

A Larger Reality

Dr Susie Lingham

Writer, Artist, Educator

In this essay, Dr Susie Lingham delves into interdisciplinary creative methodologies in different parts of the world that exercise reflective mediation amid and post-crisis.

Two of [Oppenheimer's] influences were John Donne and the Hindu scripture "Bhagavad-Gita." Oppenheimer recalled both during the Trinity test. [...] Most notably, upon seeing the Trinity detonation, Oppenheimer was said to have recalled the line, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." (Templeton 2021)

What is the role and scope of the arts and creative practice in any society, particularly in times of conflict, of whatever ilk? The arts—nice to have, but not necessary? When the pandemic hit in 2020, the arts—poetry, music, film, stories, creative work, and "maker" culture as a whole—contrary to the pragmatic "common sense" that immediately categorised it as "non-essential" work, is what sustained a sense of relative well-being in lockdown. In the long view, it is undeniable that wars have been fought to regain or preserve artistic and cultural expression and heritage. Paradoxically, the arts and culture have always been part of the arsenal of psychological defence and underpin national identity in particular.

This short essay is a brief reflection on interdisciplinary creative methodologies in different parts of the world that exercise the art of reflective mediation amid and post-conflict, spanning architecture, agriculture, archival and curatorial work, and poetry—all in the mode of socially engaged creative practice, experience, and expression.

War and poetry: conscience catalyst

Poetry was J. Robert Oppenheimer's ballast in the storms of atom bomb-building and the apparent inescapable responsibilities of war for the "greater good". It is unnerving to realise that the code name *Trinity*, for the first detonation of a nuclear weapon, was inspired by John Donne's poem "Batter my heart, three person'd God", a poem of subjugation and surrender to divine forces larger than the poet's own will. Oppenheimer also identified with Arjuna, the conflicted prince character in the Indian epic, who, wrestling with the inevitability of war, took counsel with his charioteer Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu. The divine advice complicates any notion of what constitutes responsible or ethical action and was an ironic rebuke on the hubris of thinking any mere individual has agency against complex forces, or *take the blame even*, for being the singular cause of any particular chain of effects.

Still, even as the ideal of free will has been increasingly questioned in recent scientific research, this iconic literary moment must give us pause for thought—while perhaps not being able to make the claim of being the cause per se, art can be, and is the catalyst of causes and pauses. In the military coup and assault on civilians in Myanmar this year, it was the poets who used their words in resistance against the junta's harsh measures at the cost of their own lives, like the poet Khet Thi, tragically killed by the junta. "There is so much crime against humanity [in Myanmar]. Poets in such situations live with tears in every single breath", one poet, who asked to be anonymous for security reasons, told Agence France Presse. "Our poems are hordes of screaming children." Still grieving, their voices are being heard

around the world, as Ko Ko Thett, a poet based in the UK, works to translate these Myanmar poets' verses (Martin 2021). As Ursula Le Guin said:

Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in [...] the art of words (Le Guin 2014).

War, given the contradictions of human nature, may be inevitable, even obligatory—until *all* knowledge, stories and cultural heritage become a matter of humanity's *shared legacies*, and not merely an expression of territorial, geopolitical, national, or ethnic contesting identities, or a demonstration of power and superiority over any Other. Notably, in the aftermath of the theatre of war, there is an equally irrepressible catalytic force to rebuild in the name of peace.

War and architecture: urban park peace- building

Culture is often perceived to be the antithesis of war and destruction, everything good and valuable, to be protected from the ravages of war. And yet, culture has been the cause of wars—ironically, like most aspects of power, culture is the proverbial *pharmakon*. The clash of cultures has resulted in incalculable loss and devastation of lives and cultures across millennia of human experience. There are forces much larger than the intentions of individuals, or individual nations, or allied—often contingently—nations. The power of art—its twin realities of beauty, and truth, not necessarily in tandem—has always been yoked to the projections of power and wealth. As I observed elsewhere, "...the beautiful work of art

has been used variously as ruse, muse and midwife for political intention and power throughout history, and a proxy for abstract relations of power that have real-life influence on the individual and society at large" (Lingham 2021).

