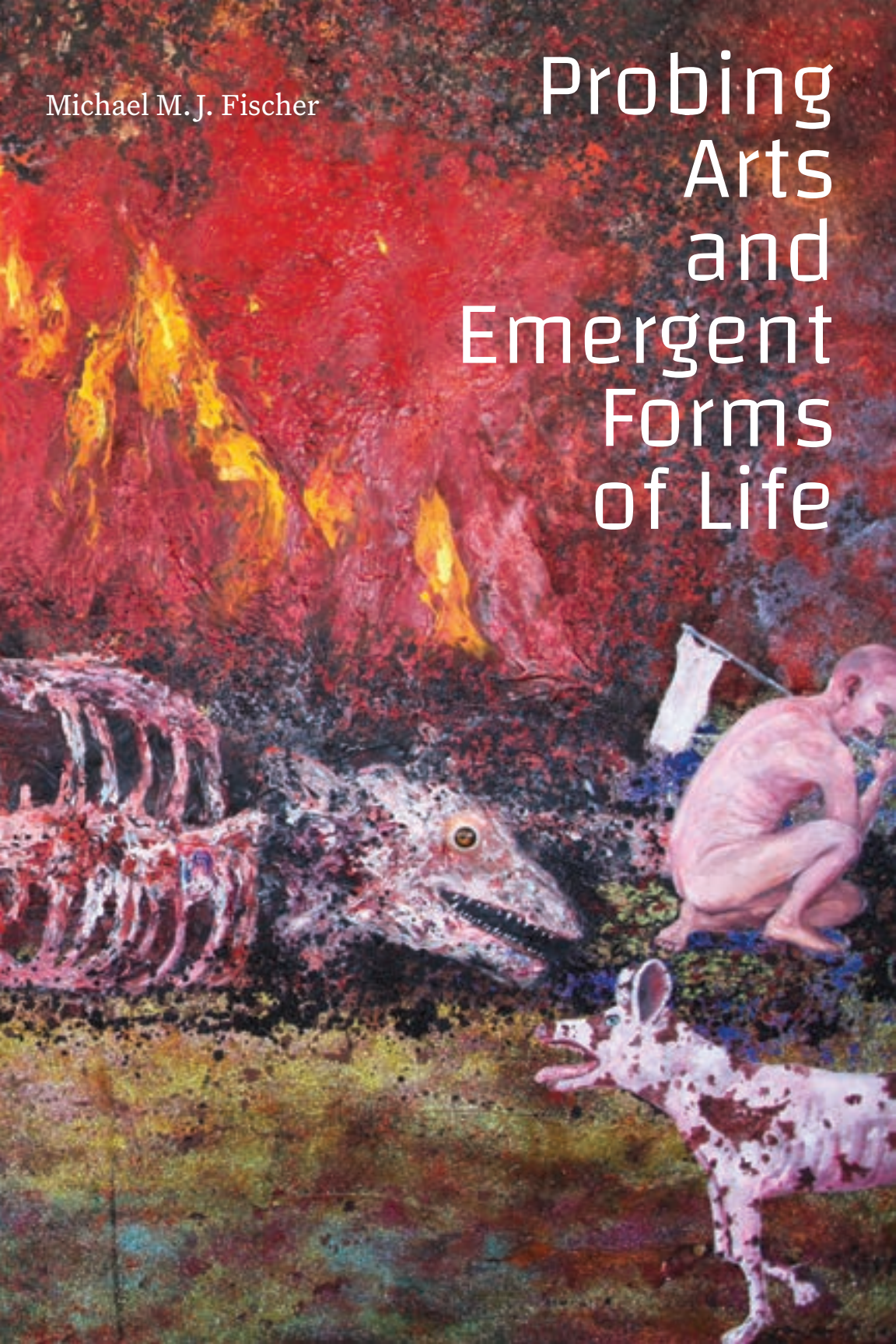


Michael M. J. Fischer

# Probing Arts and Emergent Forms of Life



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BUY



EXPERIMENTAL FUTURES

Technological Lives, Scientific Arts,  
Anthropological Voices *A series edited*

*by Michael M. J. Fischer and Joseph Dumit*

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# Probing Arts and Emergent Forms of Life

Michael M. J.  
Fischer

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Duke University Press Durham & London 2023

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Acrylic paint and glitter on canvas, 210 × 520 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Black Goat Studios.

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TO MY TEACHERS IN THE VISUAL

AND PERFORMANCE ARTS:

Sally Smart, Entang Wiharso, and Christine Cocca

Charles Lim and Li Lin Wee

Zai Kuning, Kuning Suleiman, and Tetsu Saitoh

Kiran Kumar, Edith Podesta, and Aravinth Kumarasamy

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issue in 2013 at the time of Ken Kwek's release of his three-part film anthology *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues*.

At NUS, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips welcomed me and became intellectual friends. At the National University Hospital of Singapore (NUHS), psychiatrist and writer Kua Ee Heok's memoir of being a young psychiatrist at Woodbridge Hospital figures prominently in my essay on aging societies in *American Ethnologist* and figures again in the forthcoming volume *At the Pivot of East and West*. I remember, among other things, a conversation in which he bemoaned and admired the loss of a promising medical student, now a prominent playwright and theater practitioner, letting me into backstories and histories one might otherwise not have access to.

