

VISUAL SUBVERSION AND THE RESISTANCE OF MATTER. THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF A “DISCIPLINING CITY”¹

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The article addresses practices of visual subversion undertaken by an independent contemporary art center called *The Substation* in Singapore. The curator project, “Discipline the City” examines the question of social control written into space and material and technological circumstances in a contemporary, highly urbanized metropolis. Drawing on the accomplishments of contemporary visual studies and urban studies and incorporating “material turn” into their discourse, I examine the issue of control in a disciplining city, where the source of oppression is not institutionalized and objectified power, but the material and visual properties of an urbanized reality. The political ontology of a disciplining city encompasses both forms of oppression and subversion, built into the relationships between objects, artifacts, technologies, people and other organisms that unveil themselves in social practices.

Keywords: urban studies, visual studies, material turn, subversion, political ontology, disciplinary city, disciplining city, urban *praxis*, *The Substation*, Singapore.

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Visuality after the “material turn”. Towards practice-based urban studies

Alan Oei, the current artistic director of *The Substation*, the first independent center of contemporary art in Singapore, welcomed us by showing a striking image². His address on the history and contemporariness of the gallery was illustrated through a slide showing two archival photographs. The first one was a well-known photograph of Le Corbusier’s hand pointing towards a mock-up of Plan Voisin, a utopian estate formed around the famous “Cartesian skyscrapers”. The other photograph, equally recognizable, although more local in

¹ Transl. into English by Beata Szczypińska.

² In the text, I refer to the meeting with the director of the Substantion Art Centre which took place at the 5th International Visual Methods Conference: Visualising the City in Singapore on 17 August 2018. Visual documentation from the meeting is available on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/ivmc5/>.

character, was a photograph of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, the first and longest serving Prime Minister of this city-state, and the leader of the People's Action Party – the ruling party since 1959; the man who drove a peninsula towards sovereign statehood, authored its official national ideology and became the chief architect of Singapore's urbanization. The Lee Kuan Yew in this photograph is not, however, a visionary without a face or an authoritarian divinity reaching toward its creation. The photograph depicts the leader dressed casually in the company of his then teenage son (today's Prime Minister of Singapore) on a construction site, surrounded by engineers and reporters. They are standing in sand, against a background of building machinery busily working away. The sources of Singapore's success differ from those known from western utopias. The Asian dream originated from individual sacrifice for the community, from hard work, and from building a real, not imagined city. This city would soon outperform more than one western (and non-western) metropolis. Like every global city, the modern Singapore is readily admired by many, filled with large-scale modernistic architecture in an urban climate that, as Jane M. Jacobs states, are "the big things" [Jacobs 2005]. However, the local origins and motivations for this version of urbanization were different than those in New York or Paris. High-rises did not tower over the current urban structures and fabric as icons of capitalistic success (office buildings) or leftist revolt (residential buildings). Singapore acquired this shape very quickly, nearly from scratch, from a colonial port surrounded by rural settlements (*kampongs*). It was developed not to cultivate western modernization, but to outdo it. Ultimately, it questions the colonial era and its unhealthy nostrums in the form of left-wing utopias (from "international style" socialism to Chinese communism). The Singaporean modernity was therefore superior, precisely because it was real, and this type of success is not born out of fantasy. And that is the official, ideological state interpretation of this photograph.

In this article, I would like to address the visual practices of subversion carried out by *The Substation*, with particular emphasis on "Discipline the City", one of the curator projects exhibited in the gallery in 2017. This exhibition was curated by Alan Oei and Joshua Comaroff³ and focused on the question of control derived from contemporary and

³ A detailed description of all elements of the project is available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56fcaa737da24fa2afc22beb/t/5a4f4ba4652deaf601c531b/1515146244209/01+The+Substation+presents+Discipline+the+City_Media+Release+10+Aug+2017.pdf and on the website of The Substation: www.substation.org.

advanced hyper-urbanization. As the organizers of the exhibition wrote: "The city wears you out. Constantly assaulted by ERP gantries, pavement studs, placebo buttons and open plazas that masquerade as public space, the citizen discerns just how expensive and exclusive the city can be. Everyone knows exactly where he or she should be. Discipline the City is a response to the question of control, access, and politics of space"⁴.