Architecture has indeed been an instance of the often loud projections of power and "civilization" par excellence, and not always benign in its presence and intentions. It is a specific twist that the Scottish architect Frazer Macdonald Hay focuses on—to literally transform buildings built for, or appropriated to the use of, or destroyed by war, into what he calls "ex-combatants", or peace buildings. An ex-Royal Air Force search and rescue worker in his youth, Hay was Director of Glasgow School of Art, Singapore (2013-2015), and is now founder of Uniform November, a consultancy focusing on place and peacebuilding.

Hay most recently worked on an urban park design in West Mosul, Iraq, in the Al-Jamhoria area of the city, a collaboration between The Halo Trust, United Nations Mine Action Service, and humanitarian organisation Al-Ghad. Between 2013-2017, ISIS seized Mosul, and the park, one of its oldest and most significant, had been used by ISIS to "store weapons, bombs and improvised explosive devices, 'which spread panic, fear and anxiety in the hearts of the people'" (Hay 2021). Insightfully, Hay states:

...it is important to develop the park as an acknowledgement of the past violence without venturing down the path of memorialisation thus provoking antagonistic narratives of the victim and perpetrator. This park should be about resilience and trust-building and social cohesion whilst acknowledging its ruin and past use. By using as much of its original materials and layering the new and old construction giving the park an easily

read narrative of past social positives before violence, destruction during the conflict, and a recovery built on the idea that in using the past, communities can create an even stronger, more peaceful future (Hay 2021, 9).

On 15 April 2021, Ramu Damodaran, Chief, United Nations Academic Impact initiative and Deputy Director for Partnership and Public Engagement in the United Nations, mentioned Hay’s project at the conference *Why We Care?*:

The United Nations hosted a powerful virtual exhibit [...] which, among other locations, portrayed demining efforts in Iraq which hosts a project financed by the United Nations Mine Action Service where Frazer Macdonald Hay has designed ‘Al Jamhorya Park’ in response to HALO’s progressive ‘Explosive Hazard Risk Mitigation and Education’ initiative in the region and the valuable research done in the community by HALO and Al Ghad. The layout of the park has been informed by the surrounding built environment, with an emphasis on re-use, shade, light, access, and interaction. The park will layer the site’s past so that new and old can be read, thus offering recognition and acknowledging the past and present social challenges whilst embracing an engaging narrative of reconciliation and growth.

The link Frazer makes between demining and education was vividly captured almost a quarter of a century ago by the “Schools De-Mining Schools” project, sponsored in part by the United Nations. “When I tell people that schoolyards are mined, their reaction is ‘Why? That’s stupid.’ But you want to intimidate and control the population,” said Abouali Farmanfarmanian, the then coordinator of the CyberSchoolbus, a United Nations educational programme (and a cherished friend.) “It’s basically a weapon of terror,” he said (Damodaran 2021).

Not without challenges—on several fronts—before, during and post construction, the West Mosul Park project is a catalytic, yet sensitive, emotionally managed architectural work, and not merely utilitarian. Acknowledgment of lived experiences, negative and positive, allows the larger realities of complex socio-cultural dimensions of specific communities, in particular traumatised war-torn communities, to renew and evolve. Importantly, this is also landscape conservation architecture at work, and nature has been increasingly recognised as being at the heart of our sense of place in the world. This redesigned and rebuilt park becomes the iconic site for both remembering and healing of rifts, providing safe ground outdoors that “offers a sense of belonging, identity and social reassurance.” (Hay 2021, 9)



Figure 1. Visual tryptic representing the park’s pre-conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding character. Image courtesy of Frazer Macdonald Hay.

Socially engaged art and environmental stewardship: *sugar vs the reef?*

[A]cknowledging that human interactions of all kinds are an integral part of the work: [t]his is central to the methodology of the practice. Trust is built through slowly evolving conversations (Ihle 2022, 149).

Contemporary art is unique because it has the flexibility to adopt methodologies outside its own “assigned” scope, and mediates between different disciplines and communities. This new power of art is gaining momentum in our time, as exemplified by Australian artist Lucas Ihle, who “works at the intersection of socially engaged art, agriculture, and environmental stewardship. Through long-term projects embedded in communities, he activates hidden networks of association between things and people to reveal histories of inattention to place.” (Ihle 2022, 147)

