

Re-THINGing: Sculpture in Singapore 2021

This interview is framed around the exhibition *Re-THINGing Gesture in Contemporary Sculptural Practice*, which presents the works of Singaporean artists Stephanie Jane Burt, Ezzam Rahman, Michael Lee, Vincent Leow, Lim Soo Ngee, Ivan David Ng, Sai (aka Chen Sai Hua Kuan), Grace Tan and Wang Ruobing. On view at Jendela (Visual Arts Space) until 2 Jan 2022, the exhibition was a collateral event of Sculpture Society Singapore's 20th Anniversary programming, centred on the grand theme of "re-thinging". This particular exhibition at Esplanade is one of four exhibitions across various venues that explore different sub-themes.

In this dialogue, Tan Yen Peng, curator of the SSS 20th Anniversary exhibitions, distils the idea of "re-thinging" and shares about the exhibitions at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), Lim Hak Tai Gallery, Objectifs – Centre for Photography and Film and Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC).

The theme of "re-thinging" stems from various ideas and entangled discourses of "thingness", "objecthood", and "re-materialisation" as well as current and long-established notions of sculpture and three-dimensional art. I wanted to take this opportunity to ask you to share more about these terms—and their overlaps—and how they configure in the various exhibitions and works presented.

As pointed out in the question, the concept of the "thing" is quite intricately surrounded by various terms that are intertwined. Yet, they are necessary and useful in providing some directions from which the much-problematised concept of "sculpture" could be re-examined differently with various focuses for the series of exhibitions for SSS. Perhaps it would be clearer to point out that the discussion of the "problem of sculpture" became important in the '60s in the West with the increasing (and by now common) resemblance of "art objects" to everyday objects, which threatens to erase the difference between "sculpture" and any other "things" in our daily lives. Although we could say that the art world or the world, in general, seems to be more at ease with this phenomenon now since artists, historians and theorists have done much work and research over the years to show that the "art object" is almost always more and less than just a "thing", this also means that there are unsettled issues within the openness of the debates, which may be more than just interesting concepts but also worthy topics for exploration.

While the discussion of "thingness" often leads back to philosophies such as that of Heidegger's, which theorises the dichotomy between the "subject" and the "object", the SSS exhibitions were more interested in the aspect of the "making" in the artistic context. For example, those adept in art theory might be familiar with the American art critic Michael Fried's use of the word "objecthood" to describe works that he sees as "literal" and devoid of the transcendental significance that is supposed to be present in "proper" forms of art. Such a view comes from a western modernist perspective, but the later development of conceptual art inevitably makes this rather essentialist and perhaps also idealist claim less plausible, since there was a growing tendency in the postmodern or the contemporary to equate aesthetic creations with social productions instead of seeing them as separate. Together with this idea is the deemphasis of the final end product of the artwork, as processes and concepts were championed in the creative undertakings of the conceptual artists in the '60s. However, not long after we began to get used to the rhetoric of the "dematerialisation of the art object", the rise of the digital age and a new media environment came quite quickly to change again the way we experience and see art. While the use of new media seems relevant for any "non-material centred" approach in much contemporary artmaking, we also witness the persistent presence of three-dimensional works that are

“handmade” with a loyal interest and concern for the material and the form against the conceptual, Duchampian readymade installations. The notion of the “sculpture in the expanded field” introduced by Rosalind Krauss is also deeply impacted by new experiences provided by digital technologies.

Under these circumstances, with things happening so fast before our usual preferences and habits could catch up, we find ourselves in a situation whereby it is impossible to cling on to any one definition or concept and see them as permanent. Both older and new ideas, the seemingly established and the emerging and indeterminate concepts, co-exist and overlap. In fact, this is quite evident in the series of SSS shows. As they unfold, we find that many of the artworks tend to fit the various themes in different venues. And interestingly, this is not limited to artworks that employ a more conceptual or contemporary approach, some of the works that appear to be “traditional” have a way of finding a place in a theme that is less expected.

