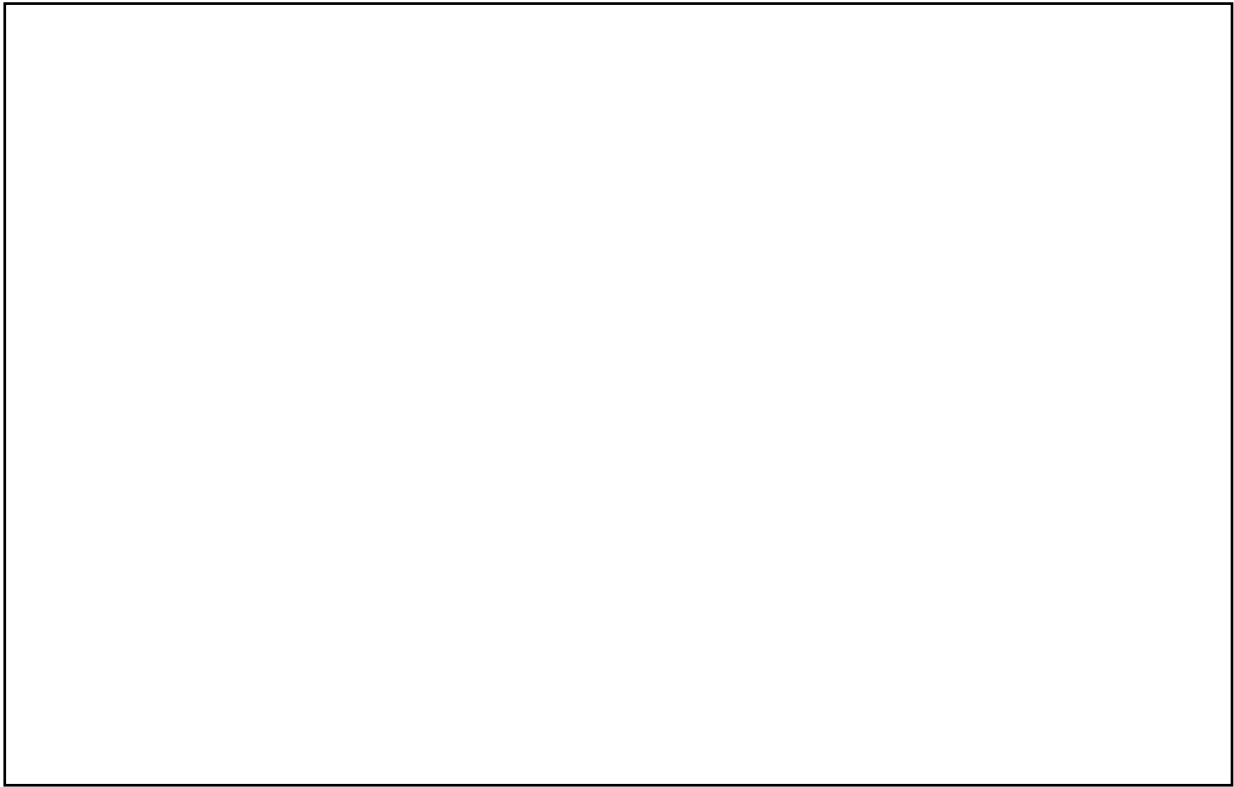Kwek Leng Joo Prize of Excellence in Photography
2021 Winners Showcase

How We Learn(t)

Hong Shu-ying & Syahrul Anuar
curated by Berny Tan

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HowWeLearn(t)-ExhibitionCatalogue-ForPrint

