



ACT BLUR, LIVE LONGER: Muslim Artists Blurring the Categories of Singapore's Smart City

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In September 2022, I attended the SeptFest arts festival in Singapore to see a new play by the writer and activist Alfian Sa'at. *The Death of Singapore Theatre* critiques state censorship of the arts through malicious compliance. By staging the process of having a script approved by the IMDA (Infocomm Media Development Authority), Alfian Sa'at “blurs” the line between on-stage Singaporean arts and backstage bureaucratic wrangling. As a researcher exploring how technology intervenes in the way Singaporean Muslims imagine the future, I was interested in how one of Singapore's more outspoken writers challenged the Smart Nation. By staging his censorship, Alfian Sa'at managed to rightly, though facetiously, argue that he had done exactly as the state asked. However, he was not the only performer at SeptFest using “blurring” as an artistic method to critique the state.

In fact, all of that year's SeptFest was “blurry.” Founded in 1990, the arts center Substation, who organizes SeptFest, constituted one of the first independent art spaces in Singapore. For many years, it served as a hub for artists who could not, or did not want to, find space in state-sponsored galleries. Yet that year's festival differed. After more than thirty years at its location on Armenia Street, the Substation board had received news in July 2021 that the building would be closed for renovations by the National Arts Council.¹ While the center received an offer to return, the board learned its organization would be one

tenant among many. The board thus declined the invitation, meaning that Sept-Fest 2022 went ahead without a set location. Instead, the community “blurred” beyond the walls of Substation, spreading to independent art spaces across the city.

The festival content also “blurred.” Having been removed from Armenia Street, the organizers announced “uproot/rootless” as the festival theme, with Substation’s website asking, “When something is removed from a place, what remains?”² While the closure of Substation was never explicitly referenced, the presence of that decision could be felt in every event. As the program stated, “Now, more than ever, we need to unearth the lessons that reside in . . . roots.”³ Artists throughout the program took this opportunity to critique the state for its resettlement of indigenous groups, the surveillance policies of the Smart Nation, and relations with Malaysia. All, of course, in a suitably “blurry” manner.

It was within this wider milieu that I found myself at a performance by Nurul Huda Rashid, a Singaporean Muslim artist. In *Nodes* Rashid critiqued how images of Muslim women become circulated and entrenched online. During the artist talk that followed her performance, she argued that algorithms created the bounded category of “Muslim woman” as either liberated or oppressed. While the categorization of Muslims by the state has a long history in Singapore, as I will go on to explore, her performance brought up neither these histories nor religion, as a result of an IMDA request for the removal of references to religion. Nevertheless, Rashid used blurring to infer her critique of the state and its categorization of Muslim women. Given my research focus on Muslim responses to AI in Singapore, Rashid’s performance spurred me to explore how other Muslim artists used blurring to resist state categories.

I derive the concept of blurring from the phrase “act blur, live longer,” which originates in the Singaporean military as advice for new recruits. In both Malaysia and Singapore, “blur” is a common epithet for someone seemingly clueless. In the case of military service, it is a reminder not to be a smartass and incur the wrath of senior officers. However, given that national service is mandatory for Singaporean men, the phrase escaped its military origins, becoming advice for parents, managers, and politicians alike. In this expanded context, acting blur refers to tactically implementing plausible deniability. Giving the appearance of cluelessness can be a useful tool. In the arts, blurring allows practitioners to skirt state censorship and still perform their work.

Blurring, I assert, is a practice of making oneself less visible to government surveillance without disappearing. Visibility can be a double-edged sword. While recognition by the state can grant access to rights, it can also lead to increased violence (Cárdenas 2017). Further, visibility can easily render one amenable to unwelcome forms of categorization. This holds particularly true when states use

technology to make their citizens visible. In Smart Cities, the data captured by cameras must be made computer readable for algorithms to sort and parse. As I will show, this Smart Nation sorting “objectifies” categories by turning identity into bounded, countable data points. This reality reinforces a dynamic illustrated by Junaid Rana (2011), whereby Muslims are constructed as a racial category in opposition to the normative citizen. Therefore, the algorithmic reason accompanying Smart Cities entrenches, rather than produces, derogatory categories like the racialized “Muslim” identity. Being blurry can render categorization difficult by resisting the imposed boundaries of identity.

Blurring is unlike Simone Browne’s (2015) dark sousveillance, where surveillance is undermined by keeping out of sight, because blurring is about being unclear publicly. In Browne’s dark sousveillance, the gaze of surveillance is inverted, the watcher becomes the watched. It is an inversion performed while remaining out of sight (Browne 2015, 21). For example, Arshad Imitaz Ali (2016) shows that members of the Muslim community in New York post 9/11 obscure their political participation by having discussions about entities such as the New York Police Department (NYPD) surveillance in private spaces. In contrast, I show that Singaporean artists make themselves visible to surveillance but act blurry by performing outside expected categories of the state. By performing publicly, blurring allows these Muslim artists to expand the category Muslim by asserting a blurrier definition. At the same time, this illegibility has the bonus of offering plausible deniability. It is more difficult to censor work that is hard to define, as we see with Alfian Sa’at’s *The Death of Singapore Theatre*. Blurring, therefore, can help describe how Muslims resist the definitions of identity imposed by racialization.

By looking at the artistic works of Nurul Huda Rashid, Noor Iskandar, and bani haykal, I explore how these Muslim artists not only evade censorship but also blur the categories of the state. In Rashid’s *Nodes*, she blurs the simplified category of “Muslim woman” as constructed by algorithms. Iskandar’s *nur*, a photo-essay exploring the city’s prayer spaces, blurs the walls of the mosque to imagine a Muslim community that transcends boundaries that divide. Finally, haykal’s *momok elektrik*, a sound installation that examines language codification, blurs the lines of Muslim religious practice to explore the possibilities of syncretism.

WHY ARE MUSLIMS SO VISIBLE IN SINGAPORE’S SMART NATION?

Singapore’s Smart Nation initiative began in 2014 with the DataSpark project. A collaboration between the government and the telecommunications company Singtel, the initiative installed a thousand sensors all over the city (Kong and Woods 2018) to track everything from air quality to traffic levels and crime

rates. This network was expanded in 2016 with the PolCam (short for “police camera”) and PolCam 2.0 projects, which saw the installation of a further 7,300 cameras (Koay 2017). Additionally, tap-to-pay systems in buses and trains collected data. This network of cameras and sensors, referred to as the “Smart Nation Sensor Platform,” forms the sensing part of the Smart Nation.

The collected data flows into a government agency, GovTech, which assumes two crucial roles.⁴ First, they develop software and services like SingPass, a platform enabling Singaporeans to access various amenities, from health care to public swimming pools. These services, in turn, generate even more data. Second, GovTech sorts, parses, and anonymizes this data before disseminating it to government agencies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Within the government, this data fuels the creation of fiscal, technological, and social policies. The SOEs use the data to create innovative products for industry and government including movement tracking software created by the SOE AI Singapore for HP Inc’s Singapore factory.⁵ These organizations, government and otherwise, represent the thinking part of the system. Together, the sensing and thinking elements of the Smart City create a feedback loop that automates and rationalizes governance (Shelton, Zook, and Wiig 2015, 13).

