

Full Report on the IPS-NGS-SAM Roundtable on
A Year of Living Precariously:
Artists on Surviving the Pandemic
(part of the IPS-NGS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series)



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Cover photo:

Circus duo performers Mr Edwin Ong and Mr Jonathan Goh, popularly known as The Annoying Brothers, engaged in a juggling act as part of the Singapore Night Festival in 2017. Photo credit: The Annoying Brothers Facebook.

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Executive Summary

A difficult, even disastrous, year for many under the shadow of COVID-19 has been one no less so for artists. The arts community has struggled financially, artistically, and emotionally with the looming prospect of the pandemic stretching for a few more years. How have artists managed to weather this storm, if at all? What adaptations have they made, and which have or have not worked? What other lessons have they learnt that will be useful for continuing to make their way through the tough times ahead? To what extent have the government's responses helped, and in what ways should they be changed? This is a report of a roundtable discussion organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in collaboration with National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) on 3 March 2021. Titled, "A Year of Living Precariously: Artists on Surviving the Pandemic", the roundtable looked at the ways in which the practices of artists and arts groups have changed over the year and how they have tried to adapt to the changes. It also looked at some of the lessons that they have learnt and the ways in which they can prepare to effectively handle future crises or similar challenges.¹

Six presenters from various disciplines and a respondent from the National Arts Council (NAC) addressed the questions above. Over 70 participants from artists to arts groups, creatives, educators, policymakers, and other experts joined the roundtable discussion.

The presenters and respondent were:

1. Dr Danny Tan, Chief Executive Officer and Founding Artistic Director, Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd (ODT Ltd)
2. Ms Salty Xi Jie Ng, Artist
3. Mr Leslie Tan, Founding Member, T'ang Quartet
4. Ms Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai, Actor, singer, and voiceover artist
5. Mr Edmund Wee, Publisher, Epigram Books
6. Ms Raka Maitra, Co-Artistic Director, The Substation
7. Dr Alvin Tan, Director (Engagement and Participation), National Arts Council (NAC)

¹ At the time of this publication, Singapore has already eased some of its Safe Management Measures (SMMs) under the Transition Phase. For more information, visit <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19-phase-advisory>.

The presentations were followed by a half-hour discussion session, open to all participants, that was moderated by Dr Nazry Bahrawi, Senior Lecturer in the Humanities department of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).

Using our “head”, “heart” and “guts” to prepare for the new normal

Dr Danny Tan, Chief Executive Officer and Founding Artistic Director of Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd (ODT Ltd) and its dance company — Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT), spoke about how ODT Ltd used its “head, heart, and guts” to navigate through the complex situation and remain relevant in the arts and non-profit ecosystem. He explained that using the head involved aligning ODT Ltd’s priorities to focus on five key areas — arts development, capability development, audience development, content development and market development — which closely tie in with the NAC’s Strategic Arts Plan (2018–2022) as well. Next, using the heart involved actively listening to the ground as well as developing a deep engagement process with its audiences, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders. Finally, using the guts meant having to set a bold agenda in the new normal and being prepared to constantly innovate and experiment with new modes of creation, production, and service delivery for audiences. Dr Tan added that doing this was not easy as it required a great amount of tenacity, persistence, and determination to overcome the uncertainties and obstacles.

Greater care and support for the busking community

Artist Ms Salty Xi Jie Ng spoke about the challenges faced by buskers, a community, which she said, had been largely overlooked in the arts ecosystem and in policymaking. Explaining that buskers made up a unique group whose work primarily involved street performances, Ms Ng said assistance schemes such as the Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG)² were of limited use to them. Despite the NAC’s efforts in supporting busking trials at designated spaces, they were largely unsuccessful in helping these performers resume work. This was because of the Safe Management Measures (SMMs) put in place and the emphasis on cashless payments — both of which undermined the true spirit of busking. In addition, Ms Ng also said that many full-time buskers and the Buskers’ Association Singapore who could have offered valuable feedback to the NAC were excluded from the busking trials. Moving forward, she suggested that policymakers directly engage, consult and collaborate with buskers and busking associations when organising future trials given their experience and expertise. She added that there should be more efforts to collect meaningful and relevant data — especially at the qualitative level, to better

² The Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG) was a time-limited scheme that was launched on 14 April 2020 to support efforts by artists and arts organisations to present their work in digital format via digital mediums during the COVID-19 period. It is no longer available at the time of this publication.

understand the community's needs. On the topic of funding, Ms Ng stressed that the Buskers' Association Singapore should be recognised as an arts organisation and be given the necessary support by the NAC.

Leveraging opportunities in online performances

Mr Leslie Tan, Founding Member of T'ang Quartet, said many of the problems that artists experienced over the months were not solely a result of the pandemic. Rather, these were problems that have been in the arts ecosystem for a long time. The pandemic also had some silver linings, especially for musicians and composers, he said. Many artists like him often worked as teachers, and for him the transition from face-to-face to online lessons had made teaching easier, more convenient and enjoyable. As online performances start becoming more prevalent, artists would need to think about how to effectively monetise them, he said. Artists need to consider changing the structure of concert performances such as reducing the performance time, increasing the frequency of these performances, or having more shows in their homes. To do these, artists must work closely with one another and policymakers.

Coping with the loss of iconic arts spaces

Actor, singer, and voiceover artist Ms Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai spoke on the loss of iconic multi-use arts spaces such as The Substation.³ She said The Substation, together with other arts spaces like Centre 42, had provided many young artists like herself with a home to explore new ideas and projects. She also said existing art venues such as the Esplanade were far too expensive for many artists to hire. Therefore, the closure of smaller and more affordable art spaces like The Substation was a heavy blow to them. Moving forward, with the increasing number of artists and arts groups emerging from the pandemic, it is even more important to preserve existing multi-use art spaces to allow them to continue experimenting new works, she said. On the topic of government assistance, Ms Rebekah said the application process for grants often felt limiting because of the high command of English required to understand and complete the application forms. She also said that policymakers should work more closely with artists to better understand what is it that artists want to do when designing different assistance schemes so that these are relevant to them.

Helping the publishing industry survive

Mr Edmund Wee, publisher of Epigram Books, spoke about the challenges faced by his publishing company during the pandemic. Given the ambiguous nature of the publishing industry, there was much confusion on whether publishing should be seen as a form of art or business. This lack of clarity made it difficult for Epigram Books to get access to the much-needed financial support from the government. Although Epigram Books was able to successfully expand its work by opening a physical bookstore in 2019, it was not able to operate under the circuit breaker. To cope with

³ On 23 July 2021, The Substation announced that it would continue to remain open even after vacating 45 Armenian Street, which would be undergoing renovations for two years.

the loss of revenue, Epigram Books had to rely on loans and made staff pay cuts to continue its work. Although the government provided some form of assistance such as delaying repayments, he said borrowers still needed to continue paying interests, which further added to their costs. Despite the difficulties, Mr Wee said Epigram Books would publish stories of Singapore for as long as it could because such stories are important and valuable for the community.

Shifting focus on local artists and works

Ms Raka Maitra, Co-Artistic Director of The Substation, described her experience of going digital at The Substation. She said The Substation was actively looking for ways to help young artists showcase their works. It explored many new programmes such as the “Isolation” series where local artists were invited to create short films using their phones, as well as the “Theatre Triple Bill” which featured a series of performances shown over Zoom. She said despite the quality of works produced, the experiments showed that theatre was best suited for a live audience. Therefore, The Substation took the risk of showing a number of works that were currently in progress to limited groups of audience in December 2020. Ms Raka also added that despite the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, it had helped to create more focus and attention on local artists and their works. In addition, audiences and members of the arts community have started to look at the more intimate, non-commercial, and non-profitable aspects of the arts, and this should be encouraged further.

Working together with the government

Dr Alvin Tan, Director (Engagement and Participation) from the National Arts Council (NAC), provided an overview of the various support measures introduced by the government, such as the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (Sirs)⁴ to help people, including artists, affected by the pandemic. Such measures were important in not only helping workers sustain themselves but also in allowing companies to think about developing newer and more sustainable business models. The NAC will continue being a strong advocate for the arts and support the sector's recovery over the next few years, he said. This does not only include providing more grants and financial assistance but also looking at relaxing Safe Management Measures (SMMs) to allow performers to resume their work outdoors. Regarding The Substation, Dr Tan said that the NAC will continue to provide more spaces for artists and arts groups to experiment with new works, collaborate with one another and support community initiatives. Moving forward, he said artists needed to think about transformation and sustainability in light of audiences' changing consumption patterns and trends such as the shift towards online performances. They need to build on their capabilities to meet these challenges. For policymakers, it was important to adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach when thinking about the recovery of the arts sector. While existing support may help to cushion the impact of the pandemic

⁴ The application period for the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (Sirs) has closed at the time of this publication.

for the time being, a broader economic recovery is important in order for the arts sector to move forward, he said

Discussion

The main points raised during the following discussion were:

1. Although the NAC organised public consultations on a myriad of issues, younger artists were often excluded from such consultations causing them to feel alienated from the larger arts ecosystem. Speakers suggested for policymakers to make such public consultations more inclusive as well as create more avenues for younger artists to share their concerns and recommendations in the future.
2. The busking community has been largely overlooked in the broader arts ecosystem and policymaking. They are a unique community whose work cannot rely on digitalisation. Moving forward, NAC needs to re-assess on its current engagement strategies with the busking community and work closely with buskers to help them resume work.
3. The lived experiences of some lesser-known arts communities often go unheard in public conversations and discussion forums, which tend to be exclusive and academic in nature. There should be greater efforts in addressing the lived experiences of such communities.
4. There cannot be a single broad policy that can help to solve all the problems in the arts ecosystem. Policymakers and artists across various disciplines need to work together to co-create customised and individual solutions.

Introduction

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), together with National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) organised a roundtable discussion on the survival of the arts community on 3 March 2021, a year after the first COVID-19 case was reported in Singapore.

The roundtable discussion was held via a Zoom webinar and aimed to answer the following questions:

- How have artists and arts groups coped with the effects of the pandemic over the year?
- What adaptations or changes have they made to their existing practices?
- How successful have such adaptations or changes been?
- What are some of the lessons that the pandemic has taught artists and arts groups?
- What is the way forward for artists and arts groups in the post-pandemic world?

Over 70 participants, including artists, arts groups, creatives, policymakers, and other experts, attended the roundtable discussion. The roundtable was chaired by Dr Nazry Bahrawi, Senior Lecturer at the Humanities department in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). In his opening remarks, he talked about how the pandemic had led to many artists and arts groups reflecting on their identity, value, and nature of their work in society.

Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Society and Culture department of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Ms Michelle Goh, Director (Planning) at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM) provided the introductory remarks for the roundtable. Dr Soon spoke about the key objectives and developments of the IPS-NGS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series since its beginning in 2015. Ms Goh spoke about the challenges SAM faced during the initial phase of the pandemic where it had to cancel existing projects and programmes because of the Safe Management Measures (SMMs) that had to be put in place. However, she said that it also allowed SAM to explore different ways of engaging with the arts community and imagine new possibilities moving forward.

