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POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The path is place: skateboarding, graffiti and performances of place

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### ABSTRACT

This article reflects on two performances of place involving graffiti and skateboarding: the first looks at a graffiti intervention by SKLO, an urban artist in Singapore, and the second examines the *Long Live Southbank (LLSB)* campaign to resist the relocation of Southbank's Undercroft, an appropriated skate space in London. SKLO and *LLSB* have galvanised significant public support, suggesting that it is possible to negotiate the aesthetics of a city (in the case of SKLO) and the visibility of (sub)cultures within publicly funded cultural institutions at Southbank Centre. Extending Michel de Certeau's concept of walking as a speech act that articulates possible paths of movement across a landscape, the article suggests that these performances of place demonstrate the possibility of outcomes initially perceived as impossible.

### KEYWORDS

Graffiti; skateboarding; place; Singapore; Long Live Southbank

'Press to Time Travel' it said. (SKLO 2012a)

I remember smiling, closing my eyes for just a second after I hit the traffic light button at an otherwise ordinary-looking pedestrian crossing, wishing the end of a long and tiring day filled with back-to-back meetings. In that moment, my imagination transformed the landscape in front of me to one filled with space pods in neon colours and a city which looked, admittedly, a little like futuristic Tokyo in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, an apocalyptic anime.<sup>1</sup> I walked around and found more stickers with tongue-in-cheek messages like 'Press Once Can Already' which is the Singlish<sup>2</sup> way of saying that one need only press once to activate the pedestrian light. As an applied performance practitioner in Singapore, I collaborated with a graffiti artist (who was also trained in fine arts) to create a three-year visual arts curriculum for underprivileged young people. The free lessons focused on introducing young people between the ages of 14 and 18 to a wide range of visual art styles, including graffiti and the use of spray paints and stencils. They worked towards a participant-led exhibition at the end of each year where young people conceptualised the work they wanted to create and the artist taught them the required skills required to realise the artwork. The conversations I have had with this graffiti artist led me to explore graffiti in terms of its care for place.

I interpret the skateboarders' and graffiti artists' appropriations of urban surfaces and architectural features as '*la perruque*', a term used by de Certeau to identify a tactic that

'finds ways of using the constraining order of the place' for one's purpose (1984, 30, emphasis in original). These acts of *la perruque* challenge implicit societal norms with an 'exemplary action' that 'opens a breach' demonstrating the instability of these unspoken rules (de Certeau 1997, 8). Once an alternative is demonstrated, it signals deviation from the norm to those who might have previously believed these alternatives did not exist. I have adopted Mackey's 'performance of place' as a critical framework for this article (Mackey and Cole 2013, 46). For Mackey, a performance of place includes planned performance interventions as well as informal interactions with site that 'interrogate or challenge the material and psychological construction of a particular locus' (Mackey and Cole 2013, 46; Mackey et al. 2013). In her analysis of *NEST*, an arts residency in Basildon, UK, Mackey finds that some performances of place can shift one's associations with, and perceptions of, a site so that prior feelings of ambiguous negativity might give way to feelings of familiarity and safety created by sharing the performance of place with others (56). In this article, I suggest that graffiti might be read as a planned performance of place where SKLO, an urban artist, produces laughter and feelings of familiarity. *Long Live Southbank (LLSB)*, a campaign against the relocation of the Undercroft below Southbank's Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, might also be read as a performance of place that evokes feelings of pride.

Mackey defines 'place' as 'a perceived environment or geographical area with which individuals (or groups) believe they have a personal relationship' (2007, 181). Place may arise out of a desire for belonging anchored in a geographical location but this location/locale is not immune to global influences (Mackey and Whybrow 2007, 6). Although place is often conceived as an emotional relationship with a site where one is resident for a considerable length of time, this article argues that place can be created in a matter of minutes, through placemaking activities like skateboarding and graffiti.