For example, Ezzam Rahman’s unique choice of material in his sculptural and installation works involve a complex array of conceptual elements and creative factors. His works could easily find a way into most of the themes designated for the various locations. On the other hand, a probably unexpected case is Wee Kong Chai, the most senior member of SSS known for his realist, figurative wood carvings. He proposed a work for the show at Objectifs – Centre for Film & Photography, where the theme is centred on materiality in sculpture and the photographic image. *The Storyteller, Sad Lady, Retired Old Man, and Samsui Women* is an installation comprising a digital print of his painting displayed like a large TV screen with three of his sculptures set in front of it, suggesting an audience.

This new installation reveals a set of the artist’s works created in the early years when he frequently took inspiration from images seen on the news broadcasted on TV and through the newspaper, offering us a chance to think about the early relationship between the media and the practice of three-dimensional art. In many ways, it is also clear that the interlacing terminologies and ideas have not only expanded, but they could be very stretchable. The overall theme of “re-thinging”, together with the various terms and concepts that it entails, hopes to identify and highlight certain protruding subjects without subjecting the work into fixed categorisation. It aims at allowing possibilities without holding on to certain ideas that may have become more or less privileged, and at the same time giving the more muted a chance to voice out in their own earnest way.



I bet you don't want to read the truth from what I have written by Ezzam Rahman



The Storyteller, Sad Lady, Retired Old Man, and Samsui Women by Wee Kong Chai

Could you share how these terms have complicated ideas of sculpture and three-dimensional art today, especially in Singapore?

I think some of my previous answers may have addressed part of this question, but to add on further, the rivalry with painting might be the first “problem” that sculpture encountered as a unique art form. Western art has a history of privileging painting. The American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, for example, famously defined sculpture as “something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.”

The issue persists because sculpture is a physical, static “thing” and stands against the visually colourful and illusory representation of a complex narrative or an imaginary world that paintings enable. Sculpture has been deemed by those accustomed to this logic as a more literal, still-copy of something that is originally more interesting and alive. So, one of the important but paradoxical tasks of sculptors, since antiquity, has been to transcend the “objecthood” or “thingness” of their own creation on the one hand, while being materially involved in and devoted to the form that they create. While this remains something for today’s sculptors to contemplate, what is also worth noting here is how sculpture as a three-dimensional entity has been seen as something that demands its own modes of display and distinctive practices of appreciation different from that of a painting. In the long processes of overcoming the problem of its “objecthood” or “thingness”—of the argument of whether there exists in the physical artwork itself a formal, aesthetical logic, or whether the appreciation of art lies mainly in the viewers’ subjective interpretation independent of the material properties of the artwork—the impact of conceptual art that champions the “concept” cannot be neglected. As a result, we see an expansion of the category of “sculpture” that includes everything “three-dimensional”, including assemblages of objects, installations, video displays, land art, performance art. Even “paintings” are sometimes used as “objects” in installations.

As we know, much of Singapore’s artistic development has been influenced by the West. If we refer to T. K. Sabapathy’s writing in the publication for the exhibition *Sculpture in Singapore* (which he curated in 1991), we see that he makes sense of sculptural developments by drawing upon ideas from influential Euro-American writers, especially

Herbert Read and Rosalind Krauss. Sabapathy believes that the history of sculpture in Singapore began with monuments, which includes the symbolic representations found in temples and statues created by British sculptors. He briefly refers to these as “premodern”, while focusing mainly on two distinct approaches that he sees as key modes of creation in the sculptural and three-dimensional practice at that point of time locally. In the first approach, he identified artists such as Ng Eng Teng and Han Sai Por, whose engagement with the art of sculpture entails the devotion to transforming materials into tangible forms in space, with a strong belief in the ability of these forms to give significant meanings. This perspective belongs to the modernist ideals extolled by Read. In the second approach, Sabapathy includes artists such as Tang Dawu and Cheo Chai Hiang, who he clearly described as working in Krauss’s “expanded field”. Here, the artists are not interested in confining themselves with any particular medium, but instead, they adopted a non-conformist attitude and a non-conventional approach. He also noted their frequent employment of texts in their works, which investigate various issues, including artistic and social-cultural ones that require more active responses from the audiences.

