

Full Report on the IPS-NGS-SAM Roundtable on

Art in the Time of Pandemic: Meaning, Relevance and Future

(part of the IPS-NGS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series)



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Cover photo:

Checkpoint Theatre's Joint Artistic Directors Claire Wong and Huzir Sulaiman getting ready on set for the filming of *Checkpoint Celebrates! 2020: Can't Stop, Won't Stop*. Photo by Althea Duncombe, courtesy of Checkpoint Theatre.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have raised deep questions about the place of art in a newly configured world. Social distancing and the resultant ban on live performances and exhibitions have led artists to think about whether and how the meaning and relevance of the arts have changed. If so, are such changes different for different art forms? What should artists do to embrace, resist, or adapt to the crisis? What can they learn from the crises of the past, and what does the present one bode for the future of the arts? This is a report of a roundtable discussion on these issues jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) on 10 June 2020. Titled “Art in the Time of Pandemic: Meaning, Relevance and Future”, the online event was attended by over 100 participants from policymakers to academics and artists. Five presenters gave their personal reflections and experiences as artists living in the pandemic. They also discussed the challenges faced by the different art forms, measures undertaken by artists and arts groups to tackle them, and the ways in which policymakers can help them cope with the effects of the circuit breaker measures.

The five presenters were:

1. Ms Nabilah Said, playwright and editor, ArtsEquator
2. Associate Professor Robin Loon, Theatre Studies, Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore and co-founder, Centre 42
3. Ms Nirmala Seshadri, dance artist and researcher
4. Ms Zarina Muhammad, artist, educator and researcher
5. Mrs Marian Pastor Roces, independent curator, critic of institutions and active member of resistance politics in the Philippines

The presentations were followed by a discussion that was moderated by Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

Intimate truths and performance anxieties

Playwright and editor Ms Nabilah Said suggested that the temporary lack of work had led to many artists including herself to question their self-identity, value and worth in society. Such questions arise because of the capitalist thinking that has been entrenched in the minds of people — where their self-value and worth are deeply tied to the visible contributions that they make to the economy, she said. The media has further reinforced such perceptions among artists by labelling people as “essential” and “non-essential” workers, with the former being regarded as more valuable and productive. However, the pandemic has also allowed artists to come together and experiment with new ways of presentation and focus on the process of creating art. Although these experiments are not always easy or successful, they still offer important lessons for artists. She also added that artists should use the interim as an opportunity to think about how they could make the industry a safe, inclusive, and equal space for everyone to participate in. To achieve this, they must engage in frank and open discussions with one another.

Loss of the public and communal elements in theatre

Associate Professor Robin Loon, who is co-founder of arts space Centre 42, spoke about how the theatre industry has been impacted by the transition of performances from the physical to the digital space. Theatre is a public and communal art meant to be enjoyed by audiences in a shared physical space, he said. It is an art form where audiences need to undergo key social rituals such as dressing up, moving into a particular space and occupying that space together with others for a certain period of time. Moving to online platforms like Zoom and social media thus becomes very challenging as this public and communal nature of theatre is eroded. He asked fellow artists to look for new ways to re-introduce some of these elements that are unique to theatre. He agreed with Ms Nabilah that some of these efforts may fail but they can still be very useful learning lessons for artists. He also stressed that the current period is important for artists to reflect on how they can continue to improve their practices and build stronger ties with their audiences.

Limits of going digital

Dance artist and researcher Ms Nirmala Seshadri spoke about the difficulties faced by art forms, like dance, which rely heavily on the physical gathering of performers in a shared space. She acknowledged that moving dance performances online from physical spaces has provided some benefits for performers and audiences. For example, it has allowed artists to reach out to more people globally, and be more inclusive and affordable. Nevertheless, digitalisation may not always be the best solution for art forms like dance in the long run. For example, audiences will experience online fatigue as well as the loss of intimate connections with performers. There will also be financial unsustainability because much of the content online is made available for free. Despite these challenges, she also said the current period was a valuable opportunity for artists and arts groups to reflect on the nature of their

practice and think about how their work can contribute to humanity. In line with this, she asked if NAC could provide a “reflection grant” for artists and arts groups to allow them to simply focus on creation rather than production during this time.

Revisiting the relevance and meanings of work in times of uncertainty

Artist, educator and researcher Ms Zarina Muhammad said artists like her whose work is research-driven, collaborative, and participatory have been made to experience discomfort and vulnerability during this period. She said that many artists, including herself, have been forced to think about how the pandemic has placed limits on certain practices and the ways in which they can organise their work in the public space. Nevertheless, she said the pandemic has encouraged artists to form new support networks and establish “care communities” as a way to overcome some of the existing challenges. This is especially important and much needed given that not all artists have equal access to resources and support systems made available to them. Ms Zarina also stressed that artists need to continue revisiting their past work and reflecting on the meanings and purposes of their work for the wider society.

Policymaking during complex times

Mrs Marian Pastor Roces, an independent curator, critic, policy writer and activist based in the Philippines, spoke about how arts policies can be crafted during such a fraught period. She stressed that the pandemic is and will not be the only catastrophic event that people will have to face within the next 10 years. For example, climate change is another large-scale problem that people need to start preparing for after the current crisis. To overcome such problems, artists, scientists, and philosophers need to reflect qualities such as humility and mastery in their policymaking as well as be willing to work with one another. She asked if there could be more enabling policies that could build stronger academic support for art making, allow artists to critique aspects of the cultural industry, and create deeper levels of interaction among art, science, philosophy, and the civil society.

