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# FOREWORD

Twenty-five years ago, the arts scene in Singapore was very different from what it is today. The idea of ‘the arts’ as a profession was almost unheard of. The prevailing mentality was that arts is for the ‘elite’, a luxury good that we should only think about only after our other material needs were met first. There was no Esplanade and the National Arts Council was just about to be born.

Unbeknown to the public, Singapore at that time was not short of talent. We had accomplished artists in the visual and performing arts, in music, literature, and traditional arts. There had always been theatre shows, exhibitions, and festivals. Our arts pioneers had been striving for years to establish our artistic and cultural traditions, to ensure that Singapore was not a cultural desert.

By the late 1980s, something else was already stirring in the arts as a younger generation had greater aspirations for more well-rounded lives. The opening of The Substation on 16 September 1990 was a watershed moment. Here was a place where everyone who loves the arts could call ‘home’, where young artists found opportunities and mentors, where inspiration lived. There had been nothing like it in Singapore.

And it was thanks to the vision and perseverance of Kuo Pao Kun, that this special place came into being and continues to exist. Pao Kun had the unique quality of being able to communicate with a diversity of people, from different cultures, and this was important and inspiring in multi-cultural Singapore. Pao Kun was a role model who inspired the next generations to see new possibilities, not to be bound by mere pragmatic thinking, and to remember that humanity is at the heart of artistic creation.

These are the values that The Substation has held on to, and these values of multiculturalism, respect for humanity, resilience, continue to be relevant for Singapore. I heartily congratulate The Substation on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, and wish it many more years of spurring artistic creation in our nation.

PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH  
Ambassador-At-Large,  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

# INTRODUCTION: THE “BACKSTORY”

AUDREY WONG

In 2014, The Substation’s Visual Arts Programme Manager, Annabelle Aw, approached me to assist with the 25th anniversary exhibition that they were planning. It would not be a straightforward exhibition about The Substation and its history; an artist, Debbie Ding, had been commissioned to create a new exhibit around The Substation’s archival material (brochures, photos, newsletters, etc). At the same time, The Substation was going to put some of its archive with the National Library — this, I felt, was a significant step for Singapore arts, as it meant that documentation of The Substation’s role and mission would be preserved and made available to future generations.

My role in the exhibition would be to help with information, with identifying significant events and people from The Substation’s past, and pulling out useful or important materials from the archive. During the discussion, I proposed a publication to accompany the exhibition, because there is yet to be a book about The Substation, its history, its people, its events, and its role in Singapore arts. Other arts companies in Singapore that had been in existence for over two decades, such as Theatreworks and The Necessary Stage, had produced their own books, but ironically, despite The Substation’s tradition of bringing the arts community together for discussions and discourse, it had not actively published for many years.

The question we faced was, what kind of publication should it be? We knew we didn’t want a celebratory, self-congratulatory coffee-table book (this would not be appropriate, given The Substation’s tradition of critique and reflection). Another possibility was a more academic publication, with commissioned essays from critics, artists, and writers on various aspects related to The Substation’s work, influence, and impact, which

might cover such diverse topics as the intersection between policy developments and the work of an arts centre; the nature of “independence” in the arts in Singapore; developments in Singapore contemporary arts and artistic practices over the past 25 years, and so on. This publication might yet surface in the coming years, but it was felt that a less academic publication would be most suitable at this point of time as The Substation wanted the book to reach a wider audience, including readers and members of the public who are unfamiliar with its work. Another option was to make it more of a historical account, but we wanted to avoid a hegemonic narrative of the past, as The Substation has also been a space of contestation, accommodating diverse, even opposing voices. Finally, it was felt that a clear explanation and discussion of The Substation’s mission, how it works with artists, its ethos, and some facts about its history and development over the years, were necessary, particularly for a younger audience who may be interested in the arts but know little of the history of Singapore arts, much less The Substation.

The reality is that, 25 years since The Substation first opened its doors, the arts scene in Singapore has greatly changed. Since the 1990s, the arts has been seen as part of the “creative” economy that would help drive Singapore’s future economic growth. There has been increased government funding for the arts, the development of new and more sophisticated infrastructure including newer, larger, and better-equipped venues like the Esplanade, and policies aimed at creating an arts “market” in Singapore resulting in the explosion of art fairs and other events that garner international attention and participation. Against such a backdrop, an independent, small-scale arts centre with limited resources like The Substation is easily ignored as media, government, and public attention turned

toward the more glamorous or mass appeal events and activities. When The Substation opened in 1990, it was almost the only place in Singapore where there was a real buzz about the arts. It was truly a “home” where anyone who loved the arts could find a space. It was where artists could test new ideas — for instance, creating a multidisciplinary collaboration, which back then, was not as common a mode of artistic creation as it is now. It was a place to see and experience the new, to meet like-minded people, to have a taste of an unfamiliar art form, to see what was going on in the arts, and to talk and debate about it. People were excited by what they saw — not just because the work was new, but because the ideas were new, or challenged the conventional, or presented a different perspective on art or society.

The Substation back then, met the diverse needs of a large and growing community of artists, creatives and audiences. As the arts scene grew, these needs expanded as did the artistic community, and artists and arts groups developed the capacity and capabilities to meet many of these needs. The evolution of the arts scene also meant that different arts groups, venues, and institutions were carving out their own areas of strength and specialisation (or a “market niche”) and there was competition for resources and audiences. When Lee Weng Choy and I became Artistic Co-Directors in 2000, we were constantly being asked for the first couple of years, what the “new” direction of The Substation was. There seemed to be an expectation that the arts had to follow the route of the corporate sector, where each organisation had to have a USP — a unique selling point — and a brand, and a market. To Weng Choy and I, there was no need to change the essence of The Substation which had developed almost organically through the charismatic tending of Kuo Pao Kun in the pioneering years, and afterwards, through the guidance of T. Sasitharan, where the focus shifted towards the rigour of artistic practice and the nurturing of local talent and artistic voices beyond the mainstream. The Substation’s role was, and is, to challenge artists and audiences to see and aspire beyond what they already know and are familiar with. In addition to being an incubator for local talent and Singapore/Asian works, it also put into circulation new artistic ideas, forms, expressions, and to reveal the connections between art and society.

Another strand of The Substation’s work has been its care and support for those communities (artistic

or otherwise) who may be marginalised in our contemporary society or lack the platforms to have their voices and perspectives heard and seen. These communities include the punks, indie musicians, solo experimental artists in performance and theatre, and small-scale amateur arts groups who may stage a play at The Substation every year. In the highly competitive arts landscape of today, it is hard and has become harder for The Substation to gain public attention, as long as the work it supports is perceived as being too niche, specialised, or not of great interest to a mass paying public.

This is why The Substation’s staff felt that it was important that the book should show facets of The Substation’s history to a broader public which may perhaps have an increasing orientation towards “arts for consumption”. And that became the approach we adopted for the book.