At the Nanyang Technical University (NTU), I am indebted first of all to Kwok Kian Woon, who was an early and rich source of conversation about the arts. He took me to a few openings—at the Singapore Art Museum, at the Esplanade, at the Kuo Pao Kun Theater Festival—and remains an imagined reader for me in these pages, the following volume, and hopefully one on the theater arts.

At NTU's Center for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA), I am deeply indebted to Ute Mehta Bauer first of all for inviting me to do a keynote talk for a retrospective of Charles Lim's work, which appears as a key essay here (chapter 4). I'd like to thank Kevin Chua, of Texas Tech, for early generous encouragement and some tips for that talk, and it is only apt that in 2022, as we put this manuscript into production, I should find him again in a 2021 video interviewing Ho Tzu Nyen, bringing Ho's work up into the time of the pandemic. Bauer also invited me to be part of her edited volume *Climates, Habitats, Environments*, reflecting on her years of crucial leadership at the Center for Contemporary Art, the essay for which, in expanded form, is a second key essay here (chapter 2). Beyond those two invitations, I want to acknowledge the many happy hours I spent at the Center: its screenings, workshops, talks, and open studios, as well as the Night Festivals and other openings at the galleries on the Gillman Barracks campus.

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cene, the history field-trip visit to the edges of the demilitarized zone, and especially, for this volume, the opportunity to engage with the Korean art world at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (and some of the galleries in Seoul) and to integrate that with the science studies and history concerns.

The Goodman Arts Centre (where Aravinth Kumarasamy, Kiran Kumar, and Boo Junfeng welcomed me), the Aliwal Arts Centre (where the RAW Moves dance company was based and where Edith Podesta premiered her *Indices of Vanishment* before the company moved to The Goodman Arts Centre, where Kiran Kumar performed a piece from his Archipelago Archives [chapter 6]), and the Blue Jazz Club (where Chris Christy's pickup band and friends played weekly) were also key venues for meeting people.

The Singapore Art Museum (SAM), I used to say, was always the first place I visited when I came back to Singapore. It was the place one could see what was happening in Southeast Asian art. While the new National Gallery of Art is now splitting that role with the SAM, I look forward to when the refurbished SAM re-opens. Similarly, STPI (formerly the Singapore Tyler Print Institute) was a place to see accomplished artists learning to work with the print and papermaking medium, in a welcoming atmosphere created by Emi Eu, the director, and the ever-informative and delightful master print-maker Eitaro Ogawa. Among the international artists who came to work and particularly engaged my attention were, from Korea, Do Ho Suh; from Indonesia, Heri Dono, Entang Wiharso, and Eko Nugroho; and, from the Philippines, Ronald Ventura and Geraldine Javier (one of whose collage works I saw there, instantly thought of Donna Haraway's work, and helped broker it to be the book cover for *Staying with the Trouble*). The National Museum of Singapore hosted an important conference on biennials, art fairs, and curatorial visions, which helped introduce me to a number of key players in the region.

As with Tembusu College, I also owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), with which I was associated, thanks to MIT, for a decade from its earliest days, before even the Dover campus days, and as it settled into its campus on Somapah Road. Without the time and freedom to explore, this research could not have been done, and I hope it might be a small return gift in recognition of the humanities and social sciences at the SUTD (and MIT). The SUTD's International Design Center held one of its summit meetings at the Art/Science Museum at Marina Bay, a venue that should become a regular partner.

I thank João Biehl and the Princeton Anthropology Department for the surprise invitation to do the Clifford Geertz Memorial Lecture, which forced me, a bit earlier than I planned, to begin to integrate the arguments of these chapters together. I thank the Princeton department for the warm reception and discussion.

If I turn back to thank more fully the artists listed in the dedication, many of whom figure in the following essays and others in the ones to follow, these acknowledgments will turn into an extended memoir. So I stop here, and only hope that my teachers, these artists, will accept these essays as humble offerings. I should also acknowledge the curators, gallerists, and critics who support the work of these artists, and who deserve an extended essay themselves. They include Shabbir Hussain Mustafa of the National Gallery of Singapore; Tan Siuli, formerly of the Singapore Art Museum, now Southeast Asia curator, National Gallery of Singapore; Emi Eu, executive director, and master printmaker Eitaro Ogawa, of STPI; Inge Santoso and Tommy Sutomo of Can's Gallery (formerly Galeri Canna) in Jakarta; Suwarno Wisetrotomo, curator of the Galeri Nasional Indonesia in Jakarta; Carla Bianpoen (art critic, Jakarta); Natalie King (curator, Melbourne); Jasdeep Sandhu of Gajah Gallery in Singapore; Yohsuke Ishizuka of Ota Fine Arts; Stephanie Fong of FOST Gallery Singapore; Marie-Pierre Mol of Intersections Gallery, Singapore; and Gridthiya Gaweewong in Bangkok.

