

Map of poetic spaces

Multi-dimensional project INSITU challenges our spatial assumptions with prose, visuals and music, report KELLY TAY and CHEAH UI-HOON

INSITU - a project that calls for the multi-disciplinary artistic mapping of 'poetic places' - could well be the first manifestation of 'content art' in Singapore, spearheaded by a newly set-up art outfit, Beautiful/Banal.



On-site artscape: David Letellier (above) will distil his experiences of Fort Canning Hill in his 'aural map' of the site

While most travellers document their expeditions in photographs or travel journals, the art project, INSITU, challenges artists to map their sojourns in far more abstract - yet arguably equally tangible - ways.

It's a project curated by erstwhile lawyer Audrey Koh and architect Budi Wijaya, who co-founded Beautiful/Banal in late 2009. The two have been running a design consultancy PlasticSoldierFactory (PSF) since 2002, whose clients include global corporations in the United States, the Middle East and Britain.

'We had wanted to produce and present art projects that are progressive, poetic and informative; focused on themes that are drawn from Asia, to be presented globally; and that will bring together artists of varying disciplines and nationalities,' says Koh.

INSITU is their first project, conceived last year. It stems from a desire to create what Koh calls 'artist travelogues' as a means to present 'poetic places in Asia'.

'Each map is real and imagined, truthful and subjective, private and public - all at the same time,' says Koh. The first edition of INSITU had already been launched, in an ancient village, Tenganan, in Bali. Now, they've brought the project here with the mapping of Fort Canning Hill.

Alternative maps

Each INSITU edition sees a group of multidisciplinary artists converging at a pre-selected site, and then branching off to create original artworks - known as artist maps - to represent and remember their experiences. Months later, artists reconvene to exhibit and perform their work. But what exactly constitutes a 'poetic place'? While Koh concedes that such places are hard to define, she notes that they are often rich in history.

'Poetic places are multi-layered - whether through history, beauty, or other qualities - and that allows for multiple access points to understanding the same place,' she says.

As such, Fort Canning Hill seemed like an obvious choice. In name alone, the site has operated under various monikers: Bukit Larangan, or Forbidden Hill; Government Hill; and Fort Canning Hill as we know it today.

The hill has also seen a dramatic evolution in terms of purpose and use. In the 14th century, it hosted the royal palace of ancient Malay rulers. When the British arrived in 1819, it served as a residence to several British governors, and even played home to Sir Stamford Raffles's bungalow. Forty-one years later, it was converted into an artillery fort with barracks, officers' quarters, and a hospital.

Today, the Hill has been transformed into a popular concert space, featuring rock bands one night, and ballet performances the next.

It is this multiplicitous identity that the artists hope to explore in their work, through an exhibition, a live performance and a book.

BUSINESS TIMES

Says Koh: 'With Google Maps and Google Earth today, we can map the world through just a few clicks, zooming in and out at will. INSITU challenges artists to encounter places in an unmediated fashion; particularly at an increasingly unfamiliar 1:1 scale.'

Four artists - French-born and Berlin-based David Letellier (also known as Kangding Ray); Japanese Taisuke Koyama, Indonesian-born and Singapore-based Boedi Widjaja; and Singaporean June Yap - traipsed up the Hill together in order to observe and perceive the site first-hand. They each will use different mediums of prose, photography, illustration and music to document their visits to Singapore's very own Fort Canning Hill.

Through stream-of-consciousness prose, Yap will create a textual map of the site, while noted photographer, Koyama, will provide a pictorial representation of his travels to the Hill. Widjaja (Budi Wijaya's artistic name) will put graphite to paper, drawing on his experience of the place - perhaps coming the closest to cartography as we know it. In stark contrast, Letellier, as an electronic music artist, will construct Fort Canning Hill as a soundscape, creating original compositions of his visit to and experience of the place.

These creations will culminate in an aural and visual performance at the Esplanade Recital Studio on May 14, where visuals from Koyama, Widjaja, and Yap's maps will be incorporated into a live performance of Letellier's compositions in the genre of minimalist electronica. One of the performance segments will see Widjaja constructing his drawing on stage, with his movements transmitted as sounds and fed live to Letellier, to be used real-time in the latter's aural performance.

Koh and Wijaya plan to have different editions of INSITU in various other Asian locations. They're also in talks with potential sponsors for the various editions. 'For now, it's an art project but we hope in time that it can become financially viable,' says Koh.

Poised for London date

As what they're doing is so new, how would they best describe it? 'Perhaps one way to label it is 'content art',' says Wijaya, as Beautiful/Banal's intention is to develop content which is artistic by nature and that doesn't need to be pigeonholed into a specific category. As a project, INSITU evidently shows that the presentation of a work is also flexible - with either a visual exhibition or a performance.

It might be a new concept here, but the imagination for it has quickly caught on, and through contacts they have, INSITU is already travelling places. The completed Bali project is slated for an exhibition in London in September, says Koh, adding that the Fort Canning Hill project might also be included in it.

Beautiful/Banal has another project in the works, but it plans to handle only a project or two a year. 'For now, we are focusing our energies on INSITU, taking a year to produce each edition, from locating a poetic place to commissioning artists to presenting the artworks as performances, exhibitions and publications,' says Koh, adding that they are being selective about their design projects while they focus on their budding art business.

The INSITU Fort Canning Hill exhibition runs from May 13 to June 5 at the Festival Village @ Esplanade Park. The performance takes place at the Esplanade Recital Studio on May 14, \$55, with tickets available from Sistic