

An Island,

As Inland, As Island

A chronic text

What kind of future(s) can we imagine for our current conditions of precarious migrations, securitized fears and asphyxiated commons? What cultures of care could be freshly fermented amidst the poison of racialized divisions, and what kinds of social contracts might persist between cities and their inhabitants, and between differing islands? How can the disruption of nature/culture binaries foster more-than-human entanglements?

Jason Wee (JW):

Switzerland is a colonial without colonies. It is an apex country, the mountainous peak territorially demarcated from the oceanic and the plains, the temperate zone set in counter-distinction from the tropical, once the tropical has been located through the apparatuses of empire. Singapore is a colony idealized by any colonial.

Tomorrow is an anagram. It is a root worm, burrowing into the soil unsalted by the encroaching seas, into the depths of the future that lies in wait, a bioindicator that tells us if that ground is polluted, ruined and toxic, or living. It is a motor row in our glass cities, where the shiny new transports are waiting for the flood-prone poor to drive and the dry rich to drive in. It is a non-identical repetition, like the past returning but in different, barely recognizable form, like dead King Duncan back as a knocking on Lady Macbeth's door, a revenant that is both embedded in its past and an escapee from it.

Damian Christinger (DC):

Hermeneutic thinkers like Canadian philosopher Charles Margrave Taylor argue that modernity created a cultural consciousness, that has been shaped in such a way that we imagine ourselves as islands of awareness floating in the great ocean of life, being mere visitors on this spaceship called earth. This specious self-consciousness can be understood as a disengaged-self. Artists, like the ones speaking in this publication, or at least their art, could be read as non-nostalgic, engaged hermeneuts, working – maybe unconsciously, but dedicated – from within the legacy of Paulo Freire, who wrote 1968 in the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed": "The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side."^[1] Artistic practice is archipelago thinking.

Nicole Bachmann (NB):

Tomorrow is an anagram of what? Of past histories? Of past movements? Tomorrow consists of overlaying space-time-islands.

JW:

The scrambling of spatial and temporal coordinates is certain, less so how exactly do these islands overlay. Is the relationship one of a spatial or temporal palimpsest, like the twinned territories in China Mieville's *The City, The City*, cohabitants of the same geography but each temporally out of phase with the other? Or a kind of bricolage, that hammers the plantation logic, slavery and indentured labor of the colonial economy, shared across seas by several islands, onto the alley of different languages, settlements, governments, rebellions, religions and customs, shaping these materialities into an entangled, if not common, future?

Monica Ursina Jäger (MUJ):

Are you suggesting an artistic practice as archipelagic, entangled engagement?

JW:

The declarative statement is enticing (see, I just did it!) but I am skeptical about claiming the archipelagic for all artistic practices. In my reading, Taylor's individualist self tends towards atomism, suggesting that any collective entanglements, any everyday participation in and development of the social is an accidental externality. To rework your words in the light of Monica's question, is an archipelagic artistic practice a recurring engagement, of entering a dialogue with the people, wherever and however they are gathered, but also forming these dialogues with other such hermeneuts, other such persons, such as another island, coinhabited by the hermeneuts, might form?

More questions – How can we think of islanding as a philosophy or theorizing of smallness? Islanding as a scale of urban design, to focus on the neighbour rather than the skyscraper.

Islanding as a vector, a non-constant speed that both accelerates and decelerates, in a non-random but irrational sequence, a horizontality that moves towards infinity as an ever-so-tiny downward curvature. Islanding as thinking at the level of sentence and verse, rather than in systems and organization. Islanding as a recognition protocol for communication, transformation and symbiosis, with the clarity of faces and hand signs, rather than the obscurity of deep code.