Singapore’s Smart Nation project is driven by what some call the “imperative to be smart” (Calder 2016, 20), while others less charitably refer to it as “techno-anxiety” (Chong 2021, 247). Singapore is small and poor in physical resources. Consequently, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has described the country as economically vulnerable and therefore in need of being efficient and disruptive to survive.⁶ By many measures, the Smart Nation has achieved these goals. As Ruth Ang-Tan and Siyuan Tan (2022) argue, Singapore’s Smart City has proved successful because the state’s interventionist approach allows for seamless collaboration between SOEs, the government, and private industry. During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, digital infrastructure facilitated an effective state response (Koh, Lim, and Tan 2020, 4). This has led some to view Singapore’s Smart Nation as a laboratory for exploring urban governance challenges.

However, responses to Smart Nation projects have not been universally positive, with many Singaporeans viewing it as surveillance. As Lily Kong and Orlando Woods (2018) show, the Smart Nation project ShineSeniors, which aimed at helping older people live independently for longer by installing cameras and sensors in their homes, encountered widespread resistance. Many participants resorted to covering cameras with towels. At a dinner my first week in Singapore, friends present described a situation in which an acquaintance of

theirs had thrown a cigarette butt on the floor. No one was around at the time, but, like clockwork, their fine arrived days later. Everyone agreed a camera must have been watching. As [Ezra Ho \(2017\)](#) argues, while a sensing city creates efficient data-feedback loops, it also creates a kind of panopticon.

RACIALIZATION IN SINGAPORE

Of course, Foucauldian governmentality is not new in Singapore. As [Walid Abdullah \(2016, 214\)](#) argues, Singapore's key governing paradigm has long paired state surveillance with multi-racialism, arguing that "ethnic and religious diversity is a problem that needs to be conscientiously managed." Consequently, ethnicity is made visible in Singapore's everyday politics: It is printed on identity cards, has been used to decide school subjects, and shapes quotas in the electoral system. These bureaucratic systems follow the lines of racial categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other (CMIO).⁷ Further, as [Joshua Babcock \(2023\)](#) shows, the CMIO is also entrenched in the visual culture of Singapore, where the four races are represented in cultural dress and tied to their associated religious affiliation. For example, Malay racial identity becomes frequently conflated with Muslim faith. As a result, Singaporeans are expected to occupy hyphenated identities like Singaporean-Malay, identities that should be perceptible. [Babcock \(2023\)](#) thus argues that Singaporean citizens patrol the boundaries of each other's racial identities alongside the state.

All Singaporeans are racialized in this way, but Singaporean Muslims find themselves in a double bind. As [Babcock \(2023\)](#) and [Beng-Huat Chua \(1996\)](#) argue, in the hyphenated racial identities of Singaporeans, the Singaporean should always come first, followed by race. Muslim-Singaporean identity therefore disrupts the hierarchy of the CMIO by complicating racial identities, as Muslims may be Malay, Indian, or other ([Tschacher 2018](#)). [Abdullah \(2016\)](#) argues, therefore, that public displays of piety by Muslims risk destabilizing the carefully managed racial harmony of the public sphere. All public acts of piety therefore come under scrutiny, no matter how innocuous they seem. This includes Muslim Singaporeans refusing to say "Merry Christmas," which the PAP in 2019 labeled "exclusivist" behavior. The term *exclusivist* is used euphemistically here to suggest that an act marks the beginning of a slippery slope toward extremism ([Abdullah 2021, 245](#)). [Dominik Müller \(2018\)](#) refers to such labeling as "classificatory power," allowing the state to outline expected behaviors that encourage normative compliance, behaviors it surveils to ensure such compliance. If the cameras of the Smart Nation represent the physical manifestation of the panopticon, policies like the CMIO constitute its social manifestation.

Yet the focus on religious identity marks a relatively new phenomenon in the racialization of Singaporean Muslims. Before independence in 1965, several race riots occurred, initiated, the state claimed, by Malay Muslim agent provocateurs from Malaysia and Indonesia. As a result, race became the country's "primordial fault line" (Hong and Huang 2008, 22), and the Malay community, whose identity was and still is conflated with Islam, became perceived as a potentially destabilizing minority. This view stems from the idea that Singaporean-Malays have divided loyalties because of their shared racial heritage with the majority population of Malaysia. This racial fault line resulted in Singapore's multiracial governance, which frequently frames Malays as a "problem."

However, the racialization of Singaporean Muslims shifted after 9/11, when adherents of Islam around the world, and especially in minority contexts, were pressed to "prove their normalcy" (Echchaibi 2018, 58). As Rana (2011) argues, this pressure on Muslims formed part of a process of racialization that constructed them as a disposable racial type held in opposition to the normative citizen. Of course, in Singapore, Muslims were already racialized, and their presumed divided loyalties positioned them in opposition to normative citizens who put their Singaporean identity ahead of all else. Yet as the Singaporean state scrambled to align itself with the United States of America, Singaporean multiracial governance shifted toward a more proactive surveillance of Singaporean Muslims in an attempt to pre-empt the influence of fundamentalism (Febrica 2010, 576). Under this new outlook, religion, not race, primarily marked the Muslim community as deviant. As the former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew argued, "I would say today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam" (quoted in Abdullah 2016, 222).

In 2003, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS),⁸ the Islamic religious authority and statutory board of the government, introduced the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI), a list of ten attributes the Muslim community should embody to be good citizens. Chief among them was the need to put their Singaporean identity above their religion. Signs that Singaporean Muslims may be heading down the path to extremism can be as innocuous as not eating with non-Muslims (Ab Razak 2019). More seriously, critiquing the state could make you a "bad Muslim" under the SMI (Hassan and Abdullah 2025). The SMI principles were written and distributed by MUIS. The agency controls many aspects of Muslim religious life, including Friday sermons distributed across all mosques, sermons written in consultation with the Minister of Muslim Affairs and often used to espouse the SMI. The boundaries of acceptable Muslim identity and behavior are thus made perpetually visible, and the community's conduct is constantly scrutinized for perceived failures to "integrate."

These SMI offer an everyday reminder to Singaporean Muslims of how the state expects them to behave. As [Arshad Ali \(2016\)](#) showed with regard to campus surveillance of Muslims in New York, the creation of the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy ([Mamdani 2004](#)) intensified the panoptical effect of state surveillance. [Ali \(2016\)](#) found that making explicit accepted boundaries of behavior increased self-disciplining for Muslims, and decreased political participation. In Singapore, the creation of an official “good Muslim” made all Muslims hypervisible, and in turn, by trying to live by the SMI, Singaporean Muslims strengthened the dichotomy, unwittingly becoming “complicit in (re)producing the states classificatory power” ([Müller 2018](#), 220). It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that the Muslim community considered the installation of thousands of cameras and sensors the creation of a surveillance system.

