

Session 2: Michael Lee

14 March 2020

Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery and
Koh Seow Chuan Concourse Gallery
National Gallery Singapore



In this conversation, Michael Lee reflects on his trajectory as an artist and cultural worker. He discusses with Seng Yu Jin the intersections between art and architecture in his practice, as well as his ground-up initiatives to benefit the Singapore arts community.

Lee's ways of working resonate with those of the seminal Alpha Gallery, established in 1971. Though it was primarily an art space, Alpha was established with a vision of bringing together different disciplines beyond art, such as architecture and design.

Alpha was part of a long tradition of artist-organisers providing crucial energy in stimulating their local arts ecology.

*In the spirit of celebrating Alpha's legacies, Lee was commissioned to create his work, *Lines, Planes, Volumes* (2019), for the exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)* [STV].*

Seng Yu Jin:

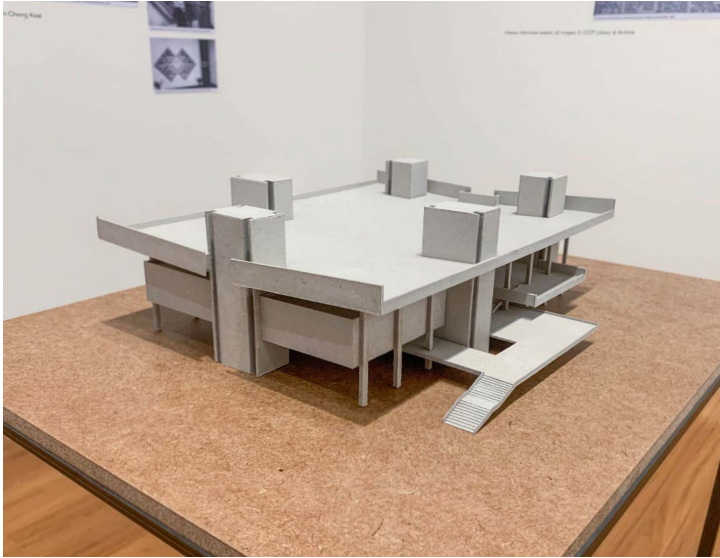
Michael, we worked with you to make three models of the Singapore Conference Hall, the Cultural Center of the Philippines [CCP] and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art [BIMA] for the STV exhibition. STV looks at the period of developmentalism in Southeast Asia, focusing on the three cities these architectural sites are located in: Singapore, Manila, and Bangkok. The exhibition also surveys the activities of Alpha Gallery in Singapore.

I should cover some background on Alpha Gallery first. It was very much the project of the architect Lim Chong Keat, who designed the Singapore Conference Hall. Alpha eventually became a site for artists to not only exhibit, but also think about the future of Singapore after independence in 1965.

Interestingly, similar activities were also taking place in CCP and BIMA. In this sense, architects were really at the forefront of imagining what the postcolonial futures of these three cities would be. Aside from Lim Chong Keat, STV also looks at Leandro V. Locsin, who was the architect of the CCP and Mom Tri [Mom Luang Tridhosyuth Devakul], who was the architect of BIMA.

These architects were very much polymaths because they had to think about acoustics when they built auditoriums for spaces. They commissioned artists to make large scale works for their buildings—like Khoo Sui Hoe's *Children of the Sun* for the Singapore Conference Hall. So, these architects worked with artists. They also worked with musicians, writers and intellectuals. Therefore, they were very much intermediaries, part of the act of bringing together different disciplines and practices.

In this spirit of bringing together different disciplines, we commissioned you, an artist, to create architectural models of the three sites. Perhaps we can start by talking a little bit more about your commission.



Singapore Conference Hall model from *Lines, Planes, Volumes* (2019), Michael Lee

Michael Lee:

I want to highlight two aspects of this work, *Lines, Planes, Volumes*. The first is my use of abstraction. My abstraction of the actual models would probably make the architects either very happy or very, very sad. [Laughs]

Instead of building the models on the same scale—which would mean the CCP model would be huge, and the BIMA model very small—I decided to make them on different scales but on the same plane. If you’ve been to Singapore Conference Hall, you would’ve realised the ground floor has tons of things happening. There are rooms and offices but I decided not to represent them because, for me, it’s too much. I also felt ignoring certain things would bring out the flavour of its “Southeast Asian aesthetic” a bit more.