It is no coincidence that this project was realized in Singapore, and the undertaking, in organizational and substantive terms, was initiated by *The Substation*. Neither is it a coincidence that the title of the exhibition derives from a key principle in Michele Foucault's philosophy. Before we address these matters, let us first focus on certain elementary issues defining the methodological and theoretical framework of this text. Indeed, the "Discipline the City" project casts specific light on the problem of contemporary visual studies oriented on studying urban reality.

One of the challenges that contemporary visual studies is faced with is how to respond to postulates concerning a return to materiality, which are increasingly reported in contemporary humanities, and, in a broader scope, postulates to acquire a realistic perspective (in counterpoint to radical constructivism in postmodernist humanities). How to return to the concreteness of social reality in cultural studies? There is no need for elaborating on this theoretical reorientation, especially because there has been an ongoing discussion on this issue for some time now, and the main arguments are well known. I have also reconstructed them elsewhere [Skórzyńska 2017, 162–197]. Nevertheless, two facts are important. An interest in materiality has refreshed the prospects of visual studies, by tackling the issue of the status of images in contemporary culture in a new way. At the same time, this represents a common denominator of studies on visuality and the city. Let us briefly address each of these issues.

Gillian Rose, author of one of the most widely read handbooks on the methodology of visual studies, belongs to a group of researchers who, recently, have eagerly tended to the relationships between the visual and the material. In the collective work, *Visuality/Materiality. Images, Objects and Practices*, edited by Dyvia P. Tolia-Kelly in 2012, Rose directed readers mainly towards the onto-epistemological consequences that a career of materiality in humanities imposes on this research field [Rose, Tolia-Kelly 2012]. One of the key solutions here is the focus on practice, where we move away from the iconic and semiotic properties

⁴ See the website of "Discipline the City": <http://www.disciplinethecity.sg>.

of an image. The image (artistic, popular, media, etc.) ceases to be a relatively autonomous object of analysis; instead, social practices related to using images become the key. Of course, the postulate to focus on the active part of visibility is not entirely new; it constituted the essence of an iconic turn in the field. Researchers such as John Berger, Hal Foster or W. T. Mitchell, for decades, encouraged us to focus on ways of seeing, the cultural conditioning of visibility, and the social circulation of images, and to not only focus on what is seen [Berger 1972; Foster 1988; Mitchell 1994; Dziamski 2016, 12; Zydorowicz 2018, 38–41]. A shift from the image as a passive object of seeing to visibility as a space of practice was also the predominant direction in the development of German cultural Bildwissenschaften, perfectly reconstructed in Poland by Karolina Charewicz-Jakubowska [Charwicz-Jakubowska 2016]. It is important to note that Rose's proposal takes into consideration the notion of practice and the resulting, new ontology of a social and cultural reality. What we shift to, in this case, is something we can describe as social visualizing practices. And visual practices, as groups of activities, always take place in space and are related to our corporeality, activity, and interrelations with other people, organisms and objects, which consequently means they are inexorably intertwined with the material aspects of the reality in which we address them. What I am referring to here is, therefore, not the visual representations of materiality, but the co-shaping of the reality by a combination of visual and material factors. The declarations of the authors of the book to focus scientific research on the dynamics of these social and cultural practices are articulated in a tone resembling a manifesto. In the introduction entitled *Visibility/Materiality: Introducing a Manifesto for Practice*, we read: "Practice is what humans do with things. Some of the effects of some of those doings is to make things visible in specific ways, or not, and this approach thus draws attention to the co-constitution of human subjectivities and the visual objects their practices create. This is somewhat different from enquiries based on looking, seeing, analyzing and writing text; instead, it considers the (geo)politics of embodied, material encounter and engagement" [Rose, Tolia-Kelly 2012, 3].

The second current theme that determines the specific methodological convergence of visual studies and urban studies refers to the very understanding of what a city is. I will not pay any more attention to this topic, as I have addressed it widely in my book. Two aspects, however, are worth highlighting.

