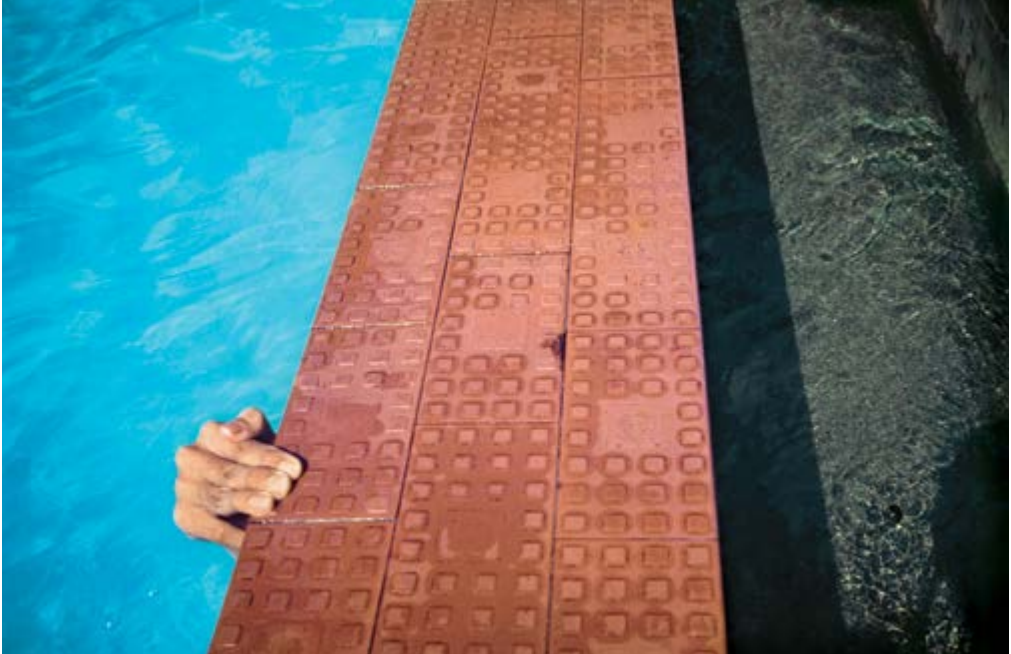




Things I Remember

Gilles Massot





To Gordon, Khalil and all the Whampoa friends who made me feel at home.

Photographed, designed and published by Gilles Massot

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ISBN 978-981-14-4722-8

First publication 2020 with the support of Ernesto Bedmar Architects

*With many thanks to Lindy Poh, Shirley Soh, Jane Allan
and See Phui Yee for their editorial contribution.*

Printed by KHL

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front cover: *Farrer Park Swimming pool, 1982-83*

inside cover: *Victoria Street, 1984*

previous page: *33G Gilstead Rd, 1980s*

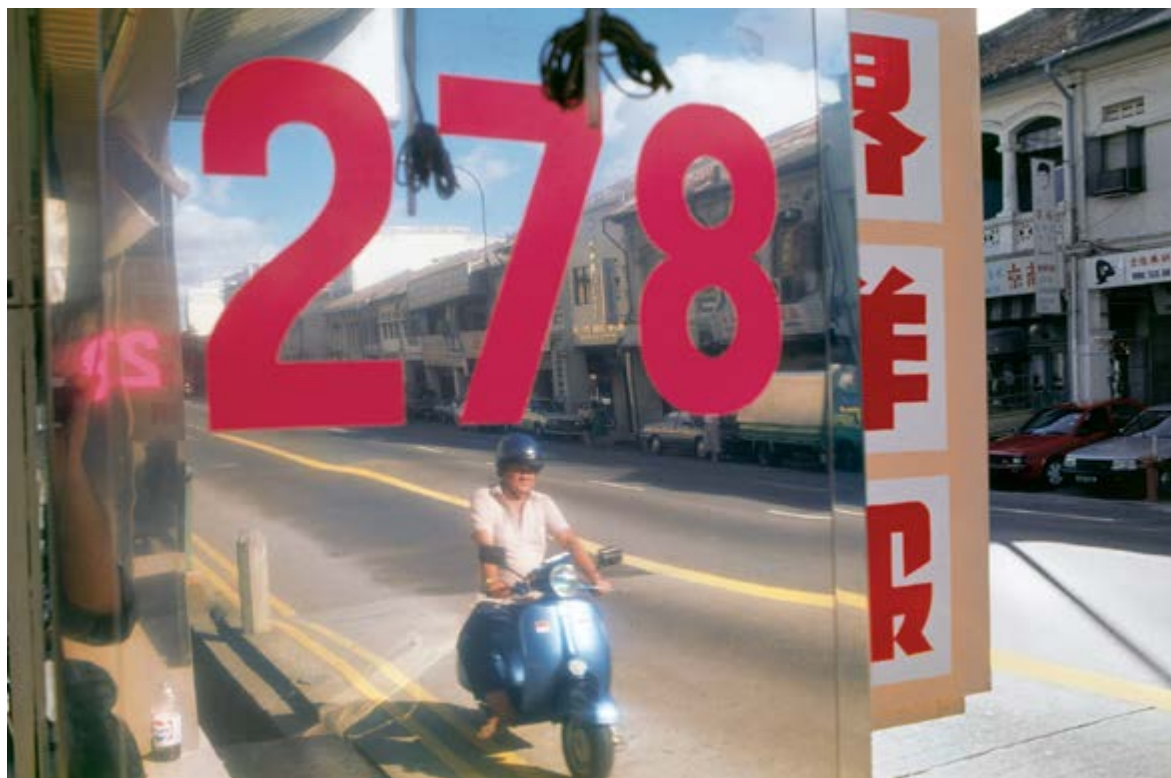
inside back cover: *Fullerton Building, 1990s*

back cover: *Singapore River, early 1980s*



Jurong Bird Park

early 90s



Things I Remember

Singapore 1980s -1990s

*A world between worlds,
a home away from home,
at the close of a century.*

Gilles Massot





Things I remember: a world between worlds, a home away from home.

by Gilles Massot

At first I was looking for City Limit, the shot of a signage, a marker from colonial days that stood along Sims Avenue at the start of Geylang Serai. It had grabbed my attention in 1982 on the occasion of my first visit to this eastern district of Singapore. I remembered it at some point in early 2019 when the curatorial direction of my up-coming solo show in NUS Museum had shifted from my historical research on Jules Itier to my artistic interaction with Singapore and surrounding Asia over a period of almost forty years. This marker in the time and space of a city then foreign to me had come to symbolise my relation to that same city. There was a big difference though: the city then alien had become truly home over the years. The visual memory of this marker was now identifying a limit in the time-space of my relation to Singapore. It marked a beginning, the beginning of my artistic interaction with the Red Dot. So I searched for it in my archives.