How We Learn(t) brings together two new bodies of work that examine, deconstruct, and re-present existing systems of knowledge.
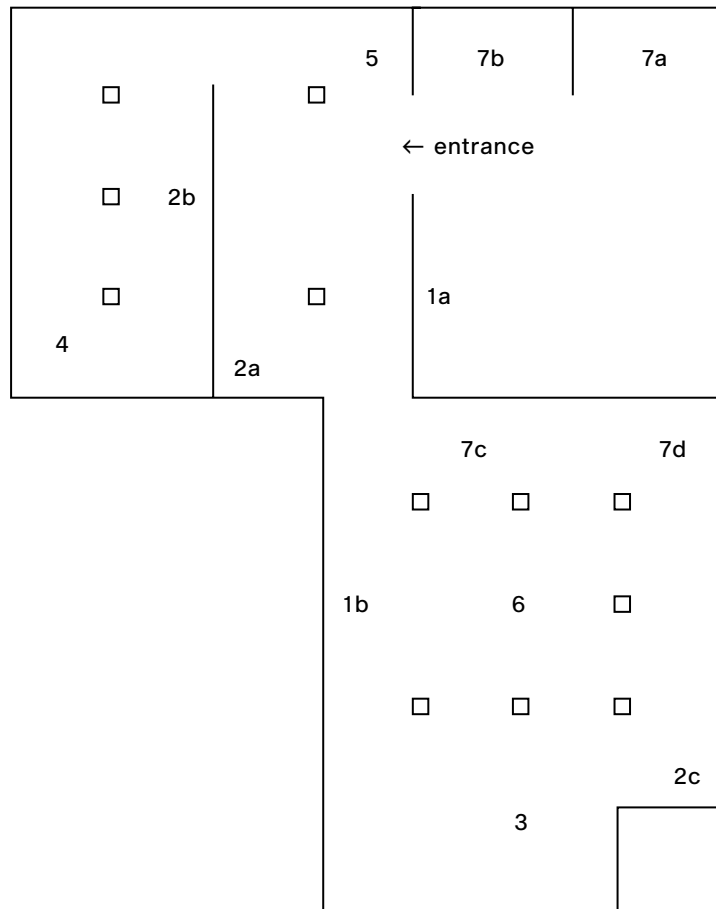
Informed by her eighteen years as a member of various Chinese orchestras, Hong Shu-ying reflects on the culture of ensembleship in 濡睦 *resonations*. Exploring hand-copied scores, pre-concert tuning, and orchestral seating arrangements, her works illuminate the shared languages and collective experiences that live on the periphery, yet serve as the scaffolding for communal music-making.

In *substance of a minute, recorded by a machine and a few others*, Syahrul Anuar takes the tools, techniques, and visual vocabulary of cartography into his own hands, removing them from positions of authority and perceived objectivity. Through four exercises in which mapmaking is unlearned and relearned, he challenges the seemingly immutable frameworks that govern the way we move through urban Singapore.

Recipients of the Kwek Leng Joo Prize of Excellence in Photography 2021, the two artists sidestep conventional photography in this exhibition. In its place are sculptures, moving images, and prints resembling drawings, all of which deliberately skirt the bodies of knowledge at the heart of their subjects.

Still, the 'documentative'—one of the core functions of photography—remains insistently present in both series. It has been reimagined as gestures that are abstract, speculative, intimate, and reflexive; gestures that dislocate something from its source, in order to transform our understanding.

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                    5      7b        7a

        □          □
                         ← entrance

        □   2b     □

        □          □    1a
    4
              2a

                   7c          7d
              □    □      □

         1b        6       □

              □    □      □

                                   2c
                   3
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Hong Shu-ying

濡睦 resonations

1   笔迹 script/notes
2   吹拉弹打 tutti
3   默契 moqi

Syahrul Anuar

substance of a minute, recorded by a machine
and a few others

4   An Excerpt of A Performance -
     live satellite view, 1000
5   somewhere in singapore, but not here
6   a digital guide to land surveying,
     for amateurs by amateurs
7   staking the landmass

Refer to page 8–19 for artwork descriptions

4

Some comments from the perimeter

by Berny Tan

In our first meeting to discuss this exhibition—and, come to think of it, even in more recent meetings—Shu and Syahrul expressed a particular anxiety to me. They saw a disparity between the series they were each intending to present, in terms of both content and aesthetic; enough of a disparity that they worried about the awkwardness, or even dissonance, of bringing these works together within the same show.