In planning *la perruque*, the surface and the site in which it is located becomes a place for graffiti writers. In her ethnographic study of graffiti in New York and London, researcher Nancy Macdonald has portrayed graffiti as a 'theatre of war' performed by graffiti writers and the authorities on the street (2001, 109). In *Addicted to Steel*, London's most wanted graffiti vandal, Judd (Noir), describes his reconnaissance of train stations with meticulous detail, including an incident where he used the CCTV cameras to climb over beams emitted by sensors at Farringdon station (2013, 13). Judd's account demonstrates *la perruque* and suggests that graffiti writers are highly conscious of location – surveying challenging sites in advance, taking note of traffic patterns (human and otherwise) and visualising the best placement for a piece. While it might be argued that the hasty nature of graffiti prevents an emotional attachment to place, criminologists Mark Halsey and Alison Young's research suggests otherwise. Graffiti is an 'affective process that does things to writers' bodies' as much as it changes the concrete and metal surfaces they write on (Halsey and Young 2006, 276). The writer's body remembers the heights she had to scale, the physical contortions she had to maintain while creating the piece and the precautions taken to evade surveillance. There is care for place as writers prepare their surfaces: sometimes using baby wipes to clean the surface identified for stickers or marker pens. Despite the relatively short duration spent on-site, graffiti turns a site into place for the writer.

Graffiti is an inscription that performs, and this performance may turn a site into a place for those who discover the inscription and are affected by it. Whybrow (2011, 113) has

theorised that graffiti's 'radical force or threat' lies in its performance of the writer's disappearance. For local authorities and property owners who express zero-tolerance for graffiti, the presence of graffiti exposes the presence of security vulnerabilities that have been exploited by the graffiti writer. For other graffiti writers, graffiti demonstrates the possibility of *la perruque*.

Borden (2001, 229) has persuasively theorised skateboarding as 'a body-centric and multi-sensory performative activity' that resists the pressure to participate in profit-making production. For Borden, the city is designed to promote consumption and profit and its architecture normalises behaviour that contributes to such activities. Borden has argued that the skateboarder subverts these compelling consumption signals through playful exploration of the urban landscape that is neither contributive to profit nor consumption (233). Instead of compliantly observing the each architectural feature presents a multiplicity of alternative interaction options for the street skateboarder: a set of railings leading towards a shopping centre might serve as a skeletal ramp structure that one might glide down or an obstacle that one might jump over. For Ben Powell, editor of UK skateboarding magazine *Sidewalk Magazine*, 'the ability to do tricks is like a vocabulary ... [a] language of tricks' employed to 'communicate with the stuff you find on the street and turn it into something else' (Edwards-Wood 2013b). Skateboarding is *la perruque* that rewrites the paths one might trace across the city.

### The path is place

Mobility need not be incompatible with placemaking and care for place. Katz's (1999, 38) study on driving in Los Angeles demonstrate how cars have become some form of mobile home. Writing about social work, Ferguson has also found that cars and automobility have significant positive impact on social work: going for a drive can facilitate deeper communication and more revealing conversations between social worker and child (2009, 279, 282). Massey (2005, 119) notes that in one's movement between 'places', one participates and becomes part of 'the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made'. By performing past places in one's present place, one incorporates past narratives into present narratives rather than layering one place over another. A link between places is made that changes the stories of both places in a present-past place. Urban design professor Ole Jensen (2009, 147) suggests that 'place is a mobility-defined spatio-temporal event that relates to the way we configure narratives of self and other'. These studies and observations make compelling arguments towards a more nuanced understanding of mobility and the way it engages and conceives place.

Place need not be defined by sedentary dwelling over an extended period of time. Place can manifest as attachment to, or responsibility for a place, even if the performer is a temporary 'visitor' (as opposed to an 'inhabitant') of the place (Mackey and Cole 2013, 56). Psychological attachment may be formed regardless of the time spent in a particular location, or indeed the permanence of site. It is widely accepted that early skateboarding recreated the feeling of surfing, riding on the break of a wave, on concrete sidewalks (sidewalk surfing) (Borden 2001, 29). Sidewalk surfing was arguably a performance of ephemeral place (the break of a wave). Extending Jensen's concept of place, I suggest that a performance of place may therefore incorporate mobility and transience.

de Certeau's (1984, 100) 'art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*)' (translation within brackets from original) is perhaps an apt metaphor for placemaking performances that open up new possibilities for a wider audience, extending its impact beyond graffiti writers and skaters. de Certeau related the practice of walking to a speech act that defines a possible trajectory for movement through a location. Walking, like speech, has a 'triple enunciative function': the pedestrian defines a path across the landscape as speech articulates language; the pedestrian performs 'a spatial acting-out of the place', actualising the known landscape; and the trajectory undertaken suggests a relationship between places (97–98). Walking articulates possible paths of movement across a landscape, performs the accessible landscape and opens up the possibility of interaction between places. *LLSB* and SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* propose ways of negotiating with institutions for an alternative to profit-maximising building facades and the established aesthetics of a city. In what follows, I reflect on these performed (alternative) places, articulated by supporters of SKLO and *LLSB*, which I am broadly sympathetic to.

