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The Substation: How many more canaries in the coal mine?

February 20, 2021

By Hoe Su Fern

Since 1990, The Substation has been the sole occupant of the conserved building at 45 Armenian Street. Over the years, it has transformed the once-abandoned power station into Singapore's first artist-led multi-disciplinary arts centre.

However, in July 2020, the news that the conserved building would undergo renovations and that The Substation might not return in full capacity was publicly made known. On 8 February 2021, it was further revealed that the National Arts Council's (NAC) renovation plans include turning 45 Armenian Street into a new centre for multiple arts groups. Through a response to the aforementioned news signed off by Tay Tong (who seems to be the Council's appointed statesman when it comes to mediating with the arts community), it was further communicated that when the renovations are completed, The Substation "will be given the option of returning to the current location and utilising the revamped spaces as a tenant". This means that The Substation would shift from sole occupant managing the building and its resources to a tenant co-sharing the building with other arts groups.

In land-scarce Singapore, this situation is not new. How it is playing out also feels like déjà vu. One year ago, the community was faced with a similar scenario when the news broke out that Centre 42 would have to co-share its building on 42 Waterloo Street with Arts Resource Hub (ARH). What this co-sharing entails is that NAC, through ARH, will manage the physical site including resources such as the Black Box and Rehearsal Studio. ArtsEquator reported on the matter in February last year, just before the pandemic hit Singapore.

Although the current situation facing The Substation is not new or unique, its impending fate is emblematic of, and raises deep questions about the progressively precarious and capricious conditions of arts practice in Singapore.

There are four underlying problems that we should be concerned with:

Firstly, the impending return of management of 45 Armenian Street to NAC highlights the increasing centralisation and concentration of resources and power by the state. Started in 1985, the Arts Housing policy has enabled more than 200 artists and arts groups to work in convenient locations like Chinatown, at a significant rental subsidy. By doing so, this policy enhanced the capacity of the arts housing tenants to practise and develop their art without worrying about paying rents at market rates.

While state policies and programmes such as the Arts Housing Policy are crucial to arts development and practice, state assistance is also a double-edged sword as artists and arts groups remain vulnerable to bureaucratic intervention and have to accept the terms and conditions dictated by the state.

Interestingly, similar reasons were provided to explain NAC's new plans for both 45 Armenian Street and 42 Waterloo Street. The decision for co-tenancy at 42 Waterloo Street was defended by a perceived need to aid the building to become "more inclusive," "benefit a wide group of practitioners" and "better serve the larger arts community". Similarly, NAC

intends for 45 Armenian Street to be an arts centre for “multiple arts groups” and the renovation would be an opportunity to better support “multi-disciplinary arts creation and presentation”. Reference to the need for NAC to take into account support for “the increasingly vibrant arts scene” was also stated in both situations.

However, this line of argument is puzzling when both Centre 42 and The Substation have always functioned as artist-led intermediaries that have cultivated their physical sites to be multi-disciplinary and open to diverse practices, workers and possibilities. In particular, the ethos of The Substation has always been to operate as a multi-disciplinary arts centre that would not be aligned to a specific arts group but open for use by multiple arts practitioners and organisations. This was also the original reason why its founder Kuo Pao Kun was selected by the then-Ministry of Community Development to manage the building back in 1986.

Mish’aal Syed Nasar, current company manager of The Observatory and former arts manager at The Substation, notes that there has been a relative lack of openness behind the decision-making processes of NAC. As he questions, “what are the metrics used when deciding the fate of a space?”

Another former arts manager of The Substation, Chelsea Chua, currently the Programme Director of Objectifs – Centre for Photography and Film, shares similar sentiments, saying that “it is very unclear what the ultimate vision for arts infrastructure is, and there is very little transparency around how the utility of a space is assessed”.

It may seem incongruous to have words like “metrics” and “utility” alongside arts practice, but being familiar with these words are in actual fact part and parcel of surviving the local arts ecosystem, as this is precisely the kind of pragmatic language employed by the state when it comes to irreversible decisions announced from the top. Often, the government will gesture towards a larger public policy objective or constraint, trotting a utilitarian argument as a trump card.

At the moment, it seems like The Substation will not be the last artist-led arts organisation that will be required to leave a space that they have tried to plant roots and grow a home in. The short one to three year leases inherent to the Arts Housing Policy have always been a key point of tension causing a sense of impermanence and precarity amongst its tenants. Importantly, it also impedes arts housing tenants from long-term strategic planning and hinders their potential to placemake and foster a sense of community.

