



Sina Wittayawiroj: *IML*  
Digital print and animation, Dimensions variable, 2012

### Simply Looking At Things (Looking)

Thinking from the viewpoint of “objects”, Graham Harman had surmised:

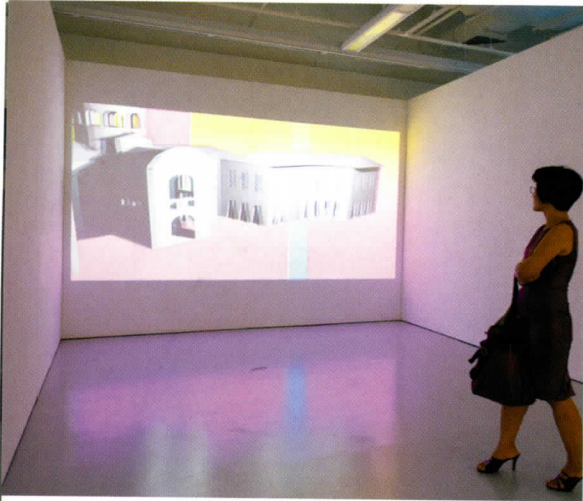
*[...] that insofar as something is present to consciousness, it is merely present-at-hand (vorhanden). But what is present to our minds in this way is only a tiny proportion of the entities with which we are involved. (174)*

What can be apprehended sensuously is a facet of an object that does not and cannot exhaust the entire meaning and existence of that same entity. This object-oriented ontology approach brings to mind an alternate scopic regime that Martin Jay described as “suppress[ing] narrative and textual reference in favour of description and visual surface” (12) – or, more than mere description, favouring an autonomy given over to the existence and insistence of (collection of) things. Muhammad Akbar’s *1000 Singapore’s Cigarette Butts* and James Yakimicki’s *Spatial Deviation* are such curious objects in themselves – the former as a Quixotic attempt to record, order and present, literally, a larger-than-life reality of cigarette butts; while the latter activates the intangible spatial relationships of things, space and thoughts by means of a barely-visible thread that shifts in and out of an all-too-fragile human-centered perception.

A slightly different manner of understanding objects can be discerned in Erika Norris’ *The Geographer Library* which hinges upon what cannot be seen as the central conceptual underpinning

of what is seen. The selective removal and paring down of a seemingly coherent collection of magazine images to a few pages of free-standing remnants points to a deep-seated desire to know images as both material and conceptual things. As Charles Merewether pointed to, in his reading of the modernist engagement of the notion of “land” through the technological advancement of aerial photography (with the increasing circulation of a disembodied view-point of large areas of land), the development of abstraction could then be realised not as detachment from reality but as a renewed means of perceiving and, hence, understanding reality. This desire of knowing is made possible by what can be seen (presently), which in turn is determined and driven by what is not seen.

Charles Lim in his introductory seminar presentation suggested a single-mindedness that drives his projects toward a manner of over-turning commonly accepted norms of discerning categories – sea / land; in / out; above / below; stasis / flow. It is a manner of working, or an ethics of art-making, which seeks to reclaim both literally and metaphorically a suppressed condition that might have been hiding in plain sight all along – or a simultaneous actualisation of the (not-)seen. The notion of “plain sight” is further taken up through Sam Rains’ *it’s kind of like patchwork*, in which one has to constantly switch mental registers between a tangible physicality and an intangible representation that are intimately dependent on each other. The succession of projected digital architectural models in turn elicits pangs of recognition of Singapore’s urban landscape, tinged



**Sam Rains:** *it's kind of like patchwork*  
Video projection, Dimensions variable, 2012

with the recognition that the selected sequence of vantage points, though perfectly plausible, cannot be normally experienced.

