, and the autonomy to define where, when, and how he worked and his choice of materials. He also began to draw distinctions between his practice outside school and what he did in school.

For Zul the value of school is in learning itself, particularly learning through the interactions with peers, rather than in what is taught. Zul feels that the quality of one’s practice is more important than one’s paper qualification though he admits that the evaluation of visual work is subjective with no one definitive standard, and differs from individual to individual. Based on his conversation, Zul values the quality of the visual as well as the quality of the work’s engagement with the viewers, as well as and the “craft”, skills and skillfulness that go into the work. He disagrees with work that “relegates” viewers through excessive intellectualizing:

…mainly being Asian I guess, there’s a lot of craftwork, a lot of craft, and, to me personally, to me, an artist is strong in his craft as well. You know, you need to paint well, you must paint well. You know, I mean, yeah, it’s subjective because some kind of artwork, you look at it and you don’t really understand what it is about. Now…some…dissertation about the work is so much longer than the artwork itself. The artwork says nothing. Then, to me, it’s like, simple, fine, you want to be an artist or you want to be a critic or art historian? You want to write
about art or you want to make art? Because at the end of the day, you’re not going to put your dissertation beside your artwork, because no one is going to read. You know, that’s why I appreciate street art, street art or graffiti art. I think it’s more grounded/ You know, some of it, yes, a lot of times it’s about making things nicer to look at but there are a lot of street artists who are evolving now in terms of the way they conceptualise the work. It’s about space, negotiating public space, you know, negotiating urban spaces. That itself is the concept by itself. Getting up, they are building something. Even if someone cannot appreciate the concept they are trying to say, at least they appreciate the beauty because not everyone is not trained. Not everyone knows. Wah, you title your work…[using big terms and artists’ names]…Somebody goes into the gallery. Who is [this person]...I mean it relegates people…When it comes to street art and graffiti art, you hate it, you love it. At least no one is indifferent to it. But sometimes a lot of art you see in the gallery, people get very indifferent to it. Going to the space itself takes a lot of [effort].... (personal communication, January 30, 2013)

As a graffiti artist, Zul is no stranger to the demarcation of physical spaces – which ones are off limits, and which are open canvases. However what is permissible to one form of art is also inhospitable to others. Zul highlights how physical-discursive details – such as relying on borrowed discourses to title a work, the physical distance and space of art gallery and museums, and those spaces’ imbued discourses – can be just as segregating as the way they mark the subjectivity of both those who respond to it and those who do not. In his work, Zul hopes to be able to connect with people physically and
visually through the immediacy of the physical location of his works, and the excitement of gestural paint strokes.

Conversations with participants further suggest that though formal art / design education was influential to some of their personal and professional development, both directly and indirectly, formal tertiary education was not the sole source and mode of how they learn. Beyond formal education, all participants shared how they learn through creating, handling materials, reading, observing, feedback from friends and critics, training and/or interacting with established practitioners, experience, research and reflection through their own work.

Gek Lin first started in ceramics through some classes in between her formal studies. Some time later, after she left her advertising job, she reconnected with Iskandar Jalil who had taught her in school, and began learning ceramics with him. When Gek Lin talks about working with clay, she personifies clay as alive, autonomous and sensorial. Working with clay is sometimes like collaboration between two equal partners; other times, it’s akin to dance, meditation, retreat, suspension, succumbing, or just “coming home”. To touch the clay, getting to know it, playing with it, is to enjoy it. She sees creating as an organic process where doing precedes ideas, and where the process is led by the dynamic character – the feel, texture, and malleability – of the clay. To her, creating in clay is a dynamic process of experimenting with the material, and responding to and with it. Hence, for Gek Lin, the process, that oneness with her materials, skills and techniques, form, actualization, and mind, is the art, if not the becoming of art.
When I do pottery…sometimes, when you have no idea what you wanted to, you can just throw balls, cups, very utilitarian stuff, but which requires the skill…if you have the skill, you can still form something out of it…And that’s the nice thing. It’s like coming back home, you know. It’s coming home to basics. I can still do this. If you have an idea what you want to do, you can use the technique that you know and create whatever you want. But at that point, when you don’t really know what you want, as an end, but you know you have the skill of throwing, whatever, you can still do these. Of course, people will say, these are utilitarian, you know? But there’s a very heartwarming thing when you know you are holding something, that you created for your every day uses. So in that, sense, if you have the technique, you will be able to come up with something….

[I] think about ways of doing…develop technique, sometimes [I] come across some way of doing [that] look quite good, but can turn out quite different too…I guess I’d like to try to think of ways of doing and then see how to [develop] the techniques…either add on another technique…It’s like trying out. You know when you experiment with something, experiment with the material, you see what it can do and from there, you realize you can do this, therefore this is something I can do. It looks like, it comes across as something else and therefore I merge it with another form that I’ve done. (personal communication, March 25, 2013)

However, from Gek Lin’s teaching experience, she also recognizes that the tactile engagement does not come naturally for everyone.
Maybe it’s to do with the fact that…the process of it, the making of it, that’s enjoyable. It’s the material itself, when you touch it, you enjoy touching it, working on it, and, you must like that, you see. Some people who do not enjoy this, they just want an end product, I think it’s very hard for them. But if you enjoy the process, the whole experience is a lot more, enjoyable. I’m trying to recall the people I have taught, and how some of them cannot understand.

“Hey, what am I doing this?”

“What is this pinching technique?”

“What for?”

“What for?”

“What am I doing?”

“What am I getting out of it?”

But if you try telling them, “Touch the clay, feel it, enjoy the characteristics of it, and then see how you can interact with that.”…But, it’s very hard, they cannot, maybe they’re just not interested. (personal communication, March 25, 2013)

Gek Lin observed that it was not easy to teach a particular technique and then expect students to know what and how to create using that technique. It was easier to teach how to make certain objects or forms, such as frogs or fish, rather than getting them to create whatever they wish with the technique. Gek Lin had at first wondered if this difficulty has to do a cultural mindset that tends to focus on outcomes; however, she also recognized similar issues with expatriate students she taught.
Michael was a communications major with interests in psychoanalysis and visual theory. Though he never saw himself as an artist, he did want to work in the creative field. He worked in advertising and video production for a while before joining an art college. Though he applied for a job at the visual communications department, the head at the fine arts department hired him as a lecturer in Western art history and visual theory. He began painting in 2001, after watching his colleagues paint in preparation for the 20th UOB Painting of the Year competition. He described it as “monkey see monkey do”, and when he won an Honorable Mention at the competition, he attributed it to beginner’s luck after (personal communication, March 16, 2013). Subsequently, he went into video, writing and curating.

So, I thought, okay, since I’m starting to show my work in the art scene, maybe I could make use of what I learned. I started making and showing video pieces. Then at the same time, I also realize that another area of my contribution could be in writing and curating, so I kind of started reviewing exhibitions, and writing catalogue essays for fellow artists. As for curating, actually, it was my boss who kind of pulled me in, so, really learnt on the job, quite tough…so, I think my art practice kind of began with more writing and curating and a little bit of making of art works between 2001 to 2003. But in 2003, I decided to increase the part on art making, at the same time, I also decided that my art practice will preside over my job as an artist. So that made a difference because I think, among art educators who continue to practice, if the practice is more a weekend thing, then it just remains that such, but in 2003, I made the decision that I want to be known as an
artist, first and foremost. I don’t really care whether people know that I have a full-time job…So that kind of like, help me, shift my focus and priority. (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

Michael’s contact with creating works probably started with video production during his university studies. Though his coming to fine arts sounded like a natural progression of colluding events and interventions, from his conversations, particular exceptional conditions, events, and moments, probably encouraged him in that direction. He was hired for a job he did not apply for, possibly by a supervisor who was looking to inject new blood and fresh perspectives. He was recognized in a competition in a media new to him. His strength in writing, theory, and communication, and his capacity as an art college professor, and his associations with different nodes in the art landscape at different times, cut a unique profile within the context of Singapore art. Until the last ten years or so, writing, creating, and curating have tended to be separate roles, usually performed by different people specializing in each. With better arts infrastructure, more specialized art schools and departments across different levels, and an increasingly more sophisticated arts audience and environment, however, we now see more Singaporean practitioners with postgraduate qualifications. Michael and Hans represent a growing group of practitioners in arts academia who not only produce works, but also organize and represent themselves and other artists through writing.

Thus far, we’ve seen how various aspects and notions of art take on multiple guises and are experienced, understood, recognized, interrogated, valued, and/or defied in multiple modes, levels, and dimensions, across various geographical, institutional,
psychical, and temporal spaces. These various facets also work together across time and space within situated contexts. For many, the main conduit of accessing such understandings is a whole body, mind, and affective engagement with physical-discursive materials and processes. Notions of what art is or how it is distinct from other concepts are encountered in learning situations and exchanges with family, peers, and authority figures within institutions and communities. In talking about their experiences, the participants inevitably highlight instances where differences or differentiating occur, where their subjectivities were separated from the phenomena, and where aspects of the subjectivity take physical forms or become apparent. These include acceptance into schools/departments/museums/exhibitions/residencies; attainment of externally set levels of performance; where they are invited or allowed to work; separations between insider and outsider; the types of materials, people, and spaces they work with; the kind of output and their circulation; and the type of recognition and accolades they receive.

I relate these to ideas from Appadurai (1990), Barad (2007), Clake (2005) and Foucault (1971; 1972; 1978) and organize them under the broad headings: Structures, Pedagogy, Practice, Market, Technology, Discourse, Resources, Place, Institutions, Materials, and Philosophies/Beliefs. These areas often interweave and work in tandem with one another. In learning, relating, situating, responding, creating, evaluating, participants’ notions and beliefs about art and their relationships with it manifest in specific configuration of space, time and matter, in a combination of some, if not all of the broad areas (see Figure 12).
Participants’ conversations document various ways they come to art: how they come to learn certain aspects of art, and how notions of art and/or themselves become distinguished in particular situations. These various physical-discursive aspects map and situate the actions in arenas where aspects of subjectivities of art and/or selves are formed or made eligible, given particular spatial, temporal and material conditions (Barad, 2007; Clarke, 2005) (see Figure 13).
The various actions mark participants in various ways (see Figure 13). Collectively, the markings give overall shape(s) or form(s) to the subjectivities of participants’ work and selves (see Figure 14). This visualization conceives of the subjectivities of participants’ work and selves not as singular coherent wholes but that these are given form(s) through a constellation of different events and marks.

