



Towards Inclusive Public Arts: A Visual Sociology on the Photography Exhibition of “Through The Lens of Our Migrant Workers” at Bayfront MRT Singapore Station

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Abstract. This visual sociology article explains a photography exhibition entitled “Through The Lens of Our Migrant Workers” at Bayfront MRT Singapore Station as an effort by the Singapore government to represent migrant workers as part of the color of the population. In collaboration with Holdinghands Studio, this exhibition invites 20 migrant workers as artists, most of whom worked in domestic work and building construction ahead of the National Day of Singapore in August 2023. This study uses the Visual Discourse Analysis method by encoding and decoding visual objects, namely several photos from migrant workers who take pictures of their daily lives while living in Singapore. The findings of the article state, first, that public space as public art is a representational political strategy for the Singapore government to show the public the inclusiveness of migrant workers through exhibitions at the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Station near the tourism centers. Second, the exhibition portrays Singapore from the perspective of migrant workers, which varies from daily activities, human interests, nature, buildings, and heritage. Third, photography is a space for dialogue between residents in Singapore to reduce othering and stigmatization of blue-collar workers, thereby encouraging cross-cultural and ethnic dialogue by selecting public spaces to facilitate a wider audience.

Keywords: Public Arts, Migrant Workers, Inclusive Artspace.

1 Introduction

Several studies have depicted the role of photography as a medium for advocating for the voices of marginalized groups [1]. In addition, Wolthers [2] photographed the work of Danish photographer Tina Enghoff as a basis for her photographic work to give voice to marginalized communities previously at the outgroup level to be included in an inclusive in-group narrative. Cabañes [1] strives for the importance of narrative representation compared to depictive representation in photographing marginalized groups. Public space is vital for reconstructing ownership of this space from various types of community groups [3], as what Xavier [4] call urban art transformation. Why are marginalized groups considered vulnerable groups and require more advocacy through public spaces? Several studies stated that marginalized groups, such

as rural tribes, do not have an equal voice with majority groups and do not become strategic portraits for mainstream media to reveal their experiences of exclusion [5] [6]. According to Foushee [7] and Zebracki [8], placing art in public spaces will increase the sense of place for improving inclusive situation. For example, Hackemann [9] provides examples of memory recordings from residents in New York regarding art installations in public spaces. Therefore, according to Robson [10], artistic work in public spaces must be connected with reflection in academic work to connect the interrelationship of producing knowledge. This study then translated into a pattern of photography exhibitions that attempted to photograph marginalized groups of migrant workers in Singapore.



Fig. 1. Above is the title of the exhibition with its initiator, collaborator, and supporters shown below (Source: From the Documentation of Researcher, 2023)



Fig. 2. Names of the organizer of the exhibition (Source: From the Documentation of Researcher, 2023)

This article pictures the photography exhibition titled 'Singapore: Through The Lens of Our Migrant Workers' in Bayfront MRT station on the Circle Line as part of Singapore's 58th birthday celebration. This exhibition was a collaborative work of SMRT (Singapore Mass Rapid Transit) and Holdinghands Studio, a social enterprise that aims to uplift under-resourced communities through photography. Running for six weeks from July 17th to August 23rd, the exhibition consists of 22 photographs capturing Singapore's landmarks, landscapes, and daily activities, all taken by 20 migrant workers who have been in various industries for years. What is interesting about the curation of this photography exhibition in a public place is the idiom "under-resourced communities," which is a subtle message to include these marginalized communities in public discourse.

Following the exhibition's goal, Ngien Hoon Ping, SMRT's chief executive officer, stated that the exhibition is hoped to be a platform that 'engenders a better understanding of people from different cultures and backgrounds' as it attempts to mediate the "under-resourced communities'" voices. The exhibition's founder, Tan Chin Hock, hoped it would 'encourage dialogues, challenge stereotypes, and ultimately foster inclusivity.' The opinion of this curation is in line with what Wolthers [2] expressed through his writing regarding photography, which can be a space to create inclusivity in public spaces, especially in Singapore with capitalistic competition among its residents, as well as leaving out people who may not be taken into account in this competition, namely migrant workers, which plays a significant role in coloring the demographics of Singapore's population.

