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RECONSTRUCTING THE FRAGMENTS



Lee Ling Wei

My brother, stark naked from the bath with soap bubbles still clinging onto his skin, charged out of the billowing black smoke with us, and continued running in this state of affairs for the next five hundred meters till we reached a friend's house.¹

My mother was a four-year-old girl when the kampong she was living in caught fire. While she fled the fire scene immediately with her six siblings, my four-month pregnant grandmother stayed back to gather some of the family's belongings. Luckily, the only other thing that my grandmother saved besides their personal identification documents was a basket of clothes, which came in really handy for my uncle. However, these were also the only worldly possessions they had to set up home in their new Housing Development Board (HDB) flat.

The personal account above from my mother reflects a similar predicament shared by many families living in Singapore between 1958-64. During this period, an estimated 42,600 people were displaced from their kampongs due to fires which razed various parts of Singapore.² These kampong fires caused much devastation on both the human and economic scale, and engendered the transformation of our urban landscape. Despite the significant impact of the kampong fires, they have seldom been wholly represented in historical accounts.

Similarly, there is scarce documentation on the urban transition from kampongs to modern public housing in our historical narratives, which are largely focused on the success story of the nation's urban reinvention – from a territory infested with overcrowded squatter settlements (the official term for kampongs) to a terrain of smart, modern, high-rise housing. The transition phase has been largely absent from this narrative due to the speed of development of the urban landscape. This rapid transformation of the landscape has, in many instances, resulted in the obliteration of all physical traces of former sites and events before they were properly documented. Thus, historical discourse has been able to capture and represent this period only with great difficulty.

LEFT:
Kampong Khoo Chye, 2009
Lee Lingwei

digital print on photographic paper
photograph: Najeeb Rahmat

RIGHT:
Bukit Ho Swee, 2009

digital print on photographic paper
Photograph: Najeeb Rahmat

The sites of the kampong fires mapped out in *Reconstructing the Fragments* exemplify the above condition. After the fires, rapid development of low cost housing on the fire sites to re-house the displaced resulted in the erasure of all traces of the fires. This phenomena is illustrated by the Kampong Koo Chai (Chye) Fire in April 1958, the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire in February 1959, the Bukit Ban Kee Fire in March 1963, the Pulau Minyak Fire in November 1964, the Bukit Ho Swee Fire in May 1961 respectively. In these instances, new blocks of flats sprung up from the fire sites within a few months, removing every remnant of the kampongs scarred by fire.

Reconstructing the Fragments is thus an illusory play of image and context, site and situation; a re-deployment of events that seemingly belie the spectators' expectation of what constitutes the 'true' circumstances leading up to and following the kampong fires. The word fragment is used to describe historical sources that present "a contrary [to] the limits of scientific history and the scientific historian's search for truth."³ These fragments are minute trajectories which embody the fractures and divisions that have been excluded from historical narratives. They take the form of anecdotes, folktales and personal narratives. *Fragment* also refers to the incomplete physical traces of the past, which still remain in the present.

The most tangible fragments that exist today of the kampong fires are the physical sites on which they occurred. Each of the photographs in the series is embedded with a "detail," which is the manifestation of a second set of fragments - the anecdote.⁴ The "detail" serves to defamiliarize the image and unsettle the spectator. In doing so, the "detail" enables the photograph to "take the spectator outside its frame" and evokes "a kind of subtle beyond ... as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see."⁵ It triggers in the spectator a whole imagination external to the content of the photograph, which is animated in the spectator's mind beyond the scene captured on film.

The discursive function of the "detail" is accentuated by another set of fragments - a collection of texts which are employed as part of the artwork to emphasize the contextual meaning of the photographs. The texts presented are facts extracted from various sources. With the insertion of these texts, the photographs are situated as part of a social discourse which enrich the photographic sequence.

Reconstructing the Fragments, then, presents lived experience as inspiration. It operates as alternative documentation of context-driven pasts; it provokes the audience, teasing almost, engaging the margins seemingly repressed from regimented truths of nation and memory.

1 Interview with informant. Singapore, 5 February 2009.

2 Estimate is author's own. For further reference please see: 'Blaze Death Toll Up', *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1958, p.1; 'Three Hour Blaze Destroys Kampong Tiong Bahru: 12,000 Lose Homes', *The Straits Times*, February 14 1959, p.1; 'Premier Lee Assures Fire Victims: Homes For All of You Soon', *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1961, p.1; 'Huts of 3,000 Go Up in Flames', *The Straits Times*, 9 March 1963, p.1; 'Attap Colony in Kallang Basin Totally Wiped Out', *The Straits Times*, 5 November 1964, p.1.

3 Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, p.39.

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hall and Wang, 1981, p. 42. Barthes defines the "detail" as the punctum, the presence of which "pricks" him and changes his reading of the photograph. The photograph is then marked in his eyes with a higher value.

5 Ibid., p.59.