Figure 13. Marking and co-constitution of aspects of subjectivities in various areas.
Apart from these ontological and epistemological markings, participants also draw different inspirations and motivations, and accord different purposes and values to what they do. Sam sees her work as “intervention[s]” that highlight social cultural issues,
and just wants to “make things that are meaningful” to her (personal communication, August 8, 2012). Hans uses design as a medium to communicate ideas and share his questioning of the world around him. A lot of Donna’s work is part of her spiritual conversations with God; for others, she hopes the works are doorways to a different world – a world of wonder and hope. Zul uses art to connect with people, and (re)claim (public) spaces, even as he expresses his ruminations on our place in global current affairs, consumerism, and the cultural economy. Gek Lin explores forms, techniques and spiritual truths in her work. Michael is “working towards a kind of praxis” where he lives out the world that he creates in his work, and where “intellectual engagement and fabrication of physical pieces….are closely related” and not disparate (personal communication, March 16, 2013). The inspirations for and purposes of their work, and their individually unique constructions of art, as gleaned from their narratives, only partially reveal the entanglement of the ethical, ontological, and epistemological threads that make up the ongoing becoming of them and their work. Even during the coding process, the narratives were constantly overflowing in excess of the codes, no matter how broad I thought they were. To lump them all under a single term, such as ‘art’ or ‘Singapore art’ for that matter, and to organize them under headings such as ‘conditions of urban living’, ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, cannot even begin to capture the multiple facets, dimensions, trajectories, and structures of constructing involved. If anything, the act of trying to understand, by means of representing any phenomena via different media, language, or structures of knowledge, marks the start of closing off other ways of knowing.
Being Artists

When people ask me how I become an artist, what influence me, there were millions of things that influence me. There were like, you know, there’s my parents, my school that I was in, it was my faith, it was the fact that I was good at it….what my friends said, you know, variety of things; but then, when you explain it, you pick one thing, or two things, and then it ends up being always this one and two things. And in all the magazines and blogs, it starts being this one or two thing, and then people read each other’s work and it starts being, your story becomes narrower and narrower.

So it’s good and bad. It means I can explain my portfolio in, you know, in fifteen minutes flat, but it also means that a lot is lost in it. And I always have to remind myself not to forget that my work is more than what I explain it to be. And to keep on pushing myself to, to make it bigger, you know, to, you, not bigger in terms of like size, but bigger in terms of like, the themes that I explore and the threads that are woven into the work. That it’s not just one thread of childhood, and imagination, [or] about my past [or] it’s about nostalgic. It’s not just about that.

When you think about an artwork, there are so many things that you have read and seen that actually go into the artwork, but when you explain it, it comes out, you need an artist’s statement of like a paragraph, it becomes distilled in that but it’s actually more than that, right?....The danger is not when other people think that your work is about that. It’s fine because they have their own experiences too,
and they have their own interpretation too, and version of the work, again bringing out that one paragraph. But it’s when you yourself get trapped by that one paragraph; you yourself think that your work is that one paragraph. (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

For Donna, a possible pitfall of being widely featured and written about is the reductive and regulatory effect reiteration has on subjectivity (Butler, 1990a; Derrida, Bass & Ronse, 1981; Lawlor, 2014). Her narrative illustrates the fine line when repetition of selective, limited descriptive information within existing structures blinkers and reinscribes subjectivity in the guise of knowledge production. Though much had been made of shifting structures in the digital media (See for example, Appadurai, 1990), the converse is just as true. The ease with which information can be copied and pasted indiscriminately, across different platforms and contexts, also ensures the mindless reproduction of the same structures and intertextuality, which in turn imposes constraints on subjectivity(s).

Participants’ coming to art takes place at different points in time, across different sites and shifts in subjectivity(s). In all instances, different understandings and ways of knowing art also signal shifts in how they experience their subjectivity(s) in terms of their relationships with aspects of art. However these experiences of subjectivity are not static, linear, and do not exist in isolation. If anything, participants experience multiplicity.

**Multiplicity.** Apart from creating, all the participants are also involved in art in multiple ways, such as curating, writing, teaching, designing, and organizing events. They talk about how they are constantly ideating, or engaged in thinking about their
work, and how they feed on the things they see, experience, and read. This creates expansive, if not boundless, dynamic and ongoing phenomena of the participants, their work, and various other aspects of what they do and who they are.

Beyond the multiple roles the participants perform, participants’ subjectivities, or sense of being, in relation to space, time and matter are constantly (re)configured in processes they undertake. Zul strategizes the work his work in relation to the location. Similarly, Donna, as an installation artist, works in response to given space, physical and non-physical conditions and resources, especially during residencies overseas. When Donna talks about her work, I get the sense that she is living the dream of not just one but many vocations.

Within my art genre, with installation art, there’re so many thing I can do. I can investigate army barracks, and then I can look back in history and see how these things were like in those times and I can put on the historian hat. Other times I can pretend to be a scientist and look at how the science work. How does it look like, how does biology look like? I can put on the hat of filmmaker and make film, so art is so open that you can be a chameleon. You can be anything you want and it becomes a project and you don’t have to go very deep in it. You can go as deep as you want. If you really want to go very deep, you can take like, five, ten years to make one project on this specific thing…but if you just want to dapple in it, you can just like, you can just go in and just like, you know, do a three-month projector something. (personal communication, January 28, 2013)
These space, physical and non-physical conditions and resources constitute phenomena that continually (re)configure the physical, discursive and human subject-object relationships. These space, conditions and resources, in turn, lead her to different approaches and processes, and enable her, like a “chameleon”, to take on different roles and relationships with the site, work and other people (personal communication, January 29, 2013).

…the genre I’m in, installation…So you have to deal with a lot of grants, so that involves a lot of writing, a lot of proposals. You have to deal due a lot with meeting people, and presenting yourself and building up relationships. I’m a very people oriented person, so I enjoy that aspect….But then with the type of art I’m making, it’s often times very large, often times it’s project based so I do involve a lot of people, not just in terms of the people who are supporting me monetarily, like giving the grant for it, or other people who are showing the artwork, the museum. I’m dealing with the contractors. I’m dealing with assistants…I’m dealing with the museum staff. I’m dealing with the security guards…There’s a whole variety of people and, and lots of different ways in which you have to relate to them…there are many things as well, I mean there’s art international, when you go overseas. And then it’s really important to be flexible, and to be eh, to be able to interact with other people, and to understand different cultures…my having studied overseas and meeting a lot of different people helps me as well. Just to be open to all other things, to, to be able to interact with a wide variety of people…I guess nowadays, art is not just about
making work in your studio and showing at the local context. You go for art fairs, you have to give talks about your work. You have to attend forums. You have to do art fairs… you have to manage your own career, you know, in terms of which galleries I go to and you have to negotiate contracts….There’s also interaction with different artists for inspiration. To inspire others and for others to inspire you. It’s about interaction between your collectors and you, your galleries and you, building relationships, between art critics and writers, for them to speak about your work and critique your work and for you to have that critique influence your work, or, or stand up against that critique. (personal communication, January 28, 2013)

As a people-oriented person, Donna qualifies her subjectivity in terms of different roles – the characters she plays and the people she works with. Other participants also speak of multiplicity in terms of their different epistemological, social, cultural, creative and philosophical allegiances. Hans and Michael speak of their interest in European philosophy, such as in phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Though Donna and Hans are influenced by European creative and other ideas, both also felt that they need to be anchored in Singapore to make the works they did.

However, multiplicity does not necessarily suggest harmonious collective(s) of attachments that are individual, distinct and/or separate. At times competing subjectivity or subjectivity perceived to be in contestation can even lead to moments of displacement.

Displacement. A graphic designer by training and still a freelance designer, Gek Lin is still stumped as to how to identify herself. Does calling herself an artist now negate
all she used to be and do? Maybe not. Does being an artist mean she spends most of her time creating work? Does it mean she is a full-time artist? How about a serious artist who makes art part-time? Even if one does not physically make art most of the time but thinks about it all the time, would one qualify as an artist? If artist is a broader term compared to designer, potter, or ceramicist – one that also covers the other creative work she does at various locations – why is she still not satisfied with the term? At various points in the interview, Gek Lin explained her problem with terminologies, classification, and the way certain definitions are set up and used. For example, she explains how in Singapore you are identified by what you do.

Even as a ceramicist, she acknowledges that she continues to be influenced by her design training, perspectives, and way of doing things. She considers, “You think you can be this, but without all these things you may not be who you are” (personal communication, March 22, 2013). However, she also admits that certain aspects of her graphic design background, such as a preference for precision, might sometimes interfere with her art. Gek Lin found it hard to call herself an artist in the beginning, but has come to embrace the term and resolves not be bothered by what other people say.

In her conversation, Gek Lin pits perspectives from varied subject positions, both in terms of situations she had found herself in and that which she had encountered, and illustrate some of the conditions of im/possibility for certain thinking and ways of knowing. As a designer, she was used to thinking through and planning her work. As a ceramics student, she recalls hearing instructions to “don’t think”, and she wonders how one stops thinking, but surmises it refers to “don’t think too hard that the work becomes
contrived” (personal communication, March 25, 2013). As a ceramics tutor, she observes how students find it hard to experience clay the way she does, and how students find it easier to make ceramics by following rather than come up with something new themselves using taught techniques. As a practitioner in her field, she weighs different perspectives from teachers, peers, friends, and her own observations on what makes a successful and/or good artist, and the balance between the act of selling oneself and one’s works, and the definition of quality in creative work.

In Zul’s case, his sense as a graffiti artist was suppressed, shaken, if not threatened by his experiences at art school. This was ironic given it was partly his love for the art form that led him to art school in the first place, and it was probably also the strength of his graffiti work that gained him certain access to it. However, the nature of the structures and scope of the course also demands that he discard what he understood of his work, and what he had attained up to that point, in exchange for something other. Instead, Zul chose to continue his work and retain his subjectivity as graffiti artist, but modify the fine art student subjectivity by altering the conditions, relations and ways of engagement between he, his tutors, the institution, and his work.

Participants’ narratives reveal a wide range of pre-existing subject positions that are dynamically and constantly shifting. While some of these subject positions are assumed, there are also many disconcerting aspects and/or mismatches that reveal the inadequacies of categories by nature, and the chasms between participants’ aspirations and the subject positions they find themselves in. Despite what had been made about the discursive effects of discourse and pre-existing subjectivity(s), examples of performance
and materialization indicate that these are not immutable, and that social, cultural and physical conditions and experiences do shape their manifestations and situated meanings.

In many of the participants’ conversations, even as they actively engage in the occurrences of understanding in, and of art, they are also concurrently redefining aspects of their relationship with its concepts in and through their work. The way that these occur can be characterized as traversing, transgressing, and/or splicing.

Traversing

In the earlier section, we see how participants come to understand the expectations and acquire the performative aspects for the respective subjectivities (Butler, 1990a; 1990b, Lave & Wenger, 1991). In some of their work, we see how it is also necessarily to move beyond, and across certain boundaries of art forms, genres, ways of working and professional subjectivity(s) to attain particular achievements for, or within their particular fields.

In the case of Hans Tan, though he talked about the role and function of design, he did not think a designer should be defined by his profession. In his conversation, he cites common presumptions, practices and different boundaries of art and design. Hans is uncomfortable with the artist-designer divide in Singapore. In Europe, where he trained, he explains that everyone is an artist, including engineers and surgeons. As long as a person is doing something interesting and creative, s/he is an artist. He finds it hard in today’s context to strictly distinguish design from art. Depending on the design brief (or design requirements) and situation, design could be more appropriate to solve certain
issues, whereas a more artistic approach would be needed to solve others. He sees himself as traversing between the two.