This article contributes ideas from previous studies regarding the relationship between photography and advocacy narratives for the voices of marginalized groups through visuals [11]. The photography exhibition held in public spaces in Singapore, apart from advocacy efforts through visual curation from the exhibition organizers, is also part of the political representation carried out by the Singapore government ahead of the National Day parade, which deliberately provides visual space for migrant workers which is deliberately placed at Bayfront MRT Station where this station is the gateway for millions of foreign tourists to Singapore's mainstay tourism locations.

2 Method

This study uses Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), a research method for examining and interpreting visual artifacts with a discourse analysis approach by codifying the visuals, language, and text used [12] [13]. Generally, VDA uses several data such as images, photography, video, and other material originating from visual representations to construct social reality. The study used data collection techniques through direct observation, namely visiting the location where the photography exhibition was held at Bayfront MRT in Singapore in August 2023. Referring to the curation committee's deliberate placement of several photos in public spaces, this study attempts to read these visual representations through several data analysis procedures such as 1) contextualization after visual data was collected through the researcher's camera by

contextualizing the time background when the photography exhibition was held in a public space, as well as the deliberate placement of the exhibition at Singapore's main tourism gateway, 2) categorization by grouping types of photos based on the theory that will be used to read the photographic work, in which case the grouping process can be in line with the curation design but can also differ according to the conceptual framework used by the researcher, 3) interpretation through the researcher's narrative by re-narrating the visual context such as the type of photo choice based on composition, color, background. Also, researchers interpreted several photographic works displayed through the conceptual reflection used in this study, namely inclusiveness regarding photography's efforts to become a medium for advocacy for marginalized groups.

3 Analysis

3.1 Towards Inclusive Public Art in MRT Singapore

The findings of the article state, first, that public space as public art is a representational political strategy for the Singapore government to show the public the inclusiveness of migrant workers through exhibitions at the MRT Station near the tourism centers. Through the National Arts Council (NAC), the Singapore government supports public art held in public spaces as an art ecosystem that enriches the city's color and makes it more vibrant. This commitment to supporting the arts ecosystem was built over several decades with the initial presence of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) in 1989 and the Renaissance City Plan (RCP) in 2000, which were both committed to improving the quality of life for Singapore residents through art as culture. To date, the Singapore government's support emphasizes various elements of arts development, such as supporting arts spaces such as facilities, and finances to enrich artistic freedom. In 2018, NAC had the 5-year Our SG Arts Plan (2018-2022), which develops the arts by involving various stakeholders, including a commitment to connecting communities across groups, races, and ethnicities. From the history of Singapore government policy, what is being done through photography exhibitions to raise the issue of migrant workers as a marginalized group is in line with mainstream policies that have been implemented.

Historically, Art on the Singapore MRT was approved by the Land Transport Authority (LTA) in 1997 and officially released to the public in 2003. The aim of having public art on the Singapore MRT is part of the Singapore government's commitment together with private stakeholders to strive for a better life and more vibrant urban areas that inclusively produce works that contain messages for the diversity of Singaporean society. This work is located along the North East Line (NEL), Circle Line (CCL), and Downtown Line (DTL). According to Quek [14], as the definition suggests, public art at the MRT seeks to involve the "public," namely residents who live around the location, such as several works that are a visual part of direct engagement with residents, such as the work involving 3000 handprints in Seck Yok Ying's Hands Up for Hougang. By the end of 2022, the Art in Transit (AIT) in Singapore has spread to 103 stations, involving 107 artists and more than 440 works of art, of which all

works are an open call for artists, except for the Little India and Chinatown which display works art from Indian and Chinese artists [15].

What is committed by the Singapore government, the National Arts Council (NAC), and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) through the Singapore MRT as public art space is an example of how the government negotiates what is called "social space" and public space, which in Inclusively, public space is a place for campaigns about diversity in Singapore by allowing artists to be given wider opportunities to get an audience in the public. This article captures public art in a country that has a high awareness of public transportation as part of efforts to promote social engagement with an inclusive identity among residents to strengthen "civic pride" as part of everyday life in Singapore.