## SKLO

From around May 2012, a young woman going by the pseudonym 'SKLO' posted stickers on traffic light buttons around Singapore that drew attention to the impatience of Singaporeans. Ranging from the cheekily admonishing 'No Need to Press So Many Times' (in Singlish) to the whimsically imaginative 'Press to Time Travel', the stickers made pedestrians stop and laugh at themselves (SKLO 2012b). For some graffiti writers who seek to defend the authenticity of writing one's name with spray paint or markers, SKLO's stickers might be classified as 'street art' rather than graffiti (Macdonald 2001, 172–173). The design aesthetic informing SKLO's stickers is more accessible to a wider audience, and this may be regarded as undesirable by graffiti writers who enjoy the coded communication between writers' scribbles on the wall. Macdonald argues that graffiti 'tags' are signatures of the graffiti artist's name and one's skill is defined through the visibility of one's tag (read: frequency and quantity) and demonstrated daring (2001, 77–78). As graffiti writers acquire notoriety, they are expected to develop their artistic skills while maintaining visibility of their tag (81). Tags develop into 'throwups' where the writer's tag is done in bubble-shaped letters or a 'piece' where the writer's name might be enhanced with 'shadowing, highlights, overlapping letters, three-dimensional effects, fading, arrows, sparkles, stars, characters, backgrounding and colour-schemes' (77, 82). These effects require knowledge of the specific paints one should use, the angle required for desired sharpness of line and sometimes, custom modification of the nozzle.

Regardless, SKLO's stickers are not legally commissioned and their impermanence is irrelevant in Singapore where vandalism is defined under Chapter 341, Section 2a(ii) of Singapore's statutes as 'affixing ... any poster, placard, advertisement, bill, notice, paper or other document' without formal permission from the government (for public property) or the owner (for private property) (Attorney-General's Chambers 1966). This definition of vandalism includes all impermanent forms of marking a surface, including stickers. Singapore is not unique in viewing the affixing of stickers as vandalism. Fairey, who is notoriously known for his 'Obey' sticker tags depicting wrestler Andre the Giant, was arrested in 2009 by the Boston police and charged for defacing property and wanton destruction (Lindsay 2009). For the purpose of this article, graffiti is broadly defined as the illegal

marking of walls which can include posters and stickers of artistic merit and street art is defined as legally commissioned work done on the street or work sold in galleries by graffiti artists. Some graffiti artists are suspicious of distinctions made between street art and graffiti by institutions who wish to legitimise certain forms of urban art for the sake of exploiting its commercial potential (Rizzal 2011). To be clear, this article does not aim to tame graffiti or appropriate it for the purpose of applied performance. In recognition of the transgressive nature of SKLO's *Champion Colloquial*, I will use the term 'graffiti' instead of 'street art'.

Inspired by 'speed limit stickers on the back of vans', SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* was conceptualised as an attempt to get Singaporeans to 'slow down', stop being impatient, stop looking at their phones and 'look around and see that we are beautiful' (Martin 2013). SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* parodies a form of official graffiti commonly found all over Singapore: regulatory signs that do not identify the authority who has jurisdiction over the relevant site. I sympathise with sociologists Hermer and Hunt (1996, 456) who argue that these signs 'mark, scar and deface public spaces' even while conveying the impression of legitimacy through iconic symbols of official commands. It has been noted that Singaporeans are accustomed to official graffiti conveying various expectations of (and restrictions to) one's behaviour (Ho and Wong 2012, 13). I want to extend this observation to the acceptance of official graffiti that seeks to encourage desired behaviour through various national campaigns. In 2010, Singapore's Speak Good English Movement created an 'activist kit' where members of the public were encouraged to use 'Get It Right' sticky notes to 'correct poor written English' used on signs posted by retailers and institutions (2010, 2). Given this precedence, some pedestrians (and reportedly even the authorities) had initially assumed that SKLO's stickers were part of a school project (Mahtani 2012). SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* is *la perruque* that questions the acceptance of such official graffiti as natural and sensitises Singaporeans to an alternative aesthetic for Singapore.

