

Retro Specks



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Future Pixs

Retro Specks Future Pixs - Sculpture Square - 18 December 2004 / 27 February 2005

RSFP / The return Ticket - National Institute of Education - 12 August / 28 September 2005



Future Pixs

et si... le temps n'existait pas, quelle serait la situation de l'espace?

Some time in May 2003, as I was coming back by train from Kuala Lumpur, I noticed an electric line along the track, running all the way from Johor to the Singapore station. At times crumbling under the thick cover of vegetation, only to later reappear, standing strong and proud with all its wiring intact, this electric line was a piece of the past which for some reason had withstood the onslaught of modernity.

Having travelled by train on many occasions between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, I had been aware for sometime already of the peculiarities associated with the train line between the two countries. This section of the train line, and the Singapore station itself, are Malaysian territory within Singaporean territory. This rather unusual situation inherited from the colonial past is so paradoxical that one administratively enters Malaysia before having physically left Singapore.

This electric line stood as an anachronism in the context of Singapore's 21st century landscape, an anachronism that was a direct consequence of a territorial paradox. In it, I could see a subject that would fit particularly well the study of time and space in photography upon which my work is based.

RSFP, or *Retro Specks Future Pixs*, was conceived as a "video and photo based time-sculpture", an installation, in which video, photography and sculpture interacted to take the viewer back and forth in time, back and forth in space, while remaining here and now in Sculpture Square. It was based on a double screen video projection respectively showing the back and forth journeys between Tanjong Pagar and Johor Baru.

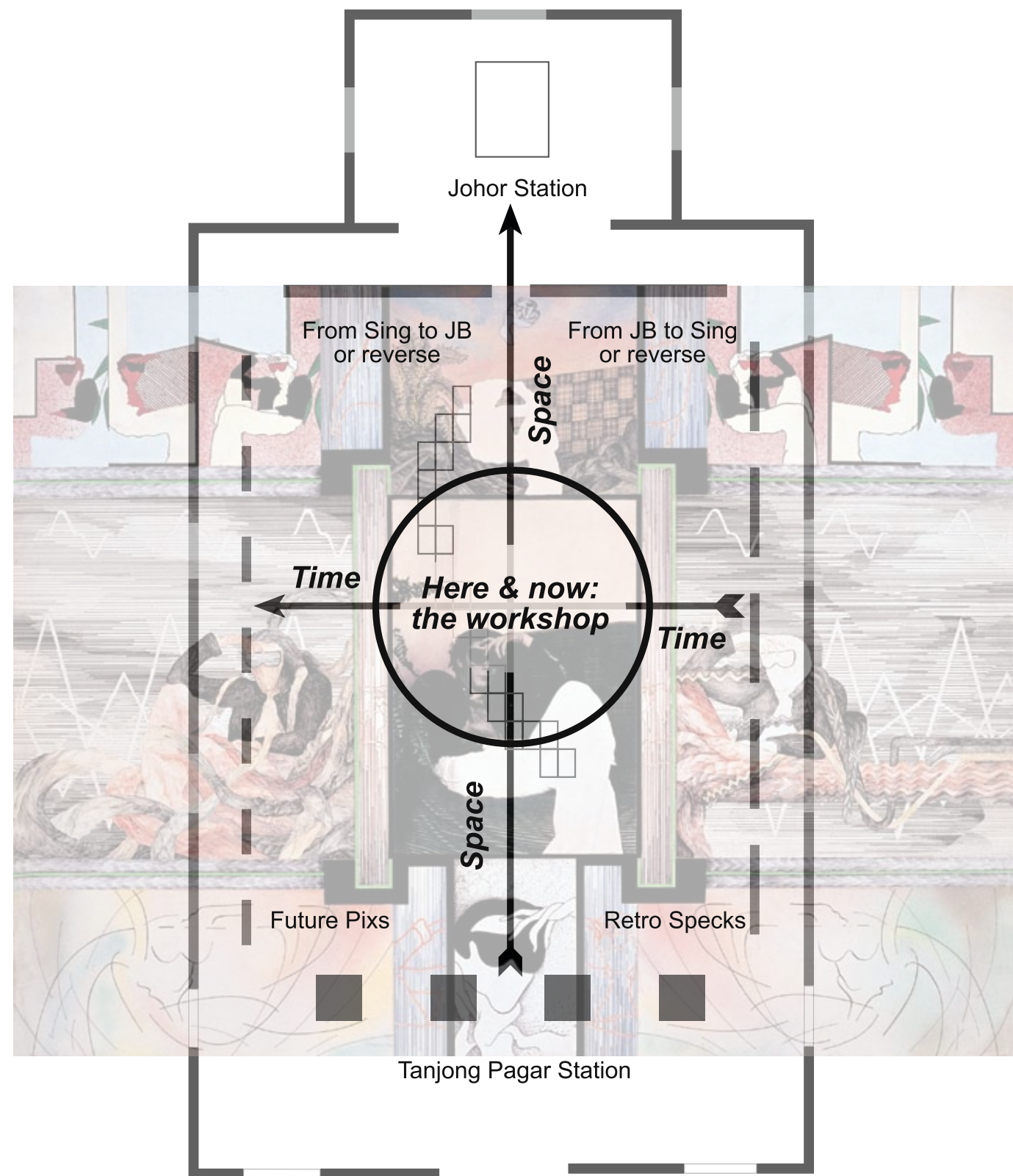
On one side, the journey from Tanjong Pagar to Johor Bahru, filmed with a backward motion, looking at the point of departure getting further and further. This is the Past, looking at "where I am coming from". On the other screen, the journey from Johor Bahru to Tanjong Pagar, filmed with a forward motion, looking at the point of arrival drawing closer and closer. This is the Future, looking at "where I am going to". By looking at both projections at the same time, the spectator is thus placed into some sort of "no-time, no-space" zone. Is he going forward? Is he going backward? Is he looking to the left? Is he looking to the right? He is doing all this at once by doing nothing... A Taoist version of the Middle Path?

