

**Exactly Foundation – Residency #13 – Plasticity by Ernest Goh
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**Word from the ‘Wart’
16th February 2019**

What is “green”? There’s the color green, which is as soothing as blue and opposite of fiery red.

Trees, foliage are mostly green. I like this subtitle – “Some Kind of Green” in Yahoo News’ *Five Singapore statistics that stunned in 2018*: “The Botanic Gardens are a UNESCO World Heritage site and almost half the city is under green cover, but we are undeniably wasteful. The 820 million plastic supermarket bags that Singapore uses each year could fill Gardens by the Bay 126 times over. Only about 2 per cent of those bags are recycled.”²

We can eat green: organic, vegan although I am not fond of eating only uncooked, cold food and I can only take so much of shrivelled, air-dried vegetables and portobello mushrooms pretending to be hamburger buns.

This looks positive: “The Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) has designated 2019 as the Year Towards Zero Waste”.³ The statistic quoted: “Of the 1.6 million tonnes of domestic waste disposed in 2017, one third consisted of packaging waste (includes plastics)”. Zero is good, right? To me, zero has an artificial “feel good” ring to it. If whatever you consume is burnt up/recycled 100%, net net it’s zero.

So, the official posture gives the impression that our problem in Singapore is mostly about not recycling enough. In fact, some argue that we don’t have a plastic waste problem, it’s only “11 per cent of the total waste generated in Singapore in 2017”.⁴ What about the demand side, are we overconsuming plastic material? We would not have to recycle so much if we did not use so much in the first place (a stunning 2017 stat: 7.7 million tonnes of waste were produced in Singapore, a seven-fold increase from 40 years ago).⁵ The Zero Waste press release says: “Of the 1.6 million tonnes of domestic waste disposed in 2017, one-third consisted of packaging waste (includes plastics)”. So we are advised to “... avoid single-use disposables where possible. Bring your own reusable bags, containers and utensils. Choose products with less/green packaging”. That “green” word again. Green also means dissolving miraculously back into nature without harming it or any living thing.

But wait, there’s another color: blue. “Launch of the Singapore Blue Plan 2018!”, which is an impressive 230-page document on what to do about protecting marine life.⁶ At around the same time, a motion to charge for plastic bags was rejected in Parliament.⁷ A side thought on fighting diabetes: drink more water to cut back on sweet drinks. Connected topics?

Will we Singaporeans only get excited when microplastics show up inside our food? Ernest Goh’s *Plasticity* project talks about what we don’t see: the microplastic bits that marine life mistakes for food. Makes one think carefully about eating fish as a healthier alternative to meat. It is not conclusive that consuming fish meat carrying microplastics is directly harmful to humans, causing malfunction of our organs. Do we need such hard evidence before we buck up and do something about how much plastic material we are using and throwing away? It’s showing up: “Toxic bacteria found on small pieces of plastic trash from S’pore beaches”.⁸

The tough question is how are we to behave? How do we stop using so much plastic? Is it enough, just shouting to get people to do the right thing? Should we be *made to* stop using so much plastic?

My favorite plastic gripe is the sale of bottled water (nearly 30% of discarded plastic items)⁹. I think we should stop selling them. But, in Singapore, it is not as easy as carrying water from home in your own bottle. It is about finding where in Singapore to refill them. And on that, we are sorely behind other countries. Not only are drinking water dispensers hard to find around Singapore, restaurants and pubs will not refill your water bottle if you just want walk in and ask. Nearly all beverage vendors in hawker centers/food courts charge 30cents for a cup of boiled water. For many, it’s a WTF moment. Nowhere else except in Singapore, do I cringe at possibly getting scolded for asking for water from a food or beverage vendor. Would it be easy for the government to give a tax break to F&B businesses to allow them to give out free water? If we can ban chewing gum in one fell swoop, we can ban selling plastic bottled water, no?

What can we safely eat? That portobello mushroom bun doesn’t look so comical after all.

¹ ‘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”. Thought “Stalwart” carried too much adult responsibility ... ‘Wart will do.

² “Five Singapore statistics that stunned in 2018”. Yahoo News Singapore 27th December 2018. <https://sg.yahoo.com/news/five-singapore-statistics-stunned-2018-023300403.html>

³ <https://www.mewr.gov.sg/news/2019-is-singapores-year-towards-zero-waste>

⁴ Aw Boon Jun. “Zero plastic bags or zero waste? In defence of Singapore’s rejection of a plastic bag ban”. <https://www.eco-business.com/opinion/zero-plastic-bags-or-zero-waste-in-defence-of-singapores-rejection-of-a-plastic-bag-ban/>

⁵ Source: Ministry of Environment and Water Resources. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/running-reusable-cups-reduce-waste?>

⁶ <https://www.iyor2018.org/news/launch-singapore-blue-plan-2018/>

⁷ Robin Hicks. “Singapore environment ministry pushes back against MP’s proposal to cut single-use plastic and tax bags”. <https://www.eco-business.com/news/singapore-environment-ministry-pushes-back-against-mps-proposal-to-cut-single-use-plastic-and-tax-bags/>

⁸ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/toxic-bacteria-found-small-pieces-plastic-trash-singapores-beaches?cid=emarsys-today>

⁹ 470 million bottles out of 1.76 billion discarded plastic items (Singapore Environment Council study 2018). <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/drink-tap-students-mission-cut-bottled-water-consumption?>