TECHNOLOGY AND RACIALIZATION

In fact, at times it appears that the Singaporean state invites such conclusions. On a poetry tour of Little India, our guide stopped next to a riot van parked by a police camera and pointed to a street sign reminding us that a moment of anger could lead to a lifetime of regret. Surveillance intensified in Little India after a protest in 2013 sparked by a bus driver hitting and killing a migrant worker. The neighborhood constitutes a hub for the migrant community, many of whose members are Bangladeshi Muslim. As we stood there, our guide read this poem:

What I learned in Malay class
 is that mata is eye while mata-mata
 is the police, a plural of eyes everywhere,
 surveilling our suspicious lives.
 Yet when aunties are congregating illegally
 over mahjong tables, when uncles are hustling
 fake virility pills, when the warning siren blares,
 “Mata lai liao!” what it really means is that eyes
 are coming, eyes in blue and baton
 that tase illicit action from our bodies,
 mata that become eyes through which
 we see this country more clearly. ([Nair 2023](#))

As the poem states, in Malay, the language widely spoken by Singaporean Muslims, the term for police is *mata-mata*. Interestingly, when the police released wheeled robots to patrol Singapore, they named the machines MATAR.

The choice to make this allusion in the language predominantly spoken by the racialized Muslim community draws an association between Smart Nation technologies and surveillance.

Such associations also have historical precedent. As [Meredith Whittaker \(2023\)](#) argues, the theoretical roots of “data governance” lie in plantation management, which transformed workers and crops into interchangeable units, allowing plantation owners to manage them from a distance. This approach to governance was applied to colonies like the Malayan Peninsula, where data gathering was common practice, including the use of censuses and mapping ([Noor 2019](#)). Such strategies have reemerged in cities like Singapore, where technology networks extract data to govern “from above,” without engaging with the specificities of the city and its inhabitants.

The Smart Nation makes for the newest tool in top-down governance. What has changed is the asymmetry of access to these technologies. Citizens cannot hope to access the amount of data or scale of infrastructures held by states ([Powell 2021](#)). In the past, people could theoretically challenge state narratives with their own information, but creating a competing Smart Nation appears less feasible. This reality raises the question of what Singaporean Muslims might do to resist the categorizing logics of racialization and the Smart Nation. Further, how can these critiques be made without falling foul of the seemingly omnipresent SMI?

PUBLIC RESISTANCE AND ART

In the literature on resistance, panoptical governmentality often appears to force activists into the shadows. As [Ali \(2016\)](#) shows, state surveillance can force political participation into private venues. Likewise, [Simone Browne \(2015\)](#) and [Steve Mann \(2013\)](#) have demonstrated how surveillance induces resistance, which respectively operates from outside visibility and seeks to invert the panopticon. It is not always the case that surveillance results in compliance or forces activists out of the public sphere. As [Deniz Yonucu \(2023\)](#) describes for Turkey, the state suppression of activism often impels activists to become more visible and active in public. Activists, Yonucu argues, choose to remain or even become more visible, partly in deference to the martyrs of the movement who preceded them. In this way, activist behavior is influenced more by a desire to ethically align with their predecessors than by the effects of panopticon. Such deference to those who came before also appears in the articulations of Singaporean artists. As Alfian Sa’at told me: “There is a historical lineage . . . theater has always been political in Singapore, it’s always been this space for dissent.” He went on to list the arrests of several playwrights in Singapore’s history: Kuo Pao Kun in 1976, Third Stage in 1987, and Necessary Stage in 1994.

Yet visible resistance under regimes of surveillance does not equal overt resistance. As [Lila Abu-Lughod \(1990\)](#) argues, acts of resistance can be quiet, personal, and everyday. Further, as [Sarah Ihmoud and Shanya Cordis \(2022, 826\)](#) encourage us to remember, resistance does not need to come in the form of “masculinist martyrdom or self-effacement.” They encourage anthropologists to focus on acts of living rebellion, in which people struggle to survive under the conditions of white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and capitalist power “while also tending to the forms of expansion, imagination and rearticulation that always already exist in and beyond this frame” ([Ihmoud and Cordis 2022, 813](#)). The artworks discussed in this article occupy the blurry space between these overt and covert resistances emerging from surveillance. They aim to affirm the complexity of Muslim Singaporean experience from within a system of surveillance that demands uniformity and legibility. They constitute acts of living rebellion that demonstrate how Muslim experiences fall outside the limiting imagined categories of the state.

The Singapore art scene may not seem like fertile ground for resistance to state surveillance. Censorship is common; for example, the IMDA must read all plays before they can be staged. The state has become increasingly invested in the arts, attracted by the global art market and tourism. In 2000, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth began running a program called “The Renaissance City,” which aimed to use the arts to make “the leap from an industrial to a knowledge economy.”⁹ In 2023, it was replaced by the National Arts Council’s “Our Arts Plan.”¹⁰

In both cases, the arts form part of the state’s national plan for economic growth. Consequently, the National Arts Council has become a central hub of arts funding in Singapore. This breeds its own censorship, as two artists explained to me: “A lot of art making relies on government grants . . . it is a psychosis in itself . . . things are heavily funded by the government, [so] people play by the rules to get a commission.” At this point, the other artist chipped in: “Artists don’t even want to put themselves at risk of trying.” However, as [Alfian Sa’at](#) pointed out, there exists a lineage of artist-activists in Singapore. In part, this derives from politicians’ former dismissal of the arts. In 1968, for example, the former prime minister [Lee Kuan Yew](#) called poetry “a luxury we cannot afford” (quoted in [Gui 2018, 10](#)). Such a lack of appreciation means that while artists are widely censored, some leeway exists for their work to critique the state, because artists’ work is often not deemed important or significant.¹¹

How can Muslim artists conceal their critiques of the state whilst opening spaces in the Smart Nation that counter the racialization of Muslim Singaporeans?

In the *Onlife Manifesto*, Mireille Hildebrandt (2015, 185) asks how citizens can create “empowering opacity of the self . . . that incorporates the need for self-expression, identity and performance, as well as the generosity of forgetfulness, erasure and the chance to reinvent oneself?” For Singaporean Muslims, living within a strictly bounded panopticon, this question seems particularly pressing. Fortunately, an answer already exists in Singapore: blurring.

NODES: Blurring the Figure of the Muslim Woman

In a room of the gallery T:>works, I attended the SeptFest performance *Nodes*. *Nodes*, by Nurul Huda Rashid, was one half of a performance called *Sillage*, the other half provided by Nicole Phua’s *Nizalia*. The room was split in half: on one side, Phua repeatedly prostrated before a large urn placed on its side, allowing white powder to spill out onto the floor. On the other side of the room, in tandem with Phua’s piece, was *Nodes*: pieces of diamond mesh fencing, rolled into cones and connected with wires, were scattered across the room. As Phua repeated her ritual movements, Rashid moved through the space attaching search terms about Muslim women to the wires. Each one connected Muslim women across the world, each one bound them to identity markers. Having created the network, Rashid moved among the crowd. Imitating machine vision, she drew sketches of audience members along with a handful of words that aimed to classify them. This included me, still, at the time, masking in the midst of the pandemic. I immediately felt the acute discomfort of being watched. Rashid then handed the sketches to the respective audience members. Having collected all the information, the artist began cutting through the connections, causing the “data” to spread across the floor.

