

AiRCAST #10

MIN-WEI TING

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Min-Wei Ting recording AiRCAST, 14 December 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

NADIA AMALINA: Welcome to the second season of AiRCAST. On this podcast, we visit the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore nestled on the fringe of a vibrant rainforest in Gillman Barracks. In this series of open-ended conversations, we invite different guests to probe the mind of our Artists-in-Residence and unfold some of the ideas, materials, processes,

influences, and research methodologies behind their practice. My name is Nadia Amalina. I am the Programmes Manager at NTU CCA Singapore, and I co-edit this podcast alongside Dr Anna Lovecchio, Assistant Director of Programmes at NTU CCA Singapore.

In this episode, we invited Viknesh Kobinathan to traverse the trajectory of our Artist-in-Residence Min-Wei Ting's filmic practice. This conversation marks a full-circle moment for the pair as they first collaborated at the beginning of their careers at the 11th Singapore Short Cuts programme in 2014. In this conversation, they exchange memories that reveal shared notions of space and architecture, while contemplating upon the latent anxieties that stem from the everchanging landscape of Singapore prevalent in Min-Wei's films. They also touch upon Min-Wei's ongoing reflections and speculations on the Singapore state's reactions and endeavours to address climate which he developed during his time in residence at NTU CCA Singapore.

Before they take it away, a few words to introduce them. Working primarily with the moving image, Min-Wei Ting explores the politics of space and the dynamic of belonging in his native Singapore. Adopting a first-person perspective where the tension between embodiment and disembodiment is often at play, his films enact gestures of protracted observation and slow movement.

Viknesh Kobinathan is a programmer at the Asian Film Archive (AFA), where he curates film screenings and discursive events that examine issues affecting Asian societies, explore the art of Asian cinema, and furthers the preservation mission of the AFA. He oversees the execution of the commissioning project, Monographs, a series that features critical text-based and audio-visual essays on the moving image.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Hi, Min-Wei

MIN-WEI TING: Hi.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: How are you?

MIN-WEI TING: Good, how are you?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I'm fine.

MIN-WEI TING: Thank you for being here.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: No, thank you. Preparing for this, I was looking back at your previous works. Just like samples, reading the blurbs, stuff like that. And I realized that actually, my beginning as a programmer coincides with I guess, me seeing your work, specifically your first film work.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, absolutely. That was the first film I made! It was programmed by you, and I was corresponding with you for Singapore Short Cuts at the National Museum of Singapore.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: That is *You're Dead To Me* in 2014. Yeah, I was just an assistant programmer at National Museum's Cinémathèque programme. Actually, I was co-programming together with [Low] Zu Boon and Warren [Sin], and I think, for that year, they had decided to kind of split the films up into sort of, 'themes'. It so happened that quite a few of the works were by artist filmmakers and were more experimental. We just felt that it would make a good programme together. Then your film came through, and then... yeah!

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I was very honored that I was included.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, that was really one of my first few programming gigs, if not my first! And it so happened to be your first film! It's interesting to see that our career trajectories kind of had this starting point that is quite similar.

MIN-WEI TING: And it's ended up back here in this space!

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think that's what they call a full circle moment, if I shouldn't be so gauche. Looking back at your previous works... I mean, I obviously went to your website and looked at all the different works you've done since then! I think my encounters with your works since *You're Dead To Me* have corresponded with different points in my life, and also in my career trajectory, and the way I see film and moving image. I have sort of grown with your films in some ways, and have also experienced your films in different spaces. Unfortunately for *You're Dead To Me*, I experienced it through a small laptop.

MIN-WEI TING: You didn't see it in person?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I saw it eventually in the cinema, but it's a bit of a programmer's curse... a lot of us watch the films on smaller screens in the hopes that we can finally see it in a bigger screen together with an audience! So after [*You're Dead To Me*], I only saw *Coming Attractions* just now, because I hadn't actually seen the work, and *I'm Coming Up* was at Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF)?

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, and it was also at the National Museum of Singapore.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Right, it was also at the National Museum, and that was a kind of, cinematic live score experience?

MIN-WEI TING: Right, right.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And then, yeah, *Hampshire Road* with me as a programmer again. It just made me reflect on my own journey through your films.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah. I think pairing us for this conversation is quite apt.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think so too. Looking at your body of work, some points come up. Some commonalities or linkages between these films come to me and I think we've spoken about these things. Yeah, a lot of it is about space, about architecture, state-sanctioned architecture, placemaking and place-unmaking, if that works.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, exactly.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about your relationship to those themes... these notions of space, the sort of state-sanctioned ideas behind it and the almost like, violence that comes from it. Yeah, could you maybe talk a bit about it?