SKLO views her work as an intervention that resists the growing uniformity of globalised cities where franchised brands dominate the street-level windows of shopping malls and people are too caught up with work to appreciate how their environment has transformed. Written in Singlish, SKLO's work is a statement about Singapore's lack of character. 'Press Once Can Already' commented on the futility of impatience in a way that anticipated this behaviour and used found surfaces to disrupt this acquired habit with self-deprecating humour (SKLO 2012b). For SKLO, the stickers were an intervention: an attempt to encourage the expression of all that is Singaporean in a visible modification of Singapore's physical urban architecture. She disseminated these stickers online – implicitly encouraging others to print them out and claim objects and architectural features as Singaporean with these stickers (SKLO 2012c). SKLO's work is at once an aesthetic aspiration for Singapore and an interrogation of its clean (characterless) aesthetic and highly regulated public infrastructure scarred by official graffiti. There is an intention to transform Singapore as a characterless site into place that reflects an aspect of the Singaporean. 'Press to Time Travel' overlays the concrete city with an imagined place shaped by each pedestrian's aspirations for Singapore.

It was significant that SKLO's work did not receive the same response as Singapore Post's failed 'Express Yourself' campaign where a masked man spray painted six post boxes belonging to Singapore Post with poorly executed tags (Fang 2010). Citizens called the police to investigate, and viewed the 'Express Yourself' tags as acts of vandalism,

ostensibly because these tags were not viewed as an artistic contribution to the city (Tan 2010). When SKLO was arrested on 3 June 2012 for vandalism, the arrest sparked furious debate in the media, and online. On 4 June, an online petition and Facebook page was set up petitioning authorities for a lighter sentence. By 14 June, the online petition had been signed by 15,000 people who objected to her stickers being classified as an act of vandalism for reasons that ranged from 'art is not a crime' (Aqil in Lee 2012) to '[b]ecause I now enjoy waiting at pedestrian crossings more than jay-walking' (2012). A local blogger, Stephanie Koh (2012), asked nine parents and three children what they would do if 'Sticker Lady' (SKLO) were their daughter. Five parents said they would support her and thought what she did was art, and should not be punished (S. Koh 2012). Although this informal opinion poll cannot claim to be proportionally reflective of views held by the larger population, it was highly unusual that SKLO received support from people who are not graffiti artists. Former nominated member of parliament for the arts, Janice Koh, defended SKLO's work, arguing that it is 'almost impossible to talk about developing a culturally vibrant, creative or loveable city, without some tolerance for those slightly messy activities that sometimes challenge the rules' (2012). Even more extraordinary was court's response to these public appeals: SKLO's charge was reduced from vandalism to seven counts of mischief in March 2013 (inSing 2013), arguably demonstrating that it is possible to initiate conversations about the aesthetics of place with government institutions. Recalling de Certeau's *walker* and the possibilities articulated by paths, I suggest that the court's response to SKLO's graffiti indicates the institution's willingness to acknowledge alternatives to the established clean and functional aesthetic of Singapore that might otherwise feel culturally and creatively sterile. For SKLO's supporters, this may well encourage more confident civic engagement and signal the possibility of negotiating other aspects of Singapore's future.

### **Long Live Southbank**

While the geographical scope of place created by SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* stickers (affixed by SKLO and members of the public at various locations around Singapore) cannot be read as equivalent to *LLSB's* efforts to halt redevelopment of the Undercroft, *LLSB's* site-specific intervention offers an opportunity to consider the impact of visibility on the formation of place attachments. In March 2013, Southbank Centre announced plans to redevelop Hayward Gallery, Purcell Room and Queen Elizabeth Hall. These plans included the relocation of 'the Undercroft' – a 40-year-old skate space that was initially reclaimed by skateboarders, BMX riders and graffiti artists in the 1970s. A group of regular Undercroft skateboarders, fronted by skateboarder and filmmaker Henry Edwards-Wood, formed *LLSB* (2013a). This non-profit organisation grew from its original group of skateboarders to include 'skateboarders, bmxers, activists, academics, local residents and artists brought together by a common affinity for the area' (Long Live Southbank 2013b). *LLSB* adopted the slogan 'You Can't Move History', resisting the proposed relocation of the Southbank Undercroft to Hungerford Bridge (Long Live Southbank 2013a). This psychological attachment to a particular site is unusual for street skateboarders who might otherwise view their practice as agnostic to place. Since the start of *LLSB's* campaign in July 2013, the Undercroft has evolved from a 'space left over after planning' (Borden 2013) to 'the birthplace of British skateboarding' (Escobales 2013) and, more