A key theme of 2022’s SeptFest was surveillance, though of who and where remained blurry. Rashid’s *Nodes* connects the surveillance of Singapore to the circumscription of Muslim women’s identities. In Singapore, the ten desired attributes of the SMI outline a particular vision of “good” Muslim behavior. Number five on the SMI list reads, “Progressive, practices Islam beyond forms/rituals and rides the modernization wave” (MUIS 2006, i). If the process of racializing Muslims “trades on pejorative characterizations of religious groups” (Meer and Modood 2010, 83), perhaps the most pervasive pejorative of the Singaporean Muslim community is that it requires modernization. At the center of this characterization is the tudung, a style of hijab common in Singapore, which for many years has been “set in antagonistic terms with the modern” (Zainal and Wong 2017, 109). Critics frequently argue that the tudung, as a visual symbol of difference, upsets the balance of racial harmony. For this reason, wearing tudung



Figure 1. Phase 1: Performative, *Women in War*, activated in *Nodes* (2022) by Nurul Huda Rashid.

was banned in public-sector jobs for many years (Baharudin 2021). As Rashid (2016) writes for the Singaporean blog *Beyond the Hijab*, this discourse around the tudung creates a dichotomy between oppressed wearers of the garment and supposedly liberated modern women. In her artist talk after *Nodes*, Rashid (2016) stated that the cutting of the wires represented breaking away from these binaries, which disregard “all other possible narrative threads that make up ‘Muslim women.’”

Nodes is situated within Rashid’s wider work on the imagery of Muslim women. At a retrospective talk on her work, she reflected on how her artistic practice has changed. In an early work called *Hijab/Her* (2012), Rashid photographed Muslim women in hijab to reflect on issues they face in Singapore. Yet considering these images in conversation with colonial archives, she concluded that her work recreated colonial imagery. As she explained, during the French colonization of Algeria, photographers were disappointed to find that Muslim women did not look like the orientalist images familiar to them. Consequently, they posed women in studios to conform to their imagination (Alloula 1986). These images then circulated via postcards, solidifying the orientalist image of Muslim women. These constructed photographs did not represent neutral snapshots, but carried an ideology that shapes the racialization of Muslim women to this day.

For Rashid, it was both the creation and circulation of these images that constituted the liberated/oppressed binary of Muslim women. Likewise, the good/bad binary of our time is perpetuated by the circulation of images online. All online images are tagged with metadata, allowing them to be sorted. This means that the online archive of images of Muslim women is sorted to create an aggregate image. Like the orientalist images of French photographers, this meta-data contains biases. As [Natascha Just and Michael Latzer \(2017\)](#) argue, algorithms shape the communities they govern. Developers design software encoded with bias from their social setting, which in turn informs what information is deemed most relevant and displayed to more users. The Smart Nation follows similar processes. How data is tagged and sorted reflects existing categories of good/bad Muslims and liberated/oppressed Muslim women. Under these binaries, the tudung is equated with being Muslim, even though many Singaporean Muslim women do not wear it. The state views tudung as anti-modern, so the Smart Nation categorizes women in tudung as anti-modern Muslims. In *Nodes*, Rashid turns these categorizations on her audience. The audience members, who are normally voyeurs, intimately experience on their own bodies the process of being tagged and sorted. Their faces are sketched alongside questions such as “race? identify? self.” When handed these sketches, audience members feel the usually invisible process of racialization in action.

In *Nodes*, Rashid blurs her critique of Singaporean state racialization. While *Nodes* clearly critiques the limiting categorizations of Muslim women, Rashid avoids the claim that she is a “bad Muslim” by generalizing her critique. While the Singaporean state and its infrastructures are actively engaged in the racialization of Muslim women, Rashid does not name them. I would learn later that this approach made not only for an artistic choice but constituted a direct response to the IMDA. As Rashid told me, “When I first submitted our artist statement . . . it was perceived as being solely about religion, as we were using performance to speak about images of Muslim women . . . We then had to re-prioritize our topics.”

The shift to speaking generally about technology, rather than about Muslim women, allowed Rashid to present her ideas while skirting state interference. Further, the blurring was enhanced as *Nodes* was performed during SeptFest, one of several performances obliquely prodding at the state and its surveillance infrastructures. Rashid’s work also blurs categorizations about Muslim women. In *Nodes*, she literally cuts the ties that bind identity markers to Muslim women. Finally, she blurs the line between systems that circulate racialized images of Muslim women and the images’ consumers. In this way *Nodes* serves

as a reminder that the categories of oppressed/liberated Muslim women are empowered and (re)produced by us, not systems—Smart Nation or otherwise. Ultimately, Rashid shows how technologies, like the camera, the internet, and the Smart City, can empower racialized categorizations by circulating and perpetuating images of Muslim women, for example. While an IMDA request made Rashid adapt her work, she still performed her critique by blurring.

Methodological Interlude 1

After Rashid's performance at SeptFest 2022, I went to speak with her. She had already heard of my project; a friend sent her the call for PhD applicants in 2021. She was friendly but understandably suspicious of a British man from a Dutch University studying Islam and AI in Singapore. We agreed to talk again via Skype a month later. Little did I know that this meeting was to "check if I was cool," as Rashid would explain later. Luckily, she concluded that while she found me "a bit too serious," I was trustworthy. When I returned a year later, it was through Rashid that I met most of the Singaporean artists I know. She emailed both haykal and Iskandar on my behalf, and behind the scenes assured others that I could be trusted. In Singapore, with its "snitching culture,"¹² as a friend jokingly called it, communities of trust prove vital. This holds particularly true when communal spaces like Substation close. In a context like Singapore, community can look like a network of friends and peers who can verify new faces.

NUR: BLURRING THE INSTITUTION

After Rashid connected us via email, I met with Iskandar at a biriyani place in the basement of Funan Mall. It was the first of many such dinners, after which we would wander around the city. One evening while walking, we passed an advertisement for a play performed in Fort Canning, a park and military base on a hill in central Singapore. "I would never go there at night," he commented, "too many jinn [beings concealed from the senses]." Such stories of the unseen, or *al-ghaib*, swap hands frequently among Singaporean Muslims. It is believed that Fort Canning is particularly haunted, as former Malay sultans built their palaces on its peak, were buried there, and forbade others from entering. Such beliefs are frowned upon by MUIS and its SMI, which promotes modernity, not superstition. However, it is on the esoteric and the spiritual on which Iskandar's artistic practice dwells.

An interdisciplinary artist and poet, Iskandar focuses his practice on "themes of losing, death, and forgetting." Since 2015, Iskandar has researched and photographed mosques around Singapore for his work *nur* (in Arabic, light

or illumination). The project explores the absence of Islamic art in Singaporean ritual spaces. Given the centralization of mosques, Iskandar told me that these buildings “boil down to a very moderate form of standardization,” tending toward aesthetically neutral spaces that embody sanitized, state-approved representations of Islamic faith. Yet in *nur*, Iskandar “attempt[s] to reconcile the beauty in such encounters of losing.”¹³ This is reflected in the images of mosques that slowly blur and brighten into a beautiful array of colors.

Since 1975, all mosques in Singapore have been built and refurbished under the MUIS Mosque Building Fund (MBF).¹⁴ The MBF is a non-mandatory fund for constructing the replacements to kampong Mosques. The fund formed part of a wider move to encourage citizens out of the kampong and into newly built urban development’s known as HDB.¹⁵ Loh Kah Seng (2009) argues that along with rapid urbanization, centralization also aimed to integrate semi-autonomous kampongs into the main citizenry, increasing state control. This policy proved a success, with most mosques relocated, rebuilt, or refurbished. It is via these now centralized mosques that MUIS espouses its brand of Islam, concerned with purported modernization and upholding the SMI. Since 1968, sermons delivered at Singaporean mosques are read and vetted by the Minister of Muslim Affairs and frequently contain government talking points.