Six presenters from various disciplines and a respondent from the National Arts Council (NAC) delivered their presentations in the following order:

1. Dr Danny Tan, Chief Executive Officer and Founding Artistic Director, Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd (ODT Ltd)
2. Ms Salty Xi Jie Ng, Artist
3. Mr Leslie Tan, Founding Member, T'ang Quartet
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The presentations were followed by a half-hour discussion session that was open to all participants and moderated by Dr Nazry.

Speaker 1: Dr Danny Tan, Chief Executive Officer and Founding Artistic Director, Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd (ODT Ltd)

Dear colleagues from the Arts and Culture community, ladies, and gentlemen, a very good morning! It's my pleasure to share with you some of my thoughts on how Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd (ODT Ltd) and its dance company, Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT), have braved through the global COVID-19 pandemic since last year. To begin my presentation, please allow me to share with you a glimpse of our artistic direction and choreography at ODT between 1991 and 2019, allowing you to sense our art and passion [Video Presentation 1: ODT Classic 1999–2019].

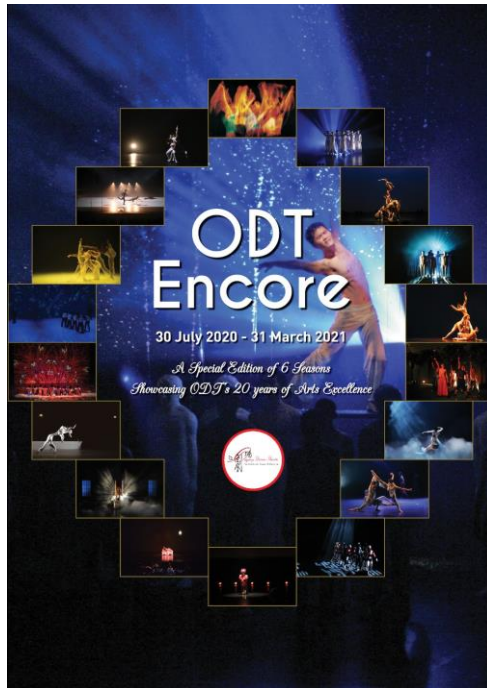
To upkeep a professional and independent Singaporean arts organisation has been an uphill task. Sustaining arts excellence in the non-profit arts sector while serving the diverse communities has proven to be challenging, as we are constantly exposed to the times of paradox, ambiguity, and unpredictability. To survive and advance our arts with creativity and innovation calls for foresight and conviction to make change. With a global pandemic like COVID-19, it is of paramount importance for us to use our “head”, “heart” and “guts” in these vulnerable and complex times. For championing a new, holistic and productive arts outfit, one must be prepared to readily respond to the rapid shift in attitude towards arts, social and political circumstances, economic conditions, and technological advancement, as well as the effects brought by globalisation. ODT Ltd has gone through a year of deep reflection, reconciling our 20 years of contributions in serving the diverse sectors locally, and having positioned Singapore globally. We have harnessed our capacity to our best ability, building a unique organisation that rejuvenates and grows. In 2020, COVID-19 came at a time that coincided with our reset. Since then, we have been championing the new ODT Arts, Culture and Services to follow closely to our mission: “Inspiring Lives, Celebrating Moments, Excellence in Dance and Arts”. I will now share with you a glimpse of ODT Arts, Culture and Services through its six divisions, which are our core work as a charity with the status of Institute of Public Character [Video Presentation 2: ODT Ltd's Corporate Profile].

As we reset for the new normal, we believe in setting our expectations and goals right. We are determined to continue our mission with boldness and purpose, reframing our boundaries of works in the creative arts and culture sector, as well as finding new relevance in the entire non-profit ecosystem. Bringing in creativity and innovation into our new framework is key to ensure our positive growth in many areas, in particularly, artistic endeavours.

ODT Ltd has rolled out its five-year Strategic Plan from 2020–2024, focusing on areas such as Arts Development, Capability Development, Audience Development, Content Development and Market Development. We have used our “head” earnestly by carving our priorities, aligning closely to the National Arts Council's Strategic Arts Plan (2018–2022).

We are always listening to the ground by having deep engagement process with the diverse communities we serve. The direct and exhaustive works that we have with our audiences, beneficiaries and stakeholders in our extensive programmes and services have allowed us to feel their “pulse”. These reality checks have allowed us to inject new strategies in building and re-designing our arts experience in order to engage them deeply and proficiently. With our concerted efforts to optimise our limited funds, space, resources and manpower, we have realised that good outcomes are often being generated through long-term sincerity and commitment. The value of our essential works cannot be measured solely by grants or financial gains, or even subjective judgements such as “quality”, “perceptions” and “assumptions”. It is the positive effects set on our audience and beneficiaries through “life” and “living” experiences, which may take longer time for us to build and justify. Trust is what we have to earn with our long-term conviction, professional skills and talents. With safe-distancing measures in place, though we might not be able to be as “physical” as before, COVID-19 has given us the much-needed time and space to realign and restart our engagement process with our stakeholders and beneficiaries. By grounding the core essence in human relations firmly, hybrid mode of operation in arts offerings, programmes and services has been the new norm for all of us. Working truthfully with our “heart” is fundamental to win trust from the people we serve. It is also the privilege for us as artists to do “good” with clear conscious and authentic intention.

The current slide introduces you to some of the new initiatives that ODT Ltd had launched in 2020. *ODT Encore* is a special edition of six seasons to showcase ODT’s 20 years of arts excellence, with several books being published. *ODT CAN!* is a campaign under *ODT Cares* to enable and encourage stakeholders and partners and fellow Singaporeans to do good and support the communities around us. *ODT TV* is a brand-new initiative to feature interviews, dialogues and commentaries of leaders across all sectors.



ODT CAN!
COLLABORATE • ATTEND • NOURISH

ODT CAN!
In the present time of COVID-19, we are all affected in many ways in various parts of the world. We believe that each of us can make a difference to others in many ways. Through ODT CAN!, an initiative of ODT Cares, we hope to enable and encourage partners, stakeholders, and fellow Singaporeans to do good and support the communities around us. Let's unite for "Giving Lives, Celebrating Good".

ODT CARES
ODT Cares, a division of Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd, strives to provide both the general public and the disadvantaged community a stimulating platform to enhance their lives through dance & arts. ODT Cares employs the aesthetics & performance qualities of arts (dance) to provide preventive and developmental services that have benefited the community with varied profile needs. ODT Cares has partnered and extended its services to numerous Voluntary Welfare Organisations & Charitable Organisations.

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Collaborate
We COLLABORATE with partners to do good

Attend
We ATTEND to the call to do good

Nourish
We NOURISH the souls to do good

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Campaign posters of *ODT Encore* (left) and *ODT CAN!* (right) that were launched by ODT Ltd to stay relevant and engage in various community initiatives. Photo courtesy of ODT Ltd.

ODT TV
A BRAND NEW INITIATIVE!

A brand new initiative of ODT Ltd to feature interviews, dialogues & commentaries of leaders across all sectors. These series provide unique industrial insights, accompanied with global perspectives, promoting better understanding of our world today.

- INSPIRE SERIES**
To feature new insights & perspectives of global leaders, be it their successes or challenges in specific topics.
- IMPACT SERIES**
To promote conversations amongst global leaders, surrounding knowledge pertaining to life, passion & ideology.
- IGNITE SERIES**
To profile interesting stories of people, organisations and travels, which move, motivate and marvel people.

Contact Us
www.odysseydance theatre ltd.com

Who are We?
Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd is Singapore's premier arts (dance) organization with IPC charity status. With the vision & ambition of its works exhibiting utmost commitment to professionalism & innovation since 1999, it delivers comprehensive arts, culture & services in diverse scales that have impacted lives in the arts, education, social, creative, corporate & global sectors, reaching thousands of recipients annually.

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Campaign poster of *ODT TV* — a new initiative to feature interviews with key leaders across various sectors to provide a deeper understanding on key local and global developments. Photo courtesy of ODT Ltd.

ODT Ltd commits to inspire people from all walks of life with its programme direction for the five years between 2020 and 2024. Programmes at ODT Ltd are specially designed to benefit different communities through its six diversified divisions. Guided by the three principles: Exquisite, Exponential and Elaborate — our multi-levelled programming hopes to engage our participants in the best possible ways through ODT Ltd's extensive hosting platforms and channels.

This slide shares with you our six different festivals, reaching the mass in diverse sectors, which we have programmed for our current financial year.

We need the “guts” to set bold agenda for the new normal in these most challenging times when physical interaction is being strongly discouraged. With strong foundation in programme development for the last 20 years, we are blessed to augment a new, purposeful and comprehensive strategic programming as we reset. Luck is with us! We take pride in operating ODT and ODT Ltd differently from the stereotyped dance company outfit or arts organisation operational mode. We constantly seek to innovate and bring change to our programme and service delivery not just for arts' sake, but for Singapore and Singaporeans. We believe that we need to have the tenacity, persistence, and the ability to overcome obstacles that get in our way.

By now, you would have noticed that I have presented my slides with Return of Investment (ROI) in mind. What is the ROI for an arts charitable organisation or a dance company?

In conclusion, ODT Ltd has to remain authentic and inspire trust. We take pride in what we do and have set very high standards in our work. We exercise our leadership qualities, empowering Singaporeans and associates and artists to chart the unknown waters. We continue to innovate, transform, grow, rise to expectation, adapt to the increased complexity of execution and global interdependence. Let time reveal the truth and tell our story. Let the reality, concrete evidences and facts to substantiate our vision, foresight and decision-making. The understanding of our challenges in this arts paradox is no longer who is right or wrong, whose responsibility it is, or who should be funded adequately. Perhaps we should be focused on the question: In whose interest we care to serve best?

To trace our works for two decades, simply log on to ODT Media⁵, which allows you to get ODT comprehensive online resources at anytime, anywhere. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our government, stakeholders, partners and supporters for their continuous support and kindness. Lastly, thank you Tarn How and IPS for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts on this platform.

Thank you!

⁵ <http://www.odysseydancetheatreltd.com/odt-media/>.

Speaker 2: Salty Xi Jie Ng, Artist

Hi, everyone. First, thank you very much to the organisers for inviting me to speak at this panel. I am humbled to be given this space to discuss my views. Late last year, via an artist residency at Buangkok Square mall organised by the NAC, I found myself being a shopkeeper managing an alternative economy stall with hundreds of second-hand items. I regularly interacted with “die-hard” Buangkok participants whom I call “legendary customers”. I was investigating intimacy, connection and alternative economy in a mall during a global pandemic.

Over five months, I was immersed in their lives — hearing about their hoarding habits, children, courtship, and tea dance days. I could not have imagined a better COVID-19 time in Singapore — an island and city without huge expanses of nature — than to be snuggled in a fluorescent-lit mall retail unit with new friends, all dreaming together of passing the pandemic together, and surrounded by second-hand items that people were free to take home. I had a positive experience at this residency at Buangkok Square, part of the community residency arts scheme — a NAC collaboration that allowed me the freedom to develop my practice within a community setting and for that, I am thankful.



Interior of the alternative economy stall inside Buangkok Square mall where second-hand items were displayed for people to take home. Photo courtesy of Ms Salty Xi Jie Ng.