First, a fair amount of attention is devoted today on the need to ponder what a city is in ontological terms. Different variants of neomateri-

alistic humanities draw our attention to the ahierarchical and flat nature of urban reality, produced as a result of the agency of a multi-source origin [Skórzyńska 2017, 162–197]. Based on this approach, an urban reality is no more produced only by people and their systems of meanings via the use of passive matter, but also by complex networks of material (natural and technological) objects, living organisms, images, and ideas, etc. Thanks to research, such as that done by Nigel Thrift, Ash Amin, Ignacio Farias and Colin McFarlane, the concept of a city as a complex assemblage of human and non-human, material and mental, and concrete and imagined factors has been popularized [Amin, Thrift 2002; Farias, Bender 2010; McFarlane 2011]. In my aforementioned book, I have suggested referring not to a city but to *an urbanized reality*, or, more precisely, a complex but flat system of relations [Skórzyńska 2017, 55–64]. This conceptual resolution is determined by a) the scale of contemporary urbanization processes and their growing dependency on advanced technologies; b) blurring of the boundary between what is urban and non-urban; and, eventually, c) the status of the city itself. More concisely, the city that we grown accustomed to in humanities (particularly in the philosophy of culture), is simply a certain construct – a notion, an ideal type, a concept – historically developed, and, importantly, rooted mainly in the mental structures of western culture. By living in certain spaces, we do not experience “cities” (that is notions overbuilt over a certain material space), but a reality that is being transformed by various processes: building, dwelling, moving, producing and consuming, everyday interactions, play or work, or biological reproduction, etc. Observing the “urbanized reality” rather than the “city” itself is a proposal to restrain idealism and constructivism in the humanities, ontologize our imagination and “situate” our studies in the circumstances of a specific fragment of reality [Nowak 2016; Harraway 1988; Skórzyńska 2017]. As there is no one, ahistorical and aterritorial model of urbanity, there is no universal idea of a city that would allow us to easily compare New York and Singapore, Paris and Tokyo, or Delhi and Montreal. On the level of a flat, assemblage urbanized reality we can, however, compare various practices of generating and transforming space, materiality or social relationships. Thus, we can, without any risk of universalism or essentialism, observe today’s contemporary life of the urbanized type on a comparative scale, because this form of life is truly becoming dominant in the world. Although this text is actually a case study, the approach proposed here is open to the comparative approach, and aware of preestablished categorizations and habits of reasoning.

Second, it is the ontological “flattening” of urban reality that causes the recurrence of the category of *praxis* or practice [Skórzyńska 2017, 42–55]. As far as we are able to imagine and speculate on the city as a notion, we experience urbanized reality only as a total *nexus* of practices constituting temporary, dynamic “arrangements of people, artefacts, objects”, other organisms, technologies, or meanings, etc. – which I have shown by referring to Theodore R. Schatzki’s theory of practice [Schatzki 1996; Schatzki 2002; Schatzki et al. 2001; Skórzyńska 2017, 53–55].

But what do we get from this interest in practices in contemporary studies on cities? Using the visual and material practices of control and subversion analyzed in this text as an example, I will attempt to show the elementary benefit of this approach. First, it facilitates the analysis of a specific form of urbanized life in its specificity and location. This is important when it comes to Asian cities, because it helps avoid a universalizing view that imposes upon a specific form of urbanized reality valorization and criteria rooted in my own Central European experience. Although this rather peripheral view directed towards a global metropolis cannot be burdened with the sin of neocolonialism, it can, nevertheless, remain misleading. My local understanding of power, control and subversion can be totally different from the experience of the inhabitants of the Lion City. To reemphasize, we cannot experience such phenomena as the city, power, control, subversion, state, institutions, community, society or art differently than through situated, embodied, material practices. Idealization and abstraction are the main procedures of western philosophy, which outside this cultural circle may be of limited use.

Political ontology of “urbanized reality”. Disciplinary or disciplining?