However, there remains a sense of loss within the community for kampong mosques. This becomes particularly evident in the Facebook group called Lost Mosques of Singapore, which archives images of these mosques (Ibrahim 2023). The overriding opinion in these groups is that while current mosques receive

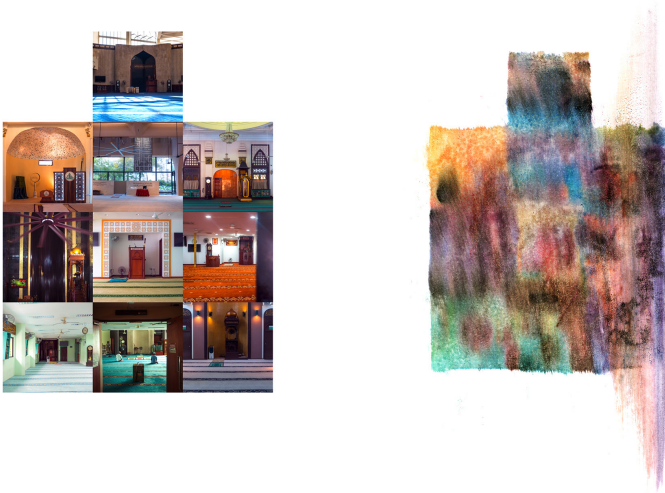


Figure 2. Image from *nur* exhibition. Photo by Noor Iskandar.

more funding, they have become standardized, lacking the beauty and idiosyncrasy of their forebears. With this also comes a loss of autonomy within communities to define their faith. Iskandar explores this sense of loss in *nur* through the Sufi concept of *fanā'*.

The word *fanā'* comes from the Arabic *faniya*, meaning “obliteration” (Wilcox 2011, 96). Andrew Wilcox (2011) argues that unlike similar terms that appear in Buddhist, Vedic, and Judeo-Christian traditions, in Islamic Sufi traditions, this term is paired with the concept *baqā'*, which translates to “subsistence” or “survival.” *Fanā'*, therefore, describes not just the negation of the self through detachment but the possibility of existing closer to Allah by disconnecting from the material world. Shahab Ahmed (2016, 20) ties this concept of disconnection from the material world to *alam al-ghaib*, arguing that “Sufis aspire [to] the uncorrupted pure Truth of the Unseen non-material reality to which material reality and its truth stand in a figural or metaphorical relation.” For Iskandar, this concept proved central to understanding the loss of aesthetic diversity in mosques.

Within Islam, *alam al-ghaib* refers to “what is unseen, imperceptible, covered, veiled, concealed, internal and hidden” (el-Aswad 2019, 279). While this category includes ghosts and jinn, it also includes the mundane, such as Wi-Fi signals. This means that parts of the Smart City, usually invisible, like cables and electrical currents, can be found in *alam al-ghaib*. Instead of assuming that everything can be explained by what can be perceived, *al-ghaib* guides the mind outside the visible (Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr 2019). The unseen makes for a common theme in Malay Muslim art, where the concept is used as “one way of contesting the systematically hegemonic ways of seeing rationally and considering modes of seeing which have been left out” (Iskandar 2019, 263). People, buildings, and categories can blur at the edges by imagining how they extend into *alam al-ghaib*.

By blurring walls in his images, Iskandar imagines a mosque without them, and with it blurs the institution. In this way, he critiques the centralized and racialized framing of Islam espoused in the mosque through the SMI. By losing the mosque, it is also possible to move closer to the pure Truth not represented in physical ritual spaces. For example, Iskandar points to how gender inequalities are emphasized by the limitations of Singapore’s mosque aesthetics. While men get to look at beautiful fractals as they pray, women are often left to look at blank walls.¹⁶ By imagining the mosque as a “placeless entity,” Iskandar “flattens out that . . . hierarchy.” In the mosque without walls, it might also be possible to remove binaries like good/bad Muslim as constructed by the SMI by moving beyond spaces controlled by the state.

During the pandemic lockdowns, this mosque without walls shifted from theoretical possibility to reality. As Iskandar explained, in 2021 during Syawal prayers, “everyone was at home . . . every household turned on their TV, then they had this kind of congregation . . . it’s so profound. This constellation of congregations where people are not physically together but are together in virtual space.” For Iskandar, then, the technological offers a possible route to blurring distinctions. By moving into virtual spaces through digital technologies, something closer to the pure Truth of Sufism can be reached. Reflecting on this pandemic experience, Iskandar told me, “That was the first awakening I had where it was like, maybe this is the future.”

During the writing process for this article, Iskandar re-read this section and asked for a caveat to be added. In his view, the wall-less mosque existed somewhere outside our experience: “It alludes to a sense of dreaming or something more afterlife-ish; [it] alludes to that sense of impossibility, or of a melancholic dream, a utopia which will never materialize.” For one, he pointed out that the virtual mosque negates religious and spiritual aspects of physical congregation. For example, the reward of prayers is greater the larger the congregation. Further, as [Barbrook \(2000\)](#) argues, hierarchies in the physical world prevent cyberspace from liberating everyone, instead privileging those with power and access. As Iskandar told me, “That is something I am aware of, that’s why I mention my idea of a mosque without walls is utopic . . . because there are all these unresolved aspects.” The mosque without walls exists, then, in a realm we cannot reach.

Through blurring, Iskandar critiques the state’s fixed categories about Muslims and their prayer spaces. Yet Iskandar only references MUIS in the online description of the work, stating, “This can hopefully encourage concerning bodies like MUIS to augment the aesthetic experience.”¹⁷ Instead, his critique of the bounded mosque is implied through his literal blurring of the walls of Singaporean spaces of worship. By criticizing the aesthetics of Singaporean mosques, Iskandar also manages to critique the bounded categorization of Islam espoused by these spaces. As Iskandar concludes in the essay accompanying *nur*, “One can also yearn that the margins of Islamic experience can position itself as valuable in the understanding of heritage.”

Unlike in *Nodes*, technology holds an ambiguous, melancholic position in *nur*, emblematic of Iskandar’s artistic practice. Through Iskandar’s experience during the pandemic, he imagined technology used to blur boundaries, rather than enforce them. As he put it, “I want a placeless, wall-less mosque . . . now with AI, people of the world could construct this idea of the mosque.” As we see

in Rashid's work, technologies all too often replicate, reinforce, and circulate negative tropes, including racialized identities of Singaporean Muslims. On the other hand, *nur* critiques current technological systems by imagining radically different ways of using them. However, for now, the mosque without walls exists beyond reach, a ghostly dream.

Methodological Interlude 2

After being vetted by Skype, I was invited to a workshop run by Rashid called "How to see like a computer." The great and good of the Singapore art scene, plus me, brought images, which we labeled as if we were computers tagging them for a database. My interest in tech and art prompted Rashid to recommend I meet with haykal, a sound artist whose work looked at the uncomfortable intimacy between machines and human labor. With Rashid's seal of approval, we would later meet at a café in Kampong Glam to discuss, among other things, his work *momok elektrik*. A year after that meeting, haykal and Iskandar would collaborate on a workshop. The workshop focused on encryption, a core idea within haykal's artistic practice. In the Singapore art scene, knowledge of how systems of control work, and how to negotiate with them, are shared via such workshops and public works. Learning to blur, therefore, is a dialogical process.