Archives... You know when you enter them, but never know when they will let you go free again. Soon, while browsing over countless slide sheets one after another, the whole city began to emerge in the glory of its youthfulness and the secrets of its memories. Or were they "my" memories? One by one I began to pull out shots that captured the evolution by which the initial strangeness had become familiar to me, while the city was on its own course of transformation into a glorious digitized post-modern wonder. In the end, I found myself with a decade of personal shots that had never been used, which had been patiently waiting for their turn to come out into the light. I could remember most of them, how they felt then. But some also turned out to be complete discoveries. I could also see how thirty years later this selection was now tracing the boundaries of our respective identities in transition. The haphazard search for City Limit had unexpectedly turned into a vibrant book. And the time for it was clearly right because it echoed a general surge of interest for the Singapore of the 1980s. This period of time had been given little attention until recently, but it was now old enough to be regarded as history, as indicated by the many inquiries I had received about it over the last couple of years.

In 2015, the gallery owner Audrey Yeo asked me to write an essay for the exhibition of a little known photographer she wanted to bring to public attention. Arrangements were then made for an interview, it turned out that we were practically neighbours and so I met Loke Hong Seng in Whampoa market. A good decade older than me, Loke had practiced photography extensively in the 1960s-70s but never aimed for a professional use of this collection of black and white films. They were indeed history by then since Loke had captured the transitions of Singapore from colonial port to independent nation, in particular its changing landscape. This was a period during which rural Singapore had been fast disappearing to make room for social housings and the resulting contrast lent itself to strong compositions. Loke had been very passionate about this self-assigned mission up until the early 1980s, when he felt that the Singapore he knew and loved had changed so completely that there was nothing much left for him to photograph. This heartfelt revelation was a turning point in our conversation in the way it made me realise that we had more in common than just a neighbourhood. Strangely enough, the early 1980s was also precisely the same moment when I started recording the life and time of a city driven by a process of unstoppable transformation that fascinated me. We were on the same trajectory but I had undertaken the process of this documentation precisely when he had stopped. We had documented the same transition between past and future, but two distinct phases of it.

I guess Singapore has been in a state of transition right from the beginning of its history. Closer analysis of its legendary founding by Sri Tri Buana for example suggests that this episode should be understood as an allegory for the transition of Malay identity from Hindu-Buddhist Sumatra to Muslim Malacca. Much later, the free port founded by Raffles marked the transition to a new era of power in colonial history, development of global trade and fusion of cultures. By the time I came to Singapore, the city had turned into a nation barely fifteen years of age! This was another phase of transition in the city-port's history, but not just any kind of transition. It made identity, culture, economy and politics, and all other aspects of the previous transformations experienced actively merge their impacts and amplify the dynamic of their forward trajectory. The port was transitioning from city to nation. Granted the official status of citizenship, the not-too-long-ago migrants were trying to define what this meant for this melting pot of ethnicities. The hypothetical definition of the Singaporean identity became a matter of primary importance. As for the economy, the port had recently benefited from a new field of manufacturing activities: electronics. The stupendous growth of this revolutionary technology-industry was turning Asia, and Singapore with it, into the powerhouse of the world. In effect, it made the country and its society transition from analogue to electronic environment and life-style.





In fact, this is what the 1980s were really about. As years went by, bits and pieces of electronics of all sorts pervaded progressively all aspects of everyday life. By the time we reached the 1990s it became clear that we had moved into an altogether different world. Loke had photographed the transition towards the modernity of concrete architecture. I arrived on the shores of the island at the tip of the northern hemisphere to photograph the transition from analogue technology to post-modern electronics and the rise of the virtual as a way of life. This wasn't just about societal transformation. It was a drastic shift of paradigms, a switch of dimensions.

I am glad that Shawn Chua agreed to write an essay for this book. In 2019, the team from Vulture magazine contacted me to inquire about my artistic work in the 1980s. The era had become history and they were curious about it. I sent a selection of images from 1981 to 1984, projects by our groups Talking Eyes and Art of Parties in the field of audio-visual and sensorial entertainment. The eight-page article came out with a meaningful essay by Shawn. He was too young to have experienced the energy that made those years shine as brief moments of wild spontaneous expressions and light-hearted explorations. But he felt this energy emanating so vividly from within the photographs that he connected past and present and through his writing brought that energy back into action in today's party scene. Clearly, he understood what all this was about, that these images of parties from 30 years ago were not nostalgia but bits of time-space waiting for someone's attention to reveal their potency. Surely, he would be able to read these images of Singapore in the 1980s as the duplicordings I see in them now. Based on a recently published paper of my research in theory of photography, Shawn gives in the next few pages a condensed explanation of the reasons why these photographs are energy in action and not mere memorabilia. Beneath the Singaporean surface, they are the reflection of a transition then taking place all around the world from analogue to virtual. Albeit here it was happening in a city born into globalisation, photography and a fragmented identity, a combination that makes it possibly the post-modern city par excellence.

By the late 80s, I came to the conclusion that the identity of Singapore can only be the absence of a singular, definitive identity, and that some day a generation would come that could live by this paradox. My being born a queer artist in a blue collar town made me grow up with the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. Coming to Singapore was deeply liberating because that was precisely what I had become socially. I guess that this is what made me feel at home here. So much so that I am still around forty years later, indeed witnessing some signs of that evolution in the younger generation.



Singapura Ho!





Out of Time, or The Work of Art in the Age of Mnemonic Duplicording

by Shawn Chua

Photography is the first manifestation of another energy 'in time'.

- Gila Masok, An Open Call to Open-Minded Scientists

The space of a photograph exists in the depth of its time.

- Professor Ma, The White Space Theory or Towards a Physics of Mnemonics

There is a time for planting, a time for harvesting, and a time to return to the soil, fertilise it, and nurture the growth of a new seed that propels the cycle of never-ending transformations of which the narrative of life is woven.

- Gilles Massot, The White Space Conflict Theory: Understanding Photography as Energy

Will we ever succeed in stripping off the continuum, in comprehending the why of the quantum, in achieving a physics of total Einstein austerity, in deriving—without time—the essence of time?

- John Archibald Wheeler, World as System Self-Synthesized by Quantum Networking (cited in Gaston Gabriel Marceau, From Chiaroscuro to the Collapse of the Wave Function or Beyond Image Making)

I begin outside, extemporaneously, beyond the time frame, already out of time. I step outside the frame to begin with this album of textual portraits. They are discrete snapshots of the continuum of “Gilles Massot”—a quantum entanglement of the Malay artist Gila Masok, the Chinese physicist Professor Ma, the historian of photography Gaston Gabriel Marceau, the prime ego Gilles Massot, and even the theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler among a crowd of many others. The pronoun “I” captures a kind of photographic stillness that only appears static when it is observed from the outside, collapsing the infinite quantum dance of probable selves into an indexical unit. Or, as Marceau put it, the photograph can be seen as the quantum of a continuum.

But this is not what I remember. I remembered differently.

You—as Roland Barthes, as Gila Masok, as Gilles Massot—had once implored me not to mistake this stillness as the absence of motion, as something frozen ‘in time’, as death. No, I had to perceive the subatomic quantum vibrations animating this intensive stillness; I had to encounter the madness of photographic stillness that threatens to explode in my face. Photography is not the mortuary process of embalming the moment into a frozen mask of itself. In his seminal paper on the physics of mnemonics, Professor Ma makes an illuminating distinction between the mnemonic processes of object-based recording and that of event recording. The former marks an organic embodiment of memory, where the thing that exists in the world becomes a cipher for the memory of a thing that existed. In event recording however, the technological apparatus does not merely record, but duplicates the incipient forces that enable the coming into being of the event.

