

## TRANSCRIPT

### INTERVIEW WITH KOH NGUANG HOW AND IOLA LENZI

*Art Places* (2015)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

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#### Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *Art Places* in 2015.

Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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*Art Places* is an art exhibition by artist, Koh Nguang How (Singapore).

It was exhibited at the Jendela (Visual Arts Space), from 1 May – 12 Jul 2015.

**Spaces, Places and People in Singapore Art: Koh Nguang How in conversation with Iola Lenzi**

In the 1970s in some parts of Southeast Asia, and then more generally in the 1980s and 1990s across Southeast Asia, new ways of thinking about the form and function of art emerged. Space, time, and audiences were enlisted as elements that acting in tandem, were building blocks of what today is known as regional contemporary art. In particular, public space was frequently integrated into this innovative art's production and display practices. In Singapore, public space and the collective start to find their way into the fabric of art-making in the 1970s. However, it is doubtless the formation of The Artists Village in the late 1980s that marks the most visible beginning of the use of urban and non-conventional zones for the siting of art. Once outside the institutional frame of the museum, gallery or art school, visual practices, fluid, site-specific, and possibly performative, tended to become collective-oriented, relying on networks of people in one place, or sometime in several different places, for their execution and reception.

In Singapore, not only do artists re-think private and public place in terms of the physical attributes of one and the other, but perhaps more crucially, they consider the value of shared zones of the collective as exhibition sites because these loci provide their work additional meaning. Its location in public places speaks of art's evolving vocation as a voice expanding civil society. Simultaneously, the widening of artistic expression's production arena influences its content, art pieces, tangible or performative, encroaching on shared terrain, engaging broad publics on topics of collective relevance. Such art may adopt an active attitude rather than a passive one because accessible to the wider community, it is open to and invites response, rather than mere contemplation. In the context of Singapore recent art history, and in particular the development of Singapore's performance practice, especially sophisticated, place and collective have become inexorably intertwined. This reveals how in reality spaces of art are as much about people and exchange, as they are about physical structures or institutional walls.

Singapore artist and archivist Koh Nguang How (b. 1963) was a founding member of The Artists Village. From his experience as a curatorial assistant (Museum Assistant) at the National Museum Art Gallery in the 1980s, Koh garnered an interest in documenting and archiving new local and regional art and from there, became a pioneering researcher of Singapore 20<sup>th</sup> century

art, with a particular focus on The Artists Village, Tang Da Wu, and performance. Integral to Koh's research has been his functions as the creator of the 'Singapore Art Archive Project'. Due to his multiple roles as document-collector/maker, and active artistic participant, Koh offers valuable insights into evolutions in art in Singapore in the 1980s-1990s that are heavily impacted by the dramatic shifts in artists' use and understanding of the role of space and people-networks in the construction of art.

### **Iola Lenzi**

Wearing different professional art-world hats in the late 1980s and early 1990s, you were simultaneously a curatorial assistant within Singapore's institutional art system, a practicing artist, and art-historically inclined so systematically photographically documenting art events and displays you witnessed, both in Singapore, and the region beyond. In this sense I would say you and your lens have been uniquely close to the sea-changes in Singapore art practices relating to artists' relationship with space and their cross-over into the public arena. Please tell me when, and in what circumstances, you first noticed that artists, maybe a single artist, was using space and the collective forum differently, especially non-institutional space.

### **Koh Nguang How**

There is no doubt in my mind that it was Tang Da Wu who provided the catalyst for this change of gear in the Singapore art scene. In 1986 I was working at the National Museum Art Gallery as curatorial assistant and I met Tang Da Wu then when he gave a talk at the Museum. He raised many ideas in that talk that were new. He mentioned land art, and gave a list of his favorite artists, including Joseph Beuys, Christo and Laurie Anderson, an experimental musician. He dwelled on cross-disciplinary forms, rather than the usual paintings. That talk left a deep impression.

