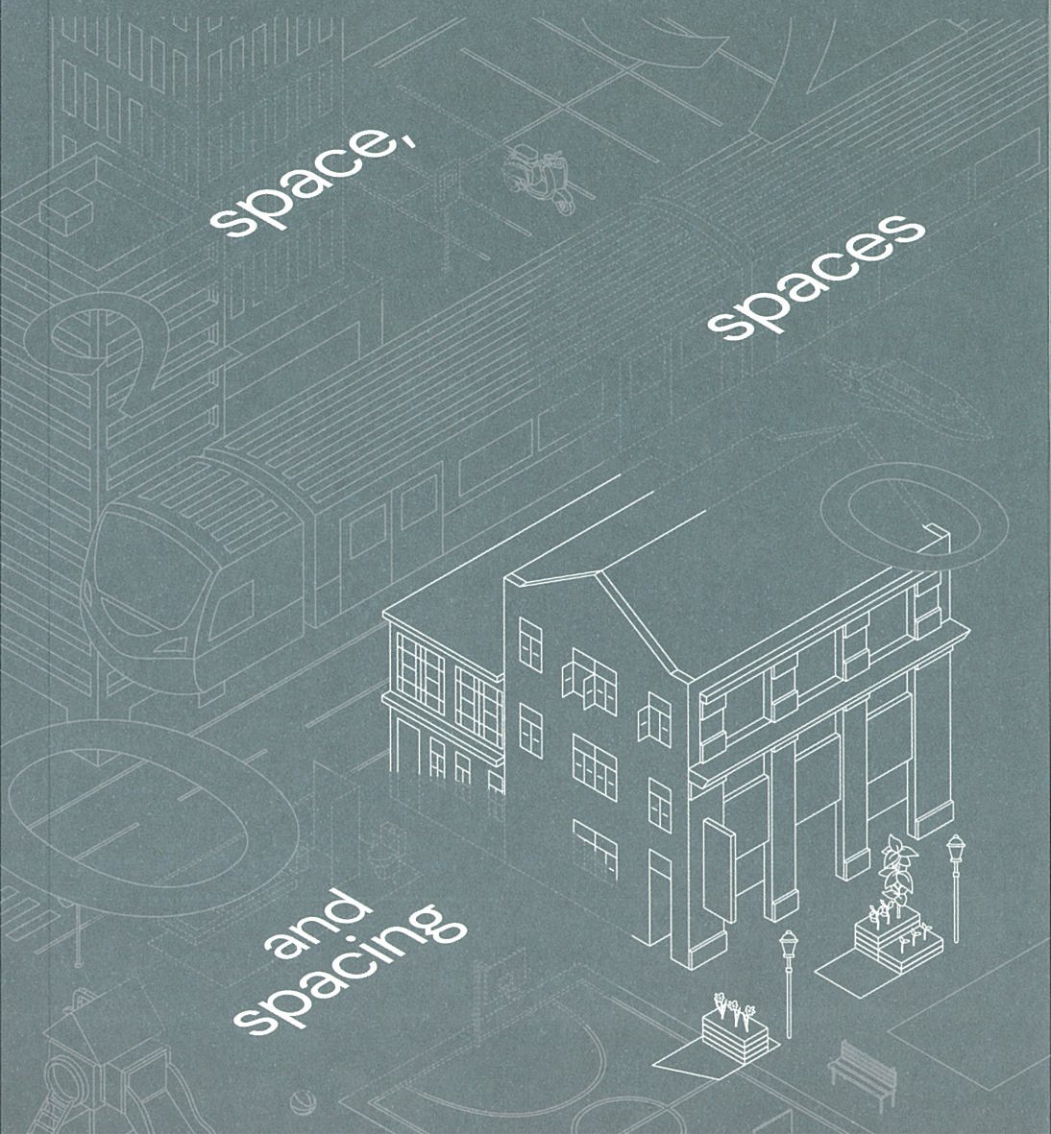


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The Substation

A Home for the Arts

Space, Spaces and Spacing 2020: The Substation Conference

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Editor's Introduction

by Adeline Chia

In 1995, The Substation organised a conference titled *Space, Spaces and Spacing*, exploring the notions of physical, political and personal space in the arts community and general citizenry. This was the third conference held by the independent arts centre, which was still under the leadership of its founding artistic director, the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun. In 2020, the fifth artistic director Alan Oei decided to hold a conference revisiting the 1995 event. It was planned as the culminating event to his year-long theme *A Public Square*, which investigated the ideas of spatial justice (mostly pertaining to urban planning and architecture), the public sphere (concerning the discursive platforms for politics) and their attendant issues of access. The reiteration aimed to take stock of "space" and its various interpretations, and to provoke discussions on its gains and losses.