The intention of the creators of the “Discipline the City” project was to demonstrate how the organization of urban space in material, visual and information terms generates a strong control over our behaviors; the way we move, the positions our body takes in space, rules concerning relationships with others. It is a level on which our mind, body and senses enter into everyday, active contact with elements of technological infrastructure, with material circumstances of space, and, especially today, also with digital management systems invisible to our eyes. All this encompasses myriad elements – bright LED lines imposing the

direction in which to move in underground crossings or in the subway, metal poles with sensors controlling access to certain places, speed bumps and other impeding elements, moving walkways or escalators that determine the pace with which we move, surveillance cameras, infrared sensors, gates with chip readers and other devices that record and register our every activity, heat and movement detectors that are used to ration access to light, water and air, physical, sound and visual barriers limiting the access of homeless people, ethnic minorities, or nonaffluent minors or women. Such control technologies are well known in every large city. However, nowhere do we experience their effect so strongly as in Singapore, an exceptionally densely urbanized city, where the entire, current developmental policy is based on *smart city* and *smart nation* ideas that address aspects such as public management by using high-tech solutions⁵ [Woo 2018]. This is where the integrated car traffic measuring system prevents traffic jams and smog in this multimillion metropolis (in a humid equatorial climate!), and the most popular means of transportation is a dense and functional Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system. On the other hand, this is also a place where you are not allowed to throw away gum in public spaces, not allowed to sell it (because it can cause the malfunction of electronic devices, such as door sensors), not allowed to smoke outside a few strictly designated places (to keep the city clean, not out of concern for citizens' health), and are not allowed to board the train with durian, a fruit, because of its rather dreadful smell. Colorful signs on the platforms indicate where you can enter the car, and upon boarding you learn straight away that eating and drinking in the cars is forbidden, and you are additionally directed where to stand to avoid overcrowding. Ubiquitous infographics remind you on which side of the escalator to stand (left-hand traffic).

The “iconic education” of prohibition signs, messages and warnings is a constant reminder to residents and visitors that they are prohibited from making noise, gathering without permission, obstructing traffic, leaving objects unattended, walking on grass lawns, or littering. Alan Oei drew our attention to numerous parks, squares and playing fields where children and adults gathered to play rugby, practice tai chi or simply play. However, each of these collective activities are prescribed and strictly monitored by the authorities, such as the Housing and Development Board (HDB). Spontaneous, grassroots activities are not

⁵ For example, see *Digital Government Blueprint* (Singapore) by Smart Nation Digital Government Group: https://www.smartnation.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/dgb_booklet_june2018.pdf.

allowed in public spaces. The official policy of “civilizing” inhabitants and visitors through the urban infosphere and iconosphere was also characteristic of Laavanya Kathiravelu and Junjia Ye, who expound on the idea of a “disciplinary society”: “The city of Singapore has gained a reputation for being a strong disciplinary state. It is not just through its restrictive policies and laws that Singapore has taken on this dubious mantle but also in terms of the way public space is regulated and highly ordered” [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 57]. They further add that: “Signs and billboards are ubiquitous across the everyday material landscape of Singapore. Residents of HDB flats encounter them as soon as they step out of the private sphere of their home and walk to the lift lobby. This visual assault of sorts continues across the void deck with signs reminding residents and other users of the space not to litter, not to play ball games or use the space in an undesignated manner” [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 58].



Fig. 1. The Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in Singapore. Photo by Marianna Michałowska

The city of Merlion has the lowest crime rate in the world, yet myriad messages on the subway constantly remind passengers to notify appropriate services about all potentially threatening situations. In particularly crowded, multi-ethnic places, police noticeboards display the number of crimes detected every day. It is here where taxis are used

to inform citizens that “low crime is not zero crime”. Singapore is not a police state. Frankly speaking, it is difficult to find a policeman on the street. Ever-present monitoring, harsh fines (for which the metropolis has earned the nickname “*fine city*”), self-surveillance, as well as control of “colleagues” in public space, suffice [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 60]. In Singapore, the idea of smart management has entered into a unique marriage with strict morality and strongly standardized social order.