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# Introduction

One is led beyond thinking in terms like modernization and globalization to feeling the clashing rhythms and tempos, the incoherent situations, contradictory developments, and the diversity of people's positions, views, emotions, dreams, and nightmares. —JAN MRAZEK, *WAYANG AND ITS DOUBLES*

The non-communist, post colonies of Asia were key battlegrounds for the defusing of socialist redistributive demands in part by recasting “freedom” as incorporation into the “free world” . . . the unbearable, devastating ambivalence of history. —JINI KIM WATSON, *COLD WAR RECKONINGS*

It is as if parts of the Non-Aligned Movement have reinvented themselves into the World Trade Organization. —C.J. W.-L. WEE, *THE ASIAN MODERN*

This volume contributes to a series of essays—along with those in a companion volume, *At the Pivot of East and West*—on the arts and forms of emergent common sense (or the emergent imaginaries of various multitudes feeling their way into uncertain futures) in the globally interconnected, politically and semiotically media-fraught, Anthropocenic twenty-first century. This is a stage on which, and within which, anthropology is often positioned as a target because it can deploy potent ethnographic tools to analyze, clarify, and make legible the social dramas surrounding films,

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pandemics, global protests, popular culture interferences, and historical accounts that have not been settled but periodically return to haunt the living.<sup>1</sup> I explore how artworks (installations, exhibitions, novels, paintings, creative modern dance performances, videos, and films) provide para-ethnographic access to changing worlds, anticipating changes as much as registering them, and often do so as much through their tactics and strategies of composition as their ostensive content.

What I call here “common sense” is what the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri calls the “imagination of the multitude,” though I would pluralize the nouns. Negri intuits that there must be a “creative materialism which great painting as well as great theater offer us in the most serious moments of crisis . . . sending out patrols into unknown territory, to observe and to sabotage, but above all to experiment and to reconstruct”; and he hopes to install in us circuits of pleasure and potentialities beyond the claims that there is no outside to capitalism (Negri 2011, 63). This book, I hope, will also shift us away from returning always to the same few European theorists and their referents (Spinoza and love, in the case of Negri). In the end, Negri wants to find “the common” in organizing the “governance of/over/in the forms of life” (Negri 2011, 63). I might call this the changing of common sense as knowledge of biology, life, and organizational behavior deepens, what anthropologists once called “culture” that responds to, and shapes, changing conditions. The theorists I wish to hear are those embedded in, and mobilizing, such creative materialisms in situated geographies, geopolitics, and historical conjunctures in many different places (lest theory become a blind monoculture, repeating itself, not seeing what is different, emergent, or possible). The canon of references needs expansion, wider comparative literacy, fuller multiple gender(s) awareness, as well as ecological, multispecies, and prosthetic-cyborg inquisitiveness. These are calls that have been made repeatedly by anthropologists, early cultural studies (before appropriation and domestication by English departments, instead of multiple languages), subaltern, postcolonial, and decolonial studies, some feminist studies, some Black and race studies, and others. Enough of just waving theoretical hands at “provincializing Europe” or opening up the canon of theory beyond Euro-America with ancient sources as nostalgic tokens: let’s actually try to listen not just to individual celebrated intellectuals but to traditions of debate and dissensus, and to situated conditions with their social movements, aware also of their positionings in the global maelstrom of transnational media circuitries.

In these pages, and essays to follow—to name the artworks in kaleidoscopic condensation—feminage (or “cutting and sewing,” from modernist Dada puppets to feminist pirates and girls’ self-cutting) converses (in Sally Smart’s art) with the language of intestines, multiple eyes, and post-wayang superheroes in an Indonesia struggling to fend off terror past and present (in Entang Wiharso’s art). In Park Chan-kyong’s *Belated Bosal* (2019), the Buddha is sent off, again, on a funeral pyre in a post-Fukushima irradiated forest, and in his *Anyang, Paradise City* (2011), a mix of Asian Gothic and shamanic *min-jung* (people’s) art is evoked to deal with the national psychological traumas of the 2014 *Sewol* ferry sinking (killing 245 high school students and 54 others) and the 1988 Green Hill textile mill fire, in which twenty-two female workers died locked in a dormitory, ironically just when the labor movement was at its height. Meanwhile, in the animist and animation art of Ayoung Kim, Yemini refugees in Korea spin in limbo in juxtaposition with spinning cubes of precious metals torn from the mother rock in Mongolia. Cultural critique of the technocratic sublime is redrawn with new video eyes, shot from the sea, in Charles Lim Yi Yong’s decade-long project. Margaret Leng Tan and John Cage show us how to listen to the ambient noise of a Singapore housing complex, and filmmaker Tan Pin Pin shows us how to map city life through ambient sound with and without people (Tan P. P. 2005, 2007). Women renarrate Southeast Asian political worlds with surround-sound cinematic motifs and the colors of intergenerational melancholy in cubist painting (in the novels of Sandi Tan, 2012, and Laksmi Pamuntjak, 2019). Weberian rationalities spin out of control (in Daren Goh’s [2019] meritocracy thriller). Analytic monsters, like Maxwell’s demons and Cartesian evil geniuses, insert themselves (in Kevin Martens Zhi Qiang Wong’s *Altered Straits* [2017]). Greek myths inhabit Chinese operatic forms (in Nuraliah Norasid’s *The Gatekeeper* [2017b]). Films dissociate and become multiple (in Daniel Hui’s hands, 2011, 2014, 2018a). Archipelago life reemerges in Zai Kuning’s ghost ships and *ghazal* music, and in Kiran Kumar’s modern dance that converses with Indonesian and Indian yogic and martial forms.<sup>2</sup>