Professor Ma christened this mnemonic process ‘duplicording’: “the action of the energy that memorizes things existing in a state of transience.”

As recent memes make explicit, all photographs are in fact GIFs always coming into being, looping in its re-animation. The ‘live photo’ function on my iPhone exposes this truth more literally, reminding me that images are never still, and are always part of this continuum, always (re-)living. The ‘stillness’ of photography is not the absence of motion, but its temporal abstraction. This is as true a statement about the technology of photography as it is about the act of remembering. To remember is not to deny but to commemorate the transience of things. Gila Masok reminds us that even death is an unfolding narrative that makes the “now” exists.

By seeing the photograph as a quantum and not as an image, we change the conceptual perspective, which leads to the following thought: Photographic duplicording is a form of energy that extracts virtual mnemonic duplicates of the time-space continuum and stores them in the white space.

- Professor Ma, The White Space Theory or Towards a Physics of Mnemonics





What does it mean to remember “things”, if we agree with Marceau’s proposition that all things exist only as a “narrative of their transformation”? How do we reconcile this with Gila Masok’s claim that

transformation is primary cause of time, not its effect
?

To wrap our heads around all of this, we need to begin by stepping “out of time”, and into Professor Ma’s theory about the virtual repository of the white space. While Professor Ma is invested in the relation between the photographic medium and the white space, I would like to interpellate white space theory into the act of remembering. To remember is also to duplicord, reproducing other times even as we attempt to embody the past. Time is already splintered. We were never fully ‘in’ time; we are always looping around multiple scales of transience, always in the act of producing different times. The preposition “out” of time no longer holds, and begins to collapse. We find ourselves in the white space, simultaneously occupying times that are both virtual and actual. The white space is not merely a repository that stores a narrative “then”; it is also the interface with the “yet” of transformative potential. To remember is to disrupt the teleological future of linear time, proliferating other virtual timelines that may yet enact a transmutation of this dimension.

Memory, like photography, is hence a fugitive act. They are the temporal residues that have leaked out of time’s frame. They are the unbearable stillness that refuses to settle. To be out of time is not merely to escape but to unsettle time itself. It is the uncovering of a quantum world between worlds. This may be what it means to let the madness you spoke of explode in my face. But we are running out of time, and I will have to recede into the white space within these pages. Here, I will continue to observe you, remembering the times we haven’t had.