The videos were digitally manipulated on the video camera itself to graphically age or 'futurise' the films and still photographs were extracted from their respective videos to illustrate the Past and the Future, thus resonating into "retro specks" and "future pixs". The "retro specks" were elongated to fit the slower motion of the past, while the "future pixs" were compressed into squares to fit the concept of pixel in digital imaging. They were presented hanging in space, as the landscape seen through the window of the train carriage, while the back of the images showed that very carriage.

The space component of the exhibition was represented by the train line and the stations marking the beginning and end of the journey. Upon entering the exhibition hall of Sculpture Square, the visitor was greeted by four photographic sculptures reproducing Noll's sculptures decorating the facade of the train station in Singapore. Behind the screen, a photo-sculpture featuring the clock tower of the Johor Station was used to hold the projection material. On it, was also projected a clock in real time, the focus point of the "time-sculpture" installation. Standing between the two photo-sculptures symbolizing the stations, an enlarged map reproducing the lay-out of the train line occupied the centre of the floor.

The map became the subject of workshops that developed in the course of the exhibition, giving further meaning to the expression "time-sculpture". Children from schools located along the train line were asked to document their everyday environment with digital photography. These images of scenery, buildings and landmarks were then turned into self-standing paper images placed according to their original location on the map. To the artistic practice, the workshop therefore added another dimension by giving a better knowledge and understanding of their country to the children.

Now something rather unexpected happened in the course of putting up the exhibition, something that eventually led to the production of this very book. While working on the graphic explaining the layout of the installation, it suddenly dawned on me that the floor plan of RSFP was reproducing exactly the layout of the seminal 1977 drawing in which I purposely explored for the first time the notions of time and space and their nature in painting and photography. The idea to trace the progression between these two significant moments of my career took shape in the blink of an eye. And as fate would have it, I was lucky enough to be given the needed budget for this project by the team of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy. Some things are just meant to be.