It has been almost a year since the pandemic hit. I was working as an Artist in Residence at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth in the US. I flew home abruptly last month leaving behind an apartment full of things. I have had to learn to be present with my life here, to nurture connections after being partially away for several years, to relearn my place in the arts ecosystem, and to ask questions like: How does socially engaged art or relational art function during a pandemic? What are the sorts of intimacies that get lost when people cannot be together in person or are masked? How is my practice relevant and responsible towards the most pressing issues of today? How have we as artists arrived at the announced closure of The Substation? I have been lucky enough to have received numerous income-generating opportunities for art-making during the pandemic such as an artist residency at the Singapore Art Museum, which I am currently in the midst of. For all that, I am immensely grateful given the general situation and the struggles of many of my peers. Hence, I would like to use most of my time today to give much needed attention and care to busking — a practice and community that has been left out of these roundtable discussions and which seldom lends itself to discourse within these platforms that are considered more academic, critical and exclusive. This is despite it being an art form that reaches bigger audiences.

Busking is close to my heart. I consider myself a busking advocate, having spent time intimately with busking communities, busking a little bit myself, and making *Singapore Minstrel*, a feature film on busking, in 2015. I talked to several buskers as well as the Buskers' Association Singapore to find out how to speak more deeply on this subject today. Any questions or comments about busking made later during the discussion will be passed back to the Buskers' Association Singapore and other buskers.

I would like to invite everyone to hold the following questions in mind as I speak. When was the last time you saw a busker? What memories do you have of buskers in Singapore? Are buskers here adequately and equally recognised as artists, albeit a different sort, even within the arts community? What is the relationship between love and art policymaking?

When the pandemic hit and busking was not allowed, many full or part-time buskers were badly affected. Those who were able rallied to together on the Singapore Buskers Facebook page to update and encourage each other. They tried to apply for the Self-Employed Person's Income Relief to partial success and tried digital busking via their own social media platforms. In the last year, *SCAPE tried to help buskers with digital busking equipment and platforms, but success was very limited. The NAC, I am sure, like many national arts departments around the world, has faced unprecedented challenges responding to the pandemic. Last year, it introduced a new Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA)⁶ and a Digital Presentation

⁶ The Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA) was a time-limited scheme that was launched on 16 March 2020 to help artists including self-employed persons (SEPs) and arts organisations upskill and grow their capabilities through training programmes in Singapore. It is no longer available at the time of this publication.

Grant for the Arts (DPG)⁷. If I may offer some thoughts on the DPG in relation to buskers — it is not relevant to who buskers are as people and should not be continually positioned as an antidote. Many buskers do not fit administrative moulds, which is why they chose to busk for full or partial income. They are not artists who apply for grants or people for whom contemporary art discourse means much. They are artists who go on the streets. Similarly, artists who live within contemporary art discourses and who apply for grants tend not to be those who go on the streets. Both are unique groups and their respective needs during the pandemic should be examined separately and accordingly.

On that note, in December last year, the NAC hurriedly rolled out a busking trial at *SCAPE and Clarke Quay to test the feasibility of busking during the pandemic. The cashless mode of payment was supposed to be encouraged and not mandatory, but when buskers showed up, some were told it was compulsory. QR codes printed were small and affected takings, as well as resulted in audiences having to go closer to scan the codes, defeating the purpose of Safe Management Measures such as fence poles that made buskers feel caged. Wee Toon Hee, who has been busking for 15 years, wrote to *The Straits Times* forum to express that not only is cashless payment antithetical to the spirit of busking, it also reduces takings as children would often ask their parents for cash to place in busking hats. Cashless payment can be encouraged but should not be compulsory. And very regretfully, full-time buskers were not prioritised as those invited to be part of the pilot when in fact they were most in need of busking income during the pandemic. They are also, naturally, those from whom the pilot could have gained the most pragmatic feedback; they could have been the best resource towards a real study on how to resume busking. The Buskers' Association Singapore was eager and ready to lend advice and help but were not consulted by the NAC for the pilot. They were only approached when temperature takers were needed at a short notice. Buskers not chosen for the pilot generously volunteered so that they could experience the pilot in some way. Noting this chain of events makes me very sad.

Moving forward, the NAC must responsibly consult buskers as well as consider the ways in which busking is a unique artform, before making huge and potentially detrimental legislative decisions for the busking scheme, especially with regard to locations, bidding, cashless payment, and auditions. There is no one-size-fits-all. For example, a one-, sometimes two-hour busking slot is impossible for many buskers because of their setup and take-down time, or the fact that an elderly busker would have no clue how to bid for his slot online. I hear from buskers they are confident of self-regulating the rotation of spots, and do not believe a bidding system is needed.

Last year, AUX Media, an external company that the NAC hired to help manage the scheme, conducted an online survey with buskers to find out how they were doing

⁷ The Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG) was a time-limited scheme that was launched on 14 April 2020 to support efforts by artists and arts organisations to present their work in digital format via digital mediums during the COVID-19 period. It is no longer available at the time of this publication.

during the pandemic. I was told the form was confusing and did not collect meaningful data, most of which was quantitative. It seems there is also no proper data on the number of full-time buskers here, many of whom go undocumented. Much as I appreciate the NAC's efforts to develop the scene with younger buskers, we must not let the older ones, the recognisable stalwarts, fall through the cracks. Perhaps a re-evaluation is needed to assess how meaningful information can be collected from buskers so as to properly understand their work and situations. Without this, it is hard to suggest appropriate steps forward and any survey done merely satisfies protocol — and we do not want to be that kind of Singaporean bureaucracy — we must strive with our hearts and souls not to be that kind of Singaporean bureaucracy. Beyond this, the Buskers' Association's co-chair Jonathan Goh feels that the NAC needs to reconsider what it means to have an external agency manage busking. Buskers have not felt that AUX Media has been on the ground understanding what they do. The relationship between the NAC, AUX, Buskers' Association, and buskers needs to be clarified.

Since Singapore has had minimal new community cases for months, and research shows that outdoor transmission rates while masked are extremely low, added to the fact that trains, buses and restaurants are more cramped than a busking site could dream of being, perhaps the government can consider allowing busking again. This is clearly different from resuming indoor activities such as karaoke, or outdoor bars where people will be unmasked while eating and drinking. There is no reason to conflate these activities and assume the public will not be able to appreciate the difference. Buskers here do not usually draw huge crowds (except during the festive season), but as crowd numbers are an understandable concern during the pandemic, perhaps social distancing ambassadors or community marshalls can be deployed. Government agencies can collaborate with busking associations to run and plan events or manage crowds, like in other countries where robust busking communities self-manage. Covent Garden in London, home to one of the world's oldest busking communities, is an example. Busking associations know the buskers and are in the best position to be on-the-ground consultants and organisers. I believe the Buskers Association should have been invited as consultants for the busking trial and their being shut out of the planning displays a regrettable disinterest in collaboration as well as a lack of foresight. Looking ahead, their members could be key personnel for forming future plans.

The Buskers' Association says there is a recurring pattern of the NAC introducing new plans without consulting buskers first, be it a new component of the busking card, or taking over a spot for a pilot without first discussing with or at least informing buskers who had organically negotiated a rotating schedule around the spot. This is deeply frustrating for them and at times cruel, displaying a lack of compassion towards or knowledge about buskers' livelihood. I am aware that the association is exploring the option of applying for the stART fund (the new Sustain The Arts fund) after they were told that they would not qualify for the Seed Grant as they are not an arts group. As an arts organisation advocating for buskers, organising capability development

programs with a long-term plan to elevate busking in Singapore, all on a voluntary basis, the Buskers' Association Singapore absolutely deserves to receive funding. Let me repeat this. They are an arts organisation. And if they are, for some reason, not deemed as one, the NAC should help them achieve the very definition of an arts organisation in the eyes of the system.

Back to the resumption of busking. Even though the decision to allow busking again is not one that will rest ultimately with the NAC but involves numerous other policymakers, the arts council is the agency that can and has the responsibility to champion buskers. If they represent artists, they also represent buskers. I urge the NAC to urgently clarify their plan for helping buskers. The NAC should strive to be the allies and advocates buskers have been waiting for all these years. Here I would also like to note that perhaps the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) needs to step in so that organisations like the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) or the Orchard Road Business Association are also part of the mission to be inclusive towards buskers, as I understand that the NAC has at times limited power to decide which buskers are approved for coveted sites.

Mr Oh Ow Kee, or Beads Uncle as he is affectionately called, was not passed at his last audition, but was told to upgrade his act instead of repeating the same thing year after year. This is both cruel and short-sighted. Mr Oh is a former *karang guni* man who taught himself English and takes his form of bead exercise as performative work. He is an institution at the spot outside Ngee Ann City. What gets to be valued as culture, heritage, or art and who gets to say it is so? I hope that the NAC — and in fact the whole government — will consider this question, in the face of the past and impending disappearances of spaces like the Sungei Road Thieves' Market, Pearl Bank Apartments, and very regrettably, The Substation.



Busker Mr Oh Ow Kee (Beads Uncle) performing his age-defying bead act outside Ngee Ann City along Orchard Road. Photo courtesy of *Singapore Minstrel*.

The management of a busking scene — from everyday communications with buskers to policies — is a fine art that takes compassion, sensitivity, an understanding of the ground, negotiations with diverse stakeholders, and more. It is one that, like arts policies in general, should support artists and cultural producers to manifest their creativity. Buskers have, in the last year, like many, been resilient in the face of the pandemic. They have become GrabFood deliverers, washed cars, and have practised their craft in HDB carparks and homes. Even as they help themselves, they need the support and care of the arts council. They need a busking framework that makes it easy and empowering for them to do what they love and are good at.

What does care mean? In roundtable discussion 10⁸, Zarina Muhammad talked about the importance of mutual aid in these times. Mutual aid initiatives come from the community, for the community, often because governments have been inadequate at addressing their needs. I argue that the NAC has to come from a position of care with buskers — not just during this pandemic but by rethinking their day-to-day approach and guiding mission with the busking scheme, how to be in relation with buskers, and to forge trust with this group of brave creative souls. Care is the ability to see someone, make them feel seen and addressed, empathise with them, and render support.

We do not often speak of love in relation to arts administration, especially not in Singapore where many practitioners have complex relationships with government bureaucracy and censorship. And perhaps it does not overtly address what I have

⁸ To read the IPS-NGS-SAM 10th roundtable report on *Art in the Time of Pandemic: Meaning, Relevance and Future*, visit https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-ngs-sam-10th-roundtable-report_150621.pdf.

been talking about. But let me venture and end with this nugget that may provide some food for thought on arts policy and arts management. Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams, the second Black woman ordained in the Zen Buddhism tradition, said in her interview with Krista Tippett in the *On Being* podcast, “Love is space. It is developing our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are. That is love.... It’s bigness. It’s allowance. It’s flexibility.” There is enough space in the arts landscape here to more consciously include buskers, to be more attentive to their unique needs, and to perhaps even be their fan. Maybe that is where it needs to begin. And this applies to how arts policy and management works here. Help us feel you want us to make the art we want to make. This presentation cannot hope to cover the mountain of details worth mentioning with regard to the busking scheme. Hence it is of immense importance for the NAC to address buskers with compassion, excitement, responsibility, good planning, resourcefulness, and friendship, starting today. They are waiting, in hopes of putting their hats out again. Thank you.

