5. Future Imaginaries

Charles Merewether

‘natural history’ has no actual existence other than through the process of human history, the only part which recaptures this historical totality, like the modern telescope whose sight captures, in time, the retreat of nebulae at the periphery of the universe.¹

The governance, if not control, of water has become an increasingly critical subject. The subject of water—of seas and rivers—as integral to the sustenance and sustainability of the land, demands urgent attention.² Over the past century this has become a major issue that requires an understanding both across and between national boundaries, giving consideration to the increasing needs of individual countries, especially as attempts to address the adequate supply of water has driven some countries to take what can only be described as drastic measures. These measures are not an issue of territorial or national sovereignty, such as the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea involving China, Japan, Korea and the Philippines. And, while there is truth to the idea of a growing openness of borders and access to and between countries, there are other concerns and solutions that involve the control, use and future of river systems or of the seas that directly effect the sustainability of countries and their peoples.

This essay focuses on a series of projects undertaken by artists who have made visible and evident through their work the plight of people whose lives have been changed by the state’s attempt to resolve issues relating to water. These solutions affect not only access to the land and the resource of water, but the sustainability of the land itself. Such issues have produced a new consciousness amongst artists about their art practice and the kind of issues they wish or feel necessary to address through their practice. I will refer to China and Singapore in regard to rivers and the sea.

My essay focuses on three Chinese artists whose projects address the Three Gorges Dam in China. I also consider the work of Debbie Ding and Charles Lim, who have been exploring the fate of the rivers and the sea, together with that of land reclamation in and around Singapore.

1 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967).

2 In 2010, Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney held the exhibition, *The River Project*, that included artists from Australia, China, India, Korea, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Vietnam. This project is an important example of the increasing recognition of the importance of water as a subject recognising the very concept of ‘nature’ as having become the subject of social forces.

Liu Xiaodong, *Three Gorges: Displaced Population* 2003 (detail); oil on canvas; 200 x 800 cm (4 panels).

© Xiaodong Studio; image courtesy of the artist

The subjects represented by these artists have become more prominent due to their artistic practice and their ability to capture public attention by virtue of participating in and, in effect, validating the importance of a public sphere. Their practices constitute forms of articulation that sharpen our focus on the subject at hand. They avoid political rhetoric and other forms of expression that are shaped by political exigencies and interests. Moreover, the subject of this essay is about the connectivities that water makes between people across countries. The idea of connectivities is significant, not in the overt manner of networks or mutual alliances, but rather, as aligned subjects across the artists' practice. Once understood in these terms, the concept of the public sphere also expands beyond national boundaries to that of a transnational issue.

Part One

In the histories of modernism, the subjects of water and the land are important, but without any sharply defined distinction between the two, or overtly directed social significance. Art critic John Berger, amongst others, eloquently argued the link between landscape painting and eighteenth century aristocratic claims over the land. In counterpoint to this history, the contemporary artist William Kentridge has shown how the landscape is in fact the burial ground for a people, especially in South Africa under apartheid rule. In the 1960s the traditional subject of landscape merged into that of land. Artists began to immerse themselves in the land and to engage directly with it in regard to its physical

materiality. We may note here artists in North America, such as Robert Smithson and his *Spiral Jetty*, and *The Lightning Field* by Walter de Maria, or Richard Long and Hamish Fulton in England, the Arte Povera movement in Italy, or others, such as Christo and the Japanese Mono-ha group, including Nobuo Sekine, Lee Ufan, Koji Enokura and Kishio Suga. All of these artists, in different ways, used commonplace materials and challenged the logic of rationalism and technology as evident in the modernist abstraction of the postwar years, most notably in American minimalism. In different ways they immersed themselves in the land, sometimes with a sense of its sheer power and physicality, while in others, it was more a sense of essence, a spiritual almost animistic homage to nature.

