

A R T I S T   A S

# CURATOR



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BACHELOR OF FINE  
ARTS

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### Introduction

John Leong (b. 1967) is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice explores the human condition, examining themes of gender, identity, and memory through a range of materials and perspectives. Driven by curiosity and a passion for discovery, he blends personal narratives with cultural insights drawn from his extensive travels and life experiences, creating intricate tapestries of interconnected stories. Through his art, John aims to produce thought-provoking works that challenge viewers and inspire new ways of seeing the world.

This Zine chronicles John's learning experience in his "Artist as Curator" studio elective in his Bachelors of Fine Arts programme at LaSalle College of the Arts and his participation in the making of the annual One Night Only (ONO) event.

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# What Curator Means To Me

Reflecting on my own understanding of the curator's role, I have participated in several exhibitions since becoming a full time artist in 2021. Many of these shows resembled fairs, where the primary focus was on selling artworks, rather than institutional exhibitions aimed at educating the public or presenting curated narratives.

Seng Yu Jin's reading highlighted the significance of curatorial text in documenting the exhibition discourse, both for its historicity as well as how it contributes to the understanding of artistic practices of the region. I was particularly struck by how the first exhibition held by SAM in 1996 titled "Modernity and Beyond" explored themes such as nationalism, modernity, mythology, and urbanization which were some of the key concerns of society of that era. She also quoted T.K. Sabapathy to emphasize that the meaning of "beyond" alluded to a future where artists "approach the future not with a determination to recohore around a long-lost identity, but with a feeling that that identity (along with the identity of the colonizer) is a thing of the past, and that the future holds new, more interesting identities for all" ("Introduction", Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art, p7, 1996).

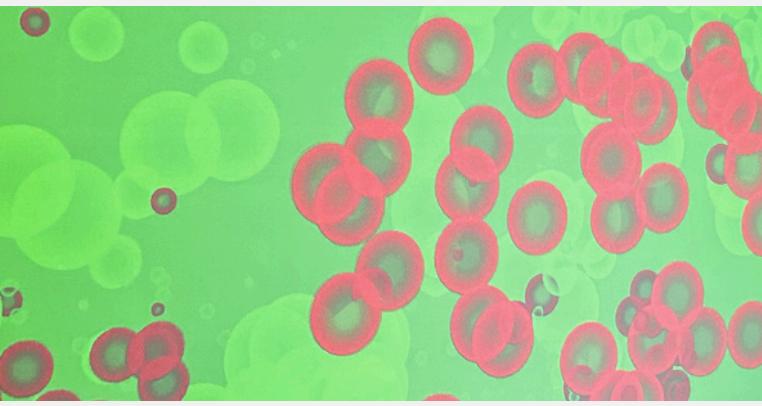


In the first week of the semester, I attended three exhibitions with diverse objectives and audiences:

## A Gathering of Tomorrow (26 Aug 2024)

This exhibition took place at Starch.sg which was an independent and curated by Gillian Daniel and Kristine Tan. It featured works from Southeast Asian artists, exploring themes of authorship and historical entanglement with land, post-humanism, and intersectional future. Gillian conducted insightful tours including the curatorial process. She noted that the curation process spanned one and half years, during which she actively engaged with the artists and the theme evolved over time. The artists were selected from those she had some personal contact with, from shows she had attended and from her research. This exhibition is relevant to the ONO as it addresses temporal themes and sound art.

