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GREAT EXPECTATIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MAKE AND HOLD SPACE FOR THE ARTS IN SINGAPORE?

Hoe Su Fern

INTRODUCTION

The arts and artists need space to thrive. However, as much of the land in Singapore is state-owned, providing space for the arts—literally and figuratively—remains challenging. Today, there is a rich variety of arts infrastructure in Singapore, including performing arts venues, state-subsidised artist studios and co-working spaces for freelancers. However, this state-administered infrastructure comes with expectations, as these arts spaces have been positioned as expedient policy resources capable of achieving a broad confluence of cultural, urban, economic and social outcomes for Singapore.

These “great expectations” on state-initiated arts spaces and the ensuing implications are the foci of this paper. I will use two case studies to question what it truly means to make space, hold space and lose space in the arts in Singapore. In doing so, I will explore the possibilities of practices of community, solidarity and collectivism in the arts in Singapore. The paper will highlight the limitations of mere physical space provision, by focusing on the practices of commoning and forms of solidarity that inhabit artistic practice and arise from coming together.

CONTEXT: ARTS INFRASTRUCTURE IN SINGAPORE

To contextualise the two case studies, it is critical to understand the broader arts infrastructural landscape in Singapore. In the original *Space, Spaces and Spacings* conference in 1995, T. Sasitharan aptly described the state narrative of land scarcity in Singapore and how it has been used to justify the lack of space for the arts in Singapore:

We are a nation intimately connected with the notion of space. Or more correctly, we are a nation intimately connected with the lack of it. We have always been, and so far as I can see, will always be a spatially impoverished nation. For the past 30 years, we have been assaulted by that brute physical fact. It has been rammed down our throats constantly, so much so a narrative has risen around our lack of space. It is a narrative designed to foster a controlled hysteria, a siege mentality, a perpetual crisis of survival pegged to the fact that we are small, devoid of resources and with a future too rueful to contemplate [...] Part of the package of buying the story is accepting the lie that culture and artistic development are necessarily secondary to and predicated upon economic development. (1996, p. 54).

This narrative of land scarcity has been repeatedly stated in cultural policies and master plans, from the *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (1989) to the more recent *Our Sg Arts Plan* (2018). The *Our Sg Arts Plan* states:

With Singapore’s limited land space and NAC’s finite space resources, we need to ensure that whatever space we have is well used for arts creation and presentation. Many of these spaces can also be platforms for place-making and community engagement (National Arts Council, p. 46).

Consequently, although there has been significant state investment in arts and cultural infrastructure in Singapore, where millions of dollars have been directed to the building, expansion and renovation of arts and cultural spaces such as museums, theatres and artist

studios, there have been also greater expectations placed upon these arts and cultural spaces to deliver urban cultural policy outcomes from place-making to neighbourhood revitalisation and community engagement (Hoe, 2020).

The nature, extent and implications of these expectations will be explored in the following two case studies.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MAKE SPACE FOR THE ARTS: CASE STUDY ONE – THE CO-OP EXPERIMENT BY THE SUBSTATION

The first case study is *The Co-op*, which is an experiment developed by Alan Oei, the fifth Artistic Director of The Substation, as part of his year-long programme for The Substation in 2016.

The catalyst for this programme came from the responses received by Oei when he was first appointed as Artistic Director and shared his plans for The Substation. His plan, which centred on an almost entirely in-house curation of programmes according to an annual theme, would entail major changes, including removing long-standing programmes such as “First Take” and easing out venue rentals. The loss of venue rentals would mean that artists and arts groups could no longer have access to a relatively affordable space for their self-organised activities, which ranged from independent music gigs and art classes to exhibitions and productions. His plans were met with anxiety and resistance from artists from varying disciplines. These negative responses led to multiple open sessions and a townhall to hear the concerns. Eventually, Oei reversed part of his plan (Fang, 2016).

For Oei, the reactions and discussions revealed more than just artists’ feelings towards The Substation; they also exposed a deeper anxiety about art, art-making and arts spaces in Singapore. As a response, he developed *Is That All There Is?* – a programme comprising three experiments that ran from 1 September 2016 to 28 February 2017.

The Co-Op was developed to imagine alternative models of operation for an arts space. To achieve this, The Substation would invite a “community” to come together and propose their own rules of engagement, and then take control of the programming for a month. For Oei, this experiment was intended to explore the possibilities of plurality, openness and sense of community in the arts, issues that were raised during the open sessions. More importantly, he wanted to find out whether these ideological aspirations could be congruent with the ground-level operations of The Substation.