Although 30 years have passed, it seems that both the two approaches and attitudes are still very much alive and remain to be dominant. What has changed, however, is that the later generation of conceptual practices seems to have lost its confrontational edge. Moreover, artists maintaining modernist virtues can find their works being sidelined by current, more “authoritative” platforms. While conceptual artists had to seek alternative spaces to display their works in the past, it is now easy to see their works in most museums and galleries, while the “proper” sculptural works—whether modernist and abstract or “traditional” and figurative, hardly appear in the mainstream big shows.

Although this observation may be partial and subjective, it also comes from actual lamentations from artists I encountered from time to time. When writing the aforementioned text in the ‘90s, Sabapathy was also aware of the fact that his attempt at that point was not yet enough to reveal the actual range and complexity of sculptural practice in the local art scene, noting the possibility for some artists to straddle between two seemingly polemical methods. I feel that this is pretty much still the same now, or perhaps more so—since it is even clearer that it is not possible anymore to speak of any distinct boundaries between methods of practice or aesthetical ideologies. This is especially evident in the works of artists such as Yeo Chee Kiong and Nyan Soe. Yeo speaks often about his status as a “sculptor” who loves to “make things”, yet there is almost always a strong conceptual component in the way he displays or installs his handmade forms with an array of other items. Nyan Soe takes his materials as ingredients for making a three-dimensional diary and disregards formal categories as he piles a DIY shelf with his seal carvings, printmaking, small ceramics, and other things.



(From top)
V for Vague, V for Vogue, W for Vague Vogue, V for Vague, V for Vogue, W for Vague Vogue by Yeo Chee Kiong
The Shadow of Memory 记忆的影子 by Nyan Soe

I think the younger artists today are less bothered by the working methods and the aesthetic paradigms their practices might carry. Since meanings are subjective, ultimately, the fact is that art has never really “dematerialised”—conceptual art that somehow has become equated with contemporary art, is not as “immaterial” as we thought, whether in the context here or in the West. Both “making” and “object” have yet again acquired new meanings. As we advanced into the digital age, the common emphasis on the virtual and the ephemeral also gives artists and audiences a chance to reflect upon the necessity for or meaning of tactile experiences that tangible artworks can provide. The current world is filled with mass mechanical reproductions and consumption. While there is a loss of sensibility in everyday life, it also highlights the possible significance of artists using their hands to make “things”. It seems that in the current world, the experience of art itself, whether in making it or appreciating it, surpasses the need to determine the status of the form. In this way, three-dimensional art has somehow managed to acquire a new recognition, no more of “secondary importance” in comparison to painting. In its substantial materiality, it provides a phenomenological, physical experience through the art objects displayed within a unique space. In an image-saturated media environment, contemporary artists’ frequent involvement with so-called “new media” and the way they work on, explore, and extract the potential of the medium to communicate beyond the visual, has sparked discussion on its possible physicality. Yet, the digital also may not be as “immaterial” as we think it is too.

Ultimately, although it is important to see the complexity of the terminologies and the significance they entailed, as theories usually do not end up with a clear conclusion, it would be fair to say that often time, artists tend to put “practice” at the forefront. I believe this is true for many SSS members at least, for it is in the open processes of their unique interaction with their medium that both issues and possibilities emerged.

Could you share further about the subthemes and artworks in the three exhibitions *Re-THINGing Materiality* at NAFA Lim Hak Tai Gallery, *Re-THINGing Materiality in Sculpture and Photographic Image* at Objectifs – Centre for Film & Photography and *Re-THINGing the Site – Sculpture and its Environment* at Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC)? How did the spaces shape and inform the exhibitions?

The allocation of various sub-themes for different locations is not a straightforward process, as sometimes original plans meet unforeseen circumstances. But overall, we think it is important that the specificity of the venues fit each of the concepts that are carefully drafted. Space and context of display is always something to be taken seriously in any curatorial projects for visual arts, but it is perhaps even more so for sculptural and three-dimensional works.

