

# Liquid territory

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Monica Ursina Jäger

*Monica Ursina Jäger is a Swiss artist living in London and Zurich. Working in drawing, sculpture and installation, her practice unfolds through a multidisciplinary reflection on concepts of space, landscape, and architecture that investigates the relationship between the natural and the constructed environment. Fluctuating between the intuitive, narrative and factual Jäger scrutinises processes of transformation, re-arrangement and mediation by unfixing the boundaries between artistic and scientific knowledge production. Recent works address the ambiguities connected to post-natural landscapes and the uncertainties related to geopolitics, natural resources and the Anthropocene. In the following text, she reflects on her ongoing research into sand trade and land reclamation, as exemplified in the paradigmatic case study of Singapore. Singapore, located at the tip of the Malaysian territory and politically severed from the mainland since its independence in 1965, has been pursuing a policy of territorial expansion onto the sea. The topographical environment is rebuilt from scratch by human cranes as new coasts and new lands emerge from the depth of the ocean to serve the state's global position and economic networks.*

One quarter of Singapore's current island-state's land area has been artificially built. Starting with smaller projects under British colonial rule, land reclamation quickly became key to Singapore's development with newly produced land areas, increasing exponentially in size after the country's independence in 1965. Sand has not only shaped the island-state's urban form but also nearly every segment of its development. An essential material component of concrete, the sand supplied by the transnational sand trading industry has effectively fuelled the country's public housing program, which supplies housing to most Singaporean residents. The steady flow of sand across national borders has been central to the development of a repertoire of char-

acteristic political and regulatory strategies that shaped Singapore's urban and national identity, while also exerting a strong influence on regional and global geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> The Island, once a hilly, densely forested place of tropical life, has shape-shifted. The rivers once were flanked by mangrove swamps and green hills, and what now are busy inland streets of circulation were once beach roads that hugged the sea. Hill after hill was cut and its soil transported to the shores; my mother still remembers the buckets of gravel passing by the windows in front of her childhood home in Bedok, the mountains translocated by conveyor belts. In the case of Singapore, the Hinterland is not just the supplier of goods and labour forces, it was physically cut and projected into the coastal sea. In tidal movements barges of sand travel in and out the mega-port, load after load. What once was a slender sandbar in Cambodia, full of maritime life and cultural residues, has been washed and turned into an aggregate. Once it reaches its destination, it is transformed into coastal earthworks of uniform stratification to further expand the territory. History, culture and geographical distinctiveness are drained from the sand in the process. The songs of the fisherman that once resided in the natural material vanish.

The practices of land mining, trade of natural resources such as sand and gravel are not specific to Southeast Asia, it happens all around the world. Today, we know that sand is not a renewable resource and the global consumption of sand for land reclamation and construction exceeds the natural deposits. We will soon run out of sand. At the same time, land, once an intransigent thing, is being eroded and expanded. Grounded states dissolve into liquid spaces. Singapore is part of a global enterprise and regularly serves as a case study for urban development and economic growth. Global capitalism and culture have emphasised comparison, similarity and homogenisation. Instead of feeding into this global uniformity, I suggest investigating the micro-geographical conditions of Singapore, found in local ecologies, and their specific social impacts. Engaging with urban development through artistic research means engaging outside of traditional classifica-

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the scientific contributions by architect Hans Hortig to the art installation *Liquid Territory* by Monica Ursina Jäger. Hortig was a member of Architecture of Territory, a research project led by Prof. Milica Topalovic at ETH Future Cities Laboratory Singapore, focusing on the multiple territorial imprints of cities and using the island-state of Singapore as one of her research cases. Accessed 15 July 2020, [https://topalovic.arch.ethz.ch/materials/hinterland/](https://topalovic.arch.ethz.ch/materials/hinterland;).

tions such as genre, type and style, and concentrating instead on means of assembly and juxtapositions, where natural and built elements begin their own conversations in specific places. These sites are particular and singular and their description should not eradicate their individuality. Landscape, architecture and urbanism always exist in strong relationships with political systems and social conditions. Land management and urban development are most of all cultural practices. Identifying and mapping the correlations between ecologies, politics and aesthetics of territories allows for a re-construction of places.

