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# BLINDNESS

Thoughts about Smart Nation in Singapore

BOEDI WIDJAJA

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**BOEDI WIDJAJA**

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Names: Boedi Widjaja, photographer  
Title: Blindness : Thoughts about Smart Nation in Singapore / Boedi Widjaja  
Description: [Singapore] : [Chung Li Li], [2023] | Cover title  
Identifiers: | ISBN 978-981-18-7236-5 (digital)  
Subjects: LCSH: Smart Nation--Singapore--Exhibitions  
Classification: Nil

DESIGN © SARAH AND SCHOOLING

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Published on the occasion of the Exactlv Residency Exhibition & Book Launch: *Blindness* by Boedi Widjaja.  
9 – 26 November 2023, at Objectifs – Centre for Photography and Film, Singapore.

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# BLINDNESS

Thoughts about Smart Nation in Singapore

BOEDI WIDJAJA

*Edited by* Li Li Chung  
*Essay by* Hao Guang Tse



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# FOREWORD

## Word from the ‘Wart’

Li Li Chung

What is Smart?

What prompted this project on smart nation was my many strolls down Waterloo Street, walking past this beautiful complex with tall trees and an obvious security gate. I discovered that I was looking at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue. Constructed in 1878, it is the oldest and largest Jewish synagogue in Southeast Asia. Googling its history, I then saw old photos of when those tall trees were waist-high hedges. So why the tall trees now? Was it “hiding something”? From what, I wondered. Since those musings in 2015, I have been fascinated by the Jewish history of Singapore, that most people know about this history but it’s all a quiet reference (after all, post-independence, our first Chief Minister David Marshall is a Singaporean of Jewish descent). Yet, there’s little unknown on the role that Israel played and continue to (quietly) in our national security and ubiquitous National Service; there is even a book out in 2019 on this, *Beating the Odds Together 50 Years of Singapore–Israel Ties*. The book also recounts a comical anecdote that our higher-ups in the 1960s were so concerned about these Israeli advisors that they told everyone they are Mexicans! Such was the fear of “who’s here” as since the end of WWII, both countries view their locations as precarious, within a potentially hostile sub-region.

But our Jewish heritage goes way back ... to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the many waves of Jewish settlements in Singapore. I hear that their descendants probably number 250; including Jewish expatriates, Singapore Jewish residents number 2-3000 today. Enough for us to still have two working synagogues with tall trees and smart gates.

So, what is a small dot like Singapore to do to be safe and thriving? Get smart. But what is smart?

A wonderfully sweet video, shows a young boy, asking:

*What is a Smart Nation? Is it having more convenience ... more information so you can make smarter decisions? Is it trust? Being certain of who you’re dealing with? Is it progress ...? Is it well-being ...? Is it staying ahead so we can stay ahead of the world? So what is a smart nation? <sup>2</sup>*

If the video had used a two-year-old in his terrible two’s, he would have only persisted with: “why, why” and “no”.

It is mind boggling how many reports are online about Smart City and Smart Nation,

both Singapore and globally. From what I can tell, Smart Nation Singapore boils it down to three *Pillars of a Smart Nation* - Digital Society, Economy, Government.<sup>3</sup> One site brags: *94% of our government services are digital from end to end!* and *We're the world's smartest city for the third year running!*<sup>4</sup>

I also read *Other Goals for 2023*<sup>5</sup>  
*We've also set our targets for 2023 and beyond:*

- *70% of eligible Government systems to be hosted on the commercial cloud*
- *All public officers to have basic digital literacy skills*
- *All ministry families to have at least 1 AI project for service delivery or policymaking*
- *At least 10 cross-agency high-impact data analytics projects to be completed per year*
- *No more than 7 working days to share data for cross-agency projects*

It's all good, right?  
What is not so obvious or visible to me is the invisible. And worse, the imagined.  
We are often reminded of that mind-twisting Donald Rumsfeld statement in 2002 on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction: *Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also **unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.** And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be **the difficult ones.***<sup>6</sup> (Bold highlights mine)

Singapore journalist Kirsten Han wrote: *We currently have more than 90,000 police cameras scattered across this little island. Apparently, this isn't enough: Minister for Home Affairs and Law, K Shanmugam, has announced that we will have at least 200,000 of 'em by 2030. Wah lau eh.*<sup>7</sup>

I am delighted that Boedi Widjaja is game enough to take on this cracking open a bit our discussion of what is a smart nation to us as Singapore citizens. *Path. 11, Blindness* is quite an astounding artwork that Boedi has crafted and in many ways, magical. It seems to say that this whole time, “things” happen and “things” work. Painlessly, unassumingly. Or so we think. Is that what smart nation is kind of like? What questions should we be asking?

Says the young boy at end of the *What makes a Smart Nation?* video: “*It's all these things and much, much more*”.

And I say: *wah lau eh, what's that mean – “much, much more”?*

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Wart is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation’s first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as “Exactly Foundation Stalwart” – a label that sounds like too much adult responsibility.  
<sup>2</sup> *What makes a Smart Nation?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJmoy41mWDQ>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/pillars-of-smart-nation>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg>. Other sources: <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/our-journey/achievements> <https://www.imd.org/news/updates/data-shows-effects-of-covid-and-climate-change-on-citizens-perceptions-of-how-smart-their-cities-are/>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/digital-government#the-progress-so-far>  
<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There\\_are\\_known\\_knowns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_are_known_knowns)  
<sup>7</sup> Kirsten Han in her WE, THE CITIZENS 7 August 2021 newsletter, *Polcams, polcams everywhere. Surveillance, surveillance everywhere.*

# KEYNOTE ESSAY

## Hide and Seek

Hao Guang Tse

*“Memory’s images, once they are fixed in words, are erased,” Polo said. “Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little”.* — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

If you will yourself to examine just the images of *Path. 11, Blindness* without any accompanying text, what do you see? I see bokeh from the stage lights of a play that’s just completed its final show. I see living cells frozen for an instant under the microscope. I see the edge of a rainbow cast into a darkened room, an attempt to probe mystery with a beam of light. There is something thrilling about encountering such images for the very first time, their veil torn once I read the explanations that tell me what they are exactly, torn to reveal what seems like the universe waving *hello* to me through these transparent particles made thick with significance.

There’s a Virginia Woolf quote that keeps coming to mind, scrawled on my consciousness like the muons that scrawl their polychromatic trails on Boedi’s camera lens. *The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms...* I see, too, now, these invisible cosmic motes of dust hurtling through deepest space,

falling upon the lens of my mind, giving me every thought I have ever spoken out, written down, or simply felt; every already-dimming flash of inspiration.

If each muonic image is an invisible city, they add up in a series to become more and more like the Venice of *Invisible Cities*, that home Marco Polo cannot describe without losing to the sea, each sentence that tumbles unintended from his lips another inch of rising water. Boedi, of course, looks towards his own home. In *Path 12: River Origins 浪淘沙* he tunes and triangulates himself to Java, as if out of all the innumerable atoms in the universe, the ones coming from that place are the ones he needs most. When we first worked together, I decided to write questions to an interview Boedi would not be allowed to answer. I asked him: *Doesn’t it get tiring answering questions about home?*

+++

In Jerusalem, it is sometimes unclear when a cry of prayer ends and a cry of anger begins, when incense becomes smoke of a different, sadder kind. Things in Jerusalem change depending on who describes them. I once encountered a man in Ein Karem, on the outskirts of this city, who told me *God ordains everything*, even that Jews and

Arabs must now share this land; he opened his home to me, said our meeting, too, was ordained. My friend upon hearing who his rabbi was scoffed—*that cult group again!* Sometimes, things are unclear because they are holy. The veiled tabernacle shields man from encountering God face to face so we don't die from the power of the presence.

Athens is a city made out of the failed attempts to attain perfection. The mathematical lines of its ancient buildings shame the ruins these buildings have become. Every other beautiful thing is in a museum. Everything that enters a museum has just begun to die. Trying to remember my brief visit, I find myself reaching for an ideal city, the relentlessly reasonable city where there is a right belief for everything and everyone, a marketplace where gods debate constantly without any smiting, without anyone winning. What is there instead is a city falling short, its best parts hiding within history books and museums. Its pale, chipped statues mean *human, human, human*.

I've never been to Silicon Valley, but it has been to me; it comes to me every day. In each keystroke, swipe and scan, I synchronise its rhythms with mine, reluctantly or eagerly accept its demand for transparency and its hunger for accumulation. I've never seen Silicon Valley, but if I tear apart my phone, my oven, the locks on my doors, I'll find the infinitesimal chips that are a sure mark of its presence. They whisper: *Without us, you could not write this. Without us, you would not even think to write this. Your ideas do not emerge from your backwater hometown, but flash forth from the ethereal superhighways of our city.* The sound of this city is a computer starting up endlessly.

Luke Burgis' thinks that people today are clustering themselves into at least three different groups with worldviews so different that it is becoming impossible to speak across them. To Tertullian's Jerusalem of faith and Athens of

reason, he adds his Silicon Valley of utilitarianism, each city selling an impoverished idea of what it means to be human. And he sees hope in those who refuse to live within the walls of any particular city, instead choosing the harder path, navigating the trade routes and wildernesses that connect and confound them. But what has this got to do with these photographs of muons?

Boedi has made these images brimming with the mystery of Jerusalem, enabled by the science of Athens, reflecting on the desire of Silicon Valley to make the invisible legible, to put it to use. Art, perhaps, is one of the paths that lies outside of but is connected to all the other places: not just those three great cities, but also the heart-places of Calvino's Venice, Boedi's Java. And we all must rely on explorers like Boedi to create these paths, describe their particularities, and show off their beauty. Sometimes what makes something truly visible is not more sensors or more light, but the wisdom to know when to shut your eyes or cover your camera.

+++

At the start of the year, I showed Boedi and his wife and producer Audrey a draft of this essay, this attempt to describe the effect that *Path 11*, *Blindness* and *Path. 12, River Origin* 浪淘沙 had had on me. I asked them questions in comments that lit up, in highlighter yellow, phrases and words on my screen. *What do you see in these images? Have you visited any of these cities in real life, and what stories emerged from your encounters? What exactly is Audrey's role in producing these works?* I thought it important to reveal my own process of questioning, first to them, and then to you, reader. To attempt a conversation, to share my uncertainties. We talked over lunch, and I scribbled their responses in a notebook.