***Re-THINGing Materiality* at NAFA Lim Hak Tai Gallery**

“Materiality” can be considered the overarching subject that is tied up with the larger theme. This show at NAFA took the point where conceptual art’s liberation of the “artist’s hand” has shaken the traditional definition of sculptural practice, where the status of the “art object” and its “thingness” became indeterminate, and attempts at placing “materiality” between the two as a possible middle ground. This theme makes a lot of sense for NAFA, being the oldest and existing local art educational institution, it is associated with the task to impart traditional skills while nurturing critical thinking in the minds of the young and emerging artists. More than just having an exhibition at the NAFA premise, there was a collaborative component where the show featured mainly, though not exclusively, NAFA alumni, students, and staff. (In fact, a lot of SSS members are NAFA alumni!) On top of that, we also developed a project where six recent graduates plunged into a practice-led research surrounding the

theme “materiality”. They each wrote an essay and produced an artwork for the show. Eventually, more than 30 artworks by both NAFA Alumni and SSS members were showcased, and it included an array of works ranging from figurative works, abstract sculptures, ceramics, installation, and new media art. The artists covered a broad spectrum of subjects, materials, and methods that sought to provide various perspectives for thinking and rethinking about the physical experience that sculptural or three-dimensional art could offer in the current and local context.



Installation view of *Re-THINGing Materiality* at NAFA Lim Hak Tai Gallery

Re-THINGing Materiality in Sculpture and Photographic Image at Objectifs – Centre for Film & Photography

Most people know Objectifs as a centre for photography and film, but its location used to house Sculpture Square, where the SSS was founded and had its inaugural exhibition in 2002. Thus, having our 20th Anniversary situated there is especially meaningful. On top of that, we also tapped on to the venue’s current focus and exhibited *Materiality in Sculpture and Photographic Image* as the show’s theme. The fact that these two art forms are related and intersect in many ways seems to have not been taken up by local researchers yet. Besides the subject of how the emergence of photography has impacted sculpture in terms of its expression, reception and interpretation, both mediums also share a long interest in the limits and affinities between the two and the three dimensions. For example, both art forms have their ways of addressing spatiality and temporality through frozen movements and gestures. There is also recent suggestion of how the relationship of the two art forms has become strengthened due to photography’s shift from the analogue to the digital. Responding to this loss of materiality has led artists working with photography to present works that have added physical dimensions. The current pandemic also pushes some artists to rethink the pros and cons of the digital medium and contemplates what lies deep within the appeal of material things. In this show, we featured a selection of artworks that incorporated elements from both practices in interesting ways. It is hoped that through their works, we would be able to think about how the meanings of both the art forms could be or have been expanded.



Installation view of *Re-THINGing Materiality in Sculpture and Photographic Image* at Objectifs – Centre for Film & Photography

***Re-THINGing the Site – Sculpture and its Environment* at Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC)**

Working with SCCC was exciting as it is not primarily a visual art exhibition gallery. This made it just the right place for a theme revolving around site-specificity. Although site-specific art is a relatively new concept associated with conceptual art, “site-specificity” however, has always been an important part of sculpture. While the conceptual site-specific works have their origin in responding to modern art objects’ transportability which subjects them to the museum and commodification, traditional sculptures such as religious statues or monuments often began from site sensitive considerations in their implementation in both private and public spaces. Often, sculptures or three-dimensional works lose all or some of their meaning when removed from their original locations, and this is true in many cases of traditional or contemporary works. We wanted to make use of some of SCCC’s non-gallery spaces to address this.

There are two components in the SCCC show. One exists on a smaller scale: site-specific installation and indoor sculptures at the Creative Box. Nine artworks were created to suit the spaces within the multi-purpose room specially assigned for this project. Within the installation works, around ten pieces of pedestal sculptures were also displayed at a designated area with display features fitted especially for them. This Creative Box show hopes to allow a fresh way for audiences to experience installation art and tabletop sculptures in close proximity, offering them ways to consider how artworks interact within unique space and how space, in turn, changes their perception of the artworks.