While covering aspects of The Substation’s history, the project team was also aware that the book should incorporate voices from different areas of arts practice, and involve staff and artists who had been associated with The Substation at different periods of its existence, from the arts centre’s opening to the present day. This also proved a tall order, simply because so many artists and people had come through The Substation’s open doors and established creative, affectionate, even emotional, relationships to this place. Regretfully, it was impossible to have contributions from all the people that the project team wanted to include. In the end, we decided to limit the book to 25 contributors to reflect The Substation’s 25th anniversary.

The book’s contents, therefore, constitute a set of recollections and reflections of the experiences of artists and staff. We were looking for their personal “stories” of The Substation at certain points in time and their interpretations of what this space means/ meant to them and their communities, or their arts practice. Hence, the book comprises a mix of personal recollection and recounting of events; reflections on specific themes or moments or projects; and creative expressions in poetry, song, images, and illustrations triggered by the authors’ encounters at The Substation.

One of the significant themes in The Substation’s programming in the early years under Kuo Pao Kun’s direction was “memories”. Pao Kun created multidisciplinary festivals around “memories” —

from screenings of old movies to readings and discussions of old newspaper articles, theatre plays to exhibitions. These events had two effects: Firstly, emphasising the necessity of a critical process of excavating and understanding the past in order to understand and articulate our present-day identity(ies) as a multicultural, multilingual society, and secondly, bringing communities together in shared acts of dialogue and reflection. Yet, while we felt that recollection was an important motivation for this book, we were also wary of becoming too nostalgic about the past — of thinking of the early 1990s at The Substation as a lost Eden.

All too often these days, when the artistic community discusses The Substation, there is a longing for The Substation of the past, when it was a hive of activity — quite inevitably, given the paucity of other venues and arts spaces in Singapore in the early 1990s. It is true that The Substation has been “quieter” in terms of the volume of activities in the past decade as the number of events, festivals, venues, and shows across Singapore has multiplied, but that is not to say that it is dormant. Its focused interventions in recent years have been in areas of commissioning and incubating, new work and artist’s research, in such programmes as the Associate Artist Research Programme; it maintains a regular exhibition and film programme year-round; and continues to be a meeting-point for the more “niche” creative communities that are out of the spotlight, and for independent, artistic practitioners who wish to initiate their own projects.

In recent years, the image for the contrast between present and past is The Substation’s Garden, with the “old” Garden symbolising the lush, artistically free-flowing Eden of the past where artists performed, met, and conducted exchanges (eg. through the Sunday Market). Change arrived with the opening of a more trendy café, the Fat Frog in the late 1990s, which brought regular live music on weekends and drew a more “commercial” crowd, and eventually with the opening of Timbre the music bar and restaurant in the mid-2000s, which brought in an influx of well-heeled young adults. Although the café/bar tenants brought in much-needed income which enabled The Substation to sustain its artistic creation programmes, the process has been seen as one of gentrification — particularly with accompanying changes along Armenian Street as the old shophouses were refurbished into high-rent office and shop spaces — and the encroachment

of the slick, money-making, materially aspirational mentality prevalent in Singapore into the raw, messy, uncommercial, alternative energy of an arts generator that is The Substation. This encroachment into a space for imaginative thought and creation was accelerated two years ago when the Singapore Management University commenced the building of its new law school just behind The Substation, necessitating the removal and transplanting of the old Banyan tree which had been standing there since before the courtyard was The Substation Garden. Several articles in the book make reference to these changes: Bruce Quek recounts recent changes from his personal perspective; Kaylene Tan’s script wittily captures the experiences of artists hanging around The Substation’s environs (notably the S11 hawker centre behind the building); and Corrie Tan offers an overview of changes in the landscape around The Substation, arguing for the necessity of spaces for “cultural memory” in Singapore, that we should acknowledge the importance of such spaces as receptacles and symbols for lived experience in a society, connecting us humans to the environment we have shaped.

Not surprisingly, the Banyan tree and Garden became recurring images in this book, quite unintentionally. Trees, plants, and gardens are apt metaphors for the generative art processes that The Substation was built to foster and the role that arts and culture play in strengthening a society. A resilient society is one that is aware of its roots, wherever they may lie; the process of searching and growing matters. We could bemoan the loss of the Banyan tree, or we could, as Loo Zihan reminds us in his contribution, look at the saplings from the tree as the seeds of new generative activity. While we look back, we also look forward. The Banyan sapling’s roots will slowly grow out of its pot and spread; where it takes us, we do not yet know.

This much we know, though: As change has swirled around The Substation and as it has changed, meeting the challenges that change brings, taking hold of new ideas and letting them develop, are also important aspects of its history. These themes also emerge among the contributions in this book. For example, Kok Heng Leun and Alvin Tan discuss how their witnessing of events at The Substation, and their participation in these events, seeded new beginnings and new visionary possibilities for their theatre practice; Hazel Lim describes how being an Associate Artist created new opportunities that shaped her thinking and added new

Ultimately, any arts and cultural space is important or meaningful because of what happens inside it. And the heart of what happens inside lie with people: the artists, creators, staff/facilitators, supporters, audiences... The Substation is a space which has been shaped by them, and in the process, the space too has shaped them.

dimensions to her artistic work; and Zai Kuning captures the energy of how shared experiences and dialogues with fellow resident artist, Ang Gey Pin, spun off into deeper explorations and new questions.

Like Pao Kun's "Memories" seasons, these acts of recollections and reflections are inevitably both personal and also speak for a broader group of people. I hope that this book reflects the organic nature of The Substation's development and its knack of putting diverse groups of people in dialogue with one another. When The Substation was opened, it was intended to be such a space, for conversations and understanding across different communities, and to communicate what emerges in the process beyond the immediate bounds of a physical place. Singapore needs such spaces. It is my hope that this book also speaks to a large group of readers, as our efforts in putting together this book will bear fruit only if there are people who care about what is said/written. I believe that there are people who care, and people who care enough make the "connections" across this series of recollections, however random or idiosyncratic, as Kent Chan does in his personal story of his involvement with The Substation from childhood to the present day.

Ultimately, any arts and cultural space is important or meaningful because of what happens inside it. And the heart of what happens inside lie with people: the artists, creators, staff/facilitators, supporters, audiences ... The Substation is a space which has been shaped by them, and in the process, the space too has shaped them. I worked at The Substation for a total of 14 years and its ethos has been imprinted in my own way of living and being. It has made me a more open, forgiving, intellectually critical person, and gave me the understanding to live with and negotiate with different points of view. I have also made many good friends: Artists like Verena Tay, Elizabeth de Roza, Low Yuen Wei, Khairuddin Hori and many more; colleagues like Lee Weng Choy, Noor Effendy Ibrahim, Annabelle Aw, Chris Ong and others; artistic mentors like Amanda Heng, Lee Wen, T. Sasitharan and others, who have all enriched my life immeasurably.

