

**Exactly Foundation – Residency #11 – *Commonplace* by Jason Wee
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**Artist's Statement
7th January 2019**

Commonplace is inspired by Arthur Yap's poetry, as well as the furtive, coded, partially hidden walks, postures and other moves that queers make in order to claim and revise the normative orientations of public space as their own. In particular, it was the poet Cyril Wong's reading of Yap's 'gaudy turnout' as a negotiation with 'a (homo)erotics of space in Singapore' that suggests to me the potential correspondences between the movement of queer bodies through public spaces and the difficult, private disclosures of emotion, desire and self.

I think of this as an anagram, a coded syntax, and I am interested in the ways that photographs might help plot this syntax. Taking it further, Yap's poem suggests to me not only the descriptions of sexualized movement but also the specific coordinates of urban spaces in Singapore. I think of the ways in which photographs can map these spaces, but also the furtiveness of the desires there, the secret lives behind the already secretive behavior, their despondencies, hesitations, sexual preoccupations.

There are a few of these sites that has persisted over the decades since I came out as a teenager, and a handful of new spots in Chinatown, Suntec City and a couple of other public places. Each, by now, is crossed and re-crossed by different demographics of men. The Chinatown building, for example, is visited by the 'uncles', the older Chinese men of retirement age, generally greying hair, in fading polo or golf shirts and plain shorts. The park by the reservoir, on the other hand, sees mostly men in their twenties, dressed as though they are there for a run or a hike, in conveniently small shorts and singlets. Some things remain true these past twenty years; the speed of one's walk through these spaces, more than the direction of one's gaze, signals the secret intent. What is new to me are the small squares of light visible even in the deep dark as the men, killing time when no one of their interest is near, playing on their Android or Apple phones.

I focused on these two spots: East Coast Park and 'a Northern Reservoir'. I'm reluctant to disclose any more, partly for the safety of the men who rely on the invisibilities of these spaces from the wider public. I was lucky enough to have a little more time in this Exactly residency, since the men only arrive a few nights a week at the most.

I learned a few things: for some men, this corner in the park or the reservoir is the only gay life they know. They have no friends outside of these spaces, and whatever friends they have in these spaces are a little less than beer buddies (they often don't know each other's names), and a little more than strangers (they share more than small talk). One man met his first gay man at the reservoir, and has never met a couple who made their lives together. For a range of reasons, [*sic*: dating/social] apps don't work for these men. They may be married with children, or living with family who never knew who their sons and brothers want as sexual or romantic partners. They may also find the needs expressed on the apps already too normative, too quick to mirror heterosexual norms. Many have decided that the apps are already too much disclosure for anyone living in Singapore.

What is constant is the mix of hesitation and suspicion, a necessary affect for moving through these spaces that still have police or security presence, but I recognize also as a psychic defence for living queer in Singapore. They come to these places because for an hour or three they can move and act without suspicion or question. Each crossing of the carpark an unspoken sentence, each look sideways punctuation, the accelerating or slowing of their steps a syntax. This may be a choreography, but it is less a dance than a embodied diagram/legend that unlocks the map of possibilities in both our public spaces and their sexual selves. These men find something in common with another, in a place that, however tentatively, they can claim as their own.