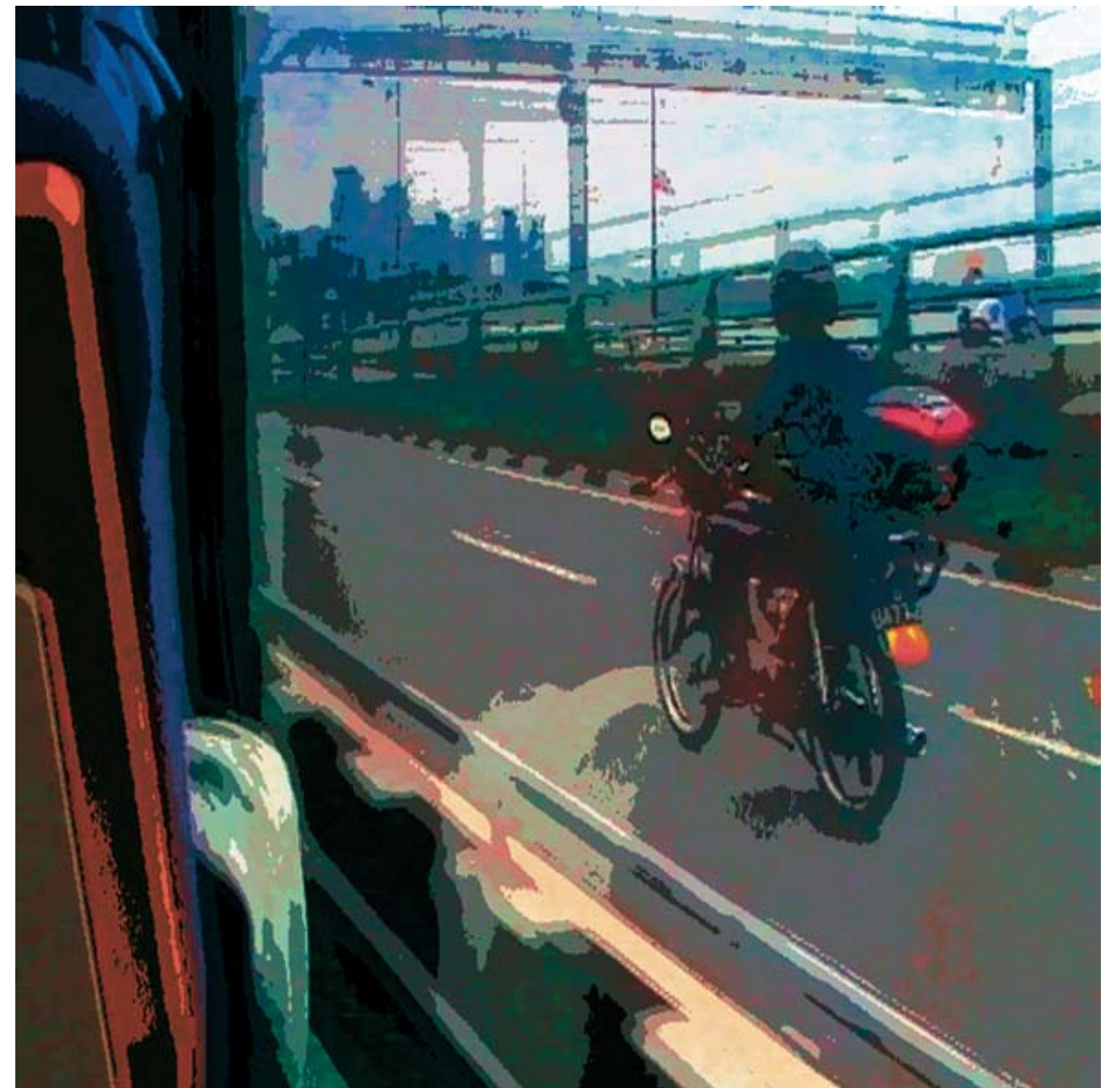


Retro Specks



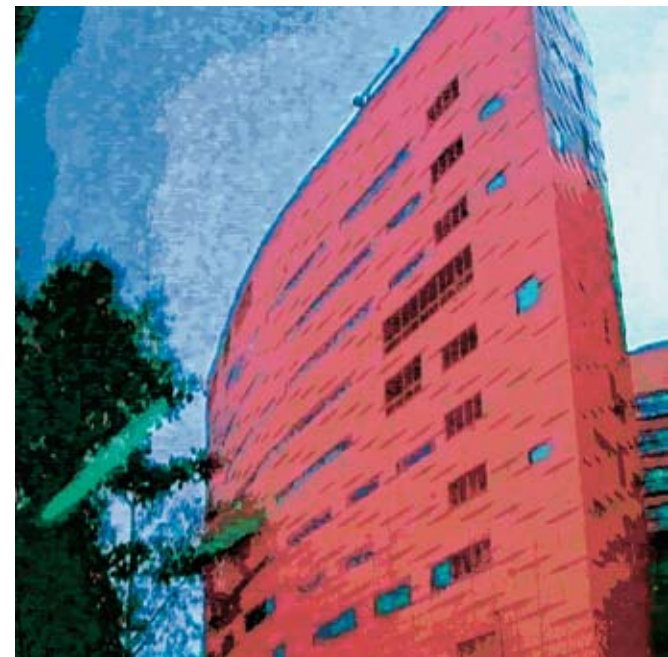
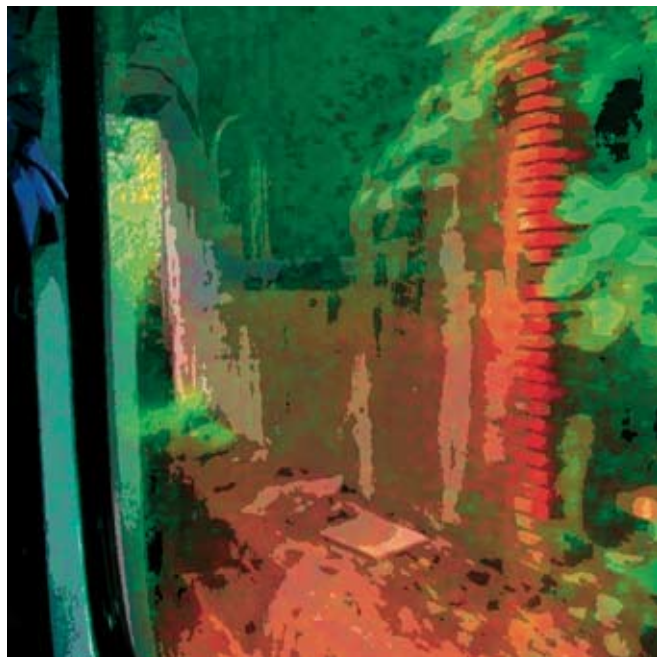
5 digitally enhanced video stills - digital prints on metal - 2005 - 120x70cm





