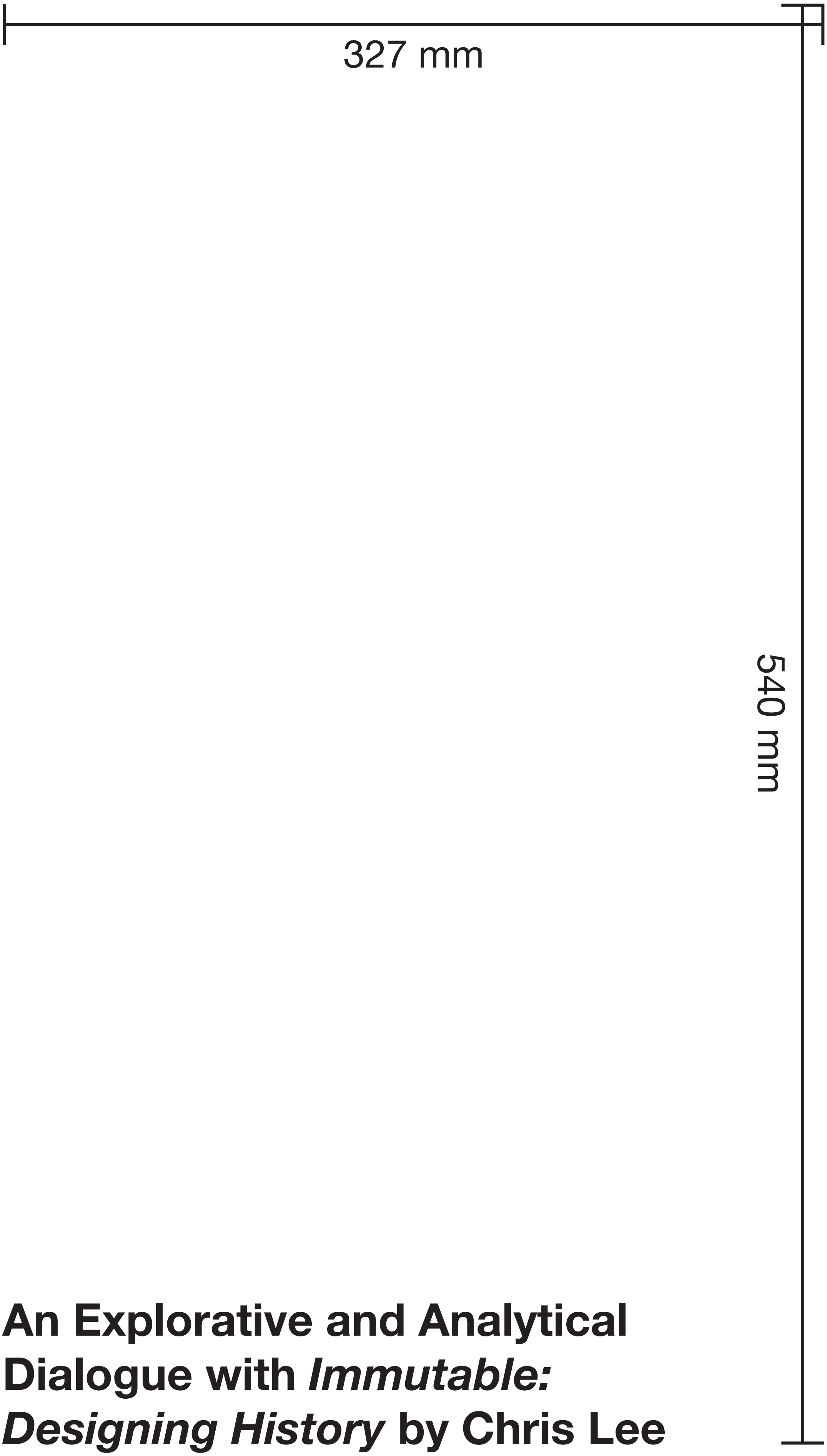


An Explorative and Analytical Dialogue with *Immutable: Designing History* by Chris Lee

We live in the era of globalisation, in which identities continually emerge, converge, diverge and expand through the ongoing interplay of languages, cultures and politics across diverse contexts.

To this day, Singapore's national identity remains an increasingly fluid and unsettled question. What it means to be 'Singaporean' has continuously evolved alongside changing demographics, generational shifts, and immigration policy amendments. As a young nation shaped by multiple cultural and linguistic influences, my project seeks to explore how typography, a discipline rooted in European and Latin traditions, can contribute to the construction or reconstruction of a postcolonial, non-Western identity. To investigate, I compiled typographic artefacts, predominantly prints, from community and national archives, examining them as visual traces through which a collective 'local' identity is articulated. My position, however, is challenged by *Immutable: Designing History* (Lee, 2022), prompting a critical reflection on banal objects in materialising typography as a political practice involved in the construction and maintenance of institutional authority. At the same time, my research complicates Lee's position by examining how graphic designers in

Singapore participate in the reproduction of authority not necessarily by choice, but under the constraints imposed by government regulations. Thus, this writing serves as an explorative and analytical dialogue that explores the oppositions and similarities between my work and *Immutable: Designing History*, opening up new questions for further development.

Typography as Apparatus of Authority

In Immutable: Designing History, Lee discusses the relationship between graphic design, state power and colonialism through the history of money and legislative documents. From Mesopotamian clay tablets to contemporary blockchain, graphic design is entangled with the administrative systems of capitalist and colonial power, legitimising knowledge, identities and ownership in ways that favour ruling elites. Lee argues that graphic design is charged with immutability, defined as the capacity to fix the form and meaning of signs and stabilise governmentality by locating claims in commonly apprehensible forms. Banality provides cover for immutability, which is why design objects located within the realm of the banal are easily overlooked and often excluded from critical scrutiny and contestation.