Fig. 2. Chinatown Crime Alert. Photo by Agata Skórzyńska

“Discipline the City” was a project composed of several different forms of activity, brought together by the main exhibition in *The Substation* premises, described by the organizers as an urban anti-museum. The exhibition presented “Stop the City...Revisited” by Stephen Shukaitis, where the artist related anarcho-punk protests in London’s City in 1983–1984 to contemporary resistance movements, including Occupy Wall Street. This is an important piece of work in one of the principal cities of global business, a city that has neither seen nor recorded a greater public protest throughout its history, a city where there is essentially no such concept as political opposition or resistance movements.

The main idea underlying the project was to visualize urban technologies of social control. The works thus refer to the material subordination tools inherent in the properties of dominating Singaporean modernistic architecture, such as edges, corridors, stairways and passages that force our body into unnatural positions – an absurd urban

choreography, as depicted in *Playground/Wonderland/Utopia* by Jiehui Avery Chen. Other works referred to digitalized space control systems, such as *Cities of Cores* by Calvin Chua, where the artist encourages us to look away from the urban “interface” – the spectacular face of Singapore – and take a closer look at the “hard core” of contemporary design, a city constituted by data, algorithms and supercomputing hardware. A direct reference to Singapore’s history was the work by Tan Pin Pin, who confronted futuristic visions of the city’s development from official propaganda with the personal experiences of its inhabitants⁶.

In addition to the exhibition, the project includes design workshops, public debates and several interventions within the city’s space. All refer to post-punk esthetics and the promotion of an idea that essentially amounts to a Situationists *hijacking* (Fr. *détournement*) of the city, directly resulting from the history of this center of art. *The Substation* was established in a former power station at the beginning of the 1990s as an independent cultural center through the initiative of various cliques in and around the Singaporean punk scene and the LGBTQ movement. The latter movement is important, especially when one considers that Singapore is one of the few states where homosexuality is officially forbidden and penalized. Although the situation of independent art in Singapore at the beginning of the center’s operation was not easy, as Alan Oei claimed during the meeting, today the center functions as a “safety vent” in conditions of relative tolerance and with the approval of authorities.

The project title, of course, makes a direct reference to discipline and is deeply rooted in Michele Foucault’s philosophy, an intentional and somewhat subversive gambit. Indeed, his is one of most recognized continental philosophies of the second half of the 20th century, and emancipating western ideology is not exactly a role model in Singapore, especially if it is the work of a homosexual philosopher. It is difficult not to notice the poignancy of this reference. The main motive of *Discipline and Punish* is the historical process of transformation: from a control regime based on physical violence and direct compulsion to a panoptic society

⁶ In the media release of *Discipline the City* we read: “In contrast to the Singapore Story – a familiar tale of the city’s transformation from fishing village to first world city – that is inscribed into the very physical architecture of our city, Tan charts a city in all of its contradictions, irony and minutiae. Eschewing spectacular skylines and prestige projects, she examines the city in its unwritten stories: people, rituals, infrastructure. In a city that is constantly erasing itself, our memories become unanchored and suspect”: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56fcaa737da24fa2afc22beb/t/5a4f4ba4652dea1f601c531b/1515146244209/01+The+Substation+presents+Discipline+the+City_Media+Release+10+Aug+2017.pdf.

where the sources of compulsion become immaterial, impersonal and invisible [Foucault 1995; Nahirny 2018]. The concept of modern discipline leads us toward understanding social control that is still imposed but at the same time deeply internalized by the controlled person, so the use of force is not needed. In a panopticon, we do not have to see the supervisor; it's enough that we are aware that he is "somewhere". But does this concept still apply to an urbanized reality? We know, even if it is from the only known project of its type by Bruno Latour, that contemporary, relational, multi-source control characteristic for urban circles is of an oligoptic, not panoptic nature [Latour 2005; Latour, Hermant 2006]. There are numerous centers that control contemporary cities – their transport, resources, waste management, information, and population, etc. – and they are both human and non-human, are strictly inter-related, and are continuously expanding. What is more, they cannot be reduced to an institutionalized political authority or sanctioned social norm. So, given the context of *The Substation* project, which metaphor is more apt, panopticon or oligopticon?