**Iola Lenzi (IL): Tang Da Wu was not unknown on the scene though. Please clarify that and explain further about land art and how Da Wu related its ideas to the Singapore context.**

**Koh Nguang How (KNH):** Certainly Da Wu had already started to make his mark on Singapore arts in the early 1980s. He had left Singapore for further art education in the United Kingdom in 1970 but then returned briefly in 1979. In 1982 he had performed at the National Museum and before that, in 1980, he had presented his Earthworks at the National Museum Art Gallery, but the exhibition was closed down not long after it was put up. Da Wu did not comment much on why the show was closed, except that it was the director (not the curator) who had a problem with his show. The mud or earth had been installed directly on the gallery's teak wood floor, without protection. Though it may not have struck anyone at the time, thinking back, this was already a new way of considering art in relation to its siting and also to meaning.

**IL: When you say 'meaning', you are referring to the piece's relationship with the environment and as such, with society? Its bearing on real events and its tone of social engagement?**

**KNH:** Earthworks brought attention to issues of land erosion, destruction of nature, peoples' disregard for the impact human behavior has on nature. This always concerned Da Wu a lot. Human irresponsibility is something that he has commented in his work consistently. He had been away in England for most of the 1970s. When he returned to Singapore, he noted very significant transformations of the natural landscape. He could see the damage and was concerned that people either did not know, or did not care about this. So I think the project was all those things.

**IL:** Re the environment, globally this was a big topic in the 1970s as well. But what is fascinating with Da Wu compared to others that championed this cause outside Singapore in other contexts is that he co-opted form and space to express his ideas in a way that was new, but also familiar in its language to local viewers. It seems in so doing he integrated audiences more thoroughly into his art. This I suppose allowed his work to have greater impact. **Rather than just be art about issues, the way his work was presented and built seemed to make people take**

**those issues on board and possibly stand up for them with action of some sort. Would you say this tactic was effective?**

**KNH: Yes, I do believe Da Wu had very different ideas about how art could be made to work. He wanted to “teach” people through art.**

**IL:** So his work had didactic purpose. But it was not literal. You yourself were involved in the experimental art scene of the time. Please explain what you thought Da Wu and others were trying to achieve with their art.

**KNH: Going back to *Earthworks* and the presentation of this directly on the gallery floor, the issue was whether it was art. So there was its topic, the environment. But when you say ‘not literal’, that was echoed by the indirectness of its statement. The fact that it was presented in an unorthodox way (with relics and photo-documentations) made people question its ‘art’ status. That question came up again and again later, but Da Wu’s art was probably among the practices then that most frequently invited that question.**

**IL:** So in this first raw, non-formalised presentation of *Earthworks* one gets a sense of both artistic experimentation, but also human concerns. Can you expand on this?

**KNH: In that work it seems Da Wu was formulating the intersection that he sees between the land and people who use it, depend on it. This became much more obvious later in Lorong Gambas when artists congregated around Da Wu and The Artists Village became a reality. It is perhaps then, as he produced pieces, often performance, in the village or kampong setting of his family’s home in Lorong Gambas, that this stressing of space in relation to society became more apparent. By then he had truly dispensed with the museum as necessary for the framing of art. He considered that “art was for learning rather than appreciation” and learning implies an active audience.**

**IL:** So you are saying that Tan Da Wu’s artistic methodology involving the interweaving of space, people, and ideas relevant to the collective, was consolidated at the time of the inception of The Artists Village?

**KNH:** It could have been present before then. Remember, I mentioned that Tang Da Wu had been away for nearly a decade in the 1970s, that on his return to Singapore he was struck by the great changes in the urban landscape. The natural environment was one thing. However a second thing, just as important, was the shift in how people lived.

**IL:** You are referring to the change in Singapore's social fabric, due to the construction of HDB tower blocks and many families being moved out of their kampong organisation and physical setting and re-assigned to new towns?

**KNH:** This interested Tang Da Wu. This evolution tied in with his concerns for the environment. He was aware that the evolving topography of Singapore, in terms of new town construction and the eliminating of kampongs, was a physical thing but also a human organisation issue. That peoples' natural networks of cooperation were being threatened by the changes was something he was aware of. Da Wu was born in 1943, so he obviously had a clear idea of the kinds of bonds between people that had traditionally existed in Singapore society. He himself had experienced them as a child, right into adulthood. He understood the value of those bonds and was worried about their loss and what this might mean for Singapore's social cohesion, the relationships between people.

