

# Heman Chong

CALENDARS (2020–2096)

Heman Chong's most recent project in his native Singapore consisted of 1,001 photographs depicting various "public spaces"—in the sense of their being freely accessible—that were all shot without a single person captured in the frame. Each of these images is presented in the form of a one-page calendar spread, spanning the years 2020 to 2096, collectively forming a cumulative but strangely deserted portrait of the hypermodern Asian city-state.

On one level, *Calendars (2020–2096)* (2004–10) functions as a sort of minimalist sci-fi trope, presenting a bleak, dystopian future-Singapore in which all traces of human presence seem to have disappeared or been obliterated. Exceptions include abandoned potted plants, the odd slipper lying at the entrance to an apartment and varying degrees of human clutter, all of which betray the fact that these are found, untouched locations rather than meticulously constructed sets. These spaces seem at once impervious to decay and resistant to further modernization.

An eerie stasis reigns in these images as the viewer's restless gaze flits across the sequence of the calendar's months, segueing into years and then into decades. The poignant stagnancy captured in *Calendars* seems to suggest that in 50 years we will have the same hawkker markets with Formica tabletops and offices, endless office corridors with the same cheap laminates and the same dreary enclosures of what Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has called "junkspace."

The grid layout of the calendar, a sort of universal index marking the passage of days and months, also suggests Chong's attempt to impose spatial order on a unique facet of the Singaporean urban experience. Suspended above a free-floating succession of dates, printed in a horizontal sequence and laid out using a consistent typeface, divided into neat, evenly spaced capsules, the images in *Calendars* tirelessly reiterate the same compositional strategy 1,001 times. Their landscape orientation, deep focus and rectilinear layout yield endless variations on commercial and residential spaces, leisure facilities and public plazas—constructions that are only nominally different from each other in terms of zoning use or the relative newness of their finish. In many cases, Chong's adoption of the grid is mirrored in the geometrical makeup of the photographs' subjects, whether they are tiled floors, service ducts, ventilation pipes or rows of fluorescent light tubes. One basic trope involves the artist's imposition of a grid-like perspective on the chosen subject, centered tightly on the vanishing point of the photograph. Viewed in quick succession, these location sequences begin to bracket the viewers' perception of their own environment into similarly capsule-like quadrilateral experiences when they



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leave the gallery and step back out into the actual realm of Singapore.

The best parts of this sprawling photographic installation point toward a more subtle irony: perhaps it isn't so much that Singapore's urban environment has been programmatically constructed, but rather that Chong is mimicking the Modernist impulse that first inspired the nation's technocrats and planners to conceive of the city in this way. Is this a double-edged tribute to the ubiquitous rationality—strict zoning regulations and maximized floor area in high-rise apartments—that seems to have permeated not just the space of Singapore, but also the commandeering perspective to which Singaporeans typically resort in order to scrutinize the urbanization of their own country? Unlike the "improvisational" mode of walking through the city, theorized by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre as a way to recover a sense of individual agency and autonomous path-making, Chong seems to be driven by an impulse to catalog both the variety and sameness of Singapore's public spaces.

Stripped of human elements that would evoke specific forms of viewer identification, *Calendars (2020–2096)* does not lament the rigidity or monotony of Singapore's urban landscape. Rather, its 1,001 images collectively make up a portrait of the desperate and purposeful archivist, combing through Singapore's spaces in order to preserve representative scenes at their most pristine, unpopulated moments—a hopeful safeguard against the onward march of urban redevelopment and collective forgetting.

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