They both are, to a certain extent. In some sense, "Discipline the City" examines the question of discipline, capturing the specificity of a local situation against a global history of urban modernization and emphasizing the uniqueness of modern local experience. As a starting point, the project looks at the process of the transformation of control instruments in a manner similar to Foucault's conceptualization, but instead focuses on the effects of this process. It also takes on the advanced forms of managing our bodies and lives, the subject of Foucault's deliberations in his latter works. One aspect that may profoundly interest a western reader in the panoptic metaphor is who is the "invisible supervisor", who observes everyone from one point; however, in a Singaporean context, it is perhaps much more interesting is to see how the inhabitants and users of urban space become "apparatuses of self-discipline", acting in place of this invisible supervisor. Therefore, the question in Singapore is not who disciplines the city, but how the city disciplines us and whether we ourselves have, as a form of resistance, any tools to discipline it. Let's go back to the two photographs I cited in the beginning: Le Corbusier was a visionary without a face managing his utopia – I am the invisible supervisor. The great architect of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew did not have a bird's-eye view of a mock-up of the city – he actually built it. The rest was only a matter of a realized, materialized relation between buildings and bodies, while the social control and self-discipline of residents were inscribed into the material spatiality. In this sense, Foucault's perspective once again leads

us towards the category of practices undoubtedly essential for us to realize the subjectivity, embodiment and materialization of the social order, which is the main goal of all these practices. Foucault's philosophical optics was, as Paul Veyne recalled, a practical vision of history [Veyne 1997]. Events in history, including relations between power and subordination are not, therefore, exhausted in abstract ideas or social models of longevity and large scales. They take place in the form of material and embodied practices, including discursive practices – somebody does them [Falkowski 2014, 44]. Hence, in his work, Jiehui Avery Chen asks not about the city as a concept or idea in the minds of modernist architects and urbanists, but about our bodies and our lives in these buildings and between these buildings. But this is just the beginning of the story, as today, Singapore has become, in addition to *the core city* from the work of Calvin Chua, a city managed from numerous, dispersed centers, a city of data and algorithms. The icons of development in Singapore, which today has become a leader among global *smart cities*, are not just the modernistic high-rise estates, as in the days of Lee Kwan Yew, but smart solutions, integrating nature, technology and culture, such as the famous “techno-trees” from the Gardens by the Bay. In this case, we are dealing much more frequently with oligoptic, dispersed technologies for controlling space, resources and people, yet still representing elements of material and practical reality. They do exist and they do work; you can touch them; they affect us.



Fig. 3. Gardens by The Bay. Photo by Agata Skórzyńska

The issue we are dealing with here can be satisfactorily resolved by a certain ontological intuition proposed by Anders Fogh Jensen [Jensen 2012; Jensen et al. 2016]. According to the author, it is worth rethinking the imaginarium of “a disciplinary society”, one related to the Early Modern social order. Here, the inherent social organization instruments were institutionalized and hierarchical and their apt metaphors were Weber’s “iron cage” and Taylor-Ford’s production line [Jensen et al. 2016, Skórzyńska 2018]. Firstly, this is a model characteristic of western societies. Secondly, it dates back to 19th century industrial-type urbanization. It was thus conceived at that stage in the history of urbanization, a stage that was not experienced by the then colonized Singapore.

Instead of an idea of disciplinarity, according to Jensen, we should instead consider a new social ontology based on the notion of project management using decentralized instruments of control (exercised by many over many), both processual and dispersed. In organizational terms, “project societies”, contrary to disciplinary societies, are based not on a subjective, hierarchical and decentralized authority, but on corporate (network or franchise) forms of managing collective activities. They require advanced self-discipline rather than personalized supervision [Jensen 2012]. In the western context, they are characteristic of the postindustrial and neoliberal phase in the development of capitalism. In Singapore, they can result strictly from the social model promoted there since the beginning of sovereign statehood and modern urbanization. For this ontological imagination, a more adequate source than the *iron cage* is Foucault’s *governmentality* or Deleuze and Guattari’s machine [Foucault 2007; Deleuze, Guattari 1987]. In terminological terms, the author’s intuition would be well described by a differentiation between a disciplinary city and a disciplining city. In my opinion, it is this second type of organization of urbanized reality and social control that the “Discipline the City” project captured. It is worth it, however, to conclude this by asking about the context in which this project was delivered.