significantly, 'a skateboarders' mecca' (Mould 2013). By March 2014, young skateboarders in London garnered 40,000 individual planning objections, making Southbank Centre's redevelopment plans for the Festival Wing the 'most unpopular planning application in UK history' (Hagen 2014). Even the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, declared the Undercroft 'the epicentre of UK skateboarding ... part of the cultural fabric of London ... It attracts tourists from across the world and undoubtedly adds to the vibrancy of the area – it helps to make London the great city it is' (Jury and Bar-Hillel 2014).

In 2012, I remember drifting towards the Undercroft, inspired by the skateboarders who traced the same paths over the same obstacles relentlessly until they perfected a trick. I stood there, entranced, watching them for two hours. It surprised me that I did not feel inclined to linger in Southbank Centre after my meetings there. Perhaps it was the prominence given to its cafe and other retail tenants, but it felt too much like a shopping mall. One year later, I stood at the same spot in the Undercroft, watching a boy who looked about 11 years of age spend at least 10 minutes slowly sliding his skateboard along a low, sloped, concrete wall that might have been designed to confine pedestrian movement to the staircase. Repeatedly, with touching seriousness, he worked out the smoothest trajectory for his board along the edge of that wall. Perhaps, it is moments like these that mark some sort of new understanding, or the beginnings, of care for place for skateboarders. I did not get to see him try – his parent called to him and told him he had to go – but I have an inkling of what happens next. As he progresses to jumping onto the wall, landing at the right spot and maintaining balance as he glides down, he becomes intimately familiar with this wall. He will fall many times before finally achieving the move he imagines. This may all happen in an hour, but the intensity of his engagement with that wall's edge is, I suggest, enough to develop an attachment to place. I have seen older skaters at the Undercroft acquaint themselves with that same wall. As for me, watching that boy figure out how to slide down a wall taught me that place can be created in a matter of minutes.

Online videos, skate sessions<sup>3</sup>, blogs and social media platforms played a significant part in increasing the visibility of the Undercroft as a place. However, given the practical constraints of this article, I will focus on the performance of place articulated by supporters in *LLSB's* most popular YouTube video, *The Bigger Picture*, and a particular skate session that brought together generations of Undercroft skateboarders. Viewed 86,841 times as of 15 May 2015, Edwards-Wood's *The Bigger Picture* (2013b) opens with a close-up of the surfaces of the Undercroft. Like the boy visualising the trajectory his board must take, the camera lingers over paths traced by skateboarders over the concrete floor, leading the viewer towards an understanding of the skateboarder's intimate experience of the textured surface. The irregularities of the Undercroft's surfaces are experienced as vibrations through the skater's body. The camera recreates visually what the skater experiences somatically, giving the viewer a vicarious experience of how the path traced might define place for the street skateboarder. For Borden, the skateboarder may not consciously choose to challenge these materialistic signals, but her/his movements might still be perceived as deviant as this behaviour does not conform to expected patterns of consumption. The skateboard becomes 'an extension of the body' (Borden 2001, 100). Lost in the sound of wheels rolling and boards popping, the skateboarder reads the surface of Southbank's Undercroft with her body, feeling the irregularities of the concrete vibrate through her feet, shifting her centre of gravity in response to her speed. A new eurythmic balance is

attained as her body familiarises itself with the rhythms of the terrain. The path she traces becomes place.

In *The Bigger Picture*, skateboarders are presented as active contributors to culture, creative talents in their own right, who are rejected by Southbank Centre (Edwards-Wood 2013b). Filmmaker Henry Edwards-Wood presents a persuasive case defending skateboarding at the Undercroft through a thoughtful assemblage of interviews with users of the Undercroft, academics, politicians and artists who articulate what the Undercroft means to them and why this place cannot be transplanted or replicated. Among those interviewed are local skateboarder Bikko Issah, minister of parliament and former culture secretary, Ben Bradshaw and human geographer Oli Mould. Issah describes the Undercroft as a place that offers friendship and opportunities to learn from other skaters, indicating an attachment to place; Bradshaw asserts that skateboarding at the Undercroft is an example of culture that emerges from its users' creative reinterpretation of architecture and is therefore more dynamic than cultural practices that are prescribed for a site and Mould argues that anomalies like the Undercroft are invaluable assets that should be preserved given the increasing homogenisation of cities as a result of globalisation. These articulations of place demonstrate care for the Undercroft and make apparent the international and local significance of the Undercroft. I suggest that it was this care for place and articulation of its significance that compelled overwhelming public support of *L LSB*.