Installation view of *Re-THiNGing the Site – Sculpture and its Environment*, Creative Box, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

The other part of the SCCC show is a yearlong display of public sculpture. Since 2019, SSS has been working with SCCC to showcase the artworks of its members. For the 2021 project, we decided to make it part of the *Re-THiNGing* show. What is special this year is that, alongside a set of new public artworks coming from important SSS members such as Sun Yuli, Chua Boon Kee and Yeo Chee Kiong, we managed to further collaborate with local collector Teng Jee Hum to include sculptures from the Teng Collection. Besides the stone sculpture of Han Sai Por and pieces Justin Lee's *Happy Warriors* series, the highlight is the 2.24 metres tall *Torso To Face (Female)* by the late Ng Eng Teng.

Over the years, the meaning of “site-specificity” has also been altered in various ways as the perceived social agenda of art changes. Accordingly, this impacted the productions and discourses of public art, one of the changes would be an emphasis on the social and the communal, for example, artworks installed at “specific locations” are sometimes expected to involve the citizens in ways that offer them opportunities of shared art experiences which then engenders a sense of shared identity. We hope that the current show at SCCC would contribute more or less to this aspect.



Torso-to-Face by Ng Eng Teng, from the Teng Collection.

The curatorial brief is framed around the 1991 exhibition *Sculpture in Singapore* curated by TK Sabapathy as a historical point for reflection. Could you share more on the decision to premise the *ReTHINGing: Sculpture in Singapore 2021* show on the aforementioned exhibition and how this has further shaped the artists and artworks in the exhibition?

SSS is the first local society dedicated to the art of sculpture. Since its establishment in 2001, the society has been very actively advocating the artistic development of its members through various events such as exhibitions, workshops, and symposiums. The 20th Anniversary is an important historical milestone for us, and it is hoped that the exhibitions will not only be a memorable one but also something constitutive to the local history of sculpture and three-dimensional art. With this in mind, the 1991 exhibition naturally became a point of interest for us as it is possibly the most significant exhibition dedicated to sculpture in local art history. Many SSS members still have a deep impression of the exhibition as they participated in the show. Looking back, I am particularly impressed by the show's openness in various ways. It not only embraced a wide variety of artworks with different formal and paradigmatic interests but also brought together the works of students as well as emerging and established artists. I remember the excitement of my classmates from NAFA whose works had been chosen to be exhibited together with our lecturers such as Chern Lian Shan, Lim Soo Ngee, Han Sai Por, as well as Ng Eng Teng. In curating *Re-THINGing Sculpture in Singapore*, SSS has consciously taken up this point so that the current show is not exclusive to our members but also tries to include young artists. We believe that doing so will present a fuller picture of the current arena of sculptural or three-dimensional practice as it is like in Singapore. Furthermore, by opening the show to non-SSS members, we hope to establish a platform where all local practitioners of this art form could make exchanges, be inspired by, or question one another. Ultimately, the various sub-themes, the callback to the 1991 show, the different natures of the four venues, did come together to push SSS members to rethink and therefore "re-THING" their art in one way or another. Many of them made new works, (taking cues from the curatorial brief or perspectives provided by the 1991 show) and tried breaking from their usual practice or medium. Such a process is slightly different from presenting existing artwork for the SSS annual show that was a common practice in the past.

The inclusiveness of the 1991 exhibition is integral for providing an honest overview and is part of why it is now a precious look-back for anyone interested in the development of local art history. By situating the current show in this nexus and continuing this sense of indiscriminateness without losing critical perspective, we hope that the current SSS show series would assist in contributing important materials for local researchers now and in the future.

Tan Yen Peng is a visual artist and has been a member, guest curator, and writer for Sculpture Society Singapore since 2006. She graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and later received her master's degrees in Fine Art Practice from Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (1998) and Contemporary Art and Art Theory from Edinburgh College of Art (2004). She is currently pursuing her PhD at the Taiwan National University of Arts.

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