Speaking of people, I would like to conclude by acknowledging the visionary work of those who were instrumental in the process of setting up The Substation in the first place: Not only Kuo Pao Kun whom everyone knows, but also the original architects involved in the refurbishment, the tenacious arts

administrators at the Ministry of Culture/Ministry of Community Development including Ms Juliana Lim, the first administrative team at The Substation led by Ms Tan Beng Luan, and the early Boards of Directors who steered a strange new ship with its variegated crew through unknown waters.

Happy 25th birthday, The Substation!

July 2015

The PUB Substation is tucked away unassumingly in Armenian Street. Just a few metres up the road is where MPH once stood. Round the back, the garden opens onto the National Library Car Park. If you stand across the road and look at The Substation head-on, it presents a plain and uncompromising facade. Yet, there is something oddly reassuring about its bulk and solidness.

The Substation was built in 1926 by the PUB. It was a powerhouse designed to serve the municipal offices and shophouses in the district. The architects of the project took pains to ensure that the substation would blend well with the colonial facade of old Armenian Street. Hence, it acquired the look of a brick-wall front, with stylized cornices characteristic of early 20th century architecture.

The Substation served its functions faithfully until the late 70s. The new Telecoms building had come up next door, and with it, an upgraded substation. The Substation was abandoned and disused until 1986, when it was earmarked for conservation under the Civic and Cultural Master Plan. Kuo Pao Kun, dramatist and playwright, saw the potential in the abandoned block. With the advice of architect Tay Kheng Soon, he developed his idea and sent a proposal to turn the place into an arts centre. In 1987, the plans were approved. In 1988, the Ministry of Community Development officially invited the Practice Performing Arts Centre Limited to manage the place.

The Substation will soon be generating "electricity" again. Where it once supplied energy to the area, it promises to resume its role as a power source, this time for the artistic community of the 90's and beyond. The building that was once a powerhouse remains a powerhouse; only we now know it as The Substation - A Home for the Arts.

在福康宁山脚下，在文化历史保留区中，有一座红砖屋，座落在亚美尼亚街旁，她曾是公用事业局的一个电力站，为毗邻的国家图书馆，博物馆和周围一带的公寓、房屋提供能源。

这座电力站建于1926年，在设计上，因吸收了周围建筑的特色，故在建筑风格上，可以和周围建筑连成一体。红砖外墙和“五脚基”走道正是二十世纪初期建筑的特色。

原有建筑分为两座，前座是三层建筑，用做办事处，今天依然保留其用途。后座只有一层，1950年代因淘汰旧电机，改装新机件，故将原有建筑拆除，改为两层建筑。花园是用来装置户外机件，今天所看到的花园平台，还是当年用来置放巨型变压器的。

1970年代末，电讯局在附近盖了大厦，这座电力分站于是被置空，因为她已完成了其历史任务。一直到1986年，政府宣布这一区为文化历史保留区，本地戏剧家兼剧作家郭宝昆觉察到这座电力站的潜力，在咨询了绘测师郑庆顺后，向社会发展部呈交一份建议书，提议将电力站发展成一个多元艺术中心。1988年，社会发展部委托实践表演艺术中心管理电力站。

很快的，这个废置多年的电力站即将重新向周围流放“电源”，这次是艺术之电，流向90年代，流向将来。这就是今天的电力站。

历史

H  
IS  
TORY

## KUO PAO KUN

### FOUNDER OF THE SUBSTATION

The SUBSTATION cannot begin to survive unless we start creating a new space within our inner selves — a space which is responsive to creative, pluralistic, artistic ventures.

By nature, such things would be untried, raw, personal, unglamorous, slow in developing and often “not successful”, “not excellent”. There is no other way to nurture the young, innovative and experimental in Art.

The SUBSTATION under the team I’m working with will not strive to become a glamorous showcase. Would it be accepted widely as such? Would artists accept a meagre (or no) pay? Would patrons pay for the high cost of intimate, small-scale arts? Would the Government and corporations sponsor ventures of long-term, fundamental importance?

This, in essence, is the significance and challenge of the SUBSTATION.

If you think the SUBSTATION is just another space, you’re wrong. If you think the SUBSTATION is a new concept of presenting the arts, you’re closer to it. If you think the SUBSTATION represents a new relationship vis-à-vis the artists and arts-goers, you’re nearly on target.

If you ask me, I’d say the SUBSTATION, small though in size, is an expression of a growing contemporary hearing: An honest pursuit in search of a transcendence, reaching for a new sensitivity raising ourselves above crass consumerism and short-term material success.

To turn this yearning into a reality requires us to cut out something from within ourselves so something new would grow in its place. There is a high price to pay. Not only money and materials. We must, above all, be honest and committed enough to effect an indispensable change in perception.

Ecstasy in arts, like in other activities, can only be gotten by persistent and often painful searching and trying. And therefore long-term, resource support (manpower and money power) are indispensable.

This, in essence, is the significance and challenge of the SUBSTATION.

— Kuo Pao Kun

*Open Space*, September 1990.

# SCOUTING OUT THE ABANDONED OLD SUBSTATION AT ARMENIAN STREET WITH PAO KUN

TAY KHENG SOON

One morning (circa 1980), Pao Kun suddenly appeared at my office in Will's Building<sup>1</sup> opposite the old dilapidated substation along Armenian Street, next to Tao Nan School. I had heard of Pao Kun vaguely but had never met him. I guess he knew my partner Chung Meng Ker, as we all shared a certain view of life that is difficult to say out loud even now, given the climate of opinion shaped by the powers that be. Of course I knew that Pao Kun and his wife Lay Kuan, had served time but what it was for, was then, vague to me. We chatted a bit, before he said to cross the road to view the substation with him. He wanted my opinion as to what can be made of it. I was sceptical but he was evidently enthusiastic.

Armenian Street was then, quite busy traffic-wise, with lots of pedestrians moving about. The corner coffee shop opposite the substation was well patronised. Next to the substation was a row of shop houses. There was the Sun Yat Sen Library and reading room, an heirloom of the overseas Chinese effort against the Japanese Imperialist invasion of China on its left, and the Tao Nan School established by Singaporean Hokkien idealism on its right. Perhaps this fact was special to Pao Kun; I had not inquired but in retrospect, I am inclined to think so. His own idealism would jive in this knowledge.

The significance was lost to me. I only saw an insignificant infrastructure, a relic of the past. All I noticed from my office window were bats and swallows flying in and out of the dusty cobwebbed brick pillars of the abandoned electric substation.

Occasionally I saw some vagrant sleeping on its five-foot-way. As Pao Kun and I approached the building, I saw on the right side of the huge iron sliding door fronting Armenian Street, a crawl-hole someone had smashed in the wall to gain access into the building.

It was dark and dank as we slithered in. As our eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could see cable trenches and concrete plinths in the high-ceiling space, where transformers and electrical switch boards once stood.

We moved carefully throughout the building, picking our way through the debris in the gloom of the interior spaces. When we came to the space that is now the black box theatre, which used to house the giant electric transformers, Pao Kun said that it would be the theatre of the arts centre he had in mind. I was doubtful; I thought it was too small.