MOMOK ELEKTRIK: Blurring Categorization

In an ominous, dark room of the Singapore Arts Museum (SAM), the audience encounters seven "figures" covered in burlap sacks. Each sack is stamped with Jawi, the vernacular Malay writing system, and obscure loudspeakers from which disembodied Malay chants emanate. Each of the voices is controlled by a sampler that selects the next audio clip based on beats per minute (BPM). However, the samples are interdependent, meaning that they trigger one another to play. This creates a shifting soundscape partly controlled by machines and partly controlled by the human voice. The result is a haunting cacophony of voices disconnected from a perceptible source. Several of the gallery sitters at SAM described the experience as scary.¹⁸ Yet haykal conceived the piece not as scary but as a meditation on the categorization of Muslim identities in Singapore.

haykal instructed the singers who performed for *momok elektrik* to imagine they were spellcasting. When I met with haykal to discuss his practice, he explained this was a reference to syncretic forms of Islam: "It doesn't have to be this way . . . when Islam came to the region, syncretic forms of practicing Islam were encouraged." However, as religious authority became centralized at MUIS throughout the 1960s, and religious practice was guided by ideas of modernization, certain religious practices became prohibited. Still, as haykal told

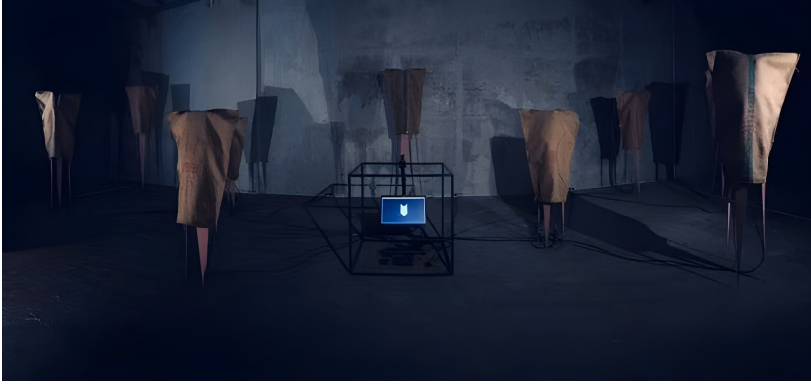


Figure 3. *momok elektrik*, in 2021. Photo by bani haykal.

me, “syncretism does still exist today. The difference is that there are state laws which start to determine that certain things are Islamic and certain things are un-Islamic . . . like cultural practices . . . which involved trance are suddenly not considered Islamic.” Here, haykal is referring to the banning of *Kuda Kepang*, a traditional Malay dance, labeled un-Islamic by MUIS.¹⁹ The Malay chanting of *momok elektrik* acts as a form of resistance to such limiting categories of what Islam can be. In redrafting this section, haykal asked me to include the following description of how the chanting in *momok elektrik* resists the capture of Islam by limiting frames and machines.

The chanting heard thru [sic] *momok elektrik* is, for me at least, a testament to the importance of oral tradition, where passing of knowledge, sharing of information, healing, knowing etc. is concerned; that the voice is what machines desire to capture but voices will escape, be amplified and repeated beyond the confines of capture.

haykal has first-hand experience of the limiting categories of race and religion in Singapore. As we have seen, the CMIO has been used to assert the state’s classificatory power (Chua 1995, 110). Race is used to assign which language students learn as their mother tongue. Malay is taught to Malay students, Mandarin to Chinese students, and Tamil to Indian students. However, this creates problems for those who do not fit these neat categories, like haykal, who is Indian Muslim. As he explained, “I was subjected to this when I was a lot younger, being identified on my ID card as Indian but Muslim. You are Indian, but you are not in Tamil class, for instance, why is that?” With Malay being the dominant language of Islamic institutions in Singapore, Indian Muslims frequently

find themselves in a strange no-man's land (Tschacher 2018). The use of Malay and Jawi chanting in *momok elektrik*, refuses the conflation of Malay and Islam, as well as that of Islamic practice and what the state proclaims it to be.

Perhaps because of his experiences with language, and state categorization, Jawi script plays a central role in haykal's work. In *momok elektrik*, for example, Jawi appears as a form of encryption. As he explained to me, Jawi contains six unique characters that he uses to encrypt his works. For example, in the piece "sifrmu," haykal's poetry is encrypted into these six unique Jawi characters. The result is poetry unreadable without the cipher and knowledge of Jawi. The artist did not choose Jawi at random; instead, it relates to haykal's early experiences of reading the Quran. Like many Muslims I met in Singapore, haykal learned to recite the Quran but not to read Arabic. For haykal, this meant that he did not consider himself to be reading the Quran, unless he was reading it in Jawi. The Malay script transformed the Quran into something intimate for haykal. This marks the core of encryption: the transformation created by intimacy. Language can be a form of encryption, not only because of the way it excludes, preventing others from reading, but also because of how it draws in those who can understand.

However, while *momok elektrik* concerns the intimate relations between the Muslim community and its language and culture, it also reflects on how the state abuses, intervenes into, and disrupts this intimacy using machine technology. In supplementary material to *momok elektrik*, haykal writes a letter in which he discusses non-consensual forms of machine intimacy. "How much of our essence," he asks, "is now stored and held captive in these devices through numerous sensors and processed by big tech?"²⁰ The sensors he refers to here include Singapore's Smart Nation. Through these sensors, Singapore is nearly always extracting data from its citizens, data that then flows into GovTech, the government body managing the Smart Nation. Here haykal reflects a widespread concern. As Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) have argued, data extraction is becoming increasingly invasive, occupying more and more of our lives, not just in public spaces but also privately. As they argue, data is the material produced by "abstracting the world into categories" (Couldry and Mejias 2019, 6), something not inherently bad or new. What has changed is the normalization of social relations in which data extraction is constant and happens without people's awareness. The Smart Nation provides an example of such pervasive data extraction. Singaporeans intimately engage with the Smart Nation every day, because even walking down the street turns individuals into data points. This intimacy transforms Singaporeans into interchangeable units or, as haykal terms it, "tokenization."²¹

The artist proposes that Muslims resist this categorization by becoming less visible, or more encrypted, through intimacy with language and culture. By representing syncretic forms of religious practice, haykal suggests that Muslims blur the boundaries of the “Singaporean Muslim.”

This theme of resisting categories re-emerges in haykal’s other work. In 2015, haykal created *necropolis for those without sleep*, an installation in which two mechanical hands play chess.²² On arrival at the gallery, viewers are randomly assigned one of two kinds of tickets. One allows the viewer to freely roam around the space, while the other allows only fifty steps. Entering the room makes for another ominous experience. It is dark, and the chess game, lit with bright white spotlights, is flanked by two lifeless orange boiler suits. Bodyguards without bodies. The hands themselves move about over the game, heavily wired, as if on life support. If the viewer has the luxury of free movement, they might notice that the game is unbalanced. As the work’s description at the SAM notes, “the orange team is significantly disadvantaged, consisting only of Pawns, a Knight and a King.” Stay long enough, and viewers may notice that the hands play seven identical games on repeat, not automated but following a script.

necropolis alludes to Wolfgang von Kempelen’s “mechanical Turk.” That fraudulent, chess-playing automaton was later revealed to be operated by a person hidden in the machine. The parallel haykal draws with the Smart Nation is clear in how government offices discuss tech governance. In May 2023, I attended an AI workshop run by the government-funded tech business AI Singapore. At the event, the host described AI, and its underlying infrastructures, as models of the real world. The more data in the model, the more accurate its simulation. Soon, with the help of Smart Nation data extraction, near perfect models of the real world would be created, rendering theory obsolete and generating objective policy. Yet in the same breath, the host also described a major pitfall: bias in the existing data set. haykal’s *necropolis* reflects on this bias, bias created by human-created scripts and categories like CMIO and the SMI, which are both then replicated by the Smart City. As haykal put it to me, this “machinery validates what is and isn’t [for] the state or tech corporations. These are entities which are constantly desiring to ensure that there is some form of control over how this information surfaces and gets regurgitated.” The machine of the Smart City is the false automaton, simply moved by the hand of the state and its categorizations.