If you go to the BIMA site in Bangkok—it’s already abandoned, so you have to climb in. If you go, you’ll realise there’s this irritating post holding up the cantilevered end of the roof. I thought, “This post has to go!” So, when I built

my model, I did it in my fantasy ideal way without the post. It was only after it was finished that the curators shared with me that this was actually the architect's original idea too. So, it seems like abstraction allowed me and the architect to share an affinity.

The second aspect of this work I want to share is that it allowed me to explore new formats in my work. You'll see there are three one-minute videos I captured off Google Earth. Google Earth is an application that you can download onto your laptop or iPad, to do a kind of virtual flyover of different places around the world. There's also a history function, where you can look at how sites have changed over time.

What's depicted in each video is actually the process that was required for my model making, mainly because I had varying information on the different buildings. Some of them have good plans, and I could also actually go onsite to the Conference Hall because it's near me. But for others like BIMA, you can't see much of it, because it's so overgrown with trees. Google Earth allowed me to almost flatten the real-world image of the sites and take their measurements.

When I shared this process with the curators, we became excited about how these videos might become a companion to, or even a part of, the work itself for this project.

SYJ:

Perhaps we can go back in time from this work, and you can share more about how art and architecture have intertwined throughout your practice.

ML:

Let's start with this graduation photo because I think, from this image, you get a sense of some of the things I did well and some of the things I did not. I managed to hold the graduation scroll at exactly 45 degrees. Both my feet are pointing to the front, but I didn't know how to smile at the same time and my gown wasn't balanced. I think that kind of

captures the way I've been living and making work: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. There are hits and misses. There are things I keep changing around, but there seem to be things that are recurrent too.



Michael Lee on graduation day, Sin Chiew Kindergarten (1978)

My reason for focusing on urban memory in my work is probably because I don't have a good memory myself. I feel, maybe through art, I can at least improve on this limitation. For me, fiction is also important. When we try to understand the past, we realise a lot of that past has been either interpreted by some authority figure, or it might actually be misremembered, or even totally forgotten. Some form of speculation is thus almost always called for.

I've been pretty much "Singapore born-bred-trained", except for two periods. Between 2007 and 2009, I was based in Hong Kong, and then, for a year from the middle of 2012, in Berlin. I think these experiences provided important exposure for me, in terms of training—looking at international

standards, cross-cultural experiences, but also ways of doing things independently.

I was privileged to go to school in a school bus, which allowed me to stare out at construction sites quite a lot. I find sites under construction fascinating because there is always a lot of building activity. The thing that is being built is ever-growing. Everything seems very open, transparent to view. But once a building is completed, it becomes a little selfish, like a lot of things are covered up and private. I think this fascination with the process of making, rather than the product, exists in my work in the background. While a lot of my work comprises finished projects, more and more, this fascination with the construction process comes into the picture. My relationship with architecture since my school bus days has always been as an onlooker—a pedestrian—rather than as one trained in it. My own training was in communications, with a major in video production.



Stud House (2003), Michael Lee

My very first architectural model, *Stud House* (2003), was made because I was invited to participate in a group show, *Sensitive Parts*, 2003 by curator Cleo Thang at what was then Plastique Kinetic Worms. The exhibition was centred around youth, relationships and sexuality, so I decided I would propose

a home design, where the residents of this home—a couple—would be able to continue living with each other without getting tired of each other. In this very “Le Corbusier-like” proposal, each half of the couple has his or her own space, but if they need to visit each other or even look at each other, they can see through the windows, or they can swim across the rooftop pool. This project was quite neurotic in a sense, in terms of how it tries to control a relationship from turning bad.

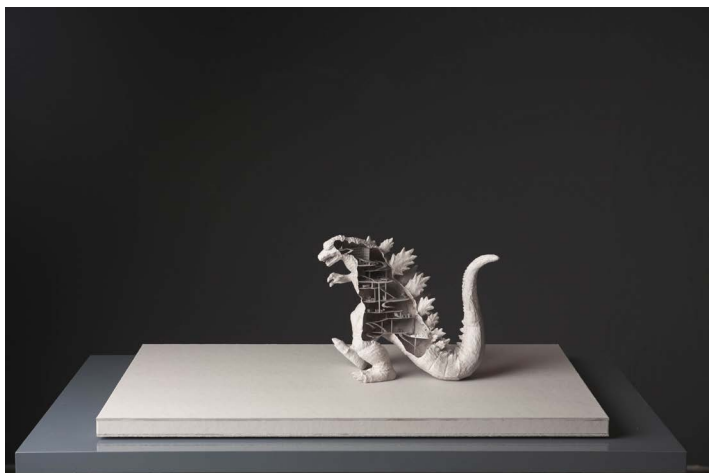
After the first model, I found a subject matter in architecture that allowed me to contribute to Singapore’s history in some way. I then made a series of models for the project, *City Planned: Tracing Monuments*, commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum [SAM]. At the time, there was an exhibition of a series of works from SAM’s collection held in the two curved galleries at SAM. There was a long walk between the two galleries. The curator wondered if I could do something there, and what I proposed was to fill the space progressively over the course of seven months with models. These were white paper models of buildings that were demolished or destroyed throughout Singapore’s modern history.