Speaker 3: Leslie Tan, Founding Member, T'ang Quartet

Good morning, everyone. I will jump straight into my presentation. I am lucky enough to be in an established ensemble. So, for me, my bottom line has not really been hit very badly. Yes, a lot of artists have been affected but not totally. If you speak to a lot of people, some of them, like composers for example, will tell you that they are doing much better because of the existing grants such as the Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG)⁹ where they can write more music for all the different productions. So, some people are actually doing better because of the pandemic. I think a lot of our problems are not just because of the pandemic. These are all policy problems that have existed for a long time before and now they have come to the fore because the pandemic has shone the spotlight on these things. I think it is very easy to blame the pandemic. People who have had their careers long enough will tell you that they have been hit by the pandemic, but not that badly. The people who have been hit suffer from collateral damage. Buskers, for example are one of them. They never existed as part of the artistic community, and we do not know why. Or we know why but what can we do about that? People who consider themselves as entertainers — people who play in bars and pubs are those who are very badly hit because the restaurants and bars have shut.

The other group of people who have been badly hit by the pandemic are school children. I run an enterprise that does work in places like Bali, Jakarta, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Singapore. We do charitable work and we have had to stop all our lessons for these kids. That, for me, is a much bigger problem. Because of COVID-19, all of these activities have been shut down and we do not know what we are going to do. We will have to wait and see but that is a huge problem. So, the collateral damage to established people like me is not really that much. I mean, T'ang Quartet does three concerts a year. How much money can that bring in anyway? Most of the money goes to the Esplanade or the Victoria Concert Hall. Yes, the venues like the Esplanade and the Victoria Concert Hall have been badly hit because there is suddenly no income stream for them. But for us, we get our grants and payouts. We end up with S\$500 for a month's work. For most of us, we have already had to teach. So, teaching has been a main source of our income anyway.

So, I think a lot of full-time musicians will tell you that the concert performances have never really been an income stream for them. The freelancers, yes, some of them have been affected, but not the full-time freelancers. I am not talking about the people who depend on freelancing full-time. I am talking about the amateur musicians or the teacher who is teaching music and occasionally plays in one opera production a year

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where he gets about a thousand dollars and that is it. For such people, yes, they have been affected by the pandemic, but just a little bit.

Because of the coronavirus, we have had to adapt very quickly. You now see a lot of online presence. For me, online teaching is super useful. I was initially very skeptical and hated the idea of setting up my cameras and everything. But during the circuit breaker it worked well. It was impossible to take on new students and teach them how to hold the cello or violin, but for existing students it really worked like a dream. This is because we often forget that we are educators. After many years in this business, you just wait for the lessons to be over. You hold out your hands and wait for the fees. But education takes a lot of work. With online education, I was able to give three 20-minute lessons a week rather than one 60-minute lesson a week. That means that my student was supervised the entire week. That was for my live lessons. For my asynchronised lessons, students would play, come back to me, and I would make detailed comments, play, and send it back. So, you would just have to work out that framework with their parents. After a while, the parents would see that this makes sense. They would understand that their kids are being supervised and I think they saw the value of online lessons. It is a lot more work but sadly, teaching is becoming more of a business, and it should not be so. This pandemic has made us re-think about a lot of these issues, at least for me. Some teachers will also tell you that they managed to do better because they get enquiries from people all over the world — especially around the region such as Indonesia where people would call them and ask how much it costs to have an online lesson. It makes no difference because what is the difference between my neighbour having an online lesson with me and someone from Indonesia? It is the same thing. So, some teachers will tell you that their business has actually multiplied because they have had enquiries from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Online performances are trickier. As a performer, I love to go on stage and hear the applause. Then you wonder, is it the applause that you like or the performing aspect that you like? Because right now, I am very comfortable with turning on the camera, performing and not getting the adulation at the end of the show. If you turn on the tape recorder or the video recorder, I will start performing for you. Yes, there is the feedback on how silent the audiences are. Unlike theatrical performances or dance performances, audiences in musical performances are silent anyway. A lot of classical musicians say, “It is different, we need the live audiences.” But how is it different from a stage actor, or even a television actor in a production or movie? They do not have live audience. So how is it different? I think you cannot say one is better than the other. If you are professional enough, you go in front of an eye — whether it is a person’s eye or a camera’s eye, and you perform. I think musicians, particularly classical musicians really need to stop saying “I need that applause and audience” because it is rubbish. We just need to understand that performing in front of the camera has more value because we reach out to a bigger audience now.

However, the big question is how do we make money from that? How do we monetise such online performances? Shows cannot be free forever. We are also getting an online fatigue now as a lot of shows and productions are online. We need to work out a framework on how to monetise them. I mean online platforms for example like YouTube and Spotify need to have more legislation. In the UK, they are talking about this already. People are questioning the big tech and recording companies as they get all the money and royalties. But this morning, I read that SoundCloud announced that it would be the first streaming service to start directing subscribers' fees to the performers and artists that they listen to. It is no longer going into a huge pot and being divided. This division is really unfair and inequitable. We also cannot say, "Let the market forces decide." It is the big companies that decide this and that is really horrible. We need to start talking about legislation and how we can move forward as a community and not as an individual business entity. We need to figure out a framework among ourselves like a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on what we need to do. Let us make a concerted effort with policymakers as well, such as the government and other businesses.

For me, the topic of current concert platforms is something that I want to talk about more because they do not work anymore. The model of paying S\$2,000 for a venue and S\$1,000 for publicity and management for one night does not work. These numbers can go higher. Does it make sense anymore, especially for smaller groups? Like what I said earlier, how much money can you make from a show? I do not know much about theatre or dance performances where shows can go on for a month, but for concert performances, they are only held once or twice. We do not really make much money. Even the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), which has grants and sponsorships, does not make much money. Maybe we can start shortening our concerts to 40 or 60 minutes and do it more often, like three times a week. We need to explore scaling down and I think that makes a lot of sense. I am thinking of perhaps having more house concerts now because your overheads are now basically zero. Audiences can give *ang paos* and all of that. That might make sense as there is that intimacy. We need to explore and go back to the time before we had the esplanade and the Victoria Concert Hall. We only had the National Theatre, and it was for huge events. Everything else was in smaller venues and homes. Why can we not have that now? Under the current model, a lot of orchestras are complaining that it is not possible to do tours. Tours are just silly because in this day of climate change and carbon offsets. How is it even viable or thinkable to fly planes of musicians and instruments all over the world and do multi-city tours? It is good for the ego, but not for the businesses and the world. So, I think we need to think about how we can get away from that.

Grants are helpful but I agree that we cannot just throw money at the problem without thinking. I do not want to offend the NAC but regarding the Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG), if you look back at some of the early productions and even now, some of the productions do not deserve to be online. They do not deserve to take the government's funding and go online. This is bad value and bad creativity. There is no

production value, and it is horrible. They think the money is there, let us take it and run with it. That is horrible. I think we need to think more carefully about these things. My time is running out, so I will say this again like what I did in the beginning. Our problems have been here before COVID-19. COVID-19 has shone the light on them, and we need to discuss and work together with one another and policymakers. Some of these questions raised may purely be business or philosophical ideas but they are no less important. We do not listen or consult enough with the right people. We need to move forward as a community — not as just businesses or individuals. We need to ask why we do what we do. These include companies and organisational decision-makers too, such as the NAC, ministries, and all that. These issues are much bigger problems than the pandemic. Thank you.



Music video production for *Morning of the World* in February 2021. Photo courtesy of Mr Leslie Tan.

Speaker 4: Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai, Actor, Singer and Voiceover Artist

Good morning, everybody. I am very grateful to be here. Thank you for having me as part of the panel. I am Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai. I am an actor, singer, and a voiceover artist. But as an artist, and I am sure that all the artists here will agree, what is on our designation is half of what we do. I think most of us take on so many different jobs just to get by. We are a teacher at some point and a producer at some other point. I see some people nodding already. I think the arts ecosystem is very difficult and it has forced us to be one of the many things just to get by — whether there is a pandemic or not. I realise that at any one point in time, I am always working about eight different jobs in addition to my primary job as an actor simply because it is very difficult. I wanted to touch on quite a few different things, but we will see how much we can cover based on time. Before I run out of time, the most important thing that I want to talk about today is about my feelings towards lost spaces. I know that at some level this feels like we are hemming and hawing over something that has been said multiple times. I do not have any slides but what I can do best is share very personally how I feel.

In terms of the latest space that we lost, which is The Substation, I remember many years ago, I walked into The Substation for the first time and that would have been my first-ever experience auditioning or walking into a space and looking for a home within the arts. I auditioned there for the first time with Buds Theatre and that set off a ripple effect that brought me where I am today. It was through Buds that I got in touch with an acting programme and went into the acting industry where I became an actor full-time. I think for me the scariest thing is knowing that if that ripple effect was provided for me, how many others would have lost that ripple effect as a result of lost spaces. I would say in addition to The Substation, last night was a very difficult night. At the risk of sounding emotional as one can do during moments like this, I did cry. I found myself having a long cry last night because it is not just about a space that is lost. It is about a heritage that is lost. As an artist, losing that space made me feel like I was losing myself. I felt like if I go back to the arts after the pandemic, I am going back into an ecosystem that I do not recognise. I understand the idea of wanting a multi-use arts space, but I believe that multi-use spaces and individual homes can and should exist at the same time. We should not always be looking to trade one for the other and say one is any less important. I think both are important. For example, one other space would be Centre 42, which is also the space to cultivate new works. A lot of artists, including myself, have gone to Centre 42. A lot of them have found their home there when they wanted to figure out new things or, if they were young, just wanted to write something and put it out. Centre 42 became the home for them, and it is very hard now that it is no longer there.

Case in point: I know another venue that everybody loves is the Esplanade. I think we have to take a hard look at the kinds of people who are being commissioned. For example, the Esplanade is a lovely venue and has wonderful people working there. However, at the same time, if I am being honest, I understand that they work on a hiring or commission basis. This means that either you take them on as a hirer, or they commission you, which is the best you get because you get rehearsal spaces and all sorts of access to whatever you need and the only thing you need to worry about is your pay. But if you are hiring them, then that is a different model altogether. Case in point: if you want to perform you will have to hire them. I remember two years ago, I did a solo performance at the Esplanade. I hired an Esplanade venue. I told myself “I am not going to wait for jobs to come to me, I am going to do it myself.” I remember having to take on six jobs just to pay for the venue, the staff and everything. The Esplanade staff who worked with me were really great. They were incredible. But I also recognised the limitations that I had. A lot of people asked me why I did not just find another venue, but it did not feel quite right for the show I was trying to do. The Esplanade felt like a perfect venue. The recital studio was what I needed for my Sinatra concert. It was incredible that I pulled that off. I actually did the show and broke even, and a lot of people were like, “Wow, you did it.” It could be a great story in tenacity of “Wow, she did it” but to be honest, it should not be that case. It should not be that difficult to get into a space, to hire, to hone your talents and find a place where you can actually do work. For a lot of people, because the Esplanade is not financially viable, they tend to look at smaller spaces like The Substation and Centre 42 as places where they can grow and germinate new works. I honestly feel quite worried that a space like that is not there now.