*Ethnographic nuggets* come as *lightning strikes* or *illuminations of recognition*.<sup>3</sup> They often sound the *alert* or *fire alarm* (après Walter Benjamin [1928] 1978; Löwy 2005), a warning, a call for help, or for doing something new, breaking out of old habits. There was a flash of illumination when I stumbled upon Henri Matisse’s *Woman with Hat* (1905) and instantly recognized through the colors what Laksmi Pamuntjak’s narrator, Siri, had been

describing, in *Fall Baby* (2019), about the portrait of Siri's mother, Amba, in Pamuntjak's two-novel (2013, 2019), female-perspective portrait of Indonesia's changing generational conflicts.<sup>4</sup> A similar flash of illumination occurred for me when Sandi Tan described in several published interviews (2012b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018d) that she wrote the female-perspective novel of Singapore, *The Black Isle* (2012a), listening over and over (on a loop) to her favorite film scores. The comment, when I went to check out the film scores, suddenly unlocked for me the emotion-rhythms of a novel that was more than another fictive family saga renarrating Singapore history. More socially powerful *flash points* illuminate deep-play social dramas that unfold in public *reactions* to certain artworks such as the Brazilian film *Bacurau* (Mendonça Filho and Donales, 2019; see Fischer 2021) and the Singaporean film *To Singapore, with Love* (Tan P. P. 2013; Fischer 2023), or in the earlier, excessive reactions to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) (Fischer 1990a, 1990b, 2014) or the Mohammad cartoons (Fischer 2009a), which can ignite conflagrations further illustrating what the artwork describes, catching up to the art and exceeding it. Such flash points remind one of the psychoanalytic test of truth: not that the analysand agrees with the analyst's interpretation but rather that the analysand is triggered to produce more discourse that illustrates the problems that brought her or him to the analyst. The results of such lightning strikes and flash points are not simply ephemera but leave legacies in the social fabric. They write their social textualities into the future, leaving their traces, constructing new haunts for transmissible ghosts, new hauntings. They thus also provide lessons learned and aspirations to be forwarded to the next generations.

Ethnographic nuggets can come in the form of vignettes, new rituals or sacralizations, and digital symbols, as in Ayoung Kim's brilliant series of Porosity Valley films and installations (2017b, 2017c, 2019b, 2019c), juxtaposing and substituting shiny metal cubes torn from the mineral earth with war refugees torn from homes in Yemen, seeking a place in Malaysia and Korea (chapter 2); the performance rituals of Zai Kuning (chapter 5); the recovery and renarrations of the history of dance through bodily memory in India and Indonesia (chapter 6); and the entirely new rituals of anatomists and transplant surgeons conferring respect, personhood, and gift receipt on cadavers abandoned by families or resulting from motorcycle accidents in order to deal with their own anxieties about using one life to save another (Sanal 2011). Park Chan-kyong's film *Belated Bosal* (2019) restages the Buddha's funeral in a radioactive noir forest after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear melt-

down and radiation release, a metaphor for the many toxicities with which we live, and is itself set within a larger installation of his artworks. The 2019–21 global pandemic of SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) or COVID-19 (coronavirus disease, identified in 2019) provides further instances requiring renewed and constant testing and sentinels for the changing external habitats, or multiple natures, within which we live, as well as for our internal immune and microbiome systems, or nature, that continuously deconstruct and reconstruct our bodies from within. These constitute two of the at least four natures to which I have argued we should be paying attention: first nature (our habitats), second nature (human built environments and social education), third nature (our internal biologies, which we are learning to repair and perhaps regenerate from the inside out, genetically, with comparative genomics and with biome understandings), and fourth nature (our companion species). Nature, as I have argued, is both what we are not (“acts of *nature*” for insurance calculations) and what we are (passions are in our *nature*), and *nature* is therefore a sliding signifier, not a binary to culture, or rather the term *culture* is only one of many binary distinctions that can be situationally used (Fischer 2009b, ch. 3). Increasingly, perhaps, we will find ways of sensing and providing feedback for reconstructing our social bodies, healing our structural inequities, modulating our relations with the ecologies within which we live.

Gallery or museum installations can also have art effects through processual rituals, as well as curatorial staging, as I experienced in the double retrospective, titled “Conversation: Endless Acts in History,” between the artworks of Entang Wiharso and Sally Smart in Jakarta, which set up triangulations of exchange between Indonesia, Australia, interwar Europe, and America (chapter 2) and between sociohistorical horizons and the pressures within our psyches (figured in cutting and feminage for Smart and in the effects of the “movementality” of the earth and the effects of the electromagnetic forces on human neurology for Wiharso).<sup>5</sup>

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Artists have the initial advantage. They are allowed to present unfinished, enigmatic, and unexplained works. Anthropologists return the serve but are required by peer review and editors to frame and explicate, often reductively to something evasively called *theory* or *narrative* (modernization, globalization, neoliberalism), which all too often are just memes posing as theory. Theory must be built up from the ethnography, not deduced from itself.