This double-volume box set is the companion text to both conferences. The first volume is a re-issue of the original book released in conjunction with the first conference, which contained transcripts of the presentations as well as discussions and Q&As afterwards. Although that book has gone out of print, over the years, there have been requests to access the archival copies in The Substation. The original text, which was a faithful record of the baggy eclecticism of the source event, has been edited for clarity, readability and pertinence to the current conversation. I have indicated the excisions in brief notes before each panel discussion. Completists can access the full, unabridged text on The Substation website.

The second volume is the transcript of the 2020 conference, which was live-streamed over the Internet due to public health restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the texts included are of undelivered speeches, as the speakers were unable to make the event due to flight cancellations. Some speakers made presentations, but chose to withdraw the paper from publication.

It is hoped that two books, placed side by side, allow convergences and divergences to emerge organically in comparison. A few perennial concerns revolve around political space, which is linked to censorship and freedom of artistic expression. Also part of a long-running conversation is the role of art spaces and institutions in a changing arts ecology. But there are also important differences between the two periods. Contributors have noted that, compared to the past, the state machinery and its methods have evolved, growing more sophisticated in some respects and more blunt in others. There has also been an increase in the number of independent art spaces, as well as a diversification of arts infrastructure and a noticeable deepening of critical vocabulary in art discourse.

Both times presented different pressures and hence anxieties in the arts. The 1995 conference happened shortly after the Josef Ng incident, in which the performance artist was persecuted for committing an obscene act in *Brother Cane*. This effectively prompted a no-funding rule for performance art and forum theatre by the government; it is in this atmosphere of state hostility against the arts that *Space, Spaces and Spacing* took place. The year 2020 will probably be best remembered in posterity as the year that Covid-19 upended the world. Given the global crisis, this is unsurprisingly not a good time for arts venues and the arts community (though, to be fair, when is?). There was also a particularly harsh appraisal of the arts in a survey of 1,000 Singaporeans commissioned by *The Straits Times* which found “artist” as the No. 1 inessential occupation.

During a pandemic, ideas of solidarity, collectivism and alliances between different communities and practices have been complicated—how to think of togetherness in an era of social distancing? But as the conference speakers have illustrated in different ways, à la Henri Lefebvre, that social space is socially produced. In this light, amid the forces of shrinkage and tightening, the conferences’ aims of fostering dialogue and “thinking together”, to borrow one of the speakers’ phrasing, has a generative effect. They create room.

Adeline Chia

*Adeline Chia is an independent arts writer and editor based in Singapore.
She is the reviews editor of ArtReview Asia.*

Foreword

by Alan Oei

A Public Square, a year-long programme that looks at how our physical spaces reflect or extend our ideas and attitudes

about the public sphere, was our response to the pedestrianisation of the historical Armenian Street. This space—is it a park, a plaza or a pedestrianised space?—raises all sorts of questions about the aspirations and contradictions of public space. Thus began an inquiry into the nature and issues surrounding public space, ownership and access in Singapore.

The professional skateboarder-turned-academic Ocean Howell said in an interview with *The Guardian* on defensive architecture, “When you’re designed against, you know it. Other people might not see it, but you will. The message is clear: you are not a member of the public, at least not of the public that is welcome here.” The park in front of us has been made for representation rather than activity; it commemorates the Bicentennial and it has very little life outside of big-scale events deemed quote, unquote, public, or palatable. So it’s imperative that we, and not just The Substation, continue to lay claim to it, and shape its meaning and function.

At The Substation, we have always been a space for the margins, the counterculture and of course, the artists. In so many ways, artists are discouraged from being part of the public, so the very fact that we are actively engaged in public conversation is an important form of representation.

Alan Oei

*Artistic Director, The Substation (2015–2019)
Co-Chair, Steering Committee, Space, Spaces and Spacing 2020*



Opening Address

by Kenneth Paul Tan
Co-Chair, Steering Committee,
Space, Spaces and Spacing 2020

Good morning everyone and welcome to The Substation.

Since its founding by the late Kuo Pao Kun, who, also in that year, had won the Cultural Medallion, The Substation has been many things to many people. For most, it has been a valuably unpolished and independent space, interdisciplinary, intercultural, process-driven, and non-judgmentally nurturing, where young and old have been able to experiment, collaborate, deliberate or just hang out with one another. A space simply for hanging out, as it turned out, enabled valuable conversations, which in turn produced valuable work and valuable careers. But it was probably the friendships, as much as anything else, that grew into communities of people forged not by singular ideologies or manifestos, but by the sheer excitement of often raw creativity and serendipitous creation. These communities, drawing on friendships and then strengthened by moral courage and solidarity, afforded opportunities, support and shelter to artists who, for all kinds of reasons, may have scraped too hard against the establishment, its norms, conventions, authority and pretensions.