MIN-WEI TING: Of course. Let's start with *You're Dead To Me*. I mean, that's where I started. That film came about from actually this desire to record sounds of nature in Singapore because I had been living away for quite some time and this was one of the things that I missed actually. It's very strange. A lot of Singaporeans who are overseas miss the food, but the sounds from nature is what I missed. On my trips back to Singapore, I'd be stricken with jetlag and would wake up in the middle of the night. I'd go out to Bukit Brown to record sounds and I thought it was a very good place to do it. It was very quiet, especially in the middle of night. Now that I think about it, it is quite crazy that I did this... going in the middle of night to a cemetery! But I did it anyway.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: You are not easily spooked, are you?

MIN-WEI TING: No, I'm actually not. I'm not superstitious at all.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think that helps if you're going into a cemetery in the middle of the night.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, but then I'm scared of other things in nature, such as snakes.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: That makes sense.

MIN-WEI TING: I don't know why I disregarded those things when I went. But I started making these recordings in Bukit Brown during the same time the government had decided to basically tear it up and build an enormous road through it. The recordings evolved into a film because I wanted to document the space and I felt more of an urgency to do something about that space. And so I started filming over, I think it was over a year or so. Every time I was back in Singapore, I would keep going back and film... until it came together as a film, *You're Dead To Me*.



Min-Wei Ting, *You're Dead To Me*, 2014, film still. Courtesy the artist.

[Audio excerpt from *You're Dead To Me*, 2014. Courtesy the artist.]

Yeah. Making that film made me very acutely aware of these changes that we are subjected to in Singapore and the changes that the landscape is subjected to. I think that sort of started the trajectory of looking at places, spaces, and sites, around Singapore that, for lack of a better phrase, are subject to state planning, you know?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Right. Actually, if I can just like jump timeline before we carry on to talk about the later iterations of your work... I guess, your beginnings in art were through photography?

MIN-WEI TING: That's right.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I'm quite struck by the fact that in *You're Dead To Me*, you put yourself in front of the camera. You acted in your own film, which was this durational, almost performance, piece that seemed inspired by still

photography. And so I'm wondering if we can just take it back a bit, to talk about your beginnings in artistic practice through still photography and how that led to your interest in the moving image.

MIN-WEI TING: Actually, this goes quite far back. So, you know, everyone makes pictures. When I was in university, a classmate of mine tried to get me to enroll in the black and white photography course, and I said: Yes, okay, let me try it. And back in those days, it was a very... it was still an analog process. So shooting with film, developing the film on my own, going into the darkroom, and printing... I was very excited about this process of making something of my own from scratch, and that kind of stuck with me. So I spent a lot of time in the darkroom actually, much more time than I did on what I was majoring in university.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Which was what?

MIN-WEI TING: I was studying electrical and computer engineering. You know, the practical Singaporean that I am.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, I feel like you've told me this before. Interesting.

MIN-WEI TING: But I finished it! I finished that course and I graduated. My time with photography really stuck with me, but I did the sensible thing like any good Singaporean would do and got a job. That took me to New York City for 10 years, and that was a fabulous time because that was where I was exposed to a lot of art. Then, there was that itch to get back into photography, and at some point, I said: Okay, that's enough, and I quit my job! I said, Let's do it. I enrolled at the International Center of Photography, which is also in New York, and I did a one-year program there. I had a great time there as well, my teachers there were very influential. They were artists in their own right, and very committed educators. From there, I went on to graduate school at Goldsmiths to study fine arts and that's led me to where I am now. I haven't looked back since. Photography from when I was in university and then that kind of evolved into filmmaking actually, when I started doing *You're Dead To Me*. It's strange how at that time, the still camera that everyone was using at the same time could also do high-definition video.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: This was the Canon 5D?

MIN-WEI TING: That's right. It was the Canon 5D Mark II.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, I remember that.

MIN-WEI TING: Okay, I could do still images with [the camera], but I could also make high-definition videos! And actually, at the International Center of Photography, they started doing that... they started using this camera. They started teaching students to make videos with this camera, in addition to making stills. So that's how I segued from still photography to the moving image.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And so, *You're Dead To Me* still holds a lot of those ideas of stillness. Skipping ahead, I mean, because *Coming Attractions* is, I guess, it's quite a different work than the other stuff you've done.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes. I mean, I was in grad school at that time and I wanted to try something different. So I just went for it. There were no consequences. I just did it.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It's like a montage that you kind of worked on, out of all these films that you... I actually want to come back to *Coming Attractions* later, because just watching it, I literally just watched it before I left the house, and I want to come back to it later because there's this topic about violence that we spoke about in your work, or this undercurrent of violence that I think we can kind of sink our teeth into a bit later, and I want to link *Coming Attractions* to that. But now that we're on this trajectory of your practice, going from photography to moving image, I'm also very interested to talk about your camera moving from the stillness that was in *You're Dead To Me*. Of course, there's this whole idea of wandering, which I've also noticed in your work... it's this idea of the flaneur, this psychogeography kind of idea.