Marcus Yee (MY):

Atmospheric ambitions ("where sky meets sea", as the promotional literature goes) weighs down upon the marshes. Think of the dizzying, twisting condominiums that pierce through the clouds, lithifying fluvial ecologies into real estate, beach and desert. Allan Sekula once wrote that the fetishization of waterfronts, promenades, beach holidays, and sea-views are but symptoms of an alienation from the sea. Alienation from the idea that the sea, apropos Glissant, cannot be used. All the names of private estates the garrison Singapore's shores: Silversea, Pebbie Bay, Water Place, The Seafront, Rivergale. Winds no longer carry you into the ocean, but rather, access cards of high-security condominiums. Bhattacharya on Kolkata: Memories of soaking ecologies are drained by dizzying verticality of developmentalist playgrounds. Architects of the atmosphere find more quick-fixes for dry land, sealing up the pores with cement.

Tides continue to advance onto borrowed shores, finding intimacies with every granule of sand. Under the new moon, they steal away.

DC:

In "Writing Culture" Stephen A. Taylor argues: "A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry – not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the ethos of the community;" [1]

JW:

Nils Busandt recently wrote, "the strangest monster in the forest is a Westerner". It is that person trained in anthropology, steeped in the history of conceptual art practices, equipped with narratology and every apparatus necessary to turn ecology into economy. The question is implied, "who is the monster familiar to the forest?"

Wei Xin Chong (WX):

Or we could dive into this world, zooming into microcosm – with a spectrometer you could measure colours on the dorsal surfaces of a *hymenopus coronatus*, rare and tiny predators resembling orchids to attract their pollinator prey. Moving in time with the orchid stems; swaying in a breeze; swaying and then striking.

Some attempt to analyse their floral mimicry: find logic behind the contrasts, the swell of the petal-like femoral lobes. Each single plant in this thick humidity, home base to constant cross-species struggle, is an arena of survival: one minute life for another every second of the day.

NB:

The poetic break in my work within this analogy would mean to board a logboat and paddle towards the next island.

DC:

I imagine this island to be overgrown by a forest. Within this entity there are no individuals. There aren't even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest.

MUJ:

With epiphytes resting on the trees, such as Bromeliads. They are collectors of water. They are harvesters of moisture, condensing mist and collecting the rain trickling onto their leaves. Their pools are not inert bodies of water, far from it, they are habitats in themselves: miniature ecosystems, with resident aquatic plants and animals. The pool absorbs any debris that falls inside, and as this decays it feeds the Bromeliad in turn.

A community of orchids, fungi, mosses, lichen, bacteria, other epiphytes has built up small caches of humus formed from minute particles of soil carried by the wind and rain. Entities growing on top of entities. Storeys upon storeys. The entire canopy is an interconnected membrane, endlessly recycling the energy harvested by the leaves through networks of aerial roots and moving water.

Here, the ceiling of the world becomes its floor. The strata of the forest remind me of the city. Signalling molecules move along the interconnecting sky-walks, minute organisms like airborne plankton. Below lies a quieter, sombre world of colonised hollows, inhabited dens, leaves, faeces and corpses. The trees bridge it all, shifting the organic matter back into their crowns as soon as it becomes available to their roots.

JW:

Another approach to smallness – islanding as an endemism, the way subjectivities closely embody adaptations to their islandic locality. To see, hal’—seriously, in the high prevalence of myopia, eczema, and dementia in Singapore bodes the symptomatic indications of shortsightedness, amnesia, allergens in its body politic.

WX:

There’s also *Malassezia*, the skin-dwelling yeast found on 90% of adult populations, which when nurtured blooms into *pitiriasis versicolor*: an occasional fine scaling of the skin, rounded patterns of discoloration with distinct borders... Common in hot, humid climates when warm bodies are in almost constant sweat, passed through contact with surfaces, aggravated and nursed through restrictive clothing. Covering one’s skin slowly, the hypo-/hyperpigmented patches of *Malassezia*’s growth creep along subtly raised, velvety soft like fine fur to the touch. Plant-like skin residents, perhaps they dream of flowering over tropical bodies unrestrained, forging an endemic camouflage—human organisms under siege—symbiosis...