Throughout haykal’s practice, he undermines state categories by blurring them. While the state uses language to enforce racialized boundaries, in haykal’s work, Jawi is used to resist them. While MUIS defines syncretic practices as

“un-Islamic,” haykal’s *momok elektrik* embraces syncretism through reference to spellcasting. Suddenly, the boundaries of what Islam is, and can be, become blurry. At the same time, Jawi, with its unique characters, acts as a cipher, drawing in the Muslim community of Singapore, while keeping at bay the prying eyes of the state. For the state, clear boundaries help maintain categories, which both ensure self-policing, as in the SMI, and make citizens countable or tokenizable. These categories make the operation of the Smart Nation possible. By refusing to be tokenized, haykal argues, Singaporean Muslims can resist state racialization. In other words, they can act blur to live longer.

Methodological Interlude 3

The knowledge of acting blur described in this article is a product of public negotiations made by artists with the surveilled environment of Singapore. This knowledge was shared to the community at public events like SeptFest and built through workshops where artists collaborated with each other and with members of the public to imagine in the blurry spaces of Singaporean governance. While it is standard practice in the social sciences to anonymize, I felt that removing haykal, Iskandar, and Rashid’s names from this article would have, as [Anna-Lydia Svalastog and Stefan Eriksson \(2010\)](#) argue, excluded them from the genealogy of that knowledge. As [Marta Kolankiewicz \(2022\)](#), whose work focuses on anti-Muslim racism, notes, participants in research deserve the right to speak in their own name. In particular, to research and write about the dialogical community of artists in Singapore as a monologue felt limiting at best. Consequently, the process of writing this article meant checking in with these three artists to ensure that their work was well represented, and that they remained comfortable being named. This article is, therefore, an effort to collaboratively represent how artists in Singapore deal with the limiting categories of race enforced by regimes of surveillance.

This does not mean to imply that I had no concerns about the implications of this essay. As the possibility of publication became more real, I went back to my interlocutors repeatedly, perhaps to the point of annoying them. They affirmed that they were happy to be included, but I could not let it go, even when my supervisors reminded me that my responsibility was to the wishes of my interlocutors. Still seeking reassurance, I co-worked with a friend from Singapore and explained my anxieties. What if the government read my article? What if it caused problems for the artists? What if they were censored because of me? “Maybe this helps,” they said: “Nothing you have written is a surprise to anyone in Singapore.” Those words served as a humbling reminder that cultural

anthropology, as [Michael Herzfeld \(1997, 301\)](#) argues, is in part the comparative “study of common sense.”

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, blurring is an act of being unclear publicly to contest the rigid categories produced by the state and the Smart Nation. Such categories have long existed in Singapore, where the Muslim minority is framed as a threat to racial harmony, and where race has been simplified into four categories. However, the Smart Nation gives these categories a new technological sheen. Not only are racial divisions asserted by the state but they are also objectified by machines. Through blurring, artists and activists disrupt these boundaries. Blurring in these examples emerges as the act of appearing as a member of a category while acting in ways that complicate that category’s limits. These artists appear as Muslims in the public sphere while not conforming to the constructed and racialized expectations of the SMI, CMIO, MUIS, or the state. Since such categories exist elsewhere as well, the concept of blurring can be used to explore how the racialization of Muslims, as described by [Rana \(2011\)](#), is resisted in other places too.

In [Mann’s \(2013\)](#) *sousveillance*, techniques are used to invert surveillance, allowing the many to watch the few, while in [Browne’s \(2015\)](#) work, dark *sousveillance* undermines surveillance from the shadows. Blurring likewise seeks to resist surveillance, but it does so by undermining the categories that empower surveillance networks. Those engaged in blurring become less legible by acting in ways that counter those enshrined by surveillance. Blurring is done publicly, perceived by the state apparatus, but it disrupts, unsettles, and confuses state categories. In this way, blurring offers a kind of resistance akin to [Abu-Lughod’s \(1990\)](#) romantics of resistance, which do not aim to overthrow whole systems, but to seek subtly destabilize hierarchies of power. However, while Abu-Lughod’s acts of resistance may occur privately, blurring constitutes a public act of refusing limiting state categories and surveillance.

The Singaporean state uses MUIS to construct the figure of the Singaporean Muslim. The expected behavior of Singaporean Muslims is spelled out in the SMI. These expectations are in turn circulated via mosque sermons, express themselves in the policing of religious symbols like the tudung, and are codified through language in CMIO policies. The creation of the Singaporean Muslim emphasizes the panoptical effect of the state. If the state defines acceptable behaviors, then citizens have clear ideas of how to self-discipline. This panoptical effect is further entrenched by Smart Nation technologies, which act as physical

manifestations of the state's watchful eye. While the Smart Nation does a great number of things, it is its surveillance role that the already heavily monitored Muslim community experiences most acutely. Further, the logics of Smart Nation categorization transform citizens into interchangeable units. This logic replicates the racialization of all Singaporeans, particularly that of the Muslim minority.

Smart Cities rely on the ability to turn everything into interchangeable units (Whittaker 2023; Powell 2021). Without this possibility, the multifarious data it collects would not be computable. Therefore, these systems are reliant on clearly bounded categories. The Smart Nation, therefore, prioritizes the visible and quantifiable. With this prioritization of the visible comes the implied need to be visible, to be counted. Each of the artists presented here resists this process of racialization. Rashid interrogates Islamic identity beyond obvious visual markers, like the tudung. Iskandar questions the hierarchies created by the MUIS-defined space of the walled mosque. And haykal proposes ways to become encrypted and un-tokenizable through syncretism. All these works run counter to Smart Nation ideology. Rashid, Iskandar, and haykal blur category lines, introducing ambiguity and blurring themselves.

Centralization and bureaucratization are not new products of Singapore's Smart Nation project. As haykal told me, "The data involved is just meant to embolden specific desires of the state." By blurring categories, artists resist their imposition by the state and its machines. Muslim women cannot be reduced to the visual symbol of the tudung. Islamic spirituality cannot be controlled centrally in the mosque. Singaporean Islamic religious practice can instead prove complex and syncretic. Unsettling the state racialization of Muslims makes these artists, and their work, hard to categorize, endangering the frictionless, multi-racial governance of the Smart Nation. Blurring, then, does not only resist the Singaporean state but also the process of racializing Muslims in general.