While contemporary art may pay due homage to these artists of the 1960s and 1970s, the orientation and consciousness of the practice of contemporary artists, and their engagement with the land and with water (albeit the sea or rivers) is far more directly informed by the social consciousness of the profoundly irreversible and damaging effect on them of the state's shaping of the land. One of the contributing factors enabling this orientation has been the influence of Conceptual art. Since its advent in the 1970s, Conceptual art proposed a more direct engagement and critique of the social domain. That is, artists explored the use of language and institutions as informing, if not determining, the way in which art and visual language was framed and received. Art critic Boris Groys argues that:

from today's perspective, the biggest change that conceptualism brought about is this: after conceptualism we can no longer see art primarily as the production and exhibition of individual things—even readymades. However, this does not mean that conceptual or post-conceptual art became somehow 'immaterial'. Conceptual artists shifted the emphasis of art-making away from static, individual objects toward the presentation of new relationships in space and time. These relationships could be purely spatial, but also logical and political. They could be relationships among things, texts, and photo-documents, but could also involve performances, happenings, films, and videos—all of which were shown inside the same installation space. In other words, conceptual art can be characterized as installation art—as a shift from the exhibition space presenting individual, disconnected objects to a holistic exhibition space in which the relations between objects are the basis of the artwork.³

The exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, went a long way to considering more specifically the breadth and significance of conceptual

³ Boris Groys, 'Introduction—Global Conceptualism Revisited', *e-flux* 29, no. 11 (2011), accessed 18 October 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/introduction%E2%80%94global-conceptualism-revisited/>.

practice.⁴ The organisers argued that there were two waves of conceptual practice between the 1950s and 1980s. These activities took place in various parts of the world as the postwar social and political upheaval prompted artists to re-examine traditional forms of representation and question art's social utility. Much of the art in the exhibition, which took the form of photographs, documentation, films, videos, postcards, posters, drawings, as well as paintings, mixed media objects and installations, was made to provoke the viewer by disturbing previously accepted ideas about social, political, and cultural systems.⁵ The inclusiveness of 'global conceptualism' was made possible by a distinction between Conceptual art as 'an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of Minimalism' and Conceptualism, 'which broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual appreciation' and was characterised by the de-emphasis of the object in favour of the 'idea' (a largely unexamined term in the discourse on Conceptual/ist art) and the conduct of art.⁶ If, as the exhibition demonstrated, many socially/politically active artists have taken approaches that look similar to conceptual strategies—that is, to the act of de-materialisation, engagement with institutional contexts, emphasis on relations between language and perception—those artists have also, clearly, been concerned with the form of their acts.

The legacy of this diverse body of work is fundamental, while not necessarily directly related to understanding the character of contemporary practice. While the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition included Asia, the focus was Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There was no artwork from elsewhere in Asia; for example, Indonesia, Singapore, or the Philippines, where there was a strong engagement and redefinition of Conceptualism within the local context. Of course, one may argue that there were limits resulting from the availability of the necessary and substantial documentation as well as secondary research. The category of 'conceptualism' itself, however, was so expanded across Asia that there were no substantive grounds for this exclusion.⁷

4 The exhibition was held at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, in 1999, followed by a national tour. The curatorial team of Jane Farver, Luis Camnitzer and Rachel Weiss invited a group of 11 international curators to contribute to the exhibition and the work was grouped into regional sections and two chronological sections: the 1950s through until approximately 1973 (Japan, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America, Australia and New Zealand), and 1973 through to the end of the 1980s (the Soviet Union [Russia], Africa, South Korea, and mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong).

5 Frazer Ward notes that the exhibition might be seen as a 'riposte' to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition of 1995–1996, *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965–1975*. See Ward, 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s', *Frieze* 48, September–October (1999), accessed 18 October 2013, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/global_conceptualism_points_of_origin_1950s_1980s/.

6 Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, 'Foreword', in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center & New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), viii.

7 The exhibition publication, however, attempted to address this omission by including an essay on Conceptual art in South-East Asia by Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda. See Poshyananda, "'Con Art" Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia', in Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, *Global Conceptualism*, 143–48.