To form this “community,” an open call was issued in August 2016. Thirteen out of 42 applicants were selected to form the Co-Op. Together with the two programme managers from The Substation, the Co-op was finally formed with 15 members of diverse fields and backgrounds.¹ Notably, the Substation also contracted one guest producer to ensure that the co-op would meet and deliver its intended deliverables. I was contracted as a guest researcher to observe the process.

From October 2016 to February 2016, the co-op met regularly. At first, the weekly meetings were discursive, with the members coming together to explore how they could possibly work together as a team, what their rules of engagement would be, and what values they would represent as a co-op. At the end of the third meeting, the guest producer noted that there had been little progress and reminded the co-op that they would need to produce a month of programming.

After that remark, the co-op shifted quickly from discursive discussions to pragmatic planning. The priority was placed on enabling the group to deliver the required month of programming. Even the eventual rules and terms of engagement were based on this. Meeting topics mainly

¹ One member left the Co-op midway, during the eight meeting (there were fifteen weekly meetings in total).

revolved around the logistical operations and technicalities including regulations and deadlines. The setting of these topics were often guided by the need for the group to respond and comply to the requests and deadlines of the General Manager of the Substation, which were communicated by the programme managers who formed part of the group. These requests included the submission of administrative paperwork such as licensing applications and marketing copies, constant reminders of building regulations as well as pressing concerns over the practical feasibility of the proposed ideas. Here, it must be noted that these requests and deadlines are not bizarre or exceptional. Rather, they are common processes behind arts programming in Singapore today. However, many within the co-op faced frustration during the process, especially since not all were familiar with the typical processes of arts management and programming in Singapore. Nevertheless, they persevered to deliver. This was in spite of the guest producer reminding the group on more than one occasion, it was her responsibility to produce the required programming, and the co-op had the option to disengage and not deliver.

To explicate the tensions between the discursive exploratory discussions and the operational realities of programming faced by the co-op, it is useful to refer to a note that Oei published on his Facebook in 2016, which was in relation to an earlier experiment from the same programme:

If you are part of the arts, you might have heard that Post-Museum is taking over The Substation. Yes, we invited them to occupy our entire first floor: from the corridor to the gallery, the black box, and yes, the toilets. We invited them because we felt the Sub had lost its vital role as a civic and public space in supporting LGBT, animal rights, and the like. As a nomadic (and formerly housed) collective that constantly blurs the line between art and social causes, we are curious how they'll use the building.

One week before they open in September, and this idea is falling apart. We can't deal with their free-n-easy working style. they can't give us clarity on installation or schedules. We try to lay down the rules. Hair is pulled; sleep is lost. We suspend some rules, we overcompensate with others.

Today, I asked [Woon] Tien [Wei], eh when are you replacing our Sub sign with yours, it's a takeover leh. He says, no what, cos look at all the tech riders and stuff we have to clear. If it was truly a takeover, you would just pass us the keys, and we would open and close any time. In my mind, doomsday scenarios—how would we know who is here, or if something goes missing, or worse someone... etc.

But you know, Tien is right. And the only reason all this friction is happening is because I missed the bigger picture: that in fact, Post-Museum coming to occupy The Sub isn't just about the ideological (of what art spaces stand for) but about the daily practice and operations, and its correspondent values.

I think about what Godwin [Koay] says, perhaps artists have only been users. And The Sub has only been a venue, all the rules we have in place are designed to protect our organisational needs, not necessarily the artists'.

But some artists are also damn one kind. We tell them not to drill, then they do it immediately after we turn away. Then there are artists who just take, take, take, and never give. We can, and have, drawn the lines, but those lines only show us the failure and limitations of our relationship with artists.

Because we are not a community. And that judgment really is on both the Sub and the artists. We have to learn to do things better together, learn to love and respect the space, so that there's an etiquette and understanding, not necessarily a bunch of hirer terms. Along the way, there may be some people who abuse the space. Well, maybe we have to accept that's inevitably part of what it means to run The Sub. Maybe there's a far bigger price to pay when we put in rules to stop a few who damage our space. Maybe the

price is the very loss of what we claim to stand for: openness and plurality, most of all, arts community. It cuts both ways.

This note was written before the start of *The Co-Op* experiment. Yet, though the Co-op was also meant to “take over” the programming, they faced similar pressures of needing to comply and abide by The Substation’s rules, regulations and operational practices. This demonstrates the difficulty for an institution to unlearn long-standing practices in order to relate anew.