But The Substation was not just about artists, talking and doing art with other artists, for arts audiences attending arts events. Its reach was further. It was a space that attracted and welcomed the participation of academics and activists, for instance. The lines dividing them were never so clear, in fact. The Substation organised conferences to discuss matters that were central to the arts but whose significance was certainly much broader in terms of the cultural, the social, the political, the technological and the international. In 1993, The Substation organised the first in a series of conferences, calling it *Art Vs Art: Conflict and Convergence*. In 1994, it organised *Our Place In Time*. And in 1995, *Space, Spaces and Spacing*.

That was 25 years ago. Today, we re-present that conference for what must surely be a very different Singapore in a space that must surely be a

very different Substation. But have Singapore and The Substation changed all that much? And if so, have they changed—on the whole—for the better or the worse? For whom, might they have changed for the better, and for whom, the worse? What can knowing all of this tell us about the present? How can it help us imagine our futures?

Let me encourage all of us here, in our conversations over the next two days, to think of these as fundamental questions to answer. The conference has, in a way, been designed to help us do this. We have kept the four original panel topics: The first two for today and the last two for tomorrow. However, we have encouraged a reinterpretation of the topics and a re-posing of the questions. We have taken the liberty to sharpen the focus of each of these panel topics so that we can narrow them down to specific concerns. In the first panel “The Making of Spaces”, we focus on the broader context of the state, cultural policy, civil society and the political environment. In the second panel “Articulating Arts Practices”, we focus on the discursive dimensions of the arts. In the third panel “Socialising the Space”, we focus on the public possibilities of arts discourse. And in the fourth and final panel “Complexities and Contradictions”, we pose broad questions to two prominent public intellectuals: The Substation’s founding chair Tay Kheng Soon and former “Arts” Nominated Member of Parliament Kok Heng Leun.

Our programme also includes two other highlights. One, which is today, is a keynote lecture by Cherian George, whose eagerly anticipated 20th anniversary edition of his celebrated book *Singapore, the Air-Conditioned Nation* has just come out. The other highlight, which is tomorrow, is a performance by Ray Langenbach and Lee Weng Choy.

Some of you may have attended the original conference in 1995 and you will recognise that we have included in our programme a few participants from that event. Most of the speakers you will hear this weekend, however, were not present then.

Some of the speakers will be beamed in. Panel 2.2 has been cancelled, but Panel 2.1 will proceed as a live feed. In a post-Covid-19 world, this will very likely be the new norm for arts events, especially large-scale events whose participation is international. This compels us to stretch our notion of space

yet again. What is the relationship between in-person and video-conferenced (eventually I suppose holographic) presence? In a post-Covid-19 world, spacing also comes to mean something else when we recalibrate social distancing tolerance levels and worry about viral superspreading of the kind held in far greater awe than the virality of social media. The question of physical and virtual space, and how the two are related, is by no means new, but I hope we will address this with new insight this weekend. Are they substitutive or complementary? How can we design our spaces, organise our events and curate our programmes so that one extends, augments and enriches the other when we "come together"? What would be the relevance and value of places like The Substation, where casual "hanging out" seems to be at the heart of creativity and development?

So aside from global pandemics, what else has changed since 1995? Listening to members of the arts community reminisce about the early years of The Substation would suggest that the 1990s must have seemed like a brave new world in Singapore, no longer just the repressive industrial society of a developmentally obsessed nation-in-the-making, but a global city starting to conceive of the arts as a necessary feature of "world-class" cosmopolitanism powering its next phase of economic development and growth. How apt that a power station should be turned into a pioneering experimental arts centre, initiated and pursued through ground-up energies.

Since then, one might say with some broadly acceptable justification that the arts scene has flourished with more funding, infrastructure, urban zoning, arts companies, audiences, educational institutions, international collaborations and global visibility. One might even get away with saying that censorship has become less heavy-handed in global-city Singapore.

But the 1990s were by no means a straightforward tale of cultural-

In a post-Covid-19 world, spacing also comes to mean something else when we recalibrate social distancing tolerance levels and worry about viral superspreading of the kind held in far greater awe than the virality of social media.

political liberalisation and a flowering of the arts. Some of you will remember novelist Catherine Lim and academic Bilveer Singh being publicly reprimanded for fairly innocent claims made in the media; or American academic Christopher Lingle fleeing Singapore to avoid being sued for contempt of court; or American teenage vandal Michael Fay given strokes of the cane in spite of formal appeals by his President; or the government banning artists and proscribing entire artforms such as forum theatre and performance art.