Climate change is certainly a huge issue that cannot be ignored: its consequences are undeniable. There is a sense of “war” between climate activists, climate change deniers, and larger organisations who stand to lose much with change that is not on their terms. Critically, farming is a big part of the complexity as it escalates. There is nothing so vital as food production. A multi-layered project with extensions, *Sugar vs the Reef?*, created in collaboration with fellow artist Kim Williams, began with an invitation from retired farmer and member of the Local Marine

Advisory Committee of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, John Sweet. Having heard of Ihle’s earlier work on regenerative agriculture and water management as a form of land art (Ihle and Milliss, 2011–2014), Sweet proposed “an artist-farmer collaboration exploring the relationship between sugar cane farming and the plight of the Great Barrier Reef” (Ihle 2022, 148). This started officially, after initial conversations in 2014, in August 2016 in Mackay, one of Queensland’s “sugar cities”, a considerable distance from where Ihle lives and works in Wollongong. It involved learning about the coastal sugar cane industry from the mid-1800s in the context of psychologically entangled Aboriginal and colonial histories, building connections between farmers and Indigenous communities, and “curating” a context to usher in the idea of regenerative soil stewardship instead of aggressive, chemically-driven high yields that ultimately have negative impact on the soil and the health of the Great Barrier Reef through pollutants. The project was extended as a “demonstration farm”—“where experimental agricultural systems are showcased for the public and other farmers” (Ihle 2022, 154)—at *The Watershed Land Art Project* in Mackay Regional Botanic Garden, and in an exhibition on the collaborative experience in Artspace Mackay, a major contemporary art gallery.

The word “war” is certainly charged, and continues to power polarised positioning in climate change issues, and is an inevitable trigger for reactive activism. Emotions run high when people *care* about things, and cannot bear indefinitely the often futile efforts to effect urgent change, especially when in conversation with the powers that be. Seeing the other side as enemy becomes a default. Coming from their social engagement, literally on the ground, Ihle and Williams, as

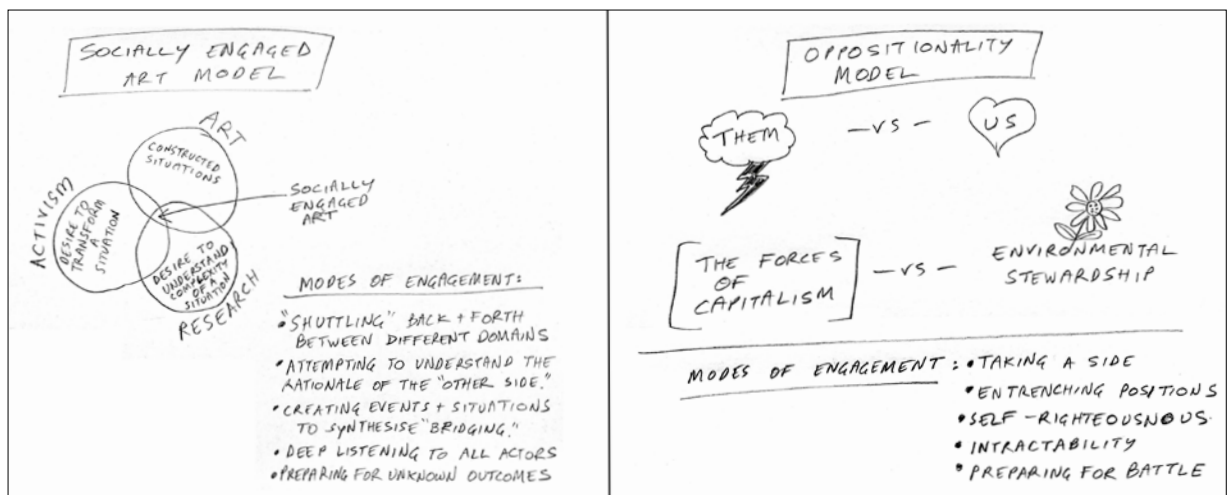
mediating artists, seek other modes that do not deepen the rift between “opposing sides”: coastal sugar cane farmers versus the activists who want to protect the Great Barrier Reef at all costs. On this sense of being “embattled”, Ihlein states, in an email conversation with me:

I am against the idea of militarisation. So, the idea of a war on climate change is not in my toolbox. In the work that we did with the sugar cane farmers, the process is much more slow and respectful. We even sat down with the right wing climate change denying member of parliament—something that the local activist conservation group could not do, because they had already burned their bridges with him—in other words, because they saw him as the enemy in a war. What does this oppositionality achieve?