Moreover, the development of a conceptual practice in these countries has been vital to socio-political debate across the art world and within those countries. This engagement has occurred within the broader cultural and social spheres, making visible what was otherwise obscured by city and national authorities as their regulatory mandate.

Since the 1970s, the lessons of Conceptualism have been received and developed in a variety of forms in Asia. If there are 'connectivities' they are drawn from the legacy of what is characterised as the 'global conceptual' art movement and from the legacy of 'land art'. This has included the revision of land art to include the subject of water and to become a more reflexive practice as to the socio-political context and agencies of change. This focus has been sharpened by the degree to which the process of modernisation has led to the rhetoric of globalisation and an almost exclusive focus on the city as a metropolitan and transnational centre of exchange economies. In some cases, the practice has been developed by individual artists, in other cases by groups who have come to the practice of art as a powerful means of articulation and dissemination.

In the process of its elaboration, my essay shows the connectivities between practices in these countries and other parts of the world. As suggested, these connectivities can be in part located in the way in which Conceptual art has helped to inform the practice of some of these artists. While there are parallels to be found between their practices with regard to their subject, there are, however, no direct connections between them as artists. The idea of transnational artistic movements seems to have virtually disappeared following the advent of Conceptual art movements. This is in part due to the strong growth of galleries and the lack of institutions or organisations to advance transnational artistic movements or other similar interests.

Part Two

In China a number of artists have explored the subject of the hydroelectric Three Gorges Dam in Central China. The project began in 1994, costing an estimated US\$24 billion, and the question that has emerged is in weighing the economic gains produced through generating a clean energy resource (as opposed to coal), and the control, if not elimination, of flooding in the Three Gorges area. Against this is the long-term environmental and social costs, including the displacement of over 1 million people, submergence or disappearance of 1,200 towns and loss of some 8,000 archaeological sites. Over the past four years the damming of the Yangtze River has caught people's attention, not simply due to the massive scale of the project, but also the destruction of villages and towns and the enormous displacement of people and the loss of their livelihood. Even government official

Wang Xiaofeng, who oversees the project for China's State Council, admitted the potential for disaster at a meeting of Chinese scientists and government representatives in Chongqing:⁸

We can't lower our guard ... We simply cannot sacrifice the environment in exchange for temporary economic gain.⁹

In 2008 an exhibition exploring the dam project was held at the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, and included the work of Chen Qiulin, Yun-Fei Ji, Liu Xiaodong and Zhuang Hui.¹⁰

Zhuang Hui, who is known for his conceptually based photography, began his engagement with the subject of the Three Gorges Dam with his work *Longitude 109.88° E and Latitude 31.09° N* (1995–2008), which he initiated in April 1995 four months after the start of the dam project. He visited three sites affected by the construction of the dam—Hubei province in the Xiling Gorge area, the meeting point of the Yangtze and Daning rivers in Wu Gorge, and White Emperor City at the entrance of the Qutang Gorge. The artist then created several site-specific works in which he bored holes in the ground to mark sites that would be buried under water. He used a Luoyang shovel—a long-poled drill invented by tomb robbers in traditional China—to make configurations of holes at each site and then took photographs. Ten years later, Zhuang sent a photographer to document each site underwater, the treasures that had once been the subject of tomb robbers activities having disappeared under the rising water.

In 2005 Liu Xiaodong had begun to visit the area where the dam was being constructed. Towns were beginning to be destroyed and Liu Xiaodong went to the city of Fengjie where he painted 11 peasant labourers on the site. He portrayed them relaxing, sitting together on old mattresses on a rooftop, stripped half naked in the warm sun and looking down as if in thought. During this time, the artist also travelled to Thailand where he painted what he envisaged as a companion work. Reminiscent of the post-impressionist paintings of Paul Gauguin in Tahiti, he chose a group of Thai women, also sitting together on a mattress, surrounded by papaya, coconuts, melons and bananas, looking out towards the viewer. In subsequent exhibitions, the artist brought these two paintings together in a work entitled *Hot Bed*.¹¹ As the Chinese curator Pi Li has suggested, the repeated iconography of the mattress in both paintings symbolically unites these separate people. The tacit implications are made overt.