Conclusion. Material and visual “contours of control”

The political, economic and urban phenomenon that is Singapore represents a challenging concept to describe, and it is perhaps even more difficult for someone from the outside to grasp. After unsuccessful attempts to establish joint statehood with Malaysia in the mid 1950s, the People’s Action Party and its leader, Lee Kuan Yew, ruled the peninsula, for better or worse, from 1959 onward. This group was made up by

a strong, anticolonial coalition that initially leaned left politically. With time, however, a more conservative faction, concentrated around the founding father, indomitably gained the upper hand [Chodkowska-Miszczuk, Wylon 2017, 11–14]. It started winning to such an extent that representatives of the Singaporean left were relegated to the level of dissidents, illegal political opposition or even a resistance movement. The People's Action Party owes its monopoly to a very simple tool, namely the prohibitively high fee candidates to the parliament have to pay, a fee that is irredeemable even if election campaigns are lost. The opposition, deprived of any viable financial means of subsistence, relatively quickly and peacefully, with little bloodshed, ceased being the opposition to the ruling party [Chodkowska-Miszczuk, Wylon 2017, 13–14]. The single-party system in Singapore, although providing for technical elements of parliamentary democracy, is thus generally referred to as a dictatorship. However, it has never represented a model comparable to any known political dictatorship in the world, if only because it has never been based on an extended apparatus of violence. The rulers of Singapore owe their success to an effective combination of craftily designed “real politiks” and a savvy ideology. To begin, Lee Kuan Yew’s camp has built a model of meritocracy, which has effectively organized the entire social order along with establishing political rule in Singapore until this day [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 61]. Second, the building of a well-paid political elite that was not vulnerable to corruption, allowed authorities to establish socially acceptable relations with the business world – in a country nearly devoid of any natural resources and industry (apart from the petrochemical industry) – and to essentially guarantee economic growth [Chodkowska-Miszczuk, Wylon 2017, 13–14]. Singapore, the most important port city in the Asian region, rapidly became a capital of international trade and finance, and, over time, a mecca for innovation and high technologies. This project was supported by advanced and very rapid urbanization, transforming the port town into an icon of ultramodern architecture and design. In addition, this transformation was accompanied by an ideological package promoting a particular social vision.

A few elements of this package are contained in the “Asian values” established by Lee Kuan in the 1970s. The “Asian values” focused on the implementation of alternative, when compared to the colonial west, values, of which the most important were the ethos of knowledge, hard work and the primacy of community over the individual. As an anti-western, and at the same time anti-leftist official state ideology, it could not reach back and borrow from the Protestant work ethic or from the

revolutionary ideas of socialism or communism. Singapore, despite being dominated by a Chinese population of nearly 80 %, was also meant to be an alternative to the social model introduced by the Mao revolution in China. So, Lee Kuan Yew rooted the concepts of collectivism and dedication to the community in Confucianism, drawing on values that preserved the traditional models of family and community, and preserved a strict morality [Chodkowska-Miszczuk, Wylon: 2017, 19]. Another important goal of championing the “Asian values” was building a new Singaporean nation, especially considering the multiethnic population inhabiting the peninsula. Managing ethnic differences was one of the more difficult tasks for local authorities. An ideological variant is the official multicultural policy implemented according to the CMIO model (Chinese, Malays, Indians and “Others”) [Vertovec 2015, 9; Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 47–48], a model, according to Laavanya Kathiravelu and Junjia Ye, which serves the propagandistic purpose of masking the effects of old and new ethnic inequalities and specific social engineering instead of focusing on solving real multi-ethnic problems.