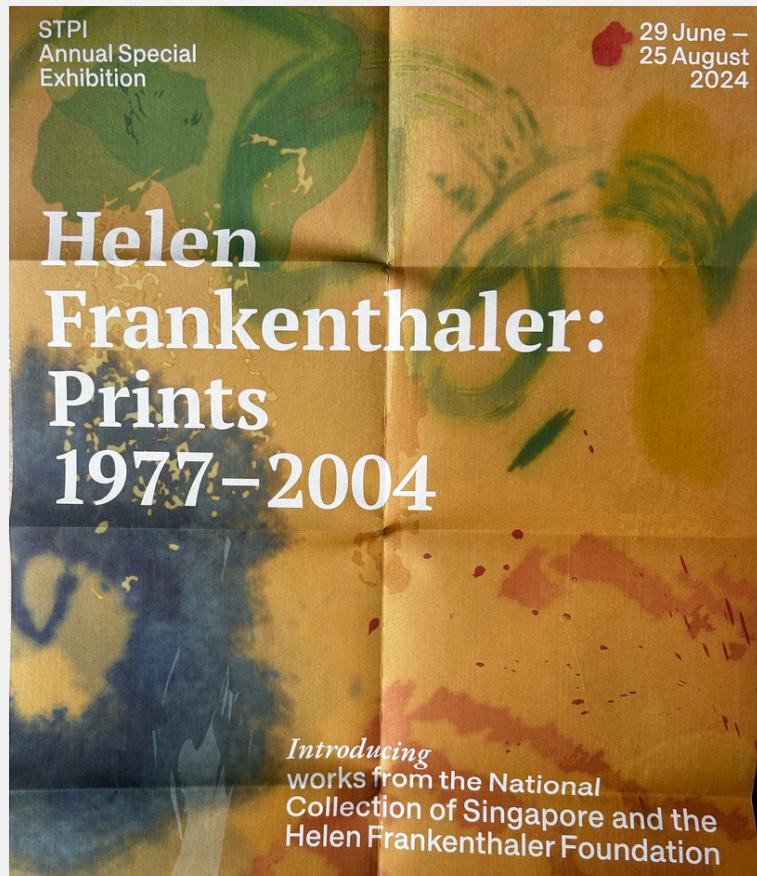
In terms of curatorial design which I also noted for ONO, the art pieces were well spaced out to optimize the use of the entire gallery. The brochure consisted of two A4 sheets which were heavier paper (150 to 200 g) printed on both sides and folded in half. It contained the curatorial theme, floor plan, artists descriptions and bios, and a QR code linked to a digital version of the brochure.



### Alternative Ecology: Redistributing the Sensible (15 Aug 2024)

The exhibition was held at the Brother Joseph McNally Gallery. The purpose of the exhibition was to promote the launch of the MA Arts and Ecology program, targeting potential students and educators. As such, an area at the front of the gallery was identified for a mobile rostrum for speeches by the VIP and dean during the opening event. The curatorial statement was prominently displayed at the entrance for visibility. The space was divided into two main areas; one for the event's official opening and the back section to showcase the dynamic digital art which used the price movement data as inputs which was projected onto the walls.

A six-page handout which consisted of one A3 sheet and one A4 sheet printed on both sides were given out. It included a floor plan, artwork descriptions, artists statements and bios. QR codes linked to an online brochure on the LaSalle website were also provided in the brochure. These are useful tips for the ONO.



### Helen Frankenthaler: 1977-2004 (26 Aug 2024)

Held at STPI, this exhibition showcased Helen Frankenthaler's artistic talent and printmaking techniques. The show was mainly educational in nature and the curator highlighted her skills through a dedicated section in the spacious gallery. The show was targeted at the general art loving public with an interest in abstraction and printmaking techniques.

The exhibition pamphlet was beautifully designed with some details of Helen's work in the background. It was printed on a double-sided sheet to provide educational content. This method could potentially help to reduce printing cost and is an idea that could be adopted in the ONO collaterals.



# Designing My Curatorial Practice

In week four we discussed the fundamental aspects of exhibition-making, including project management and event planning. Key learning points included aligning artistic vision with audience engagement, how the artworks interact with the viewer influences their interpretation of the works.

Besides designing and producing the exhibition there are many other tasks that the curator must manage including managing the relationship with the artists, marketing and publicity, finance management and logistics. Our class was divided into four teams which included project management, design, curatorial writing and logistics. I joined the logistics team together with Khushi and Daisy. We discussed key activities and tasks our team was responsible for.

Our team also considered logistics for the ONO, including exhibition spaces and contingency plans for inclement weather. We mapped out a sheltered route from the MRT station to the Winstedt campus entrance.