8 Chongqing is a municipality of around 31 million people abutting the dam. Mara Hvistendahl, 'China's Three Gorges Dam: An Environmental Catastrophe?', *Scientific American*, 25 March 2008, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/chinas-three-gorges-dam-disaster/>.

9 Wang Xiaofeng, quoted in Hvistendahl, 'China's Three Gorges Dam'.

10 The exhibition *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* opened in Chicago on 2 October 2008 and at the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, in 2010.

11 In *Zones of Contact*, Biennale of Sydney 2006, the two paintings were shown facing one another with a mattress and television monitor between them.

Liu Xiaodong, *Hot Bed I* 2005; oil on canvas, 260 x 1,000 cm.

© Xiaodong Studio; image courtesy of the artist

Liu Xiaodong, *Hot Bed II* 2006; oil on canvas; 260 x 1,000 cm.

© Xiaodong Studio; image courtesy of the artist

Chen Qiulin, *Old Archway* (from 桃花 *Peach Blossom*) 2009; 录像 video; 16 min, 37 sec; photograph, 154 x 124 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Beam Contemporary Art, New York and London

In an unrelated project, the artist Chen Qiulin responds to the demolition of homes in the Three Gorges area. Covering both the Three Gorges Dam and the Sichuan earthquake, her work anticipates the paintings of Liu Xiaodong. Using video, one of the key subjects of Chen Qiulin's art practice has been the transformation of Sichuan, the province where she was born and lives. In May 2008, three months before the Beijing Olympics were scheduled to open, Sichuan province experienced the worst earthquake in its history. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, friends and homes. Less than a year later, Chen Qiulin released the video work *Peach Blossom (Tao Hua)* 2009. Her research for this film led her to discover that her hometown of Wanxian, lying next to the Yangtze River, was destined to be submerged beneath rising water as a result of the dam construction. She made three video works *Farewell Poem (Bie Fu)* 2002, followed by *River, River (Jiang He Shui)* 2005, and *The Garden (Hua Yuan)* 2007, each of which corresponds to the successive stages of the flooding of her city.¹²

Unlike many, Chen Qiulin seeks to be optimistic in her exploration of how people adapt to traumatic change and what the future holds. The result is often fragmented and disjointed, as in Chen Qiulin's *Farewell Poem*, which is constructed from memories of her childhood and the ruins of the city. In *River, River* she captures images of the new city as it rises out of the ruins and, using operatic scenes, she portrays the contrast of the old and the new. *The Garden* shows the disappearance of part of Wanxian as the dam water rose, and the appearance of a new city and daily life shaped by the demands of change.

Together, these Chinese artists show distinct approaches that seriously engage with the subject. The work of Zhuang Hui extends the power of a conceptual practice to abstract the essence of the issues. In a sense his work offers a serious parody that refers to both the history of the Three Gorges and the futility of any action that can now be taken to reverse the course of what has happened. Liu Xiaodong's paintings refer to the subject of the dam, but create an imaginary relation to another world that relieves the affected communities from the pressing immediacy of the situation. While offering a personal reflection on what has happened to her city and the people of the region, Chen Qiulin seeks to invent a new future by engaging young residents to perform a mock Chinese opera and imagine the future.

Artists have been at the forefront of raising social awareness of pressing issues as they impact upon communities. They have collaborated with others who have different forms of expertise and skills. This phenomenon has developed in

12 Chen was commissioned to produce the first work *Farewell Poem (Bie Fu)* for the exhibition *Harvest: Contemporary Art* at the Agricultural Museum in Beijing, 2002, organised by the Chinese curator and art historian Gao Minglu.