Finally, we peeped into the courtyard behind the building. It was a tangle of vegetation between huge concrete plinths which used to support other outdoor electrical equipment.

My scepticism stood in stark contrast to Pao Kun's evident enthusiasm. What about planning and building permits? What about funding? Pao Kun said all these questions could be solved. Such was his foresight and his determination.

Through his sincerity and his infectious energy, he gathered together like-minded people, and I, too, was



Windows at Level Two (credit: The Substation)



The Substation Gallery (credit: The Substation)



The Substation Theatre (credit: The Substation)



The Substation Garden (credit: The Substation)

## TAY KHENG SOON

eventually and happily swept up by the momentum Pao Kun had generated. I didn't know how he did it but he got government support for his dream of making the substation into "A Home for the Arts".

We did measured drawings of the building; I did the conceptual design sketches in close consultation with Pao Kun. The "Home for the Arts" eventually got a grant from the government on the condition that the building restoration had to be undertaken by the Public Works Department (PWD). How ironic that was, as it had turned out that Lydia Fong, the architect assigned by the PWD to do the design and project management, was the daughter of former proscribed leftist opposition politician, Fong Swee Suan<sup>2</sup>! A strange undercurrent seemed to energise the project. Perhaps the better feelings of the past still flow imperceptibly and

improbably through the pragmatics of everyday life as it should especially in the Arts!

When writer and cultural commentator, Li Lienfung<sup>3</sup>, took over as chairperson of the centre, she suggested to change the name to "Power Station", a title she thought was more aligned in keeping with the lofty aims of the project. I was one of those who agreed with Pao Kun that "Substation" was more ironic, and therefore, more suitable as an understatement of bigger aims. And the flourish of Chinese brush stroke artist Tan Swie Hian's<sup>4</sup> calligraphy, aptly rendered this spirit in ink for all time. I am proud to have been associated with Pao Kun's deep vision.

**My scepticism stood in stark contrast to Pao Kun's evident enthusiasm. What about planning and building permits? What about funding? Pao Kun said all these questions could be solved. Such was his foresight and his determination.**

1 Currently known as Wilmer's Place.

2 Fong Swee Suan was a trade unionist who was active in the Singapore labour scene during the 1950s and 1960s, and one of the convenors at the inauguration of the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1954.

3 Li Lienfung was a chemist and author. She worked in the Wah Chang/Thai Wah group of companies started by her father Dr Li Kuo Ching, and eventually became vice-chairman of Wah Chang. She chaired the Singapore Totalisator Board Arts Fund Committee between 1994 and 2002, and sat on the Censorship Review Committee and the Drama Promotion Board.

4 Tan Swie Hian is a Singaporean multidisciplinary artist known for his contemporary Chinese calligraphy, Chinese poetry and contemporary art sculptures found in Singapore and many parts of the world. He was a close friend of Kuo Pao Kun. Tan was the one who designed The Substation logo.



## NUMEROUS, THINGS (for KPK)

He wrote,  
an introduction,

HEMAN CHONG

This is a short story about an exhibition. It occurred between 24 October and 9 November 1997. The exhibition was held at the Substation Gallery. He was 31 when he made the show. The exhibition was the one and only he ever made. It was called Numerous, Things.

There are five works in this exhibition. All of which I have made within the past year in my life. But, the truth is that I have spent my last twenty years making and re-making these five works. I know it's not much to show, but it's all I have at the moment. I suspect, it's all that I'll ever have. So, on that note, I wish that you'll be able to spend time with the works. And that it might bring you a thought (or feeling) or two, without which, would have been, impossible.

Stacks of 4R size photographs were placed on a table. Next to it, two chairs to sit on. The photographs reveals tens of thousands of minute details of cracks, gaps, fractures, overflows, accidents, dead animals, holes in t-shirts, wounds. Things that needs patching. He claims to not know how many photographs there actually are. He claims no interest in cataloguing or reprinting the photographs. People seem to be able to take these photographs away, but he doesn't really say if they can or cannot do so. He claims to not desire things, but rather to allow things, even the things he has made, to slip away from him. Accidental, gifts.

He wrote, I responded to an open call from The Substation. It was the first time I ever showed anything in public. I remembered that the title of the exhibition appealed to me. Memories. I remember the name Kuo Pao Kun, but I had never met him. I decided to submit four drawings that I made while I sat beside my dying grandfather in a C-class ward at NUH, listening closely to his short, thin breaths. I would visit him in the afternoons, and the ward was always warm and humid, the overhead fans shuffling dead air. I made images with the little that I had. Some paper, a couple of crayons, fingers, the last moments of my grandfather.

In 1984, on his way back home from work, he met an old woman who collected scraps of cardboard. She would trolley stacks to a nearby recycling shop and sold them. This is how she survived.

Auntie, can I ask you, how much do you sell them for, he asked. Aiyah, very little lah, 1 kilo only 10 cents, I must find a lot or else cannot tan lui, she replied. Auntie, I buy from you, ok, but I pay you 50 cents a kilo, I collecting this, for art project, he said. 50 cents, you siao ah, so much, what art project, this thing your job issit, she shouted. Really one, I never bluff you one, I buy from you, here I give you my telephone number, you can call me whenever you have cardboard ok, you call me and we meet here, he said.

For the next seven years, until her death, he bought all scraps of cardboard from the old woman, and secretly dispersed them around his HDB estate late at night so that she will be able to find them again.

In the gallery, a large stack of folded cardboard boxes sit neatly on the floor. He had collected this, himself, over the course of a year, the year after the death of the old woman. A weighing machine stands beside it.

He wrote,  
on the wall,  
near the stack,

One Kilo  
Ten Cents

To Buy,  
Please Page:  
92899220

A small painting hangs on the wall of the gallery. The date April 9, 1991 meticulously hand-painted in white, on a blue background.

When he made the painting, he did not know about Kawara and remains genuinely upset by the fact that he made something that most people would associate with the work of another artist.

The choice of the size of the painting, typeface in which the date is set in, and conceptual methodology are uncanny to the date paintings of Kawara. Save for the fact that he did not make a box to hold the painting, one can pretty much assume that it was a blatant copy of Kawara's monumental series.

Till today, the painting hangs in his living room, in a 3-room HDB flat in Sims Drive.

He spent the entire duration of the exhibition in the gallery. He could not afford to hire someone to sit in the gallery for him. He had planned it very carefully. He saved up his annual leave over two years to be able to spare 20 days (the exhibition lasted 17 days, he gave himself 2 days to set up his work and a day to dismantle everything) away from work. He had explained it very carefully to his employer, who was visibly amused that this quiet, bookish man had a secret second life as an artist. He did not have a habit of keeping secrets and did not intend to begin.

Over the course of 17 days, he wrote about the people who stepped into the gallery. He would scribble in his notebook, observations, assumptions, wild guesses, whatever that came to mind about these people. He would meticulously transfer these notes onto the wall using a brush and black indian ink. The curly letters stretched across the space.

