

The Substation: art and culture in/of the city-state Singapore

The Performative Space



I have been living in Indonesia for the past nine years, and occasionally I must travel to renew my visa. I have already visited Singapore five times for this reason. As I waited for the MRT (subway train) to make my way from the airport to downtown Singapore, on my most recent visit, I spotted over forty CCTV-cameras on the platform alone. One wonders how many people are employed to watch all that footage. (The situation has led to locals mischievously joking that civil servants in Singapore must be perverts since they love to watch that many hours of CCTV video.)

Roy Voragen

IN SINGAPORE, SECURITY CAMERAS are indeed omnipresent, no-smoking signs are everywhere, and hefty penalties are levied to those who fail to comply. It seems though as if most Singaporeans have internalized the multifarious do's and don'ts of the law – from surveillance to self-surveillance. Nevertheless, there are plenty of great artists in this 'nanny state' who also like to mock their nanny – often in private and sometimes in their artworks.

In addition to this sterile and controlled environment, Singapore is also often accused of being a cultural desert; even some Singaporeans have made this claim.¹ However, even if that has ever been true, a lot has changed over the past two decades. And alternative art and performance space The Substation has played – and still does play – a significant role in this development. Since its founding, many organizations have been added to Singapore's cultural landscape, to name just a few: the Singapore Art Museum (SAM; 1996), which now has probably the best collection of contemporary art from Southeast Asia; the Singapore Biennale (organized since 2006); the art fair Art Stage at the Marina Bay Sands Convention and Exhibition Centre (organized since 2011); and the art district Gillman Barracks (opened earlier this year). SAM and The Substation are now exploring the possibilities to collaborate for the upcoming Singapore Biennale in 2013. Moreover, The Substation's current artistic director, since 2010, artist and playwright Noor Effendy Ibrahim says that to counter the cultural desert argument we should not merely look at a country's

infrastructure, as we will then still overlook the richness of cultural practices and art making – “the learning, the training, the sharing, and the empowering.”²

For me, art museums and bookstores are the gateways into a new city. Wandering as a modern-day *flâneur*, from art museum to bookstore, I slowly get to know a new city – whether it is Stockholm or Singapore – and detours are part of the journey. My first impression of Singapore and its sidewalk crowd: the women are clad in sexy miniskirts, are buying Gucci and are scented by Picasso. The men go around in Armani and smell like Boss. My first impression of its architecture: an apparent mixture of communist-style office buildings and hyper-capitalist styled mega-malls. What then to expect from and to discover in Singapore's cultural landscape? I acknowledge that first impressions are colored by many prejudices. And it took me a while, but I befriended art spaces SAM and The Substation, and bookstores Select Books (a new neighbor of The Substation) and Books Actually.

In the nineties, the Singapore government's role in and its policies on the arts changed dramatically. The government started to subsidize the arts substantially, among other reasons because the arts are considered essential to attract qualified expatriates to work and stay in Singapore. The government wanted to make Singapore a global and creative city to bolster its GDP, and the arts were instrumental to the branding of “a city with a softer face.”³ This led to the classic problem with government subsidies for the arts: artists and art organizations

happily accept subsidies, but also prefer to have as little as possible government involvement. Noor Effendy Ibrahim says of the pre-subsidy era: “I remember, much opportunity was carved by artists themselves despite the severe lack of arts infrastructure then. Artists found and created spaces where there wasn't any (or was perceived then). What I do find to be disturbing yet intriguing is the reverse today.” Today, artists generally do not consider alternatives to the grant system, which means they have to work within the state's parameters.

The Substation was founded in 1990 by the late playwright Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002), who was its first artistic director until T. Sasitharan took over in 1995. Kuo Pao Kun had been jailed without trial between 1979 and 1980 on suspicion of being a communist (during this time his citizenship was rescinded as well, only to be reinstated in 1992). The Substation is named after the building's original function: in 1926 the Public Utilities Board built it as an electric substation. In the late 1970's the building was vacated and it took the vision of Kuo Pao Kun to put it to good use once again, this time for artistic experimentation and imagination. And as in its original manifestation, The Substation is an essential source of energy.

The Substation has become like a friend to return to time after time for inspiration, for imagination, to be moved towards new horizons and possibilities. The Substation is an interface between artists, audiences and their city; an interface that is never merely transactional. It is, therefore, fitting that The Substation started the Love Letters Project in 2010, for which poets are invited to address The Substation as a long lost lover. This was the May 2010 contribution by poet Gaston Ng:⁴

Rent

*We never ever meet during daytime,
when you're busy turning tricks for
donations, charging rent for endless
courses, who occupy your body
as efficiently as possible.*

*At closing, I smoke endless, curb-side cigarettes,
waiting for your last patron to go home,
waiting for our bedroom whispers to begin.*

*Your aspirations sound better worry-free; money-free.
Dreams flourish when reclining,
hopes fattening up for the night,
you make a killing, and begin
doing what you really want to do.*

I wait helplessly.