I had every intention of incorporating what they told me into the essay. I wanted to make plain the

experiences they had shared so openly with me, to present you with more data and derive better insights. But then I got stuck. I couldn't finish. Weeks turned into months. I couldn't even look at my notebook. I see now that it was necessary to talk to Boedi and Audrey, and that it was equally necessary and in the spirit of these works to keep what they said hidden. I had to will myself to forget everything they shared before I was even able to open my draft again and fumble towards an ending.

Is the future ordained, predicted, or sold? And to what extent are these three invisible cities truly different from each other? When this essay is finally abandoned, its electronic soul given a paper and ink body, then I might consider sliding open the drawer where my old notebooks go to rest, fish out that particular one I had used over lunch, and try to decipher my own scrawling. Burgis is right: human desire is hard to pin down because it built every city. Woolf is right: all our memories and thoughts are fleeting as cosmic dust. Calvino is right: the more you try to talk about some things, the more they slip away. And Boedi, standing in the mangroves, pointing his laser box at Java, trying to reach the muons? He's also right.

**Biography**

**Tse Hao Guang** is the author of *The International Left-Hand Calligraphy Association* (Tinfish Press, 2023). He edited the new edition of Wong May's *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* (Ethos Books, 2023). His poems and essays appear in Poetry, Poem-a-Day, The Yale Review, Poetry Northwest, Entropyand elsewhere.

**ARTIST’S STATEMENT**

**Path. 11, Blindness (2022)**  
**Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙 (2023)**  
Boedi Widjaja

In January 2020, Li Li approached me with a photography commission to look into Smart Nation, Singapore’s digitalisation drive. The pandemic crisis that followed pointed us sharply towards the invisible, the unseen that nonetheless marked us deeply. Amidst the uncertain period of lockdowns, accelerated technological adoption and mass mRNA vaccinations. I inquired into notions of invisibility and impalpable intensities. I worked with the cosmic ray particles muons as material, and my research culminated in experimental photography and moving-image projects: *Path. 11, Blindness* and *Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙*. The interdisciplinary projects explore physicality in the digital; and the human dimensions that lie beyond hyper-focused, bio-technological visions.

**Path. 11, Blindness (2022)**  
Widjaja blindfolded digital cameras to perform photography of muons - invisible, extra-terrestrial particles that pass through matter and bodies. CMOS image sensors, common in smartphones, detect visible light as well as ionising radiation photons such as muons that collide into the sensor plates. To record the muon traces, Widjaja blindfolded a CMOS device to block off light - turning it momentarily into an unseeing sensing instrument - and applied a code to filter muonic signals on the sensor. The muon signals are then transformed through a photographic technique that Widjaja had developed - through an analogue manipulation of an inverted camera lens - to produce a series of muonic marks that bear his micro movements and his imagination of a vast cosmic distance.

Special thanks to Marek Knap of CREDO, Institute of Nuclear Physics in Krakow, Poland, for his code to filter the muonic signals; and to Prof. Hiroyuki Tanaka, University of Tokyo, for his consultation.

**Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙 (2021)**  
Widjaja performed for the camera by introducing minimalistic movements to the stillness of his frame at the southern coast of mainland Singapore that faces Java, Indonesia - the artist’s birthplace. He held a muon tracker that signalled through encoded light and sound, the Tang Dynasty poem 浪淘沙 (Waves Dredging Sand). Written when the author was in exile, the Tang Dynasty poem began with the fantastical story of Han Dynasty envoy Zhang Qian’s travels to the West and up the celestial Milky Way. The work speaks of poetic connections, between an ancient myth and a modern city, between regional history and personal story, between the known and the unknown.

*Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙* was commissioned by BIO:ART SEA:T (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh.

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# PHOTOGRAPHS

*Path.* series (2012 – ongoing) looks at the migratory notions of belonging, physical movement and isolation. The series was triggered by Boedi Widjaja’s change in nationality and the broader context of relentless global, urban migration. 2020 marks the next decade of *Path.*, building on the first ten that had pivoted around deep, personal memories of displacement.

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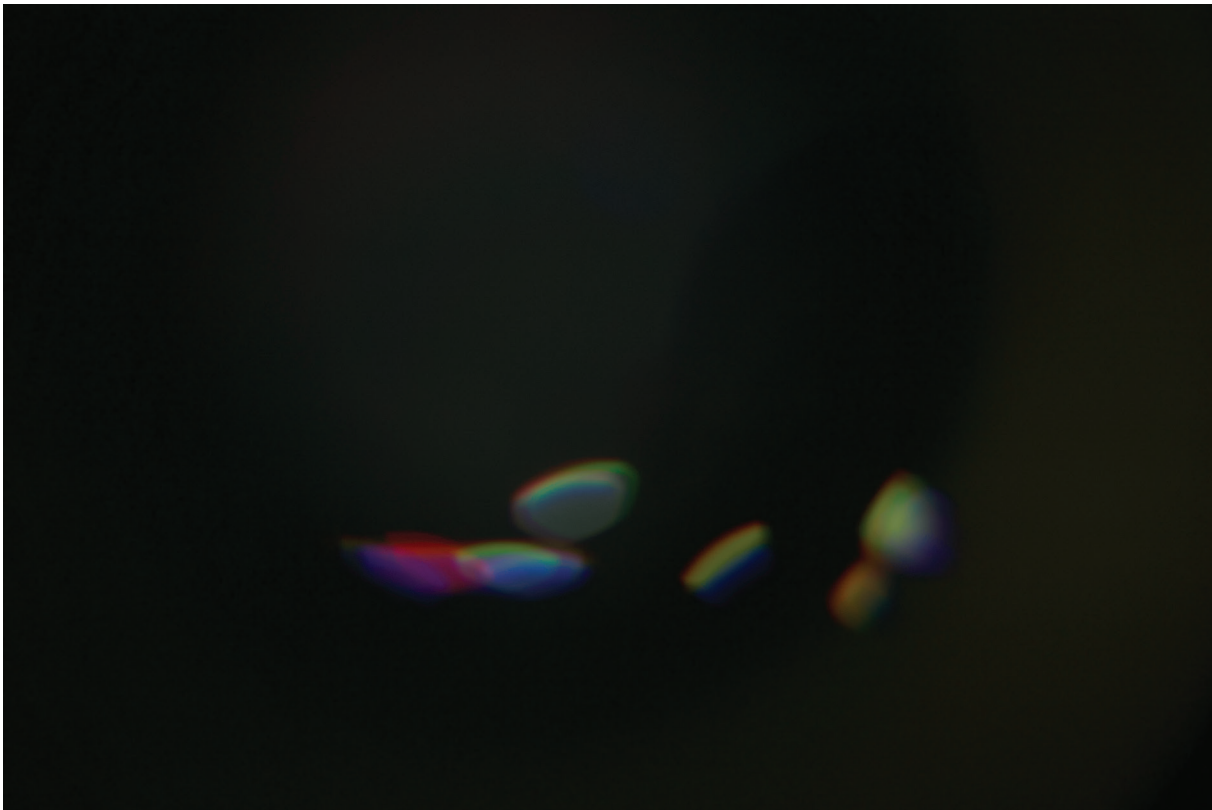
<sup>1</sup> With a half-life of less than two-millionth of a second, muons are extra-terrestrial particles that pass through walls and bodies.

## **PATH. 11, BLINDNESS**



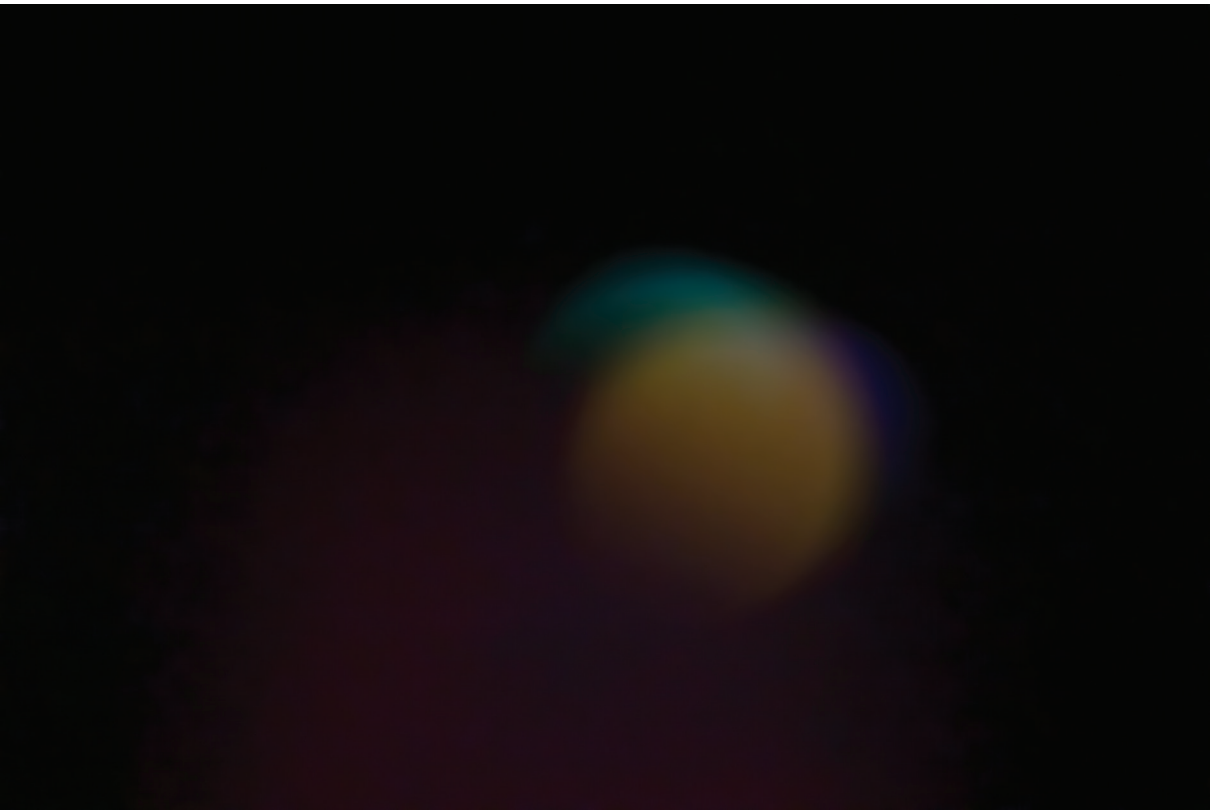
#1      ***Olinda (2022)***

“In Olinda, if you go out with a magnifying glass and hunt carefully, you may find somewhere a point no bigger than the head of a pin which, if you look at it slightly enlarged, reveals within itself the roofs, the antennas, the skylights, the gardens, the pools, the streamers across the streets, the kiosks in the squares, the horse-racing track.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*



