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Buoy

by Aihwa Ong

This post is part of the series [Speaking Volumes](#)

At the 2015 Venice Biennale, the Singapore Pavilion hosted the exhibition *SEA STATE*, by Singaporean artist Charles Lim Yi Yong. A former Olympic sailor, Lim devised a method of spinning his sailboat in the water and repeatedly dipping himself into the sea, thus performing the recursive process of land–sea interchangeability that is now state policy in the Asian Pacific.

SEA STATE has since returned home to Singapore where it was housed at the Center for Contemporary Art at Nanyang Technological University. When I visited in July 2016, Lim showed off a gigantic buoy that he had retrieved from the surrounding sea.

Remarking on the invasive odor of the ocean in the room, he noted that it did not take long for the abandoned buoy to be heavily encrusted with barnacles and seaweed. This man-made object has been transformed into a property of the ocean.

In *SEA STATE*, digital videos on multiple screens track Lim’s peregrinations in Singapore’s surrounding sea, describing an elastic notion of the state. We see Lim in his boat spinning in and out of the water, prowling through underground caves, tracking the seabed, and following what he terms the Sandman. He boards a survey ship that engages in a process of sand search by identifying the rocks dotting the surrounding water as tiny islands. These outcrops are considered uncontrolled, as the neighboring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia have been unable to patrol them. They exist in a grey zone of overlapping and ambiguous sovereignty. As ghostly sentinels, they menace gigantic oil tankers plowing through the narrow Straits of Malacca on their way to China. To the Sandman, the islets, harvested and pulverized, become a key source of sands that are sucked up and transported by barges to satisfy Singapore’s demand for landfill. As the island nation is materially augmented by the constant search for sea sand, the land–sea boundary configures an emerging entity Lim calls “Sea State.”

Justly famous for its cramped and expensive real estate, Singapore is thrusting above and below the sea level. The displacement of dirt and garbage can bulk up islets, build beaches, and carve underground caverns. A landfill built the Sentosa beach resort.

Currently, the national environmental agency is converting an islet called Pulau Semakau into the world’s first ecological offshore landfill. Two rocky points are linked by solid garbage that has been processed to be sanitary and supportive of rare plant, bird, and fish species, covering a zone of 350 hectares. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to most citizens, the state has been digging a tunnel system one hundred feet underneath the island. The Jurong Rock Caverns now store 126 million gallons of crude oil to be refined for further export.

Besides building up and digging down, volumetric sovereignty involves managing watery resources from the sky and ocean. As an island nation of few natural resources, Singapore has devised different ways to ride the tide. Drinking water has long been delivered by pipes from neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia. Seeking water independence, the government has developed technology to capture seasonal monsoon rains and channel

runoff water through a system of filters. Besides reservoirs, the cleaned-up Singapore River is a last-resort source of potentially drinkable water (Ong 2004). Even the undrinkable ocean water has been rethought as a prop for extending lateral space. There are plans, for instance, to float solar panels on the seas surrounding Singapore. By claiming the ocean surface of water, sunlight, and rock and carving an undersea demimonde of storage tunnels, this three-dimensional sovereignty prepares to remain buoyant in a perilous near future.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea recognizes a two-hundred-mile radius around a nation-state as part of its sovereign territory. In *Sea State*, though, the clarity of legal language muddles into the material and political interchangeability of land and water. Garbage turns from waste into a valuable material for engineering this indistinction. Increasingly, the surrounding ocean is being engineered as a technosphere that responds to an expansion of sovereign anxiety and opportunity. Indeed, security and political goals have prompted China to embark on what some have called “blue territorialization,” a process of technological and ecological manipulation of land–sea interfaces (see Chubb 2017; Ong 2017). But increasingly ferocious typhoons remind us that the ocean easily washes away man-made props to sovereign claims. A policy of land–sea interchangeability is thus vulnerable to ceaseless processes of erosion. It raises the question of whether the logic of sovereign territoriality can easily invest in watery spaces.

Threats of climate change, combined with the dynamic tropical environment, have become ideological justification for swelling sovereign space. According to Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, a senior curator at the National Gallery Singapore, the island-state has grown from 245 to 277 square miles through the steady reclamation of land. While noting the island’s anxiety in the midst of changeable climatic and tropic conditions, Mustafa’s notes in the exhibition catalog discern a political message: “In *SEA STATE*, the effects of erasure and residue are then a simultaneous resistance to and acceptance of the tropics that demands constant renewal and replacement.”

Contemporary Asian artists are invariably engaged in anticipatory politics, anticipating the homeland’s future as an entanglement of borders, knowledges, and media (see Ong 2012). In Lim’s imagination, the geobody of Singapore is technologically sustained in a fluid material environment. The island is reimagined as a buoy (the iconic item in the Lim exhibition) and a body likewise learning to float as a way to survive rough seas.

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