I was thinking about the concept of equity while making this series. During the course of my research, I found it very hard to find information from any single source. Floor plans from the past are distributed, depending on era, across the National Archives, the Urban Redevelopment Authority and individual architects. So, I wondered whether there could be a system where, whenever a building is demolished, the model of this building could be added to this space, so everything is in one place.

I’ve been quite lucky since to be commissioned by different institutions to make works that combine both architectural heritage and art heritage. This one from 2007—which you commissioned, Yu Jin, so thank you—*The \$100,000 Gallery of Art*, was a response to the then-unbuilt National



Plans from *The \$100,000 Gallery of Art* (2007), Michael Lee



God's Villa, from *Office Architect* (2011), Michael Lee

Art Gallery, designed by the architect and painter Dr Ho Kok Hoe. The plans were announced to the press with the artist's impression—but this manifestation was eventually shelved.

My fascination with heritage also landed with me conceiving this project, *Office Architect*. This was a retrospective exhibition for a fictional Singaporean architect, Mr. K. S. Wong. The exhibition had two levels, with 11 models on the first floor by this K.S. Wong—I envisioned him to be Kuching-born, though he worked a lot in Singapore and traveled around the world. There was a special model shaped like Godzilla on the second floor. I think what I was trying to do here was ask the question whether it's enough to trust experts like architectural historians to tell us, "Ah, these were our important talents, the important contributors to art and our urban scape." I decided I would take it as my project to thus imagine one totally on my own [Laughs]. I remember some architects responding, saying things like, "There are actually living architects who need to be documented and you cooked one up! What's the use of this?"

On this note of documentation and urban memory, the well-known temple ruins of Cambodia inspire my thinking about the current discussions around how we should deal with our post-war independence era buildings, such as Pearl Bank, which we have recently lost. The ruins inspire me to think about what we really want from architecturally significant buildings, like Pearl Bank. If we really want them to be used in a contemporary way, it might require a lot more work, including groundwork by activists, as well as a lot of resources from the government. But if we don't mind having them as structures to be looked at, maybe what we need is just the help of some seeds and plants, just like what has happened with these celebrated ruins, which are now beautifully overgrown.

Some final thoughts on this subject. I think what I have been doing for the past 19 years—from 2001 when I first started exhibiting in the art context—is just barging into conversations without any credibility [Laughs]. I'm not trained in architecture; my training was in communication, as I said. But maybe what I do is enter these conversations with interest and imagination, as well as a sense of equity in finding out who's being excluded from these conversations.

SYJ:

We've collaborated quite a few times now. I've been wondering—remember when we went to interview the late Dr Ho Kok Hoe for *The \$100,000 Gallery of Art*? That interview helped to develop the work. But you mentioned that with *Office Architect* and that imaginary architect, real architects came up to you to say, "Hey, there are so many living architects. Why make up a fictional one?" This is where I'm going: obviously there've been some moments of tension in the relationship between you as an artist and the architecture community, as well as moments of connection. Could you share more about your relationship with architects and how that has shaped your practice as an artist?

ML:

Yeah, it's interesting because, even though there've been moments of tension like you mentioned, there are also times when architects pat me on my shoulder for contributing to architectural heritage, when actually my focus could have been on something else entirely, like mathematical equations.

But I do remember having a fond afternoon talking to Dr Ho, especially when trying to get him to flesh out certain details beyond the facade drawing he did of the then-unbuilt National Art Gallery. I especially enjoyed those times where he was just rambling on and I couldn't make out what those architectural elements beyond the façade were. For me, that was like, *wah*. They were like seeds of abstract art.

Regarding my own personal relationship with architects, well, I still do wish to be able to make a built work one day. I'm looking for an architect to work with—maybe... [Laughs] All my architect friends say, "You don't want to come here into the architecture space. It's more fun where you are!" So, I guess I'm still looking.