Subscribing to “the philosophy of ennobling the relationship between all concerned, both people and place” (Williams and Ihlein 2019, 345–46), Ihlein and his fellow artist collaborator Kim Williams work with what they call “lively

objects”, because “they are living systems where things literally grow, die, and decompose. They are also socially lively—deeply implicated in the struggles, desires, and histories of communities. Working across contexts such as farms, galleries, and botanic gardens requires the artists to engage a certain kind of care for objects, people, and situations, which can be seen as curatorial” (Ihlein 2022, 147). Long-term and painstaking practice-led research projects like this require well-deserved funding, and faith.

It is never easy to maintain cool diplomacy in the heat of situations when dealing with a sense of *responsibility* to overturn serious injustice, ignorance, or bigotry. Powerlessness must also be understood—the experience has deep roots, and as part of a natural process, can erupt irreparably. Also, there are different moments along the arc of redress which might call for different modes. Understanding the *process*, as Ihlein emphasises, is key. Where is the art and artist in this process we may well ask, as mediator between opposing sides? Precisely in the *ambiguity* of the hydra-headed role, in its *fluidity*.



Figures 2 and 3. Hand-drawn diagrams by Lucas Ihlein, illustrating socially engaged art model and oppositionality model. Images courtesy of Lucas Ihlein.

Ironically, using the Trojan Horse—that poetic and legendary war weapon disguised as gift—as metaphor and methodology, Ihlein describes how at critical points he and Williams curated socially-engaged cultural phenomenon, an instance centred around the blossoming of sunflowers amid sugar cane in a farmer’s field as soil-regenerative practice—taking the already popular flower show to literally the next stage, the artists created an amphitheatre in the fields, invited a local youth orchestra and South Sea Islander group performances, and catered gourmet food for all. It coalesced into a meaningful time for the diverse group of people purposefully brought together. That event was the aesthetic and memorable *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* (Ihlein 2022, 153).

Curatorial mode: mediating archives and unwritten histories

As a final and brief instantiation of working with larger realities beyond the pragmatic immediate, it is timely to consider the concept of curatorial work in relation to the actual etymology of the term—to care for, to attend to, to conserve—modes vital to the intangible realities of memory and experience. Exemplary is the work of John Tung, ex-SAM curator (2015–2020) and now working independently. For the Singapore Biennale 2019, he brought *Centro Audiovisual Max Stahl Timor-Leste (CAMSTL)* to the public, a seven-channel installation of archival materials around a pivotal moment in the history of Timor-Leste, Southeast Asia’s youngest nation-state: at the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili, where after 17

years of Indonesian occupation, 250 peaceful pro-independence demonstrators lost their lives in violent clashes. The filmic archive is the work of British journalist and war correspondent, Max Stahl aka Christopher Wenner, who was ground-witness to the Timorese experience for over 30 years. It encompasses not only the “violence, confrontations, human rights violations and bloodshed, the work also touches on a vast range of subjects including Timorese music, dance, crafts, food and social practice” (Tung 2019, 93).

As Tung states, the material “underscores the filmic medium’s potential to redress injustice and effect significant global change”, and highlights “the importance and currency of archival work as a means of preserving memory, culture and heritage in times of oppression and struggle” (Tung 2019, 93). Archival resources allow for deep research into silent and silenced histories, and curatorial work is critical in presenting and representing interpretations and perspectives.

Recently opened in September 2021, Tung curated an exhibition on 5th Passage, a Singapore artist initiative with its beginnings in 1991. Once again, Tung worked with archival material that has yet to be properly contextualised due to a history of omission and silence. Through numerous interviews, attentive listening to the “dropped clues”, and feeling out “allusions” in conversations that resurrected often traumatic memories, Tung began to jigsaw splintered narratives and memories into a cohesive context, as well as curate the exhibition *5th Passage: In Search of Lost Time*, featuring 10 associated artists at Gajah Gallery, Singapore, with a published catalogue—optimistically entitled *5th Passage: Time Regained*.