7 digitally enhanced video stills - digital prints on metal - 2005 - 80x80cm

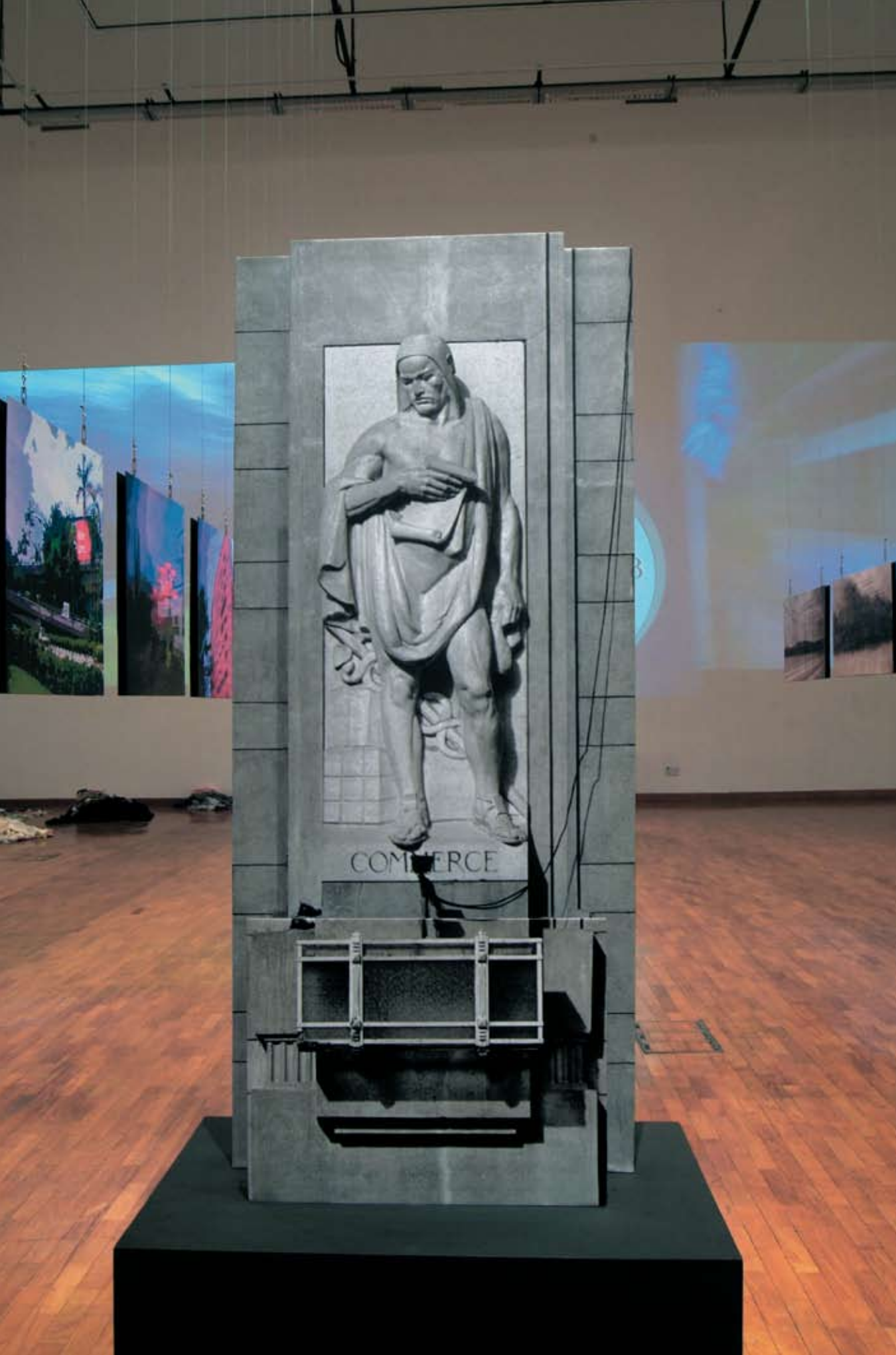
Future Pixs





Retro Specks Future Pixs... le nom de l'exposition lui-même demande quelques explications. *Specks* se traduit par 'petite tache' ou 'grain' (de poussière par exemple). *Pixs* se réfère bien sûr aux pixels du monde digital contemporain. Le titre est donc un jeu de mots évoquant 'les grains du passé' et 'les grains du futur', ou peut-être les graines du passé et celles du futur! L'idée de l'exposition prit forme lors d'un voyage en train entre Kuala Lumpur et Singapour. Alors que nous venions de quitter Johor Bahru, la dernière ville malaisienne, et que nous roulions dans la lumière blafarde du petit matin vers Tanjong Pagar, la gare au centre de Singapour, je remarquais le long de la voie ferrée une vieille ligne électrique abandonnée datant probablement des années 50, ou peut-être bien même des années 30! Si l'on prend en compte le fait que tout le système électrique de Singapour est souterrain et qu'il n'existe plus de ligne électrique dans le paysage de l'île, vous comprendrez que la chose suscita ma curiosité. Ayant maintes fois effectué ce voyage en train entre les deux capitales, j'étais parfaitement conscient de la situation administrative à l'origine de ce paradoxe. Suite à une histoire post-coloniale compliquée, ce morceau de la voie ferrée était resté la propriété de la société des chemins de fer malaisiens au moment de l'accès à l'indépendance de Singapour, un morceau de territoire malaisien à l'intérieur même de Singapour! Il en découle qu'aujourd'hui encore on entre administrativement en Malaisie avant d'avoir physiquement quitté Singapour si on voyage en train. Les autorités malaisiennes ne s'étaient pas soucies de cette ligne vétuste. Celles de Singapour n'avaient pas le droit d'y toucher. La ligne électrique était un anachronisme qui reposait sur une anomalie spatiale. Elle m'apparut comme un sujet idéal pour la suite de mon exploration du temps et de l'espace en photographie.