Blurring offers a way to explore how people resist state categorization by reflecting on the complexity of their own identities. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott (1998, 343) argues that modernist schemes of legibility fail because "the progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter . . . than they really were and . . . regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than they really were." This logic applies not only in highly technological cities like Singapore but in all neoliberal contexts where states use simplified categories to divide and control citizens. By blurring, artists can operate within the state, perhaps even receiving its funding, while maintaining their critique. These are the kinds of critique that arise under authoritarian states with technologies of

surveillance much more advanced than Scott described. As the use of AI technologies by states proliferate, the need to blur as an act of resistance will only increase. By considering how blurriness might prove strategic, it is possible to consider other ways of resisting hegemonic discourses, both in Singapore and in other technocratic states.

ABSTRACT

In 2024, Singapore was again named “Smartest City in Asia,” a position achieved through the strategic deployment of surveillance infrastructures and technocratic governance. This article explores the practices of three Muslim artists whose work challenges the limiting categorizations produced by the intertwined logics of Smart Nation governance and state racialization. Based on fieldwork conducted since 2022, I argue that by offering their work plausible deniability through the strategy of “blurring,” these artists operate in the highly surveilled context of Singapore by being unclear publicly. This not just marks a strategy of evasion. By engaging with the anthropologies of Islam and surveillance, I argue that these artworks disrupt established categories, revealing the inherent complexities of identity obscured by technological efficiency and racial categories. Through these works, which go beyond the visible, these artists create space to imagine something otherwise by complicating the neat categorization of the Singapore state. [blurring; Smart Nation; invisibility; governance; Singapore; surveillance; racialization]

ABSTRAK

Pada tahun 2024, Singapura sekali lagi dinamakan “Bandar Paling Pintar di Asia”, satu kedudukan yang dicapai melalui pelaksanaan strategik infrastruktur pemantauan dan tadbir urus teknokratik. Artikel ini meneroka amalan tiga seniman Muslim yang mengusik pengkategorian terhadap yang terhasil daripada logik berjalın antara pentadbiran Smart Nation dan perkauman negara. Berdasarkan hasil kerja lapangan sejak 2022, saya berhujah bahawa dengan menonjolkan karya mereka kebolehnafian yang munasabah melalui motif “blurring”, para seniman ini beroperasi dengan pendekatan yang lebih terselindung dalam suasana pemantauan tinggi di Singapura. Ini bukan hanya atas dasar untuk mengelak. Dengan mengaitkan wacana antropologi Islam dan pemantauan, saya mengemukakan bahawa karya-karya ini mengoyahkan kategori yang sudah mapan, lalu mendedahkan kerumitan identiti yang tersembunyi di sebalik kecakapan teknologi dan kategori perkauman. Melalui karya-karya yang melangkaui apa yang sedia tampak, saya berpendapat bahawa dengan merumitkan pengkategorian kemas dilakarkan Singapura, seniman-seniman ini berupaya mencipta ruang untuk membayangkan realiti yang lain. [“blurring”; Smart Nation; ketidaktampakan; tadbir urus; Singapura; pemantauan; perkauman]

NOTES

Acknowledgments My deepest thanks go to Nurul, Iskandar, and bani for allowing me to write about and think with their work. I also thank them for taking time to discuss their artistic practice with me, for reading drafts of this article, and for guiding me physically and conceptually through Singapore. For their guidance through the many drafts of this text, I thank my supervisors Bart Barendregt and Andrew Littlejohn. I also owe a lot to my colleagues in the digitalization cluster and PhD thesis seminar who helped me find my argument. Particular thanks go to my fellow PhDs on the One among Zeroes project, Weiyan Low and Daphne Wong-A-Foe, for their support. I owe special thanks to Ting Hui Lau who not only read drafts but had me on their panel at the AAA twice, allowing me to sharpen this work in conversation with the other panelists. In particular, I thank the discussant on the panel in 2023, Dwai Banerjee, whose feedback informed the first versions of this essay. For reading drafts, let me thank Anne Noël, ants chua, and Julie Karremans. This research forms part of the One among Zeroes project at Leiden University, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

1. See Substation, “The Substation Post–Town Hall Update,” March 18, 2021, <https://www.substation.org/blog/post-townhall>
2. See Substation, “SeptFest 2022: Uproot | Rootless,” 2022, <https://www.substation.org/sept-fest-2022>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
3. Ibid.
4. See GovTech, “Our Role,” 2019, <https://www.tech.gov.sg/who-we-are/our-role/>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
5. See AI Singapore “Introduction To Computer Vision (CV) Hub” 2021, <https://aisingapore.org/introduction-to-computer-vision-cv-hub/>, last accessed March 5, 2026.
6. The PAP has ruled in Singapore since 1959, as what some call a competitive authoritarian state (Abdullah 2016).
7. Widely referred to as the CMIO, these categories emerged under British colonial rule but were maintained after independence by the PAP.
8. Formed in 1968, the MUIS is a statutory board of the government that reports directly to the minister of Muslim Affairs. The MUIS is governed by a council whose members are nominated from several Singaporean Muslim organizations and appointed by the president of Singapore. It is widely acknowledged that the MUIS is co-opted by the Singaporean state (Abdullah 2013).
9. See National Arts Council, “Renaissance City Reports (2000, 2004, 2008),” 2021, [https://www.nac.gov.sg/resources/arts-masterplans/renaissance-city-reports-\(2000-2004-2008\)](https://www.nac.gov.sg/resources/arts-masterplans/renaissance-city-reports-(2000-2004-2008)), last accessed March 29, 2024.
10. See Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, “Our SG Arts Plan,” 2023, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/cultureacademy/researchandpublications/Research-Papers/Strategic-Plans/Our-SG-Art-Plan-2023---2027>, last accessed July 28, 2025.
11. It is of course worth pointing out that the state is not a monolith. As ethnographies of the state explore, it is full of nuance, contradictions, and complexity. However, this article does not mean to constitute an ethnography of the state. Instead, it focuses on how my interlocutors respond to a state they frequently experience, and which often asserts itself, as a monolith.
12. Beyond state surveillance, various forms of citizen surveillance also exist in Singapore. For example, the website Stomp formerly paid for videos of people breaking social norms (Abidin 2017).
13. Noor Iskandar, “nur,” 2021, <https://noor-iskandar.com/nur>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
14. National Library Board, “Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund” 2023, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=28ec75a4-0cd2-401f-bf89-ea0f60bad98d>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
15. Named for the Housing Development Board.

16. Prayer spaces allocated for women are often relegated to side rooms of the mosque, marginalizing them physically and socially.
17. Noor Iskandar, “nur,” 2021, <https://noor-iskandar.com/nur>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
18. Singapore Art Museum, “Electric Intimacies, Singapore Art Museum,” September 1, 2022, <https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/about/our-collection/stories/electric-intimacies>
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20. bani haykal, “semangat momok & Bodies,” *Other Futures*, 2021, <https://otherfutures.nl/uploads/documents/semangat-momok--bodies.pdf>, last accessed March 29, 2024.
21. bani haykal, “Become Untokenable,” *Portside Review*, 2022, <https://www.portsidereview.com/become-untokenable>, last accessed June 25, 2024.
22. Singapore Art Museum, “President’s Young Talents 2015,” 2015, <https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/Art-Events/Exhibitions/PYT2015>, last accessed March 29, 2024.

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