



space,

spaces

and
spacing

space,

spaces

and
spacing



The Substation

A Home for the Arts

Space, Spaces and Spacing 1995: The Substation Conference

© The Substation

First published in 1996

Copyrights of individual works are reserved by their respective authors.

ISBN: 978-981-14-7648-8

Published by The Substation

45 Armenian Street, Singapore 179936

substation.org

Editor: Adeline Chia

Project coordinator: Karine Tan

Cover & book design: Rochelle Lai (TRCL)

Typeface: DM Sans and Calling Code

Material: Maple White

Printed by and with the support from:



The publisher reserves all rights to this title.

Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

01

Welcome Address

by Chew Kheng Chuan

03

Introduction

by T.K. Sabapathy

11

Panel 1: The Making Of Spaces

11

Political Space: Has It Shrunk Since the '60s?

by Chua Beng Huat

21

There is No Place like Home: Space and the Uncanny

by Yao Souchou

30

Panel 2: Articulating Arts Practices

30

Don't Let the Children Down: the Challenge of Theatre-In-Education

by Rani Moorthy

41

Art Here: What Price Space?

by T. Sasitharan

45

Panel 3: Socialising the Space

45

Remarks on Art Museology in Singapore

by Kwok Kian Chow

52

Panel 4: Complexities and Contradictions

52

Looking Back at Brother Cane: Performance Art and State Performance

by Ray Langenbach

70

The City, the Body

by Lee Weng Choy

81

Commentary

by Zai Kuning

86

Featured Speakers

89

Acknowledgements

Welcome Address

by Chew Kheng Chuan,
Member of The Substation
Management Committee

Mr Hsuan Owyang, [Chairman, Housing Development Board (1983–1998)] our guest-of-honour; distinguished guests and participants, friends,

Space, spaces and spacing. This is not an architectural conference. I hope those of you in the audience who are architects by profession realised this when you paid your conference fees. But, on the one hand, given the time immemorial nature of architecture—the science of building—and, on the other hand, the current trendiness of wanting to build the architecture of the information superhighways, perhaps it is timely that we are gathered here this weekend to examine, reflect and record the *psychic* architecture of the arts in Singapore. Hence the title of the conference, “Space, Spaces and Spacing”. Perhaps we are going to be engaged, after all, in a different kind of architecture. Not a science of building, but a *building* of the arts, that is to say, cultural life itself.

This is the third arts conference organised by The Substation. Being a well-schooled Singaporean, when called upon to give this welcome address, I did the equivalent of preparing for exams. I read up the equivalent of the relevant 10-year series on this subject. Of course, The Substation has only been around for five years; and this only the third year of what has become a very special conference-event in the annual calendar of The Substation, as well as a significant contribution to critical discourse on the arts in Singapore. So I looked up what was said in the opening or welcome addresses of the first two conferences. Ho Kwon Ping gave the opening speech at the first, *Art Vs Art: Conflict and Convergence*, and Kuo Pao Kun gave a speech for last year’s *Our Place in Time*. I am honoured to be included in such worthy company—hard acts to follow. But I am relieved to realise that the task isn’t really even mine. It is yours. So may I wish everyone here at this conference, clarity of thought, but before I conclude, may I make a minor plea on behalf, not of future generations, but simply present company, that we be mindful of two things.

The first: I hope that we do not let the discussions dwell only on gripes and lamentations. By all means, gripe if you will—it is the refuge of the powerless. And the powers-that-be should be reminded that in the arts, as in the corporate and economic spheres, “empowerment” of individuals is necessary for self-sustaining and profitable growth.

The second: I also hope that we can minimise slipping into academese in the papers and discussions. But, even if anyone does, not to worry, for The Substation is a wonderfully inclusive place, or should I say, *space*, where the mainstream and the fringe, the classical, the avant-garde and experimental commingle and interact, so why not, I suppose, the abstractly academic? But surely, like most of us, one wants to be understood.

Distinguished guests and friends, thank you once again, and welcome.

Note: Chew Kheng Chuan is now the Chairman of The Substation.



Introduction

by T.K. Sabapathy

Space, yes, space, hooray for space! I am an artist myself, I am a playwright and I always welcome space to work in. I welcome space to work in that is free from constraints, free from economic and socio-political constraints—this would be ideal. Notice the term I use is “social constraints”, which is different from the term “social responsibility”. The former is something which comes from the outside and the latter from the inside.

— Desmond Sim, in *Art Vs Art: Conflict & Convergence*¹

The aim of this conference, as with the preceding two, is to bring together speakers and various publics in order to spur discussion and debate on matters concerning creative and critical practices in Singapore. This endeavour is pointed towards a goal, namely: to claim for artists and artworks articulated roles, presences and significance in the public realm. It must be underlined that such a claim has to be argued for and defended continuously and in the face of ever-changing circumstances. In convening this gathering, The Substation has hosted three conferences, one per year, and in doing so has generated a degree of expectation. I don't think I exaggerate in advancing this surmise. Consider the following.

At the end of the first conference, *Art Vs Art*, Kuo Pao Kun in his concluding remarks held out the following: “I just hope that this is the first of a series of dialogues that we hold, either here at The Substation, or elsewhere—that we keep going on”.² Well, we are at the third, and evidently we have kept going on; so much so that at a gathering of speakers, respondents and members of the organising committee last Saturday [Sept 9, 1995], one person was sufficiently elated to say that a tradition has been set. I can understand the sense of jubilation and even the magnitude of the claim. In a situation such as ours—where public discussion of artistic matters is thin, few and far between, to the extent that one might conclude that hardly any critical activity of consequence has taken place—to realise that The Substation conferences have had a run of three years must be surprising even as the conferences are welcomed. Indeed our critical

landscape, a landscape that is still dispersed and dislocated, is a terrain that can be prospected for a future conference. For that matter, the appearance of *Art Vs Art* in published form, finally, points to an oasis in these parched conditions.