That's a strange way to begin curating a two-person show, isn't it? When the two artists are concerned about the differences between their works, rather than excited by potential affinities. Of course, there's always the option to clearly divide an exhibition space in half, and showcase two solo presentations under the same umbrella. Yet what matched the artists' anxiety was this aspiration that their works *could* cohere into a single entity; one that didn't simply feel like two parts, united only by the fact that both artists were recipients of the same prize.

I understood this anxiety, but never really shared it. Even in that first meeting, I didn't feel that the disparity between their practices was so vast. At the time, the artists self-consciously presented an initial proposal to me, in which the show had already been given the working title, 'Things We Learnt'. They had identified—though not fully fleshed out—that they were both making works about systems of knowledge: the customs and practices of the Chinese orchestra in Shu's case, and cartographical methodologies in Syahrul's case. To me, this was a decent enough foundation to begin thinking about the exhibition.

Nevertheless, I could see why they were worried. Here are two very different subjects after all, driven by apparently divergent motivations and processes. Shu's inward-looking strategies are rooted in her personal experiences; she needs that level of emotional investment, she says, or it would be very difficult for her to do the work. Syahrul, on the other hand, has a research-based approach; he enjoys reading up on his chosen topics via academic texts and historical archives, finding parallels and connections that way.[1] There is a necessary intimacy to Shu's practice that doesn't always appear in Syahrul's, and a rational, informational slant to Syahrul's work that doesn't always emerge in Shu's.

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[1] Later, I would learn from Syahrul that there is a personal history to his interest too. He grew up around narratives of land and mapping; being told where family members came from or used to live, and what happened to the places they used to call home. This kind of osmosis is perhaps not so dissimilar from Shu's many years spent in the environment of the Chinese orchestra.

It's interesting, then, that these distinct starting points have resulted in two bodies of work that follow a similar structure. Both series can be described as a set of gestures or exercises, each touching upon one small corner of something much larger and more daunting. Those larger and more daunting things are, in fact, barely present in this exhibition. There are sounds, or visual indications of them, in Shu's series, but one can hear no melody, see no expression of a cohesive musical composition. Syahrul's works do not depict real or even fictional geographies—they look somewhat like maps, integrate tools that make mapping possible, but they do not situate or give direction.

About the Chinese orchestra, yet integrating very little of its music; about cartography, yet with little evidence or possibility of navigation. Not the *things* we learnt, but the ways in which those things are told to and absorbed by us; how those things have been organised, conveyed, and received; how those methods might be skewed or even flawed, and so too the ways of thinking that they intentionally or inadvertently shape.

Thus, learning itself becomes variable, if only through a succession of minute, vibrational movements: stepping back, in order to observe; dislodging a fragment, in order to pick it apart; gently reaching in, in order to turn something on its head. An orchestra's practice of collective tuning is isolated from its performance, and distilled into single lines that reveal its collectivity as an illusion. A range pole, made by hand rather than commercially manufactured, is divorced from its function, standing alone and apart from the land it means to measure.
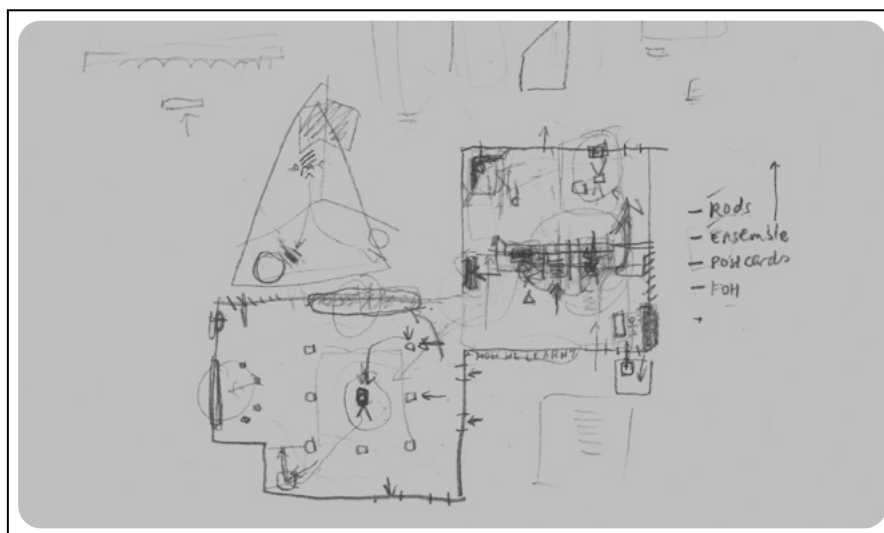
The draft of the exhibition's floor plan, sketched on a piece of tracing paper
in Shu's studio two Saturdays before the opening

