Points of Departure

Charting Memories Through Collective Imaginations

School excursion to Changi Point from "Points of Departure" (2014). The original photograph of school boys is in black and white, captioned "Form 4B picnic at Changi date 28 Nov 1957". The artist has overlaid this image onto a more recent shot of Changi Point. © *Juria Toramae. All rights reserved.*

Juria Toramae is a Singapore-based artist and engineer. Her photographic series "Temporality" debuted at Noise Singapore's The Apprenticeship Programme exhibition in 2013. She is an irememberSG fund recipient for her collaborative project titled "Points of Departure".

When the National Library Board announced its plans to extend its outreach efforts for the Singapore Memory Project (SMP) in 2012,[1] the first question that sprung to my mind was: How can one relate to the shared memories of a place if the place in question no longer exists?

Memory is naturally place-oriented or, at least, place-supported as philosopher Edward S. Casey suggests. Memory is a place where "the past can revive and survive; it is a space for places, meeting them midway in its own preservative powers" – playing a "reservative"[2] function as Casey describes it.[3] Memory also relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording and the visibility of the image, as noted by historian Pierre Nora.[4] Thus, in the context of Singapore, where landscapes and places change in a heartbeat, it is not surprising, especially in recent times, to see a surge of interest in documenting the present and remembering the past.

MEMORY, PLACE AND ART

This phenomenon of documentation and remembering is evidenced by the proliferation of nostalgia-related blogs and Facebook groups – many of which have matured into participatory archives – where memories are shared openly among members. The most popular, and obvious, way is through the sharing of photographs. A photo has the ability to instantly trigger conversations, recollections and even moods. However, this is also the most disorienting means of sharing memories as it brings to the fore how places have so drastically and irrevocably changed in the last 50 years or so. With this in mind, I wondered: How would the memories found in the participatory archives, including those in the SMP portal, "nurture bonding and *rootedness*"[5] (emphasis added) if they were bound to cause disorientation?[6]

In thinking this through, I felt compelled to map these memories according to where they were formed in their present-day locations. I focused on photographs, these artefacts of memory, which had been shared in various participatory archives. I surgically deconstructed each photograph and wove them into a present-day image of their place of memory. The resulting images are imagined narratives depicting ordinary and recurring events in people's lives. It felt like the right thing to do – to compress time, space and memory – in order to discard the disorienting nature of the photographs in question.

Singapore to the lesser known shores of our outlying islands.[12] I think Pierre Nora was right when he said that people acquire, recall, recognise and localise their memories in society. Working on this project has been a surprising journey into the self.

I must admit that my initial interest in memories was simply due to the desire to immerse myself into the culture of Singapore – a yearning I have had from having lived an itinerant childhood. It was only after reading about conversations on nostalgia-related blogs and sites such as Jerome's *On a Little Street in Singapore*[13] that I realised how pervasive this sense of disorientation is for many people living in our city. It became acutely noticeable to me thereafter; in the arts, films and news I came into contact with and even in conversations with taxi drivers. It is a sense that I deal with too frequently as an adult third culture kid.[14] It's like being trapped between states of belonging and alienation as poet Boey Kim Cheng so eloquently writes in his book *Between Stations*: "…You become engaged in a kind of research, ransacking your fading archive, probing the memories of those over fifty for clues…You start experiencing reality as imagined, memory as something that writes you, gives you a second chance, and you seek a possible dwelling place between memory and imagination, fact and fiction…"[15] That was the point of departure for me; what began as a humble attempt at acculturation in the end became a long quest for connections.

The idea of the sea being the only permanent feature in our ever-changing geographical landscape was reason enough for me to explore it as a unifying thread for memories. This is a sentiment shared by Jerome too as he often looks at the sea in attempts to discover his own connections with the past.

Through this collaboration, we hope to create a meaningful connection with and between the memories that are very much part of who we are. It is a journey embarked on not by just the two of us but with all the people whose memories are part of the story. ♦

"The Harbour" from "Temporality" (2013). The junk is constructed from a number of images from black and white archival photographs dating from the mid-1970s, which were taken at The New Harbour (present-day Keppel Harbour). It was inspired by Margaret Leong's poem "The Junk". © Juria Toramae. All rights reserved.

"Points of Departure" – an exhibition of photographs, stories and installation art works – brings together the forgotten and the unfamiliar in the hope of making the past less foreign. The exhibition will take place between April and June 2015 at National Library Building and is part of Singapore's 50th National Day celebrations. Find out more at: http://www.pointsofdeparture.sg or https://www.facebook.com/PointsOfDepartureSG

Notes

1 See "NLB to launch initiatives for Singapore Memory Project" published by AsiaOne on 5 Sept 2012: <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120905-369727.html#sthash.giwlf944.i8hmft1G.dpuf>
2 The adjective "reservative", which Casey notes, is meant to encompass the connotations of "preservation," "reservation," "holding in reserve," and "being reserved," is a coinage by Casey.
3 Casey, E. S. 1987. *Remembering: A phenomenological study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 187.
4 Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*". *Representations No. 26*. 1989. 7-25.
5 See < http://www.iremember.sg/index.php/about/>
6 Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong quoted in "Untidy memories for a loveable Singapore" published by Today on 21 Mar 2013 <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/untidy-memories-loveable-singapore?singlepage=true>
7 "Temporality" is a photographic series created during NOISE apprenticeship programme by NAC in 2013. See <http://toramae.com/series/temporality/>
8 See <http://pointsofdeparture.sg/>
9 Leong, Margaret. "The Junk" in *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011. 18.
10 See http://thelongnwindingroad.wordpress.com/2010/08/16/the-lost-idyllic-coastline-of-tanah-merah/
11 See http://thelongnwindingroad.wordpress.com/2009/10/31/changi-beach/
12 See http://wildshores.blogspot.sg/2014/05/how-is-kusu-island-doing.html
13 See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/183252211695508>
14 The term "third culture kid or adult" was first coined by researchers John and Ruth Useem in the 1950s, who used it to describe children who were raised in a culture outside of their parents' culture for a significant part of their development years. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_culture_kid
15 Kim Cheng Boey. "Between Stations", *Between Stations*. Australia: Giramondo, 2009. 306.

References

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Casey, E. S. (1987). *Remembering: A phenomenological study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
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