Chua notes that what is happening with The Substation “hangs heavily over us at Objectifs, especially since our tenure is due to expire in 2024, with no certainty of renewal.” Objectifs is located in a historic church building that was formerly Sculpture Square, just down the road from 42 Waterloo Street. She articulates the benefits of enabling arts groups the autonomy to manage arts centre-type spaces across a longer period:

“There seems to be little sensitivity to what an arts organisation can do for a space and the surrounding community, if given the opportunity to invest in it for the long-term, and build a sense of identity and belonging, while also serving more short-term space needs. [...] I think that the state’s persistent micromanagement of these spaces stifles growth opportunities for arts organisations who want to expand their operational and programming abilities.”

While acknowledging that Objectifs does benefit from the state's "generous provision of arts spaces", Chua says they are often placed "in a position where we are reacting to changes in policy, rather than trying to see how we can proactively work together with the state to see how we can help achieve its aims".

NAC should be commended for its well-meaning intentions to upgrade its arts housing spaces, but these upgrades should not come at the expense of displacing "homes" that have enabled diverse groups of artists and arts practitioners to develop their practice without worrying about high space rental costs, as well as organically built affective relations to. Supporting the arts is about having policies and programmes that produce an environment in which the local arts and creative ecosystem can flourish, rather than trying to manage the ecosystem directly.

As Ma Yanling, Company Manager of Centre 42, aptly states, "for a healthy and truly vibrant arts ecosystem to exist, there cannot be a blanket approach to address the diverse needs of the arts community and the uniqueness of art space usage. We need a mix of all types of arts spaces and a wider-range of space support structures: state-run, state-supported, and independent".

Secondly, the top-down desire to displace The Substation from the building where both the organisation and numerous artists have established roots, reveals what does not belong to what Terence Chong calls the "bureaucratic imagination of the arts" in Singapore. He uses this term 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". (Chong 2014, p. 20).

The Substation has always been known for making and holding space for artists to dream, try, experiment, grow, and fail. This space includes being open and accessible to new practices, emergent ideologies, alternative viewpoints, the experimental and the fringe. In doing so, The Substation has offered artists and the public an access point to engage in a place where intellectual conversations, subcultures and countercultures can flourish side by side. It is also generative of new and unexpected possibilities.

Independent creative Shaiful Risan, who has had a longstanding relationship with The Substation which includes organising punk rock gigs to curating gallery exhibitions, shares: *"The Substation has been the playground of our creative scene. It is where many notable and crucial creatives got their start, the unpretentious space that allowed everyone to experiment, try and flourish without judgement. Apart from just artworks and work processes, it fostered a community and also a consciousness."*

Indeed, holding such space means cultivating convivial and conducive environments for art-making as well as community-building. For organisations like The Substation and Centre 42, managing their physical sites includes relational activities such as the invisible caring that takes on different guises: from honest conversations about rental rates and being flexible about operational needs, to the seemingly banal social activities such as pre/post-show drinks.

Their perceptive care extends to enabling informal spaces for much-needed deep unexpected encounters. For Mish'aal, intermediary spaces like The Substation and Centre 42 are vital because "they also serve as spaces where people can just hang. This encourages

practitioners from different practices to interact and explore cross-disciplinary exchanges, as well as narrow the gap between audience and practitioners.”

Holding such space hence means enabling an environment constituted by a radical openness to the messiness of art-making and coexisting differences. However, this environment might not necessarily result in producing crowd-pleasers, attracting high footfall, or even have clear immediate outcomes. Holding space for things that do not fit neatly in boxes can be difficult to justify and account for, in an arts ecosystem that is governed by the pragmatic logics of market discipline, evaluation reports, and key performance indicators (KPIs). The possible displacement of The Substation indicates that such holding spaces and testing grounds may bear no legitimacy in, and even be antithetical to, Singapore’s bureaucratic imagination of the arts.

Interestingly, failure, process and experimentation are inherent in other disciplines like the sciences. If you want to learn how a process works, or develop a new one yourself, the scientific method naturally demands that you try, fail and try again. However, in the arts, failure can often be viewed as a dirty word or something lesser that is difficult to account for. But without spaces like The Substation where one can safely take risks and push boundaries, the arts will remain stagnant and there would be no creativity, innovation or change-makers.

The third issue is the increasing rarity of living archives like The Substation. In a world of persistent urban redevelopment and where urban renewal is viewed as progress, physical anchors with historical roots like The Substation are increasingly rare. The Substation has been particularly vital in terms of capacity-building for the arts. Apart from offering opportunities for plentiful artists, arts groups and arts managers, it also nurtures engaged audiences and shapes future arts workers.