6

'Things'—the content of knowledge, or at least what we assume knowledge contains—are absent in this exhibition in another sense. This is meant to be a showcase by winners of a photography prize; presumably, the subject matter of such a showcase would be still images made by a camera. But there are none. In fact, while practising photography has informed how Shu sees and reads the world, she doesn't consider herself a photographer. Most of her images don't function well on their own, she says; she often makes books that include her own writings and other materials, such that her images can come alive within a defined context.

Syahrul has no issues calling himself a photographer—even if it's in a sort of shoulder-shrugging, it's-just-easier manner—but says the image can also feel limiting, even if it was his first point of contact with a subject. "I wanted to photograph the things that don't necessarily exist, but can happen," he mentions to me, when explaining why he began generating his own images through machine learning. "I love consuming images, but I don't take pretty photographs. I just want to do what I want to do with the medium in an experimental, DIY way."

While the thematic disparity between their works was a cause of anxiety for the artists, this disparity between the 'photography prize showcase' and their 'non-photographic' works doesn't seem to faze them at all. Shu, in particular, thinks of photography as a means to an end, even if images never fully manifest in her final presentations. "Photography has taught me to be aware and to embrace that what we see has a before and after," she says. "The visuals I present are subjective touchpoints for something more universal."

It's easy to characterise this exhibition as two artists evolving past photography, or rejecting it altogether. Instead, I prefer to think of it as a chance to expand our understanding of photography beyond its definitions as a tool, medium, or final product. Photography, too, can be seen as a system of knowledge; a way of working and thinking, of researching and documenting, of framing the world around us. Just as the works in this show can operate on the perimeters of their bodies of knowledge—without which they would not exist—so can the show itself, to which photography is integral, even if not visible.

In reflecting on the format of a gesture or exercise, towards which both artists have gravitated, I am reminded of the snapshot. Perhaps its most common iteration is this: we come across an interesting sight, whip out our phones to take a picture, maybe share it with a friend or on social media. Maybe we forget about it once it's been acknowledged by someone other than ourselves. Or maybe we will remember it again, some time later, and realise there was something deeper to what we were trying to capture. The word 'snapshot' can also be interpreted as a small piece of information; one that provides us with a brief understanding of a specific context, at a specific time. By virtue of its form, it does not show us everything that can possibly be known. Yet it is still an opening—a promise—that something lies beyond the frame.

Hong Shu-ying

濡睦 resonations

濡 – to immerse, implicate, abide, endure
睦 – to be harmonious; to be loving and caring towards each other

res·o·nate
1. To exhibit or produce resonance or resonant effects
2. To evoke a feeling of shared emotion or belief
3. To correspond closely or harmoniously

濡睦 *(rú mù)* is a series of reflections on the artist's eighteen years spent as a member of various Chinese orchestras and ensembles. Growing up in these environments, she experienced the customs, gestures, and behaviours of communal music-making from within. Embedded in the culture of ensembleship are a number of curious quirks, rooted in a desire to carve out a shared language and identity. Yet, in Shu's observations, this communality is not without its own flaws and contradictions.

Through experimental abstractions, 濡睦 isolates and recontextualises three different aspects of ensembleship: the cumulative adaptations of hand-copied scores, the illusory standardisation of pre-concert tuning, and the overlapping social dynamics of seating arrangements. A study of the Chinese orchestra, and yet mostly devoid of its music, these works are a record of the idiosyncrasies and intimacies that persist on the margins of the collective.