Zul cuts a unique profile. He is a street artist who is careful to dodge the wrong authorities in graffiti art but who also exhibits at alternate art spaces, the Singapore Art Museum, and even at a high-end commercial art gallery. He had also exhibited in New York, Istanbul, Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur (National Arts Council, 2014). His work makes commentary on institutions, popular culture, consumerism and art but he had also been commissioned by commercial companies to make works. In a twist of events, he also lectures at the same art college where he felt his preferred art form marginalized at one point. Zul was awarded the Singapore National Arts Council’s Young Artist Award 2013, the “highest award for young arts practitioners, aged 35 years and below….whose artistic achievements and commitment have distinguished them among their peers” (National Arts Council, 2014). Zul traverses across different social, cultural, artistic and academic spaces and created a unique space for himself while increasing the visibility of street art in Singapore. From his latest accolade, he gained recognition that is normally reserved for mainstream artists, while remaining true to his commitment to street art.

Other than describing their works using existing categories and terms, such as installations, contemporary, mixed media, design, and ceramics, participants also relied on certain physical and discursive aspects that defined the nature of what they do. These surface in the form of recurring themes in their conversations about their developments as practitioners and their work. These include institutions, external forms of recognition, locality and sites where they work and sell, physical and other materials and resources
they draw from, personal beliefs and/or ethics, communities where they work, the
materiality of their work and the value system(s) applied to it. Very often, these operate
in tandem with one another rather than in isolation. In some conversations, participants
mentioned these explicitly as factors affecting how their work. Some of these factors,
such as locality and sites where they work and sell, seldom feature explicitly in
conversations but are picked out due to the underlying pervasiveness and also variances
in how these present themselves across conversations.

These aspects enact certain effects on ways of working and works that mark the
works and practitioners differently. Using Barad’s agential realist theory (2007), these
aspects form particular phenomena where actions of every entity in the entanglement
constitute the eventual separation or distinguishing of different entities. Entities become
intelligible to other parts through the relations and co-constitution of boundaries in the
phenomena. When looked through using Foucault’s ideas on grid of intelligibility (1978),
these constitute fields of force relations that make possible certain forms of thinking and
discourses. In the conversations, all the participants either had overseas education, or are
engaged with work and practitioners at an international level, the mention of some of
these aspects, such as established techniques and approaches, and international
institutions, awards and residencies seem to imply certain forms of universalized
referents, expectations and benchmarks. Some of these external referents assume generic
global qualities and are drawn upon to validate the work, render it intelligible to
particular frames, as well as to circumscribe the scope of the field the participants situate
themselves.
At one level, the acquisition and use of established discourses and performative elements of pre-existing subjectivity(s) legitimates one’s work and situates practitioners within a larger, already intelligible system (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Furthermore, the dynamism and multifarious nature of current practice and market that requires practitioners to be conversant across various fields, had also provided a means for practitioners traversing different fields or boundaries to act on and change discourses.

Weng Choy notes the heightened activities in the Singapore curatorial scene. Curators, more than art historians are “trying to propose new platforms, new modes of engagement” with peculiar aspects of Asian and/or Singapore art. He also notes the increasing number of artist-curators.

The curators might be proposing different things, because for them, they might actually have a way of saying, look, contemporary art is a phenomena, it’s a cultural phenomena. How am I dealing with this cultural phenomena, right? So they might be interested in that. The art historians are talking about artists, and this and that, you know, it’s the same old stuff. But it’s the curators who are, all of a sudden trying to propose new platforms, new modes of engagement, so they are the ones who might be trying to come up with, “Asian cities are peculiar in this way, let’s talk about them this way”….

But you see, it’s the word [i.e. curating] that has come up….artists have always been organising themselves, modern artists…..[but] what’s happened is that they are organising themselves and then they are using a different discourse…. before, you know, people used to organise, but now, there is an
agency of curating that’s changed in the last generation. (personal communication March 8, 2013)

This “agency of curating” is also seen in other areas, such as artists organized forums (for example, Sam and Zul) and publications (for example, Michael and Hans). Instead of leaving it to other specialized curators, critics or writers, some artists are taking over how their works could be presented, represented and understood in various platforms. The shift towards democratizing of curating in Singapore is also demonstrated by a few artists joining the staff of the Singapore Art Museum as curators. The latest director of the museum, Dr Susie Lingham, is also a performance artist. Singapore Biennale organized by the Singapore Art Museum in 2013, focused on Southeast Asian works, and featured a team of 27 co-curators from across Singapore and Southeast Asian. A number of the co-curators are also practicing artists themselves. While pre-existing categorizing by roles had not changed, the mixing and matching of roles and subjectivity had become more blurred and blended as practitioners take on multiple roles.

What is interesting is that four of the six practitioners who talked about their own work in terms of larger accepted forms of practice within the same genre, also used these established practices as referents for how they differentiate themselves. These referents, rather than as measures for adherence, are instead, used as markers for interrogation and intervention.

Transgressing

Though Hans identifies with the design field, he also leverages on certain features of the field and commonly accepted concepts only to subvert them in his approach and
work. He sees function and design as a medium, rather than an end, just as canvas is a medium for an artist. He sees design’s main function as communication. A designer uses function to suggest a different narrative, to change a common perception and to change the way we commonly see or use things. In this conception, design plays many roles. At the fundamental level, design helps to address issues encountered in daily lives and improve living, such as designing for diabetes devices and apparatuses for the disabled.

Hans uses function and design to help people understand concepts of aesthetics, to share his own questioning, and to encourage others to question. He explains, “where we start questioning, where we start not understanding…when you don’t understand… then you’re truly trying to understand it in some ways” (personal communication, February 14, 2013). Quoting Guston Bachelard, Hans shares that when we think we are creating something new, we often think that we are forming new images, new typologies, in that “we always think of the imagination as the faculty that forms images” (Bachelard, 1988, p. 1, italics in original) (originally printed in French in 1943). However, according to Bachelard, it is quite the contrary, imagination “deforms what we perceive” and “frees us from immediate images and changes them” (p. 1). Bachelard writes that for there to be an imaginative act, there needs to be a change, for that to happen, “the image that is present” need to make us think of “one that is absent” (p. 1). If an image does not involve an “abundance”, an “explosion” of unusual images, then there is no imagination just the memory of perception (p. 1). As such, for Hans, to come up with something new is not to start with a blank piece of paper, as many designers and artists are taught, but rather to start with the status quo, use what is expected, then reframe, rethink it, to “deform” what
is known (personal communication, February 14, 2013). He refers to the status quo and that which has come to be expected or taken for granted as the baseline. The more stable the baseline, the more interesting the outcome. He points out that nothing is ever new. Creation is not always about discovery but about seeing something in a different perspective.

Though almost all the participants spoke about disrupting people’s experience of their work in certain aspects of their work at one point or another, Hans uses destabilizing as a core strategy. For example, his work the *Idea of a Clock* (Figure 15) disrupts the notion and function of a clock, while challenging the way we interact with it. In the work, he examines what it means for a clock to tell time and for us to read time. In order to refocus our attention and disrupt the concept and function of a clock, he needs the bedrock of our current notion and expectation of the form and function of a clock. It is thus this dialectic between stability and disruption, and between form and function – that unsettles the works as industrial products, and complicates the definitions of and relationships between art, design, concept, and object.
These two examples describe two different types of relationships with external structures or referents. In one, what once enabled a framework for practice also became a constraint. In the other, the subject-object relationship is reversed as established concepts and practices become resources for interrogation and disruption, and sites for transgressions. However, in Gek Lin’s example, the necessity to draw from what one is taught and yet surpass it so as to distinguish oneself from it; is constrained by other conditions, such as cultural mindsets. In Hans’s example, disruption does not dispense with the object that one is working against. His mode of disruption instead cannibalizes on the object while transforming it at the same time.
It is this complex relationship between source references and work that characterize the cultural identity and siting of some of participants’ work.

Splicing.

Hans’s *Spotted Nonya Collection* (Figure 7) was made from sandblasting commercially available Peranakan ware. Hans used Peranakan ware because it was a familiar local imagery – a stable “baseline”, so to speak – so “any disruption would produce interesting effects” (personal communication, February 14, 2013). The journey of the *Spotted Nonya* entails some interesting space, time and matter reconfiguration (see Chapters 2 and 3). The *Spotted Nonya* uses porcelain recently imported from China, but which was imbued with specific cultural significance through its use by indigenized Chinese in Singapore and Malaya before the 19th century. The work bears imprints from different social, cultural, and historical locations, from the original form and glaze, to Hans’ sandblasting in Singapore, to the display and conferment of the *Les Découvertes* (Most Innovative Product Award) at *Maison et Objet 2011* in Paris. In that work, Hans intervenes in the social cultural narrative of the original ware, first from its production in China, then again from the Peranakan context in Singapore, by physically and literally erasing part of the time stamp and reverse stenciling the original glaze with Western originated polka dots (see Figure 7). This reconfigures the spatiality of the circulation of the objects, and splices the cultural time stamping. While the physical form has remained, the *Spotted Nonya Collection* has been transformed from household objects positioned in particular socio-cultural history to international award-winning designer items.
Though some people consider Peranakan culture as one of the few and rare forms of culture that is authentic to Singapore, the transformation of the *Spotted Nonya* by Hans who is non-Peranakan, is also symptomatic of similar pick and choose approaches towards given cultures in Singapore – approaches that are marked by exteriority. This is also not dissimilar to Dick Lee’s songs that incorporate so many different cultural influences that are indigenized over time and made coherent through the entity known as Singapore.

Appadurai uses the term indigenization to describe global cultural trends that had been adapted and transformed in local conditions (Appadurai, 1990). Underlying indigenization is the fear of cultural absorption by larger entities. The way Appadurai uses the concept of indigenization suggest a one-way flow of cultural influence from the global to the local. The concept of indigenization also does not account for the postmodernist occurrence that the exchanges and appropriation of cultural references also diminishes the depth of their use by making these intelligible first and foremost as consumer goods (Jameson, 1984). In the Spotted Nonya, for example, the cultural context is in fact twice removed. In the case of some of the works in this study, the concept of indigenization also does not fully capture the cultural chameleonic operations of the works that allows them to traverse across different cultural sites and art markets.

What seems to have taken place in the Spotted Nonya series is reconfiguring through splicing, that is, connecting of different cultural, spatial, temporal, and material strands by interweaving these in the physical making or intervening of the object. Beyond
disjuncture, moving beyond the state of disconnect, splicing re-connects different elements towards a new imagining, a new narrative.