South Korea in relation to the Four Rivers Restoration Project, a plan begun in 2009 to further develop Korea's four major river systems—the Han, Nakdong, Geum and Yeongsan. This has involved building 16 dams on those rivers and rebuilding 87 old dams, alongside dredging 520 million cubic metres of mud from the riverbeds in a bid to simplify flood prevention. The stated objectives of the project are flood control, prevention of water shortages, improvement of water quality, and the creation of parks for tourism. One of many groups to have developed in response to the project is the Seoul-based organisation Listen to the City.¹³ For this group, and others active in opposition to a project that has cost, to date, some US\$19.3 billion, the project is destroying the natural environment and ruining the habitat of multitudes of migratory birds.

Eunseon Park—Listen to the City, *A Monument for Buddhist Monk Munsu who Self-immolated Against 4 River Construction* 2010 2011; C-print.

Image courtesy Eunseon Park

In Singapore the issue of water has never stopped being a subject of concern, as has land. The exploration and transformation, if not destruction, of the land has exposed its history, as if laid bare in the moment prior to its disappearance.

¹³ See 'Listen to the City', accessed 18 October 2013, <http://listentothecity.org/>; <http://urbandrawings.blogspot.com>; <http://www.eunseonpark.com>.

The coincidence of such forces has encouraged greater exploration and research of its history, both in its telling and as a point around which to defend its existing value. And yet, arguably, its present condition and future have become increasingly fragile, even precarious under the impact of urban development. This has affected the availability of land for sustainable natural resources: namely, of food and water.

Debbie Ding is an artist, designer/programmer and cartographer who maps and visualises spaces—whether they be real or imaginary. She develops touchscreen applications, interactive installations and teaches the website development and software technology of Actionscript (AS3). Her personal interest is in map-making, documenting and researching local histories, and reconstructing local narratives. She facilitates the Singapore Psychogeographical Society, referring to one of her works, discussed below, as an ‘interactive and generative art piece depicting the Singapore River as a “psychogeographical faultline”’. Ding notes:

I believe that most people living in Singapore are unaware of the shape or precise location of the Singapore River, despite it being Singapore’s eponymous river and arguably its most historically important river. This may be because the name is not geographically precise, or because the river itself is relatively small and resembles nothing more than a large canal at some points. ...

I would like to create an interactive installation of a generative ‘Map of the Singapore River’, that will redraw itself according to different variables marked out on a map on a table. It may be viewed as an act of speculative archeology—staring into the great big crack in the earth, taking a peek through the geological layers of the city underneath.¹⁴

Describing the Singapore River as a ‘psychogeographical faultline’, Ding writes of it as a site at which memories of spaces, fictional (imagined) spaces, and dream spaces interact, merge, or drift apart—like a series of tectonic plates. In using the term ‘psychogeographical’, Ding pays tacit homage to the French writer Guy Debord who was a key figure in founding the social revolutionary organisation Situationist International in the 1950s. Debord wrote a major critique of consumer culture and commodity fetishism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). In *The Naked City* (1957), he defined psychogeography as the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals and the need for *dérive*, which was a technique of transient passage to disrupt an increasingly commodified and organised society.

14 Debbie Ding, *The Singapore River as a Psychogeographical Faultline I* (2010), accessed 18 October 2013, <http://dreamsyntax.org/dbbd/portfolio/psychogeographicalfaultline/>.

Debbie Ding, \ (The Singapore River as a Psychogeographical Faultline) 2010; Substation Gallery, Singapore.

Photograph by Kevin Lim; image courtesy Creative Commons (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/inju/>)

For Ding, the Singapore River is a site where residents congregate to socialise, create memories, or dream of things to come—yet, when prompted, very few know where it is or what it looks like. Just as people struggle to pin down an image of it in their minds, it is also a site constantly in construction and in motion, as the water ebbs out to sea, and as people struggle to give meaning to their geography.