9
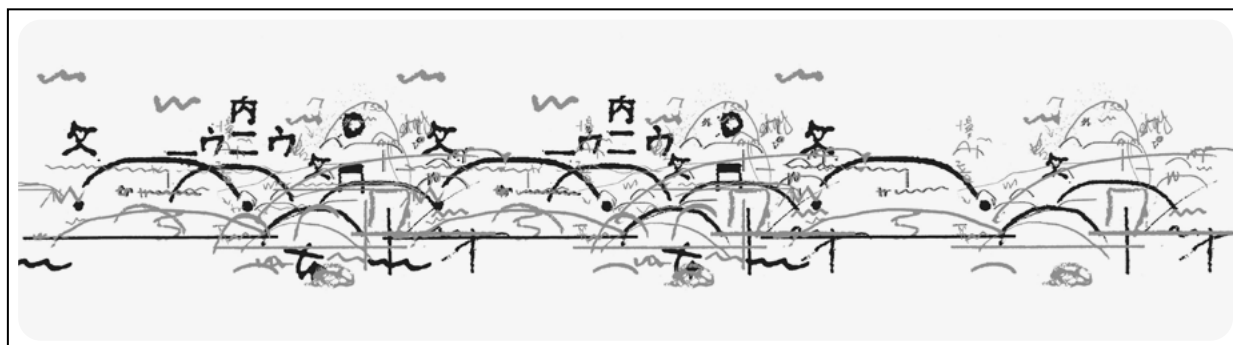
笔迹 script/notes

2021-2022

Inkjet prints with silkscreen ink, wall drawings, vinyl stickers,
artist book with found annotations

笔迹 *script/notes* reframes eighteen years' worth of hand-copied and hand-annotated musical scores from the artist's personal collection. The title 笔迹 (*bǐ jī*) is a pun on the word 笔记 (*bǐ jì*), meaning annotations, combining it with 迹, meaning traces. In Chinese orchestras, scores for each part and instrument are hand-copied from the conductors' scores, clarified with additional annotations before being distributed to the players. They are also sometimes photocopied to be shared and swapped with other orchestras, with further changes to make performance directions more suitable for each instrument, and to accommodate the musical treatment of different conductors. Over time, scores accumulate layers of annotations and writings from multiple individuals. By observing and organising these markings, Shu considers the way language and customs are developed within the social group of each orchestra, and how it borrows and evolves from existing and adjacent communities.

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吹拉弹打 tutti
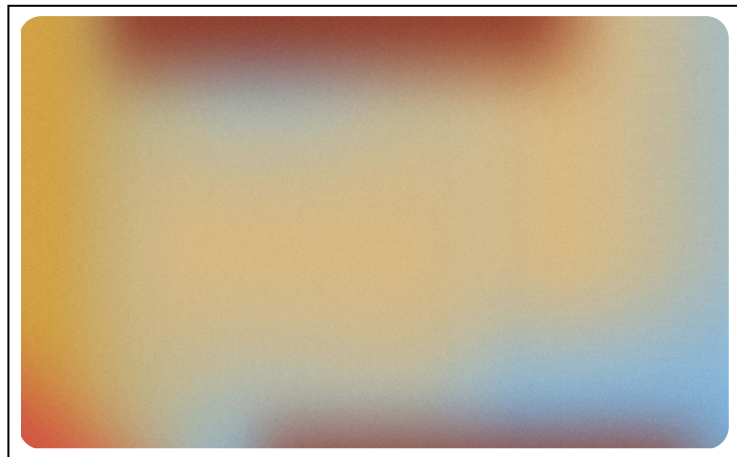
2022

Digital prints on fabric

An alternative presentation of the orchestral stage plan, this work delves into the artist's personal experiences of the performance space, and how it did or did not intersect with her friendships with other players. Abstract fields of colour represent her field of vision on stage, classified according to the four sections referenced in the Chinese title, 吹拉弹打 (*chuī lā tán dǎ*, literally blow, pull, pluck, and hit). Each section comprises various instruments that are played using similar techniques: woodwinds, bowed strings, plucked strings, and percussion. This manner of organisation reflects the interchangeability of players within the same section, and also indicates social groups dictated by sectional practices as well as the proximity of seats during combined practices. *tutti*, on the other hand, is an Italian musical term that refers to all voices or instruments in an orchestra performing in unison. The combination of these two phrases hints at the interplay of division and cohesion that influences relationships within the ensemble.