Theory and ethnography are dialectically related. Less can often be more: an editor-friend advises to focus on “the film, not the footage.” But for the anthropologist the footage *is* the film. It is what one goes to films to see, or at least what I go for. The footage is or contains the object of desire, however much, in Lacanian fashion, the object may be elusive. It is the traces, the semantic slippages and allusions, that are the substance of the conjuring. “The film” is but a frame device, sometimes suggesting a point of view, or a take, on the richer complexity (“real world”), to which one again returns. Or, perhaps better is the analogy with the move in documentary filmmaking to dispense with voice-overs (the theory that overwrites the ethnography). As Carlos Fausto, the Brazilian anthropologist who has written one of the most exciting books of the past several decades on Amazonian art, puts it, “The complexity that interests me here is . . . that of the form itself and its power to evoke its non-visible parts and convoke an act of looking, setting off an imaginative projection” (2020, 22). What is “most exciting” for me about Fausto’s book is its dedication to, and respect for, the ethnographic material (the footage, not the film), not in some romantic or nostalgic way, but in a way that also pursues historical change, migrations, borrowings, and exchanges.<sup>6</sup>

The following essays are half or a third of a larger project that I have been calling “Art and Emergent Twenty-First-Century Common Sense.”<sup>7</sup> Both the terms *common sense* and *sensus communis* have varied in their usages across languages and philosophers and often were at the center of struggles over forms of government, from Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), that is, the sense of the commons, the people, against the tyranny of monarchy, even in its constitutional form; to Antonio Gramsci’s arguments about coalitional and cultural politics in the struggle for hegemonic control (Gramsci 1947); or C. S. Pierce’s and John Dewey’s pragmatist *critical common sense* arising out of the need to deal with emergent crises that call political coalitions into being, mobilizing citizens with and against one another over rights, interests, and justice (Pierce 1905; Dewey 1927).<sup>8</sup> The social nature and historical contexts of all of the above are central to the anthropological understanding of what often are narrated as purely intellectual chess games among philosophers. Without getting enmeshed in these all-too-fascinating philosophical and historical debates, my case material in the current project is to try to think about new forms of understandings in the twenty-first century with the help of artists as fellow ethnographers of emergent forms of life.

As I was assembling these essays, I was invited by João Biehl and the Princeton Department of Anthropology to give the Clifford Geertz Memorial Lecture for 2019. I chose to use Geertz's essay "Art as a Cultural System" ([1976] 1983) as a token starting point to try to articulate what I was trying to do with the essays but also to reconstruct what anthropologists have had to say about art, to broaden it from its often narrow confines, as in the work of another of my teachers, Anthony Forge (who worked on New Guinea art along the Sepik River), or his student Alfred Gell. I have decided to leave the lecture as it was originally presented, in the vocative voice, addressed to Cliff. Memorial lectures are, after all, ancestor rites, one of whose functions is to make present the spirit in order to dialogue with its afterlives. Geertz broadened the scope of what anthropologists had to say about art through his engagement with social historians of art, such as Michael Baxandall, whose work he had us, as graduate students, read, and with social phenomenologists and symbolic analysts, such as Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer, whose influence is signaled in the epigraph for the lecture. Carlos Fausto and Carlo Severi are more recent anthropologists who have also tried to broaden the scope of the field, by bringing in Claude Lévi-Strauss's brilliant writings on art and engaging Native American and New Guinea art with and against the traditions of European art, including their profound effect on European modernist art. So I begin this volume with Geertz as a kind of baseline introduction to the arguments I want to explore, pluralizing and challenging his title and moving into the emergent forms of life of the present through the arts that I think throw some para-ethnographic light on what is emerging. The other essays in this volume are expansions of what is argued (the theory, the narrative), but each has its own integrity of form, and power to both "evoke their settings and convoke acts of looking" (Fausto 2020, 22), recognizing the footage and acknowledging the voices of the people whose lives constitute the footage.

The opening essay, "Synthetic Realism: Postcinema in the Anthropocene" (on the Anthropocene see Steffen et al 2011; Steffen 2019; and Williams and Zalasiewicz 2019), was originally invited by Ute Mehta Bauer, the director of the Nanyang Technical University's Center for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA), to celebrate the annual expositions she and her team have curated, a celebration done under the shadow of the ending of funding for the center. I intended with the original essay both to protest that funding decision (an effort to offload fundraising, if possible, onto the private sector) and to point to the explosive and innovative work being done by the arts in Asia.

The essay, originally titled “Embers of an Exposition,” is expanded for this volume by fusing it with two exhibitions at the Seoul Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art that I stumbled upon while attending a conference on the Anthropocene across the street at the Korea Folklore Museum, convened by historian and science studies colleague Professor Buhm Soon Park of the Korea Institute for Advanced Studies. I intend with this fusion to stress both the geographic and the urgent social issues that the artists address, indeed in the spirit of Geertz’s formulation about art, “locating in their tenor the sources of their spell” (Geertz 1976 [1983]).

*Synthetic realism* is the temporary name for what I see emerging as a new art style particularly in Asia but also elsewhere, which I characterize in chapter 2. It resonates, as ethnographically detailed by Jan Mrazek (2019), with the Indonesian wayang (puppet) masters’ distinction between the English “realism” and Indonesian *realis* (realism) for non-wayang elements absorbed into wayang from film and television, which after all are part of today’s Indonesian reality or realism (chapter 3).

Curation has become a major topic in the arts: how to frame, stage, and put artworks in conversation. To explore curation in the mode of both Faus-to’s and Geertz’s formulations, I slowly walk the reader through an exhibition at the National Gallery in Jakarta that put the artwork of Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso and Australian artist Sally Smart in juxtaposition and conversation. This essay was solicited by the two artists and Christine Cocca, Wiharso’s wife and editor of his catalogs. In my original vision for a larger volume, this was to be the opening essay both to remind the reader of the exhibit and exposition setting of much art as it moves from artist studio and galleries to larger national and international stages, and also to demonstrate the enigmatic, open-ended, and allusive qualities of artworks that refuse to be reduced to fixed explanations and theory. While I respect the professionalization of curators and may have something to say elsewhere about biennials and blockbuster business models, I am more interested here in the artist-curators, the way the artists themselves stage and explain and at a point refuse, or are unable, to explain further. Wiharso’s artwork initially gave me the idea that something quite different was happening in Asia, something post-Reformasi (the “reform” period after the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian regime in Indonesia in 1998), which could no longer be contained in the usual rubrics that curators, art historians, and art critics have been using. I once gave a speed talk at the Singapore University of Technology and Design—we were given two minutes—a pitch for my research proj-

ect. The only thing people remembered, and a number of people came up to comment, was an image of one of Wiharso's colorful artworks that they found exciting in a stimulating and puzzling way. Bingo!