In distinct ways, artists who share Ding's interests look at the constitution of a country through land reclamation. In terms of the percentage of land reclaims, Singapore is said to exceed the Netherlands. Water is integral to this process and Ding, along with other Singapore artists such as Charles Lim and Zhao Renhui, have each in different ways, explored the growth of Singapore as a land mass. As Zhao Renhui shows, we can trace this development back to the nineteenth century, when the hills of Singapore were slowly levelled in order to provide the sides of rivers.¹⁵

At face value it is possible to link such practices to those of land art in the late 1960s and 1970s. But, while there are links that can be drawn, the differences

¹⁵ See the photo essay by The Land Archive and Zhang Renhui, 'The Lost Hills of Singapore', *ISSUE 1: Land* (Singapore, 2012): 25–33.

are greater. These differences can be characterised by Lim's practice. In 2011 Lim produced a 20-minute video, *all lines flow out*, which follows the journey of a mysterious figure who walks along the 'longkangs'—a local term for drains—that create a vast network across the city state of Singapore. He is searching for a way home. Recalling the mysterious, almost science fiction, landscape of Andrei Tarkovsky, Lim creates a mysterious latter-day world of the French poet Charles Baudelaire's flâneur. And yet, these *longkangs* have slowly been subsumed to the dictates of Singapore's almost compulsive obsession to construct itself as a modern cityscape. This construction ignores the boundless force of nature, evident when the city is immobilised by the monsoon period, which causes flash flooding that can strike at the heart of its shopping district.

Charles Lim, *all lines flow out* 2011 (still); video installation, 21 min.

Image courtesy the artist

Lim has expanded his view of Singapore to look at its topographical character, discovering that even this is not immune to the governmental logic of instrumentality and its ambition. Lim has explored the nation's physical growth through the addition of sand to its shores—land 'reclamation' projects—which has involved the dredging of sand from small islands belonging to neighbouring countries.¹⁶ This has resulted in Singapore being at the top of the list of countries that have grown in physical size. As the curator David Teh has suggested, Lim's *Sea State* project captures how the 'maritime geography' has been 'all but erased from the national imaginary and everyday experience', replaced by land-based urban visions.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Charles Lim, 'Sea State 2: As Evil Disappears', and interview with Jessica Anne Rahardjo, in *ISSUE 1: Land* (Singapore, 2012): 34–45.

¹⁷ David Teh, 'Charles Lim's Informatic Naturalism: Notes on *Sea State 2*', in '*Sea State 2: As Evil Disappears*' (Singapore, 2012).

The work of Lim, as with other artists discussed here, points to a national imaginary that will never cease to disturb the future of the nation's people, that will inexorably draw together the residual connectivities between countries and the fate of their folly.

Conclusion

Most significantly, the work of these contemporary Asia-based artists is grounded on considerable research of their subject and its realisation as an artwork. Their work draws from research and documentation to offer an exploratory form, a 'work in progress' that extends the subject into the world of the imaginary. This move is critical to an appreciation of the way in which the idea of the archive is not a fixed repository or evidence of an inalienable truth. Rather, the archive becomes a means of locating the past, what was and is no longer and to detect the passage of fictive elaborations surrounding, often obscuring this past. This practice is not something closed, belonging simply to the past, but as the German intellectual Walter Benjamin aptly stated, it is a history of the present. This is how it is but equally, this is how it was!

Let me also return, however, to the naming of this practice as artwork. The work is exhibited in art museums and galleries, in the domain of the art world. It is made principally as art. Both Ding and Lim explore a world made opaque by the silence surrounding their subjects, which are steadily having a profound effect on the well-being of people's lives and their country. The three Chinese artists offer radically different approaches and, at the least, attest to the power of art to not only document but lead the way to creating an imaginary future.

Art becomes an operative, a means of conveying histories of ourselves. It offers an imaginary future, a creative solution, if not resolution, of the crisis of the present. Although these practices vary between themselves in this regard, they are nevertheless connected in the belief that through art, a deeper logic is shaped about the rapidly changing urban landscapes of Asia, about the subjection of nature to the dictates of progress: a logic which defies understanding as to its effects on human lives.

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