MIN-WEI TING: I think that comes from my photography days, actually. Because, for me, photography was a way of like, exploring the places and people around me, of getting out and walking, in discovering and encountering.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I kept trying to think about how we don't get to see you in such a visceral way after *You're Dead To Me*. You don't put yourself in

front of camera anymore after that, yet, right? But when we go into *I'm Coming Up* and your works from there onwards, and this is my interpretation, I feel that your presence is still felt, but now it's from the movement of the camera, the conscious movement of it. It's still durational and it's in the long process of moving from one place to another, or of wandering through, that I feel your presence is kind of evoked. You know?

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, yes. That's True. I'm sort of the... I'm the.. I'm the camera.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Maybe that's a good point for us to talk about *I'm Coming Up* with, because with that, it seems you have pushed the idea of durational filmmaking and your idea of wandering also takes on a larger, more extended timeframe, where the dilation of time is truly felt. Maybe you can talk a bit about what led you into *I'm Coming Up* and the choices that led you to make this sort of feature-length slow-motion track across this quite oppressive-looking HDB block.

MIN-WEI TING: So a friend, actually a mutual friend of ours, Philippe [Aldrup] introduced me to this building in Jurong. It's a very unique building and it's from the 70s. It's four blocks joined together and you can actually walk in a circle through these four blocks. Just go up or down, whatever you wish to do. I thought the building was very interesting architecturally and I wanted to do something with it. I wanted to do something performative with it, actually. One of the first iterations was of me being filmed by Philippe running the corridors, or walking the corridors, I can't remember. But that plan didn't turn out so well. And then I just had this sort of crazy idea. Why don't I... Well, first of all, I just started thinking: let me walk a few stories from a first-person perspective, and then it became this crazy idea of why don't I walk the entire building from bottom to top, from a first-person perspective? So I just went about and I did that. I worked with a Steadicam operator to do that. We chose to do it in the middle of the night, because the corridors are very narrow and if there were people around, it would be very hard to do the filming.



Min-Wei Ting, *I'm Coming Up*, 2016, film still. Courtesy the artist.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, and could you also talk about the eventual presentation of it? It premiered at SGIFF with this live score by BALBALAB.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, they're a group of sound artists and musicians.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Could you maybe talk a bit about how that came about? Was it developed together with the Festival?

MIN-WEI TING: Sure. So I made the film, or rather, I shot the film. And I showed it to [Low] Zu Boon who was a programmer at the festival. He liked it but there was no sound to it because it was arduous enough to film it. As there wasn't any sound to it yet, he suggested that I work with BALBALAB to create the soundtrack to the film. I specifically worked with Zai Tang, who's an artist as well. He suggested that I go back and walk through the building while recording the sounds as I walked through the building from bottom to top. They took this recording and turned it into a live performance with the film. So it was this hybrid presentation, right? You had the film playing on the screen and a group of sound artists and musicians playing in front of the screen.

[Audio excerpt from *I'm Coming Up*, 2016. Courtesy the artist.]

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think that while we talk about Zai Tang... I'm thinking that he is also someone who is a sonic artist first, who also kind of works with the moving image and visuals. A lot of his work is centered on his field recordings and so I'm also drawing that link between what you talked about in *You're Dead To Me*, about how it started for you with the sound, whereas in *I'm Coming Up*, the process has now been inverted.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, exactly.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: While we are talking about your works, a lot of things are coming to me. I'm making a lot of connections. Because I was there an audience watching...

MIN-WEI TING: I remember you said to me this was difficult to watch.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It was!

MIN-WEI TING: And I don't blame you! It was difficult for everyone who saw it in that cinema setting to watch. It wasn't like a laptop which you could just close and walk away from.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Also you're in those seats, you know, those National Museum [of Singapore] seats. You can't just get up and there's not much leg room. You can't just get up and leave.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, it was difficult to leave. Maybe much to my benefit.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: This brings me to this idea of oppression and surveillance, which is also something that I think is prevalent in your works that follow from *I'm Coming Up*. Surely the space that you have described is a unique one, but I think the ways HDB's are constructed are very much, perhaps even inspired, by this idea of the panopticon. It's just that this structure makes it even more obvious.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I think, I mean, this structure really is... it really relates to the panopticon because you can just look out across your flat and see your neighbors.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Exactly. You know, for all the success of public housing in Singapore, I think, what's not talked about is this idea that they are built in a way that you are keenly aware that you're always being seen.