He wrote, She entered the gallery at 3.25 pm. She wore a thin green cardigan over a white singlet, her jeans were slightly worn. Flat, brown shoes. No socks. A small black cotton tote bag. She sat and looked at the photographs. Long intervals in-between each image. She stares into space, perhaps in an attempt to locate where the photograph was taken. We spent a part of the afternoon in silence, the two of us in our own worlds. Not a single word exchanged. She left the gallery at 4.45 pm.

He wrote, She walked in, asked me where the garden is, and left through the back door.

The final work in the exhibition is a sentence on a small piece of white paper, pinned to the wall with a single, thin needle.

He wrote, with a HB pencil,

This building is the only place in Singapore where failure remains; a welcomed possibility.

## THE NEXT STATION:

# CULTURAL MEMORY AND SINGAPORE'S "FIRST COLLECTIVE ARTS SPACE"

CORRIE TAN



Old Tao Nan Primary School and The Substation in 1991 (credit: The Substation)

When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself — then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell — a picture.

### *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook (1968)

Everything around The Substation has changed. Where there was a hill, there is now a tunnel. Where there was a garden, there is now a bar. Where there was a tree, its roots thick in the earth, there is now scaffolding and the sound of a sledgehammer, and what will soon become a university's law library.

The cultural life cycle tends to be a short one in Singapore. Vacant buildings and empty spaces are quickly replaced, rebuilt or appropriated for other uses — or they might serve as a sort of anchor as the physical world around them changes.

Three years ago, a medical research team from Northwestern University discovered something quite startling about the way we remember<sup>1</sup>. When we cast our minds back, and trace those seemingly sturdy outlines of a memory in our mind, we are not travelling back to the original event as it occurred. We are, in fact, remembering our memory of a memory, like an endless series of nesting dolls, each one slightly different from the next. It is a slow, erosive amnesia, chipping away

at what we think was our original memory with every iteration. Singapore might have its nationwide memory projects and its attempts to document oral histories. But we cannot rely on memory as the sole witness to our past. It, too, would grow old, and eventually die.

It is why I think of The Substation as one of these physical anchors, a space that calls us back. It is a storytelling space, a living biography of the 25 years it has witnessed within and without its walls, as the world around it warped and shifted with incredible speed.

Around it, the civic district is dotted with historic buildings that have been converted into arts and cultural institutions. Among them, the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall date back to the 1860s as a town hall; the National Gallery will soon be opening its doors to the public at the former Supreme Court and City Hall; the National Museum of Singapore's premises were the former Raffles Library and Museum in 1886; the cornerstone of St Joseph's Institution, a mission school, was laid in 1855 and it became the Singapore



Art Museum in 1996; the former Parliament House, built in 1827 as a private residence, became The Arts House in 2004. The Empress Place Building, originally the Government Offices during the British colonial era, welcomed the Asian Civilisations Museum in 2003. The museum had originally taken up residence in the Old Tao Nan School building (circa 1912) along Armenian Street, which, as of 2008, houses the Peranakan Museum — right next to The Substation.

A former PUB power substation, built in 1926 and left unused in the late 1970s, doesn't quite shoulder that same weight of history. But it occupies that liminal space between "old, venerable, must-be-conserved heritage site" and "spanking new, state-of-the-art, ultra-modern venue", a vacant lot given new and richer meaning by the experiences it has played host to over the years.

Many of Singapore's performing arts spaces have either been torn down, such as the National Theatre and the Fort Canning Drama Centre, or they are relatively new, having opened within the past 15 years, such as the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay (2002), the National Library Building's Drama Centre and Black Box (2005), and the School of the Arts (2010) in downtown Dhoby Ghaut.

The Substation hardly rivals any of these spaces in terms of size or facilities. It is a scrappy bulldog of a space, one that had a rocky start but sank its teeth into the ground and refused to let go. It lobbied for months to become an Institution of Public Character, which paid off, and shook off hundreds of thousands of dollars in deficits in its first year when it finally landed brewery Guinness' high-profile sponsorship of \$1.2 million in June 1991.

There were questions as to the lack of identity of Singapore's "first collective centre for the arts" — who was it for? what would it do? — but while other groups or institutions may have suffered from the lack of a single focus, it was this hodgepodge of "anything goes" that gave The Substation its edge. It welcomed

everybody. It served as a space for collective, communal memory, of fledgling creations given a chance.

Seven months before The Substation's formal opening in September 1990, Taiwanese theatre practitioner Stan Lai said: "The Substation is going to be important for Singapore because there is nothing like it here. It is a structured place which has the freedom to do anything. Singapore doesn't have a space like that. You have formal places like the Victoria Theatre or the DBS Auditorium, or you have ethnic spaces like those in the Chinese associations. But these places don't provide suitable margins of error in the creative process.

"The Substation should be a place where things grow, not a place where things are showcased. It is small, but that is not bad. The Chinese have a saying, 'The sparrow is small, but it has all five organs.' What is important is that audiences tolerate failure and be receptive to ideas and modes of expression which don't match their own preferences."<sup>2</sup>

The Substation came into being at a pivotal time, just as many of the contemporary arts groups in Singapore were beginning to professionalise in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a rich period of experimentation and creation. Before The Necessary Stage took up residence in their current black box and office space at the Marine Parade Community Building, some of their seminal early work in devising and collaboration that would eventually become a cornerstone of their artistic identity, was staged in The Substation — in fact, Haresh Sharma's iconic play about education, *Those Who Can't, Teach* (1990), was the first theatre production to grace its stage.

It is a cultural fore-runner, preceding the creation of the National Arts Council a year later, and part of a first wave of used or vacant buildings that were given a new lease of life when arts groups took up residence within their walls under the Arts Housing Scheme, outlasting the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre, which closed in 2013.



Space, Spaces and Spacing Conference (1995) (credit: The Substation)

But I think more than the many diverse performances and programmes that took place, whether in the theatre, gallery or dance studio, The Substation also charted a cultural memory of the Singapore arts scene, cementing itself as a gathering place for artists and observers to stop and take stock, to contextualise and to discuss, where the arts scene stood at that point in time.

It was not just a performing arts calendar — it created historical checkpoints along the way. It regularly held conferences that interrogated the arts and its place in society, asking difficult questions of the authorities, the media, the public spacing — and of themselves.

In 1995, The Substation's arts conference was themed *Space, Spaces and Spacing*, and it reflected on a difficult year in Singapore's artistic history. The authorities had come down hard on forum theatre and performance art, compounded by a slew of censorship

issues, and the mood was decidedly downbeat. Daniel Wong, The Substation's programme coordinator at the time, was quoted in *The Straits Times*: "We found our work being limited by boundaries after the 5th Passage and Catherine Lim incidents, and this made it important for artists to validate their positions in the third conference." The article continues: "Far from taking public scrutiny negatively, Mr Wong stressed that it could be positive and could enable artists and arts administrators to re-examine their own perspectives."<sup>3</sup>

The Substation has long been viewed as a "neutral" space, one not aligned with any specific arts group, and also one that stands as an alternative counterpoint to the blockbuster mainstream. It might be small, but it is nimble — an ideal platform for artists to flesh out their responses to what might have been glossed over in the national or official narratives that Singapore is fond of, narratives that conveniently smooth over the bumps and creases that make our history that much more textured.