The entire team collaborated closely throughout the ONO development. With Hazel's assistance, we selected locations for students' artworks by surveying the grounds together. The logistics team drafted visual guides to help students identify display areas.

These experiences are aligned with my curatorial practice as I would like to focus on exhibition production particularly space design and activation. Being part of the ONO logistics team allowed me to experiment with this.

In week five of the semester, architect and artist Dr Wong Zi Hao shared his insights on exhibition design and space activation. He illustrated how he displayed his works linearly for his PhD viva while recontextualizing them for public engagement at Art Outreach gallery.



# Understanding of the Principles of Being an Artist, Curator and Artist/Curator

One takeaway from week two's lecture was the idea that institutions like museums were focused on public art while independent galleries were commercially driven. Both significantly influenced what art received attention or were exhibited in those spaces. Independent artist-run spaces like Ruangrupa and Gudart have emerged as viable alternatives.

I was moved by Lucy Steeds, who in her paper titled *Contemporary Exhibitions: Art at Large in the World*, contends that contemporary art exhibitions have a role to play in shaping artistic discourse. Besides serving as a platform for critical engagement and cultural negotiation, exhibitions are dynamic events that include diverse contributions from artists, curators and audiences. I was struck by the idea that exhibitions have the enormous potential to shape the narratives, beliefs, and culture of society.

As curators have a key role in the formation of the themes of exhibitions they have the ability to shape and influence society. While the ONO event is for only one night, it still has the potential to make an impact on Singaporean society. Below are two recent exhibitions which have inspired me to explore the enormous potential of exhibition making.



## Off The Wall Project (14 Sep 2024)

I volunteered as a gallery sitter at the Art Outreached during the Off The Wall Project, where three artists created murals on adjacent walls. Observing firsthand how space was activated was enlightening; I noted that the curatorial theme was prominently displayed at the gallery entrance while the artist's statements were positioned facing the studio.

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## SOUP Restaged (18 Aug 2024)

The Soup Restaged event by Critical Craft Collective and Tenthause at SAM's residency at Distripark. Both Critical Craft Collective and Tenthause are artist collectives and both Adeline Kueh and Ebba Moi, who were themselves artists, curated the show. The theme of the show centered around the concept of comfort that is embodied in the idea of "soup".

The space was divided such that the respective artists could display their works and engage in discourse and share ideas with their visitors. Video installation and documentation of the artist's works were projected onto the back wall in the center of the room providing the visitor with visual references to their ideas. For this event the artist bio and description of artwork of each of the artists were printed on double sided A4 sheets which were stapled together.



## Desiring Sanctuary (27 Sep 2024)

Curated by Regina DeRozario at Starch.sg, this exhibition showcased works by Dylan Chan and Ezzam Rahman. Regina is herself an artist and in this show she detailed her curatorial process from conception to execution, from the formulation of the curatorial to the design of the space. She discussed how the website would enhance visibility and document the show.

A price list was available on-site however they opted not to display artist's bios or artwork titles on the walls, relying solely on their website [www.desiringsanctuary.com](http://www.desiringsanctuary.com) for information. The website contains the curatorial theme, floorplan and artworks layout, bio of both artist and the curator as well as the details and description of all the artworks. They had considered the possibility that this event could be expanded to tour other countries. Regina shared her unsuccessful efforts in trying to obtain funding for the event.

The artists then elaborated on the concepts behind some of their works. Ezzam explained that his works utilized many objects from his home which helped to ease or reduce pain like poppers, muscle ointments, plaster for muscle aches, knee guards, valium, pain killers and other such pills. Besides activating the walls, this exhibition demonstrated how the floor and stairs could also be activated and this was valuable learning for me in my curatorial practice for ONO.



# Learning Points From One Night Only 2024 - It's About Time

To come up with the Sub-theme of the One Night Only, I was inspired by several exhibitions including Haven't Seen You Lately by Ian Woo, Staring Into Voids and Blues by Wei Leng Tay and Kim Lim's retrospective at the National Gallery.