Ultimately, the group managed to deliver their required programming. However, one comment by a member exposes the lack of affective relations and conviviality amongst the co-op. When the group completed its month of programming, this member remarked, “I never got to know them as friends till now.” She shared that she only got to know the co-op as friends when they had to gallery-sit together during the month of programming. Her comment also received consensus amongst the others. During the debrief, several members also shared their frustrations over the need to comply with the rules and regulations of The Substation, as they had disrupted and altered the group’s original programming ideas and aspirations.

In February 2019, Oei announced that he would step down as artistic director before his expected tenure of five years. His reasons for stepping down provide a further context to the pressures faced by the co-op as well as the incongruities between the ideals of collectivism and the operational realities of a state-controlled arts space:

The reality however is that because in Singapore (the arts scene is) driven by particular KPIs, as well as there are so many art events all the time, it is hard to cut above the noise. A lot of it becomes a paint-by-numbers kind of game sometimes, and that’s one of the things that I would like to be able to step back from. I’d like to be able to spend more time on work that is meaningful, rather than always churning out programme after programme (Oei, as cited by Chai, 2019).

Overall, this case study reveals how the operational governance of state-managed spaces like The Substation, and the ensuing expectations to produce, pose palpable hurdles against the fostering of a conducive relational space where conviviality and the social life of creativity are able to thrive, let alone the nurturing of any sense of commoning and collectivism.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOSE SPACE FOR THE ARTS: CASE STUDY TWO – THE DISPLACEMENT OF CENTRE 42 FROM 42 WATERLOO STREET

The second case study centres on the collective responses to the recent announcement by the National Arts Council (NAC) about the redevelopment of 42 Waterloo Street, which is also a site allocated for arts housing.

On 22 January 2020, NAC announced that 42 Waterloo Street will house the third Arts Resource Hub (ARH) co-working space. This means that Centre 42, which is the current sole tenant of the site, will return the premises to NAC and become a co-tenant with ARH. While Centre 42 will still remain at 42 Waterloo Street, it will only occupy the office space, which is a small rectangle comprising possibly less than 20% of the total gross floor area. NAC, through ARH, will manage the rest of the site, as well as the resources. On 29 January 2020, NAC updated that the decision was meant to enable 42 Waterloo Street to become a more accessible and inclusive space for the wider arts community. NAC also shared that it has been “in conversations” with Centre 42 since 2018 about its needs and is confident that Centre 42 “can continue to play its intermediary role in the theatre scene”.

NAC’s announcement was quickly met with a collective outpouring of reactions from many in the arts, contemplating the rationale and implications of this sudden move, particularly in terms of how this will affect art-making and a sense of place for artists and arts groups (see Said and Rowland, 2020).

The collective response bears testament to how Centre 42 has been organically placemaking 42 Waterloo Street into a critical node of creative exchange. Since its opening in 2014, Centre 42 has been the intermediary caring over 42 Waterloo Street and its resources, which includes a Black Box and Rehearsal Studio. As a non-profit organisation devoted to local theatre development, it has supported the incubation and development of more than 200 new works of different media and disciplines. Importantly, their custodianship of the space has enabled them to cultivate a convivial and conducive environment for art-making, particularly in terms of providing a safe space for incubation and experimentation for emerging and/or independent artists. Centre 42 may appear as a quiet, empty and even under-utilised space to passers-by, as most of the work takes place behind doors to enable the artists and creative teams to explore ideas and develop works-in-progress safely. This is all part of Centre 42's invisible caring, which guises itself in the form of honest conversations about optimal technical support and permits, to the seemingly banal discussions on well-being and self-care over home-baked desserts. The caring also extends to ceding space and trust to the messiness of the making process, and allowing emerging playwrights a space to raise funds to go overseas to pursue their studies and/or dreams. In this way, Centre 42 has cultivated social capital by fostering affective relations and bonds with numerous arts practitioners, managers and producers, who feel comfortable enough to drop by the space whenever they are in the area.

In fact, Centre 42's social capital and affective relations have also enabled its own production of programmes. According to company manager Ma Yanling, its annual Late Night Texting programme—a showcase of text-based works by emerging artists and arts groups that takes place during the Singapore Night Festival period—was a risky endeavor that would not have been possible if not for their networks. As she explains,

What we had then, was two to three years of relationships with artists and arts groups who had trust in us—in our ways of working, our values, and our mission to grow the local theatre scene—and in whom we also had confidence, particularly their ideas and processes of creation. This mutual trust and faith allowed us to deliver a successful inaugural LNT in 2016, which we have since evolved into a platform that responds both to the needs of our artists to test new works, and the desire to allow audiences—especially new ones—to acquaint themselves and cultivate positive experiences with local theatre and artists (personal communication, 2019).