Be that as it may, it was partly with a projection such as Pao Kun's, and partly from talking with practitioners, art teachers, writers, curators, art administrators, students and members of the public that I venture to say that these conferences have generated expectations. Expectations in the sense that there is a sufficient public for these kinds of dialogues. I recall the one-day public forum held in conjunction with the SEAMEO-SPAFA Symposium on Southeast Asian Art History and Regional Aesthetics in March this year at the National Museum. The auditorium was nearly filled to capacity, and from wherein emerged considerable, passionate discussion—albeit in a roller-coaster manner—on wide-ranging issues and problems related to art in the Southeast Asian region. By “expectation” I also mean in the sense that there are persons who are willing to present their thoughts and test their ideas, persons who are prepared to describe their practices and disclose their aims, who are eager to share their visions and anxieties. There is a will to widen the arenas for communication, to deepen the grounds for appreciation and understanding, to engender habits of reflection, discovery and debate in the public. This last feature, the public, is crucial to creative practices in general, but specifically to the theme and scope of this very conference.

From the very beginning of this project and in developing it through committees, one interest tended to dominate all else: the notion of the public. This is not altogether surprising as creative practices seek, at times find, and are sited in a public. It is in public and by publics that creative productions are validated and are accorded significance and meaning. In this connection, I am reminded of a principle formulated for assessing artworks, or, rather, art processes and art ideas that resist the obligation to produce “polished objects which people can possess and keep in glass cases”, as Tang Da Wu described.³ It is a principle proposed by Donald Brook in his 1969 lecture “Flight from the Object”, which he delivered at the Power Institute in Sydney, Australia. Brook called it the Principle of Publicity, and I cite it as it homes into our concerns for this conference.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

Panel 1: The Making of Spaces

CHAIRPERSON
SPEAKERS
RESPONDENTS

: T.K. SABAPATHY
: DR CHUA BENG HUAT, RICHARD LIM, DR YAO SOUCHOU
: FRANCES LOW POOI FONG, PROF EDDIE KUO

EDITOR'S NOTE

In his presentation, sociologist Chua Beng Huat argues that democratic space in Singapore is growing. The evidence he provides in support of his thesis—the responsiveness of the People Action's Party to criticism, how income stratification leads to social pluralism, and how more individual citizens are writing into newspaper forums—might not always stand up to close scrutiny (they were in fact, challenged by the respondents) but are interesting at least for historical colour. His refusal to discuss the role of civil society groups such as AWARE and The Nature Society because these are "obvious" is curious—but the growth of feminist and heritage activism in the intervening years undermines his dismissal.

Yao Souchou's multi-layered discussion of "home" as a construct, in architectural, spatial, psychological and political terms, reads as an evergreen, though his views on gender roles in the home were less updated.

Omitted here is journalist Richard Lim's piece *Space in The Straits Times for the Arts*, in which the then Life! editor gave a short presentation on art and commerce, specifically pertaining to advertising.

Political Space: Has it shrunk since the '60s?

by Chua Beng Huat

Let me begin by clarifying the question posed in the title of the paper itself: Has political space shrunk since the 1960s? My own preference is to say that it has not. On the other hand, the conventional wisdom and the conventional argument is that political space has radically shrunk

since the 1960s. The evidence that is generally provided for this thesis is that there is a decimation of opposition parties, that politics has now been reduced practically to a one-party politic. And that as a result of the demise of opposition parties, democratic politics in Singapore was as good as over by 1965—or 1968 at the latest. There is also, as a matter of evidence, the increasing interchangeability of civil service, political party, government and the state. So that we are now in a situation where there is, increasingly, a seamless weave of political leadership, persons in the political elite can change positions readily from the political party to the civil service to the private sector, then back to the government again.

I think that the most concise statement about the shrinkage of political space since the 1960s is the Chan Heng Chee essay, written in the '70s, titled "Where has the politics gone?" The answer she gives is that it has all gone to the administrative state; we're no longer dealing with a state that is political as such, but we're just talking about a group of administrators, numbering approximately 400, who are running the nation.

I've always been uncomfortable with the definition of politics in the above sense. It implies that to some extent Singaporeans have in one way or another given up their political rights. I would like to argue against this conventional thesis about the death of politics in Singapore. Largely because I think if we continue in that vein it would be self-debilitating. We would no longer know how to practise politics if we keep accepting that kind of analysis.

But it is not just a question of desiring to preserve a certain kind of political space. I also think the conventional thesis is a very limited thesis because it only looks at politics in terms of political institutional structures. There is a need to look below the political structures to see what is happening, and from such an analysis of what is happening on the ground, we can begin to reformulate a different sense of politics. Basically, this is what I will attempt to do in my paper.

My argument is that political space since 1960 has not really shrunk all that much. We need to go back to see what is meant when we say there was a lot of political activity happening in the 1950s and '60s. The tendency is to say that the democratic period in Singapore politics was in the last years of the colonial era and the immediate post-colonial years. By that argument, then by 1959 politics would be over. We don't have to wait until 1968 because, if you recall, by 1959 the People's Action Party (PAP) had already emerged as the dominant party.

All the conservative parties at that moment were already in fact defeated. The mandate that they had under limited franchise was already decimated by the time the PAP decided to contest for power. And I think the decline of the conservative parties formed in the last years of colonialism was largely because their political sentiments had no public resonance, even at that time. By 1959, the contest for the political machinery was

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