The project *Liquid Territory* is an ongoing artistic research project into sand mining, sand trade and land reclamation, and their ecological and geo-political implications. Through researching academic archives, the National Archives of Singapore, conducting interviews with local residents, visual mapping of coastal territories and correspondences with UN Environmental Programme and researchers of the ETH Future Cities Laboratory Singapore, I amassed a diverse collection of visual and text-based material. In an artistic transformation process, these source materials are translated into a poetological structure by combining, collaging, layering, and paraphrasing the source material. The text above is an excerpt of the artistic text and part of an art installation. It consists of a wooden structure composed of different table-like layers, which display photographs, collages, poems and scientific texts, as well as actual sand samples. Wood, concrete, and glass surfaces at different heights allow the elements to fold into each other and create a complex collage of material, content, and impressions. This encourages a non-linear reading of the fragments, highlighting the impression of a multi-perspective space. The installation evokes the metropolis as a global hub that is stripped from historical and cultural peculiarity. The installation reflects on alternate hinterlands, their shape-shifting qualities and the manner through which we can think of them as a multi-layered, three-dimensional structure.

The first chapter was conceived as part of a research residency at the NTU Centre of Contemporary Arts Singapore in collaboration with Hans Hortig ETH FutureCities Laboratory Singapore and was first presented in the exhibition *Hinterland – The Eyes of the Lighthouse* at Corner College Zurich in 2019, curated by Anne-Laure Franchette and Gabriel Gee. Since then it has been extended by additional chapters based in Switzerland and the United Kingdom, and been presented as a 3 x 4 m installation at Helmhaus Zurich and Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur.

*Fig. 1: Monica Ursina Jäger, Liquid Territory, 2018-19, installation view (detail),  
exported sand, wood, concrete, glass, collages, photographs, and texts,  
145x300x140 cm*

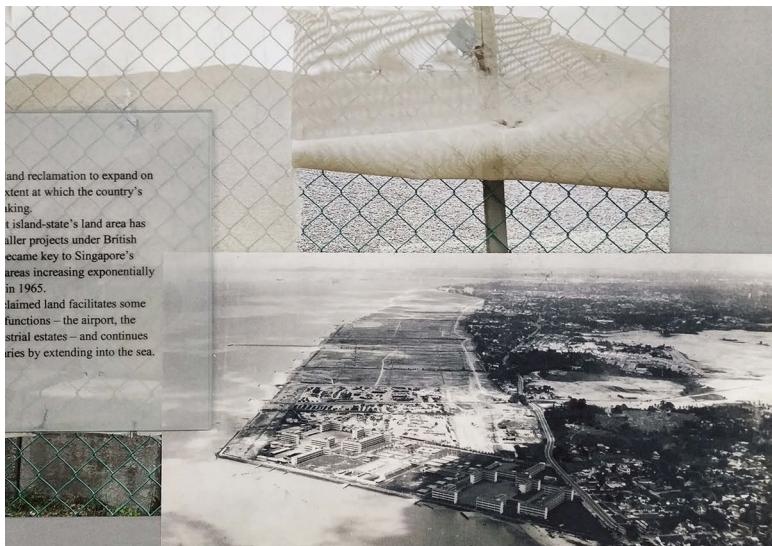


*Fig. 2: Monica Ursina Jäger, Liquid Territory, 2018-19, installation view (detail),  
exported sand, wood, concrete, glass, collages, photographs, and texts,  
145x300x140 cm*



*fine river sand drives new shorelines and solidifies in verticality  
the island's ground multiplied in the sky  
I wish the monsoon breathes in concrete high-rises  
the song of a fisherman echoes in narrow corridors  
the new grounds must be solid for the skyscrapers to stand strong*

*Fig. 3: Monica Ursina Jäger, Liquid Territory, 2018-19, installation view (detail), exported sand, wood, concrete, glass, collages, photographs, and texts, 145x300x140 cm*



*Fig. 4: Monica Ursina Jäger, Liquid Territory, 2018-19, collage on fine art print on Hahnemühle paper, 40x60 cm*



*Fig. 5: Monica Ursina Jäger, Liquid Territory, 2018-19, fine art print on Hahnemühle paper, 40x60 cm*