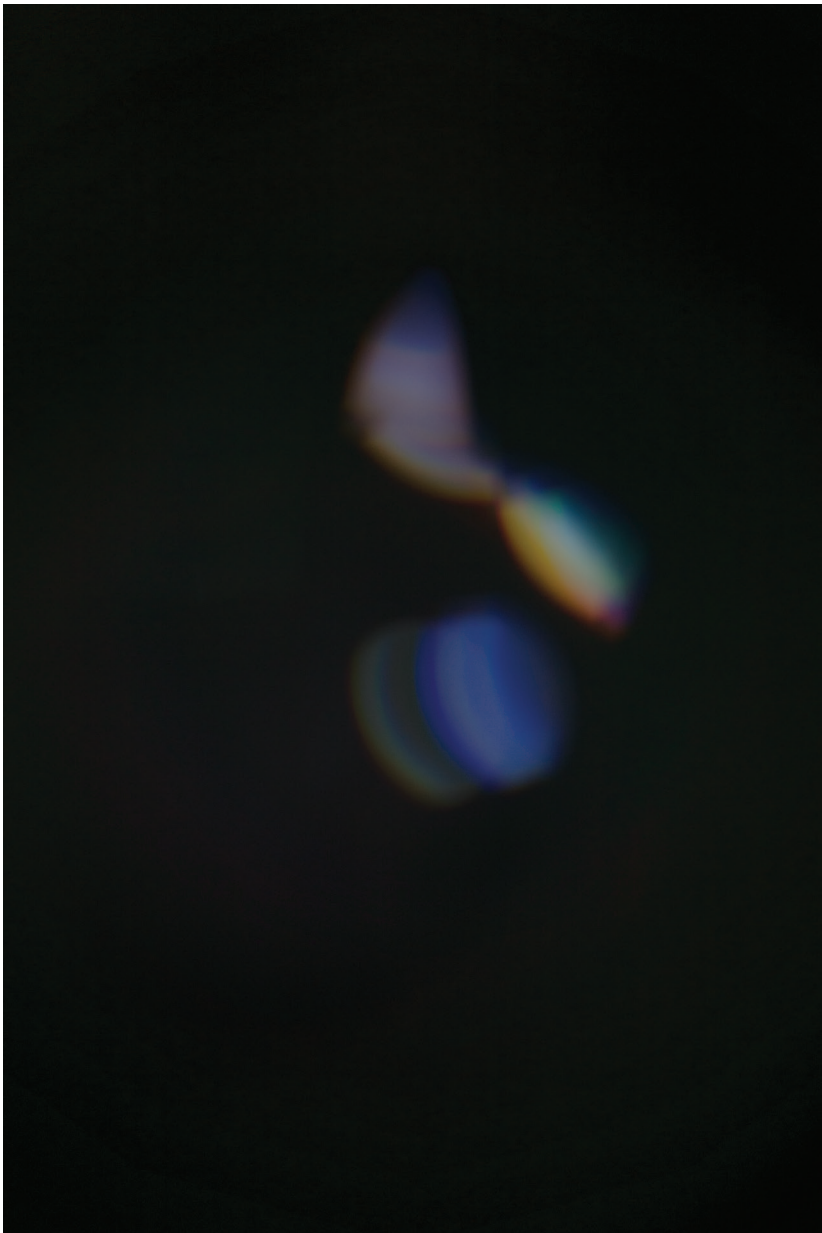
#2      **Marozia (2022)**

“It also happens that, if you move along Marozia’s compact walls, when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear. Then, an instant later, it has already vanished.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*



#3      **Raissa (2022)**

“Also in Raissa, city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*



#4 **Berenice (2022)**

“From these data it is possible to deduce an image of the future Berenice, which will bring you closer to knowing the truth than any other information about the city as it is seen today.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

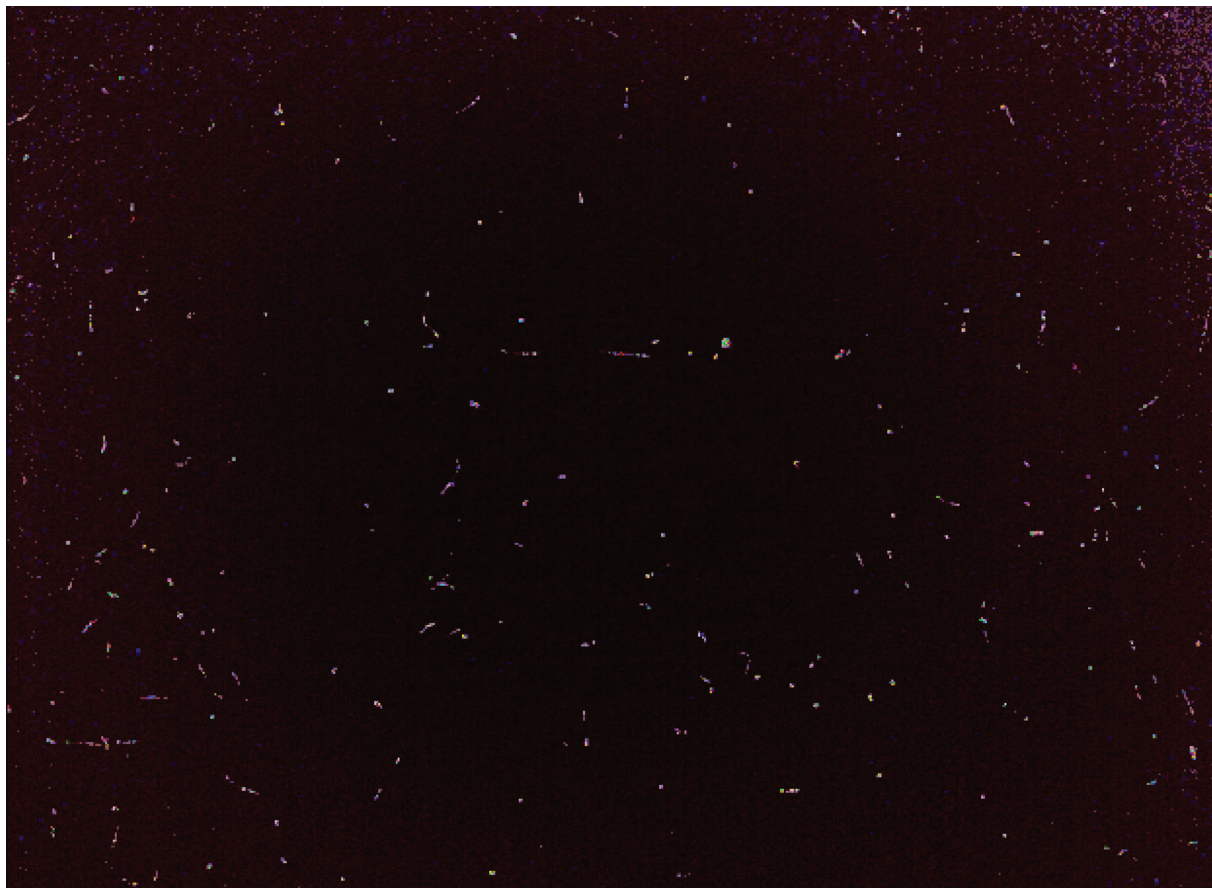
© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



#5 **Theodora (2022)**

“By dint of ripping away scales and carapaces, tearing off elytra and feathers, the people gave Theodora the exclusive image of human city that still distinguishes it.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



**PATH. 12, RIVER ORIGIN 浪淘沙**



#7 *Video still*

Commissioned by BIO:ART SEAT (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh

© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



#8 *Video still*

Commissioned by BIO:ART SEAT (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh

© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



#9 *Video still*

Commissioned by BIO:ART SEAT (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh

© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



#10 *Video still*

Commissioned by BIO:ART SEAT (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh

© Boedi Widjaja, in residency with Exactly Foundation, March 2020



AROUND-THE-TABLE

Exactly Foundation Residency  
No. 19

Boedi Widjaja – *Path. 11 Blindness*

**NOTE**  
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DINNER

10<sup>th</sup> September 2022  
Exactly founder Li Li Chung’s home  
(East Coast Road, Singapore)

TEA

12<sup>th</sup> November 2022  
Exactly founder Li Li Chung’s home  
(East Coast Road, Singapore)

First 24-hr response, sharing with family & friends:  
September–November 2022

RESPONSES

Anonymous

11 September 2022

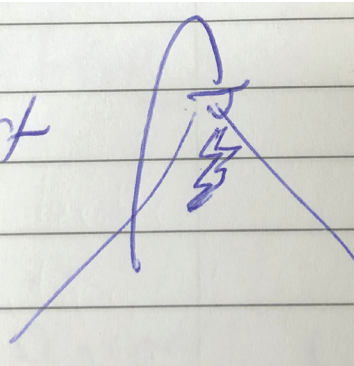
With three Anonymous respondents

SNDGO -> Funan #o6-o1 “Transforming Singapore Through Tech”  
SCS  
CSC  
GovTech -> SNSP “platform” data collection  
Citizen business gov agency

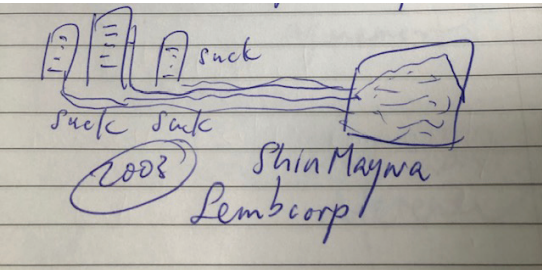
“using data to build a better Punggol smart town ... future” ☺

Punggol ☺ :  
Academia (SIT)? meets Industry (JTC)?  
Digital District:  
Business (huh?) meets Community (who?)  
PDD -> Punggol & northeast region  
“work, learn, play”

PAP ... smart lamp post



HCB – “smarter turns, better living” ???  
PWCC – pneumatic waste conveyance system



LKYSPP  
- policy  
- organisational perspective  
- data security  
- personal privacy  
Hmmm ...  
The Govt has no plan to use sensors for the purpose of social credit scoring or moral policy.