MIN-WEI TING: Or heard.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Or heard, yes. I think the duration of *I'm Coming Up* paired with the sort of droning sound and the fact that you couldn't actually escape your seat as easy as you could... it just amplifies those feelings for you. Especially for me, I mean, I grew up in HDB from the age of nine, or ten, and I still live in one. I've gotten weirdly comfortable with the idea that I could be seen. But I don't discount the fact that it does form a base level sort of anxiety, which is reflective of existence in Singapore, I think. This notion of being seen, always seeing someone else, not being able to hide, or not being able to kind of exercise anonymity in a very accessible way. This, of course, fluctuates very widely across



Min-Wei Ting, *Hampshire Road*, 2019, film still. Courtesy the artist.

class and privilege. And if you're on the side of class that doesn't afford you a lot of privileges or freedom of movement, then in this system, you are surveilled more. The fact that you're being surveilled seems to be a given.

MIN-WEI TING: That's right, yeah.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Which brings me to *Hampshire Road*, right? [The work] is you documenting this bus interchange structure that was built after the Little India incident and which resembles another sort of oppressive architecture. Yeah, maybe you can talk more about that?

MIN-WEI TING: I'm glad you brought up all these sensations and feelings about public housing. Because I think *I'm Coming Up* is a documentation of space, but it's also an experience of space.

[Audio excerpt from *Hampshire Road*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.]

With *Hampshire Road*... that came about from my visits to Little India. I like going to Little India, I think it's a very lively part of Singapore that hasn't changed very much. Actually, I think owing to the presence of migrant workers. But after the Little India incident, I noticed that the government had constructed this building and I immediately felt that this was a very oppressive structure. So *Hampshire Road* is a seven-minute long tracking shot of a building in Little India that's used as a bus station for migrant workers and it's built in such a way that the migrant workers are very contained and policed and surveilled.

When I went there while it was used – it's only used on Sundays – when the workers come and go from Little India, there was also a very heavy police presence as well. So I wanted to capture this and decided to use the length of the building... I decided to film the entire length of this building because it occupies the length of *Hampshire Road* and that's why [the work] is named *Hampshire Road* as well.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think going back to the notion of, you know, oppression, again... this is another state-sanctioned architectural structure, this time solely built for a particular group of people, specifically the migrant workers. I grew up in Little India, as you know. I was at home when the Little India incident happened. It affected me quite a lot. Actually, the incident itself was a very condensed period of time. That was quite scary. But actually, it was the months and years after that where my feelings about what was being done to the neighborhood started to kind of settle in. I remember feeling this very deep discomfort because the surveillance had gone to a different sort of level.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, following the incident, the entire neighborhood changed.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Just for people who might not know what we're talking about: the Little India incident, also known as a Little India riot, it was on a Sunday. At that time, the buses that would take the workers to and from their places of work didn't have proper places to park and disembark and so on. So they would all line up on this quite narrow road, which is Race Course Road, which is weird, because the road itself was made new and was extended but there still wasn't enough provisions made for these buses every Sunday.

MIN-WEI TING: Exactly. It was very ad hoc.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Hampshire Road, before the bus terminal was built, would be closed every Sunday to let the buses kind of gather there, and so on. So the details of that evening are actually... Okay, um, I don't think there's any official objective record of this. I think the reporting on this was also lacking in some details. But what we know is that a worker was sort of denied entry on a bus if I'm not wrong. And out of that, one person was hit by the bus and subsequently died. This then escalated into a confrontation between a group of migrant workers, and eventually the police and the special forces, and even an ambulance.

MIN-WEI TING: Vehicles were set on fire or overturned. It was very serious.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It was very, very serious. I lived on Buffalo Road. I mean, I just go down and it's like two minutes to Race Course Road. So in the early parts of the incident, I actually went down to, probably not very wise, but I went down

to see what was going on. I actually saw a police car being overturned and the windows being smashed. I had never seen anything like it before. I just remember, people were like running and I also just ran back home.