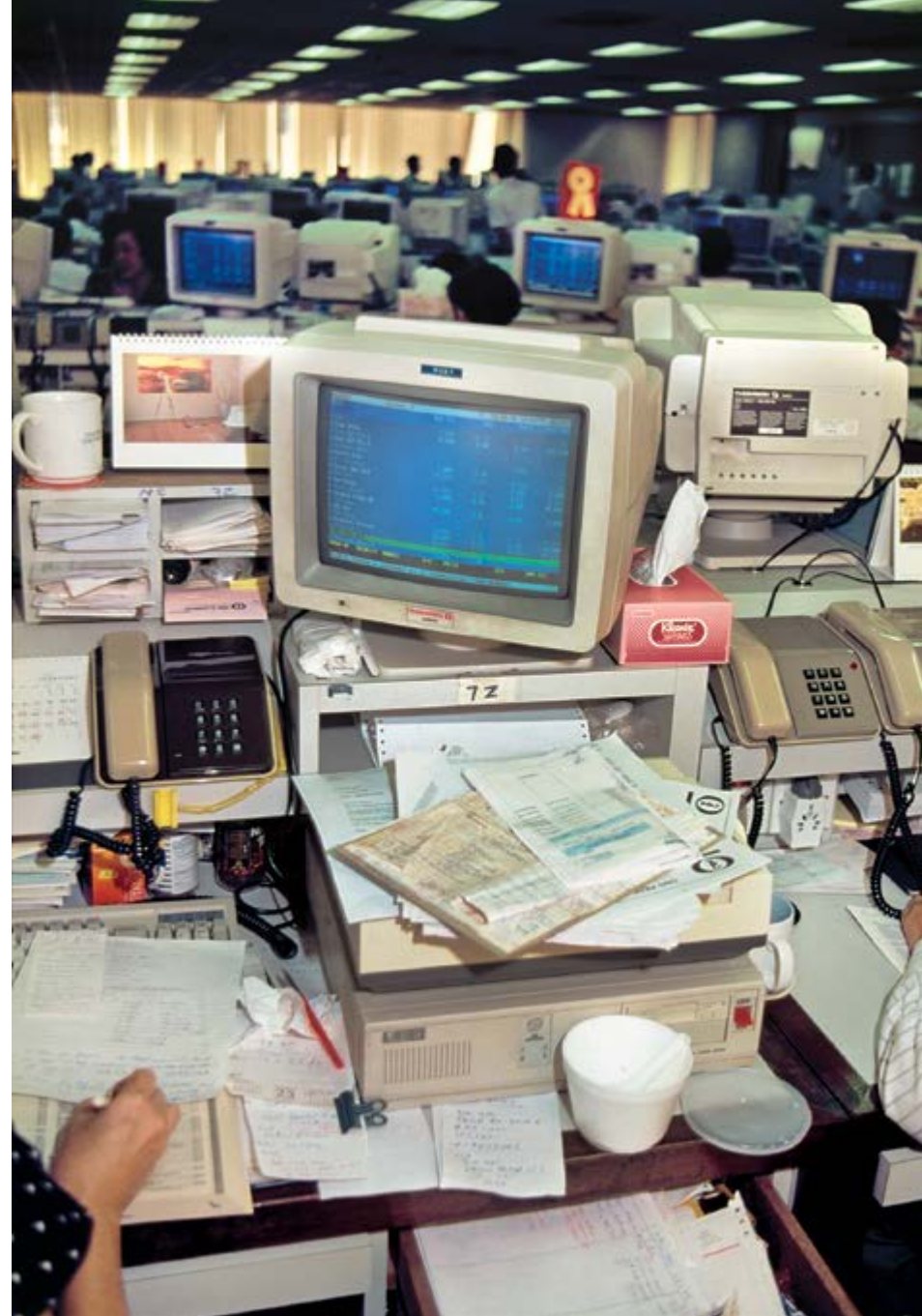




20 *Jurong, SAFTI Military Institute*
1983-84



Business district 21
1984









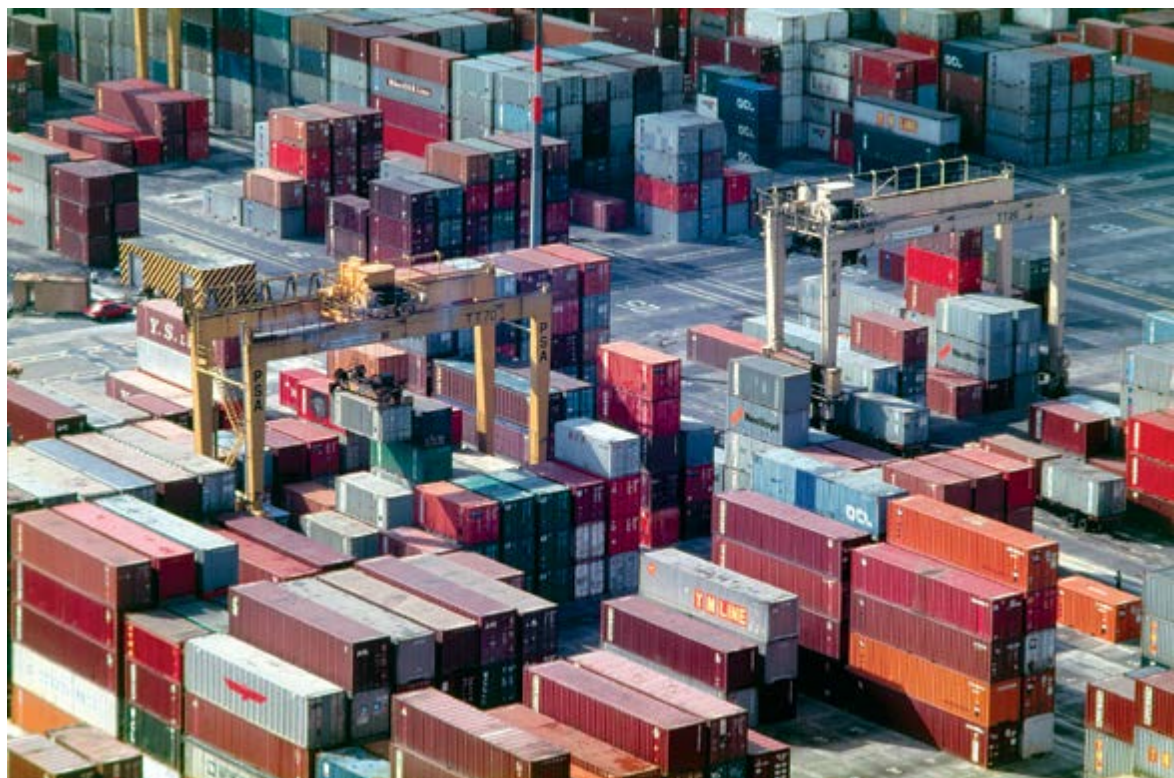