SYJ:

In recent years, your practice has seen a key shift, growing to also include ground-up initiatives aimed at providing fellow cultural workers with additional resources to navigate the wider arts ecosystem and the real world beyond. This echoes the spirit of Alpha, as it adopted a model of collective organisation in the 1970s and 1980s. Could you speak more about this new direction in your work?

ML:

Aside from my interests in architecture, in the past few years, I've been observing the mood of Singapore's art scene. I think there is good reason to sometimes just stay as an observer for a time and not do anything, even if something looks like it needs to be done. I've been thinking as well about how to sustain creative independence.

The theme of embracing failure came into the picture in my practice in 2008, when I was in Hong Kong. That experience started with one semester of teaching in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. It was a very good experience—I was very well taken care of—but it also very quickly fell into ruin because the money ran out. For example, there was a moment when there wasn't enough money to pay for catalogues that were meant to be arriving the next week. But nothing stopped me *lah*. I just emailed people to either donate some money or buy some works. Two out of 40 people responded and that wasn't too bad, I think [Laughs].

So anyway, I started rethinking our faith in or fetish for success. In the first major exhibition I participated in, which

was *Guangzhou Triennial*, 2008, I decided I would make a project called *Consolations of Museology*. It consisted of ten books that console people for their weaknesses or failings.

My parents are in the F&B business, so our finances growing up were, like, up and down *lah*. To cut a long story short, I've been privileged to live in a three-storey terrace house, but also in a two-room public rental flat on Kim Tian Road, where Highline Residences now is. I've moved around a lot, including having overseas bases, but now I'm pretty much settled in the Tiong Bahru area at Bukit Ho Swee. The smallest house that we—four kids—tried to squeeze into was a rental flat. My parents had divorced and had to stay on their own, so the four kids had to band together. My dad arranged for us to stay in my uncle's rental flat. Somehow, during that time, it was possible to have a public rental flat and yet let it be empty, so we made use of that.

I stupidly went to renovate my first home studio in Hong Kong. At that time, I really didn't know what it meant to reinstate a property—rights of tenants and all that. I was just lucky that my landlord did not charge me money to return it to the original. Then in 2014, I finally did the thing that kids are expected to do, which is "adulthood", when I bought my own place. I feel this is significant, because it has kind of changed the way I work as an artist too.

Moneywise, when I was in university, that was my lowest point financially because, although I had an allowance from my dad, I was trying to not dip too much into his savings, so I was walking past "mama-shops" and just not buying things. Of course, after buying a house, money became an issue again. Normally, most people buy a house and then it just becomes part of their expenses. But I became too enthusiastic in trying to clear my mortgage, so my cash flow became quite *terok*. It was a big thing then.

In terms of my health, I hurt my back in 2008. I twisted it again in 2010, and then I hurt my leg when I was in Berlin in 2012.

All these things happening in my life—the ups and downs in terms of my housing situation, money, and then my physical health—alerted me to how I might have benefited from some additional knowledge. This was an important shift in the way I worked.

SYJ:

Could you tell us more about some key projects that resulted from this?



Hookup 1 (2015), Michael Lee

ML:

I'll start with this project called *Hookup*. It's a speed dating series between artists and other stakeholders. I feel it is a bit more open-ended than my previous works because, basically, my proposal was to do something in the Latent Spaces booth at Marina Bay Sands during *Art Stage* 2015. I organised eight artists to meet eight curators, to create some kind of opportunity for them to meet and talk shop. My reason for

doing so was I've experienced being on both sides of being included or excluded from such privileged encounters and I felt there might be people like me who might benefit from this kind of organizing. Inclusiveness was an important aspect. I had four of the artists' slots thrown to open calls. People like Luke Heng and Kanchana Gupta won a seat at the session from the lucky draw.

A clashing kind of aesthetic was quite important for me. One of my friends described *Hookup 1* as appearing quite surreal, because visitors to *Art Stage* were in suits and ties and looking at artwork and paying for artwork. But here you had people kind of just pulling colourful chairs together and seriously talking shop. I did a second iteration in August of that year in a laundry shop on Rowell Road.

In 2018, I ended up with a series of rooms I booked for seven weeks, for three hours each time. I had already paid the deposit, but I had to change venues in the end. So, I could either let it go empty or—you know, I decided that got room, must do things *lah*. That was the title of this project, *Got Room, Do Things*. It was a series of life skills workshops and talks—eight of them. Session two was on real estate and property for artists. Number three: tips on renovation and furnishing, shared by the interior designer and lecturer, Larry Seow, and the young artist, Divaagar.