MIN-WEI TING: We've not seen anything like this for decades.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: The incident went on for several hours until it quietened down. I think quite a few people were arrested. There were blockades everywhere.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, police finally got it under control.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, they got it under control, I think quite late into the night, maybe 2:00 or 3:00am in the night. This is the other kind of dissonant thing that I remember feeling. My whole family was awake until the whole thing quietened down because there were still people making loud noises. There was still shouting and there were still police sirens way into the night. And the news, I don't know whether it's because they couldn't get people into the scene or they couldn't get reporters in there, but the news report, the live reporting, was actually quite scant. There was some civilian phone camera footage but other than that, there wasn't a lot information coming through. Yeah, this was also pre-Instagram. Instagram might have been around but wasn't very heavily used, so we had to rely on some information from Twitter and so on. Anyway, the dissonant thing was that when I woke up the next day at 9:00 or 10:00am, I went to get breakfast and I went to the same location where most of the things happened, where I saw the car burning... it was like normal! They had put tar over it and cleaned it up. No traces of it!

MIN-WEI TING: It sounds like they were really trying to remove it from memory, or the trauma of it from memory.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Perhaps. I was just very shocking to me. I mean, on one hand, it's about efficiency. But on the other hand, it's sort of felt like: Okay, we're not discussing this.

MIN-WEI TING: I mean, it says a lot about Singapore, and it talks about the efficiency of Singapore. It talks about how order needs to be maintained and the

impression of order needs to be present.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah. I think following the incident was I guess where we were going... it was this increased surveillance and increased police presence. I think while there used to be some police patrolling on Sundays, I think the numbers and the groups increased. I distinctly remember it went from, let's say, just two people patrolling, it became five and sometimes up to six people patrolling at the same time.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah. I noticed that as well.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: The Special Forces, the red trucks, were parked near Hampshire Road every Sunday for years, right? Alleyways had floodlights that were on constantly. They were not like motion-activated, they were always on.

MIN-WEI TING: I remember those alleys being completely unlit, and dark, and kind of mysterious. Yeah.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And the alcohol ban! That was a significant thing because that actually transpired into a nationwide policy on alcohol at some point. Because at first Little India was designated as a special zone along with Geylang within which you couldn't get alcohol. I might be wrong here, but initially, it was after six [pm], I think. I might not be right, don't quote me on this. And then, at some point, although it may or may not be related to this, it became a nationwide thing where you couldn't get alcohol anywhere after 10:30pm unless you're in a bar which has a license. Yeah, this also made me think of how discriminatory a law like that is, because not everyone...

MIN-WEI TING: ...can afford to go into a bar.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, or have the social access to go into any bar they please, right? Bars are, I mean, in most places, not accessible socially to many, not least of which are the migrant workers who would primarily get the alcohol from convenience stores, supermarkets, hawker centers. I think the whole thing about the incident also was that it was then blamed on the alcohol, right?

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, it was.



Viknesh Kobinathan recording AiRCAST, 14 December 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I was very angry about this framing for very long. I still am actually, because it brings up quite a lot of race-related prejudice, and also community-related prejudice, that a group of people are predisposed to inebriety and, therefore, violence. And this was already something that growing up Indian or brown would be told to me in various ways, whether it's jokingly or whether it's as a sort of backhanded insult. After the incident, it felt that people were emboldened to make such statements. I remember taking cabs to my neighborhood and cab drivers would go: "Oh, better be careful. Very dangerous, you know, this neighborhood."

MIN-WEI TING: It suddenly became dangerous!

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah! Or the distinction between: "oh, you're not that kind of Indian," right? These were conversations I remember happening in a more protracted way after the incident.

MIN-WEI TING: You are Singaporean Indian...

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: All these were just things that came up in wider society because then you had this 10:30 ban, which we still have until today. I guess linked to this idea of access and freedom, or the lack of movement, is explored in *If For Nothing Else Than For Sunday*?

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I think I think the film says of how the state deals with trouble. It's heavy handed. It's severe. I think what it says is that the state doesn't leave anything to chance. They will make every effort to make sure that it never happens again. So, the way the building is constructed and the heavy police presence around it, like you said, those special forces police are there all the time just to make sure that another incident like that is never going to happen again. *Hampshire Road* was a kind of vignette into the way the State operates in relation to trouble, in relation to migrant workers.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And I think also, just to tie a thread, something that exists through your work and which we talked about quite often, is your struggle with belonging here in Singapore. I spoke about the discomfort of what Little India became and I feel that we share this idea of discomfort, or not feeling like you quite belong. And this, this notion exists as a phantom. Not just a phantom, but it pervades your work.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, because I've spent so much time abroad, I've sort of developed different ways of relating to space and place, you know. I've developed different values, and when I come back to Singapore, I feel this dissonance. I feel like, this is not a kind of place that I can really relate to, or it doesn't relate to my own values, my own beliefs of what a place should be, or what my home should really be. I mean, I lived in the US, and the UK, and Europe, and these are comparatively freer places to be, and I think Singapore is not that. There's really nothing left to chance in this country. Everything is very planned and ordered to very specific goals. There's really no room to sort of roam and be a little different.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Which is maybe where the crux of your work comes from? Your anger, dissatisfaction, and discontent with this?