The Four Nolli Sculptures and their back - digital prints on metal - 2004 - 60x20x140 cm

Le travail prit la forme d'une installation que je définis comme une 'sculpture temporelle'. Elle était basée sur deux vidéos, une prise dans le sens Tanjung Pagar - Johor et regardant le côté de la voie où se trouve la ligne électrique, et l'autre dans le sens inverse et regardant par la fenêtre opposée. La vidéo Singapour - Johor tournait le dos au sens de la marche et regardait le point de départ s'éloigner inexorablement. Avec la ligne électrique dans le paysage, elle symbolisait le passé. L'autre regardait vers la destination d'arrivée, le futur! Les vidéos furent ensuite manipulées numériquement avec un effet sépia pour le passé et une solarisation pour le futur. J'en tirai alors des images fixes qui furent suspendues dans l'espace, complétées au dos par des images de l'extérieur du train. L'espace fut symbolisé par des éléments architecturaux des deux gares, les sculptures art déco de Nolli à Singapour et la tour d'horloge de Johor. La sculpture photographique représentant celle-ci contenait une petite caméra de surveillance filmant une horloge en temps réel, projetée à son tour sur la sculpture elle-même. Au centre de la pièce, une carte géante du trajet ferroviaire, qui devint le support d'un atelier graphique conduit avec les élèves de diverses écoles situées le long de la voie ferrée. Il se passa alors quelque chose d'inattendu pendant que je travaillais sur le schéma expliquant la configuration de l'installation: je remarquai que le plan au sol reproduisait exactement la composition du dessin de 1977 qui avait mis en route cette exploration du temps et de l'espace à travers la photographie. L'idée d'un ouvrage retraçant la progression entre ces deux moments décisifs s'ensuivit tout naturellement. Elle dut plaire à mes bonnes fées, car les services culturels de l'Ambassade de France m'accorderent le budget qui me permettrait de la réaliser. Cet ouvrage, vous l'avez maintenant entre vos mains.