For The Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG)¹⁰ — which someone has already talked about — COVID-19 or not, I would say that the process of even applying for a grant is so arduous. I feel more like a corporate person rather than an artist. We must also note that a lot of people do not have the technology to put forth something in the DPG. Something very important to note is that Singapore may be a very highly connected country. We may be pushing towards 5G. We may have Wi-Fi connection in every MRT station and every Starbucks. But not everyone has the same access to technology and even more so for artists — most of whom are freelancers. We do not have access to the latest iPhones or the latest laptops that allow for the DPG to become possible. I know of people who struggled to open the DPG form and think, “How do I do this when I barely have any equipment?” There are others who have found their way around it, but it is a sobering reality to know that the technology is not accessible to everyone. Another note about the DPG grant or any other grants from the NAC is that sometimes it can feel limiting or perhaps, even elitist. I say this very lightly and with a lot of heart. The level of command of English that everybody has is not the same. Sometimes it can be difficult to even understand half the stuff on the

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portal — even for me, and I am someone who was trained in management before going into theatre. Sometimes I look at the forms and wonder what on earth am I supposed to fill up here. For example, before the Esplanade show, I applied for a grant which I did not get. That is why I had to work six jobs to be able to pay off everything. It was a bit silly, but I tried.

On that note on lost spaces, I do not know if this is in the works, but I do hope that we do not have to trade one space for another. I do believe that multi-use spaces should exist to make way for the burgeoning number of arts groups coming up. We should not trade them for another kind of space that already exists. For instance, I hope that we never close one school and combine it with another arts school to make two schools into one school. I worry that this might be something on the trajectory like how we do it with Junior Colleges (JCs). With JCs for example, they may have different logos, but they are more or less based on the same kind of education. But for the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), School of the Arts (SOTA), LASALLE and the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), they are all very different kinds of institutions offering different kinds of education to different kinds of students. We cannot close one school and combine two schools to make them one. I hope that is not something we are considering, only because I spent six years studying in both LASALLE and NAFA. I would say that they are both very different institutions with different backgrounds.

I was sharing with someone yesterday that as a LASALLE graduate, when I was working with predominantly ITI students, I felt incredibly challenged and I thought “Wow, this is incredible.” I looked at the way they spoke, the way they moved their bodies and the way they commanded their presence. It was a kind of acting that I had not experienced only because I had not stepped foot into ITI at that point as a student. To experience that was for me was like another world in terms of learning someone else’s practice and seeing the way they work. From an outside view, I can kind of see why the schools may look the same besides the fact that one looks very pretty and is made of glass, and the other of wood and concrete. Inside, what is happening with these students is very different and I think part of understanding the ecosystem and how we are is really looking at the education. I think we need to rethink the way we think about these art schools and the way we are talking to our students, especially the students who are coming into the industry. I have already been in this industry for some time, while not as much as some of you in the panel here. I have a lot of fear. I constantly have a lot of fear. I do not know if I will be able to recognise the arts ecosystem when I go back. I do not know what kinds of spaces are available for me to make art. I worry about the grants because half the time, they feel alienating and, a lot of the time as a student or a young person in the industry, I feel very much alone. I am not saying that this is all on the NAC. I think we do have a concerted effort as a community to always reach out, and I do think there are those who have made a lot of efforts to do so. But I think we need to do better. The space for artists already feels so small and if we keep making it even smaller, it diminishes the freedom for us to be truly creative.

I would say that as an artist, COVID-19 or not, I wish to have the freedom to be the artist that I actually want to be and not the artist I have to be. Going back to the grants again, a lot of times when I am filling out the forms, I feel like I have to be a certain kind of artist as opposed to the kind of artist I want to be. I wish when we create the list for grants, we ask them what they want to do, instead of creating grants that say “this is what you need to do in order to get the money.” Often, it can feel like that even when hiring a space.

Sometimes it goes back to the topics that we want to talk about. It often feels like there is a very tight lid on the topics that we can talk about and sometimes these topics are very important. As a young person, I can say this. I worry that there are also a lot of young people like me who are forgetting what it means to communicate or what it really means to speak their minds — to say what they mean and mean what they say. A lot of them are afraid to ask the questions that need to be asked and these are very important. We want to talk about a lot of difficult things like racism, policies, politics and what is happening in Singapore. We need to allow our young people to ask the questions that they want to ask. Often, it does not need to be taken as something that is very scary. Sometimes, they are curious, and they want to ask these questions. This is part and parcel of not just being young but also being an artist. But if we stifle everyone too early, it diminishes the capacity of people to really talk about things that they should be talking about. It also diminishes the capacity for us to be actually creative. If not, we will find that everyone is saying the same things in the same kind of spaces and then we ask the question why we are not growing.

To end off, I would say that I personally always believe that art must disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. That must be the kind of work that I really hope we have and that we can create an ecosystem that allows us to make this kind of work. Ironically, this was the very quote on the side of The Substation which has now closed. Thank you for allowing me the time to speak very honestly.

Speaker 5: Edmund Wee, Publisher, Epigram Books

Hi, I am Edmund, and I am the publisher at Epigram Books, and I am not an artist. I think there are some problems always deciding whether publishing is a form of art, business, or something more commercial. So, we faced this problem during this epidemic. How did we survive? It is very simple. We survived by getting into great debt. Epigram Books has been around for about nine years. We publish mainly fiction. We have survived earlier with support from my other businesses and through a lot of grants and help from the NAC. But in 2015, we published *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and subsequently, it has been much more difficult to get the grants that we would have liked. So, we went into debt. But, over the years, we have managed to continue publishing. We publish about 40 to 50 titles a year. A year before COVID-19, we opened a bookshop and became a bookseller as well, and that actually has been a lifesaver for us. If not for COVID-19, I think we would have broken even at the end of last year and would have paid a substantial amount of our debt.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 happened. During the circuit breaker, we obviously had to shut down our bookshop, which meant that we had zero income for nearly three months. Online sales went up, but they could not compensate for the great loss during the three months. Subsequently, we have re-opened. How did we survive during this time? The whole company took a pay cut. We have about 27 people in the company, and we all took a pay cut. Of course, we had all those government help. But that was not enough. Apart from the pay cut, I went around trying very hard to borrow money. I am 69 years old, and a lot of banks told me I could not get a lot of the loans because of the Monetary Authority of Singapore's (MAS') regulations. I think there are some regulations that say you cannot take loans if you are 70 years old. While I could borrow money from some banks, I had to pay back at quite a high rate because I had to pay back before I reached 70 years old. Eventually, I managed to borrow money through a money broker, which meant that I had to pay commission to this person. This was from a foreign bank (in Malaysia). I also borrowed personal loans from people I knew. I borrowed quite a lot of money and that kept us going through the latter half of 2020.

Here we are now. This year is a bit tough because all the repayment of the loans started in the beginning of this year. I have a huge repayment every month. Fortunately, we had quite good sales during the run-up to Christmas. But we will see. We do not know how things are going to go. We have a lot of trouble with bookshops. We have tried to negotiate for the reduction of rent with our landlord, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). We have only managed to get a 10 per cent reduction. So, it is quite tough. I think there is some confusion for people like me. Am I a publisher or am I a book seller? Unfortunately, I am listed as a publisher. Therefore, I am not considered to be in the retail trade and therefore, I am not in Tier 2. So, support is limited because I am a publisher.

Essentially, our work has not been affected by COVID-19. We have pushed back some publications, which were supposed to come out in 2020, to 2021. Instead of publishing about 50 titles in 2020, we published only about 38 titles. Publishing is such that you plan two years in advance. Your titles are all ready and it is quite hard to cut them. Authors are all waiting for their books to be published and you cannot suddenly tell them after waiting for one or two years that they need to wait another year. We have tried to avoid that. We tried to publish mainly what we planned to publish. Some were just delayed. We also have an annual book prize. We did not cancel it this time. In fact, we selected two more works to be published. We usually select four from the book prize to be published. This time, we selected six works to be published because we cancelled our prize dinner due to COVID-19. We used this money that we saved to give to the two other writers. In that sense, we had not been affected in substantial ways by COVID-19 in terms of our output. Sales have been terrible. During the circuit breaker, our sales went down by 75 to 80 per cent. Overall, for the whole year, sales may be down by 50 per cent. We have really survived on a hand-to-mouth and month-to-month basis because of the nature of the publishing industry.

I know the government has been helping with all kinds of things and I am very grateful. But there are many things that do not make sense to me. For example, we were able to delay our loan repayment to the bank, but we had to continue paying the interest. Therefore, when the loan repayments kick back in, we will be continuing to pay the interest again. In fact, during COVID-19, while we were able to delay the loan, we had to pay more money because we had to pay more interest. We tried cutting down on our rental space, but our landlord would not do it. We tried to sublet but we were not allowed to do so. So, I wish the government had done what Switzerland did, where the government announced to all Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that they could borrow up to a million dollars on an interest-free basis. The money could be paid back in seven years. I wish they had done that.

Epigram Books will continue to publish as long as we have the money to do so. I do not have any more money. I have dug deep into my pockets as far as I can go. It is empty now. We are surviving on loans, but we will continue. I think publishing the stories of Singapore is so critical. Nine years ago, Epigram Books started. At that time, I felt that there was not enough publication of novels and fiction and that is why I started Epigram Books. We will continue as long as we can — with or without grants. I do not want to end up as a publisher who publishes only two titles a year. That is quite pointless. You do not add to the cultural capital and the things that are needed. We try our best to publish about 50 titles a year. Even if we do not make it, we usually try about 40 titles a year. COVID-19 has made it harder. I have restored half of the salary cuts in the beginning of the year, but the salaries of my staff are still cut from what they were before COVID-19. What else can I say? Thank you.

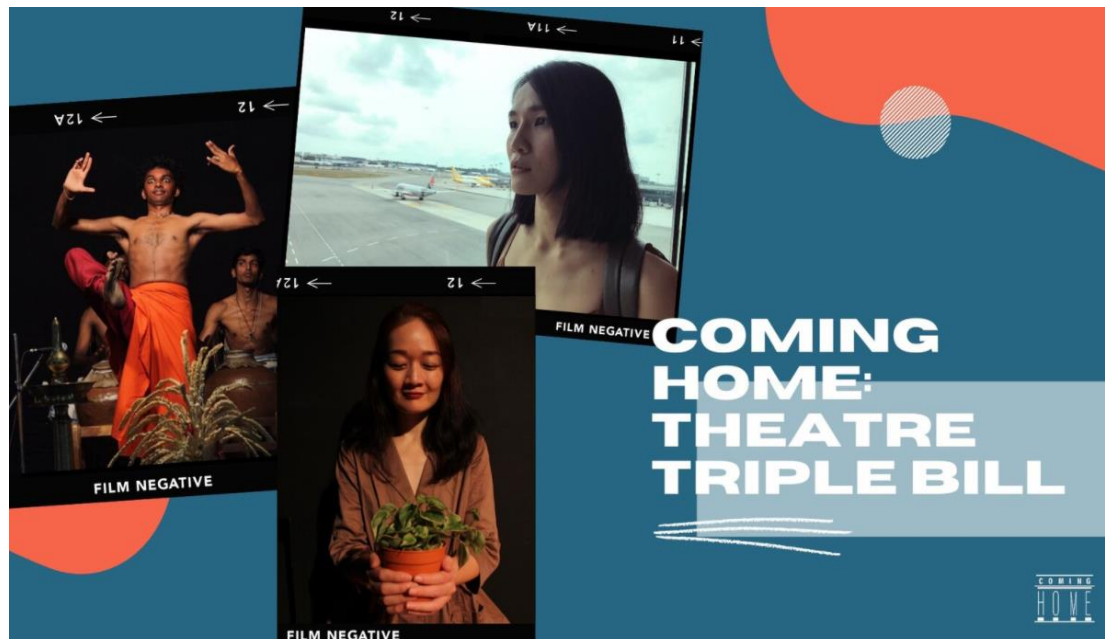
Speaker 6: Raka Maitra, Co-Artistic Director, The Substation

Thank you, Rebekah, for your thoughts on The Substation. The Substation needs no introduction. It was the first interdisciplinary, independent art centre and I maintain that till today; it is still the only independent, interdisciplinary art centre. A recent article in *Plural Magazine* mentions that it is difficult for any arts venue to claim to be the “sole haven for artistic experimentation.” I think The Substation can claim to be the sole haven for artistic experimentation that includes all arts and artists. I joined The Substation in January 2020 and soon after, we were hit by the global pandemic. My initial thoughts were that this is temporary, and I never thought that we would have to re-think the way art is done and think of art without human interaction. I was not sure whether I wanted to go digital at The Substation, but ultimately, we had to accept it and we did go digital for all the young artists who were waiting for an outlet. So, during the circuit breaker, we approached 15 local artists from different disciplines to create short films with their phone cameras. The result was quite amazing. We had asked them to respond to the topic of isolation, and the works that came out of it were diverse, surprising, and provocative. I would like to share one of my favourite works. The next slide is a work by Wendy Toh called *In Between*. I would just like to share the quality of videos and works that came out.



A screen capture of Ms Wendy Toh's experimental short film, titled *In Between*, submitted as part of the Isolation series. Photo courtesy of The Substation.

After the success of the Isolation series, I got very excited. We collaborated with filmmaker Russell Morton to produce a Theatre Triple Bill where there were two contemporary works by Lina Yu and Zelda Tatiana Ng, and one traditional work by Ramith Ramesh. The works were shown over Zoom, but what really struck me about the works was that theatre does not really work online. We need a live audience. That is when I decided that even if we were allowed to have an audience member of five people watching a show, that is the way to go. Here, I would like to quote Professor Chinmoy Guha: “This wretched virus seems to have stripped us of all illusions of technical advancements and progress and pushed us in front of a cracked mirror.”



Poster of The Substation’s Theatre Triple Bill featuring three series of production written and/or performed by Ms Lina Yu, Mr Ramith Ramesh and Ms Zelda Tatiana Ng together with filmmaker Mr Russell Morton. Photo courtesy of The Substation.

I was absolutely convinced that we needed to wait and go live. I also knew that we could only do it at The Substation because we were small and could afford to take the risk and take the responsibility for the safety of others. It was also going back to The Substation’s values where artistic measures and artists are more important than value and scale. I think one good thing that came out of the pandemic was that we were forced to look closer at artists at home. There was a focus back at the small and the intimate. We can no longer be looking at international celebrities and collaborations. It is like going back to the little theatre movement – intimate, non-commercial, and non-profitable. This is everything that The Substation stands for.

In September, to mark our 30th anniversary, we decided to do a series of lecture demonstrations and workshops with very limited participants. So, over four weekends, we had these lecture demonstrations that will develop into full-length works — like *Brown is Haram*, which is a full-length performance work which will be shown in the SeptFest 2021. For me, one of the most memorable works was *Men with Pens*. Subhas Nair conducted a series of workshops with troubled teenagers, and he developed these workshops into lecture demonstrations. I would just like to play this video please [trailer of *Men with Pens*]. I was hoping to work with these teenagers and develop a full-length performance. Unfortunately, we are closing but I am hoping somebody continues this work that we started.

In December, we started showing small works-in-progress. So, Lina used one of our associate artists who has been working with traditional forms and developing them into contemporary works. She is an ex-student of the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI). This show was supposed to be a performance that we were supposed to have in March. But of course, because of the pandemic, it was called off and we did a small work-in-progress in our theatre. Again, we did it with a very small group of audience. We allowed about 40 people at that time. Could we now play this video? Again, I would like to emphasise that we were able to show these works-in-progress and take the risks because we were small.

This month, we will have our last festival in The Substation, titled *Margins*. We have 35 artists from all generations doing work. This is where we realise that we need small spaces like The Substation to help such artists. That is it from me. Thank you.

Speaker 7: Dr Alvin Tan, Director (Engagement and Participation) National Arts Council (NAC)

Thank you everyone for the sharing. It is really heartening to know that so many people are here today. Thank you IPS for doing this. For someone who is new to the scene, it has been a great humbling and learning experience hearing everything that has been said. I totally agree with a lot of the comments on how we need to think better, including how we need to think better together. It is not about the sector versus the NAC, the government or whatever. It is really about all of us coming together, solutioning together and finding the best way forward. Let me also share a few personal reflections on all of these.

I think firstly, the COVID-19 situation has affected us all. Nevertheless, it has affected us all differently. It has had an uneven effect on all of us and this is something that has been shared by many on the panel so far. We have seen that the more vulnerable in our society have felt the greatest impact. I also agree with Leslie that there have also been differences felt within and between the different art forms. Sometimes, the issues then get magnified. Like the composers, there are many in the visual arts who also say that they can still work and produce in their studios. But there are also those in the performing arts who find that they still cannot continue — at least not in the usual way or on the same scale. However, government support must be, and I believe has been, fairly and equally provided to all. I cannot imagine anyone in this room saying that one art form is more critical than another, or that another art form is less deserving than theirs.

This brings me to my second point. When we boil it down, it is also a story of responsibility and sustainability, which I think many have spoken about as well — both at a personal level and at the sectorial level. So, I believe that we know that we are more than arts practitioners. We are also sons, daughters, fathers, mothers and like what Edmund said, we all have responsibilities at least to provide for our families. For some of us, this concept of the family also includes those whom we employ. We know that our duties then further extend to the people whom they care and provide for. So, it is indeed about livelihoods. Another important thing is that it is also about the lived experiences and that is why I am so grateful to IPS for running this because it is an opportunity for us to also listen and hear about people's lived experiences. It is not just about policies. People are not just digits. It is really about the lives that are impacted and how we can help individuals. In this regard, I think there have been various government support schemes already in place to support both Self-Employed Persons (SEPs) and employers. Some of them have already been mentioned. We have things like the COVID-19 Support Grant (CSG)¹¹ for full-time and part-time

¹¹ The COVID-19 Support Grant (CSG) is no longer available at the time of this publication.

employees who have lost their income. We have the Job Support Scheme (JSS)¹² which provides wage support to employers to help them retain their local employees. We have the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (Sirs)¹³ and more recently, we have the COVID-19 Recovery Grant (CRG) for both employees and SEPs who remain financially impacted by COVID-19. Of course, when we talk about livelihoods and families being affected, there is also financial support like ComCare Short-to-Medium-Term Assistance (SMTA) and Long-Term Assistance (LTA) that the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) provides directly to help families in need. So, when I think about how the economy has done so far and when I look at the numbers, I see that about 95,000 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents (PRs) have actually received financial help at least through the CSG alone already. The government support also meant that companies could keep their workers while giving their management some breathing room to think about new ways to make some revenue. This was a point that Leslie mentioned earlier about finding new business models.

In the past 17 months, I think that more than \$25 billion has already been committed to at least the CSG scheme alone, helping more than 150,000 employers. This is where I talked about support being fair and equal to all. Analysts have pointed out that Singapore's support has actually been more than that of other countries. The effects can be seen in employment figures. Singapore's annual average unemployment rate rose slightly to 3 per cent last year, which is an increase. But the figure is much lower than our Asian neighbours. Moving forward, as we reopen, I think the government will begin weaning companies off this lifeline. Business owners acknowledge that financial support cannot go on indefinitely. Like what Leslie said, it is not about how much government support is given out, but what needs to be done now to create new business models and to make ourselves sustainable given the current limitations.

I will say that at the sectoral level, the NAC recognises the challenges and difficulties that the arts sector has gone through. In addition to all of the generic support packages I spoke about earlier, the NAC has made a strong case for our sector to be considered as a Tier 2 sector under the Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP).¹⁴ At the core of all of these are our major companies and seed grant recipients, which are selected on a competitive basis. But the more important thing is that there are a whole host of other organisations that are then also supported and can operate in the outer circle of the NAC's support. Besides the ACRP's operating grant, which is the next bubble in the slide, you would see that we have also got the Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA)¹⁵ and the Digital Presentation

¹² For latest announcements on the Job Support Scheme (JSS), visit <https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/sustaining-the-arts-during-covid-19/acrp.html>

¹³ The Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (Sirs) is no longer available at the time of this publication.

¹⁴ To learn more about the Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP), visit <https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/sustaining-the-arts-during-covid-19/acrp.html>

¹⁵ The Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA) was a time-limited scheme that was launched on 16 March 2020 to help artists including self-employed persons (SEPs) and arts organisations upskill and grow their capabilities through training programmes in Singapore. It is no longer available at the time of this publication.

Grant for the Arts (DPG)¹⁶ which has been spoken much about. We also had rental waivers, venue hire subsidies and not forgetting the existing NAC project grants, commissions and even the residencies that Salty mentioned she was on.

These have enabled support to continue flowing to a wider group of arts organisations and SEPs who have then received customised arts support from the Arts Resource Hub. So, as you can see, these are some of the things that have been supported. During this time, support has gone out to more than 200 arts organisations and many more SEPs in our sector. I am happy to note that there are members of this panel who have actually spoken up and said they have been able to access things like the DPG, ACRP and job support. Just to show some figures, you can see that currently with our sector specific support, over 13,000 jobs and training opportunities have been supported. Close to 700 digitalisation projects were supported under the DPG. Yes, there have been some comments about the DPG, but we need to remember that this was time-limited and was also an urgent response to the situation where we were in the lockdown. So, how else could we have helped? This is one of the issues that we must keep in mind. Just as much as how the arts sector and the artist think about how can they pivot, policymakers have also thought about how they can help to ensure that things can be rolled out quite quickly and seamlessly. The reality is that if we do not do this, a lot of people would be in a potentially worse-off state. This also led to us thinking about what else we can do. That is why we had things like training opportunities. For example, we had about 1,100 training opportunities supported under the CDSA. We had commissioned more than 14 key partners and hosted content as part of #SGCultureAnywhere.

I believe that at the last roundtable session, Mrs Rosa Daniel spoke on the measures available to the arts community at that point of time. She said that the NAC would continue to focus on three key areas such as: (1) sustaining jobs through retraining and reskilling; (2) ensuring sustainability by optimising resources and diversifying incomes; and (3) promoting innovation by harnessing on technology to transform our operations and programme designs in the sector. I am happy to say that the good news is that the arts sector will continue to get support under the Budget 2021 where a \$45 million package has already been set aside for arts and sports under the ACRP. I cannot share more at this point, but more details will be shared at MCCY's Committee of Supply debate. But the focus I believe will be on business transformation. The NAC remains committed to fully supporting COVID-19 recovery in the next couple of years for the arts sector. Our role is to champion the arts with agency leads in other sectors. That is where our real value-add will be. The resumption of activities has also been a key priority at the top of our mind. So, apart from money and grants, it is about how we reopen, how we find new business models and how we get back to life. We have been moving quite fast while prioritising public health. Differences between art forms have meant different phase of resumption due

¹⁶ The Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG) was a time-limited scheme that was launched on 14 April 2020 to support efforts by artists and arts organisations to present their work in digital format via digital mediums during the COVID-19 period. It is no longer available at the time of this publication.

to safety considerations. But we have come a long way. For live performances, we started piloting with 50 audiences in September last year. We moved on an approval basis to 250 audiences in November. It has now been regularised to 250 audiences in Phase Three.¹⁷ These required a lot of effort behind the scenes such as the NAC having to communicate and commit to our other stakeholder partners and agencies and letting them know this is what we can do. We also pushed for outdoor performances. They have now been allowed also on an approval basis with up to 250 audiences.

I thank Salty for her comments on busking. Busking was indeed trialled earlier. We are reviewing the outcomes and I thank her for raising that point as well. One thing that I wanted to quickly add is that cashless payments were not compulsory. We can talk more about this in the discussion session. The physical hats, if you can say, were still there. We will think about relaxing the safe management measures in tandem with outdoor spaces, but this is again, a conversation that the NAC needs to have with our other partners from the other Ministries such as the Ministry of Health (MOH) and so on. We have engaged the Buskers' Association and Jonathan Goh and so forth. So, it is not that it has not happened. But we also understand that the community is bigger and wider than just the Buskers' Association. Buskers are not homogeneous. There are some who work part-time and some who work full-time. So, there is a whole range, and we will engage all of them as we want to hear all of their voices. On just the topic of busking, if I may quickly just add, is that I think venues are quite important. The venue owners must be interested, and the venue owners also want to open up at this stage because there will be costs to them or sometimes even risk. I agree that we can always do more for busking and the rest. Salty also mentioned Covent Garden and things like that. Actually, maybe that is another reason why a public-private kind of partnership really makes sense where the private sector such as land and venue owners together with buskers and the NAC can co-create and find solutions together. Without one party being involved, it really does not make sense.

In terms of reopening, I would also say that we have got workshops and training programmes that were resumed in July 2020. Museums and gallery have also opened and operate at a 65 per cent capacity. This is quite important for our art galleries. Undergirding all these policy principles of support which have been to: (1) safeguard livelihoods; (2) retain talents in our sector; (3) provide immediate work opportunities; (4) help develop new and related capabilities in our sector; and (5) continue to support the resumption of activities. I think for all these reasons, our arts sector has done relatively well compared with other countries. Hand to heart, I would think that as a country, as a nation, Singapore has done well. Again, all of these are in part due to our collective efforts. It is really because all of us pulled in together. In terms of the sector, I also must recognise that the NAC's regular grants and support pre-COVID

¹⁷ At the time of this publication, Singapore has already eased some of its Safe Management Measures (SMMs) under the Transition Phase. For more information, visit <https://www.gov.sg/article/stabilising-singapores-covid-19-situation-and-protecting-our-overall-healthcare-capacity>.

have also put us in a good state. I hear the comments about the NAC's grants and things like that. I agree that we can do better and again, opportunities like this can give us the feedback and we can work together to find out how we can make our grant schemes more citizen and artist centric. But I also understand that the NAC's grants do not prescribe the content of arts projects. All that said, I will also point out that the NAC does not have unlimited resources or spaces. As a public sector agency, our mandate does not provide us with the luxury to provide support either infinitely or indefinitely. I think this is a point that relates very clearly to spaces, which both Rebekah and Raka spoke about.

On the topic of The Substation, I believe the NAC had wished that the Substation board had taken up the offer to continue. But it is with regret, and this is something that is shared by many of the leaders in the arts sector, that it is not happening. But I also note that an organisation is sometimes different from the physical location and the spirit of it.

I refer to Rebekah's point on the amalgamation of schools. I think about some schools and how their ethos, legacy, and spirit continue even though the schools have shifted place to place. I am wondering about that. But just give me an opportunity to just recap about how the NAC has managed the arts spaces. Prior to 2010, the NAC only had one arts housing scheme called the Arts Housing Scheme (AHS). But since 2010, the framework for arts spaces was announced to better support the changing needs of a growing and increasingly diverse arts sector, provide platforms where artists and arts groups can collaborate with one another, and bring the arts to the surrounding community. This is something about how the arts gives back. It is not only about having the arts for arts' sake but there is an element of giving back to the wider community and wider society. So, under the Framework for Arts Spaces scheme, there are also greater opportunities for newer entrants. While existing tenants can compete to stay on, we are encouraging for a pipeline of new artists to come up. This is a fair approach that offers greater access and inclusivity to balance support for existing tenants and potential new tenants. So, this is part of the NAC's effort to support some level of churn and I guess more in the arts community will then have the opportunity to access our arts spaces. If not, there will be people who will be there forever, and new people will not have the opportunity to rise.

COVID-19 has had a severe impact on the abilities of arts organisations to generate revenues and raise funds. I agree with Leslie and the other speakers that some issues may have been there before. It is not just all COVID-19. But COVID-19 does have this magnifying effect, which has in turn adversely affected the abilities of arts organisations to maintain large spaces. This is where co-locations or co-sharing of spaces may be a solution. It is one solution to mitigate rising cost pressures. Arts organisations can benefit from being asset-like similar to many companies. For example, work from home now means that companies do not have to have big offices anymore. You see this now in a lot of the tech companies. So, a question is why not leave the burden of investments in infrastructure to the state? What is happening now

is actually 10 years in the making. I want to assure people in the room and everyone in the panel that it is not about closing arts spaces. As you can see from this slide, support for arts spaces has been growing since 1985. One other thing is that there is no intention to do away with intimate small spaces that support experimentation. The NAC has conversations with each tenant and each occupant. Each of these conversations will be customised and we will always give as much lead time they need for them to decide what they want to do. As a side point, because The Substation has been such a hot topic and a lot of people have been talking about it, I want to say that the NAC will be holding engagement sessions on 45 Armenian Street with key arts leaders and stakeholders over the next couple of months to help us re-purpose its intended use. So please do join us. One thing that I want to add now is that we agree that 45 Armenian Street should remain a safe space for artistic experimentation — one that supports young, unproven practitioners in an inclusive and multidisciplinary arts space which was its original vision. That is at the heart of it all.

Let me move to a third point which I think is quite critical and one of the key points around this discussion. It is about transformation and sustainability. How do we transform and ensure that our individual and collective sector remains sustainable? We must recognise that consumption patterns have changed and that like many other industries and sectors, relatively protected markets are less protected nowadays. I remember recently reading a Silver Arts survey where even the seniors are saying that they are happy to go and watch a musical or a play from the West End or Broadway and whatever not. So, what used to be a market that used to be physically here has now found opportunities to expand its viewership elsewhere. We cannot return to pre-COVID times or hope for status quo. There will unfortunately and inevitably be some who will leave the sector for a myriad of reasons. The fact is that the NAC's resources are limited and finite. Taxpayers' dollars cannot continue to sustain everyone especially if they cannot adapt or seize new opportunities. But at the same time, the truth is that there are opportunities for the arts to pivot and grow beyond our small domestic market. I completely agree with Leslie that the online space is something that is quite viable. Let us not dismiss it straightaway. We do have a range of tools in our tool kit as practitioners – be it as teachers or performers. This is what people like Rebekah have been saying that we wear many hats — not only just as parents or siblings but even as practitioners. It is that diversity and ability to find so many opportunities that will put us in a good stead. I think that our arts scene has already transformed greatly in the past year with the types of programmes that we see today. This is a remarkable shift from what was offered last year and consumed pre-COVID. Our first edition of the Singapore Writers Festival saw over 37,000 views. I do not think we would have had that kind of numbers pre-COVID.

Apart from digital programmes, we also see the emergence of hybrid programmes such as the recently concluded Singapore Arts Week, which had over 100 programmes across physical and digital forms. Local arts have found itself in the limelight with new demands and we can see collaborations between artists and entities taking place near and far. So, this is an opportunity. We can actually now co-

create with artists and partners in multiple jurisdictions who do not just have to be located in Singapore. So, when Leslie talked about flying people here and there, we can now see that people are doing this virtually. For example, having sing-alongs and get together. But this also brings me back to Nazry's opening remarks. The question and challenge statement that I now see is with anticipated poor economic outlook, how will this affect the arts and spending on the arts? Here, I do not mean government spending but consumer spending. I agree with the points about IP rights. With COVID-19, issues that were not at the front-burner have been brought from the backburner to the front-burner because they are even more important and critical now. I will just add that the Ministry of Law and IPOS are having their Copyright Act reviewed and their public consultations have opened. I just checked earlier, they opened in the first week of February and will end on the first of April. So, if the sector has views, please go and take a look. I think there are some public consultations that have already taken place. But go and look at what has been proposed and see whether there are things that need to be added from the perspectives of the different art forms. No less important is the question of rebuilding our economy. IP, as I said, is all part of it. But no less important is this creation and appreciation of the arts which remains relevant and an integral part of our lives. Singapore is home to diverse and distinctive arts, which inspires and connects our people and communities. This is part of the larger "us" that some of the speakers have spoken about.

A question that also pops into my mind and a challenge statement to Rebekah's point about really being creative is that with the changing textures of the Singapore society, what is the role of the arts in shaping Singapore's identity? How can the arts facilitate constructive dialogue and connect our communities? I think these are harder points that we need to think about, and it brings us together as a sector and community. It is about how we situate ourselves within Singapore — economically, socially, and culturally. It is also about how we give back.

Let me just sum up and say that to move forward, it will be a whole-of-sector, a whole-of-government, and a whole-of-Singapore approach. There will not be any light at the end of the tunnel if the economy remains weak and consumers are unwilling to spend, or if people are hesitant to attend shows. The broader recovery of the economy is important. So, it is not just about giving money. It is not just about how we pivot. But it is about how the entire ecosystem changes, and we move forward together. Thank you.

Discussion

Helping artists and arts groups sustain themselves financially

A participant noted that the pandemic had led to many artists and arts groups having to cancel their performances or temporarily stop work. She asked about the extent of financial losses that the speakers had experienced as well as how existing government grants have helped them to cope with the losses. She also asked how artists and arts groups could better sustain themselves financially under the new normal.

In response, Ms Raka said that although the subsidies introduced by the government were timely and helpful, the key problem faced by The Substation was the loss of income from venue hire, which cannot be adequately resolved by the subsidies and grants alone.¹⁸

Mr Wee said that if existing or more Safe Management Measures (SMMs) continue to be put in place, then it would be a difficult situation for Epigram Books, which has already been experiencing heavy financial loss since last year. As many people are still working from home, he said it would be a challenge to attract more customers to the physical bookstore. Currently, he explained that the bookstore has been trying to sell more books online to make up for the loss of income. He agreed with Ms Raka that the assistance schemes by the government had helped to make up for some of the losses. However, he said that some of the assistance grants were limited only for a certain period of time. Therefore, many like him have been unable to sustain themselves despite the relief measures.

Ms Ng also agreed that the existing grants and support scheme by the government as well as her residency at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) have been useful in helping her tide through the difficult period. However, she recognised that these were simply temporary measures and that she would need to continue finding more opportunities to sustain her income in the next few months. Ms Rebekah, who had been a freelancer throughout the pandemic, shared similar sentiments with Ms Ng on having to look for other forms of jobs to sustain herself during this difficult period.