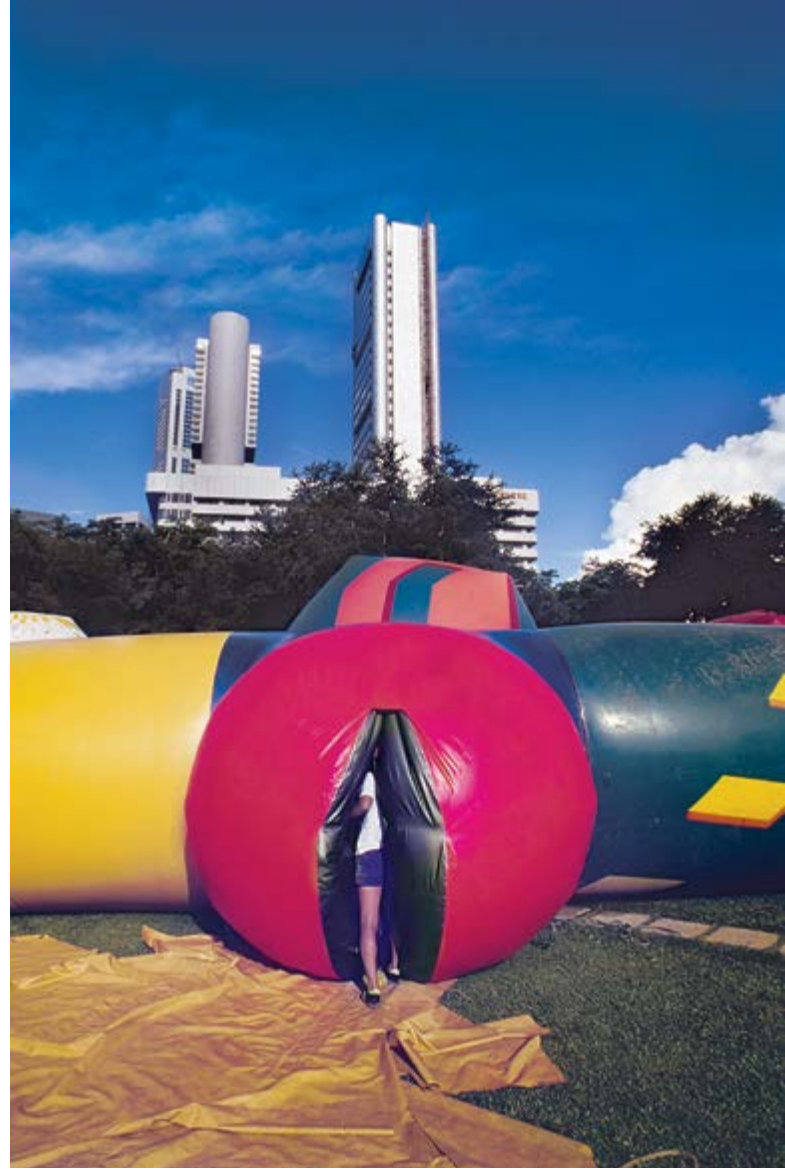




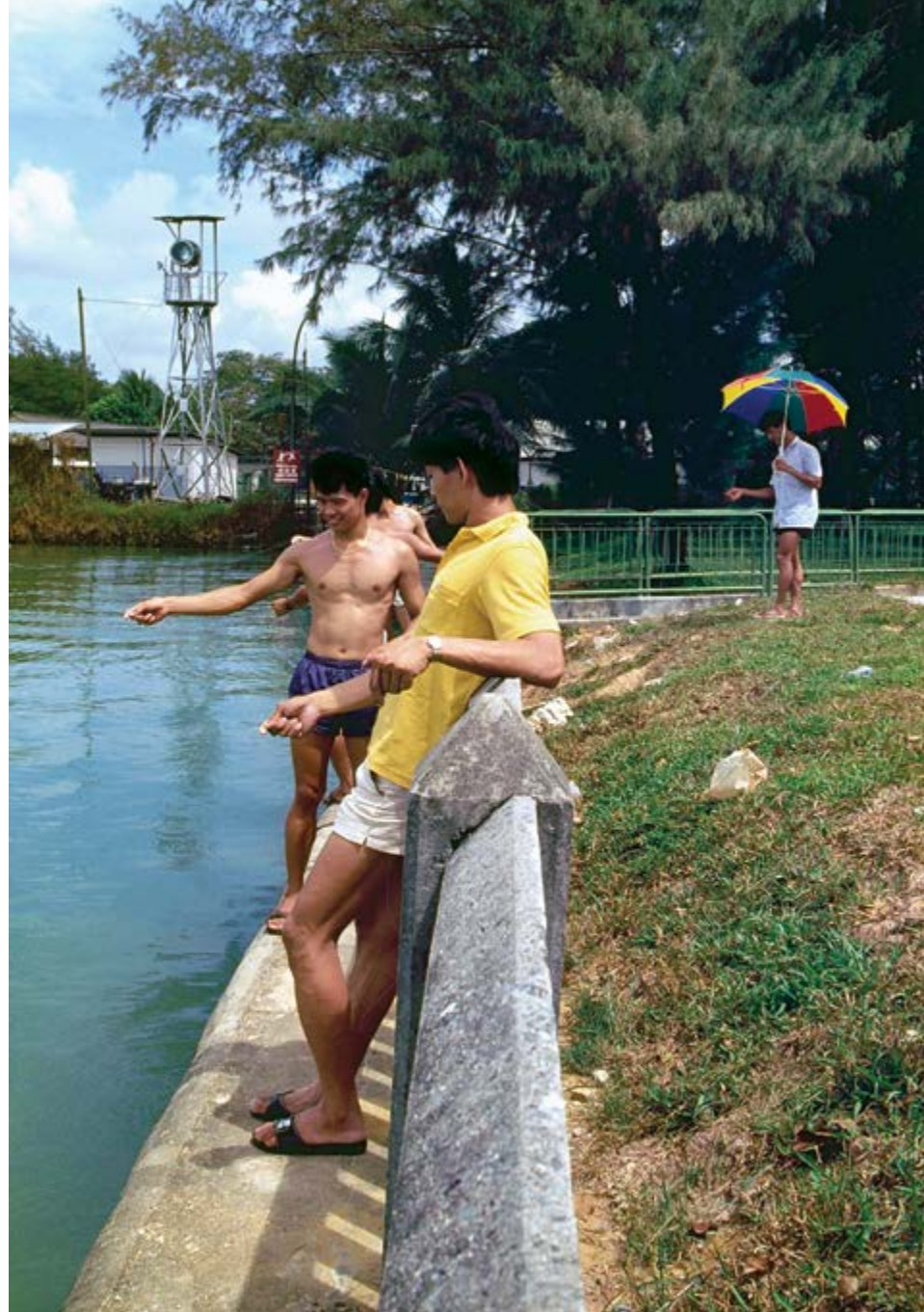










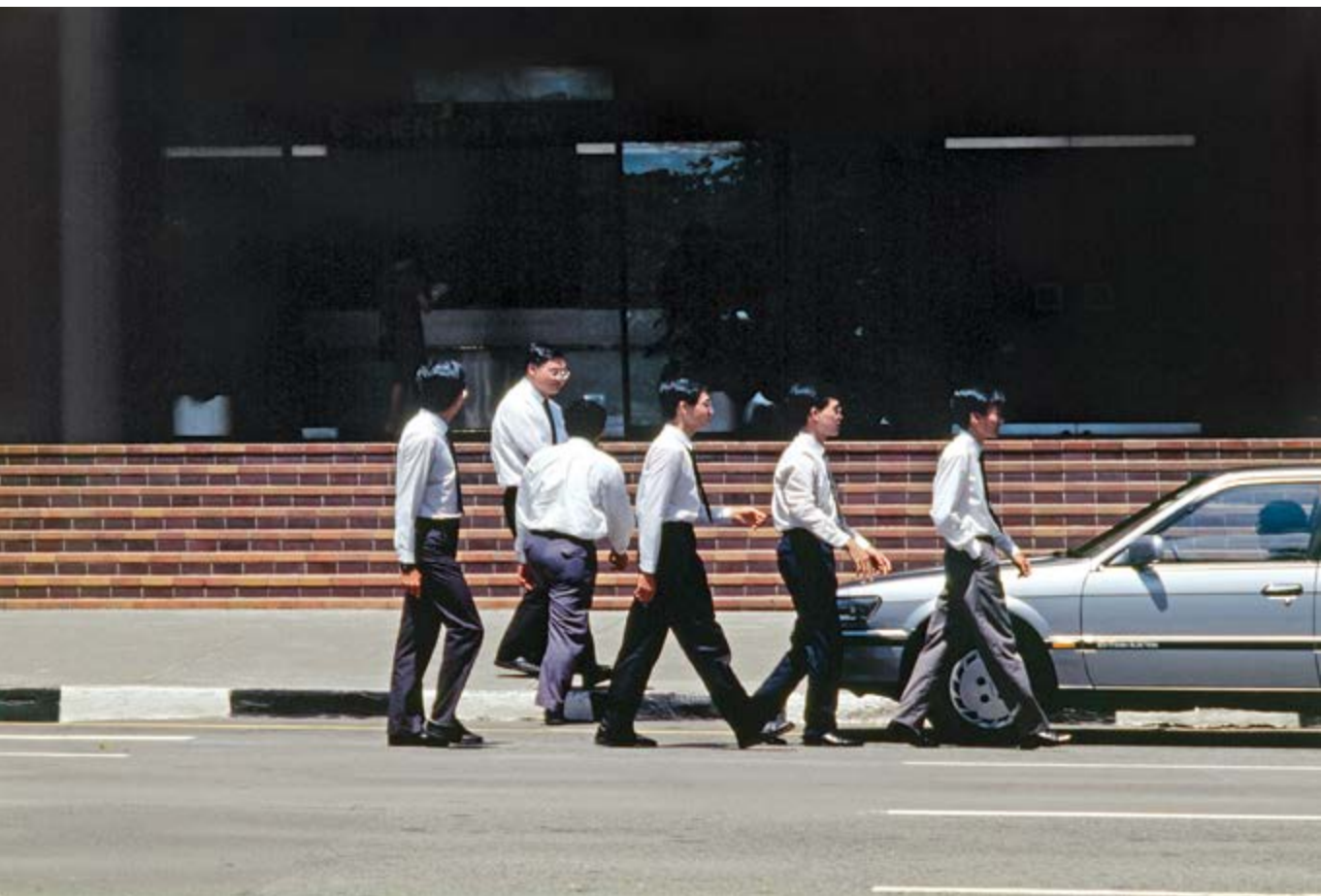