Randy Chan and Grace Tan's project earlier this year, entitled *Building as a Body*, for which they wrapped the façade of The Substation, can also be seen as emphasizing the above mentioned interface element that makes The Substation so significant.

The Substation's home is a large building, housing a 108-seat black box theatre, a white cube gallery, a dance studio and two classrooms. This multifunctional architecture facilitates the crossing-over between diverse artistic disciplines and media for different audiences in varying settings. It is The Substation's mission to support experimentation through inter- and cross-disciplinarity. For example, artists Andrée Weschler and Lynn Lu decided to use the theatre instead of the gallery for their project *La Carte de Tendre* [A Map of Love]. Andrée Weschler explained: "a theatre [...] is a very different kind of space, and is closer to a landscape than a gallery, it is a space of possibilities."⁵ The building is, therefore, well suited to meet the needs of very different artists and their audiences. Furthermore, The Substation has a night bar in its backyard, Timbre, which also organizes live (cover) music performances (the backyard was added in a 1950 renovation to store outdoor equipment).

The Substation's sources of income are government subsidies, rent from the bar, individual donors, corporate sponsors, merchandise and ticket sales⁶ – diversification is important in case one source dries up. Leasing out the backyard to Timbre is a financial necessity, but Noor Effendy Ibrahim misses the openness of the garden during the 1990s and the connection with other activities at The Substation. Sustainability of art and cultural organizations must also include variables such as *audience, human resources and new ideas*. The Substation is able to exist as it does today because it has a loyal audience, which is also important for feedback. And art and cultural organizations can only survive over time if their audience is not only diverse, but also multi-generational.

Second, the work force is vital to the sustainability of art and cultural organizations. Most of these institutions function with a limited number of staff, who work long hours for little pay (compared to the commercial sector). A lot of attention should be given to keeping them satisfied with their jobs. The organization, with its staff, should also consistently regenerate itself, so as to avoid an over-identification with the founder, unable to move on and develop.

Third, sustainability requires a maintained flow of ideas on how to attract new financial resources, draw in and keep audiences, and organize human resources; but above all, it needs fresh artistic ideas, including a discourse on the arts, to keep The Substation and its programming contemporary. The Substation's programming includes visual and sound arts exhibitions; theatre, dance, music and art performances; movie screenings ranging from documentaries to video art; publications, including the Love Letter Project; and conferences.⁷ One way to test and renew ideas, of course, is through reciprocal feedback between members of the audience, artists, and The Substation. The Substation employs a number of ways to encourage and engage with artists, to challenge and guide them to develop discursive, performative and visual ideas.

One way is through The Substation's Associate Artist Research Programme (AARP), a two-year residency program for which artists receive curatorial, financial and organizational support to develop and execute research and artistic practices. Participating artists are supported to work with communities to rethink the connection between art and everyday life. One of the AARP artists is musician and sound artist Bani Haykal. His project rethinks aspects of music; for example, he developed alternative styles of music notation, because the classical way excludes lay people. He even invited non-classically trained people to play music with him in the gallery.

Another way The Substation engages with artists is through the Open Call for visual, sound and performance artists. Visual artist Boedi Widjaja commented: "The Substation's Open Call means that I receive tremendous support to develop, execute and present a new work to the public."⁸ Through the Open Call, The Substation gives young and upcoming artists an opportunity. Recently, sound artist Joel Ong developed and showcased his *Wagon* project: robotic wagons equipped with sensors would start moving in response to visitors pacing up and down the gallery, which, in turn, altered the sound emitted from loudspeakers mounted onto the walls. Ong's exhibition succeeded in subtly offering us a new experience of the (acoustic) environment.

In an interview with curator June Yap,⁹ co-artistic director Audrey Wong (2000-2010) explained why The Substation remains relevant: "Pao Kun's vision was (and still is)



"A worthy failure is more valuable than a mediocre success"
Kuo Pao Kun, founder of The Substation



supremely relevant to Singapore: to provide a space for artists to play, to experiment, test things out and fail, if necessary; to recognize the need for honesty of vision in the artist work; to cultivate depth in the arts [...]; there aren't that many platforms [...] to showcase more risky and alternative, abstract or intellectual kind of work."¹⁰ The Substation, which aims to show art practices and processes instead of finished art products¹¹ (that can be sold as commodities on the art market), has to deal with two issues: First, while the numbers of visitors are, of course, important, there is more to art than can be quantified; unfortunately, quantification is exactly what a government hopes to see after granting a subsidy. Second, to show what remains invisible in the art market will have a limited reach, although in a city the size of Singapore that should not be a problem; at the same time though, it remains important to communicate why these forms are relevant without patronizing members of the audience.¹²