The hybrid installations of objects and video projections presented in Jying Tan's *Future Wanderland*, Ika Yulianti's *On The Land* and Alice Theobald's *New Age Lament* bring into sharp relief the ambiguity of the screen as an indeterminate object, as part-thing, part-thought, and – by extension – a tacit reclamation of things as more than thoughts, and perhaps even more necessary than thoughts. This reclamation is not to be confused for a romantic return to a prior or given meaning of things, but a tacit acknowledgment that things are, perhaps, always and already what they are, in their multi-faceted meanings and possibilities, or – despite what they are made out to be – in their singular and distorted clarity. The defiant sense of things asserting a larger existence and meaning can be glimpsed through Lizzy Sampson's *Walking (to find a food source)*; even as the objects are intentionally collected, modified, arranged, aligned, rotated, lifted, piled, scattered, weighted and bounded, they elude any final state of significance in so far as the viewer is concerned. It is as if these things are staring back and saying something else altogether beyond a human-centered intention.

***"In every landscape are ongoing dialogues;  
there are no 'blank slate';  
the task is to join the conversation." (Spirn 45.)***

In accepting a non-human-centered approach of looking at the world, one might also then accept the world as already teeming with possibilities: a fullness that is not exclusionary but inclusionary and ever-expanding. As such, the productive work to be done is to add to this proliferation and overlapping of meanings, akin to the final schema in Martin Jay's broad account of scopic regimes, that is, "[...] the baroque [connoting] the bizarre and peculiar, traits which are normally disdained by the champions of clarity and transparency of form" (16).

The resultant opacity does not stem from an intention to obscure but from a demarcation of the possibility and limits of thought. It is an admission that it is not possible to know all things; even the familiar can and will become unfamiliar. Both of Minha Park's works, *Praxis of Patriotism* and *08/09*, carry an understated awareness of the complexity of nation and land through the complex prism of identity – the acquisition of language in the former; and the displacement of language in everyday experiences in the latter. Kim Thorton's *Warrior I* performs a similar displacement in its poignant reminder that one's association with a place has significant yet invisible ties to notions of territory, labour and violence. It is an awareness that comes from an unfamiliar encounter of a familiar situation resulting in unequal bursts of sombre recognition and amusing disorientation. It is an after-effect of (not) knowing things.

This echoes Venka Purushothaman's earlier admonishment, in the introductory seminar, to be a foreigner in the internal terrain or land of ourselves, which can be construed as making anew every encounter to the point that assumptions break down and wash over as just a few more things in the larger schema. The ensuing productive work and mutual transformation would return the notion of "land" closer to "scipe". Sina Witayawiroj's *IML*, perhaps comes closest in demanding such a rethink of one's relationship with one's perception of land and the various attempts to represent it. Facing an incessant invitation, by way of an instructional animation, to add to and reconfigure cut-out cardboard pieces of what is already present, one might also face the realisation that there is land ... and then, there is land, depending on how one is looking or doing or not.



**Jying Tan:** *Future Wanderland*  
Video projection, Dimensions variable, 2012

## Note

Tropical Lab is an annual international art workshop for students, organised by LASALLE College of the Arts. For the sixth cycle in 2012, the programme started with an introductory seminar (moderated by Adeline Kueh, Senior Lecturer, LASALLE College of the Arts) on 27 July with presentations by Dr Lai Chee Kien (Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore), Dr Charles Merewether (Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts), Charles Lim (Artist and Cinematographer) and Venka Purushothaman (Vice President (Academic) and Provost, LASALLE College of the Arts). This was followed by visits to various venues around Singapore, interspersed with studio work, culminating in an exhibition of artworks (from 8 - 15 August) presented by the following participating artists:

Muhammad Akbar, Adi Brande, Daniel Dallabrida, Hili Greenfeld, Hua Xi Yu, Lydia Keith, Molly Lowe, Natalie Madani, Connor McIntyre, Kassia Ng, Erika Norris, Minha Park, Sam Rains, Lizzy Sampson, Emily Shanahan, Jying Tan, Alice Theobald, Kim Thornton, Tina Tomovic, Ayumi Wakita, Billy Ward, Sina Wittayawiroj, Valérie Wolf Gang, James Yakimicki, Ika Yulianti, Zhu Pei Hong.

## Works Cited

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**Alice Theobald:** *New Age Lament*  
Fiber optic plant, paper, shell, video; Dimensions variable, 2012



Erika Norris: *The Geographer's Library*  
National Geographic magazine, tape; Dimensions variable, 2012