Contemporary Singapore is consequently a political and economic hybrid. While keeping up the appearance of a parliamentary system, it is, in fact, a single-party autocracy inclined towards nepotism. Open to global markets and world investments, it is also a capitalistic country with elements of a free-market economy and private property; however, the key sectors of social and economic development, such as housing, education, transport or certain branches of industry, remain under the total control of state authorities and their agencies [Chodkowska-Miszczuk, Wylon 2017, 24–29]. Although strong social control and the management of class and ethnic differences inclines authors, in their publications of contemporary inequalities, to describe Singapore as disciplinary, this control, as I’ve already mentioned, does not require, in fact, any direct means of coercion. On the contrary, the city-state makes exceptionally effective use of the elements of rigorist morality and the instruments of propaganda and public education, all maintained by a high quality of life, a formula that guarantees loyalty. Laavanya Kathiravelu and Junjia Ye have explicitly called this out as a carrot and stick philosophy [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 58]. Self-discipline, controlling others in public space, restricting personal freedom for the interests of the collective, disciplinary subordination to the street’s “visual education” and restrictive laws is the price one has to pay for comfort, safety, no public rioting and the invisibility of poverty.

The authors use the example of one of the newest residential districts in Singapore, Jurong West, inhabited mostly by new economic immigrants, to draw attention to how submissiveness towards authority and self-discipline are achieved by means of material and visual properties of urban space. Kathiravelu and Ye describe this phenomenon as “contours of control”, a technique of spatial segregation and isolation, along with material and visual tools, for regulating everyday behaviors [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 57–61]. The techniques were used to manage old social diversities arising from the privileged status of the Chinese in comparison to Malays or Indians. But the contours of control are equally effective in managing inequalities driven by large labor migration in contemporary Singapore. Today, approximately 40 % of the population of the city-state is cheap labor, so-called *foreign workers* (contrary to *foreign talents*, who are conferred a completely different social status in the city), the result of both a demographic crisis (negative natural population growth), and the success the official model support high personal aspirations and improved quality of life (Singaporeans do not want to do housework or other service-type jobs). Aside from the differentiated living conditions different ethnic and social groups often experience, and the ‘street education’ addressed to various language groups that often stigmatizes minorities, the social policy of self-discipline and control exercised by all, is also supported through the officially promoted ethos of *gui ju* [Kathiravelu, Ye 2015, 64]. In Mandarin, this term means nothing more than “old residence” or “old dwelling”. This phrase is more or less the equivalent of the European “salon culture”, or the “old-money culture”, or “patina”, as opposed to *nouveaux riche*, if not for the fact that *gui ju* has no class, but a time-related undertow, where the criterion of time is important in understanding how one obtains resident status. This is important in a spatial and political organism with such a short history. *Gui ju* means being a well-settled, “civilized” inhabitant, implying that one has lived in the city for some time. Only “permanent” locals know how to behave, move, treat others, and talk. They know what is allowed and what is forbidden in this city. Singaporean authorities restrict the status of residents, making it dependent on their permanence of stay. Official statistics aside, the population in Singapore can be divided into citizens, permanent residents (PR) and others, including economic newcomers. *Gui ju* is a practiced ethics, targeted against newcomers. If one wants to live in this principal global metropolis, one must stick to the principles the metropolis demands from all of its inhabitants.

How can one oppose such omnipresent social control with no definite source? It is a control that does not result from power exercised

through violence, but is instead written into the material and visual practices of designing, transforming and using urban space, evident in elements of infrastructure, in the colors employed, in handy devices, in iconography, and in the behaviors of passers-by, how they look, what they are wearing, and where they live. Are the subversive tactics of *The Substation*, which take art visibility and materiality of the urban critical design as instruments of opposition, able to expose and question the mechanism of this control? Not really. They are probably left with and thus assume the role of the *safety vent* referred to by Alan Oei. We must, however, remember that, in a metropolis which has never experienced any "right-to-the-city" type of revolt in its short history, where independent culture has been around for only thirty years, these intimate, macro-practices of subversion do indeed have significance. Evidently, it is comparably more difficult to fight the "comfortable oppression" of a safe and clean city that has won the global race to be first in the world, than to resist against "western" impersonal elites and capital.

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