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, maybe I see things that many people don't, or have

come to accept about the country? And I picked this up. I mean, amongst my friends, obviously, we feel the same way. But I think for the vast majority of people, they've come to accept that this is the way things are in Singapore. That, you know, we're expected to accept a certain kind of order, a certain kind of arrangement. I think my work has been a reaction to that, a pushback to that, I suppose, you know. With Bukit Brown, with *You Are Dead To Me*, there was an anger that they would take away this very special place. I thought it was a very special place, and I think a lot of other people thought it was a very special place, to build a road through.

With *I'm Coming Up*, I think it's to do with an ordering. I think public housing is a metaphor for ordering society, reconfiguring, restructuring society. And I think *Hampshire Road* does that as well. There was an anomaly that needed to be dealt with, and the state came in and did so in this way. Which I don't think is necessary. They can just build a very regular bus terminal, which I think was needed.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yes, something that resembles all the bus terminals in Singapore.

MIN-WEI TING: Exactly! Instead of building this cage-like structure surrounded by cameras and police.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I mean, there's like a metal fence that that runs throughout, and there's only a few entrances.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, so you can only enter from one location. It's very clear that it's built to contain crowds.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: If you needed to, you can actually just lock it.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, you could just close everyone in, you know, and stop anything from happening.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It doesn't escape me that the structures that you deal with in *You Are Dead To Me* and *I'm Coming Up* are also possibly built by migrant labor. These oppressive structures that we are talking about that are for Singaporeans, primarily, are built by a migrant workforce.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, we're very dependent on the migrant workforce. But it's a workforce that also needs to be very tightly controlled as well.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And I think the effects of which was also profoundly felt during COVID lockdowns?

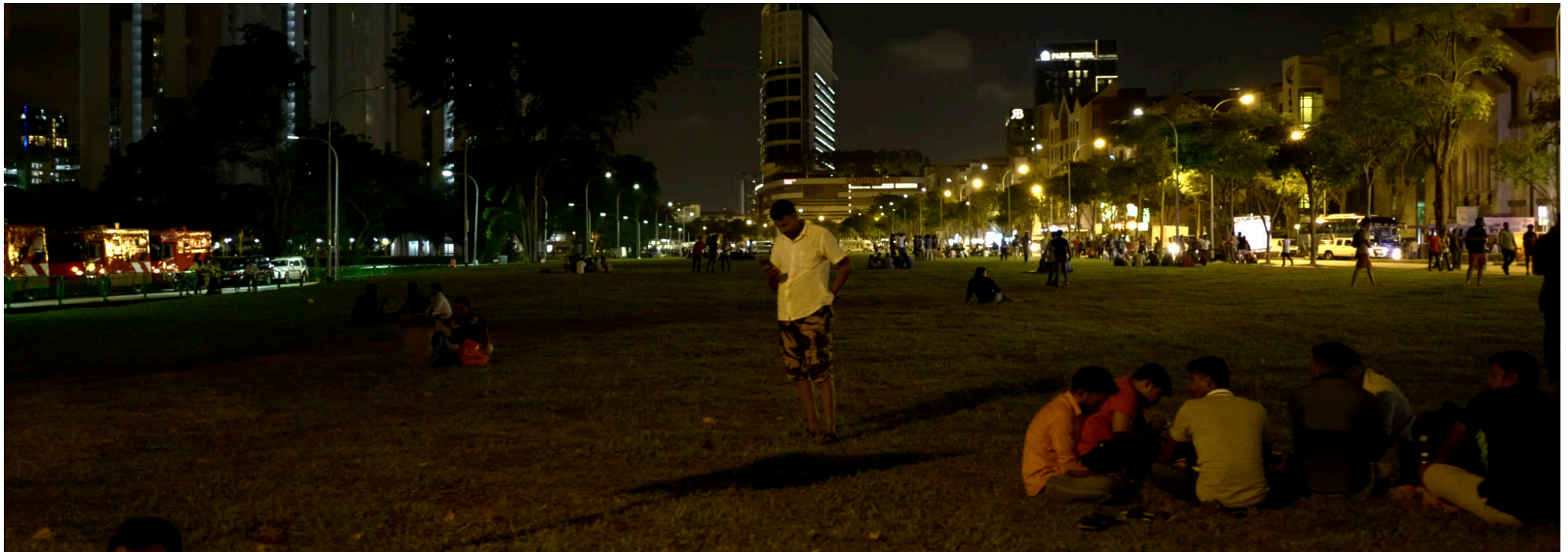
MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, during COVID, workers were not allowed to leave the dormitories for a very long time, much longer than Singaporeans and other residents. Again, I think that reflects a kind of anxiety of the state not wanting to take any chances.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Where does this thought process or this trajectory then lead? How does it lead to *If For Nothing Else Than For Sunday*? Because to me in that piece, you are also playing with form, you're playing with different types of editing and pace. It's more deliberate in its editing, as opposed to the more

durational long takes your previous work is based on. It's almost like a companion piece, but also, a jump off point to a different approach to moving image making.