The fourth essay, on the work of Charles Lim, again originally resulted from an invitation from Ute Mehta Bauer to do a keynote for a retrospective of his work at the NTU CCA. I draw on it extensively in the Geertz lecture but ask indulgence for the repetition: putting together a narratable sequence of his work into an overall account was a challenge, given the way pieces were shuffled and rearranged at various times over the course of the decade-plus-long project, and each of the *chapters* or *sea states* is valuable to think with, in its own right, to allow the *imajinasi batin* (inner imagination) to work with the images and videos—as wayang puppeteers might say in criticizing newer, “more efficient,” substitutable televisual media forms of presentation and presencing, which, however, allow little time for mystical philosophizing or even just seeing behind the curtain/veil of the illusions that we see in the real world. Lim, like Wiharso and Smart, was always available and helpful, both in the pressured days before the talk that was my introduction to his work—although, as it turned out, I had seen a few of his pieces earlier in other shows at the Singapore Art Museum—and afterward, as I slowly reworked the talk into a longer piece. Lim would have liked the retrospective to have been staged as a site-specific event in an old boat shed near the beach village of Mataikan, on Somapah Road, where he grew up, more appropriate to the coastal and sea concerns of his art. (Somapah Road is now the location of one of my homes in Singapore: the new, decade-old Singapore University of Technology and Design.) But the funders insisted on the NTU CCA venue since they were already supporting that as a national site for displaying art being produced today.

The fifth and sixth essays were inspired by a concert and a dance-installation that I stumbled into. The concert was an entry into traditions of Malay music and the polymath musician and visual artist Zai Kuning, who had me following along in his quest to evoke (and help) the sea peoples and *orang asli* (original people) of the archipelago of the Malay world. As I followed his work, his artwork gradually became a parallel aquatic and archipelago world to Lim's artwork. Like Lim and Wiharso, Kuning has exhibited at the Venice Biennale representing his country, and I watched him prepare for it, though I was not privy to his struggles with curators (which I learned about mostly after the fact). As with Lim, the Venice show was an iteration of many previous shows, one of a series of expanding explorations,

seen better as a series than an event, one that for me began with the magical concert with which the essay opens. As with the Wiharso-Smart *Conversation: Endless Acts in History* exhibition, I try hard to provide the reader with an evocation of what made that evening magical, which is also the tuning fork for Kuning's historical and ethnographic explorations, musically and through his rattan ship sculptures with their cargos of books and mystical-cum-sovereignty-claiming voyages.

I found yet a third voyage across the seas in Kiran Kumar's artwork in dance-cum-installation, tracing gendered forms across the archipelago stretching from South India to Java and Singapore. I had already been engaged with the Apsaras Arts Dance Company and its artistic director, Aravinth Kumarasamy, watching his development of Bharatanatyam into stage shows (with video backdrops) that visualize the shastras of the arts (with dancers coming alive off the carvings of temple walls), the life and travels of the Buddha and Buddhism (from India to Sri Lanka to Cham, Cambodia, and Thailand), and the dramas on the walls of Angkor Wat and Borobudur. He brought senior dancers from India to engage in a discussion of changing generations, which I recount in the essay, which takes me (back) to India and modern developments in so-called classical Indian dance forms. What Kumar is doing for exploring the differences between codes of masculinity in Indian and Indonesian dance, Chandralekha and Padmini Chettur in a different way had been doing for expressing the creativity of the feminine in Bharatanatyam-derived dance, different from the form classicized at the Kalakshetra school of dance in Madras, from which Aravinth Kumarasamy and the Apsaras Arts Dance Company also stem. Kumar and Chandralekha practice quest forms, journeys of discovery and experimentation, into the past and into the emergent future. RAW Moves is the name of the Singapore dance company under whose auspices Kumar staged his choreography and installation at the Goodman Arts Centre.

The arts invoked in this volume are intended to be *probes* into how new forms of life are emerging out of the ruins of the past, sensors of new materialities and emergent forms of common sense, of the dynamics of the sensus communis, of how our nature and its habitats and prostheses are changing. I have done several such essays with artists in the past, with the filmmaker Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz on Poland after the fall of communism (Fischer 1997); with psychiatrist-artist Eric Avery on his woodblock prints and art-medicine actions in the United States on Somaliland refugee camps, Haitian and Central American refugee detention centers, and an HIV/AIDS clinic

placed in the Harvard Fogg Museum to do institutional therapy (Fischer 2000); and with Parviz Yashar on the legacies of training at the Los Angeles art school that produced designers for the Detroit automobiles, for the BART rapid transit, and early levitating trains—which was home to the color theorists who worked on the Works Progress Administration public mosaics in California—and on his own work on the above projects as well as for Wedgwood ceramics and modular furniture design, and his commentaries in painting on these and other topics, including migration from Iran (Fischer 2009b and its cover). More recently, I have also worked with the Brazilian film *Bacurau*, directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, as a text about the US-Brazil dyad’s use of “fifth generation hybrid warfare” (from disinformation to post-truth disruption of information in general), the COVID-19 pandemic, and authoritarianism, as much as about the transnational mix of cultural genres, technological projection, and mirrorings of deep social polarizations in the present day (Fischer 2021).