64 *Serangoon Road*
late 80s



Business district 65
mid 80s















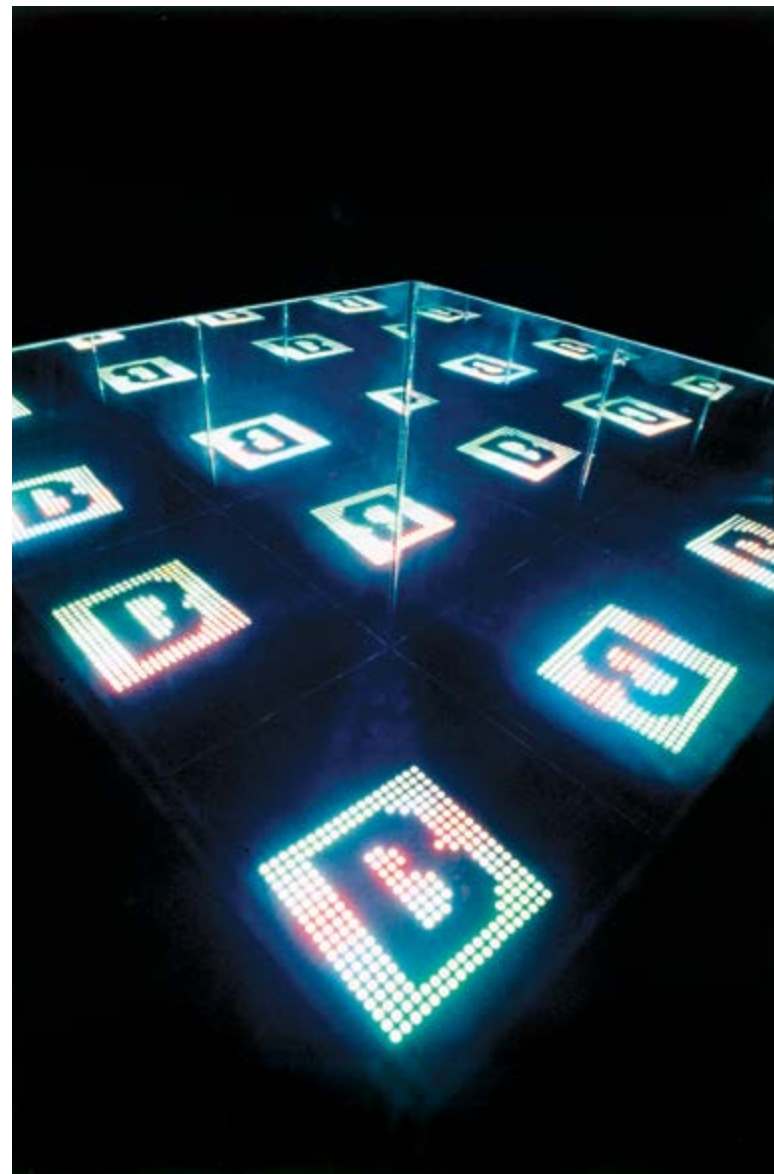
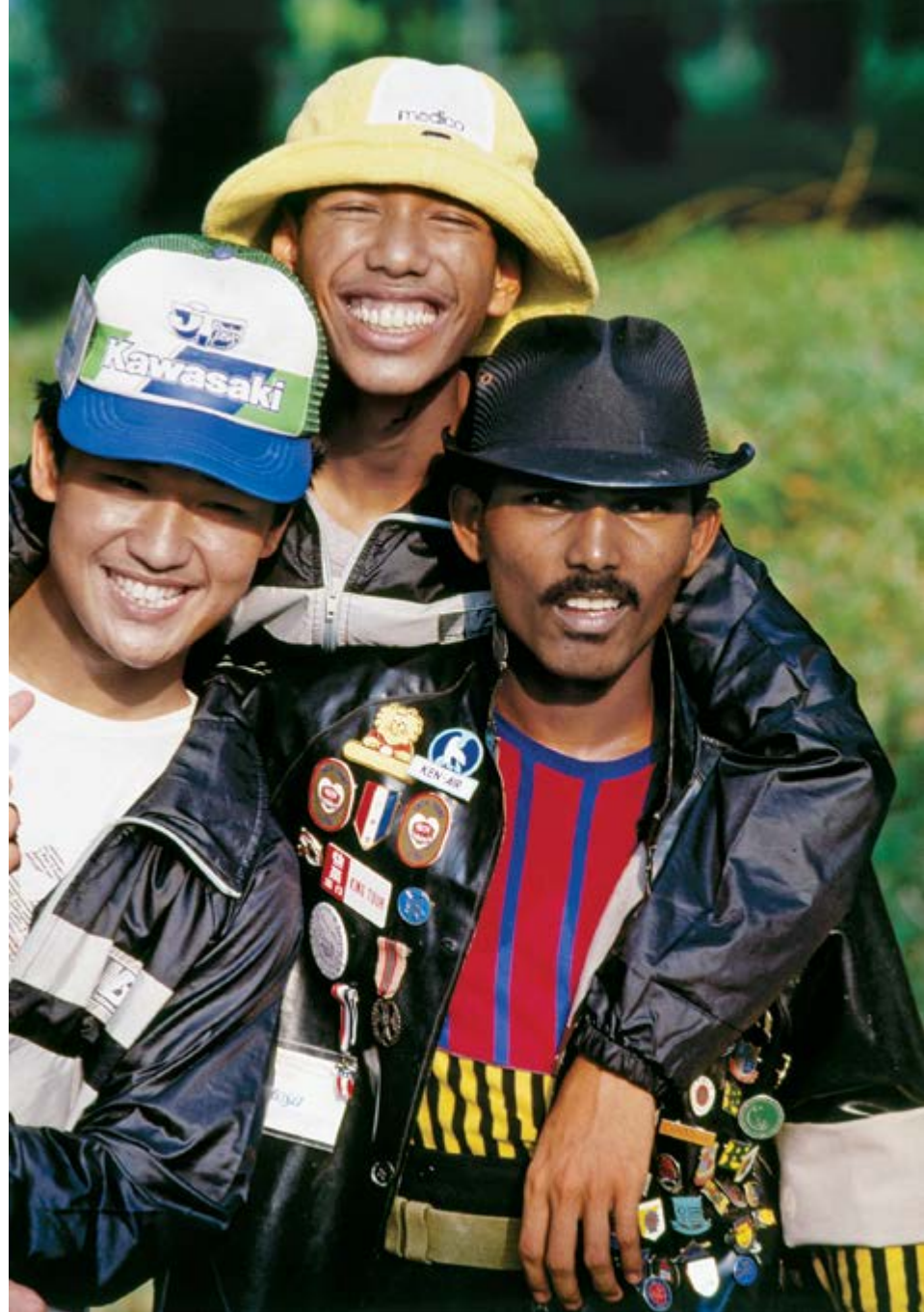