It has also soldiered on despite the buzz of trendier events or shinier facilities in other newer spaces, choosing to build on long-term ties with artists, such as its Associate Artist Scheme and Associate Artist Research Programme, as well as its unflinching support for the underdog. From multidisciplinary artist Zai Kuning, to performance artist Lee Wen; from poet and writer Tania de Rozario, to multimedia artist Loo Zihan, The Substation has stubbornly stayed true to the course that Kuo Pao Kun imagined it would have when the arts centre was still an idea on paper.

Singapore's artistic history is a fragile one, one often not recorded in the history books. Even in the mainstream media, the newspapers of record, the lifespan of cultural memory is painfully short — one young journalist enters and, several years later, they leave, replaced by yet another young journalist, such that there is rarely a sustained dialogue between the arts and the media. We are a country that has bred little enthusiasm for looking back, less so for re-evaluating our past, and even then, only very specific moments are given due weight — the rest, simply memories of memories.

But perhaps a small tide is turning. Within the past two years, there has been a heightened interest in the arts scene in archiving and historicising, to preserve artifacts and documents, and bring beloved or influential texts back to the stage. During his recent tenure as Artistic Director at The Substation, Noor Effendy Ibrahim brought back these intellectual exchanges, hosting lectures and panels that often cast a fierce eye on Singapore's artistic developments.

In a year where Singapore has been obsessively celebrating its relatively short contemporary history, there are so many parties that have been competing both for memory space — to be recognised and remembered — as well as physical space. And here, in a tiny corner of Armenian Street, is a space that has managed to do both. It is a space that all of Singapore's artists, regardless of genre, can call a home, because they have made it one, slowly but surely, over 25 years. From punk rock concerts to zentai art to experimental theatre, The Substation has seen and embraced it all, inking their impact, no matter how small, onto the shifting sands of Singapore's physical and emotional landscape.

The Substation is not simply a place. It is also an idea. And in a country where buildings and stories all too often come in neat, rigid categories, here is one that ignored what was prescribed and decided to create its own history — one that, in turn, inspired others to create their own.

1 Marla Paul, "Your memory is like the telephone game: each time you recall an event, your brain distorts it". Northwestern University News Centre, Chicago, USA, September 19, 2012.

2 T. Sasitharan, "A power-house of dreams," *The Straits Times*, February 24, 1990.

3 Koh Boon Pin, "The artist and how much space does he have?" *The Straits Times*, September 15, 1995.

The Substation has long been viewed as a “neutral” space, one not aligned with any specific arts group, and also one that stands as an alternative counterpoint to the blockbuster mainstream. It might be small, but it is nimble — an ideal platform for artists to flesh out their responses to what might have been glossed over in the national or official narratives that Singapore is fond of, narratives that conveniently smooth over the bumps and creases that make our history that much more textured.

# THE PLACE OF THE SUBSTATION<sup>1</sup>

## A SPACE AND A PLACE FOR A BEGINNING

KOK HENG LEUN

The Substation is for me, first and foremost, a place of beginnings. Let me relate my connections with The Substation to illustrate the point.

### CONNECTION 1:

In 1990, I volunteered for the opening of The Substation. I had never been involved in any arts organisation or arts activities outside my school, college and university. I read in the papers about The Substation, and was intrigued by the idea of an Arts Centre where artists could gather, and because they were looking for volunteers, I signed up. I was assigned to two tasks. The first, was to pick a piece of music for the opening ceremony and to operate the sound cue when the Guest-of-Honour sounded the gong; the second task was to help to crew for a monologue, *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*, which was performed by Ren Bao Xian. I was so thrilled to be crewing for Ren Bao Xian, a renowned actor from China who was also here in Singapore upon the invitation of Practice Theatre Ensemble (now known as The Theatre Practice) to perform in Kuo Pao Kun's *Lao Jiu*. This volunteering experience opened a door for me and got me thinking about possibly working in an arts organisation full time.

### CONNECTION 2:

I worked at The Substation from January 1992 to mid 1993 as a programme executive. My job scope included managing programmes in The Guinness Theatre (now re-named as The Substation Theatre), as well as The Substation Garden. I had no previous experience working full time in an arts organisation.

Throughout my 25 years of education, I had been a Science student (majoring in Mathematics), with little knowledge of Arts and Culture (other than the school productions that I was involved in).

Working in The Substation was figuratively my baptism of fire into the fantastical world of the arts. I knew a little about theatre, but next to nothing about visual arts, dance and music. I was put in charge of running programmes like Dance Space, Raw Theatre, Music Space, Word Space, and others. I got to know so many artists and also be exposed to art forms I was never familiar with. My education in the arts started in The Substation.

### CONNECTION 3:

On one October evening 1990, a group of young people (myself included) who had just graduated from the National University of Singapore, gathered at the garden of The Substation and decided to form Drama Box. We formed the Drama Box because we wanted to do our own Chinese Language Theatre telling our stories. 25 years later, Drama Box has become one of the major theatre companies in Singapore. Drama Box's first production, a double bill, was held at the Guinness Theatre in 1991.

Yi-Fu Tuan, eminent Geographer, noted that while space is for freedom, place is for security.

"The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa."<sup>2</sup>



Opening of The Substation (credit: The Substation)

**GUINNESS** **Raw Theatre**

*THE GARDEN 7:00PM GUINNESS THEATRE 8:15PM*

6-11 DEC 91 "O ZERO O!"  
DIRECTED BY KUO PAO KUN  
PRESENTED BY PRACTICE THEATRE ENSEMBLE

14-15 DEC 91 "FOUR IN THE SPOTLIGHT"  
- FOUR RAW PLAYS BY DRAMA STUDENTS FROM VICTORIA JUNIOR COLLEGE

17 DEC 91 "THE BRICK"  
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY ELANGOYAN  
PRESENTED BY ANA KOOTTHU

6-11 DEC 91 "LISTEN TO THE DOOR OF DOLORES"  
DIRECTED BY WILLIAM TEO

12, 14, 15, 17 DEC "SWITCH OFF THE LIGHT, PLEASE"  
CREATED & PERFORMED BY TANG DA WU

TICKETS AT \$10 FOR THEATRE PERFORMANCES AND \$5 FOR GARDEN PERFORMANCES WILL BE AVAILABLE AT THE SUBSTATION BOX OFFICE FROM 18 NOV 91 ONWARDS  
45 ALDENHAY STREET SINGAPORE 0614  
TEL: 3377800 FAX: (65) 337-2429

BENEFACTOR: GUINNESS

**the Substation**  
A Home for the Arts

Guinness Raw Theatre poster (credit: The Substation)

Young practitioners like myself found The Substation a good place to start something new. Drama Box started without much connection with the bigger community; coming to The Substation made us feel like you were part of something bigger, part of a community.