Donna’s works are often assemblages of objects and found imagery, coming together to reconfigure semiotic, physical, and temporal spaces. The imagery and titles of her works evoke landscapes of various kinds, such as *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* (2006) (Figure 16) and *Crystal City* (2009) (Figure 17). These works evoke déjà vu, familiar and yet unfamiliar places and memories. In these works, familiar daily objects not only inhabit but disrupt different spaces and their demarcations. Certain pieces of Hans’ work are similarly situated in specific socio-cultural artifacts of the everyday. However, Donna’s objects and spaces, such as the glassware and arrangement in *Crystal City*, seem to inhabit a generic ordinary thing-ness that recalls objects and landscapes from somewhere and everywhere, and yet from nowhere in particular. Singapore art historian Kevin Chua identifies the strength of Donna’s *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* series with the fact that the narrative and object are hinged together in an adroit way. In these works, the viewer never loses the narrative, even in the close-up encounter with the objects. The object-parts, in turn, are metaphorized without losing their tangibility as material things, rooted in a place and time (Chua, 2010). Chua disputes the adequacy and precision of commentary that describes Donna’s work as being drawn from her imagination, for, he asks, which post-Renaissance artwork does not. Instead, he writes of her work as emplacing the imagination by grounding it in reality, bringing us to a world, a different future.
While Donna’s works are very much reliant on the ontologies of the objects she uses, they tend to lack temporal, geographical, and cultural specificity. This then frees the works to act with the sites where they circulate and the relationships audiences draw from them. In this manner, splicing need not be predicated on preexisting categories but can be a way of reconfiguring, an ongoing becoming. Though it constantly alludes to certain space, time and matter, it is itself timeless and suspended in certain memory(s) of space and material in its constant becoming, as it acts on, acts with the phenomena.
In many ways, the subjectivities of works and participants’ selves may adhere to existing conceptions and pre-existing categories in dominant discourse. However, closer examination of the nature, motivations, and/or acts in their work reveals the slippages in between, as well as the excess of, existing conceptions and categories. Subjectivities in many cases are recognizable or assumed by approximating existing categories, rather
than the actual acts and workings that are made in spite of the markings (see Figure 18). The subjectivities also do not stay the same but shift constantly according to how different aspects act in changing conditions.

**Responding to Art**

Even as the reconfiguring of global referents and pre-existing subjectivity(s) in and through visual practice provide possibilities for reimagining and reworking postcolonial relations, fundamental questions regarding the nature and basis of our engagement still remain. Who or what is Singapore in relation to art and others? How do we, in using Singapore as method, in establishing ways of understanding based on our peculiar ways of working be “an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness” from others, rather than a territorializing and closing down of other meanings (Kleinman, 2012, p. 81).

**Singapore as Resource, Place, Space and Site**

Throughout the study, the notion of Singapore was enacted in various ways through our conversations and through participants’ work. Singapore is nationality, home, location where participants, learn, grow and practice. Singapore plays different roles as practice space for different genres, and presents different opportunities in terms of audience and market.

**Singapore as Resource**

In their ideation, development, and practice, all six artists draw from and respond to their immediate work environment in Singapore. The practitioners respond to mundane daily objects; everyday practices; speech, mannerisms, and behaviors and mindsets of
people they encounter; the material and processes they work with; other people’s practices; and the histories and spaces they inhabit and work with(in). Formulating their responses to these items would often involve assemblages of ontological and epistemological conditioning from different sources, localities, and sites. These include faith, beliefs, ethics, philosophies, certain dogmas relating to the practice, social-cultural histories of the practice, developments of the practice in other locations, various types of literature and current affairs.

Even though Hans had had job offers in Holland and even offers for him to set up his own studio there, he knew that he had to come back to Singapore to do what he imagined himself doing. He notes that the work he did in Holland was different from what he is doing in Singapore, in terms of the imagery and materials to which he responds. Hans draws inspiration from the things he sees and reads every day, the people he talks to, and his observations of everyday life. These feed a person’s perception. With technology today, he acknowledges that one can see what is happening almost everywhere; however, he points to the importance of having one’s family around and notes that perception is both mental and emotional. He needs the locality, the every-day-ness in Singapore: Singapore as context, as foundation and grounding for the kind of work he is doing.

**Singapore as Place for Practice**

Gek Lin’s conversation on the practice of ceramics in Singapore situates the practice in terms of the relationships between the physical constraints of equipment and infrastructure, the setup of the learning and practice environment, and approaches and
attitudes to skills and practice. Due to the costs of setting up ceramics studio spaces and firing equipment, along with the safety restrictions on gas kilns and other non-electric firing methods, there are typically only a few ceramics studios scattered across different locations in Singapore. Most serious ceramicists would thus practice at one or two of these locations, depending on their associations. As ceramicists usually start off by learning under particular master artists or lead artists, who practice at particular studios, the studios are usually organized somewhat like learning or practicing communities. This is also reinforced by the open manner in which the studios are set up. Depending on the resident master artist or lead artist(s), there can also be expectations for practice, code of conduct, and attendance. Entry or acceptance into some of these studios can sometimes also be contingent on a number of factors, such as the type of work an artist produced and his/her practice in general.

Figure 19. Gek Lin Tan, Man Series.

Note. Copyright by Gek Lin Tan. Used with permission.
The discussion implicates the ethical and epistemological with the ontological practice of ceramics by individual practitioners, and as a field in Singapore. Though ceramic works are most visible in terms of bearing witness to the physical working processes, given the relatively more embodied nature of the medium, the discursive marks require greater understanding of the various aspects of the ontological. In my attempt to analyze the work, I tried to look for relations with our conversation in the visual and physical, such as in the form of narrative. Her man series records her observations of human interaction through biblical teachings (see Figure 19). The narrative element is enhanced by displaying or constituting the object-figures in relation to one another. In her vessel forms, such as the commissioned work for the National Heritage Board (see Figure 20), the physical work embodies its own narrative in the mix of the clay, the throwing of the vessel, the overlaying and scratching of marks, and imprints. The constituting of the works in terms of the actions of clay, ceramicist, glaze, form, texture, ideation, technique, feel, touch, and other moment-by-moment decisions would require an intimate understanding of each of these various constituents as well as their contingent configuration in time and space.
Not dissimilar to the demarcation of spaces, the role of institutions in the circumscribing of works and practice cannot be overstated. The inclusion or acceptance of works within a museum setting, for example, reconfigures the status and value of works. For one, it casts works as both art and mainstream. Formal and/or non-formal educational institutions affect artists and their work epistemologically, ontologically, and ethically. Accolades also mark the artists and their work in particular ways. It would appear then that the more the associations, accolades and recognition they get, the more boundaries are enacted. In some ways, these forms of boundary making could also constrain the spaces for practice and how artists and their works are experienced. Such boundaries could be in terms of having works that are intelligible to only a particular audience, constraining the disciplines and markets where the artists, their practices, and works circulate. In the same way, institutions are constituted by the works they use and/or endorse.

Figure 20. Gek Lin Tan, commissioned work for National Heritage Board's Patron of the Arts Award.

Note. Copyright by Gek Lin Tan. Used with permission.
Physical materials constitute the participants’ work in a number of material-discursive ways. Physical materials are not only the actual materials that constitute the works per se. These, in their entanglement with the specific space and time configurations of their own constitution, can also be intra-related with other forms of discursive meaning making. The works are also constantly reconstituted and reconstitute the sites, artists, and other people where they circulate.

Materiality of objects is enacted in various ways. Donna uses everyday objects in her installations to evoke the material, discursive, metaphoric, and spiritual spaces. In Hans’ work, he demonstrates the entanglement of materiality, in terms of form, function, cultural and market value, and class issues. Gek Lin’s works bear the marks of the ceramicist, and physical intra-actions with the place, equipment and environment where they are made. Michael’s works question and reconfigure aspects of the ontological, such as historical, environmental, social, cultural, architectural, lived, fantastical, and imaginary space and time. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the physical forms of the works are in some cases, already pre-constituted and predetermined by the genres or fields that the artists choose to work in. The materialization, or the coming to intelligibility of the works, comprises enactment of the epistemological and ontological conditions, institutions, and markets where the works are produced and circulate. Even so, the nature of intra-actions of form, material, space and ways of manipulating and making the works, and the differential agential, at times subverts the expectations, norms and various forms of circumscription.
Because artworks bear the physical imprint of artists through the physical making, and the works, practices, and the artists are inextricably entangled, how artists and their practices matter presents interesting issues of ethics. By ethics, I allude to Barad’s notion of responsibility and accountability for not only what came to matter but also that, which was excluded, and the relations therein (2007). Barad writes about differentiating, in terms of boundaries, properties and meanings, as not about radical exteriority but separability in terms of agency and action, as not about othering or separation but making connections and relationalities of the “becoming of which we are a part” (2007, p. 393). In the artists’ conversations, the discussions of their practice are linked to their formal and non-formal learning, and the environment and institutions they interact with, at the personal and professional levels, and the ongoing dynamic relationships with these. Some linked their practice to personal beliefs, influences from philosophy, theory, reading, research, current affairs, important mentors or formative experiences. These influences originate from a variety of cultures, fields and localities. To the artists, they see art and their practice as an enactment of who they are and what they believe, be it holistically or at the professional level.

If artmaking and practice are considered forms of knowledge production, how is it possible to account for our subjective positioning through our work and practice and the connections we make? In many works, some conditions of the possibility of the works, such as the works’ relationships with the markets and institutions, received knowledge and cultures, and our reconfiguring of cultural, historical, temporal and material objects and references in the making and responding, are often not (made) apparent. Some
exceptions are works like Zul’s *Pseudo Branding Series* (2010) (Figure 11) and Michael’s *Notes Towards a Museum of Cooking Pot Bay* (2010 – 2011) (Figures 22 and 26) that address some of these issues as topics, methodology or presentation in their works. While not all works are transparent about their constitution, how can responding to them at various levels also acknowledge the conditions of the possibility of the works and our engagement with them?

**Vantage Positions.** One of Donna’s favorite works, *The Meeting* (2009) (Figure 21), was done during her residency in Japan and documents the Friendship Doll project between the United States and Japan in 1927. A former missionary to Japan initiated the Friendship Doll project and sent more than 10,000 blue-eyed dolls donated by US children to Japan as a goodwill gesture, and to encourage mutual understanding. The Japanese reciprocated by raising money to commission and send exquisite kimono-clad dolls representing Japan’s various regions. However, the dolls were kept in storage, and defaced or destroyed during the Second World War. In *The Meeting*, Donna uses antique dolls from Japan and the US produced around that time period in a black and white video. In the video, the dolls are placed in different positions in different interiors, compositions and lighting (Hammond, 2009).
While most, if not all, of Donna’s works have elements and/or origins in particular temporal and geographical spatiality, such as in personal memories, I see *The Meeting* as the most specific in terms of its cultural and historical situatedness. This work attempts to capture the poignancy of the event and perhaps bring about reconciliation, albeit virtually. The work was exhibited in her solo exhibition in Japan. The title of the exhibition, *Asleep, A Room Awakens*, was also the title of her other work in the exhibition, a photographic installation of room interiors. When seen in the context of the exhibition, *The Meeting* can be associated with her experiences in Japan. While I can situate the work as part of Donna’s experiences and her oeuvre of hope, I wonder how audiences newer to her work will locate and read it, as I too had also wondered about works I am not familiar with. Who/where/what is the Other? How do the other

geographical, cultural and historical references of the work situate her in return? In a post-postmodernist era where the meanings of social cultural objects and references are dynamic and constantly appropriated, what are the responsibilities of the use(r)s? While I have presented some possible interpretations for the participants’ works, I am also aware that many other interpretations are possible. What are the responsibilities of the artist and audience in making meaning?