What is the optics of SMART NATION?  
Compliance  
Agreement?  
Abidance  
Obligation. What about deference?  
Conformity

How do people end up living in Punggol?  
How bad is it really? ☺  
Punggol grapples with growing paid and traffic jams? ☺

CLC  
Liveable cities  
Webinar on social resilience in a disrupted world (2021)  
MinDef – cyberattack. V44n4-Article2.pdf  
iDa

SMART acronym?  
Nation hmmm  
Govt / state. People / citizenry

Seeing	Collecting
Sensing	Quantifying
Make Senses	What about quality?
	Meaning “liquidated” (Adorno)
Purpose	fully paid-up members of society?
Useful	

Seeing – optics, sensing  
Photography (technology), art – tease out the relational through unseeing.

Invisibility  
Does it make us smarter?

# RESPONSES

## Jevon Chandra

### FIRST RESPONSE

I enjoyed my dinner immensely. I saw old friends, acquaintances, and met new people, and had good food, good conversation ... it was in many ways close to a perfect evening! It felt stimulating without pretence – a tone set, I’m sure, in no small part by Boedi’s understated and confident presentation.

I came into the dinner at the back of a particularly aggravating week, or even months. I am fed up with rigidity, institutions, and what feels like manic hunger for scale and spectacle. So tonight’s humble setting and simple setup was the antidote I sorely needed.

I had lovely conversations mostly with Shirley, Amillin, Audrey, and thereafter with Yun Teng, Boedi, and Li-Chuan. Yun Teng and I are friends but we have not met in a long while, and I appreciated catching up more with her in our train ride home to the west. We shared mutual anger about our current predicaments in the art industry, and the shameful reality of our arts industry being fundamentally incapable of support art-making. Why? How did this happen?

### Conversation with Amillin at dinner

Amillin is a recent acquaintance – we first met one day before the first dinner ! But I had a sense that we would be able to speak more, and at

greater length. So we scheduled to meet again at a separate time.

Amillin researches our smart cities, especially its in-progress implementation in Punggol – but first, we spoke of other things. I asked her about her work in NTU now, and before when she studied in Cambridge. We spoke loosely about hopes and dreams, and what/how it means to realize them in this small island of rapidly rising costs.

Quite early, the conversation turned towards “Smart Cities” at some point and we reverted back to modes of seeing/un-seeing, revealing/ hiding that “Smart Cities” ethos rely on ... an intentional degree of obscurity premised on the assumption that reduced cognitive load is good. Train disappears – that’s all you need to know. Lights, temperatures, and water supplies are regulated – that’s all you need to know. Underlying all this is a sense of trust – given learned, conditioned – that happens consciously and subconsciously. When did I consent to any of this, and how?

Of late, owing to a general sense of fatigue, I’ve been processing thoughts in my mind through 2 questions:

- 1. For what end?
- 2. At what cost?

I recall recent changes and trends in Singapore and the art scene (which takes after Singapore so much because we’re so small) and the production cycles we’re somehow locked ourselves into: main shows per theatre season, audience satisfaction ratings of >9/10, campaign reading a certain number of eyeballs, impact.

For what end? At what cost?

I also spoke to another friend, where we discussed Ursula le Gimms’ *The Ones Who Walk Away From Ondas*. The short story describes life in a seeming utopia – lingers on the sufferance of one child in the basement. If the child is released, the utopia collapses. In the story, I initially recalled there being “children” in the basement, but my friend was quick to clarify: no, not “children”, but “child”. Just one child.

Is it not a sharp focussing of our thoughts, instead of focusing on many, consider the value of one? The rightness of the system depends on how many child, etc, funnelling us down utilitarian analysis, of net suffering vs net gain.. Dealing with plurals pre-empt us to calculate.

But faced with “one” – as in “one” child – undue forced to confront of such calculations should be made at all.

**Reflections from personal work on Aphantasia**  
It is of great serendipity that Boedi’s work is titled *Blindness*. Because of late, I’m working on a series of works revolving around *Aphantasia*, a condition I recently feared I have.

What is “aphantasia”? Simply, it is described as a blindness of the mind’s eye. I recently learned that when people “see” things in their heads, they meant that literally.

But for me, “seeing” (in the mind) has never been literal, only every metaphorical. If I imagine seeing “red start” in my mind, I see nothing – all I know is that I’m thinking of an image.

This research is in progress, but I preliminarily title the investigations as *Ways of Not Seeing*. Clearly, there are many methods of seeing, visual perception and analysis, and the word “seeing has great mileage as metaphor and heuristic. But what about “not seeing”?

In the next two pages, I share a paragraph (modelled, of course, after John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*) as provocation:

Below is section from *Ways of Seeing*, which Boedi read in his presentation:  
*Ways of Seeing* by John Berger  
*Seeing comes before words. This child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surround world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening, we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the exploration, never quite fits the sight. Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.*

Below is my riff off John Berger’s writing, the main change being a simple shift: replacing all words about “seeing” with “not seeing”:

Ways of Seeing by John Berger  
(my edited version)

*Not seeing comes before words. This child does not look and does not recognize before it can speak.*

*But there is also another sense in which not seeing comes before words. It is not seeing which establishes our place in the surround world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded it. The relation between what we do not see and what we know is never settled. Each evening, we do see \_\_\_\_\_. We know that \_\_\_\_\_. Yet the knowledge, the exploration, never quite fits the sight.*

*Soon after we cannot see, we are aware that we can also not be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the invisible world.*

- Questioning:
1. Visual positivism: visuality as moral argument  
e.g. “if you’re innocent, you have nothing to hide”.
  2. Models of/Measuring “intelligence: are machines becoming more intelligent like humans or is human understanding of intelligence becoming more mechanical?
  3. Data gathering vs data analysing
- Hiding, illegibility, obfuscation is also a source of power! Especially if you’re marginalized, persecuted, misunderstood.

RESPONSES

Eric D’Angelo

**FIRST RESPONSE**

Smart Nation is something that should be felt but not seen.

Just like muons, they are everywhere and touch us but cannot be seen.

I was “put off” at first by the blurriness of the photos but I think they represent the vast definitions of what is a Smart City.

Smart Nation ≠ Smarter People

**OTHER THOUGHTS**

“Safe City” and “Surveillance” are not the same.

99.9% of people are not a “person of interest”.

RESPONSES

Naomi Clara Hanakata

11 September 2022

It’s all about communication.

The invite. The idea of a dinner. The seating arrangement. The photographs. The performance. The strive to be smart.

Are muons trying to tell us something?  
Who is the recipient of the Morse poem?

I think one of the issues arises when the “communication” becomes one sided. When it is only the algorithms talking to us. When the “conversation” is only grounded in numeric values’ but no others. When there is no more accountability on one side; “smart technology” or “smart infrastructures” are never neutral facilitators. They are always means to an end which is determined by someone.

We cannot just put “smart tech” out there.

It has to be accompanied by:

1. Foresight and the development of long-term plans. Otherwise people will get carried away by their fascination, curiosity and the prospect of a quick fix or gain.
2. Education efforts to build an inclusive and consistent degree of digital literacy.
3. A dedicated governing body that oversees these processes, and consolidates the data gathered and ensures its protection to avoid exploitation by multiple, private interests.

Books, books, books. On masculinity, home cooking, art in Asia; now in conversation with paintings, drawings, sculptures, design objects.

Synergy can only emerge by bringing different objects, different people, different skills together.

Or  
Different flavours, difference features, different temperatures, different histories.

Italo Calvino  
Image #1 *Olinda* (2022). What a coincidence?  
*Marco Polo, Italy*, one of my favorite books, fictitious cities

Image #2 *Marozia* (2022): a glimpse of the city, of its lights.

Image #3 *Raissa* (2022)

Image #4 *Berenice* (2022): reflecting the emotional state of the city – its citizens? A trace

Image #5 *Theodora* (2022): Appreciation of the reference getting lost – losing the smart city.

Are these smart cities?  
Smart imaginaries?

RESPONSES

Hong Huazheng

11 September 2022

Boedi’s use of technology to expound on his art project – investigating something as esoteric as muons – is an example of how the Smart Nation campaign has succeeded to some extent.

That is not to say that the campaign should have a measurable goalpost, or in bureaucratic parlance – a KPI. Instead, I believe such an exercise is open-ended and ever-evolving. In other words, I think Smart Nation is here to stay.

I can think of 3 reasons why that is the case:

1) It is existential.

We’ve heard plenty of the adage that Singapore is a small island without natural resources... no one owes us a living. As much as these sound like “blah blah blah” (a nod to Greta Thunberg), I’m afraid it’s quite true. The region around our island state has deteriorated vastly in the last decade – Hong Kong and Myanmar’s reversion to an autocratic state-run system, Malaysia’s political debacle, Taiwan’s sovereignty, and the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, just to name a few.

With portentous regional geopolitics, the digital highway is a lifeline in place of the physical one. This is probably evident in SAF’s formation of the fourth service branch, the Digital and Intelligence Service.

2) It’s not just macroeconomics, we’re looking at the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution.

If you believe that Singapore is characteristic of a corporation, as someone mentioned at Boedi’s talk, then by corollary we’re facing a mismatch between the skills of our workforce and the future economy. Economists call this structural unemployment.

If that is true, then Smart Nation isn’t frivolous. It is a concerted recalibration of our workforce on a national level in response to the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution. Interestingly, studies have shown that the pandemic has hastened this process by 7 years, albeit at great costs.

3) Our social compact demands it.

I’ve always believed that our world is defined not by our most advanced technology, but by the distance between those who have access to the most advanced vis-a-vis those to the least.

In Singapore’s context, the gap is stark between digital natives and digital immigrants. Or more to the point, the isolation of our elderlies from a fast-moving and seemingly distant digital world.