So what could be a conclusion to these 30 years or so of research? Hum... can there be a conclusion to a mystery that has pounded on the human mind since the beginning of time? Hardly of course, but in the process of formalising my thoughts for teaching purposes over the last couple of years, I have derived a few concepts, which judging by the reaction of people around do hold water. So here we go...

When photography was invented, it brought about a shift in the perception of time and space the effect of which still has to be fully evaluated and understood. Suddenly, far away places could be seen as they were and the appearance of bodies could forever be preserved. By using the very light that made the world visible, photography made images from bits and pieces of it, images that started floating around, travelling across the world, recalling long gone departed ones. The infinity of space found itself compressed and the relentless flow of time fragmented. Things were forever different. Roland Barthes in his seminal book *Camera Lucida* suggests that if we had then begun asking ourselves what is photography truly doing, we would have gone mad. We had no other choice but to take it for granted. Maybe, rather than asking what photography does, we could wonder what happened when Reality looked at itself for the first time in the form of a photograph. The question is not any easier to answer, but one thing for sure, we can assume that Reality must have liked it a lot, given that by now photographs and their ersatz in the form of films and TV are simply everywhere!

From the packet of cereals on our breakfast table, to our IC in the wallet, to the avalanche of images in real-time on 24-hour TV news channels, images of a photographic nature are all around us. In fact it is as if Reality got so hooked on looking at its own self that it went into a process which I propose to call the *constant self recording mode*. The latest and most efficient tool of this



Constant Self Recording Mode is obviously digital photography, a medium that allows instant visualisation of the moment and the almost surreal choice given to us to either preserve or erase it. The long term effect of this is anybody's guess but judging by the impact it already has on us today it will certainly be decisive.

There are a few well entrenched misconceptions about photography, within the public and even within the specialists community. The first one is about the naturalistic aspect of the medium. Because of its uncanny resemblance to the original moment, photography was perceived as the perfect realistic means of representation. But if we look at the effects of its apparition in our realm, we can see that far from having comforted the notion of reality, it has on the contrary blurred the thin line between fact and fiction, evolving eventually into the virtual reality now slowly but surely shaping up around us.

The second is its similarity to death, a perception of the medium naturally comforted by the function it fulfills in the remembrance of the departed ones. Even Barthes, although most visionary in the book already mentioned can not avoid this trap. To many commentators, Photography is 'the death of a moment'.

No doubt that Photography confronts us to our own transience. Yet physics say that "nothing is lost, nothing is created, things are transformed". And if one refers to spiritual traditions, indeed Nature does not die, it transforms itself. Rather than reading a photograph as 'the death of a moment', I prefer to see it as a moment detaching itself from the four dimensions space continuum (three for space and one for time), a moment that goes on floating around in a new continuum of its own. Recent developments have led physics to pre-suppose the existence of other dimensions than the four we perceive to explain the world. I suspect that photography creates (a) dimension(s) of its own in which what happens is again anybody's guess. Some new time theory even suggests that not only time but even movement would not exist. Photography would then show the world as it 'really is', for ever still, and cinema then explain the illusion of movement.

The last misconception is about the supposedly 'transparency' of the medium. This notion, induced by the medium's realistic aspect, is emphasised by the use of transparent films and light. It is said for example that the effortless reconstitution of perspective in a photograph makes its support 'transparent'. However, if one looks at the history of photography, the very first image recorded in 1826 was anything but 'transparent'. The *Point de Vue d'une Fenêtre du Gras* by Niecephore Niepce was actually a rather 'opaque' affair. To begin



with, the image is embedded, not printed, in a coat of bitumen of Judea, a chemical that has the property to turn from black to white. This bitumen is laid over pewter, a perfectly dull metal with no shine to it. Lastly, the image itself is almost invisible because it needs a specific angle of incidence of light to suddenly reveal itself. All things that make the first photograph anything but transparent

The image's subject however was indeed 'transparent': the view out from a window

over Niepce's property. In this very first image, photography was a 'window' over the world and because of that superficial transparency, most readings of the medium focused on what could be seen 'through' that window, the social, historical, political content. But what makes the 'frame' of the window has been largely ignored. We know very well how to take good photographs, but what truly happens when photography records a moment in space and time, and when subsequently we look at it, remains a complete mystery.