JW:

...at some tipping point, we are no longer the extinction-generating swarm, the voracious machine turning biomateriality into resource, but the most abundant host and food source. *Malassezia* has a pathogenic role in various manifestations of atopic dermatitis and eczema. Imagine a fungi bequeathed with this terra derma and the blessing to go forth and multiply. Imagine ourselves not as the homed but the housing, not individuals in search of dwelling and shelter but as the surface the bacterial/fungal parts of the world will live off and live on.

MY:

Earthly enclaves are fragile, ambiguous affairs. Considering the history of the nascent atmosphere, oxygen is an event, rather than mere substance. Traces of the Great Oxygenation Event that happened 2.4 billion years ago are imprinted in stromatolites, fossils of layered microbial fabric. They line the hems of hypersaline bays. With this nutrient-rich conditions of fine sediment, tides, and photosynthetic cyanobacteria, oxygen was first released into the seas as iron oxides.

But the rise of cyanobacteria also saw the first mass extinction of anaerobic life-forms, the Oxygenation Catastrophe. For these anaerobic ancestors, oxygen was toxic. Stromatolites were the warehouses and workhouses for poison. If we turned Jameson’s injunction on its head, “always historicize”, the planetary is temporal: a branching bush of contingencies. Rather than a Huttonian steady-state system held together by eternalist cycles, planetary plots are motile, recursive, and contradictory.

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DC:

As an opposing model of bodies we could come back to the proposed “phytophilosophy,” of Monica and argue that plants are the medium through which we perceive and experience the world. They form their own political bodies. On a chemical level, they are the creators of the world we live in, generate its oxygenic atmosphere. Live from CO₂ emissions, and use processes of photosynthesis to exploit the energies of the sun. Plants transformed life into an atmospheric condition, a space where everything mixes with everything else, and where everything is literally inside other subjects than their selves. Thinking – and the production of knowledge – is thus the breath of being, and not merely individual expression; it is a thinking with the universal that exists everywhere and in all possible forms. Might this be one role model for a certain agency within the arts? And how radically have we to incorporate it as artists and curators, as practitioners of an archipelago state of mind?

JW:

A micro-practice: to inhale, not with a thought of emptying the self, or an infilling of a transcendent spirit, but as a recognition of the oxygen-giving plantworld, a first step in a communication protocol.

A thought experiment: if we speak and see through the plantworld, it is a means of slowed if universal communication, resistant to accelerants and cycles of rapid obsolescence (the affliction of every access point we currently have to the Internet). Would this produce useful delays, productive expectancies as we wait to receive and transmit our thoughts, or will this only be a weak interaction between sentients? The comics writer Jonathan Hickman in his *House of X* and *Dawn of X* works, imagines newly evolved humans living entirely on a plant-based biomass that is both their habitat as well as their means of communicating with each other. This not only changes what they consider speech and writing, but also new collective agreements. Will plantmedia consciousness ever change the patterns and syntax of our speech and writing? Which is another way of asking if another universalism is the counter to the current proliferation of shipwrecked nationalisms. If this, what social contact will be produced between humans and between the plant- and human world?

MUJ:

I wish we could stand in the salty water and produce our own land. With our feet submerged in deliciously oozy mud, we could – just like the *Samphire* plant – collect deposits and minerals from the sea and transform fragile coastal strips into cultivable land. Over time, it would become a place of imagination, narration and memory, a lively archipelago of matter and knowledge, a multi-layered place of resistance and resilience. Stories of entire civilizations would become—inscribed in its strata, memories deposited between sand and gravel. But – as it goes with the counter-intuitive life of the *Samphire* plant: by creating solid land the territory becomes untenable for oneself, but gives way to other creatures to inhabit the land.

NB:

open your mind
daydream
loose associations
filter in
evaporate
contaminate
or
pellinate
come back round
in a different dress
add your rhythm
tone
and
hesitation
pump
blood in your veins
ideas circulated
rub my fingers
tingle
tap
shake it up
inside
or
rather
inner thoughts?
float
change position
into the dark
testing ground
huddle together
not one
but a many
many others
bend lines
dent the structure
do you want it
to fall?
or
adapt?

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