I do not believe that Singapore with a fast aging population could afford to ignore this societal divide. Had it been left to market forces, the capitalistic nature of Big Techs would have compelled them to ignore elderly customers

who contribute little to customer equity: the sum total of all customers’ lifetime values. I do not mean to cast aspersions on Big Techs, but profitability is their raison d’être.

Singapore’s government counts on elderlies as one of its largest and most reliable bases of constituents. Its efforts to include elderlies in the digitalization drives, such as the Senior Go Digital Initiative, is not a sanctimonious platitude. It is part of a crucial social compact.

Going back to Boedi’s use of the internet to research muons and photograph these extra-terrestrial particles, I recall this quote by the former chairman of Cisco Systems. “There are two equalizers in life: the internet and education.” I suppose we’re privileged to be living in a world where we have both equalizers and even the luxury of having a discourse/salon.

I’m more interested in what we’re going to do with this privilege.

RESPONSES

1. TAY JIA YING

10-year-old

“Jia Ying, I show you this photo that my friend took. He used a special camera.” (Path. 11, Blindness. Image #6) “Ok.”  
“Can you tell me... what does it look like?”  
“Hummm... Bugs? Stars?”  
“Oh yes, it looks like fireflies at night right?”  
“Ya.”  
“Okay Jia Ying, I show you another photo. This one. What do you think?” (Path. 11, Blindness. Image #1) “Is it from Norway? Because my aunty is going there.”  
“What do you mean Norway?”  
“The special thing at night. The one in the sky.”

“Oh you mean Northern lights?”  
“Ya.”  
“That’s true! It looks like northern lights! What else can you tell me about this photo?”  
“It’s priceless.”  
“Why?”  
“Because it’s very rare. You can’t see it.”  
“What do you think of the words ‘Smart Nation’?” “Hur?”  
“The words ‘Smart’, ‘Nation’.”  
“A nation that is smart lah!”  
“Do you think we’re a smart nation?”  
“Everybody is smart in their own way.”  
“Do you think we’re smart enough?”  
“We’re smart enough for our own personal reasons.” “Do you think we need to be smart?”  
“It’s not that important.”  
“Why?”  
“Because a lot of teenagers also use their phones what!”  
“You mean your friends and cousins?”  
“Ya. Parents also, sometimes.”  
“Oh.”  
“And then we don’t get to spend a lot of time with our families.”  
“Jia Ying, I’m going to show you the last photo. “What do you think of this one?” (Path. 11, Blindness. Image #5) [Long silence]  
“That is just that.”  
“Hur?”  
“For some people it’s interesting. For some people, it’s just that. Because it’s not money.”

2. TAY JIA EN

8-year-old

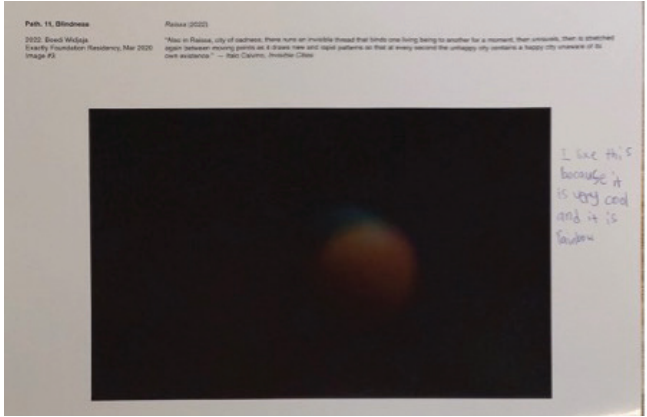
“Jia En, I show you some photos and you tell me what you think okay?” (Path. 12, River Origin. Image #12)  
“Ok. These are your photos ah?”  
“No these are my friend’s photos. What do you think?”  
“What is he doing? Looks scary.”

“Hahaha! He is doing an experiment. He is trying to find something that we cannot see with our eyes.” “Why he wants to do that?”  
“Because he is an artist.”  
“Oh like you?”  
“Yes! But I do things that our eyes can see. He is doing something that we cannot see.” “Why he want to be artist?”  
“I don’t know. Maybe he has many questions. How about you ask him?”  
“Ok.”  
“You can write your question here.” (Path. 12, River Origin. Image #9)

“Your friend will read this?”  
“Yes I think so. Anything else you want to say about this photo?”  
“It is very cool.”



“Now I’ll show you another photo and you tell me what you think ok?” (Path. 12, River Origin. Image #12)  
“Ok. Can I write also?”  
“Sure.”



## RESPONSES

**Joanne Lim**

11 September 2022

I thought that the inquiry into the smart city was very timely, considering the rate of digitalization Singapore is undergoing – especially since the pandemic broke out. Looking back, we have turned the city into one that functions through the smart phone – governmental documents are now fully accessible using our SingPass, the ability to get groceries or transportation through the simple click of the app.

However efficient it may be, the question I guess is always the accessibility to such infrastructure and knowledge to tech tech gadgets and know-how to navigate this complicated space. And with all the development that start off with the right intention, are we taking time to deliberate on the people who we leave behind as we march toward this tech-utopia that promises efficiency? At what cost?

Then there is the question of data collection, retention and sharing. Where does it all go? Who has access to it? Can we say “no”? Privacy policies are all good and dandy if you have time and space to read it and understand all the legal jargon that comes with it. Do we truly understand the mechanisms and algorithms? Do we have control? I am hard-pressed to say “yes”.

Boedi’s project is both poetic and beautiful; images were captured using CMOS technology. Drawing parallels to the data that flows through city every day, he has managed to capture the

invisible and made it visible to us. As we move towards the smart nation, it is hoped that the technocrats and policy makers, including the tech giants, would do similarly and provide as much guidance and policy making more transparent to shed light on the path that this digitalization drive so that we can see a little clearer where we are moving towards and also accept when society collectively raise their doubts.

I thought that the white circular data translation machine was a beautiful and brilliant mechanism. A translation of light to sound into language and a poem nonetheless made something so invisible truly visible.

The sending of messages from mainland Singapore to his birth town, across the sea, was a truly poetic gesture. The performance truly translated a form of longing and a connection to the home city. Thank you, Boedi, for the beautiful work.

## RESPONSES

### 1. Josephine

20 September 2022

#### Impression of artworks

Did not know that there were such particles that passed through our bodies on a daily basis. *[edit/correction: comments from a*

medical doctor/geneticist working in a cross-disciplinary bio-digital research centre: *While muon decay is technically considered radioactive, in that they produce electrons (called beta radiation), they are not in themselves regarded in the same category as Uranium-235 or Iodine-135, in causing radioactive damage from ionizing radiation they release on decay. In other words Muons are human-safe in not causing increased DNA mutations for example, unlike the other radio-chemicals mentioned.]*

Amazing that smart phone technology can detect and take such beautiful pictures. The colors are beautiful. Nice to see how the artist did it and process the pictures. I'm not art based but the video tugs at the heart strings, knowing that he is facing his hometown.

What is "smart" to you?

Smart is intelligence – to know how to do things on its own or to figure out quickly on your own.

What is a "smart nation" to you?

A city filled with machinery to make things faster and better for the people living in it.

Is Singapore a "smart nation" to you?

Yes. Everything can be done online e.g.

1) SingPass, 2) apps, 3) children use gateway apps. Everything can be done through the smart phone which makes it very convenient.

What do you not like about the smart nation? Or your concerns?

Things happen too quickly.

Sometimes the system/machine do not work

What if it breaks down one day?

Sometimes not user friendly

Difficult for the older generation.

**2. Ming**

20 September 2022

Impression of artworks

Like my wife, did not know that there were such particles going through the body every day. The artist must have taken a long time to research and come up with this system.

The video – the artist must miss his hometown a lot. At least, that's what I am sensing

What is "smart" to you?

Smart is intelligent. Can solve things quickly.

Is Singapore a "smart nation"?

Yes. Got QR code everywhere. SingPass also holds all of our details. Very efficient.

Yes, it's good because like during Covid, everyone can be tracked, to let us know where there is a Covid cluster. Then the government informs us daily through WhatsApp. Don't need to wait for newspaper. Everything is online.

What do you not like about it?

Sometimes not really sure how to do things online – maybe can be I am old. Need to ask for help from son and daughter. Changes come very quickly too.

Can we do better?

Maybe manual for old people like me.

**3. Hashita**

12 October 2022

Impression of artworks

I feel that Boedi's works are interesting in a way that it is scientifically related to our bodies as well as the gadgets that we often use.

I have studied about smartphone radiations but never could have thought about capturing it or abstracting it through art.

Some of his images before reading about the work

... can figure out they look like cells (body cells). But I also feel they are the radiations of the sun ... when sun rays are cast over a reflective surface.

What is "smart" to you in "smart city" mean to you?

I don't know if I am fully in agreement that we should live in a smart city ... as we tend to ignore our surroundings in a way that we humans are evolving but not with the other species.

So for me, we call it a smart city mainly due to our own convenience and comfort. Usually it's how fast the industry grows or how achievable they are with their tech capabilities.

It's just a new technical word that has become famous now – smart city. But I don't know what's so smart as we are rushing around like zombies.

I don't know a valid answer but I just feel that the more tech-oriented a country is, the more complicated it is to live. Complicated in a way that we are too dependent on the technologies.

What is a "smart nation" to you?

A city filled with machinery to make things faster and better for the people living in it.

What do you think a "smart nation" would be?

For us, the nation is smart when the govt take initiatives towards tech advancement. So from an Indian's perspective, Singapore is definitely a smart nation as it has been advancing towards a more tech integrated society.

But a smart nation should also be the one who considers that all the species (human/ non-human) can exist without hampering one another's space.

As for now, we have been making use of unlimited electronic components that might not be suitable or right for other organisms.

What do you like about smart nation happenings today in Singapore?

I do like the convenience and how it is integrated in a way that everything from transportation facilities to local apps all have been neatly designed for locals to move around easily in the county and live here.

But I do feel that due to this formulation, we are too dependent here, on the electrical controlled facilities. It might be a disadvantage for us.

Recently, I read the news that by 2028, a skyscraper to be built that will be integrated with all the facilities and greens, though it did tempt me initially but now I feel that such infrastructure might make us lazy? I feel it's their step toward a smart city and it does look rather appealing from the govt side.

What do you like about the smart city?

What I like about the smart nation is that here, almost the entire city has been wired with WiFi.