**Re-imagination.** By contrast, the worlds in Michael Lee’s works are composites of the actual and fictitious. If Donna’s works evoke the fantastic that seem hinged to a certain sense of place and time, Michael’s works question what we know, understand, and experience by exploring the subconscious, hidden structures and ‘what could have been,’ sometimes by fracturing and fusing different temporal and geographical spatialities.

Michael’s approach is to create something new by bringing together different things. Some of Michael’s works not only make visible the coming together of different material-discursive markings of time and space, but also make these the focus. In Michael’s *Museum of Cooking Pot Bay* (see Figures 22 and 26), he curates a collection of actual, fictitious, past, present, and imagined future of entities, spaces, events, figures, and phenomena. He even inserts himself and aspects of his personal history as part of the mapping (see Figures 22 and 26). The layout of the map facilitates different orienteering and ways of reading – horizontal, vertical, and circuitous-- thus enabling different connections and paths of intra-actions. In the mapping, he blurs the distinctions between the actual, commonplace, historic, banal and fantastic to create a pseudo Telok Blangah
phenomena, which enables the (re)mattering of Telok Blangah with different temporal and spatial constituents.

Figure 22. Michael Lee, Close up of Notes Towards a Museum of Cooking Pot Bay, 2010/11. Mindmap. Digital print on vinyl mounted on glass. 287 x 868 cm.


An interesting aspect of this work is Michael’s insertion of himself, as the artist and a person with connections to Telok Blangah, within the artwork. This is in ironic contrast to Michael’s admission that the problem of his approach to working with other sources is that of establishing his own identity (personal communication, March 16, 2013). Michael’s website provides a link to a research blog that documents a far longer list of entries and events, together with their sources, that are associated with Telok
Blangah (M. Lee, 2009; 2013). The work, Michael’s website, and the research blog compositely create a phenomenon of the work, practice, and artist, with glimpses into the ontological and epistemological links, and into the possible ethical considerations of the selection and categorization process.

Barad’s notion of ethics comprises notions of responsibility and response-ability (Barad, 2000; 2007; Kleinman, 2012). Response-ability, or the ability to respond, refers to the range of possible responses that are invited, ruled out, constrained, and conditioned in the particular practices of engagement. Hence, ethical considerations would encompass our accountability or responsibility for the specific histories of particular practices of engagement (Kleinman, 2012). Michael makes his sources transparent as a form of acknowledgement, yet at the same time, he teases the audience by mixing the actual with the imaginary or fantastic. By inserting himself as an element of the work, he also makes transparent his role and presence in the making and co-constitution of the work. He incorporates his ethical responsibility into the work by teasing and inviting the audience to be more engaged in the work by considering its claims and querying the sources, even himself.

**Response-ability.** The meanings, attributes, and shapes of representations, even self-representation, are not static but transmute dynamically as they interface with other contexts, social cultural structures, and relations in their wider exchange and circulation. Michael highlights the differences in the foci of the characterization and perception of Singapore art that we have from others, and hints at how notions of, and relations between Asia, Asian art, Singapore, and Singapore art are drawn.
I think the fact that Singapore is relatively safe, free of disasters – man-made or natural, has a certain impact on how we generally work. I think there’s…a perception that Singapore artists are being too comfortable or not being socially or politically engaged, as compared to say, our Indonesian neighbors, or even further away, the Chinese contemporary artists. But I think these are generalizations. I think the best artists of Singapore…are able to, [well] first of all, we have reasonably good education system that trains us in language….Singaporeans can [speak English proficiently] and that actually helps in communication – person to person communication but also in the way the work is developed. I also think that the best of Singapore artists are able to….make critical observations of the world and of Singapore society in quite sophisticated ways, in certain cases, even better than a lot of, famous, regional or international artists. I think what we’re lacking….at the moment could be cheap resources, but that can be overcome with, you know, determination and all that. Maybe we are also lacking in some kind of access to important circuits in the world. But one way to get around is maybe we create our own access or portals. I think, one thing that Singapore artists tend to be quite good at at the moment is being able to articulate and communicate what they are trying to do. This reminds me of one of the many criticisms of my work….because it’s not all smooth sailing. Some people feel that my work is too glib. I’m reminded of this when I cite the point about Singapore artists being quite articulate in communication, etc. So whatever I think could be
good quality or bad quality, could be perceived as the opposite in the other context as well.

Michael hints at some variances in physical, social, cultural, educational and political conditions that could account for some differences in the understanding of the function and evaluation of art. Critic, writer, and curator, Weng Choy Lee sums up the differences in perception and conception as “different conditions of production”, as well as differences in the physicality of working in different locations, infrastructure and support in the art scene, history, and social structure (personal communication, March 8, 2013). These give rise to different instruments used by different parties for sense making, such as framework, purpose and reference points. To form generalizations of a diverse region and collective, assumptions of shared commonalities are made, and in the process, the attributes of some are often used as measures across others. Even though exceptions and variances are acknowledged, the identified measures mark up not only the boundaries of different sides of the marking, but also the entities themselves. For instance, the question of social political content often surfaces in the discussion of Southeast Asian art. While this portrays certain segments of Southeast Asian art as socially engaged and active, by the same stroke, it also paints an image of the region as rife with social inequalities, and those who are not as socially engaged as apathetic.

In trying to understand how knowing, being, and valuing art occurs, (from the study,) Donna warns about the selective and delimiting nature of representing what we know, and displacing the act of knowing, and even being, with their representations. Just as representations do not operate in a vacuum, Michael and Weng Choy highlight how
meaning making is constantly, dynamically negotiated and contested at the nexus of epistemological structures, and physical-discursive ontological situations, creating conditions of possibility, in a particular space and time, with given materials. Their accounts demonstrate how meaning is constantly (re)made at every occurrence (Derrida, Bass & Ronse, 1981, Lawlor, 2014), and with it, relations are (re)drawn.
Chapter 7: Coming into Intelligibility

During my days as an undergraduate Fine Arts student in the UK, I made marks so as to escape intelligibility. I began making marks instead of painting to deter people from making cultural meanings of my work, and to prevent people from stereotyping my work and me through my ethnicity and gender. Just as a mark is a drawing in its becoming, mark making was artmaking in search of its own articulation. Gibberish. Anonymous individuation. A speaking in tongues that is also a refusal to speak. My marking on paper, surfaces and objects extended to spaces. I mark to prevent being marked by other markers. What started out as a holding place, a deferment, and a temporary detour, became its own journey. Marking as anonymous individuation.

When I became a teacher, marking took on a very different significance as a form of assessment practice. Instead of marking surfaces and objects, marking as assessment distinguishes certain qualities in students’ works that are often predetermined by teachers, subject experts, and administrators. In the process, it excludes, or even negates other qualities that the works carry. In certain practices, marking ascertains the relative position of a piece of work against other works and set targets. In marking, I place my mark on someone else’s works. It was not only an indication of how students performed but also how well I had done as a teacher. At the beginning of my journey as a doctoral student researcher, I learnt how assessment not only marks individuals but also creates and
justifies strata in society (Broadfoot, 1996). Just as assessment reproduces structural
differentiation in societies, the differentials adopted from one culture are reproduced in
another. I was amazed at the reproductive effects of these forms of difference. I began
asking how we were positioned through colonial discourses, and how we were also a part
of the apparatuses of the discursive practices that made us. More importantly, I asked
how we could find a way out.

In my research, I ask how we can unthink the discursive cultural markers and
boundaries delimiting and circumscribing the understanding of Singapore art, which are
also likewise reproduced in the art curriculum. The research examines how select
eamples of art, types of practices, and artists become intelligible or come to be known in
Singapore, in order to understand the particular and situated formulation of such
understandings. I hope that this examination will yield insights into the ontological,
epistemological and ethical meaning making of art in Singapore that will not only inform
the rewriting of the art curriculum, but also indicate how knowledge making occurs in
diverse postcolonial global societies.

The research experimented with a composite of three theories to more fully
examine the constitution of art in Singapore in dynamic post-colonial globalization.
Specifically, the study makes use of Karen Barad’s agential realism (2007), Michel
Foucault’s ideas on the grid of intelligibility (1978), and Appadurai’s ideas on global
disjuncture (1990) to examine the particularities of the situated constitution of art in
Singapore, in the larger context of global cultural economy.

Who’s Afraid of Big Bad Discourse? – The Limits of Discursive Subjectivity(s)
I started out the project with great concerns over several discursive practices generated by discourses of art and Singapore. When I began interviewing the participants, I was often perturbed by how they would use and perpetuate existing forms of discursive representations and vocabulary. Participants used vocabulary and terms of reference in their field and as they had been taught. They described themselves as ‘installation artists’, ‘contemporary artists’ and ‘designers’ who use ‘aesthetics’ and reference ‘Western art history’, ‘Western philosophy’, and ‘theory’. Along the way, I kept wondering how I was to examine and unthink pre-existing dominant categories in art and practice in Singapore when almost everyone seemed to be using them. Nobody seemed particularly bothered with their discursive practices, even after I explained where I was coming from. I remember conducting a teachers’ workshop during the research. When I challenged teachers to question the terms and concepts we teach, and think apart from them, one teacher asked me how that could be done: were these not ‘basic’ and ‘fundamental’ to the discipline? How do you think without elements of art and principles of design? How can a fish be made aware of the water it swims in? Why does it need to?

There were a number of times when I wondered if I was on the right track. American professors and friends with whom I shared the project seemed impressed. When I shared the project with friends, potential participants and participants in Singapore, the initial response was empathy. They generally agreed that something could be done about art education in Singapore. This was quickly followed by skepticism regarding my goal to move away from Eurocentrism. Two participants agreed with my topic. A few had their own ideas on what could be done for art education in schools, but
they felt the root of the problem of art education lay elsewhere. This made me wonder if
the research really matters, or if it only affects me because of the guilt I felt for having
allowed Western discourse rein over my thinking and work all this while.

Over time, as I paid closer attention to participants’ narratives and examined
different written and visual forms of data through different theoretical lenses, I saw how
the data opened up a great wealth of information that current writing on art and
curriculum in Singapore has not even begun to uncover, much less develop.

All the participants in this study work in very diverse ways. Some features of their
work that are noted in this research include the use of industrial processes and/or
industrially produced objects; the recalling of a wide range of imaginary from different
geographical, cultural, and historical locations; and the exercising of a certain level of
cognizance of international practices within their selected genre. The challenges of
physical and geographical space in Singapore have not only affected where some
participants work, but also whom they work with, and how they work. Admittedly, these
features and challenges are not uncommon across different social, cultural and historical
contexts. However, the dynamic mix and actions of these features with other structures
and factors, joined together with the imaginary and spatiality known as Singapore,
present peculiar conditions for knowing, being and responding. Practices cohere in
certain shared motivations, conjure as well as feed imagery from everyday physical-
discursive conditions in the materialization of Singapore as resource, place, space and
site.