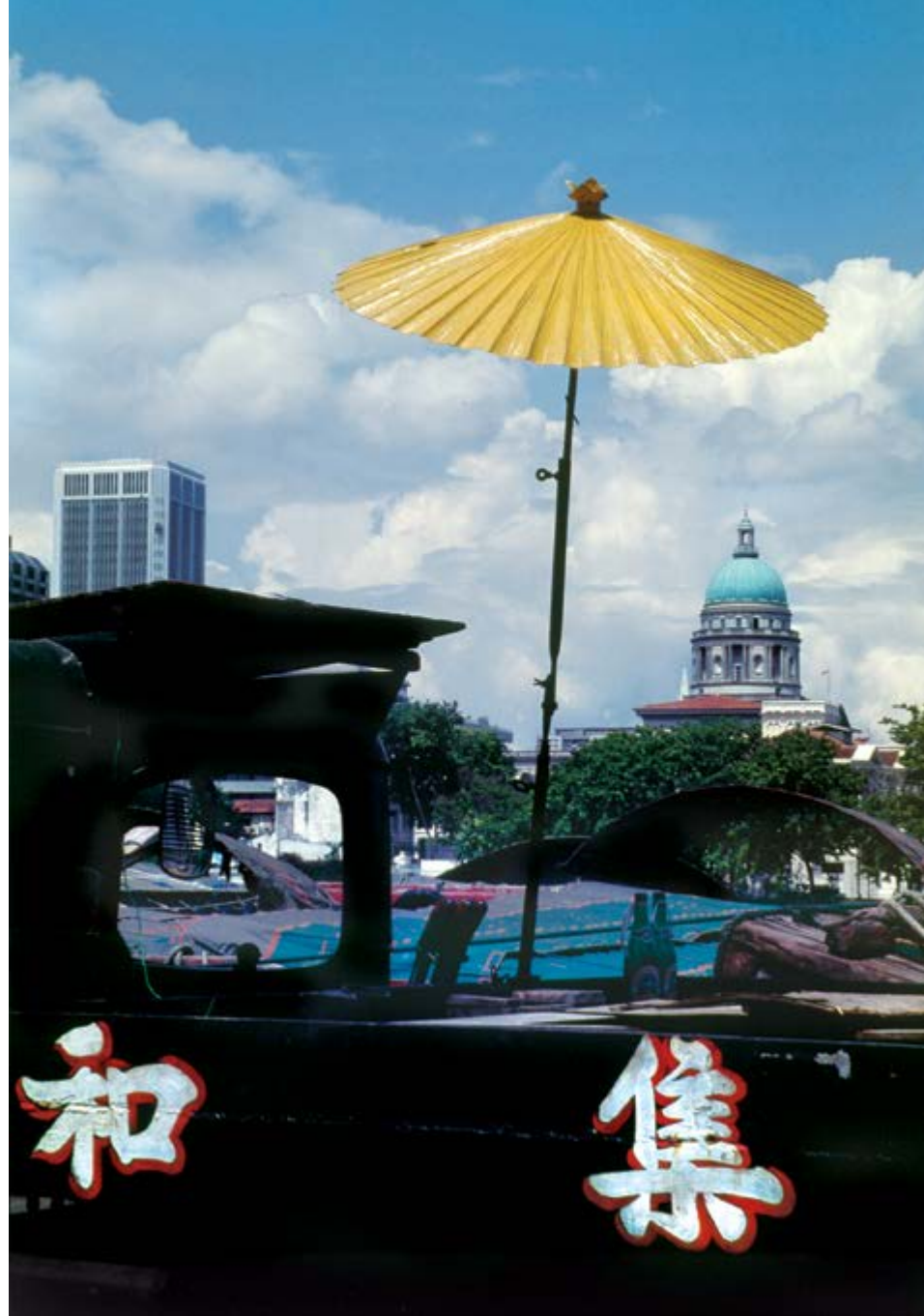




















108 around Jalan Besar
late 80s



Haji Lane 109
early 90s



110 *Beach Road*
1984



Smith Street 111
early 2000s



112 *Esplanade Drive*
early 2000s



Sturdee Road
1984













124 *Marina Park*
early 2000s



East Coast Fort Road 125
1990s



126 *Kwan Im Thong Waterloo Street*
1981-82



Benjamin Sheares Bridge 127
mid 1980s







132 *National Stadium*
mid 80s



Chye Hong Coffee Shop Dunearn Rd
early 90s









140 Sri Vadapathira Kalamman temple Serangoon Road
1983-84



Nee Soon district Sembawang Road 141
1983



142 *Novena Church Thomson Road*
1982-83



East Coast Park 143
mid 80s



Johor Causeway Bridge

145
late 1980s



146 *Johor Causeway Bridge*
late 1980s



unidentified 147
1990s





150 *Changi Airport*
mid 80s



around Jalan Besar
1990s





154 *West Coast from Mount Faber*
late 1980s



Benjamin Sheares Bridge 155
mid 80s





































190 *Merlion Park*
late 90s



Lavender Street 191
1980s



So why this book in 2020?

First came the pager. Not quite a tool for communication as such but it made the user contactable any time while tiny enough to be kept in a pocket. It was probably the first electronic communication device devised to fully integrate into daily routine. Then came the FAX, a wondrous sort of animal that combined analogue mechanism and electronic technology to send instantly any type of visual information anywhere in the world! It reigned supreme for about a decade, the 1980s, a time during which it defined information exchange, especially in work environments. Offices and businesses simply could not function without this form of modern efficiency that carried something almost religious in the ritualistic dance performed by information when it crossed from the analogue to the digital realm to complete a transfer. The transmission of information over phone lines was practically immediate but its processing performed to the gentle sound of rotating mechanics from another time, was not quite so. The modernity of the fax was ubiquitous and instantaneous, yet still nicely relaxed. By the mid-90s however, it was mercilessly outdone by the killer combination of computer science, wireless transmission and user-friendly interface in a platform specifically designed for high volumes of fluid paperless information exchange between computers. The discreet lightness of the email proved to be a format quickly familiar to the point of being invasive, a revolution in everyday life routine, whether for work or leisure. Soon, it allowed attachments of a few megabytes, such as photographs. This resulted in a quality of transmission by mail far superior to that of a fax, thus heralding its inevitable obsolescence.

By then we stood at the edge of a century that promised to be different, a future of endless progress and improvements already making everything forever more instant and ubiquitous, a future of leisure we were told, thanks to the record amounts of work completed in record time. We were not quite naive enough to believe that last part, but anyway there was no choice ... 21st century exchange of information, and with it everyday life, was evidently destined to become virtual in essence, form and use. This evolution of our relation to reality towards an emerging virtual world had unfolded over the last two decades of the 20th century. It crossed a threshold in November 2000 with the release of the third hand phone equipped with an electronic eye, but most importantly the first with a fully integrated camera, a phone that could produce, send and receive photographs.



194 *Little India*
early 90s



Lorong Gambas
1983



By bringing together sonic and visual memorisation in a handheld tool that communicated the results of its mnemonic activity with no strings attached, a tool for constant and instant “virtualisation” of the world was born. It sealed our destiny. Its power was so decisive that less than a year later it took us straight into a new form of societal interaction for the collapse of the WTC twin towers in New York. The event was experienced live by the world as one single moment of global information and shared instantly as the resulting associated consciousness. From there on it was all the way down the slope of virtual fantasy entanglement, to reach the current riotous culmination of its latest manifestation: a new breed of corona virus that achieved the distinction of becoming the first virus at once biological and virtual. In doing so, it became the manifestation of a bridge between dimensions, such a clear reflection of what we have become in our daily actions that it is likely here to stay. In fact it might have even been conceived of by Mother Nature to foster our adaptation to this new level of human existence.

By 2004 I came to the concept of Constant Self-recording Mode, a societal mode of functioning initiated right at the onset of photography's apparition by way of its action on the world and destined to become today's infocomm society. I began to see a recurrent thread of associations between photography and quantum mechanics as if they were almost one another's mirroring justifications. Photography combined to the concept of Constant Self-recording Mode was at the image of Wheeler's U theory in which the world is understood as made up primarily not of particles but information and its existence induced by the self-synthesized circulation of information by way of quantum networking between perceived and perceiver. I began to see in photography the emergence of a form of energy that could turn the transience of past memories into tangible mechanical duplicates of their vanished temporality, an energy the purpose of which was to bring to the surface of our shared macro reality the underlying quantic paradox of its *modus operandi* active at the micro level. By 2013, my intuition of a Constant Self-recording Mode received the stamp of academia's approval when the Oxford Dictionary declared the word Selfie “Word of the Year”, so universal this new form of societal behaviour had become. The selfie was the clear illustration of Wheeler's U theory, and the direct manifestation of what I saw as the quantic nature of photography: the collapse of the wave function in the camera that turns the transience of the past into physical information shareable in the future.