I feel that also an advantage living here because I can always be replying to the pending chats and work anywhere.

But this could also be the reason why we are so disconnected with our own surroundings.

What worries you?

Mainly that we have been evolving too fast without the consideration that we co-exist with other beings. We are leaving them behind but instead, we should move and grow along together. I feel we as humans will always be the dominating species here, we should for our own

benefit not affect the others to the extent that we become the reason for their extinction.

I have read a lot of articles where they state that our phone radiations and other electrical towers have been affecting especially the birds. Even though these radiations are invisible but they have managed to harm them as well as us. We have been witnessing a fall in the bird species and likewise for the others.

I also know that blue rays coming out from gadgets tend to harm our eyesight and even our skin. Why take pleasure in excessive of something that result in harming us/others?

Maybe usage of tech components are important. But we should try to limit the use and importance of it in our lives.

As we cannot completely demolish this habit, but we can try to lime use and importance of it in our lives and definitely improvise it. Our lives are too intertwined with tech that now to us more comfortable, robots have been introduced as another component ... and there already exists other such automatic elements. What if it replaces us in the future?

**4. Celia**

14 October 2022

What is “smart” in “smart city” mean to you?

IT-savvy city where most of their residents are linked to a modern device, where information flows can get to them rapidly.

It means apps for travel, for communications, for information collection, backend process in place for efficient city resources planning and monitoring e.g. roads, airports, waterways. What do you think a “smart nation” should be?

Savvy population, tech savvy – not just govt agencies and agendas but the average lay person on the street needs to be able to keep up with the tech. Tech is everything – data collection, dissemination, studies.

What do you like about smart nation happenings today in Singapore?

Cashless payment platforms. Transportation updates. First transmission of information to everyone.

What do you not like about the smart nation?

Everything is so fast, is there any wonder that anxiety rates are through the roof?

Hyper-vigilance because citizens don’t know what is coming next, and everything needs to move at a rapid pace to keep up.

That is a build-up of a lot of pressure there and mental health takes a toll. There are many pockets of people in society that cannot keep up with the rapid changes and I feel there isn’t enough “stand in the gap” and “close gap” measures.

What worries you?

Right now, we have to stand in the gap for our parents’ generations. Sure, they can now use WhatsApp, group chats, maybe even enjoy TikTok.

But their world started from radio, to black & white TV, to color TV and now to the digital age. I wonder what we will be in our lifetime. What would our children’s world look like, how would communication change?

Will we be the ones one day being left out and struggling to keep up.

**5. Lizzie Wee (artist/curator)**

17 October 2022

Impression of artworks

These photographs tells a story of a process, and truly need the narrative to be a part of their curation. I wonder how best to display or present them so that the story is delivered, not solely though text – the colors are very striking and suit the aesthetic sensibilities of the current zeitgeist which also would appeal to the curation decisions.

It is a series of works best shown in person rather than digital, to emphasize the relationships to our human bodies, in my humble opinion.

What is “smart” in “smart city” mean to you?

Smart always seems to refer to technology or its use in context of the building of the city in question.

I’d like to think it also means that this city is connected via means of the internet or technology to other communities and “smart cities”.

What do you think a “smart nation” should be?

A “smart nation” might be an alternative name to a city, but seems like more of an idea than a place. I think it should mean a nation of people interested in using technology to connect with other communities and to improve its citizens’ lives.

What do you like about smart nation happenings today in Singapore?

When things are designed for convenience and ease, things like using your smartphone to take any form of transport or never carrying cash is commonplace – it can save time and allow people to feel assured that our city is designed to make our lives easier and thus better.

What do you not like about the smart nation?

When things become so reliant on technology and data, we become trained to tap things rather than understand the processes in which the tapping has replace. When travelling or things break down in emergencies or other situations, the humans of a “smart nation” might not be so smart themselves if they aren’t familiar with how the technologies that we integrate into our daily lives actually work.

That is a build-up of a lot of pressure there and mental health takes a toll. There are many pockets of people in society that cannot keep up with the rapid changes and I feel there isn’t enough “stand in the gap” and “close gap” measures.

What worries you?

With regard to a “smart city”, I’m mostly worried about being too reliant on technology and larger institutions and corporations without fully understanding what we lose in blindly accepting them as status quo of our daily lives.

However, that being said, I also have hope that while technology is rapidly developing, most humans are also not the most adaptable to incorporating it when it isn’t already mainstream, so a healthy dose of people preferring more analog methods (older generation or lack of tech savvy) will also help to keep it in check.

**6. Wayne**

22 October 2022

What is “smart” in “smart city” mean to you?

Smart means that the city is supported with new technologies to make the lives of its residents easier.

What do you think a “smart nation” should be?

A smart nation means that every citizen is up to date and has access to new technology to make their lives easier.

What do you like about smart nation happenings today in Singapore?

I am not really sure exactly what smart nation happenings are but EasyLink is truly making things convenient and I guess the QR codes for Covid is really useful to track the pandemic. I guess.

What do you not like about the smart nation?

I do not appreciate that smart technology is used for other purposes other than the one stipulated, such as illegally tracking its residents.

What worries you?

Hackers and leaks from governmental bodies or databases would be much work for everyone. I don't know how secure our cybersecurity is at the moment as there have been multiple leaks from govt agencies in recent years. Also secretive tracking and monitoring of citizens would be a concern as well.

**7. A**

29 October 2022

What is “smart” in “smart city” mean to you?

Efficiency at its finest

What do you think a “smart nation” should be?

A society that utilizes technology to the benefit of their people and the surroundings.

What do you like about smart nation happenings today in Singapore?

It simplifies everyday tasks, making it super convenient to get daily personal chores and work more convenient

What do you not like about the smart nation?

That we don't know what exactly is being traced and recorded.

What worries you?

Unknown personal data that have already been extracted to be manipulated.

**FINAL RESPONSE**

7 November 2022

It was very interesting to discover the various concerns and viewpoints of different people in regards to the smart city. We cannot seem to deny that it is very convenient for the city to operate at a click of a mouse or the touch of a screen on the phone.

However, there seems to be concerns about tracking, tracing and also the difficulties of following up with the latest technology changes. This is especially so for the older generation that seem to be left behind.

Will be interesting to see how society will continue to morph and change and the government and society cope and respond to these changes.

# RESPONSES

**N.A.H.**

**FIRST RESPONSE**

A Smart City is not Smart Nation: a smart city seems to refer to the digital infrastructure/ technologies deployed in a city – things like Sensors, IoT, AI – technologies to optimize the administrating of a territory. A Smart Nation is a specifically Singaporean project, aimed at using digital technology to develop solutions for citizens in order to serve the objectives of the Nation.

What is Smart? Empty signifier? Just another iteration of the “city”. Ethics?  
Smart Nation: not just an urban planning project; making a nation.

Nation vs City: people/laws/state/collective

How much of the nation is constructed to be invisible? Future imagination  
Smart: as a “neutral” interface;  
noticeable, invisible

Ways of seeing/visibility:  
meeting with Jervon:  
what happens to data? Differences between previous use of census and data collection now  
*Alphatasia* (sign) as a metaphor (signifier):  
citizenship and the idea of “invisible” in determining belonging

Ways of not seeing/invisibility:  
Marginal: Invisibilities as a way of living with each other  
Climate change

Promethean discourse: humans can solve anything with technology

Smart Nation as co-created; top-down/ bottom-up  
Co-creation tools: Smart City builders, GovTech: Tech kakis  
Visited URA Smart Gallery:

Drones, experts vs residents  
History: (long history, many differences, “smart”/“tech” related masterplans, “whole-of-govt” vs “whole-of-nation” efforts; Singapore has history of best practice in this space (e.g. RFID tech in libraries/first in the world).  
Apps: Pre-emptive surveillance tech. A lot of technology deployed; can be used when there is an emergency such as Covid. Lite SG, Trace Together, SingPass.

Smart Nation Ambassadors  
History. Smart Nation, technological transformation must serve a purpose

Smart Surveillance  
Hard and soft power  
Dystopian or as an extension of state care, as apparatus of state care (for elderly, to protect against crime, to keep marginal/ “unwanted” people from occupying or accessing public spaces.

How do we appear as visible to the state? Data, surveillance tech

Worry: that western ideas of a Smart City and what it entails, how it should be judged/assessed will be applied indiscriminately to places like Singapore. Unnecessary and unhelpful. Sovereignty will depend on defining what is flourishing smart city looks like in our own country.

What is a territory? Issue of volumetric sovereignty

FINAL RESPONSE

Use of technology/the digital transformation can be seen as bring about dystopia, but a lot about what transformation will feel like depends on how we perceive it.

Between utopia and dystopia are elements of visibility/invisibility, state/sovereign relations, use of ideology/perception. How smart citizens engage with the Smart Nation will determine how they perceive, and accept it, and if it feels like utopia or not.

How do we communicate with Smart Nation to citizens? How do we deliver on its promises in ways that people perceive and trust?

RESPONSES

Not Wei Teck

11 September 2022

FIRST RESPONSE

Not sure how the two sets of artworks relate to “Smart Nation”.  
I like Path 12 more than Path 11; meaningful performance piece.

For Path 11:

Can the photography of muons be transformed into better visual representation?  
Why not use other imaging method?  
Audiences that Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities might relate to the artworks differently from those who didn’t.

RESPONSES

1. Not Wei Teck’s mother

17 September 2022

Abstract works.  
Artist tries to encourage audiences to come up with meanings.  
Like Path 11 image #1 [Olinda (2022)] and image #2 [Marozia (2022)] visually.

2. Beth

24 October 2022

The use of scientific theory in the production of interesting from one perspective but the prevalence of black, despite the splashes of

rainbow colors, creates a fairly mundane presentation.

3. Nina

24 October 2022

On the writeup: It is written in a way that is intentionally confusing, such that the purpose and statement of the artist is unclear.  
The artist takes issue with the smart nation initiative and the clarity of what this means in real terms.

On the art pieces: A title and statement that has no correlation with the visuals. Invoking confusion from the use of technology which does not provide value.

My impression of the artist’s works: He is mocking the efforts of smart nation initiatives.  
As a statement, the art-piece execution is too far away from the subject matter. A viewer of the art pieces will not be able to relate it to the subject with the writeup.