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While practitioners largely adopt the forms and ethos of dominant practices and assume pre-existing subjectivities that are shaped by these dominant practices, practitioners’ accounts also reveal that such adherence can also be external and formalistic. As I listened to the conversations during the transcription and writing process, as I paid attention not to the categories participants used but to what they did, thought, experienced and aspired to be in and between the categories, I was surprised at how much was going on beyond the subject categories. Participants traverse across different roles, transgressing and confounding expectations they encounter in their fields and lives. They splice time, culture, history, fact, and fiction to create different visions, alternate ways of seeing, and whole new worlds. They adopt the terms of reference and prevailing code of practice for practitioners in their fields, if only to dismantle them in the work they do. Pragmatic Asians as we are – pardon me for enacting racial stereotypes here – the subject categories were only the ticket to somewhere else. The study reveals the limited ability of subject categories and dominant existing discourses to fully account for the extent of participants’ actions in their situations and through their work. I thought of the theoretical and disciplinary framings of current writings, and the knowledge generated, as well as the knowledge foregone in them. I realize that writing is partial. So is discourse.

Very often, to gain access and recognition in the global arena, we subscribe to existing dominant discourses. In doing so, we fail to recognize the full extent of our acts and potential, and lapse into existing but ill-fitting lexicons that approximate what was in
existence, rather than what we can become. In trying to be intelligible to one part of the world, we risk being incomprehensible to ourselves.

The multiplicity of artists’ identities, the dynamic traversing in and out and moving in between spaces, open up multiple avenues to make meaning and to be intelligible in various social and professional spheres. Just as we are still trying to make sense of the varied forms of disjuncture in global-local (Appadurai, 1990; Shuman 1993; Shuman & Briggs, 1993), there are also disjunctures between discourse and ontological-epistemological experiences and enactments. Although practitioners in this study cite certain given and/or expected forms of practice as means to frame their own work, they are also cognizant of their dynamic relationships with these structures as part of a larger ontological-epistemological context. Practitioners question their own training, background, values, approaches, and norms in their fields, and even their own practice. In working through these questions, dilemmas, and paradoxes in their work, practitioners constantly transgress and reconfigure their object-subject relationships with, and in, these conditions and structures. In these reconfigurations, artists, artworks, and practice are not just passively written in discourse but are active constituents. Subject-object enactment also does not mean separating one from the other, if anything, it draws them together through relationships in the co-constitution. While we cannot help but be entangled with the material, our physical and discursive environment, and other institutions, our relationships are not pre-determined but constantly reconfigured. By implication, those of us who write bear the responsibility to make these sides of the stories known.

Intervening, Reconfiguring, Reimagining
The same marks that circumscribe and make intelligible certain entities could well create opposing ones. Some conditions are thus concurrent conditions of impossibility and possibility, where different differentiations are possible, non-permanent, and dynamic, contingent upon the reconfiguring of space, time, and matter. The issue is how the selection and enacting of ethico-onto-epistemological structures enable some entities to be known while preventing others.

The grey spaces where boundaries are not so clear cut, be they in the form of practice, knowing, being, or responding, provide opportunities for intervention. It is easy to confuse freedom, that is, the lack or blurring of boundaries, with a need for structure. It is also easier to seek external or existing ethical, ontological, and epistemological structures than to write our own. In the case of the Sticker Lady, we see that in a vacuum, in the absence of meaning making devices, people are often quick to latch on to whatever available structures or boundary ma(r)king devices there are that provide intelligibility. However, to appeal to institutions outside of our own practice and field for those structures of intelligibility also means ceding control over their effects. Working towards decolonizing does not mean the absence of ethical, ontological, and epistemological structures, but rather rendering them more transparent, and at the same time critically reconfiguring and reimaging them to meet our needs and aspirations. It also means critically considering the reproductive effects in multiple fields, and in various expanses of phenomena. There is a need to pay attention to the conditions, constituents, and consequences or effects of boundary ma(r)king, and how they can obscure and supersede the meanings of events and works. Not all of these conditions,
constituents, and consequences are (art) related. Nonetheless, they reveal vested interests that are reiteratively produced and enfolded in the ongoing becoming of the works and practice. The study shows that it is just as important to take note of the enactment of the actions of human and non-human, the various forms of knowledge, borders and distinctions that are suppressed or excluded, and the relations among them.

**Im/possibility(s) of Art and Curriculum – Recommendations**

Writing about art and designating something as art enact boundary(s), albeit with many exclusions. The writing of art presupposes art as entity and field of engagement. The case of the Sticker Lady illustrates that there is no inherent property or boundary to art, and that there are a lot of ontological connections and formations that are lost or not documented when works and practice are written according to other writing practices. What(ever) is art can also be hijacked by various agenda if we do not pay attention to the boundary ma(r)king practices. Seeing art practices as entanglement of space, time, and matter, and as phenomena, attunes us to the micro-logic of conditions, constraints and practices of its im/possibility(s).

An agential realist approach to the writing of art takes into account the material-discursive practices in the entanglement of humans and non-humans in phenomena. More than a claim to attention to the local or claim to authenticity through the ontological, an ethico-onto-epistemological account makes us think about our engagement in terms of our responsibility and accountability to what comes to matter in art, in the practices of knowing in being. In an age of transnational flows and globalization, the making, being, and responding of art takes place at the nexus: exchanges and flows of ideas, people,
technology, media, and finances. While there is no outside place to write from, an ethico-onto-epistemological account considers the entanglement of the local and/with global, material and/with discursive, and us and/with others.

The understanding of art in its contextual elements and social cultural positioning is usually transposed, if not reproduced, in a school curriculum. Art curriculum as practice has enacted different agendas in different histories (see for example, Thistlewood, 1992). While art curriculum in schools follows to some extent the disciplinary circumscription of various aspects of art, it is often seen as mimetic and derivative of art disciplines (Efland, 1976; 1983; 1990), instead of as practices of disciplines in themselves. In different social and historical accounts of art education, art education is also presented as having been influenced by social, cultural, and intellectual trends of the society at large (Thistlewood, 1992; Efland 1990). Art curricula are likewise often positioned as lagging behind professional arts practices. The practices of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are discursive boundary ma(r)king practices. Art curricula, by nature of their disciplinary conceptions and structures within school curriculum and society, presuppose certain bounded notions and boundaries, inclusions and exclusions of art. Very often, such boundaries, though drawn within specific time, space and matter configurations, can reproduce discursive values and subjectification when taken or exercised as immutable.

Drawing from the analysis from this study, we see that the drawing of boundaries is contingent upon the phenomena of space, time, and matter of the practice; the effects and response to the practice; institutions; the art market(s); and many other personal
histories, experiences, and performances of self. These elements are not static or passive, and the continual actions they exert on one another in their entanglement enact particular and dynamic configurations within specific space, time, and matter.

In seeing art education as a form of ethico-onto-epistemology, the art curriculum should then focus not on pre-constituted boundaries of art, but on the dynamic constitution of material, discursive, human, and nonhuman, at the local and other levels. Such a curriculum will not focus on knowledge and practice within discrete boundaries, but provide for exploration of the interconnectedness and dynamic contingency of communities’ being, knowing, and responding in and through art. The learning of art focuses on art as knowledge making practices, situated within specific conditions, constraints, and practices of being. Art as practice encapsulates continuous knowing, being, and responding to an ongoing becoming of the world. An ethico-onto-epistemological approach to art curriculum emphasizes our responsibility in the making, knowing, being, and responding to art within situated environments, conditions and practices. Such a curriculum will focus on the context and structure of the constitution of different epistemologies and ontologies of art, and how objects, practices, and practitioners are understood or come to intelligibility within specific conditions. An important aspect of this approach is enabling students to draw relationships among different epistemologies and ontologies, as well as their own relationships with them. In examining these items and relating them to themselves, students can also explore the exclusions, alongside their effects and differences.
Ideally, this pedagogy will require students to constantly examine their own preconceived and ongoing notions and how those notions come to be. Students should also be given opportunities to investigate events, practices, and works, and to analyze how different understandings of the same phenomenon could be generated from different ethical, ontological, and epistemological standpoints.

The curriculum will also involve giving students exposure to and experience with different materials. Such experiences should not be tied to specific genres or art forms, but rather aim at providing students with an understanding of the nature of materials, manipulative skills, artists, and ideas in intra-action.

The irony and challenge of writing these ideas into part of a national curriculum is how easily ideas become territorialized in its reification as knowledge and how such forms of knowledge in turn creates its own subjects. We remember the cautionary example in Donna’s account where an artist’s statement reified over time creates its own subjectivity(s) of the artist and her work: where knowing is supplanted by its own reification as knowledge. Other than the neocolonialist and subjectifying tendencies that are already prevailing in dominant discourses and even in the outward forms of disciplinary knowledge, the continuous challenge in decolonizing curriculum design is to guard against its own re-colonizing.

An important mindset shift for the Singapore learning context is to get curriculum planners, teachers, and students to see the curriculum as a knowledge producing practice. While this may sound commonsensical, the situation is such that most stakeholders see a curriculum as packaged received knowledge, or disciplinary knowledge that has been
verified and published by experts. There is limited scholarship about art in Singapore: scholarship about art has largely been undertaken by the Singapore Art Museum, and a very few individuals. As these writings tend to be the only one or two in any given area, many of them are viewed as authoritative. If art curriculum is to be taken seriously as a knowledge producing enterprise, schools, teachers and students should be encouraged to write their own accounts of their experience with artists and their work.

Notes on Using Barad and Limitations of the Research

As much as the research is about understanding the materialization of select Singapore artists and their work, the study is also a preliminary exploration of Karen Barad’s (2007) agential realism theory within a larger composite framework. The use of this theory presents certain epistemological, ontological, and ethical challenges on its own. Its posthumanist conception is somewhat antithetical to humanist concerns in studies on post-colonial conditions and decolonizing methodologies. The notion of entanglement versus the pre-constitution of boundaries and categories of any kind, while liberating and fitting the anti-subjectification stance of post-colonial and decolonizing studies, also presents issues for efforts that are constructive and/or preservative in nature. For the purposes of this research, the attention to the ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues addresses major issues while the framework provides interesting points of reconsideration of subjectivity(s) than what is currently proposed in post-colonial and decolonizing studies. Adopting a posthumanist stance and de-centering humanist concerns and intentions was challenging, especially at the beginning. At times I had to
question whether I was projecting humanist attributes even when describing the material, and then constantly step back and check myself.

The notion of entanglement and no predetermined boundaries presented a language issue that also became apparent as an epistemological one over time. How do you even discuss and think in an entangled way that is also non-constitutive, if the nature of language is differentiating in nature? This forced me to check my language and frame of thinking constantly. It came to a point when even the use of ‘art,’ ‘artists,’ and ‘practice’ became problematic. To address some of these issues, I focused on intra-actions and thinking of describing intra-actions as verbs and gerunds. I also use ‘work’ in place of ‘art’ and ‘practice’, and ‘participants’ instead of ‘artists’ as far as possible.