I remember Noor Effendy Ibrahim, previously Artistic Director of The Substation (2010 – January 2015), staging one of his earliest works *Anak Melayu* in The Guinness Theatre in 1992. Presented by Teater Kami, the work was a provoking piece of theatre that looked at youth issues, but had created a controversy among the Malay community.

Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble (now renamed as Toy Factory Productions) also started at about the same time as Drama Box. Like Drama Box, their first inaugural production was held at The Guinness Theatre. The production *Redear* (1991) was an experimental work that was beautiful and yet different from what most Chinese Language Theatre was like in those days. Inspired by *Madame Butterfly*, it was a visual installation with movements, esoteric and bold. It was also at The Substation that Quah Sy Ren's *The Assassin, The Medium And The Masseur*, was staged, at The Guinness Theatre and The Substation Garden by Hwa Chong Alumni Association. This experimental play started late with the audience having to wait for a Guest-of-Honour. And when the Guest-of-Honour arrived, he was then shot "dead". The audience was ushered (almost forcibly) to The Substation Garden to witness the execution of the Assassin. The play delved into the absurdity of modern living, with characters moving on stage almost aimlessly, almost like a Tsai Ming Liang<sup>3</sup> movie.

It is not a coincidence that these three new Chinese Language Theatre groups staged their productions at The Substation<sup>4</sup>. The Substation was a place for experimentation. For young theatre makers, it allows you to take risks, to try things out. The generosity of the place as a space for exploration offers freedom, yet at the same time, the security for you to experiment. Here, you can afford to fail and still not feel that you have achieved nothing. In fact, when you have tried and failed, you are maybe a step closer to success, as Pao Kun would remind us, "A worthy failure is better than a mediocre success."<sup>5</sup>

The first production of Drama Box in 1991 was a conventional one, a double bill of two plays, *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee and *Marriage* by Lim Swee San. It gave the group confidence to mount a full-length devised work, again inspired by what I saw at The Substation. I saw *Those Who Can't, Teach* by The Necessary Stage, also staged at The Substation for the latter's opening, which inspired me to want to devise a new work. Drama Box wanted to make plays about things we were familiar with, and amongst us there were teachers, and so a play about Chinese Language Theatre seemed a good choice. No one told us not to try devising as a young group. It was a tough process, but we found a lot of comfort in creating and collaborating, in exploring together to find a voice. This ethos of work has since become a part of Drama Box's DNA.

For a new group or a young artist, a beginning would require a supportive environment. The Guinness Theatre black box is small, with a manageable audience capacity. The flexible space in The Guinness Theatre also allows directors to try things, to reconfigure, to start from "zero". The black box offered that possibility. The floor plan of the black box indicated that the seats could be moved, and during the 1990s, it was such an exciting possibility. Yet at the same time, we knew that once we started on something, we would subject our work to being critically examined by others. There were so many different practitioners of different backgrounds, of different artistic practices, visiting and working at The Substation. Your work would be seen by these artists. You would even get to talk to them after the show at the café at The Substation Garden. The Guinness Theatre was a space (open, free yet threatening) in a place (The Substation). The Substation was the place where we knew we could be free, safely, without being judged, but where we must learn how to receive critical opinions. I like how Gaston Bachelard describes a house as a place in *Poetics of Space*, which I think fits perfectly the way I see The Substation:

"...the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."<sup>6</sup>

The Substation is a home for the arts. So it should accommodate any kind of arts, traditional, contemporary, experimental and pop. So when people come to The Substation, they get to meet different artists, they get to meet different kinds of arts. Isn't that good?"

## A HOME FOR THE ARTS

I remembered asking Pao Kun about the diversity of programming in The Substation. As a programme executive, I was also responsible for some of the marketing and publicity work. After a year, there were people who were quite confused about what the place was about. In fact, there were people who asked that The Substation should have a clearer identity for easy marketing purposes. So I asked Pao Kun whether he would consider streamlining the programming to achieve a better branding recognition.

Pao Kun's response was (and I paraphrase his words here), "The Substation is a home for the arts. So it should accommodate any kind of arts, traditional, contemporary, experimental, and pop. So when people come to The Substation, they get to meet different artists, they get to meet different kinds of arts. Isn't that good?"

I recall a particular night when there was a sold out Suzhou Pingtan performance at The Guinness Theatre. Suzhou Pingtan is a traditional and exquisite folk form that involves storytelling using music and singing from Suzhou, China. It was a rare treat to have such a performance as this traditional art form was hardly seen in Singapore. At the same time, there was a set-up for a late night concert at the Garden featuring local punk rock bands. It was really a beautiful sight seeing two very different groups of audiences passing by each other.

The Substation was meant to house different kinds of art. From the traditional to the contemporary, the refined to the raw, the well-made productions to experimental ones, and the popular to the esoteric. It was a home for different mediums, different languages, and practices of different races and nationalities.

This place housed a carnivalistic world. The Substation Garden embodied such a vision. The garden was not especially big, but it had a number of beautiful Bodhi trees there, providing shade and nooks for solace and quietude. The wall surrounding the garden was a mural wall of free expression. The garden was also a venue for storytelling sessions by Ren Bao Xian under the beautiful Bodhi tree, an outdoor

performance space for concerts and plays like *Blue Remembered Hills* (1992) by The Necessary Stage that had converted the Garden into an old kampung, or William Teo's epic offering of *The Mahabharata Part 1: The Game of Dice* (1995), amongst others.



Storytelling sessions by Ren Bao Xian under the Bodhi tree at The Substation Garden in 1992 (credit: The Substation)

When there were no performances in The Substation Garden, one would see busker Roy Payamal (buskers were also very rare in Singapore back then) practising his juggling skills. Another group of people would be sitting around having discussions, or another group would be playing their guitars and singing. Here, visual artists met freely with theatre artists and dance artists.

In its most quiet moments, The Substation Garden could best be described in these words by poet Rainer Rilke:

"These trees are magnificent, but even more magnificent is the sublime and moving space between them, as though with growth it too increased."<sup>7</sup>

There were so many of these subliminal spaces in this Home for the Arts. The café, the door connecting the gallery to The Substation Garden, the corridor outside The Substation, the staircase leading up to the dance

studio, the “underground” backstage, or the stairs that go up to the little room that was once Pao Kun’s office, that later became a space for filmmakers.<sup>8</sup> These subliminal spaces grew on you. They built a kind of connection between people. Relationships were forged, in a very deep way. My short time of working at The Substation had helped me build connections with artists of different mediums, and 20 years later, these connections are still there. In fact, as a home, it provides a sense of rootedness to my growth as an artist, but yet at the same time, it did not restrict me to where I would venture. It always feels warm to be back, especially when you see Mrs Chua, the caretaker, telling you, “Wah, you have grown old!”... you know you are back home.