198
mid 80s

Victoria Street



199
late 90s

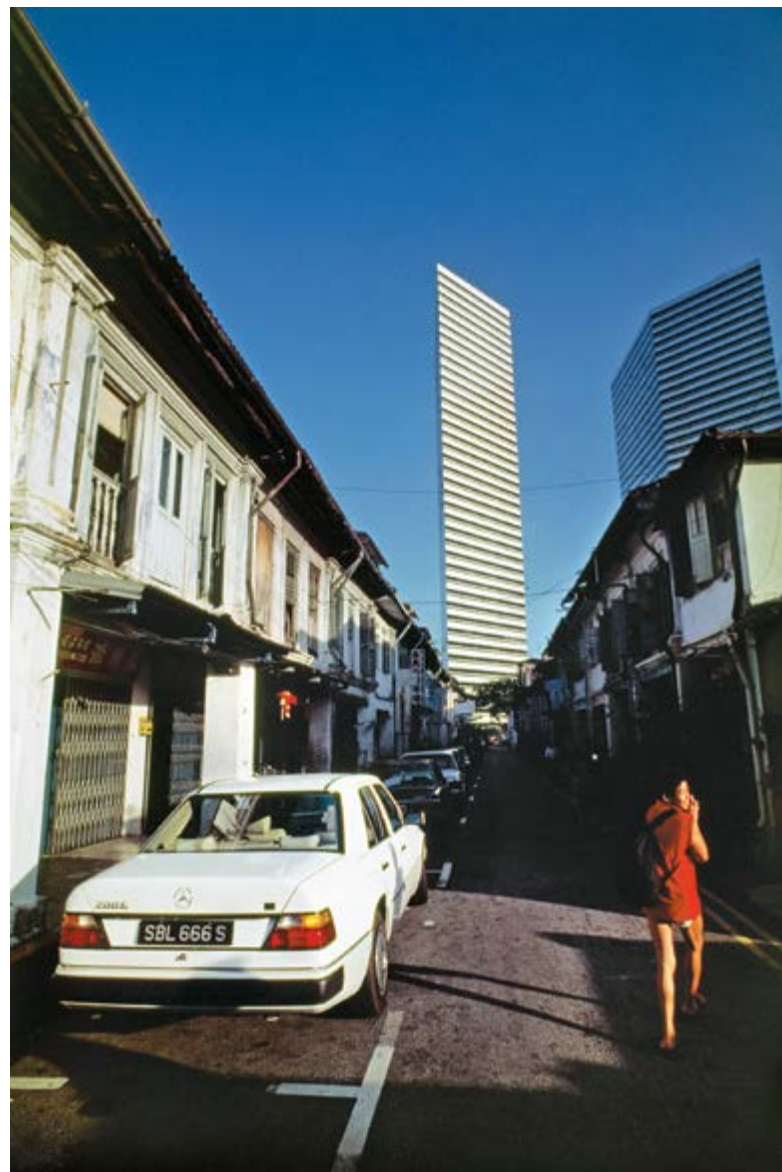
Bras Basah Road



The selfie craze also fed the enthusiastic growth of social media. Creation, circulation and consumption of instantaneous bits of information carried the possibility of absolute freedom and boundless creativity. Any user could become a source of global information. But with this freedom also came the moral responsibility attached to the nature of the information created and most importantly circulated. Fake news is nothing new. Far from being the reliable authentication of truth commonly perceived in it, the very essence of photography is in fact to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction by making the physical look virtual and the virtual look physical. The stimulation of emotions by way of bold and provocative exaggerations supported by manipulation of images quickly proved a sure way to achieve impact. Not surprisingly, by the 2010s, public mandate went as far as giving access to the highest responsibility to an American personality whose years of experience as a TV reality show host had allowed him to master effective mass media manipulation. The amount of fake news circulating in the social media has grown to such an extent that the border between truth and fiction is thinner than ever and the fine line separating the virtual from the physical will probably soon vanish.

So why a book dedicated in 2020 to images of Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s? Well first of all I hope that the two texts at the start helped you to go on drifting along the pages with the right perspective in mind, and that coming as you do now to the end of this flow of moments in times, in which places, faces, light, shape and colours collide into the sole unity of their boundless diversity, you will feel that you experienced little if any nostalgia. Yes these are photographs of a bygone time when life was different. No doubt a part of them has become history, which lends to some a factual significance that has little to do with the photograph itself, while others are imbued with a form of light-hearted tenderness that has everything to do with the photograph itself. But I don't think that there are many of these moments filled with the longing and regrets characteristic of nostalgia, even in the photos of old corners of the city captured at dire moments of their existence when they stood menaced by irremediable erasure. Because that is precisely what life in Singapore was about at that time: destruction rejoicing in the spontaneity of youth projected by the impact of its regenerative action on the city's fabric. Even the photos of solitary old things, be they building or people, are not about longing for a vanishing past. They are about the essence of Now as it exists in the interval needed to see the forever recurrent Becoming turn to Memory. So I hope that the duplicording energy at work in them made them glow under your gaze, filled with life in the Now, at least on some occasions if not at the turn of each and every page.





The congenial presence of the fax mentioned at the beginning of this closing text may be the best way to address the question of why this book. The fax was beginning to make things ubiquitous and instantaneous yet its contribution to the everyday life environment still felt fairly relaxed and that is pretty much the way the 1980s felt as a whole. The radical transformation of our life by electronics was already in full swing but there was still ample time and space to breathe. The 1990s were a tad less relaxed, yet that proved to be as nothing compared to the radical change of pace brought at the turn of the century by the hand phone and the associated user's interfaces. The last two decades of the 20th century saw the fax standing halfway between the analogue and the digital, the self-assurance of analogue modernism and the instability of virtual postmodernism.

It heralded the condition of our life today that sees us spending much of our waking time in the virtual computerised sphere of the web in order to complete the daily tasks of a working society. We now live in between worlds for most of the day, hooked as we are on the incessant influx of information brought to us by the magical little screen. And these photographs of Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s are the reflection of that moment in time when the world was tipping off into a new era, the traces of the things I remember, the traces of how it felt then to be at home away from home, the traces of what it meant to exist in that world between worlds, a state of being that came to be our new reality in the century that was rising over the horizon.

Gilles Massot

Whampoa, 16 March 2020



For a list of full captions, please visit
<https://www.gillesmassot.com/2020-things-i-remember.html>

For more information on my work in the 1980s, please watch the short movie
 Singapore from BW to C v. 2.0.17 (<https://vimeo.com/332576736>)

gillesmassot





ISBN 9789811447228



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