默契 sync
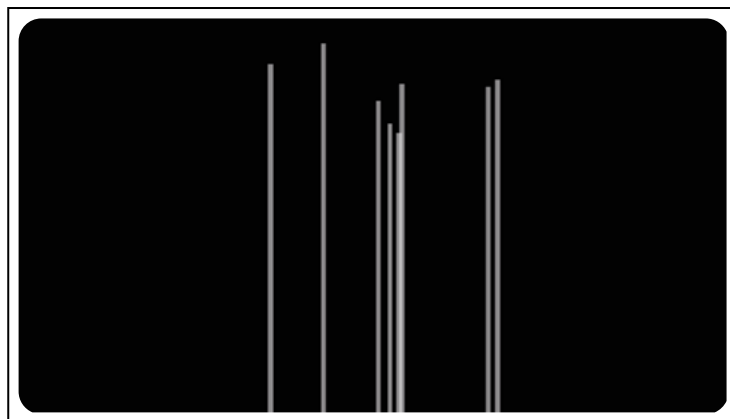
2022

Video with 5-channel audio

This work, titled with the Chinese word 默契 (*mò qì*, meaning chemistry or rapport), references the ritual of pre-concert tuning to explore the social dynamics of orchestras and ensembleship. On stage, players collectively tune their instruments to ensure that they are playing at a standardised pitch. This pre-performance 'performance' presents an entity in sync, as the players listen and adjust to each other in order to create a semblance of unity. Yet moments of true synchronisation can be fleeting, existing more in the mind than in reality. To distil this observation, the video component of this work features graphics extracted from an electronic tuner, in which lines—representing recordings of different orchestras—only occasionally coincide in the 'correct' position. The accompanying audio mimics the soundscape of a pre-concert tuning session, but is in fact made up of individual musicians calibrating their instruments to a tuner, and not to each other.

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17/05/22 6:10 PM

17/05/22 6:10 PM

Syahrul Anuar

substance of a minute, recorded by a machine and a few others

This series is a dismantling of the unassuming and pragmatic tool for navigation: the map. Driven initially by research into the 1822 Jackson Plan (or the Raffles Town Plan) as the seed of urban planning for 'modern' Singapore, the works implicitly acknowledge how maps can be an unceasing influence on our topographies and social realities. Referencing the subversive violence inflicted by colonial cartography, the title of the series is adapted from an 1814 text by Sir Stamford Raffles. In this text, Raffles discussed systems of internal management and land rental in Java, which was briefly and tumultuously occupied by the British East India Company under his instigation.

To upend the power dynamics of the map—commonly presumed to be an objective and benign medium—Syahrul's investigation has been expanded into a series of four exercises. Each one proposes a recontextualisation of the motivations, processes, and adjacent ideas of mapmaking, from the collection of data through land surveying, to the circulation of maps as apparent truth. By foregrounding speculative and do-it-yourself strategies, these exercises cast doubt on the authority of cartographical methodologies. In doing so, Syahrul's works indirectly question how Singapore has been moulded by the motions and consequences of mapmaking.

17/05/22 6:10 PM

An Excerpt of A Performance - live satellite view, 1000
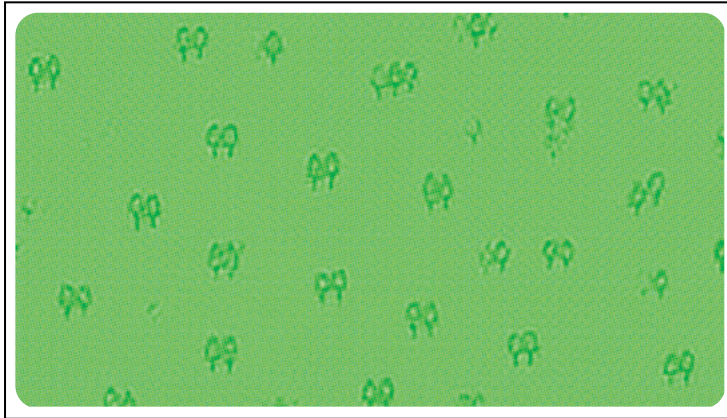
2022