MIN-WEI TING: I think that film, yeah, it's a companion to *Hampshire Road*, and I think they're very different explorations of space. I think one is about how space is controlled and restricted. With *If For Nothing Else Than For Sunday*, it's more to do with how public space is used by migrant workers and how it's actually enjoyed by migrant workers. I was interested in exploring how their social life plays out in public space, so I set about doing that. I took footage from when the streets are empty in Little India to when the streets were brimming with migrant workers on a Sunday evening, to explore and demonstrate how space is used and how it changes with the presence of the workers.

[Audio excerpt from *If For Nothing Else Than For Sunday*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.]



Min-Wei Ting, *Hampshire Road*, 2019, film still. Courtesy the artist.

MIN-WEITING: In a way, for me, it was kind of like a celebration of the liveliness that they bring to the neighborhood, which is what attracted me to the neighborhood in the first place. It's how freely the space is used, you know, because they would...

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: They would sit on the grass, on the pathways, in the alleys.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, places that as Singaporeans we just don't do, right? We don't... they would hang out on the grass patch, any grass patch!

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It's actually a very active engagement with public space that the average citizen doesn't do.

MIN-WEI TING: Exactly. They would sit in alleyways, just really take over the space, almost every inch of space. But of course, there's still this sort of specter of the police and policing, right? Because this was made after the Little India incident. So yeah, for me, this film was about looking at space in a completely different way where it's not very controlled, and ordered, and structured.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And it somehow became quite prescient about the time that was to come, right? I mean, when COVID, when the lockdowns happened, and the area started to resemble...

MIN-WEI TING: A desert, right?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah, because I watched it during lockdown. I think we were still in various forms of lockdown. Little India was really not as active as... because the workers couldn't come out. So when I saw it, I had a different engagement with the piece. It was the empty parts of the film that resonated with me more. The stark difference between a place of activity and a place of non-activity became too real to me because I need only look out my window, or just go downstairs, to know that this place is not what it was. It's interesting to me, because the joy that you speak about, it was flipped for me when I actually started noticing the emptiness in that film.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I mean, with that film, I was like, you know, I was interested

in how it's transformed from deadness to life. And then COVID came along and took it away, took the life away from these streets.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: The deadness became the norm for a long time.

MIN-WEI TING: Yes, the deadness came back.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I think we should also talk about why we are here because you are currently Artist-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore, and you are about to complete your residency in a few months. We spoke briefly about these different kinds of trajectories, points of interest, and research topics that you've been sort of delving into, in quite a free, associative sort of way. I'm wondering if you could elucidate us a bit more about these threads.

MIN-WEI TING: Okay. So, you know, my films have engaged with these pretty discreet scenarios, they are kind of these vignettes that are put together quite neatly. With the residency, I wanted to step back a little bit and look at, I suppose, the bigger picture. Maybe try to unearth these ideas and themes that have sort of flown through my work. And so I've been looking at the landscape of Singapore, at how it's constantly changing, how it's constantly reconfigured and restructured, thinking and looking at the manifestations of these processes and really thinking about what drives these changes.

I've taken a more historical perspective of Singapore and what I've realized, is that this country has been changed since the British arrived, you know. When the British came, they started dredging the coasts. They started reclaiming land from the sea. They cleared the interior of the island for plantations. It's a process that's not new, even if we think that it's something post-independence. It's a process that comes from the colonial era. And it went on, right into postcolonial times when Singapore started to urbanise and industrialise and there, we see new changes in the landscape. We well know that Singapore has expanded terrestrially by something like 25%.