#### THE VISION AND COURAGE

Having a vision does not make a place tick. The values that the place embodies must be upheld by strong and firm leadership. This would give the place its meaning, build trust and deep relationships with people. The Artistic Director and his team play an important role in making The Substation what it was and what it is now. All the Artistic Directors of The Substation are strong artists, visionary and also resilient, if not The Substation would have lost its spirit as a place and space for artists.

I have witnessed Pao Kun defending why certain art works or performances were allowed to be showcased at The Substation Gallery (even if they were not presented by The Substation) when queried by the public or even by the Board of Directors. By doing so, Pao Kun gave artists a sense of security that the place is one of freedom and openness.

Having good artistic leadership and a good team run the place attracts artists and audience to want to visit the place, to showcase works in this place. The artists are attracted by the vision; challenged and inspired, they would want to visit the place.

The audience would also know that this is a place for dialogue, learning and sharing. It is not just a place for the consumption of artistic goods and products. The audience knows that when they are at this place they

may not like the products that they see, but that is okay because what they really want is a sense of place.

It takes courage to uphold the integrity of the place. There are financial challenges, as well as interventions from various agencies when works are challenging and provocative. It is to the credit of all the Artistic Directors of The Substation that the vision has been upheld in some of the most difficult times, making The Substation a place that puts audience, artists and their work at the forefront of its mission.

#### THE SUBSTATION AND CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

Recently, the National Arts Council of Singapore has spoken quite a lot about Creative Placemaking. Aliwal Arts Centre and Goodman Arts Centre are Placemaking projects that NAC has started.<sup>9</sup>

However, I would argue that Aliwal Arts Centre and Goodman Arts Centre could only be considered as Arts Housing initiatives with entertainment and F&B options for the public to visit, rather than Placemaking projects. In fact, I would think that The Substation could be called a good example of what Creative Placemaking can be in Singapore. Good Creative Placemaking involves a space that inspires art-making, allows for interaction between artists and artists, artists and audiences, and be able to create a sustainable condition for artists and other businesses to grow (think about the former S11 hawker centre and the coffee shop opposite The Substation), and most importantly, it must have a clear vision and good leadership.

What makes The Substation work is that it is artist-led. It is needed by the community, and led by the community who also knows what it needs. With strong and visionary leadership, a place was created. It was a ground up initiative, with huge support from the community. The synergy between artists, audience and the people running The Substation is a huge part of why it works.

I hope that more placemaking projects here will take some lessons from The Substation experience.

It takes courage to uphold the integrity of the place. There are financial challenges, as well as interventions from various agencies when works are challenging and provocative. It is to the credit of all the Artistic Directors of The Substation that the vision has been upheld in some of the most difficult times, making The Substation a place that puts audience, artists and their work at the forefront of its mission.

1 In this essay, I am writing about The Substation in the time (1990–1993) when I was intimately involved. This article is written in the past tense, but it does not mean that The Substation and the spirits as mentioned in the text, no longer exist. These spirits are very much living in The Substation, but manifested differently. However I have not done enough research to be able to make those connections. Hence I decided to write this article in the past tense, about my past involvement with The Substation.

2 From Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place – The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

3 Tsai Ming Liang is a Malaysian-born Taiwanese film director.

4 In fact, one can even say that The Substation was instrumental in regenerating the Chinese Language Theatre when it suffered from a lack of vitality and relevance in the early 1990s. During that time, the only active Chinese Language Theatre Company was Kuo Pao Kun’s Practice Theatre Ensemble. Now, two other major Chinese Language Theatre companies in Singapore are Drama Box and Toy Factory Productions.

5 Pao Kun’s famous quote about the value of a “worthy failure” appeared in the September/October 1991 issue of The Substation’s newsletter *Open Space*. Writing on the occasion of The Substation’s first anniversary,

his editorial notes the surging interest in the arts among Singaporeans who have embraced The Substation, and emphasises the distinctive role of The Substation in nurturing the new, young, and diverse, with an understanding of the different local cultures and language streams in our society. The editorial ends with this line: “And to give preference to worthy failures rather than mediocre successes.” A similar quote appears in an article of 11 May 1994 in *The Straits Times* by T. Sasitharan, “Theatre doyen sells himself to raise funds”, where Sasitharan cites from a text written by Pao Kun for Arts on Campus, the publication of NUS Centre for the Arts. The quotation is: “As a home for the arts, funded chiefly by the community, this non-profit arts base wishes to practice the belief that a worthy failure is more valuable than a mediocre success.”

6 From Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6.

7 As cited by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

8 Private company Monster Films set up The Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop in this room, teaching 16mm filmmaking classes in the late 1990s.

9 Aliwal Arts Centre was opened in 2013 and Goodman Arts Centre in 2011.

## ABOUT NATURE

### ROBERT ZHAO

In 2009, my first solo exhibition was presented by The Substation because I was selected through the Open Call programme. The exhibition was called *When A Tree Falls In The Forest* and it investigated humankind's relationship with nature. In a way, The Substation is where I first got a major platform for my practice, and I took an active interest in the art venue's goings-on afterwards. I always found it an organic space for art, and an iconic structure with beautiful greenery — I had some pictures taken there when I spent a couple of days under the gigantic Banyan tree at the back of the building. Sadly, last April, I watched these trees get cut down to make way for new buildings. It was a great spectacle, filled with great noises, and falling branches, and sophisticated machinery, and I took a lot of pictures for documentation's sake. But the most impressive sight of all was the "transplantation" of the Banyan tree at the back of The Substation — the same one I spent time under — three men attempted to prune all 20m of a huge tangle of branches and leaves down to a single stump, which was then carted away in a lorry to an undisclosed location where it would be placed until a new permanent home was found.

That tree was very special to The Substation's history. It is said that The Substation's founder, Kuo Pao Kun, fought to save it as part of The Substation Garden, and many art events had taken place over the years under its shade. I managed to save a few segments of its trunks, as well as a long hanging root.

I have thought a lot about the notion of transplantation ever since. Part of me finds it patronising, an act done more to placate outraged humans rather than for the tree's welfare. After all, what we're doing is to reduce a magnificent specimen to a smaller, supposedly integral part of itself. Thus diminished, the tree is taken away from the place that gave it life and meaning in the first place.

Even the bits of wood that I saved are starting to be eaten by insects, one year later. Tiny holes are drilled by termites, and small piles of dust are left behind. At first, curious to see how far these holes went in, I started sanding down the wood with a piece of sandpaper — then I couldn't stop, and I wanted to see if I could make the tree disappear completely into dust. I could.

In the form of sawdust, I find the tree in a more "natural" state, as dust is as natural as nature gets. If a tree fell in a forest, it returns to the forest by breaking down — I've sped up the process here a little. Dust, if we are to look at it at a micron level, carries material from a long time ago and from far away. Dust is human, animal, and buildings. Dust is everywhere and nowhere, and in art, we could learn to stop fighting it, and instead, embrace it.



Artist sanding down tree trunks belonging to The Substation Malayan Banyan (credit: Robert Zhao)