On one level, agential realism seems generic and all-encompassing in explaining various phenomena. One difficulty in applying it is in terms of scoping the phenomena and looking for and defining specific intra-actions within phenomena (Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011). I was able to analyze the phenomenon of the Sticker Lady as I was in Singapore when it started. I followed and observed it as I was also part of it. It was less so for the work of other artists as we tended to talk about work that they had already done or phenomena that were outside my experience. This led me to wonder about the limits of the ontological as a form of knowing. To have a better understanding of what constitutes the phenomena of the artists’ work, I tried to gather other information on the artists and their work. In presenting the phenomena and analysis, there were times I had to juggle being critical and being faithful to participants’ accounts, as well as wondering how to present the ethical considerations. The challenge of using an ethico-onto-epistemological
framework is the practice of it. The application of the theory during the research has given me a better understanding of the theory as practice. Given the resources of the current research, I hope I have been responsible with what I was entrusted.

**Limitations, Implications, and Future Research**

As a preliminary study on the reconsideration of subjectivity in and of art in Singapore, this research has explored the topic using a composite of theories. These are: Karen Barad’s (2007) posthumanist conception that combines the human and nonhuman, discursive, and material; Michel Foucault’s grid of intelligibility (1978); and Appadurai’s global disjunctures (1990). Within the confines of the research, I focused mainly on the constitution of a very select group of works and practices by current artists at the local level within the context of Singapore. The research has yielded several insights and preliminary ideas for the (re)writing of art and curriculum. Further research will be needed to examine these ideas more critically and develop them for use in the respective fields. More research is also needed to examine and develop the framework for use in research on more and different forms of art in Singapore, to more fully evaluate its use in the field more fully. Nonetheless, given the limited resources and perspectives on art and art curriculum in Singapore and Southeast Asia, I hope that this research will trigger curricular discussions in the arts and education fields.

The research has also provided a preliminary exploration for an alternate framework to consider subjectivity(s) as boundary ma(r)king practices with ethical, ontological, and epistemological implications. Some of the issues raised such as (re)perceiving curriculum as knowledge-making practices, can also be interesting
discussion points for curriculum studies in various disciplines and fields. Though the research was borne out of concerns of subjectivity issues of the post-colonial global, some of the ideas on enabling the reconfiguring of subject-object relationships can be further examined for use in other contexts.
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Appendix A: List of sample of interview questions

1. How did you start making/curating/writing about art?

2. What keeps you making/curating/writing about art? What do you do other than make art?

3. Do you consider your art to be a practice? If so, can you describe that practice, and how is it the same as, or different than, other practices?

4. What are some of the challenges of describing how you work? What are the advantages or limitations of putting your practice into words?

5. What do you think is often left out in publications or writing about you and your work?

6. What are some things or experiences that have affected your work?

7. What are you most proud of in your work?

8. What do you think how other people see your work?

9. What would you like to see happen regarding art in Singapore?
Appendix B: Select Snapshots of Interviews

SKLO & ZERO

For Sam and Zul, street art addresses social issues by engaging people to think and participate in the discussion about key issues. Some of their works, such as painting onsite, aim at engaging people or creating opportunities for people to interact with the work and artists. Their work is site-specific, and encourages people to interact with the physical and psychical space by using art elements and ways of working that invite the viewer to respond. Zul spoke of using gestural strokes in his work as a way of getting viewers to experience the making process. Even though some of the works address larger issues such as characteristics of people and consumerism, these are filtered through the artists’ observation of how these manifest or interact with the Singapore urban population.

However, an important cultural aspect that Sam and Zul had to contend with is Singapore law: strict vandalism laws affected where and how they could work. Zul shared how his graffiti artist counterparts in other Asian cities had questioned the opportunity to practice graffiti art in Singapore. He acknowledges these constraints, but he also points to them as what set his work apart. Unlike in other cities, Zul points out that in Singapore there is no “wild abandonment”: “we have to strategize…you have to contextualize your work, you have to be sophisticated about your practice…you need
some restraint. Restraint actually gives you certain new insights” (personal communication, January 30, 2013).

After Sam’s arrest, she was invited by The Substation, an alternative art space, to make a work on its walls (Figure 8). After her sentencing, as part of an art commission, she also designed signs for an area on the resort island Sentosa, using Singlish and her unique take on behaviors and mannerisms (Figure 9). Zul and his artist collectives, which he formed with friends, also created work for the Singapore Art Museum and other commercial companies (Figure 10). Over time, the local press also recognized Zul and his collective ARTVSTS as being among the who’s who in street art (The Straits Times, 2007). The irony of such paradoxical co-opting by institutions and commercial entities is not lost on Zul, as can be seen in his pseudo self-parodic work (Figure 11).

**Hans Tan**

Hans does not think a designer should be defined by his profession. In fact, he sees function and design as a medium, rather than an end, just as canvas is a medium for an artist. He sees design’s main function as communication, using function to suggest a different narrative, to change a common perception and to change the way we commonly see or use things. In this model, design plays many roles. At the fundamental level, design helps to address issues encountered in daily lives and improve living, such as designs for diabetes devices and apparatuses for the disabled. Hans is uncomfortable with the artist-designer divide in Singapore. In Europe, where he trained, he explains that everyone is an artist, including engineers and surgeons. As long as a person is doing something interesting and creative, s/he is an artist. He finds it hard in today’s context to
strictly distinguish design from art. Depending on the design brief (requirements) and situation, design could be more appropriate to solve certain issues, whereas a more artistic approach would be needed to solve others. He sees himself as traversing between the two.

Hans uses function and design to help people understand concepts of aesthetics, to share his own questioning, and to encourages others to question. He explains, “where we start questioning, where we start not understanding,… when you don’t understand… then you’re truly trying to understand it in some ways” (personal communication, February 14, 2013). Quoting Guston Bachelard, Hans shares that when we think we are creating something new, we often think that we are forming new images, new typologies, in that “we always think of the imagination as the faculty that forms images” (Bachelard, 1988, p. 1, italics in original) (originally printed in French in 1943). However, according to Bachelard, it is quite the contrary, imagination “deforms what we perceive” and “frees us from immediate images and changes them” (p. 1). Bachelard writes that for there to be an imaginative act, there needs to be a change, for that to happen, “the image that is present” need to make us think of “one that is absent” (p. 1). If an image does not involve an “abundance”, an “explosion” of unusual images, then there is no imagination just the memory of perception (p. 1). As such, to come up with something new is not to start with a blank piece of paper, as many designers and artists are taught, but rather to start with the status quo, use what is expected, then reframe, rethink it, to “deform” what is known (personal communication, February 14, 2013). He refers to the status quo and that which has come to be expected or taken for granted as the baseline. The more stable the
baseline, the more interesting the outcome. He points out that nothing is ever new. Creation is not always about discovery but about seeing something in a different perspective.

When he started on his *Spotted Nonya* collection (Figure 7), the brief he gave himself was that he wanted to work with ceramics and porcelain. As he is not a ceramicist, instead of creating ceramics he asked how he could work with the medium in reverse: working on something already in existence, disrupting it, even to the point of destruction. The Peranakan ceramics ware was not unfamiliar in the local context. It, and everything Peranakan, was made popular in recent years thanks to a local Chinese television series. The television period drama “The Little Nonya,” featuring the life and fortunes of three generations of a Peranakan family, was on the air from November 2008 to January 2009, and enjoyed the highest television rankings compared to shows in all previous years. The show was also very popular when exported to other Chinese speaking countries. Hans used the Peranakan ware because it was a familiar local imagery— a stable baseline, so to speak— so any disruption would produce interesting effects. He attributes the good reception of the *Spotted Nonya Collection* in Europe to the colors and the techniques he used, which affirms the fact that the work can be appreciated at various levels, unhinged from its cultural specificity.

In addition to the *Spotted Nonya*, Hans also did a number of other works that are new re-productions of objects that were once common sights in Singapore, such as glass mugs used in local hawker centers and plastic colanders used in fruit stalls to hold and display fruits. In hawker centers where many different stalls sell the same or similar food,
stall operators usually mark their own mugs, crockery, and utensils with crude painting and/or electrical tape. Hans saw this practice within the context of “a cultural institution where people are just finding quick solutions in a smart way,” which was propagated and became “recognizable as a Singapore thing.” His re-production aims to capture the “common, mundane, everyday behavior” which could be lost over time as society progresses, and as hawker centers downsize or are slowly replaced (personal communication, February 14, 2013). He notes ruefully that the irony is that once this is lost, nobody would recognize and understand the work anymore. Hans’ glass mugs replicate those in actual hawker centers, but instead of quick-fix markings, the color markings are made permanent by expensive heat-screening colored glass strips (Figure 23). The humble plastic colanders are similarly immortalized through solid gold plating that also references the commercial gold plating of Singapore’s national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim, a type of orchid (Figure 24). The permanence and deliberateness of the techniques and choice of materials not only capture these everyday stories and moments through the objects, but also transform their value. When produced in limited editions, these everyday items become collector’s items.
Even though Hans had had job offers in Holland and even offers for him to set up his own studio there, he knew that he had to come back to Singapore to do what he imagined himself doing. He notes that the work he did in Holland was different from what he is doing in Singapore, in terms of the imagery and materials to which he responds. Hans draws inspiration from the things he sees and reads every day, the people he talks to, and his observations of everyday life. These feed a person’s perception. With technology today, he acknowledges that one can see what is happening almost everywhere; however, he points to the importance of having one’s family around and notes that perception is both mental and emotional. He needs the locality, the every-day-ness in Singapore: Singapore as context, as foundation and grounding for the kind of work he is doing.
Gek Lin Tan

Gek Lin’s sharing brings up the relationships between physical infrastructure, organization of ceramics communities, and the practice of ceramics in Singapore. Due to the costs of setting up ceramics studio spaces and firing equipment, along with the safety restrictions on gas kilns and other non-electric firing methods, there are typically only a few ceramics studios scattered across different locations in Singapore. Most serious ceramicists would thus practice at one or two of these locations, depending on their associations. As ceramicists usually start off by learning under particular master artists or lead artists, who practice at particular studios, the studios are usually organized somewhat like learning or practicing communities. This is also reinforced by the open manner in which the studios are set up. Depending on the resident master artist or lead artist(s), there can also be expectations for practice, code of conduct, and attendance. Entry or
acceptance into some of these studios can sometimes also be contingent on a number of factors, such as the type of work an artist produced and his/her practice in general. Given the small circle of ceramicists and the often mimetic nature of ceramics training, it is common for ceramicists to identify and describe works in terms of who the artists had studied with. In such an environment, it is important to cultivate one’s own artistic identity.