The project examines the social significance of the broad and “ground-breaking” scope of work

that 5th Passage was doing in the early 1990s in Singapore, at a time when the National Arts Council was only just coming into being, and there was little on the ground that identified and harnessed creative and social concerns cohesively. Tung says, “The artists’ product done with 5th Passage had already exceeded what legislators and policy makers could envision, let alone regulate”. The pre-emptive strike against these pioneering artists was aggressive and excessive: Goliath bashed David into smithereens, in this instance. The punitive measures that continued killed the initiative’s artistic and creative movement in its tracks, and “subsequent policies served to curtail growth along the interdisciplinary developmental path 5th Passage took”—way ahead of its time in the Singapore context—of art being socially engaged in issues from the environment to animal ethics, special education, and more. Thirty years ago, natural cultural expressions should have been given the room to grow from the ground up—initiatives should not only take the form of top-down directives. Too much precious individual and collective work and time, lost.

Conclusion

Hard times are coming, when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We’ll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality (Le Guin 2014).

A real figure of real terror in life, nearly 800 years after his death, Genghis Khan is re-visited in a monumental sculpture, erected in 2008 in Mongolia, 54 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar—cultural memory cast in 250 tonnes of stainless steel, 40 metres high. Ironically, even brutal global military conquests can be a source of pride to the people who claim shares in belonging and birthplace.



Figure 4. Timeline in the exhibition *5th Passage: In Search of Lost Time*, September 2021. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

War, culture, and history are realities shaped by perspectives, and given enough time, set perspectives are interrogated by other perspectives. Values, ideals, beliefs, and tastes, shift. Many forces sculpt history and whittle memory. There is power and influence in engaged arts practice—the figure of the thinking and feeling creative practitioner stands amid flows

of power, and remains critically individual, catalytic, riding on larger momentums. Le Guin’s reference to “realists of a larger reality” extends to all artists and creative practitioners. The psychological and emotional dimensions of human experience need attention and time, mediated through a larger reality. □

About the Author

Dr Susie Lingham is an interdisciplinary thinker, writer, artist, educator, and curator. With a focus on the nature of mind, her work synthesises ideas across different fields from the humanities to the sciences. From 2013-2016, Susie was Director of the Singapore Art Museum where she shaped its vision/mission, curatorial direction, and acquisition strategy, and oversaw the development, organisation and curating of 13 exhibitions. She was appointed creative director of the Singapore Biennale 2016, *An Atlas of Mirrors*. Prior to these appointments, Susie was Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2009-2013). Conferred the Distinguished Alumni Medal 2014 by Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Susie has a DPhil in Literature, Religion and Philosophy (University of Sussex, U.K.), and has taught at universities and art colleges in Australia, Singapore and the U.K. Currently, she is Senior Lecturer at the School of Technology for the Arts, Republic Polytechnic, Singapore.

Bibliography

Damodaran, Ramu. 2021. “Why We Care.” *United Nations Academic Impact*, April 15, 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/why-we-care-15-april-2021>.

Guin, Ursula Le. 2014. “Ursula K Le Guin’s Speech at National Book Awards: ‘Books Aren’t Just Commodities.’” *The Guardian*, November 20, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/20/ursula-k-le-guin-national-book-awards-speech>.

Hay, Frazer Macdonald. 2021. *End of Contract Report*. The HALO Trust.

Ihle, Lucas. 2022. “Social Objects, Art, and Agriculture, Lucas Ihle Interviewed by Caroline Seck Langil.” In *Curating Lively Objects: Exhibitions Beyond Disciplines*, edited by Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill. New York: Routledge.

Lingham, Susie. 2021. “Sculpture Cast as Satire: Misgivings on the Quest for Beauty.” In *VagueVogue: The Yeo Chee Kiong Collection*, 130–57. Taipei: Artist Publishing Co.

Martin, Lisa. 2021. “Myanmar Poets Square off Against Junta’s War on Words.” *The Jakarta Post*, June 5, 2021. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2021/06/05/myanmar-poets-square-off-against-juntas-war-on-words.html>.

Templeton, Patty. 2021. “Plutonium and Poetry: Where Trinity and Oppenheimer’s Reading Habits Met.” Los Alamos National Laboratory. 2021. <https://discover.lanl.gov/news/stories/0714-oppenheimer-literature>.

Tung, John. 2019. “Centro Audiovisual Max Stahl Timor-Leste (CAMSTL), Every Step in the Right Direction.” In *Singapore Biennale 2019*. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum.

Williams, Kim, and Lucas Ihle. 2019. “Two Places: Working and Walking with Waterways.” In *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder*. London: Open Humanities Press.