“Tropical Modernity: Managing vegetable energies and pruning the human plant”
Robin Peckham

João Ó has located a recursive geography—a fabled white whale of postmodern cultural production that has appeared in texts from the Borgesian to the Deleuzian—in South China, where, truth be told, it is a rather more commonplace occurrence. Whereas semantics has taught us to memorize the dictum that the map is not the territory, a constellation of cultural practices ranging from the casinos of the Cotai Strip to the Splendid China and Window on the World theme parks of Shenzhen and still further to the shopping mall urban planning of Hong Kong proves in a very material and highly sensible way that, following Gregory Bateson, the territory can only ever be defined through representation. In the recent photographic series *Recursive Geography* (2011) Ó mines this specific space of simulation and immersion in an attempt to seek out something more essential in the relationship between urban man and encroaching nature, a pseudo-ontological pursuit that inspires by virtue of its implicitly exaggerated approach. Consisting of some 32 images taken at various points and at various times along the Coloane Fitness Circuit, these photographs serve to demarcate an internal barrier between city (or, more broadly, *techne*s) and wilderness, adopting a visual rhetoric of studio-style ambient lighting and careful positioning to present an impressively flexible relationship of environmental recursion.

Borrowing something (but perhaps not too much) from Fredric Jameson in terms of cognitive mapping while recognizing that the best map is always the territory in question, João Ó has explored the strikingly prosaic qualities of this particular hiking path extensively. He has structured the resulting images according to a series of categories, labels, tags, and attributes: some are inherently attractive because of formal qualities in rock formations and the colors of vegetation; some depict the ways in which plants and sand encroach back on the mostly well-maintained path; infrastructural components like electrical wires and empty reservoirs; one actual tree even appears akin to a camouflaged cell phone tower. At the same time, Ó (drawing on his architectural work) seeks to prove his willingness to redeem such synthetic visions of the newly natural, installing a second project entitled *Suspended Gardens* (2011). Here, plastic vines climb across folding metal beds as the sounds of planes and trucks boom out from the temporary structures—if *Recursive Geography* constitutes an implicit critique at a distance from the present situation, *Suspended Gardens* finds something productive to reclaim within the aesthetic strategies of Cantonese pastiche. The aesthetic is forced, but the artificiality is real.

According to the theoretical canon of contemporary architecture as codified by Rem Koolhaas (and never entirely substantiated by empirical research), Singapore represents the purest instantiation of this approach to the remolding of the relationship to the environmental

context. A highly functional urban space, connections between open space and residential zones are as carefully managed as the quotas of class and ethnicity that define the social composition of dominant public housing developments; according to this mythology, the island nation is a laboratory for this distillation of functioning political ideologies, controlling the rapid growth of the surrounding tropical ecosystem through the liberal and sporadic application of concrete and glass. In this scenario, it may be the canals—so necessary for the normative implementation of a financial center besieged by regular equatorial downpours—that, parallel to highways, function as a regional analogue for the Coloane Fitness Circuit that João Ó has taken as his object of interpretation.

The situation may be comparable in the more northern spaces of Hong Kong and Macau, also self-governing if non-sovereign geographic territories that must contend with social control as a living metaphor for the relationship between city, mountain, and sea. Here, however, we must note that the idea of tropical modernity is primarily an aspirational phrase: although the architecture of social housing is similarly imported wholesale from the failed designs of Le Corbusier and other visionaries, the climate is distinct, and the Pearl River Delta, despite summer temperatures that regularly push north of thirty degrees Celsius, has never been tropical. (Nor indeed, we might argue, has it ever been modern, but this is another discussion entirely, and one with which João Ó will no doubt be interested in grappling when the time comes.) Still, the island is a special place, and the colonial port island presents a number of fascinating patterns of growth that point to aspects of planning and lived experience that coalesce along the Coloane trail.

Prior to more digital (that is to say, discrete and, ultimately, semiotic) understandings of life through genetic code, philosophers from the ancient to the early modern often distinguished life in the plant kingdom from its animal counterparts by virtue of a certain quality of self-growth; this is what we might call vegetative energy, arising from within and fundamentally opposed to the designs of modernity that were sutured into the possibility of life itself (human and otherwise) with European biopolitics. This is what the totalitarian Asian metropolis has learned to guard against, a parallel invasion of tropical vegetation and improper behavior on the part of the population. Our understanding of Singapore and the Peal River Delta may be largely filtered through Rem Koolhaas, but his critique of William Gibson was decisively wrong in at least one very significant way, a consequence of his rush to appear more politically sympathetic (a bet that has certainly paid off in the intervening years): while Gibson may not have been the most appropriate psychogeographer, he was right to worry about the effects of an obsession with the sheen of modernity without an attendant understanding of its intellectual histories and political consequences.

A once-popular notion of the human being—its education and training—as a plant has been rightly disregarded for its historical association with the American eugenics movement, but there is a sheer poetic beauty to this idea that might deserve a skeptical degree of rehabilitation outside of a technocratic context. In contemporary art that makes use of biological media, intervening in the genetic makeup of bacteria and reproducing tissue cultures in new forms, we find a radical realignment of the subject-object relationship that has traditionally characterized the viewing of a work of art (approaching more recent work in object-oriented ontologies); João Ó, importantly, disregards this possibility and inserts more standard materials of mediation between his viewers and their objects. The living ecosystem of the Coloane trail is here presented only in photographs, while the ivy vines of *Suspended Gardens* are definitively artificial. In this plasticine configuration, the possibility of a subject-subject relationship becomes more real than ever.

Hong Kong-based studio MAP Office, a collective project that, like João Ó, shifts continually between the territories of contemporary art and architecture, once seized upon the convergence of colonial mythology and recent urban planning to explain their observations of Hong Kong culture. *Concrete Jungle* (2007) takes the form of a series of photographs exhibited in a grid or array not unlike that of *Recursive Geography* that depict the instant-pour concrete slopes carefully managed by the Hong Kong government—occasionally even painted green to blend in with their lush surroundings but overlaid here with abstract line patterns that serve to juxtapose an imagined topography of graphic practice over this never-fully-natural territory. By attempting to control the jungle, authorities transformed it into precisely what they once feared: a "barren rock," as the island was described when the first colonists landed. Ó offers something strikingly similar and yet integrally different with Coloane: concrete, naturally, sits as the infrastructural representation of modernity, colluding with biopolitical ideologies of fitness to create a perfect storm of internalized border mechanics.

As Hong Kong prepares to both build a new world-class museum from scratch on a plot of land pulled out of the harbor (and planned as such decades in advance) and convert several major downtown heritage buildings of the colonial era into art or cultural spaces of some sort, divergent approaches to architectural preservation in Hong Kong and Macau have become something of a talking point in artistic circles. As the theorists cited in this short discussion may mock to no end, we are ultimately handed a package for the retention of a particular brand of humanist (or, more properly, anthropocentric) history that rhetorically denies but substantively proves the wilderness thesis put forward by environmental historian William Cronon—that the idea of nature untouched by human activity is a romantic legacy with no basis in empirical ecological systems. João Ó, on the other hand, points us to a rather different possibility: pure wilderness recreated. Through the critical contentions of his photography and the tacky

materiality of his installation, Ó asserts the practicability of camp as a tool of governmentality for the Pearl River Delta, finding in a next-nature based on the plastic flower factories of the region a potential model for the restoration of a subject-object relationship based on plastic identities and plasticine ideologies.