There could be however some new developments soon. It is generally accepted that when photography appeared, it took over the function of realistic representation performed until then by painting. Freed of any representational needs, painting could then embark on a path of its own and fully reveal its essence. I suspect that something similar is about to happen in the photographic world because of the development of digital photography. Obviously, digital imaging now fulfills the representational needs of the Constant Self Recording Mode. This could eventually leave analog photography free to reveal the full mystery of its alchemical process in the dark room where water, the very essence of life, reigns supreme.

Espace

Johor Bahru



Greenwood Primary School

Fajar Secondary School

ISS International School

St. Andrew's Junior College

Zhangde Primary School

Tanjong Pagar Station



Dunman Secondary School

Lasalle SIA

25-01-2005

Temps





St. Andrew's Junior College

The Workshops

The workshops formed an important part of RSFP. They were important for two reasons. Firstly, they made the sponsors look at the project with a kind eye! A rather important point in today's world where the search for budgets to realise artistic visions often takes the best of an artist's time. Secondly, they gave a concrete meaning to the description of the installation as a 'time-sculpture' by changing the appearance of the central map over the duration of the exhibition.

Seven schools participated in the workshop in Sculpture Square and another three in NIE, where it took on a different form. In Sculpture Square, I first went to the different schools involved to present a lecture on photography, together with a representative of Epson who talked about digital printing. With this brief on what their contribution to the exhibition would be, the students photographed their daily life environment, their school and eventually the nearby train track. The photos were then turned into photo-objects which were brought to stand on the map, in relation to their original location, thus recreating the landscape along the track.

In NIE, the teachers made the project fit their respective programmes. One of them had the students documenting the train journey from Tanjong Pagar to Johor with pin hole cameras. Another one, working on a giant kilt, had them to travel while disassembling and assembling the kilt, as a symbol of the relation between the two countries. The last one also made the student work on the relation between the countries but with drawings and collages.

January/February 2005
August/September 2005



Zhangde Primary School



L'invention de la photographie suscita une transformation radicale des notions de temps et d'espace. Avec elle, on pouvait voir à quoi ressemblait le bout du monde et conserver l'image des êtres chers pour toujours. Et lorsque la Réalité, incarnée en la personne de Nicephore Niepce, contempla la première image photographique fixée, Elle dut beaucoup aimer le résultat car la photographie et ses ersatz sous forme de film et de vidéo sont maintenant partout. Le développement de la photo numérique marque bien sûr le stade le plus récent de cette histoire de 'l'instantané' que l'on peut maintenant choisir de conserver ou d'effacer sur le champ. La photo permet à la peinture de se libérer du besoin de représentation réaliste. La photo numérique remplit maintenant cette fonction pour le grand public. On peut sans doute espérer que la photo traditionnelle va bientôt révéler sa véritable nature dans le mystère de la chambre noire où l'eau règne en maîtresse.

L'espace commence à manquer pour véritablement développer les derniers points de cet ouvrage. Mais que diable, usons au mieux de ce que le temps nous donne. Il faudrait parler des ateliers qui réunirent dix écoles au cours des deux présentations de l'exposition. Ces ateliers vous en voyez les résultats dans les images ci-contre. En recréant le paysage le long de la voie ferrée, ils donnèrent un sens supplémentaire à l'expression 'Time Sculpture' qui définissait l'installation. Avec les œuvres des élèves, celle-ci évolua dans sa forme tout au long de sa durée. Mais il faudrait surtout parler des idées plus théoriques concernant la photographie présentées en anglais dans les pages précédentes. Le texte contient principalement la présentation du concept de 'Constant Self Recording Mode' ou Mode d'Auto Enregistrement Permanent que je propose comme description des effets de l'invention de la photographie sur le monde.





The Constant Self Recording Mode

A history of photography, à ma façon

The Performance

Singapore 27 February 2005