Art and cultural organizations in Singapore have to deal inevitably with censorship. Noor Effendy Ibrahim: "Our approach with the state on censorship matters and situations is of open and transparent negotiation, and this includes the artists involved, as much as we can possible get. It is never easy and the openness and transparency varies with each case, and often we will find ourselves in a situation where the state opts out of such negotiation parameters, and then we'll find ourselves in an impossible situation." In the meantime, the National Arts Council (NAC), Singapore's body in charge of granting subsidies, decided it would not sponsor Singapore's pavilion at the next Venice Biennale, which very well may indicate a new direction in art policy. During my last visit this was the talk of the town – artists feel neglected, they feel they have been bereft of a wonderful chance to showcase their work at the best venue in the art world.¹³ Pragmatically speaking, NAC's budget and organization are limited, and the Venice Biennale absorbs a huge part of its budget and manpower. NAC justifies its decision by demanding that art organizations develop programs that have more community involvement.¹⁴ What this means for The Substation is yet to be seen. The Substation continues to organize ambitious programs, such as the yearly art festival SeptFest in celebration of its own birthday: 22 and counting.

Roy Voragen is a Bandung-based art writer and founder of Roma Arts, he can be contacted at fatumbrutum.blogspot.com

The Substation, 45 Armenian Street, Singapore www.substation.org



Notes

- For example, C.J.W.L. Wee, "Creating High Culture in the Globalized 'Cultural Desert' of Singapore," in *The Drama Review* 47, 4 (Winter 2003): 84-97.
- All quotes by Noor Effendy Ibrahim in this article originate from an email to the author, 27-10-2012.
- Jeannine Tang, "Spectacle's Politics and the Singapore Biennale," in *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no.3 (2007): 365-377.
- <http://tinyurl.com/c5kl487> (accessed 18-10-2012). Originally the poem was written in Mandarin, the poet wrote the translation.
- Tim Zeely, "Charting Unknown Territory, an interview with Andrée Weschler," <http://tinyurl.com/czwkobj> (accessed 19-10-2012).
- Emily J. Hoe (general manager since 2010): "Up until 2006, The Substation was making substantial losses each year. Since then, the rental from our tenant [Timbre, RV] in the Garden has increased substantially. When combined with the rental from our other facilities, it equals about 55% for FY2012. Funding from National Arts Council and Singapore Film Commission was 20%, donations/sponsors 19%, and the rest was made up of ticket sales, merchandise, course and our Visual Arts Fund." Emily, J. Hoe, email to the author, 27-10-2012.
- A recent conference was the third HAO Summit for young curators from the region, <http://tinyurl.com/c5hanes> (accessed 19-10-2012). 'Hao' is Mandarin for good.
- Michele Adriaans, "Exhibition: *Path.1* by Boedi Widjaja," <http://tinyurl.com/bqz8hp4> (accessed 19-10-2012).
- June Yap is a curator-in-resident at the Guggenheim in New York (2012-2014).
- June Yap, "The Substation in Contemporary Singapore, an interview with Audrey Wong and Ho Tzu Nyen," in *C-Arts Magazine* (March-April 2008), 89. Today, Audrey Wong teaches art management at Lasalle College of the Arts.
- Audrey Wong claims that The Substation is an alternative art space as it is distinct from commercial art galleries. Audrey Wong, "On The Substation's 21st Birthday," <http://tinyurl.com/bnk77nz> (accessed 19-10-2012). She also signals another problem: "Our highly materialistic and results-focused society has bred a consumerist mentality towards the arts."
- For example, the wall texts at the Singapore Art Museum are patronizing; they make the artworks flat by explaining literally what one sees.
- Audrey Wong: "our artists are being recognized internationally but remain totally unknown to local audiences," and now artists are afraid that international recognition might also diminish. In June Yap, "The Substation in Contemporary Singapore," 90; see note 10.
- Does that mean that art organizations have to do more with traditional or ethnic art forms? Or does NAC want people to come to visit Singapore instead of bringing art from Singapore to venues abroad? On a more cynical note: the last parliamentary elections saw substantive criticism against the government that allowed the influx of a great number of foreigners who could easily become permanent residents, approximately one third of all people residing in Singapore do not have citizenship (see <http://tinyurl.com/dydkb7c>; accessed 19-10-2012), and NAC's decision not to sponsor a pavilion at the Venice Biennale could then indicate a policy change towards pacifying this anger, but that is perhaps speculation (while those receiving grants have to be accountable, the Singapore government is only accountable to a certain degree).