2-channel video, single channel audio, speaker, laptop,
topcon survey tripod, portable projector

 This work re-encounters cartographical processes through adversarial algorithms and computational labour. Conceptualised as a 'performance' by a machine, the projection features an excerpted recording of speculative map tiles, procedurally and recursively generated via a framework known as 'CycleGAN'. Approximately 84 minutes of the original 92-hour 'performance' is presented here. Each otherworldly image morphs into the next, teetering on the edge of recognisability, distorted cousins of the digital maps we use to navigate our world on a daily basis. This hypnotic sequence is replicated as a continuous stream of code running on a nearby screen, which is in turn accompanied by the audio of a fan, mimicking the exertions of a computer. The installation comes together as a surreal interpretation of the ever-changing landscape of Singapore, while also contemplating an environment built by labourers who remain unseen, and whose efforts are often forgotten.

16

somewhere in singapore, but not here

2022

Digital prints on 300 gsm matte card, plywood shelves

Historically, the medium of the postcard—particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries—has not only served as a convenient means of communication between individuals and across countries, but also as a means of circulating idealised scenes of 'exotic' places. This series of postcards references and subverts such illustrations, featuring map tiles cropped from images generated by the performance of *live satellite view, 1000*. These strange, almost abstract aerial views seem to hint at a parallel reality; a Singapore that both does and does not exist. Able to be held and read by the viewer, the postcards also contain factual information distilled from the artist's research into the history of mapmaking, providing insight into the cartographical and even legal peculiarities that have shaped the Singapore we know today.

17

a digital guide to land surveying, for amateurs by amateurs
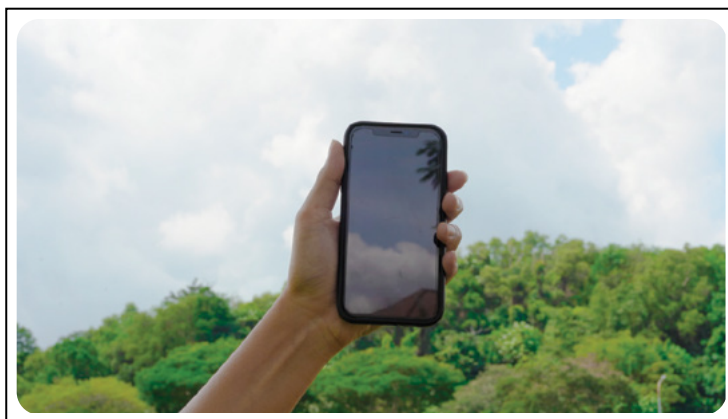
2022

Single-channel video, smartphone

This work is an inquiry into the knowledge and practice of land surveying, a vital step prior to the making of a map. While the measurement process is underpinned by relatively straightforward mathematics, it remains opaque to the layperson; the specialised land surveyor thus becomes the arbiter in the demarcation of physical boundaries. Borrowing from the conventions of tutorial videos, land surveying is re-encountered in this work as a series of digestible methods, implying that the viewer could also take the place of a land surveyor. The seemingly professional tools used in the video are in fact amateur reproductions, presented in the exhibition as a series of sculptures (*staking the landmass*). Straddling the instructional and the satirical, this work destabilises the systems that prescribe the definition of borders, and by extension, the legitimacy of land ownership.

18

staking the landmass

2022

Painted adjustable steel rods, 1800mm GNSS pole, WiFi router, soil, wooden boxes

A counterpart to *a digital guide to land surveying, for amateurs by amateurs*, this series appropriates and transforms the functional tools of land surveying into banal sculptures. The red-and-white range pole, which is commonly used in outdoor environments for site measurements, has been faithfully replicated by the artist at different heights. A GNSS (global navigation satellite system) pole, similarly reproduced by the artist, now acts merely as a display mechanism for the video in which it was employed as a prop. Installed in planter boxes within the gallery space, the tools have been removed from the domain of the professional land surveyor, losing their original intention, context, and power. In their absurd existence as purely aesthetic objects, they are made accessible to an audience that might otherwise never encounter them.