NAC has also publicly shared their view on the predicament of Centre 42 and the collective sentiments about the displacement of Centre 42 from 42 Waterloo Street:

All arts tenancy spaces, including Goodman Arts Centre where NAC itself is sited, have hitherto been on lease terms. This has not hindered the development of the healthy and vibrant arts landscape today. The reality is that with a flourishing arts scene comes growing demand for spaces, among other resources [...] Waterloo Street is a key arts and heritage district and home to many diverse art forms supported by NAC. NAC will step up efforts on place-making to work with the cultural arts groups and institutions in the precinct [...] Together, we can programme meaningful and varied cultural activities that more Singaporeans can enjoy. The Singapore Night Festival is an example of successful precinct-wide activation (Yeoh, 2020).

Their response assumes that community and sense of place can be simply and solely created through top-down policy. Additionally, place-making seems to have been conflated with place management and activating spaces through arts programming and increasing footfall. While it is understandable that policy makers aspire to enable 42 Waterloo Street to become more vibrant, accessible and inclusive, we should be concerned about the attempt to rejuvenate the space by displacing the current tenant. A peopled place is not always a community. Spaces and people both require time and care to become embedded within a neighbourhood, to nurture social bonds and interpersonal networks and to foster vernacular creativity. The lack of shared histories, place

attachment and the habit of transience means that even well-meaning efforts at community building can fail.

On the whole, this case study highlights the precarity of arts spaces in Singapore, as well as the tensions between artist needs and what Terence Chong has termed as the bureaucratic imagination of the arts, used to describe the “selective and rudimentary application of art and its imagined qualities” by politicians and bureaucrats as a “creative solution to perceived socio-political or economic challenges” (2014, p. 20).

CONCLUSION: HOLDING SPACE FOR ARTS SOLIDARITY

I have used two case studies to provide a micro-level understanding of the internal tensions and external pressures of arts spaces in Singapore, as well as the incongruities that exist between local artist needs and state expectations. Although state policies like the NAC’s Arts Housing Spaces enable the provision of space for the arts, as well as allow these spaces to sites of relatively affordable creative spaces of production, the expectations to maximise and optimise space utilisation have hindered cultural intermediaries like The Substation and Centre 42 to persist in making and holding space for solidarity and collective action.

The two case studies have demonstrated the limitations of mere physical space provision by focusing on the practices of commoning and forms of solidarity that inhabit artistic practice and arise from coming together. The responses and sentiments garnered, when the generative power of these intermediaries was threatened, also highlight how it is possible to foster these “thick” relations even with “thin” resources. Importantly, the social and relational life of the arts are the anchors that nurture a sense of place, while also energising the city as a generative, creative ecosystem that is ever in flux.

The concerns and tensions raised here are not new. They are best expressed in a statement by Kuo Pao Kun, the late theatre doyen and founder of The Substation, about his intentions for The Substation to become a “home for the arts”:

We don’t have an arts centre in Singapore. We have theatres and galleries but these are all places where you cannot really ‘stay’. There was no way you could mix with the artists [...] am concerned about creating a space in Singapore life for the arts. A space not in terms of a place, but a space in our value systems, lifestyle and consciousness. A space that will be as important in our lives as the need to find a job [...] The Substation will be a permanent space to do arts, see arts, talk arts and live the arts. A space where artists can mingle and encounter strange artistic activities far removed from their own (Sasitharan, 1990).

Here, I call for a refreshed way of thinking about how we can make, hold and hopefully not lose space for the arts in Singapore. Are we able to conceive and (re)imagine our arts spaces in different ways, particularly in how they can function as “possibility spaces”? This idea of possibility spaces is borrowed from Ava Kromberg, who is the co-founder of Mess Hall, a community-centric arts centre in Chicago. She used the term to describe the way she ran her arts centre, as “accessible and inclusive spaces, which promote an environment of generosity, conviviality and the messiness of co-existing differences as an openness that allows new ideas and forms to take shape in favour of habitual responses or patterns” (2010, p. 214 – 5). And as local architect William Lim reminds us, we must recognise the city as being in a vital “state of incompleteness, with spaces that are indeterminate and open to continuous unforeseen changes and unplanned growth” (2012).

Nonetheless, perhaps a small tide is finally turning. In recent years, we have more artist-initiated independent spaces like *soft/WALL/studs* and collectives such as *Main Tulis Group* and *Brown Voices*. The global pandemic and its devastating consequences have stressed this dire need for solidarity in a fragmented and turbulent landscape, as well as (re)surfaced the need for the arts

to work towards thriving together, in difference. Whether we embrace this opportunity for change is another question.

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