**IL:** Am I correct then that this was not at all about sentimentality or nostalgia for the past, but rather about Da Wu understanding the cost to citizens of the change. That he knew that with the move to HDB blocks, the power of the individual when in alliance with the collective would be lost. That he understood that this change of geography in Singapore had implications for the distribution of power, and that average citizens would lose out.

**KNH:** Tang Da Wu has always been concerned with social justice. Loss of communal space with the razing of the kampong, for Da Wu meant much more than a different physical landscape. Nostalgia for the past...? If there had been then this would certainly not have been the main issue. Power, or peoples' lack of power over their own fate was definitely more the point.

**IL:** So, going back to his art practice, Da Wu's developing of a practice inhabiting the public space, and calling more emphatically on public response, is related to conditions in Singapore in the 1980s. How was Lorong Gambas, the first home of The Artists Village, perceived by other artists and were there other such spaces in Singapore that conveyed the same ethos?

**KNH:** Lorong Gambas was familiar in feel for some artists. The culture was of making do and cooperation, not so distant from the feel of the kampong. We borrowed used materials discarded by the museum, and other sorts of found objects. So TAV was much more than a place. Other venues that shared a similar ethos included The Substation and Hong Bee Warehouse (the first now an institution, the second a short-lived artist run collective art production and display space), both coming later. Hong Bee was Singapore artists' collaborative efforts to try to build a collective and public artists' space. So again it was about place, but also about people and team-work. There had been some precedent for networking outside Singapore, via the ARX-Artists' Regional Exchange initiatives and the ASEAN workshops and art shows that assembled regional artists in the 1980s and early 1990s. These occurred before biennales such as APT and Fukuoka took shape. In the end, personal relationships between artists, local and regional, fostered collaborations.

**IL:** Some considered TAV and Hong Bee Warehouse more than just 'places'. It seems art practices evolved in relation to what they were physically, but also what they represented in terms of attitudes to freedom and artists' exchange at ground level, not involving institutions. Can you comment on this and did you, at the time, understand the linkage between certain Singapore practitioners' interest in working in the public place, these very particular venues, and new modes of expression such as installation and performance?

**KNH:** It is true that in the museum galleries there were restrictions. Amanda's Tiananmen victims solidarity installation with lighted candles could never have been presented in any functioning building because of fire regulations. In Hong Bee this was possible. So yes, space influenced production. Similarly, audience involvement in works was not encouraged in the Gallery, whereas in a less formally controlled space, it could happen.

**IL:** Please give some details of TAV and Hong Bee warehouse.

**KNH:** We were at the Hong Bee warehouse from early 1992 to January 1993. Singapore's National Arts Council (NAC) had been formed in 1991. After that, art somehow was a bigger public topic,

**The former Bank of China warehouse (later used by Theatreworks, known as 72-13) was allocated for TAV to propose to do a show for the Singapore Arts Festival Fringe 1992. But after a chance viewing of the nearby Hong Bee warehouse which had also been disused for many years, yet was in better condition, we changed the proposal for our event to be held at Hong Bee. NAC and the arts festival approved it. We did a three weeks exhibition entitled *The Space* there in June 92, with TAV as well as non-members showing (40 local and 20 foreign artists). Hong Bee was full of debris; so many artists were induced to use found objects from the site. There was a lot of installation and performance. Soon there were press discussions regarding converting Hong Bee into a permanent arts space similar to The Substation.**

In mid August 1992, fourteen of us from the Hong Bee show were invited to participate in a Performance Week organised by Gallery 21, part of Club 21 clothing brand. That was my own first show of performance archives - images as installation with relics from Da Wu's 1987 national museum performances. As I was scheduled as the last performer, I also re-enacted with the relics from the week of performances. Gallery 21 continued featuring performance art with "Atman", performance and installation by S. Chandrasekaran at end of August. They would also feature Jose Tence Ruiz's first solo show in Singapore, in late 1993.