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In all these essays, there has been an abiding ethnographic interest in *places and peoples*, a providing of *changing historical contexts*, and *artists’ own discourses* and explanations. Art worlds can be key dialogic or conversation sites to present ethnographic evidence of cultural change, cultural contests, and immanent cultural critiques. Artists’ ethnographies (they call it “research” or “field research”) not only parallel those of anthropologists but should be objects of anthropological attention, not just an emic resource for etic theory. They can be colleagues who are good at presenting things in more adventurous, exploratory ways.

Future volumes of the project “Art and Emergent Twenty-First-Century Common Sense” are called *At the Pivot of East and West: Ethnographic, Literary, and Filmic Arts* (Fischer 2023), which will deal with women novelists and filmmakers renarrating male national histories otherwise; and tentatively *Risky Theater and the Ethnography of Life*, which will pick up the theme of the strategies of cultural critique in “illiberal” societies, or “liberalism disavowed” (as the sociologist Chua Beng Huat [2017] has put it), or digital and global circuitries in meritocracies, which are at play in the essays here as well.

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## Notes

### INTRODUCTION

- 1 By *semiotically* or *linguistically fraught*, I am thinking of such diagnoses as digitally enabled “post-truth” conditions of “equiprobability, where virtually any statement can be challenged at very low, or no cost” (Cesarino 2020), and cryptographic models of proxy social media dissemination in order to disappear sources, as part of hybrid warfare and politics, inserted into national political systems (Leirner 2020). On anthropology as a target, see Neiburg and Ribeiro (2020), Cabral de Oliveira and Marini (2020), and Cavignac (2020), but also more generally the role of anthropology in promoting what Ronaldo de Almeida (2020) calls “compensatory politics” (investing in those who have had low social and economic capital), seen as inimical to radical neoliberalism.
- 2 In an earlier, more fully global conception, two other essays added how industrial design and color theory simultaneously renarrate modern American and Iranian culture (in the work of Parviz Yashar) and how northeastern Brazil mixes Cinema Novo, spaghetti western, and American film in a renewed *antropofagia* to contest pandemics and fascism (in Kleber Mendonça Filho and Dornelles’ *Bacurau*). For the former, see the cover art and pp. 248–53 in Fischer (2009); for the latter, see Fischer (2021).
- 3 An attentive reviewer suggests a comparison-contrast with anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada’s figure of “caughtness” as a way of positioning the ethnographer, while preserving the aporia of whether the new apperception and understanding is a matter of serendipity or of overdetermination. Favret-Saada’s use of caughtness is more linguistic and performative and is an extreme case (obligatory) of being caught up in or identifying within a discursive field of action, while Walter Benjamin’s notions of a fire alarm and of sudden lightning flashes of illumination have to do with a break in normalcy that reveals an underlying terrain or contradiction of social forces, such that it can mobilize political action.
- 4 In my two examples here, the one, Matisse, is a visual recognition of what had

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been a textual description of a Fauvist technique, linking the emotional palattes in the novel to a painter's technique of color, volume, and affect. I am now caught by, and in, that nexus—and so, too, by, and in, the second example of film soundtracks (and their narrative titles) that for me reveal and illuminate the composition or choreography of intense emotional registers in a novel's text. But Favret-Saada's concern in her accounts of contemporary witchcraft in France has to do with participant observation: she argues for a more varied terrain of positionings to be explored than is poorly glossed in anthropology as "participant observation" (Favret-Saada [1977] 1980, 2012).

- 5 On museums as reworked spaces for cultural critique, see the artwork of Eric Avery, placing an HIV/AIDS consulting room in the Harvard Fogg Museum, conceived as doing institutional therapy (Fischer 2000). But see also the important three volumes coedited by Ivan Karp (Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine 1992; Karp et al. 2006) on the reconstruction of civic and community museums, especially the transformation of colonial museums in Africa into national ones accessible to, and open to criticism by, all citizens; and the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola's (1995) attention to art museums as spaces where art is detached from its contexts and performs something like "ritual without myth." See also now David Joselit's (2020) lecture on the National Gallery Singapore along with the M+ museum in Hong Kong and the Zeitz Museum in Cape Town as examples of new museums of modern and contemporary art in the age of globalization, built in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, designed by European star architects, around a building rooted to its historical site, meant to garner international recognition and to produce publicity and tourism. Much of what Joselit says comes from Singapore's own planning and publicity documents (including the museum's own exhibit on its design and renovation), but his cherry-picked examples ignore places like the Tate Modern in London, which fits his model equally but disturbs his division between Europe and the Rest. The National Gallery Singapore, in any case, is only one of a complex of newly expanded museums within walking distance, including the Singapore Art Museum (a former Catholic school, which for years was the premier art venue for new works from the region and is currently undergoing renovation and expansion); the lotus blossom-shaped Science/Art Museum, including a performance venue; the Singapore National Museum (the former Raffles Museum, which fits Karp's civic museum category but with a new glass building extension and a performance venue); and the Asian Civilizations Museum, also with a new extension (which fits Joselit's encyclopedic museum category); as well as a series of arts venues such as the Substation (connected by a walkway to the Singapore National Museum and to the new Funan Theater), art schools (LaSalle School of the Arts, with its spectacular new building of six glass faceted towers around an atrium with black stone and aluminum exterior cladding; Nanyang Academy of the Arts,