As an artist statement, I find that it is too weak.

4. Kan

24 October 2022

On the writeup: The writeup is written in such a way that confuse the reader/viewer. I can’t follow the creator’s train of thought especially with regards to his stroll and the smart nation initiative.

The research about the smart nation initiative remain extremely surface level, without making a further effort to understand deeply the effort taken to implement smart nation.  
TLDR (too long; didn’t read): fluff, no substance, trying to be controversial.

On the art-pieces: Image #1 Olinda (2022) This is a logo of Figma [edit: https://www.figma.com], with a gaussian blur treatment on top. The rest of the art pieces remain too abstract for any viewer to relate to the pieces.

Would not recommend, introduction does not related strongly with the execution.

5. Archimboldo

27 October 2022

I am curious where Paths 1 to 10 lie.  
Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities never ceases to pique one’s imagination. How were the images paired?  
Beautiful light. Are these “cities”?  
Beautifully cinematic.  
Where is the origin of the river?  
A lot of black. A lot of darkness ...  
And then, trees!!  
Olinda, a magnifying glass ... sounds like looking at muons.

# RESPONSES

## Shirley Soh

11 September 2022

### FIRST RESPONSE within 24 hours:

The first overall impression of Boedi’s work, after a day of rumination, was how clever Boedi was with his response to the topic, Smart Nation. He refused to define or attempt to describe it. And I thought what kind of a mind starts with this island’s sloganeering to end with a more esoteric topic – MUONS! Oh boy, that caught me (us?) off-guard, on a flight of fantasy on the subject – MUON – and no longer Smart Nation. Muons, cosmic rays; questions flew: are they harmful, not harmful to humans? have they always existed even before Smart Nation and “hi-tech” applications (radio-wave, ICTs)? are they something new because of the rampant crowded radio-wave/ICT atmosphere? how will MUONS be harnessed now that their existence have been discovered? and so on and so forth.

### Past first 24 hours, 1-ish am:

I wanted to go to sleep, but the thoughts kept churning. Let’s take a step back from thinking about MUONS. What were Boedi’s intentions behind the work?

Ahhhhhh, I think I got it. He was performing “smart” nation, at a deep level, not as the consumerist, optimistically tech-crazed, obedient citizen who embraces hi-tech for economic survival.

Boedi was performing “smart”, discovering for himself the work (or universe) beyond smartphones, smart homes, robot-assisted living.

He was performing “smart” but in a modest way, and he has even given us a crash course on an aspect of the cosmos hidden from us.

### The next day after the 24-hour response:

How do I feel now about Smart Nation and Boedi’s work? My usual response to Smart Nation would be to inveigh against its ill while still enjoying and benefitting from smart tech (in my limited, consumerist way). Boedi’s work made me feel less pessimistic about living in an increasingly hi-tech environment. Rather, his approach made me feel more equanimous, although not less critical, about this island’s push towards a more hi-tech future. In fact, to accept and use the conveniences they offer, just as long as I remember to continue to be more human than a robot!

### RESPONDENTS

#### 1. Conversation with Jon Chan

26 Oct 2022

**Jon:** The main thing usually when I think about work right now is to ask questions around the subject of the artist, like the most important question is where the artist is coming from. So, what I find most peculiar about Boedi is he keeps

trying to reach back to his home, specifically the home he comes from, Indonesia. But he does it in a round and about way. He doesn’t go and take direct references. Most artists will just find photographs and deal with it, like straight out. But for Boedi, somehow in his work, there’s always this chasm; he is always talking about this distantiation. I was talking to him once also and remember asking: “why is it always so far, this distance between you and your subject matter?” If I remember correctly, he said it was simply how he operates and that he agreed with what I was pointing out. It is very peculiar, but it is Boedi. You see what I’m saying? So, this whole idea of technology - and I see how it’s interesting that you can find his own tendency with something that’s a larger phenomenon - which is you’re looking at Smart Nation and how ... that technology is becoming something like tunnel vision. It’s like trying to navigate through a blackout when we’re trying to interconnect with the internet and something more human and personal at the same time. There’s a gap that he’s making you recognize. Boedi is in a funny way trying to bring back the body, by simultaneously questioning its role in relation to technology while remaining sincere in regards to its relevance and he uses all these devices to help us to frame this relationship, but always with a sense in his work that there is this chasm.

**Shirley:** So, it’s quite interesting maybe because it’s straying away from Smart Nation, but the idea of home and how you say most people will go direct – photographs, artefacts, belongings, right? But for him, there is a conscious yearning for home, but there is also this chasm, which is exactly why we long for home.

**Jon:** Yeah.

**Shirley:** Because of this chasm, right?

**Jon:** Yeah.

**Shirley:** But he doesn’t eliminate it. So, I thought that was an interesting point you made. Because it makes you really look at anything, right? How we can tend to look at a thing ...

**Jon:** ... how we look at a thing. Yes, even if the person is right in front ... like my mom is in front of me, yet there’s still a chasm.

**Shirley:** Okay, so in this work, I mean to me, I was quite bowled over by the fact that his response to Smart Nation made him do this series of research, and then suddenly discovers this phenomenon that has always existed, but never part of the common mind, common understanding, right? So that was one thing that I felt very impressed with is this kind of research, that he discovered something bigger. Something bigger like this that it doesn’t really include us. I mean, we are completely nobody here, right? So that was one thing that impressed me. Then the other thing I begin to wonder is: he’s now bringing his aesthetics, he’s just trying to show it exists.

**Jon:** So, there is another thing that I observed which is he is quiet, in a sense. But he’s not rhetorical. The work has references but he’s not trying to make a commentary but what he’s trying to say I think is similar to what Jonathan Nichols would be talking about, Jonathan is a fellow correspondent Boedi and I share, Jonathan would be talking about how there are these forces that are outside the technology, yet somehow it still travels through the technology. You see, so the technology, what is considered as smart, might not actually catch the whole thing... it’s still a framework, it’s still ... a utilitarian issue.

It might become something like ... okay ... this is a bit farfetched. Ghostbusters. It’s technology, they use technology to catch the ghosts. But the ghosts are beyond the technology. But somehow the technology gets roped into it and it gets kind of assimilated into it.

**Shirley:** That’s the Hollywood part!

**Jon:** You know what I mean, the devices, the technology but this is something related to the muons.

**Shirley:** So, in the end, of course, I got quite carried away with the muon thing and his doing this (points to the photograph). Then I had to think: Okay, in the end so he’s gone beyond even the criticising, like you say being rhetorical about what is Smart Nation. I mean, it’s part of the earlier conversation we had; you know, you yourself trying to get to the bigger picture.

**Jon:** I mean, the question is where does it end? This is something that I think is a separate conversation. What is Boedi’s ultimate goal? Is he trying to validate universalism, some universalist ideas, or is it just pure science? Or is he simply resolving this as an artist and less as a theorist?

**Shirley:** So how do we come back to ... like the everyday, the common person in the street? Yes, I now know about muons, but ...

**Jon:** How does it relate to them? Is that it?

**Shirley:** How does it relate even to us every day. So, he has kind of used a very transcendent approach, which is not invalid, but why ...

**Jon:** There is something transcendental to it that already sits with the everyday. In the ordinary, these particles exist amongst us right now. In and out.

**Shirley:** Yah, but how do we come back now to look at Smart Nation. That’s all.

**Jon:** Yeah, I see what you mean.

**Shirley:** My quick comments in 24 hours after viewing Boedi’s work was: “oh, boy, Boedi, you’re

so smart”. He has performed Smart Nation. He has gone beyond Smart Nation and performed Smart Nation, you know what I mean. He has sound ... beyond all this ... because the Smart Nation is basically consumerism.

**Jon:** It’s not smart, it’s consumerist nation. [Shirley laughs]. Just change the name.

**Shirley:** So, you see, you have really been smarter than Smart Nation.

**Jon:** I think that’s what art aspires to, to meet that intelligent and inquisitive viewer. It’s just that the fundamental frustration will always be there, which is the real issue we are talking about here. You can’t program sincerity and appreciation into a person, you can’t make them ‘smart’ about Art systematically through an app. I think Boedi’s work addresses these issues simply by making his work based on the pre-existing intentions he’s always had. His Art doesn’t fall prey to a lack of ‘smarts’ by serving the pressing issues at hand directly. It’s like he continues to move forward and they get addressed by default anyway.

**2. Tini Aliman**

31 Oct 2022

Muons, invisible energy field as presented in Boedi’s work, can be likened to sound wave properties. When experienced in different settings coupled with various thoughts and belief systems, it’s a sensorial occurrence, not limited to one’s hearing but also bodily responses. Like how sound therapy comes in contact with different parts of the body, Boedi captures physical images of those invisible energies, providing depiction o human comprehension.

**3. LDB**

2 November 2022

“Smart people doing/saying things that alienate some others.”

**4. Ji Hyun Kim**

3 November 2022

What is muon doing on our Earth? They sound very cute, first of all. But the fact that it penetrates our body sounds a bit scary. Now we live in a time where we can keep track of all these invisible molecules (?) which we aren’t even sure about how they affect our world and us. But surely they would affect us somehow. Even though we think we’re the ones who make our own decisions, but it could also be an influence of weather, sudden hormone changes or the words my mom said to me just now. I don’t know. Humans have developed so many philosophies and technologies, scientific discoveries to make sense of the mystery of the universe, but it seems it was not enough to provide an understandable narrative of the world. Or maybe it’s to find a blue ocean to make a new market using these small particles. Who knows. But knowing something exists, but when it is not visible or tangible, gives us the tension in our minds. ^^ Ji Hyun Kim

**5. Rachel**

3 November 2022

Prior to this response, I’ve not thought much about the words “smart nation”. Perhaps because we are so in-tuned to technology, a convenience that has become an everyday necessity. I remember a few weeks ago, there was an infamous event that struck WhatsApp, and in that few minutes, the app that we were very much reliant for communication, was down. Did it make a big impact? Perhaps to some, yes. Looking at Boedi’s work and his visual renderings

and capture of muons, invisible by present ... could we also be oblivious to this technological advancement that could one day be more visible than it ever was? Passing through bodies like it never existed, yet very much needed.