3.2 The Familiar Sightseeings : Wee See Through the Same Eyes



Fig. 3. A Timeless Sanctuary by Rangeline Declangin Garcia, Yueh Hai Ching Temple

The content in the photo of Figure 2.1 shows one of the landmarks frequently passed by Singaporeans. Citizens taking their morning strolls, tourists, blue-collar and white-collar workers alike, are most likely to walk in front of the gateway of Yueh Hai Ching Temple on the way to their destination. The photographer who captured the landmark along with the curation process that resulted in the selection of this photo forms an argument that strengthens the belongingness of migrant workers, knowing that for decades, it would not have been the people of Singapore if they have not had walked the same path and passed this remarkably timeless landmark of Yueh Hai Ching Temple.



Fig. 4. A Leap of Faith by Rodenson Bugay, Gardens by the Bay

As seen in the photo of Figure 2.2, the photographer captures a different view and angles that can be taken at Gardens by the Bay. Here, rather than focusing on the Supertree Grove as the photograph's main subject, it focuses on the person in the center, who is most likely the photographer, jumping over the camera, embodying the title "Leap of Faith." All the elements uniquely captured in the photographs create a definite line between the tourist's approach and the local's approach in terms of photography. The locals, contextually the in-group, who might have seen the Supertree Grove as the main attraction at the Gardens by the Bay from time to time again, are most likely to experiment by distinguishing their photograph from that of tourists'; an out-group, who might have seen it for the first time. Thus conveying the message that the photographer, the migrant worker, like all Singapore's residents, tends to capture everyday sightseeing differently than most nomads.

3.3 Social Practice as Social Space : Local Hidden Gems

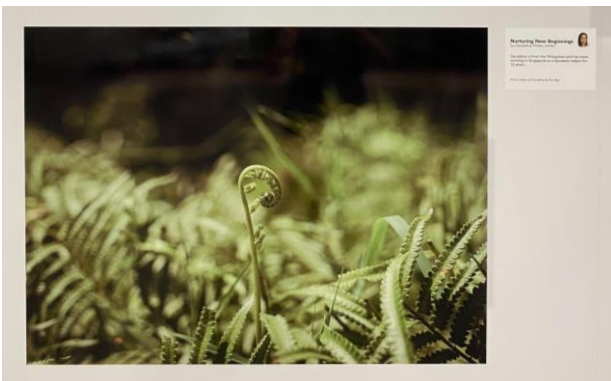


Fig. 5. Nurturing New Beginnings by Geraldine Flores Jordan, Gardens by the Bay

As opposed to the extravagant display of numerous landmarks of Singapore, one of the photographs, as seen in Figure 3.1, shows a sprouting fern among the dense patch of grass at Gardens by the Bay. If taken for granted, photographing a single fern might be interpreted as a lazy, almost wasteful way of using a macro lens on a camera. However, in the sense of migrant workers' social practice in the public space of Singapore, the photograph could be understood as a representation of the boredom that many long-staying Singapore residents feel: too bored of photographing the same object that tourist and nomadic photographers are photographing—being the Super-tree Grove penetrating the canopy of Gardens by the Bay—that they chose to photograph the unseen micro-phenomena of a sprouting fern instead.



Fig. 6. Wings of Wonder by Alan Aguinaldo, Kranji Marshes

Somewhere in the branches of Kranji Marshes lies a Kingfisher, a rare sight that often hides behind the blind spot for first-time and temporary visitors. Wildlife photography requires persistence and patience to the point where it is impossible to imagine a traveler from outside of Singapore who travels far to a country known for its bustling cityscapes and rising skyscrapers to capture a telephotography of a bird standing on a branch. Descriptively, figure 3.2 shows the kinds of biodiversity offered in one of Singapore's landmarks, the Kranji Marshes. However, indeed, it possessed a deeper meaning than just a zoomed-in picture of a bird of paradise. The curation process that leads to the photo selection implies a social practice that deviates from the touristic perspective in seeing Singapore as a public space. Instead, it captures the hidden and unseen 'gems' that otherwise would have been kept hidden if they were not seen by other than Singaporeans.