with more functional modern buildings; and the sculptural, vertical-gardened, naturally ventilated machine for wind School of the Arts, or SOTA), and the performance and art spaces at the Esplanade. The Nanyang Technical University's Center for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA), in the Gillman Barracks arts complex, is another important venue for art being produced today. Of importance to the anthropologist are the communities of conversation in and across these spaces, rather than typologizing and panoptic commentary from the former metropolises and imperial centers; the kernel, as Rumi would say, not merely the shell.

- 6 Fausto quite incisively reviews the “so-called anthropology of art” debates among Alfred Gell, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, noting archly (and correctly, in my view) that models of art “cannot resolve to two terms and cannot be stabilized by a foundational anthropomorphism” (2020, 13). Quite to the contrary of their premature theoretical reductions (the film, not the footage), Fausto suggests that the Amerindian problematic or ambition involves “generating the most complex and paradoxical images with multiple referents, recursively nested, oscillating between figure and ground” (22). This, it strikes me, is a far more felicitous basis for a general anthropology of art that is not forever bound to Christian theological obsessions with images and presence (which both he and, even more in depth, Carlo Severi analyze [Severi, 2015, 2018]). It is a fascinating discussion, but my net is wider than Fausto’s framing around the genesis of presence in ritual and undoing the Protestant Reformation (Bruno Latour’s purifications, Latour 1993) and Protestant and Catholic missionaries’ efforts to undo Amerindian cosmologies and rituals. Fausto’s work builds, in a way, on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s fundamental understanding that binary oppositions are generative (not stable) and so is able to build on his work, as well as situate his analyses of Amerindian myth and ritual within the much larger and growing corpus of ethnographic work (Lévi-Strauss 1964–71).
- 7 Influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s genealogical discussion of *common sense* (Lat. *sensus communis*) in his magisterial *Truth and Method* (1960 [1975]), particularly as inflected by Giambattista Vico, I first invoked common sense as the kind of shared conventional wisdoms and normative understandings that can at certain historical times profoundly shift. They can overthrow *ancien régime* practical agreements underpinning both governance and social relations, constituting a shift in paradigms in the language of Thomas Kuhn, in ideological hegemonies in the language of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, or in epistemes in the language of Michel Foucault. The case I was working on at the time was the Iranian Revolution. I opened with questions about the changing *sensus communis* in Iran and detailed the contests for hegemony over social and moral reason among and within at least three major traditions of thought (a secular liberal understanding of a renewed phase in the century-long bour-

geois revolution, an Islamic understanding that democratic forms should always be under the hegemony of clerical interpretations, and a socialist understanding of class struggle first in the feudal agrarian system and increasingly in the industrial working classes). The arts played critical roles in these contests (Fischer 1980, 1989, 1993, 2003; Fischer and Abedi 1990b).

- 8 See Gadamer (1960) for a more detailed philosophical genealogy. Among the key steps are locating conventional wisdom in both sensory and rational sources; moving from these cognitive groundings in the “brain” or “mind” to more socially mediated understandings built up from shared experiences and emotions but subjected to skepticism, interrogation, and debate; and thereby generating evolving, changing, and competing moral norms and taste cultures.

## CHAPTER ONE. CHALLENGING ART AS CULTURAL SYSTEMS

This essay originally was presented as the Clifford Geertz Memorial Lecture, April 25, 2019, Princeton, New Jersey. It was subtitled “Light Shows, Shadow Plays, Pressure Points.”

- 1 For complementary accounts focused on museums and curators’ framings, see Tan B. and Yun (2017) and Yap (2016); and on performance, see Ade and Lim (2016).
- 2 Interview, June 8, 2016, tape 2. All direct quotations are from my interviews with Charles Lim, but I dispense here with marking each with a date. If there is a need, these can be recovered from my field notes, typed transcripts, or tapes.
- 3 A new Singapore Army promotional video released on July 30, 2019, shows the eighty-eight-hectare “SAFTI city,” or Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute training grounds for urban warfare, to be opened in phases from 2023. It is a video remarkably like the Lim spoof, made up as a high-tech video game.
- 4 See Sandi Tan, question-and-answer session, Brattle Theatre, September 17, 2018; Tan (2018d, at 18:00–23:00, 27:57); and Tan (2018a).

## CHAPTER TWO. SYNTHETIC REALISM

- 1 A shorter and earlier version of this chapter was written for, and appears in, Ute Mehta Bauer’s edited volume *Climates, Habitats, Environments* (2022), celebrating five years of exhibitions she has curated at the Nanyang Technical University of Singapore’s Center for Contemporary Art.
- 2 I think especially of Ionat Zurr and Oren Catts’s installations and artworks using tissue engineering both to demystify the technology and to teach us that even the simplest living matter requires a whole ecology of care, in partial criticism of the “engineering mindset”; also Tal Danino’s *Supernova* (2010), which hangs in the entry of MIT’s Koch Institute for Cancer Research, an over-