We are no strangers to this remaking of the environment. Buildings are torn down, rebuilt, land is cleared for new developments. I've been thinking about why we do this, because it's a kind of violence, you know, you've used the word violence, and I think a lot of Singaporeans lament these changes, and they wish that we

didn't have to go through these changes all the time. So I've been thinking about why we do this. I think there's an anxiety about Singapore, an anxiety about being a very small country. An anxiety about being small and wanting to be larger, and an anxiety about staying relevant. An anxiety about staying relevant to global trade and capitalism. We've become a hub for these things. And I think the state wants to maintain that, so it's constantly trying to do whatever it takes to avoid, I suppose, failure or becoming irrelevant. One of the ways is to constantly remake the country.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Which is quite ironic, right? The, I think a lot of these anxieties are also about wanting to pursue this idea of comfort, or success, or aspiration. But the more you escalate these efforts, the greater the anxieties become.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, it comes from this notion that we need to keep growing. I used to think, oh, yeah, we kind of internalise this notion of perpetual growth. Our politicians talk about, oh, the economy only grew by 2%. Next year, we'll aim for 5% or whatever. And I sense that we can't keep going on like this, you know, because this need drives this anxiety. Which in turn drives the need to come up with something new all the time in this country. Something new comes up... I don't know, Bitcoin or something, so therefore, we need to be like, a Bitcoin hub, you know?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: It's a sort of vicious anxiety cycle, perhaps.

MIN-WEI TING: One of the new anxieties that I think has arisen in the last few years is an anxiety about climate change. So in order to stay relevant, Singapore needs to stave off climate change. I'm interested in the changes that are taking place in relation to that, the kind of infrastructures that are being built, the policies that are being implemented, the pronouncements from the government. I'll give you an example. Like Changi Airport, the new terminal is being built five meters above sea level. I think they're mooted, or building some kind of barrier system off East Coast Parkway.

[Audio excerpt from untitled work-in-progress, 2023. Courtesy the artist.]

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: So to wrap it up... I guess we've kind of surveyed your

past work. You've talked a bit about the sort of deep research that you've been involved with in the past few months, that is also tethered to your previous work, but you now have the space, which is what residencies do, right? You have the space to kind of slow it down and look deeper into it.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, to step back and understand what it is that I've been doing ... all these films that I've made, you know, what have I been really responding to? Yeah, and thinking about that.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: And so I think that naturally brings me to ask: if you could speculate either for your own artistic trajectory, or for the nation, what do you think is next? And what does all this lead to for you? Or what could it lead to?

MIN-WEI TING: Well, I mean, I think the residency has made me think about what this place is going to look like, what are the infrastructures that we are going to see here? The buildings and flood protection systems or whatnot, you know? Yeah, I've been just trying to envision, or trying to speculate what Singapore might look like, in, I don't know, 10-20 years time.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: How does that make you feel?

MIN-WEI TING: I don't know. It's hard to say. I haven't reached the point where I can concretely say, oh, it's going to look like this. I mean, right now, I'm sort of just thinking about what drives these changes. As far as climate change is concerned, I think that Singapore believes that it can build itself out of it. And I think it believes that climate change is predictable. I don't take such an optimistic view of things. I think it's very unpredictable and I don't think we can build ourselves out of it. I mean, we've built ourselves out of many situations over a century. I just don't think that we can keep doing that and I don't think we can keep doing that without relinquishing some parts of the economy that are responsible for climate change, and that we are very much a part of, like oil refining and petrochemicals.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Yeah. We are quite deeply invested in these things.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, it's kind of... it's very schizophrenic. The economy

depends on these things, but at the same time, these things are going to destroy us. But we also believe that we can just build walls and whatever, underground cities, over-ground cities, that will get us out of it. Or maybe they'll just build like a dome over the whole country, just like they've done in the Gardens by the Bay where they've built these enormous domes. And we will live in some air-conditioned biosphere, but I don't think any country is an island.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: Is that too grim an ending?

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I think, yeah.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I mean, we don't need to make things pretty. But you know, it's... I guess it's a sobering ending.

MIN-WEI TING: Yeah, I think it's worth thinking about. I think it's worth thinking about what's the trajectory of this country. Can we go on doing the things that we do, you know?

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: I'm excited to see how your work will evolve, with these new anxieties that might evolve, from what we've talked about.

MIN-WEI TING: I'm excited too. It's gonna take some time.

VIKNESH KOBINATHAN: At least there's that to be excited about! Okay, thank you!

NADIA AMALINA: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit our website at www.ntu.ccasingapore.org, you can sign up to our newsletter, or follow us on your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast. AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore.

This episode featured artist Min-Wei Ting in conversation with Viknesh Kobinathan.

I am Nadia Amalina, the programme manager and co-editor of this podcast. AiRCAST is conceptualised and co-edited by Dr Anna Lovecchio. The Audio Engineer is Ashwin Menon.

The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai with field recordings of our non-human neighbours in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on 14 December 2022. Thank you for listening.



Viknesh Kobinathan and Min-Wei Ting recording AiRCAST, 14 December 2022.
Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.