The 1990s were a politically interesting decade. In 1990, Goh Chok Tong and his 2G team had just taken over the leadership mantle. There was a general feeling of nervousness about whether the new generation of leaders could live up to the achievements of Lee Kuan Yew's heroic founding leadership. Reflecting that nervousness perhaps were the results of the 1991 general elections, when the People's Action Party (PAP) lost four seats to the opposition, their worst result since independence.

Twenty years later, in the general election of 2011, the PAP were once again confronted by an even worse result. They lost six seats. Singaporeans talked about a "new normal", indicating the possibility of new political inroads for the opposition in a more competitive democracy for Singapore. Although the PAP was able to recover much of its lost ground in the next general election in 2015, the year that Lee Kuan Yew died and Singapore celebrated its 50th year of independence, there is today still a feeling of unease about 4G, the next generation of PAP leaders. In such an insecure political climate, much like in the 1990s, we have also seen some eerily repressive moves. POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act)—the anti-fake news law—is probably the most spectacular example of this. In practice, how will the arts and artists be affected by this?

A lot of people have done a lot of work for this conference. They deserve sincere thanks. I want to thank my co-chair Alan Oei and members of the steering committee Terence Chong, Kathleen Ditzig, T. Sasitharan, and Tan Tarn How. I want to thank The Substation Board of Directors and its tireless staff, especially Karine Tan. And I want to thank all moderators and speakers.

It now gives me immense pleasure to declare the conference open.

Panel 1: The Making of Spaces (State and Policy)

CHAIRPERSON
SPEAKERS

: KENNETH PAUL TAN
: ALVIN TAN, AUDREY WONG, AUDREY YUE, ARUN MAHIZHNNAN

EDITOR'S NOTE

Arun Mahizhnnan's paper was not delivered at the conference as the speaker could not make the event due to public health measures. The paper published here is the text he had prepared. Audrey Yue made a presentation but withdrew her paper for this publication.

Is There Space for Diversity?

by Alvin Tan

Good morning, everyone. Thank you to The Substation for organising this conference and for having me on the panel.

The title of this presentation, *The Making of Spaces (State and Policy): Is There Space for Diversity?* is something I've been asking for the past few years. My reading of the situation is that diversity in Singapore seems to be eradicated to the point where we've got only manageable plurality. The range of differences we have here is tolerable and non-threatening, a kind of selective diversity to show our vibrancy to the world and for the Singapore Tourism Board to bring in the tourists. Even if the government recognises the multicultural in Singapore, it is not doing enough. It does not allow the true interaction of difference.

In our work [at The Necessary Stage (TNS)], we try to push for more space for diverse views. Now, I want to show a short clip of a collaboration between TNS and Drama Box, a play called *Underclass*. This play ran into some difficulties because it questioned meritocracy, and had to be vetted by the Ministry of Home Affairs. It was eventually allowed to be staged with an advisory of "16 (some mature content)".

In this clip, we see a prime minister giving this speech



Image courtesy The Necessary Stage
Photo by Tuckys Photography

in 2040. In his earlier days as a minister, he encountered the poor in his constituency.

[Video excerpt:]

Desmond: Every year, at the National Day Rally speech, we give examples of Singaporeans who have succeeded beyond expectations. We celebrate these people because, from humble and challenging beginnings, they have risen to the top. Today I'd like to give a different example. Meet Desmond Olsen. He grew up in a landed property at Sunset Way. Even before he was born, his mother played classical music for him. He was born in a private hospital. He had a maid to take care of him and access to all kinds of enrichment classes before he even started primary school. He went to a top primary school—because his father went to that same school, he was given priority over other kids. By the time he was 13 years old, he was more advanced—mentally, emotionally, intellectually—than 90% of his peers.

This is our meritocracy, the meritocracy we are so proud of, the meritocracy we are so convinced by or deluded by, that every year we shamelessly parade those who have succeeded in spite of this system, not because of it. If you think that poverty in Singapore is a myth, a fiction, then I invite everyone here to spend a day at these neighbourhoods. Walk around these blocks, visit the homes, talk to the residents. The people in these flats do not have choices, they do not have access to a lot of things we do.

What are people in positions of privilege willing to give up? 10% of the combined salaries of the people in this room can help eradicate poverty in Singapore. I am willing to contribute that 10% every month. Are you?

In this play, there is a prime minister who is aware of the flaws of meritocracy and has taken steps to address it. But there is also ambiguity here. After the show, the audience was divided. Some were saying, "Wow you humanised the future Prime Minister and gave us hope, that's your strategy, isn't it?" Others said, "The leopard doesn't change its spots. What you're saying is he shows he's enlightened, but he still resorts to charity as a way to address the inequalities, when throughout the whole play, we have

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