**6. Johnson Tang**

5 November 2022

Seeing the invisible  
Curing our blindness  
Radiation -> sound

Is Smart Nation smart?  
Is IT information overload?  
Use smart nation sensors smarter.  
Don’t collect information blindly.  
Collect information only if you need to use it.  
Consider data collection ethics.  
Use human as filter.  
See what is needed to manage in Smart Nation.

**7. Shafie**

5 November 2022

SMART nation – a promise for innovation and beauty, but it also entails other aspects that are not immediately recognized.

Aspects of the “invisible”, the invisible muon signals unbeknownst to the naked eye.

SMART nation also has made surveillance efficient, with us exchanging convenience for lack of privacy. Surveillance cameras, giving permission to apps to have access to our private information, etc. Most of us take it for granted about the lack of privacy. Just like the radiation permeating our bodies, how much or are we aware that the promise of SMART nation idea has negative implication on our wellbeing?

Should we also look to disengage from technology to manage our mental wellbeing,

rather than being too attached to it? Having good work-life boundaries, etc?

**8. Lee Chin Sin**

8 November 2022

I have to confess to not being in the least clued in to the idea of a Smart Nation. Being confronted with the task of understanding the concept in relation to Boedi Widjaja's Path series left me even more befuddled. All the greater the pity, since I find the series presenting elementary particles in a tangible form visually and conceptually intriguing.

**FINAL RESPONSE**

11 November 2022

1.30pm

The topic of Smart Nation seemed to irk my respondents more than it excited them, but still, most obliged to respond in some way. However, one respondent, who didn't eventually participate, said very quickly: "I never think about it". End of conversation. For all those who responded, I thank them kindly for their time.

The topic solicited more negative than positive responses, and in the short encounter, it was difficult to unpick the more complex and subtle ambivalences the respondents have to Smart Nation. I could even detect many reactions to be quite visceral – a slight twitching of the facial muscles, a slow furrowing of the brow, even a sigh. Personally, I myself have quite a visceral reaction that I don't try to hide when the phrase, Smart Nation, is brought up.

So what is about Smart Nation that causes a discomfort that's quite hard to articulate. It

seems as if to voice any negative feedback would be interpreted and perceived as "stupid".

I have many critical views about the invasion of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) applications in our daily and personal life, and I have found such reactions quickly "date" me from the receiver's perspective, especially if they are young, tech-savvy, and frequent users of social media.

Of course, ICTs are here and will never go away and I am thankful to many of their applications that have made my life "easier".

Am I smarter? Question mark! Question mark! Question mark!

Has the quality of my life improve? Question mark! Question mark! Question mark!

Like Boedi rightfully said in his presentation (and I hope I recollect it correctly), something to the effect that I don't know what "smart nation" means, so I decided to do my own thing. And he did.

There's no question that Boedi creatively engaged with his newfound subject in response to Smart Nation.

In fact, I thought as I had first reflected, how clever he was to perform the "smart" in Smart Nation. For whatever his response to the interactions and mediations of ICTs in our daily live, I thought: here is an artist truly claiming his own agency to a complex and inescapable feature of our lives.

Maybe Boedi isn't irked about Smart Nation and what it all means to our sense of being and actual daily negotiations. At least, I can't gather any of this from his two Path works.

What does Boedi care about Smart Nation in an everyday sense of negotiating life? Is this too pedestrian a preoccupation for a work of art?

Maybe it is too difficult a subject for the visual arts to handle or too slippery, too huge and complex to grapple with.

I wonder then if the work is too "smart" for the viewer to connect to the topic of Smart Nation. If the work is about "cosmic rays particles," muons themselves as material, making the invisible visible, then the work is a historical continuation of the artist's preoccupation to visualise through his tools, apparatuses, materials and processes what's not obvious to the naked eye. And this "what's not obvious to the naked eye" is not necessarily an object (like a muon) but it could be a way of thinking something that is not valid after being received wisdom for a long time. I guess the whole of art history (Western) has been a venture (and adventure) of making the invisible visible.

In truth, I found the abstraction of Path 11 a little too straightforward to the point of foreclosing much or most of the curiosity about muons; cleverly the use of quotes from Calvino's *Invisible Cities* prepared the viewer to go beyond the surface. But I am not sure if the artwork then becomes too reliant on text to compensate for a more sensorial encounter. It would thus be interesting to find out more about the transition from Path 11 to Path 12. How it happened? Why did the work change to a video performance? Even how was the poem translated through muons and sound?

The work changed completely. There's a living body and it's moving gracefully; there's a forest and the passage of time reflected with the change of light; there's a most intriguing sound

instrument like a drum and there's sound, rhythmic and hypnotic.

The end.

RESPONSES

Mike Wong  
10 September 2022

I think fundamentally, Smart Nation is about the world a better place.  
Smart Nation works when it works, without being seen. Unless it breaks down, no one should even be aware of its presence.

RESPONSES

- 1. MY  
Smart Nation is an experiment; it leaves people who are not tech savvy behind.
- 2. Thoughts & Conversations from others  
QR Code



PEER DIALOGUE

Exactly Foundation Residency  
No. 19  
Boedi Widjaja – *Path. 11 Blindness*



PRESENTATION

11<sup>th</sup> September 2022, 3pm-4pm  
Objectifs - Centre for Photography & Film,  
155 Middle Road, S188977.

Boedi Widjaja presents his explorations into the cosmic ray particles muons, and his research process that culminated in the experimental photographic series *Path. 11, Blindness\** and his performance for the video *Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙\*\**

WALKABOUT

Photography brief - imaging the *hidden*  
1.5km leisurely walk: see Kwan Im Tho Temple, to start of Rochor Canal at Sungei Road, pass the Muslim Cemetery and to Hotel Boss.

DINNER

The Hainan Story Chapter One, 500 Jln Sultan,  
#01-09 Hotel Boss, S199020

\* Special thanks to Marek Knap of CREDO, Institute of Nuclear Physics in Krakow, Poland, for his code to filter the muonic signals; and to Prof. Hiroyuki Tanaka, University of Tokyo, for his consultation generously extended.

\*\* *Path. 12, River Origin 浪淘沙* was commissioned by BIO:ART SEA:T (Southeast Asia Taiwan) curated by Tang Fu Kuen with the support of Exactly Foundation and National Arts Council Creation Grant. Videographer - Harry Chew. Producer - Audrey Koh.

An inconvenient truth is hidden in this picture. I was drawn to this untouched greenery, a small plot of land just metres away from the hustle and bustle of this prime location. The migrant workers have chosen to remain 'hidden' and away from the glitz and shiny high rise buildings that they have built in return for meagre salaries. Did we choose not to 'see' the inequality and continue with our busy lives as usual, pretending everything is ok? Have we also forgotten about the history of these places?



Pogo is a fictional character in a short story of mine that will be published this fall. He approaches his work with mischievousness, skepticism and even a bit of a sense of maliciousness. He works in IT in a Singapore hospital and is aware of SmartNation.

In a recent walk on the way to work, he took the following photos and made some notes on his phone.



Are these traces of muons? Boedi's work makes me think about scale (Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Lessons of Physics*) and interactions (Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*).

A kind of marvelling at the everyday ...

... that nonetheless is juxtaposed with the SmartNation.



Above suspicion?



Who will watch the watchmen?  
(Assuming we get that far?)



Prematurely Ageing  
Data Centre

Is Hipstamatic acting as a sort  
of hacker version of the filter/  
receiver Boedi constructed to  
detect Muons with a mobile  
phone? Detecting the ageing  
process before its time; adding  
a touching nostalgia?



Technology is neither neutral nor blind. Its  
development, use and consequence are  
complicated to foresee.

## ADELENE NG

17 September 2022

### *Hidden Beauty*

There are many ongoing construction projects in Singapore. From the chaos and rubble,  
will arise a thing of beauty.



A gray pall settles without the golden rays of the sun. A reflection of the world we now live in, waiting.



In January 2020, the Exactly Foundation commissioned Boedi Widjaja to look into Smart Nation, Singapore's digitalisation drive. The pandemic that followed pointed him sharply towards the invisible, the unseen that nonetheless marked us deeply. Amidst the uncertain period of lockdowns, accelerated technological adoption and mass mRNA vaccinations, Boedi contemplated notions of invisibility and impalpable intensities. He worked with cosmic ray muons as material, and his research culminated in experimental photography and moving-image projects: **Path. 11, Blindness** and **Path. 12, River Origin** 浪淘沙.

9<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial (2018-19) and the 6<sup>th</sup> Singapore Biennale (2019-20). He presented projects in *Future Ages will Wonder* (2021), FACT Liverpool; *Cladogram: KMA's 2<sup>nd</sup> Int'l. Juried Biennial* (2021), Katonah Museum of Art, New York, awarded First Prize; and *MAP1: Waterways* (2017), Diaspora Pavilion, 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Recent solo exhibitions include *Kang Ou* 侠客行 (2022), Esplanade Tunnel, Singapore; *Declaration of* (2019), Helwaser Gallery, New York; and *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air* (2018), ShanghART Singapore.

The interdisciplinary projects explore embodied languages, and the human dimensions that lie beyond bio-technological visions. Boedi developed new photographic processes for *Blindness*. The images were described by renowned muography scientist Professor Hiroyuki Tanaka, University of Tokyo, as the world's first fine-art muography that he has seen, and were presented by Boedi at the scientific forum, Muographers General Assembly 2022.

**Boedi Widjaja's** art contemplates on house, home and homeland through long-running, interdisciplinary series developed in parallel. His approach is often autobiographical and oblique. Drawing as a method is a defining element; expressed through diverse media from experimental photography and architectural installations to bio art and live art, with an emphasis on process and bodily engagement. Boedi received the inaugural QAGOMA and Singapore Art Museum co-commission, for the

The keynote essay, *Hide and Seek*, is by **Hao Guang Tse**, who is the author of *The International Left-Hand Calligraphy Association* (Tinfish Press, 2023). He edited the new edition of Wong May's *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* (Ethos Books, 2023). His poems and essays appear in *Poetry*, *Poem-a-Day*, *The Yale Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Entropy* and elsewhere.

**Exactly Foundation** is a not-for-profit, trademark registered label established by Li Li Chung to commission photographers to create works that stimulate discussion of social concerns in Singapore. Exactly's goal is to produce new knowledge by having viewers engage with the photographs and share them with friends and family over a two-three-month period.