**IL: What was public response like?**

**KNH:** Few saw it. The general public was still not familiar, this was not as accessible as the Arts Festival. It was our first collaboration with a private gallery, Gallery 21. At the end of 1992, 5th Passage held *Body Fields*, with the famous Vincent Leow urine incident.

**IL:** What sort of content came out of Hong Bee?



**KNH:** The Tiananmen incident had affected us all in 1989. For her performance at Hong Bee, Amanda Heng continued her memorial of Tiananmen and appropriately merged it with the installation work of Chumpol Apisuk based on the then recent Thai military coup.

**IL:** **Would you say that the ephemeral aspect of practices as it was developing then came about in relation to evolving attitudes to space?**

**KNH:** Quite possible. The two were certainly connected.

**IL:** And mobile collaborative projects such as *the Art Bus*? Please tell me about that.

**KNH:** **The Art Bus was organised in 1996, end of May to middle of June, an idea of Vincent Leow's. It was an extension of the Art Commandos initiative of 1988. The project had been proposed for the fringe Singapore Festival in 1994 but had been rejected. Finally in 1996 sponsors came on board and it could happen. The idea was to send a bus and kitted out with art works and transporting artists around, it circulated in Singapore, stopping here and there, a sort of mobile, free-access and changing art display.** Artists involved included Vincent Leow, Noor Effendy (Zul Mahmood in Effendy's TV installation), Jason Lim, Chua Chye Teck, Tang Da Wu, Victor Tan, Yvonne Lee, others. It was done under the auspices of The Artists Village. Later the National Arts Council obtained sponsorship to have the Art Bus do the rounds of Singapore schools but this was stopped as some of the art was deemed too frightening for Singapore school children.

**IL:** **And why did you start documenting performance, in particular?**

**KNH:** I was especially interested in performance documentation because of the genre's ephemeral nature and as a live form, its unpredictability. I had no money for a decent video camera, and shooting still images did not involve copyright issues, so I shot stills to record the performances. I started photographing performance in 1987 when the National Museum Art Gallery presented "Four Days at National Museum Art Gallery" by Tang Da Wu.

**IL:** Do you find it surprising that Singapore, a city-state with very few rural zones to begin with, and fewer and fewer as time goes by, has spawned an artistic community so interested in developing practices that seep into public spaces, beyond the walls of closed buildings?

**KNH:** For the generation of Da Wu, and mine as well, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, it is maybe not so surprising, since we witnessed first hand some extraordinary shifts in the urban landscape of Singapore. It was natural for us to incorporate a great questioning into our practices.

**IL:** Do you think the younger generation of Singapore artists, those born in the 1980s and after, is less interested in working with, and in, public space? If so, why?

**KNH:** I think due to the building up of knowledge through writings, museum exhibitions, web pages as well as independent archival records the younger artists are more aware of how Singapore artists and foreign artists worked in the 1980s, and how this involved public space in Singapore. Whether these younger artists will be equally interested or able to do so depends on the conditions in which they are practicing their art. But I do see an increase in the number of artists making art at all kinds of places in the last two decades, not through my own documentation but through internet sources.

**IL:** Certainly, it seems to me that the ethos of The Artists Village, shared space and an inclusive attitude to all artists lives on in Singapore in the form, some years ago of Plastic Kinetic Worms, and more recently Your Mother Gallery, instigated by multi-media artist Jeremy Hiah in his own Little India home in 2004. This attitude of sharing and inclusiveness, though one of many facets of Singapore art, to me is distinctive. Mobile performance events such as Future of Imagination are also part of this Singapore art story featuring the meshing of people and public spaces. And perhaps what is most encouraging in all this is that even as institutional involvement in the independent Singapore scene has increased (meaning government support), it seems that the independent flavor of the scene has not been lost. To me, that says a great deal about the lasting influence of TAV and its founders.

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Iola Lenzi is a Singapore critic and curator of Southeast Asian contemporary art. She has conceptualised numerous exhibitions of Southeast Asian art in Asia and Europe focusing on the socially critical practices of the region. She is the editor of several institutional research catalogues on Southeast Asian contemporary art, and teaches in Singapore's Lasalle-Goldsmiths Asian Art Histories MA programme.

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