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Conceptualised by gideon-jamie, the design approach takes the exhibition identity itself as a system of knowledge to be de- and re-constructed. It focuses particularly on the idea of the 'key visual', a recurring graphic that is used to distinguish and reinforce a 'product'.

Conventionally, the key visual of an art exhibition would illustrate its theme or feature a representative artwork. Instead, gideon-jamie has chosen to use generic stock images of photography exhibitions, showing perfectly-lit gallery spaces with blank frames where artworks should be. Meant to be used as templates for visual mock-ups—and by extension legitimise any artworks superimposed on these settings—here they have been presented as they are, subverting both their intended function as well as the standard practices of 'branding' an exhibition.

Akin to how Shu and Syahrul have created works without ostensibly depicting their subject matter, the stock images provide not a visual point of reference, but a conceptual one; going so far as to be interchangeable with the artwork images in the exhibition publication. At the same time, they literally depict a photography exhibition without photographs, circuitously becoming the perfect key visual for a photography award showcase that has no photographs on display.

Beyond the stock images, additional exhibition information has been left relatively 'undesigned', existing as purely functional elements. This simplicity of execution challenges prevailing expectations of what graphic design labour involves—whether it is located in the 'doing' or the 'thinking'.

gideon-jamie is a two-people studio designing and producing books, publications, and objects in close relation to writing, publishing, teaching, and running a small space for exhibitions and workshops.

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Image credits:

set A
1: courtesy of Berny Tan
2–9: courtesy of the artists

set B
1–9: shutterstock.com

Hong Shu-ying (b. 1997, Singapore) is a Singaporean Chinese artist. She engages in process-led projects to clarify and negotiate how vocabularies and customs act as a shorthand for communities to which she belongs. She is fascinated by the creative potential of familiarity, both as a narrative tool and source of inquiry. Informed by her lived experiences, she is a keen observer of the traces people leave on and for each other.

Shu graduated with a BFA in Media Art (Photography) from the Nanyang Technological University, School of Art, Design and Media. She has exhibited in shows and festivals in Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Her works were recognised during the International Photography Awards 2020 and the 7th Women in Film and Photography Showcase 2021 by Objectifs (Singapore).

hongshuying.art

Syahrul Anuar (b. 1995, Singapore) is a cultural worker aligning closely to the notions of merantau (migration), owing to his family's diaspora within the Nusantara (Malay World). Intrigued by the narratives and histories of the Malay World, as well as how humans consume them, he surveys and unravels these complex multiplicities, employing a re-search-based methodology that weaves fact and fiction, past and present. His practice constantly expands beyond the photographic, recently utilising AI and ML methods and frameworks, questioning the role of photography in today's landscape.

Syahrul is a graduate of the Nanyang Technological University, School of Art, Design Media with a BFA in Media Art (Photography). He has exhibited his work at DECK and Objectifs in Singapore, as well as in festivals in China and the Netherlands. He also freelances as a full-stack front-end developer, designer, and coding educator.

syahrulanuar.org

Berny Tan (b. 1990, Singapore) is an artist, curator, and writer. Her interdisciplinary practice explores the tensions that arise when she applies systems to—and unearths systems in—her personal experiences. As an independent curator, she has developed a practice built on principles of empathy, sensitivity, and close collaboration with artists. Her exhibitions are often accompanied by poetic, approachable writing that illuminates the processes and materialities of art-making.

Berny earned an MA (Dist) in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths, University of London, and a BFA (Hons) in Visual and Critical Studies from the School of Visual Arts. Recent curatorial projects include *Three Sketches for a Lost Year* (Field Studies, 2022), *Bad Imitation* (Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022), *Recast* (starch, 2021), and *Maybe we read too much into things* (72-13, 2021).

bernytan.com

How We Learn(t)

21 May – 5 June 2022
Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road, #02-21, S108937

by Hong Shu-ying and Syahrul Anuar
curated by Berny Tan

design by gideon-jamie

supported by: