

The ‘Real’ World, the Interdisciplinary Arts and the Community: An Interview with the Artistic Director of The Substation – A Home for the Arts

Noor Effendy Ibrahim, interviewed by C. J. W.-L. Wee

What would you say are the present central goals of the historically first independent Singapore art centre, The Substation – A Home for the Arts?

I have been Artistic Director of The Substation since February 2010. The key goal is clear: to continue and develop the legacy of this centre¹ through artistic strategies and methods that are sensitive to and aware of the current and immediate cultural, political and economic contexts that exist. The Substation aims to provide a rigorous and safe space for the development and research into art practices that have a primarily interdisciplinary orientation – in short, the aim is to be a venue where dialogues occur and artistic curation and creation can transpire.

It is apparent, though, that the physical infrastructure of The Substation is ageing, and that sufficient funding is also another key concern. So, a major issue is the re-thinking of how to make the available resources within The Substation itself good enough such that challenging artwork is possible, and so that the imagination of the larger arts community – the larger public, government agencies and possible funders – can be fired up to comprehend our commitment to interdisciplinary arts creation at The Substation, whatever the limitations and constraints of the moment.

A particular challenge that we are face today lies in the education, the nurturing and the sustaining of critically informed and engaged audiences who will not be fearful of the artistic experimentation and exploration that form the backbone of interdisciplinary practice. One of the ways we attempt to address this is through designing spaces and opportunities for artists and artistic research that grapple with the need for the active participation and involvement of the audience/public in artistic practice *not* as consumers of art, but as integral partners and collaborators in the artistic process. It is also important to reach out and work with ‘non-arts’ communities and sectors of society. In the long run, the hope would be that such possible partnerships, collaboration and outreach are possible for all relevant parties related to the arts so that art is not seen as a product for consumption, but instead can become a tool for dialogue and for possible change in the ‘real’ world.

Tell us a bit about your own artistic background and development and how they may have contributed towards your goal as Artistic Director of The Substation.

¹ [Editor’s note:] In relation to the ‘legacy’ question that Effendy raises, The Substation website offers this self-description of this legacy: ‘In the first five years of The Substation’s history, under the visionary artistic direction of founder Kuo Pao Kun [1939-2002], The Substation was a pioneer arts space in Singapore. It played a key part in almost every arts event or development of significance. The Substation’s founding coincided with a burst of activity in Singapore such as the emergence of professional theatre companies, new writing in theatre, and a new generation of visual artists inspired by new practices and ideas promoted by artists and groups such as the Artists Village. Experimentation, across all the art forms, was the order of the day. These artists found a congenial home in The Substation which encouraged them to experiment, to try, and most importantly, to fail – and to continue. [...] From the start, The Substation has been committed to nurturing “local voices” in Singapore arts and culture, and supporting diversity and depth in the arts. [...] The first multi-disciplinary, thematic events were held at The Substation including The Tree Celebration, which featured installations, mime performances, theatre performances, readings; and Pao Kun’s “Memories” seasons which explored tradition and heritage from a personal point of view, through art. The “Memories” seasons developed into The Substation’s annual festival SeptFest which was notable for the seminal arts conferences that brought together artists, critics, cultural commentators, civil society activists, and the public’ (‘The Substation: About Us: History’ <<http://www.substation.org/about-us/history/>> accessed 6 June 2012).

In 1990-91, I was a member of the second cohort that studied in the pioneering General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'Advanced'-level Theatre Studies and Drama (TSD) programme at the Victoria Junior College (VJC). The teachers involved then were Rey Buono and Alan Austin. This entry into theatre studies was accidental, as I was initially sent by the Ministry of Education to study at the Catholic Junior College. However, I auditioned for and gained admission to VJC – but for non-artistic reasons; my GCE 'Ordinary'-level results were in fact somewhat mediocre, and VJC was (and is) a highly competitive junior college. In fact, despite being accepted into the TSD programme, I resisted the syllabus because I had real difficulties and problems in understanding the English literary and theatre texts and the Western-centric discourse of the programme. I also could not find any empathetic, open and critical space in the Malay-language syllabus, which relied heavily on a Malaysian artistic canon and Malaysian cultural concerns, and as such severely neglected the conflicted situation of the contemporary Malay in Singapore. I protested – and failed my 'A' levels. From then on, up until 2000, I rejected English-language theatre and started seeking, designing and creating possible immaterial and physical spaces for a contemporary Malay-language theatre and art.

I directed, wrote and produced my first play *Haidah* (this was the name of the protagonist in the play) in 1991 as an independent student work (one not approved by VJC) for the annual Malay Theatre Festival (discontinued since the mid-1990s) of the Festival Teater Remaja (Youth Theatre Festival), held at the old Drama Centre on Fort Canning Hill. (That venue no longer exists, of course – a part of the inexorable movement of Progress in Singapore.) Some found the play controversial. The event introduced me to the Singapore Malay Theatre community. As a result, I started to work with Teater Kami and Teater Artistik and in the process finally found a very safe haven for experimentation in Malay-language theatre in Teater Ekamatra, which was then under the direction of the husband-and-wife team of Lut Ali and Rubie Lazim, who were also the founders of Teater Ekamatra.

It was this time that I began to find space to work at The Substation. I wrote and directed my second and again controversial work *Anak Melayu* (Malay Child), and had it presented at The Substation, in the then-Guinness Theatre, by Teater Kami in 1992. This play dealt with the social dilemma faced by Malay delinquents at that point in Singapore.

During the time I served my compulsory National Service stretch of two-and-a-half years, I stayed in touch with Teater Ekamatra, where I met and started working with interdisciplinary theatre practitioners and artists such as Rafa'at Hamzah, Adi Yadoni, Zamberi A. Patah, Khairul Anwar Salleh, Art Fazil and Zai Kuning. These artists introduced me to the performance art community and to discourses on performance and performativity. This was the juncture when my text-based, Malay-language theatre scripts evolved into a more physical art form, and I also began applying interdisciplinary approaches to art creation. The latter was totally liberating, and helped me resolve my suspicions and distrust of both the English and Malay languages.

It was during this time of working with Teater Ekamatra and early experimentation with performance art that I also started to meet other key persons who added on my understanding of what the 'artistic' could be; these persons included Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu, Juliana Yasin, Koh Nguang How, Vincent Leow, T. Sasitharan and of course the late Kuo Pao Kun, among others. With artists like Tang, I was introduced to the artists involved with the collective called The Artist Village.²

² [Editor's note:] For more information on the artistic collective, so important in the development of the contemporary arts in Singapore, see Kwok Kian Woon and Lee Wen (eds.), *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009).

I had read Greek dramatic texts – separate from the actual TSD curriculum – during my years in VJC, and this engagement led to what is now a long-term fixation (perhaps even fetish) in my art practice with a desired violence through sex that could reinforce consciousness in the body. I researched into and then developed the themes and the issues related to the solitary and vulnerable Malay body in the contemporary space of Singapore.

When I was a member of Teater Ekamatra (1992-1996³), this exploration was undertaken through the reduction of the Malay language into obscure minimal dialogues; the suppression and oppression of the limited modern/contemporary Malay language, somehow making it devoid of elegance and the opulence of poetry; and working through how present social, cultural and political ‘reality’ could somehow constrain and negate the truth found within the body. I felt that language censors, language suppresses, language disguises, and language could deny and negate the truth of the moment for the performer/actor in the performance space. The Malay body is apparently detached from and separated from the Malay voice, a worrying disconnect...

My feeling is that the physical body is able to respond directly to socio-political reality truthfully, yet the various voices that could emerge from the Malay body (or bodies) are muted, and instead we have the one defining voice of authority. The Malay body is made solitary, and eventually becomes voiceless in contemporary space, trapped as it is by frustrating self-definitions and external definitions; eventually it enters into a sort of state of hyper-consciousness where language has totally failed and is no longer needed.

The engagement with the body triggered experimentation with designing the performance space through set design in the initial years of my working with Malay-language scripts. These experiments eventually evolved and developed into S&M-kinetic-inspired machines powered by the human performer’s body that I worked with during my Bachelor of Fine Arts years in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and my Master of Fine Arts course in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) in Singapore. These experiments entailed the design and construction of actual functioning machines to be attached or worn on the body, and function as either an extension of the existing body parts, the introduction of a new part to an ill-equipped body, or to restrict and deform the body forcing it to unlearn and relearn what it once knew as natural behaviour. Thus, in a reaction to being muted, the Malay body is then forced to speak only through the installation of built architectural structures around and on the body itself; the structures either extend other forms of expression, or trap the body and through that entrapment, force the body to react and therefore to speak in an ‘other’ and more multiple manner.

From 2001, upon my return from Chicago, I rejoined Teater Ekamatra. I was also invited to be their Artistic Director. I accepted this invitation and held the appointment from 2001-2006. At the same time, when time permitted, I further developed both solo and collective performance work that continued to explore the design of machines that could be incorporated as extensions to or as the voice of the body that had become mute, or voiceless.

During my tenure as Artistic Director, I articulated Ekamatra’s artistic mission in this manner: ‘Teater Ekamatra seeks to give voice and visibility to the Malay/human condition and experience with regard to the new contemporary local and global possibilities.’ The objective was to locate, to find or to create a bridge on which the Malay and the rest of the world could meet and ‘bleed’ into each other. This meant, at the same time, encouraging the diverse others of the ‘rest of the world’ to bleed into one another as well.

³ I was a temporary co-Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, with Zai, Rafa’at and Zamber, from 1995-1996.

Part of the goal was to reclaim the Malay language from the constraints of present cultural, political and economic agendas and institutions and to liberate it to become uncouth, raw and wild, so that it can be the rightful extension and expression of the Malay body that – at the same time – would no longer be ‘Malay’. My own artistic work and research of course dealt with the opposite: the exploration of the body as an object in which my voice is absent and the free body is replaced by machinery.

The goal for the liberation of the Malay voice also entailed pushing the Malay language to confront other languages and to understand and to learn how to still speak in Malay while yet allowing it to be immediately understandable and recognizable without translation. And it is here that the question arose of how to translate the living language and the life it represents into physical space rather than only spoken space – and theatre was the realm for this embodiment. Gradually, under my leadership, the company began to partner and collaborate with non-Malay artists and theatre practitioners to help evolve and expand the Malay language beyond present social or cultural constraints.

Today, as the Artistic Director of The Substation, I am afraid of my own practice: I am afraid that no one understands my artistic language. I am afraid of being fatally misunderstood.

Can you share with us a little more as the nature of the *interdisciplinary* that is the goal of The Substation? Does your own artistic practice have a bearing or offer a specific perspective on the question of the interdisciplinary in artistic creation?

Broadly speaking, I am committed to the question of communication: the question of community is linked to the practice of art, and the presentation of art is not to be a goal in itself. Presentation is not the end, and it is never the end of art. Art is not a product. Communication is connected with language and the manipulation of language, and this process of communication is not of learning, but indeed of unlearning – of getting past the present constraints in expression. This situation then leads us in turn to the vocabulary or the language of interdisciplinary: to unlearn present forms of limiting definitions through confrontation, through collision. This confrontation and collision are achieved through the stubborn insistence of being inclusive, of being diverse. The spaces for an emerging commonality of spaces for confrontations and collisions for different communities can be formed at and within The Substation through various platforms, programmes and avenues – and the independent arts centre can also be a locale for chance cultural and artistic encounters.

Simply put, we hope to make The Substation a meeting place for the known and the unknown, for the familiar and the unfamiliar – for the points of intersection and collision that form the very heart of interdisciplinary practice and community building. We unlearn together. There should never be a never dumbing down of thought or art: there should only be safe spaces where people and communities are welcomed in to engage and to confront, and even to refuse or decline to the need to engage or to confront. The ability and power to choose and act independently, free of pressure, through artistic practice and strategies matters; and also important is that the artist can unlearn who or what he/she may be through a confrontation and collision with the varied communities who might be brought into The Substation.

What is the connection of the artistic agenda that you articulate to the larger arts context in Singapore?

The Substation is currently streamlining and re-structuring its artistic programme. Apart from disciplines such as sound and music, performance (broadly taken as theatre, dance, live art and so forth), visual art and film, we now have literary art and design as artistic areas we can include for

rigorous creative incubation. The focus – as might be expected from what I have said thus far – is on the creative process, which is so important now that the national artistic goals seem to be oriented towards the presentation of ‘final’ products, with the consequence that artistic process becomes invisible. The clearest manifestation of our intent is the new Associate Artist Research Programme (AARP). This is a two-year research residency for local artists whose work have firm interdisciplinary dimensions and who are also conscious of the need for a larger community for artwork.

The Substation has always had resident artists, from Zai Kuning and In Source Theatre in the 1990s, to over 50 contemporary artists participating in the previous Associate Artist Programme from 2000-2010. The Substation provided space and general ‘infrastructural’ support such as funding assistance, curatorial intervention, and technical assistance for artists seeking room to undertake the necessary research and development to engage with the questions they had at hand for the type of artwork they sought to create.

The present AARP continues to provide the above, but with a twist. The programme seeks arts practitioners (a term we flexibly define to include to include educators, social or cultural workers and academics) with on-going research that recognises, identifies with , or even requires the non-artist or the less artistically inclined community (or communities) as integral collaborators or partners to help facilitate or otherwise generate his/her artistic research process.

The hope is that such forms of engaged art research and collaboration in Singapore will strongly contribute to the much-needed rethinking of art not as a directly effective and necessary tool for positive change. We hope that the realm of art will be removed from the realm of art-market speak, and instead be transposed to a realm where art becomes a living language for the so-called ‘common’ person – the *everyman* and *everywoman*. This does *not* mean that we think that the current AARP will in some simplistic way save the world. Far from it – for we know that such work is risky and may fail; art can fail – but such possible failure is an essential part of artistic process and investigation.

Those in our present AARP who embody some of the hopes I have mentioned are the following:

- Berlin-based choreographer Ming Poon’s work on developing a performative and directorial vocabulary for the visible and the invisible by partnering with persons with HIV, rather than with organisations or NGOs that may work with social concerns.
- Conceptual visual artist Zaki Razak’s proposal to examine how our sense of hearing contributes to the creation of meaning and the way space can be navigated. Zaki will be working with both visual-artistic and hearing-impaired communities, and also with musicians from the indie scene.

Another objective of the AARP is that we also desire to educate state agencies dealing with arts funding that larger realms of art practice can be opened up in other sections of the nation apart from the more obvious arts production with clear economic consequences – and that such arts practices can be rigorous, and not just be socially touchy-feely type projects.

Finally, what is like for you to ‘follow’ in the late Kuo Pao Kun’s leadership footsteps at The Substation – A Home for the Arts? Is that enabling or does it represent a weight – a burden, perhaps – that’s hard to bear?

Honestly and sincerely, I can say that I am full of fear. I fear disappointing in the management of this Home that many have inhabited, and still continue to inhabit.

Zai [Kuning] has asked me if I see the Artistic Director's position as a job. I said to him then that it was, indeed, in large part, a job. However, I said that to him then not because I believed it to be true, but because I was trying to contain my fear and to build up the courage to engage with and confront what is ahead.

I could never conceive The Substation to be as an artistic or intellectual burden. I have in a sense lived in it too long to see it that way. To me it is Home. It is familiar, safe; and I see the challenge of leading it as a way of promising not only Pao Kun, but also Sasi, Audrey and Weng,⁴ and, in addition, the many arts practitioners and communities who need The Substation that I will continue to maintain The Substation as an 'alive' and breathing space.

*A recipient of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) Singapore Foundation Culture Award 2007, **Noor Effendy Ibrahim** has served as a member of the Singapore National Arts Council Board from 2004 to 2006 (seventh term), and currently sits as a Board Member of the Singapore Film Commission (2010-2012) and the Malay Heritage Foundation (2010-2011), as well as on several other consultative panels and committees. Currently the Artistic Director of The Substation – A Home for the Arts, Singapore's first independent contemporary art centre, Effendy has also served as the Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, a Singapore-based, contemporary Malay Theatre company, from 2001-2006. An interdisciplinary artist, Effendy has created solo and ensemble art projects and performances in several countries, and has worked with Teater Kami, Teater Ekamatra, Teater Artistik, The Actors Studio (Malaysia), Cake Theatre, spell#7, Maya Dance Theatre and Five Arts Centre (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), among other arts groups and collectives. Having completed his 'O' Levels at Raffles Institution (1986-1989; Singapore) and 'A' Levels (second cohort Theatre Studies and Drama programme) at Victoria Junior College (1990-1991; Singapore), Effendy went on to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1997-2000). Effendy then obtained a Master of Arts in Contemporary Practice from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts-University of Huddersfield (2006-2007; Singapore/UK); he was awarded the 2006 NAFA Scholarship, and was awarded the NAFA Best Graduate Award for Visual Arts upon graduation*

⁴ [Editor's note:] T. Sasitharan, Audrey Wong and Lee Weng Choy were all former Artistic Directors of The Substation.