## Haven't Seen You Lately (31 Aug 2024)

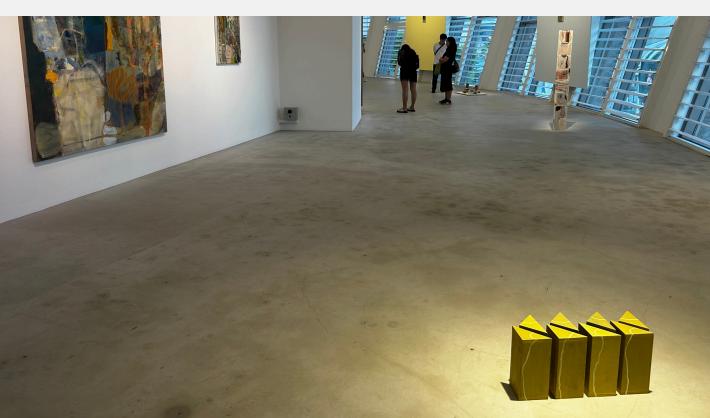
The exhibition of Ian Woo's works was held at the Jendela at the Esplanade which is a not for profit organization. Ian conducted a guided tour in which he explained how he responded to the curatorial theme and used the walls and windows of the gallery in evoking memory and observing the passage of time. The Esplanade's quarterly publication of visual arts exhibitions contained an interview between curator Lu XiaoHui and Ian Wu. It provided insight into Ian's artistic and thinking process in the making of his works and how it related to time.

The shape of the space was not a regular square but long and curved. On one side, the open windows overlooking the Marina Bay reservoir and the other were plain flat walls. The artworks display design took full advantage of the space and natural lighting. Upon entering the space one could experience a feeling of openness owing to the placement of the items. Despite the void spaces there was a feeling of continuity in the flow and connection between the pieces.



Ian also provided an in-person guided tour and elaborated further on his thinking and inspiration behind the works and how they were displayed in the space. The spaces between the works gave the viewer room to appreciate both the interior and the exterior through the windows. It also meant that the viewer had to take time to move from one work to the other thereby giving a sense of rhythm and appreciation for the passing of time. *My favorite things* sitting on the floor across from the quadriptych created a dialogue between the pieces and evoking the curiosity of the viewer to stoop or squat down to take a closer look at the objects, from there they could take in a different perspective of the space.

In this exhibition, the passing of time was also signaled by the change in light caused by earth's physical movement around the sun. This physicality and rhythm of change was a key inspiration for the sub-theme of the logistics team for the ONO - Rooted Rhythms.



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## Staring Into Voids and Blues (14 Sep 2024)

The exhibition by Tay Wei Leng was held at the Yeo Workshop which is an independent for-profit gallery. Her works explore images in the passing of time and its impact on our memories. The passing of time was mediated through the use of photographs and images, where she explored the idea of displacement in her reflection of family relationships in her lived history. She also used photographs of postcards which had faded through time and had date stamps on them to explore themes of the passing of time, memory and shared history. This physical aspect of temporality could also be explored within the sub-theme of ONO. The details of the theme, description of the artworks and floor plan were condensed into two pages of an A4 size sheet.



## Kim Lim. The Space Between. A Retrospective (28 Sep 2024)

The Kim Lim exhibition at the National Gallery of Singapore curated by Adele Tan and Jolene Loh, provides an excellent benchmark for curatorial practices. I attended the guided tour which was conducted by Kim Lim's two sons, Alex and Johnny, and they provided valuable insight into her life and their heartfelt firsthand experience of her as their mother and artist.

The positioning of each of the artworks allowed for spaces in between the works which gave the visitors time to appreciate each piece. The lighting was also strategically placed to accentuate each of the pieces. The National Gallery website contained comprehensive information about the event as well as the general floor plan and each piece of work had an accompanying title and description on the wall.