For Nigel Lopez, who is not only a graduating arts management student but also founder of indie music record label Middle Class Cigars and experimental music label Evening Chants, his first visit to The Substation during the 2012 Singapore Night Festival played a formative role in expanding his exploration of the arts:

“I may not have completely understood what was going on then, but I was instantly intrigued and captivated by the programmes offered by The Substation. It was there that I was introduced to the possibilities of performance art, the potentialities of music programming and the differences made when artists are able to experiment and take risks. The Substation immediately felt different. It had soul. This to me, represents The Substation: A place for the unknown, the bizarre, the challenging. A home for a motley mix of outsiders, subcultures and even families to congregate, mix and share similar experiences through the arts. Where else would we get to see punks and indie kids in the same space?”

The value of physical anchors like The Substation is evident from the recent outpouring of reactions to its impending fate by a multiplicity of voices including arts practitioners, arts managers, writers, students and concerned citizens. Notably, on 13 February 2021, an impromptu online Town Hall about the future of The Substation attracted 99 diverse

attendees. Some of the possible actions raised range from crowdfunding for a new physical space, to writing a paper documenting The Substation's impact on the arts community. However, is this recent groundswell of sentiments towards The Substation too much/little, too late? Is it simply nostalgia? Are we holding on for the sake of holding on? Do we only start to rally together and care for something only when its existence is threatened? Additionally, how many other youths and arts students have actually taken the chance that Lopez did and ventured towards Armenian Street?

After all, everything around The Substation has changed. As NAC has constantly reminded, the arts ecosystem in Singapore has also changed, and their decisions are intended to better support this changing landscape. The Substation is a rare survivor of the gentrification and (re)development of its neighbourhood. Its former neighbours – from the old S11 coffeeshop that was once a meeting point for artists, to the beloved red-bricked National Library and the former MPH bookstore – have all disappeared in the name of government plans to improve the city centre. Armenian Street itself has been pedestrianised and manicured to become part of “the world's first Botanic Garden on urban streets.”

These changes have resulted in an ongoing divided debate about the relevance and sustainability of The Substation. Although the recent news has led to many expressing their concerns about losing a significant cultural institution, others – including some former artistic directors of the institution – have also voiced their views about how The Substation has been held back by its own legacy and should be allowed to bite the dust. There are also those who have shared their cynicism about how the current groundswell of sentiments is a false rallying call for an already fractured arts community.

This brings us to the final but most important issue: it cannot be the sole responsibility of the state to sustain a space and the overall arts ecosystem. The onus is also on those who express concern over the future of The Substation and/or identify as being part of, and caring about the arts ecosystem. The aforementioned issues are not new. The terms and conditions tied to state funding have always been made known. The short-term leases of the Arts Housing Policy have been in effect since 1985, and the arts-centre model under The Framework for Arts Spaces has also been implemented since 2011. NAC has also previously engaged with The Substation about space-related concerns.

We should all be concerned because The Substation's impending fate is a symptom of a fragile and fragmented arts ecosystem that is in trouble. It should be noted that the same Straits Times article published last July also reported on the current and future losses of space by the Intercultural Theatre Institute and theatre company The Necessary Stage. Other striking developments: NTU CCA has lost its funding from the Economic Development Board and will have to move out of its Gillman Barracks space in March; and photography centre DECK is raising funds to secure a permanent space as its current shipping container-structure on Prinsep Street is slated to be demolished, also in March. Though they all take place under different circumstances, taken together, these various losses have a collective impact on the community.

Losing another artist-led space like The Substation will have a far-reaching impact on the arts ecosystem and further exposes enduring, systemic issues plaguing the Singapore arts ecosystem, including the precarity of arts spaces, state-dependency, capacity-building, intangible cultural heritage and the need for a sustained and concerted collective solidarity. Pointing to a possible way forward, it is heartening to see a group of young undergraduates stepping up to form a recent initiative titled Saving Spaces. Concerned by the aforesaid

changes, they intend to publish a position paper to protect current and future arts spaces, and to advocate for “sustainability in policy-making and shared accountability for the spaces we create and sustain”.

Brack, a platform for socially-engaged artists and recent participant in The Substation’s Associate Artist Programme, also calls for more meaningful communication as well as greater trust, care and alignment in the entire arts ecosystem. As they state, “we trust that where there is alignment, there is a lot of room for potential collaboration and mutual growth. But good intentions are not enough, and must also translate into concrete actions. We are eager to find this alignment through honest dialogue and sharing”.

While we may not be able to reverse a state decision, this is an opportune moment and reality check for those in the arts to take stock, come together and collectively work towards new possibilities for more sustainable and beloved “homes for the arts” in Singapore.

Update on 25 February 2021: The National Arts Council has released a commentary piece written by Paul Tan, its Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Planning & Corporate Development). The piece aims to give a fuller picture of the current situation. It was published by Plural Art Mag.