Fig. 7. Nature's Playground by Haryanti, Pasir Ris Park

Parks are a safe place for Singaporeans, as it is crucial to integrate them into their daily urban life. In contrast, for tourists, many alternative landmarks are more visit-worthy than just a place with shades of trees, no different in function from other public infrastructures in Singapore. The photograph of Figure 3.3 shows the walkways of Pasir Ris Park with a cyclist and a couple standing just below the ramping path. Aside from the visually present elements, the photograph also shows the relationship between the photographer as a migrant worker and Singapore as a country, with the knowledge that parks in Singapore are commonplace and are visited daily, thus integrated into the everyday social practice of Singaporeans.

3.4 Unity in Adversity : the Struggle We Face Together as a Country



Fig. 8. The Social Distancing Era by Ana Rohana, Our Tampines Hub

The photo in figure 4.1 shows the country's implementation of social distancing amid a global pandemic. A chair composition is bounded by evenly spaced square chalk markings, indicating the barrier of interaction between one person and another. Regarding its technicality, the photo was taken from an eagle-eye angle. It was purposefully presented in a monochrome hue to intensify the dramatic visualization, congruent with the situation in the exhibited photo. The photographer successfully captured the shared struggle faced by Singaporeans. Though distant from one another, the photograph still shows a display of togetherness, manifested in the presence of numerous individuals in a single frame, all adhering to the effort of social distancing, creating an image of unity in adversity.

In several studies, Public Arts, in line with what was shown at the exhibition in Singapore, expresses the curator's message in the process of inclusivity through accepting "ingroups" and does not provide labels that are different from exclusion. In their study, Sharp [16] mention art as a form of struggle for social phenomena that exclude members of groups of people, a number of immigrants in Scotland. Meanwhile, Hannes [17] stated that visual exhibitions, especially photography in public spaces, are an example of advocacy to raise the issue of subjugated knowledge through issues of hidden population groups that are on the margins outside the mainstream narrative. Therefore, according to a study by Cheung [18], reviewing the Arts Inclusion Policies policy encourages a common perception of the importance of inclusivity by highlighting issues of marginalized groups. This study, which was carried out to review policies in 14 countries, is in line with what is being attempted to be done through this exhibition in Singapore by involving more narratively the "same" experience during the Pandemic that occurred because the disease does not recognize nationality, so that what citizens are worried about local, also definitely felt by migrant workers. Therefore, according to Wang [19], curators have great power in narrating the selection of works of art according to the ideas they seek to advocate through various art mediums.

4 Conclusion

What the article concludes from the curator's photographic exhibition process at Bayfront MRT is the curator's efforts to negotiate public space with public discussion through visuals. First, the selection of photographic works is visually dominated by tourist buildings in Singapore, which raises the question of whether migrant workers who have lived in Singapore for so long are still connected to the landscape of the developed country as tourists. This situation implies a curation process with two points of view, namely, migrant workers still enjoying being long-term tourists while also questioning whether this visual selection was intentional because the location of this temporary exhibition was at Singapore's main tourist gateway. Second, this article concludes that from the migrant worker's point of view, through the selection of their work, they try to become part of the Singaporean population by being involved in everyday social practice, for example, by photographing the daily lives of Singaporeans in non-mass tourism places, or just enjoying daily life in parks as a public space

for "all Singaporeans." Third, natural objects such as birds and grass, which are not authentic to Singapore - or can be found in many places - are a curation effort to emphasize that migrant workers also try to see in a micro way things that are not visible semiotically by tourists or other residents, from an aesthetic point of view. Finally, this work shows efforts to involve migrant workers in contributing to the development of Singaporean society. Even though the article criticizes the public space chosen in the tourism center - the curation message aimed at inclusiveness is not fully captured by residents who, perhaps, still see migrant workers as immigrants. In contrast, curation in the tourism area only captures short-term tourists in Singapore to understand the message.

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