While Mr Leslie Tan also agreed with the speakers that the pandemic had affected revenue outcomes, causing him and other members of the T'ang Quartet to take pay cuts, he also acknowledged that this financial loss did not affect him as much as the other speakers because he still had a full-time teaching job at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

¹⁸ On 23 July 2021, The Substation announced that it would continue to remain open even after vacating 45 Armenian Street, which would be undergoing renovations for two years.

Adding to the discussion, Dr Danny Tan said that ODT Ltd had already been thinking hard about the ways to sustain its operation model even before the pandemic in preparation for its 20th anniversary in 2019. Reflecting on his experience managing ODT Ltd for over two decades, Dr Tan said that there would always be challenges that arts companies have to face whether there was a pandemic or not. Therefore, this is something that artists and arts companies needed to prepare themselves for. Dr Tan said that during the pandemic, ODT Ltd focused on maintaining its infrastructure and worked towards gaining the confidence of its key stakeholders.

Closure of The Substation

Responding to the discussion on the topic of lost spaces, a participant asked if the closure of The Substation was inevitable and if there were any factors that could make the NAC change its decision of making 42 Armenian Street a co-tenant space.

Based on her experience working as a Co-Artistic Director at The Substation, Ms Raka said that the closure of The Substation was inevitable because of the policies that were proposed by the NAC, which made it difficult for The Substation to act as an independent arts incubator. She gave the example of how the pandemic had shown how unpredictable and volatile the arts environment can become. The management cannot create fixed schedules or make proposals to the NAC to reserve certain spaces for certain dates. She said that unless The Substation could return to its full capacity, it would be difficult to prevent its closure.

Adding to this, Dr Alvin Tan said that the NAC would continue to maintain The Substation's vision of being an interdisciplinary space that provides a platform for young artists to explore and experiment with new creative works.

Inadequacies of existing consultations and feedback sessions by NAC

A participant referred to an earlier point raised by Ms Ng on how full-time buskers and the Buskers' Association were left out from the NAC's discussions and asked about what can be done to improve this situation.

In response, Dr Danny Tan said that although he had not taken part in many consultations or feedback sessions conducted by the NAC, he believed that there should be a two-way communication process between policymakers and members of the arts community. He added that artists are often unsure of whom they can seek direct and timely help from, especially under difficult times like COVID-19 which he described as a "life or death" situation for many artists and arts groups. He stressed that during such times, it was extremely important for policymakers to swiftly respond to the immediate needs of the arts community.

Reflecting on her experience managing The Substation as well as her dance company CHOWK Productions, Ms Raka said that the effectiveness of such consultations and feedback sessions mostly depended on individual officers who are involved. Some officers may be more understanding towards the needs of artists

and arts groups across various disciplines, whereas some might not be as engaged or sympathetic towards the cause of the arts community, she said.

Adding on, Ms Rebekah said that younger artists were often not given much attention during such consultations and feedback sessions. The language used in policymaking focus mostly on the growth of the arts ecosystem in the quantitative aspects, she said. As a result, this could have an alienating effect on younger artists like her who simply wanted more avenues to have their concerns heard, especially during such a fraught period. Moving forward, she suggested creating more conversations and discussions that focus less on the economic value of the arts. Instead, they should discuss how artists and arts groups could be better supported to maximise their potential in the industry.

Ms Ng agreed with the need to hear the voices of younger artists. She referred to Dr Alvin Tan's earlier presentation, which provided a comprehensive breakdown on the number of people who had benefitted from the government's assistance schemes. Instead of responding to the arts community by presenting them with these numbers and statistics, Ms Ng said that the NAC should work towards providing a more "nuanced, soulful and heartfelt" response to their concerns. Ms Ng also reiterated an earlier point made during her presentation on how the busking community had been overlooked by the NAC during its consultations on its plans to conduct busking trials. She acknowledged that the NAC carried the good intention of helping the busking community as seen from its engagement with the Buskers' Association of Singapore. However, such engagements have been insufficient, and more effort has to be carried out in reaching out to the community to truly understand their needs and wants. Ms Ng also referred to Dr Alvin Tan's earlier point in his presentation on how avenues such as IPS' roundtable discussions allow policymakers the opportunity to know more about the lived experiences of different artists and arts groups. While she recognised that such avenues were important, she also said that policymakers needed to be mindful that they could be exclusive in nature. Therefore, they must make the continuous effort in creating more inclusive platforms to seek the lived experiences of lesser-known arts communities such as that of the buskers.

NAC's vision for the future

In response to the speakers' calls for more inclusive consultations with artists and arts groups from various disciplines, Dr Alvin Tan said that the NAC would continue to work very closely with the arts community in co-creating solutions to a wide range of issues. He also added that it would continue to work on providing more assistance and grants together with the already existing ones when needed. He pointed out that different artists and arts groups have different needs. Therefore, there cannot be a single broad policy to solve these needs. He said that it is important to create customised and individualised policies and assistance schemes to cater to these needs. This is where building stronger communication platforms will be extremely

useful. He also encouraged the arts community to be actively involved in such discussions not just through academic platforms but also through other avenues that they come across.

About the speakers

Michelle GOH is Director of Planning at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM). She also manages international partnerships for both institutions and leads SAM's programme office in organising the Singapore Biennale and the museum's residency programme.

NAZRY Bahrawi is a literary critic, academic and translator. He is Senior Lecturer of Comparative and World Literature at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). Dr Nazry serves on the board of the Intercultural Theatre Institute.

Salty Xi Jie NG co-creates semi-fictional paradigms for the real and imagined lives of humans within the poetics of the intimate vernacular. Often playing with the aesthetics of social relations and structures, her interdisciplinary work proposes a collective reimagining through humour, care, subversion, discomfort, a celebration of the eccentric, and a commitment to the deeply personal, manifesting as brief encounter, collaborative space, performance, film, publication, meal, and variety show.

Ms Ng has a Master of Fine Arts in Art and Social Practice from Portland State University. Recently she was Artist-in-Residence 2019–20 at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Artist Fellow at New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, and Artist-in-Residence at Buangkok Square. She is currently Community & Education Artist-in-Residence at the Singapore Art Museum and is editor of *Conversations On Everything*, an interview-based Portland publication on social forms of art.

RAKA Maitra is a dancer who defies the conventional dichotomy of “classical” and “contemporary”. She is a dancer simpliciter, exploring the notion of “Asian culture” through her own language of contemporary dance. The basis of her movement is classical Indian dance and martial arts. Ms Raka is a recipient of the Shringarmani, a national award for Odissi. She was an associate artist with The Substation from 2007–2011.

On top of her role as Artistic Director of Chowk Productions, which she founded in 2014 with the support of the National Arts Council's Seed Grant, Ms Raka is also Co-Artistic Director of The Substation. Her works have been regularly commissioned by the Esplanade and have travelled extensively internationally. Her

notable works include *The Hungry Stones*, *The Blind Age*, *The Second Sunrise*, from: *The Platform* and the *Pallavi* Series.

In the words of *Dance Europe*, “Maitra is without doubt a dancer of the 21st century.”

REBEKAH SANGEETHA Dorai is an actor, singer and voiceover artist. Her one-person show *Building A Character* was sold out at the Singapore Theatre Festival (2018) and featured as *The Business Times*’ “Top 3 Theatre Picks of the Year”. She also scored a Best Supporting Actress nomination at the Life! Theatre Awards Singapore for her multi-character turn in *Three Fat Virgins* (2019). Other credits include the National Day Parade 2020, *Who’s There?* (The Transit Ensemble), *Merdeka* (Wild Rice), *Miss British* (Art of Strangers, Esplanade), and *Eloquence* (TheatreWorks). Following *Sangeetha Sings Sinatra* — Live at the Esplanade, her next concert is slated for 2021/2. She was recently seen in *7cm* (directed by K Rajagopal) and will next be starring in *Moonrise Sunset*, set to premiere globally in spring 2022. As a voiceover artist, she has lent her voice to pitches for DBS, AirAsia, Singapore University of Social Sciences, and Channel NewsAsia.

Carol SOON is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies where she leads the Society and Culture Department. Her research interests are in false information, media regulation, digital inclusion, new media and activism, online public opinion sensing and public engagement. She has published her research in books and peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Asian Journal of Communication*, and *Public Integrity*.

Dr Soon is also Associate Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship, which is supported by Temasek Foundation. She is Vice Chair of Singapore’s Media Literacy Council and Principal Investigator at the Centre for Trusted Internet and Community, National University of Singapore (NUS). She has taught courses at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the University Scholars Programme at NUS. She speaks about her research frequently at international, regional and local forums.

In 2015, Dr Soon received the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Research Excellence Award. She was also a recipient of the Australian Endeavour Award in 2012.

Alvin TAN is currently Director (Engagement and Participation) in the National Arts Council (NAC). In this role, he works with colleagues to create opportunities for people to have meaningful encounters in the arts and to ensure access, participation, and inclusion in and through the arts. He has served in various positions in the public and private sectors, as well as in academia.

Danny TAN is a renowned and prolific Singaporean artist, and Chief Executive Officer and Founding Artistic Director of Odyssey Dance Theatre Ltd. He has been recognised for his artistic excellence and dance curation worldwide. As a multi-talented arts practitioner and producer who is strong in crafting artistic direction and consultancy, dance-making and production, and also an educator and consultant, Dr Tan has contributed extensively to dance education from 1994. Since 2010, he has authored and published more than 10 books. Dr Tan has transformed Odyssey Dance Theatre from a dance company to a notable dance institution in Singapore, providing holistic support towards a healthy dance ecosystem in Singapore and the region. As a pace-setting Singaporean cultural ambassador with his creative voice in various capacities, he is sincere in his dealings with others and has earned the trust of many local and international esteemed organisations, and across different sectors. In 2010, he was conferred the Doctor in Creative Industries at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

Leslie TAN is a founding member of the T'ang Quartet and cellist of Red Dot Baroque, who has performed to critical acclaim in major venues and festivals worldwide. These include the Tanglewood and Aspen Festivals in the United States; the Melbourne and Port Fairy Folk Festivals in Australia; the New Zealand Festival; the Hong Kong Arts Festival; and the Prague-Vienna-Budapest Sommerakademie and the Edinburgh Festival in Europe.

A graduate of the Trinity College of Music in London at 19, Mr Tan returned to Singapore and embarked on a career with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He continued his studies in the USSR, at the Tchaikovsky-Moscow State Conservatory with Natalia Shahkovskaya; and in the United States, working closely with chamber music experts Paul Katz and Norman Fischer; and with historical performance specialist, Kenneth Goldsmith.

Mr Tan is a champion of outreach activities, and musical and transformative education in the ASEAN region, teaching in different festivals and projects. He has recently started a programme with the Singapore International Foundation to work with Afghan refugees.

TAN Tarn How is Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Policy Studies. He researches arts and cultural policy.

Edmund WEE is the founder of Epigram Books which was set up in 2011 to champion Singapore literature. Since then, it has published over 400 titles and is best known for *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, the multiple award-winning graphic novel by Sonny Liew. Its authors regularly win the major book prizes in

Singapore, including the Hedwig Anuar Children's Book Award, Singapore Literature Prize, and Singapore Book Awards. It is also behind the country's richest literary prize, the annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize for unpublished novels, which in 2021 awarded \$50,000 to six writers from Singapore and the region. In an earlier life, he was a psychologist, journalist, and designer.