There were other moments in the film that left a deep impression of place as experienced by supporters and users of the Undercroft: black and white photographs of skateboarders taken in the 1970s at the Undercroft, the iconic pillars of the Undercroft drawn like tattoos on the inner arm of a skateboarder, skateboarding tricks framed by the city against colour-saturated sunsets, children pointing in awe at the skateboarders' tricks, families and seniors signing the petition at *L LSB*'s booth, young people skateboarding to Lambeth Council with boxes full of individual planning objections and finally, the closing shot looking out from within the Undercroft. One can only faintly make out the tricks of the skateboarders from the shadows, but one hears the sound of wheels rolling against the floor, a wooden board popping against the concrete, the smack of good landing, cheers from the crowd and then wheels rolling, fading into silence.

*L LSB* also exposed the contested nature of this 'space left over after planning' (Borden 2013). While Southbank Centre claimed to be 'committed to working with young, emerging and established talent across the artistic community' it prioritised the retail units' need for visibility when it announced its redevelopment plans (Southbank Centre 2014). Perhaps, pro-skateboarder Aarto Saari was interrogating this impulse to engage the public as paying consumers when he asserted that skateboarding should not be 'fenced up somewhere' in a skatepark (Parrot 2013). The street-facing facades of cultural institutions are highly sought-after by commercial retailers seeking to entice passers-by and cultural institutions like Southbank Centre have capitalised on this revenue generating opportunity through the rental of these spaces to long-term retail tenants (Isbell 2014). *L LSB* appears to question this logic, arguing that street-facing facades should represent the cultural priorities of cultural institutions like Southbank. While it might be argued that skateboarding is not usually regarded as an art, Saari disagrees, stating that 'it is more of an art form than a sport. It is a lot more of a cultural thing than just doing

tricks and this and that. It's art' (Parrot 2013). In *The Bigger Picture* (2013b) and *Southbank Centre – Consumerism Over Culture* (2014), dancers and food vendors from the pop-up markets organised by Southbank defended skateboarding at the Undercroft as a cultural activity that demands physical discipline and nurtures creativity, arguing that skateboarders should retain their visible location facing the river, under Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall.

On 27 July 2013, Undercroft skateboarder Ben Simmons organised *Southbank Reunion* which saw Undercroft skaters from as early as 1976 skating with skateboarders from the 1980s, 1990s, current regulars and first-timers (Long Live Southbank 2013c). Interviews with the skaters in attendance described the reunion jam as one that embodied 'the spirit of the Undercroft' (Zac 2013). For 50-year-old Mark Slough, skating in the Undercroft again after 34 years was a highly evocative experience of familiar sounds and smells that reminded him of his first forays into professional skateboarding. Slough was not the only 1970s skateboarder who had not skated the Undercroft in recent times. Others like Tim Leighton-Boyce and Elton Whybrow had not skated for two decades or more but this did not diminish their memories of the Undercroft, its smells, sounds and surfaces. This suggests, counter-intuitively, that place does not fade with time. Place is constantly remade as one's present experiences within that site shape one's memories of place and may contour future relationships formed with others. It may be argued that *LLSB*'s success relies on nostalgia or that it romanticises the skateboarder as rogue, but this would be an oversimplification. While there was some reminiscing of the Undercroft in its original condition and an expressed desire to 'reinstate all the original features', the skateboarders who remembered the original Undercroft only told stories about the past to keep alive their memories of place within the present (Zac 2013). This reunion skate session functioned as a critical performance of place that weaves older memories of the Undercroft into present experiences of the Undercroft. This in turn deepens the *LLSB* activists' understanding of the Undercroft's history, strengthening their resolve to preserve what remains of the Undercroft. The *LLSB* activists were idealistic in believing it would be possible to stop Southbank Centre's redevelopment plans, but they were also strategic and worked through existing planning objection systems to communicate their position. Together, the online videos and skate sessions create a vision of place that promises cultural vitality, an allegiance to the meanings that emerge from users' interactions with site and the political engagement of young people. For supporters of *LLSB*, securing the future of the Undercroft is a statement that defends the visibility of (sub)cultures within cultural institutions. It affirms the obligations of cultural institutions to its public and asserts the public nature of the Undercroft as a place that has been claimed and reinterpreted for public-initiated cultural practices.