The works were arranged by chronological flow where one could trace the development of her style through time as well as the various phases in her life. This was also supported by a clearly laid out artist's timeline followed by a 20 minute video at the end of the exhibition which provided viewers with an excellent overview of her life as an artist. One of the key learning points from this show that is relevant for the ONO was that the passing of time could be portrayed through the observation of the evolution of one's artistic practice as well as the ebb and flow of life's rhythm.

## Key Takeaway From Observation of Curatorial Practice of Exhibitions

My visits to the various exhibitions the last few months has inspired me to aspire to produce exhibitions of similarly high quality. Exhibition spaces can serve as a platform for communicating ideas and sharing different points of views. It can be used to create moments where discourse could happen which could shape narratives, beliefs and influence societies. Exhibitions not only bring together works of art, but people with diverse cultures and backgrounds could share thoughts and ideas which may have impactful and lasting real world effects.



### What I learned from process of curating the theme and being in charge of Logistics

Through Shireen's guidance, it was decided that each of the teams would curate art works for a sub theme based on the overall theme of "It's About Time". We would also allow the students to display their works outside of the classrooms and the works of each sub theme did not have to be placed together. This meant that the spaces available for displaying the works could be quite spread out and wayfinding aides would be needed for visitors to find their way around the ground to appreciate all the artworks.

Being in the logistics team, I had the opportunity to work with Daisy and Khushi in the logistics team as well as the Project Management team to decide on the refreshments for the event. I learned that it was necessary to seek everyone's inputs as each of us may have a different perspective as well as to gain consensus. The logistics team worked on the presentation together to complete the rainy-day plans and finalized the curatorial theme together. We also worked together to list the pedestals available as well as the equipment list and liaised with LaSalle lecturers, facilities and ICT to secure them for the students.

### Collective Strengths of the group/team and Areas for Improvement

As in any other team-based activity where people have to interact with each other to achieve an objective there would undoubtedly be disagreements or differences in opinion. The key is to communicate and remain open and treat each other with respect and kindness. We formed a Whatsapp group and communicated with each other every step of the way.

The area for improvement for me is learning to delegate work and responsibility to the rest of the team. Even though some tasks may seem simple or straightforward for me, they may be new and challenging for others. I should therefore empower and engage the team members and delegate tasks to them so that they could learn from the experience.

During the preparation for the event I took a leadership role in the logistics group. I met with the facilities team to confirm what their lighting plan had been in previous year's events. I visited the school after sun down and identified areas which needed more lighting and areas where there could be the risk of people tripping and falling. I'm pleased that the Facilities team accepted my feedback and took action to trim down the bushes and rectify the hazards.



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Leading up to the ONO I worked with the Facilities team to install powerpoints where they were required by the students. I also coordinated with the ICT team to secure projectors which were required by students and collected them when the event ended. The logistics team prepared paint and rollers for students who wanted to paint their walls or pedestals and procured additional battery operated lighting for students whose works were located at corridor spaces where the lighting was inadequate.

As some of the classrooms were used in the exhibition it was necessary to relocate the furniture. I garnered the support of volunteers to help in the move. I also liaised with the contractors to move furniture and set up partitions, as well as the facilities team on setting up the electrical power supply, lighting and supplying ladders for the set up.



## Curatorial's Tour

In preparation for the curator's tour for the sub-theme of Rooted Rhythm, I went to each of the artworks when they had been set up and studied the works and spoke with many of the artists to hear first hand their description of the works. I found that the artist's in-person description was often more insightful than the written description as I could ask them more questions regarding their artistic practice, process and inspiration for their works.



## Key Challenges of Curatorial Practice in One Night Only

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the ONO was the unexpected changes which occurred last minute. In less than a week to the event, we were informed by facilities that additional fire safety considerations needed to be taken. This required some of the works at the stairwells to be relocated. The next last minute change occurred when it was decided that the artworks which were located outside of the buildings should be relocated to the corridors or within the classrooms as the probability of rain was quite high and some of the works required electrical equipment as part of the display. The key learning point from this experience was that unexpected events beyond the control of the curators do occur and we must be prepared to deal with such circumstances, and be flexible and agile to adapt to last minute changes.