A graphic designer by training and still a freelance designer, Gek Lin is still stumped as to how to identify herself. Does calling herself an artist now negate all she used to be and do? Maybe not. Does being an artist mean she spends most of her time creating work? Does it mean she is a full-time artist? How about a serious artist who makes art part-time? Even if one does not physically make art most of the time but thinks about it all the time, would one qualify as an artist? If artist is a broader term compared to designer, potter, or ceramicist-- one that also covers the other creative work she does at various locations-- why is she still not satisfied with the term? At various points in the interview, Gek Lin explained her problem with terminologies, classification, and the way certain definitions are set up and used. For example, she explains how in Singapore you are identified by what you do. Even as a ceramicist, she acknowledges that she continues to be influenced by her design training, perspectives, and way of doing things. She considers, “You think you can be this, but without all these things you may not be who you are” (personal communication, March 22, 2013). However, she also admits that certain aspects of her graphic design background, such as a preference for precision, might sometimes interfere with her art. Gek Lin found it hard to call herself an artist in
the beginning, but has come to embrace the term and resolves not be bothered by what other people say.

When asked how she would define a practice, she talks about it being holistic, as being about what she believed in doing, what she does regularly, and how what she does translates into who she is. It is not just about the art, but also the way she sees life and the principles she lives by. She gave the example of making a vessel and how the outside should reflect the inside, and that there should be even thickness from the top to bottom to ensure that the absorption of glaze is consistent. She used this example to illustrate that whatever one shows to others, one also has to be true to oneself.

When working on ceramics, she usually has some vague idea in mind, and often develops her form, methods and techniques as she works. On a few occasions she started with certain themes, but even these works often changed along the way and did not turn out as intended, so it was not easy to follow a predetermined idea or plan. Gek Lin likens the comfort of falling back on skills to “coming back home”: 

What is so nice feeling about it, sometimes when you have no idea what you wanted to do, you can just throw bowls, cups, very utilitarian stuff, but which requires the skill. . . if you have the skill, you can still form something. . . And that’s the nice thing, it’s like coming back home, . . . It’s coming home to basics. I can still do this. . .but if you have an idea of what you want to do, you can use the technique that you know and create what you want. (personal communication, March 22, 2013)
Even though this is how she works, she observed that it was not easy to teach in this manner. That is, it is difficult to teach a particular technique and then expect students to know what and how to create using that technique alone. It is easier to teach them how to make certain objects or forms, such as frogs or fish, rather than getting them to create whatever they wish with the technique. Gek Lin used to attribute this issue to the Singapore mindset that tends to focus on outcomes. She noted how a British lady told her that her own ceramics education in the UK focused on process rather than on the final outcome of what is made. However, in Gek Lin’s teaching of expatriate students, she also encountered similar issues, causing her to wonder about the cultural basis of her observation.

Gek Lin often talks about the importance of feeling and enjoying the clay. The condition of the clay, such as its hardness and softness, determines the kind of techniques, methods, and forms that can be applied. She relates how in her teaching, students sometimes could not understand why they need to do certain things, and have difficulties grasping the feel of clay and understanding its character. She emphasizes the importance of appreciating ceramics through feel instead of just visually, as one can only grasp certain aspects of the weight and form, and thereby appreciate the making, by touching, holding, and even tapping and listening to the clay. She has always enjoyed working with different types of materials since her days as a design student. However, in much of her work, she finds that she needs to work with whatever is available for transport and can be easily managed within the confines of her workspaces.
Both Gek Lin and Donna related what they do to their Christian faith. The organic nature of clay reminds Gek Lin of biblical teachings about man’s relationship with his Maker. Donna’s works are conversations she has with her Maker, about her own and other people’s hopes. Donna uses art to impart a sense of wonderment, a sense of hope that can transport people from the realities of life to experience moments of pleasure, which can in turn color and affect what they see in life. Donna also hopes that she herself can be a positive influence within the arts community.

Donna describes her work and her decision to go into art as a calling. Her father is a local sculptor who also works in a family business. She acknowledges his influence not just through his art but the everyday things, such as the way he arranges found objects, juxtaposes them, and makes them into something new around the house. Her formal training in art mostly began when she took art for her A levels (high school) at a British boarding school. Donna shared how a friend was surprised by her initial decision to go into architecture, as her friend described art as Donna’s ethos, spirit, and who she was. Even though many people, including her teachers and parents, had seen her aptitude in art and encouraged her to take it up in college, she resisted for a while. She did not think art was a proper career, financially speaking, and thought art was something she could always do part time as an architect.

After she went into architecture, though, she found herself struggling. She felt unsuited for architecture, because of its practical, solution-oriented nature. By comparison, she felt that art was “as natural as breathing” to her (personal communication, January 29, 2013). After more than a year in architecture, she felt called
to do art. At that point, she did not have a sense that she was really talented in art or that
she was suited for it, but she decided to go into art out of obedience to the calling. She
completed her architecture degree, in accordance with her family’s wishes, before
earning a second degree in fine art at Goldsmiths’ College, University of London, on a
Shell-National Arts Council scholarship from Singapore.

When Donna talks about her work, I get the sense that she is living the dream of
not just one but many vocations. She talks about being a “chameleon” through art: “Art is
so open that you can be a chameleon. You can be anything you want and it becomes a
project, and you don’t have to go very deep in it. You can go as deep as you want.”
Similarly, she characterizes herself as an “investigator,” “historian,” “scientist” and
“film-maker” (personal communication, January 29, 2013). Even within her work as an
artist, she also has to work with many different people, such as suppliers, contractors,
gallery security guards, studio assistants, and museum staff. Given the international
nature of her work, she found her overseas education helpful in preparing her to be
flexible enough to interact with people across different cultures and situations. She had
initially thought that being an artist meant working in her studio and making better works
each year. Yet she now sees her calling as being more than making art and showing it in
the local context. She talks about attending international art fairs and forums; talking
about her works in various contexts; managing her career; knowing which galleries to go
to; negotiating contracts; and building relationships with other artists, art critics and
writers. She also recalls how she benefited from more senior artists nurturing her and
sharing their experiences. While she acknowledges the importance of critics and writers
writing about and critiquing her work, she also talks about ways of interacting with the critique, in terms of allowing it to influence her work or to knowing when to stand up against it.

Donna’s works are often assemblages of objects and found imagery, coming together to reconfigure semiotic, physical, and temporal spaces. The imagery and titles of her works evoke landscapes of various kinds, such as *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* (2006) (Figure 16) and *Crystal City* (2009) (Figure 17). These works evoke déjà vu, familiar and yet unfamiliar places and memories. In these works, familiar daily objects not only inhabit but disrupt different spaces and their demarcations. Certain pieces of Hans’ work are similarly situated in specific socio-cultural artifacts of the everyday. However, Donna’s objects and spaces, such as the glassware and arrangement in *Crystal City*, seem to inhabit a generic ordinary thing-ness that recalls objects and landscapes from somewhere and everywhere, and yet from nowhere in particular. Singapore art historian Kevin Chua identifies the strength of Donna’s *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* series with the fact that the narrative and object are hinged together in an adroit way. In these works, the viewer never loses the narrative, even in the close-up encounter with the objects. The object-parts, in turn, are metaphorized without losing their tangibility as material things, rooted in a place and time (Chua, 2010). Chua disputes the adequacy and precision of commentary that describes Donna’s work as being drawn from her imagination, for, he asks, which post-Renaissance artwork does not. Instead, he writes of her work as emplacing the imagination by grounding it in reality, bringing us to a world, a different future.
By contrast, the worlds in Michael Lee’s works are composites of the actual and fictitious. If Donna’s works evoke the fantastic that seem hinged to a certain sense of place and time, Michael’s works question what we know, understand, and experience by exploring the subconscious, hidden structures and ‘what could have been,’ sometimes by fracturing and fusing different temporal and geographical spatialities.

Trained in mass communication, Michael started making art around 2001, after he joined the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts as a lecturer in aesthetics and history of art. Inspired by the colleagues around him, he started painting and then went on to video, curating, and writing. He decided in 2003 “to be known as an artist, first and foremost,” that is, an artist who “just happens to have a teaching job” rather than as a lecturer who also made art (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

In his work, he explores notions of space and desire based on his bachelor’s and master’s research in sexuality, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. As he did not have any formal training, he recalls that he was “picking up things randomly” (personal communication, March 16, 2013). He first researched concepts of space across different theories and fields, such as architecture, urban studies, and urban geography. He then created a diverse series of architectural works, including architectural models, origami architecture, architectural proposals, and floor plans of significant buildings. His National Columbarium of Singapore, a white floating city, is comprised of 100 lost monuments of Singapore, and includes 45 scale models of demolished, unbuilt, or fictitious structures named after the city-state (Figure 25). His work explores how space and structures engage our memories of one another and the environment. He is especially interested in
“why certain spaces are defined in certain ways” and “how spaces are used against their function” (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

Installation of architectural models, captions, and a timeline paper board, vinyl. 1:100 scale.

Implicit in this is the notion of transgression and how people find ways to resist normalization in society. He defines the normal person, in Singapore, as someone who is heterosexual, married, owns a house, and has children. He wonders about such structures of normalization and standardization in a world of diversity, and their implications on issues of human rights and equality. To explore these implications, he uses Freudian notions of the whole range of desire, and its relation to human existence and resistances.

His fascination with seeking connections, underlying structures, and seeing other possibilities is demonstrated in his mind maps and infographics. His mindmap “Museum of Cooking Pot Bay” (Figures 22 & 26) brings together locations, geographical and imaginary spatialities, legends, historical and everyday events and persons, nature, trivialities and fiction into a commemoration of Telok Blangah, or “Cooking Pot Bay” in English. Telok Blangah is a district south of Singapore, and the artwork was commissioned by the Land Transport Authority and is installed at the Mass Rapid Transit (Singapore’s underground rail system) station in that area.

Michael feels that the toughest thing for him as an artist is to do his “own thing,” to establish his own identity in his work. He describes himself as an alchemist who brings things together and “cooks them” (personal communication, March 16, 2013). In doing so, he prefers to be transparent and cite his sources as means of paying homage, though he admits to using red herrings at times. He does not make works that are too direct or too easy, but instead looks for the complex, layered, and ironic that could incite different insights and responses.

His sense of ethics in his work meant that he strives for what he thinks is right for himself and the world, rather than what mainstream society or the contemporary art circle defines as good or bad. He sees his work as engaging with topical issues while “always attempting to develop some kind of visual innovation,” and believes that the binary thinking in Singapore persistently tends towards rigidity and exclusivity in categorization, even within the art scene. In such a context, where “we keep things in very clear boxes and apart,” he discusses the conflation of morality and ethics in that “moral differentiation of the right thing cannot be wrong” and “the wrong thing cannot be good” (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

He believes there is a perception that Singapore artists are too comfortable and not as socially or politically engaged, compared to their Indonesian counterparts. The fact that Singapore is relatively safe and free from natural and human-made disasters has an impact on how artists work. He notes that the best of Singapore artists are able to “make critical observations of the world and of Singapore society in quite sophisticated ways.” Singapore artists also tend to be quite good at articulating and communicating what they
are trying to do. In saying this, he notes, he is reminded of criticisms that his work is “too glib.” He discusses the need to expand notions of the art community, as well as community and the art. Current conceptions suggest that to engage the community, we need to “dumb things down”. However he sees the need to rectify the fact that artistic and intellectual pursuits are seen as separate. As artists, he believes “we should see ourselves as intellectual leaders” (personal communication, March 16, 2013).