In the chapter ‘Printing & Typography’, Lee points to prints, specifically stocks and bonds, in consolidating the formation of a general public within a commercial framework. Other popular printed formats, including newsletters, gazettes, pamphlets and broadsheet, also enable new forms of political collectivity through their circulation. As these materials circulate in multiple copies, they instantiate a shared, albeit imagined, world among strangers who potentially share common concerns. Furthermore, they establish a linear, progressive narrative of the nation through the standardisation of its language, which sustain void promises of a better future and divert public attention from the maldistribution of power (Caswell, 2021).

My online archive collects a variety of prints designed by community members and government staffs, ranging from campaign posters and exhibition leaflets to community event flyers and product advertisements, and provides information about their production based on historical records. Through collecting materials produced within and outside governmental institutions, I initially intended to explore collective identity within and beyond official national narratives. However, Lee’s discussion of banality and authority prompts me to question the neutrality of these artefacts,

including those that appear independent of institutional directives.

The development of graphic design in Singapore, quite brutally subsumed under the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) conception of “Arts and Culture”, has been heavily shaped by government policies. Since its unceremonious expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, the ruling party has assigned an ideological function to graphic design. Under the objective of building a “multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religion society” (Lee, 1966), graphic designers working under government institutions have tended to adopt a style characterised by large, bold yet minimally decorative texts at the top, accompanied by a single photograph or a simple illustration aligned centrally. The priority of these prints is not to attract a particular target audience, but to communicate the government’s messages to its citizens. These prints are explicitly political, as they are meant to serve political purposes.

Graphic designs produced by community members, on the other hand, are political in another way. Graphic designers were described as craftsmen who dedicated their skills exclusively to their patrons or commissioners and work within the given parameters (Dhanabalan, 1984). This gave rise to a flourish-

ing commissioned-work culture in the commercial industry, with typographic works featuring more meticulous illustrations and greater varied layouts. Still, these works were produced within the rules set by their commissioners and did not represent the designer's own opinions or ideas. The 1985 recession, in particular, prompted the PAP to recognise the economic potential of arts and culture. Subsequently, the government began encouraging competition among local practitioners across various artistic disciplines. While typographic works produced under these circumstances may enjoy greater freedom of self-expression, they were still created with the intention of appealing to the officials and competing for funding or opportunities to participate in international events.

Even when produced outside direct state commissions, typographic works remain entangled with government policies, economic priorities and dominant cultural values that influence what can be designed, communicated and made visible. Graphic designers, too, despite appearing as autonomous authors of their work, do not develop their visual languages in isolation. Their design decisions are also shaped, to varying degrees, by regulatory constraints imposed by the ruling party.

Lee's introduction of the relationship between graphic design and politics has significantly shifted my critical position by revealing how deeply political concerns permeate typographic works in Singapore. This challenges my initial assumption that community-based typographic works may offer alternative expressions of collective identity to those published through official channels. Most importantly, it suggests that uncovering a collective identity independent of institutional authority in Singapore through its typographic works, is nearly impossible, for what made their production, circulation and preservation available was, in the first place, determined by what the government deemed culturally valuable or politically and economically desirable in graphic design during the respective periods of production.

Moving Forward

Similar to my approach in Δ1, the physical copy of Immutable: Designing History was designed with the objective to "swim against the implicit linear, progressive flow of a bound book" (Lee, 2022, p.7). Rather than following an unidirectional trajectory, its contents are arranged in a recursive loop: while the pages advance sequentially according to Latin orthography, the figures devolve. As part of my future research

into decolonising non-western typographic practices, I would like to continue exploring achronological ways to discussing and presenting typography as an act of resistance against linear Christian temporalities. The pagination of this writing presents an intuitive exploration of how this approach may be carried out. Each page of the print is numbered in both ascending and descending order, disrupting the convention of a singular, forward-moving sequence and suggesting instead a timeline in which progression and regression coexist.

My project development before Δ1 revolved around the question: “How can letterforms function as contested spaces where typographic hierarchies in globalised writing systems are challenged?”. I approached it by viewing digital type as a site of creolisation and non-Latin scripts as typographic creoles that retain linguistic meanings but are no longer visually identical to their local cultures, as they are harmonised according to Latin principles. In resistance to these Eurocentric ideals, I deconstructed and introduced interlocality into the grid system commonly found in typeface design, redistributing power across multilingual scripts through spatial frameworks that integrate the traditional typographic structures of their associated writing system.

In Δ1, I zoomed out from the structures of letterforms and explored typography on a broader scale, examining prints grounded in the Singaporean context. Immutable: Designing History has been particularly insightful in helping me identify the power structures within prints, leading me to once again question the neutrality of typographic works and consider how power could be redistributed among the people and mediums involved. As this project develops, I hope to investigate further how these existing hierarchies could be challenged and repoliticise archival texts and graphics by recontextualising them into visual expressions of languages or cultures that remain absent from official narratives.

(This writing is designed to match the dimensions of the newspaper pages of The Straits Times and uses Helvetica Neue, a typeface widely used in editorial and newspaper design in Singapore.)

Reference:

1. Lee, C. (2022) *Immutable: Designing History*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

Additional Reference:

1. Caswell, M. (2021) *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. London: Routledge.
2. Dhanabalan, S. (1984) *Speech by Mr S. Dhanabalan, Minister for Culture, at the Official Opening of "Italian Renaissance - Portrait of an Era" Exhibition Organised by the Italian Embassy at the National Museum Art Gallery, 9 April at 5.30 pm.* Singapore: Ministry of Culture.
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