### **What SKLO and *LLSB* have taught me about place**

It has been more than 2 years since SKLO was sentenced to 240 hours of community service. SKLO has since defended the main message and drive behind *Champion Colloquial* in numerous interviews for newspapers, television and online blogs as 'an act of reclaiming spaces, to make Singapore feel like Singapore again' (Martin 2013). SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* challenged the predominant aesthetics of Singapore, arguing for a place that is recognisably Singaporean and prompted greater awareness of the quirkiness and

local character that might be sacrificed in the pursuit of cleanliness and order. SKLO was also commissioned to create *The People's Republic*, a place filled with signs, based on *Champion Colloquial* (2013). These are promising signs of new conversations that have become possible through SKLO's interventions, and like de Certeau's walker, *Champion Colloquial* opens up the possibility of conversation for those who would like to pursue further conversations addressing the predominant aesthetics of Singapore. Perhaps such conversations might acknowledge that Singapore's 'clean' aesthetic has already been compromised by current levels of official graffiti (regulatory signs, prohibition circles and national campaign posters). And perhaps, such conversations could explore the possibility of spontaneous creative expressions that make Singapore a place. The reduction of SKLO's charges also suggests that Singaporeans might negotiate with government institutions through online campaigns that reflect an appreciation of thoughtfully executed graffiti as art. This willingness to listen, on the part of institutions, is a promising start towards building a Singapore that reflects a wider range of aesthetic values.

*LLSB* reached an agreement with Southbank Centre that confirmed the preservation of the Undercroft as a place for skateboarding on 18 September 2014. Skateboarding at the Undercroft in support of *LLSB* functioned as an embodied statement about the visibility of public-initiated cultural practices in publicly funded cultural institutions like Southbank Centre. In articulating the significance of the Undercroft, *LLSB* has also given its activists more confidence to contest the closure of skate spots and lead public debates about the visibility of skateboarding. It is presently engaged in a campaign to oppose a proposal to prohibit skateboarding within Norwich's City Centre (Long Live Southbank 2014b). Like de Certeau's walker, *LLSB* has set a precedence for skateboarders who wish to protect beloved skate spots and cultures that are displaced by commercial interests. *LLSB* has defined a possible defence strategy, beginning with performances of place that articulated the Undercroft's significance through online videos, skate sessions, blogs and social media platforms. These articulations of place garnered substantial support from the public, which translated into individual planning objections and significant political support.

As a Singaporean applied performance practitioner and researcher, this analysis of places performed has raised more questions for me that compel further research: Why do the skateboarders of *LLSB* confidently assert that the Undercroft is a site reinterpreted by skateboarders, a place created by its users and 'made by minds, not money' (Edwards-Wood 2014) while the petition to reduce SKLO's charges cedes ownership of all public architecture to the state authorities? Why must SKLO's efforts to initiate a conversation about the aesthetics of a city pass as an act of mischief? This analysis of performed place suggests that its political potential lies in the allegiance this performance fosters for a place and the questions it raises about who might reinterpret this place. In Nicholson's reflections on her walk to the ballot box, she proposes that the act of voting involves an affective relationality between voter, landscape and the polling station that can create interactions 'between place-based identities and the wider political sphere' (2015: 241). Perhaps, like de Certeau's pedestrian who performs a 'spatial acting-out of the place' (1984, 98), SKLO's *Champion Colloquial* makes apparent the boundaries of civil society in Singapore even as it suggests the possibility of negotiating, through placemaking interventions, this alternative vision of a place worth fighting for.

## Notes

1. Japanese animation.
2. A colloquial form of Singaporean English that incorporates Malay and Hokkien, a Chinese dialect. The conjunctions are often omitted for speed of communication.
3. The skate sessions organised by *LLSB* offered a mix of 'free [skateboarding] lessons for the public', competitions, demonstrations by BMX riders and skateboarders and open 'skate for all' sessions (Jones 2014; Long Live Southbank 2014a).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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