I continued this strand of trying to fill in what schools couldn't provide formally in my recent book-making workshop with art teachers at Singapore Teachers Academy for the Arts. The workshop was titled *A Self-Care Guide: Teacher-Artists' Edition*. When we displayed the work we had made at the end of the four-day workshop, we titled the presentation *Never Say Earlier*. The key question there was about how to sustain the creative practice in a way that is manageable, but also fosters individual and community flourishing.



Got Room, Do Things (2018), Michael Lee

SYJ:

You've also started using social media as a way to coordinate resources for arts community. Could you speak a bit about this?

ML:

There is this Facebook group I started called *Money Lobangs*. I've started quite a few Facebook groups, but they have varying levels of success. I think there are reasons for that. So, for example, this one, *Ai Pi, Ai Qi, Cheap and Good Singapore*—the membership never grew beyond 75. But *Money Lobangs for Part-Time Educators and Other Creative Independents (SG)* is growing. Now it is at about 1,300 members. It was started in January 2018, which was about one year after I felt I was at the lowest point of my finances—meaning to say, I wouldn't have been able to do this when I was in the midst of struggling.

Part of the reason I felt it was time was that I had encountered articles, like one by *The Guardian* with the headline "Facing poverty, academics turns to sex work and sleeping in cars". Basically, it was describing the precariousness of being an adjunct professor and I'm one myself. I think another reason it works is there is a lot of information being shared. I saw that a holistic approach was quite important, in the sense that the members invited to join this group are not only part-timers or freelancers, but also full-time staff at arts institutions—like you, Yu Jin. Member, right? [Laughs] Because I truly believe that for sustainability of the whole scene, we need the understanding of those who have "9-5 jobs" as well. Light-touch too—I don't do too much here, because it's all community contribution.

SYJ:

To close, do you have any final thoughts about the state of the arts ecology in Singapore today?

ML:

I don't have too many conclusive remarks about the Singapore arts scene. I think that, like many other cultural scenes, the mood among the artist community here is very much regulated by structures and personalities. I mean, a good example of how the overall structure influences the mood would be how *Singapore Art Week* is pretty much a National Arts Council initiative to make sure we love art to a feverish pitch during one week at the start of each year. Sometimes, the mood can also be regulated or dependent on individual personalities—you may be aware of some tensions that happened among artists in the community.

But, really, at the end of the day, we're all just searching for our individual ways of sustaining our independent creativity.

Michael Lee is an artist, curator and organiser who researches urban memory and the “mood” of Singapore’s art scene. He transforms his observations into diagrams, models, environments, events or texts. He also organises activities and initiatives to benefit the local arts community.

Seng Yu Jin is Deputy Director (Curatorial & Research) at National Gallery Singapore.



This zine is an edited and abridged version of the original programme transcript.

All images courtesy of Michael Lee.

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* This version is exported in single pages for easy digital viewing. There is another version exported in double-page spreads with its pages reordered for booklet printing. You can find both at www.nationalgallery.sg

About the Series

The "Another Initial Impetus" zine series explores the legacies of the seminal Alpha Gallery and its place in a formative period of Singapore's cultural history. Sparked by a series of programmes organised in conjunction with the 2019 exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969 - 1989)* at National Gallery Singapore, each zine features individuals connected to the Alpha Gallery, as well as those who were inspired by or embody its spirit.



About Alpha Gallery

Yet another gallery: another four walls, another fifty pictures, another initial impetus. ALPHA is all this, too. And we believe, more as well.

—Arthur Yap, Introduction to the catalogue accompanying Alpha Gallery's inaugural exhibition, October 1971.

The Alpha Gallery was as an artist-run cooperative gallery established in Singapore in 1971. It adopted a model of collective organisation where artists could share resources, enter and exit freely and actively contribute to burgeoning debates surrounding artistic production in an era of new modernity and rapid economic progress in then newly independent Malaysia and Singapore. The pioneering architect Lim Chong Keat was a catalyst and staunch supporter of the Alpha Gallery. Lim was inspired by the Bauhaus concept of a totality of knowledge, where the boundaries between disciplines like art, architecture, craft and design were fluid. Alongside becoming one of the most significant venues in Singapore for exhibiting contemporary art from the region, Alpha would thus also eventually become a place for the exchange of ideas between artists, as well as writers, cultural policymakers and architects, among others. Many members of these networks had also studied or practiced abroad, returning home during a critical juncture in Singapore's history when it was considering urgent questions of postcolonial national identity. Against this backdrop, Alpha's global outlook inspired a generation of artists and public intellectuals who went on to shape various fields of practice in Singapore.