Discussion

The main points raised during the discussion that followed were:

1. Artists and arts groups should make good use of the current period to discover and explore new ways to stay visible and relevant, and continue building relationships with their audiences.
2. Artists and arts groups should be open to and learn from failures when experimenting with new ways of presentation.
3. The use of online spaces has helped artists and arts groups to connect with their audiences, but they need to understand the limitations that come with it and think of ways to overcome them.

4. Artists must start to focus on the process of production rather than the creation of the end product. To encourage this, NAC should introduce grants for Research and Design (R&D) and works that are currently in progress during this time.
5. Policymakers should think of ways to integrate aspects of art, science, philosophy, and civil society together to be more effective and useful during such a complex period.
6. A “reflection grant” could be given to artists and arts groups to let them use the interim to think about the meanings, relevance, and future of their work.

Introduction

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), together with the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM), organised a roundtable discussion on 10 June 2020 to discuss on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on artists and arts groups in Singapore.

The roundtable discussion was held via Zoom webinar and examined the following issues:

- What has the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic been for the different art forms?
- What are the measures that have been adopted by members of the art community to overcome the challenges and struggles faced?
- What are some of the things that artists and arts groups have learnt in the absence or slowdown of work during the past few months?
- How can government policies be further improved to help artists and the arts community to sustain itself in the present and the aftermath of the pandemic?

Over 100 participants, including policymakers, artists, art practitioners and academics attended this roundtable. The roundtable was chaired by Dr Eugene Tan, Director of the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, started the roundtable with introductory remarks. Five speakers delivered their presentations in the following order:

1. Ms Nabilah Said, playwright and editor, ArtsEquator
2. Associate Professor Robin Loon, Theatre Studies, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences National University of Singapore and co-founder, Centre 42
3. Ms Nirmala Seshadri, dance artist and researcher
4. Ms Zarina Muhammad, artist, educator and researcher
5. Mrs Marian Pastor Roces, independent curator, critic of institutions and active member of resistance politics in the Philippines

The presentations were followed by a half-hour discussion moderated by Dr Tan. In his remarks, Dr Tan talked about the impact of similar catastrophic events in history and their impact on art and society — for example, the Spanish Flu in 1918, which coincided with the end of the First World War and was responsible for millions of

deaths in Europe. The prevailing sense of nihilism had led to the creation of the Dada movement in Europe. Similarly, in Germany, the Bauhaus school of art was established in 1919 under the discourse of health and hygiene. In the case of Singapore, with the gradual re-opening of arts and cultural spaces, Dr Tan said we would need to start thinking about the present and lasting impact of the pandemic on the arts industry and the ways to move forward.

Speaker 1: Nabilah Said, playwright and editor

Hi everyone, I am Nabilah. I am a playwright; I write plays in Malay and English, usually about issues written from the perspective of a Malay person, a Muslim person. I am also the editor of *ArtsEquator* where we cover the arts in Singapore and also the larger Southeast Asian region. Today, I am representing myself, but I do have that insider-outsider perspective, that is where I am speaking from.

I will start with the anxieties that we are feeling. As you may know, all the theatres are currently closed. Unlike some other businesses, it is really hard to turn theatre-making into a home-based business — primarily because the way we work is highly collaborative, and the way we work requires gathering.

To start with, I am sharing two photos with you. Please allow me to bring in examples from the visual arts.

In the first photo, you see “I am not an artist. I am not important” written on a name card. Visual artist Zaki Razak gave this to then-President Mr Tony Tan at an exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum in 2013.¹



Namecard presented by visual artist Zaki Razak to the then-President Mr Tony Tan in 2013. Photo courtesy of *TODAY*.

¹ Zaki's work was a performance installation titled *Revising Art: The Ten-Year Series*, shown as part of the President's Young Talents exhibition

This was a reference to an earlier artwork. Here in the second photo, you will see artist Tang Da Wu wearing a jacket that says “Don’t give money to the arts”. This was in the presence of the then-president, Mr Ong Teng Cheong. Besides wearing the coat, Tang also offered a letter to the president that said, “I am an artist, I am important”. He did this in 1995, during a time when performance art was essentially not allowed in Singapore (between the years 1994 and 2003).



Artist Tang Da Wu wearing a jacket that says “Don’t give money to the arts” in the presence of the then-president, Mr Ong Teng Cheong in 1995. Photo courtesy of *sinθ* magazine.

There are a couple of reasons why I am choosing to start with these photos. At this time of COVID-19 when we cannot do theatre as we usually do, I think that we are going through a similar time of identity questioning, identity making, identity reinforcing, all at once, in a very fraught period. And it comes down to our notions of personal value and worth.

Just from my own experience, at this time when I cannot write, for so many reasons, I have asked myself, “If I’m not writing, am I still a playwright?” And other artists have said similar things to me as well. What it tells me about me, is that I have been valuing myself so much in terms of the work that I am doing, in terms of the product I am creating or helping to create. I am so entrenched in that capitalistic structure, that when I am not working, I find almost no value in myself. That is quite a sad thing to think about yourself.

The other thing about these photos/artworks that I have chosen is that these were examples of artists directly interacting with the heads of state, the representations of the government at the time and the larger state machinery. And it was really to

make them reckon with the worth of artists, the value of artists, and the importance of artists at that point of time.

I think with COVID-19, there has been this larger messaging that has come into play, with how the media puts things: “these people are essential”, “these people, maybe not so essential”, and you see it in the way they are relaxing during the circuit breaker measures in Singapore. And it really feeds into how you look at the value of yourself and your work, to the country. Because a lot of what we value in this country, is tied to economic worth.

But if you ask a theatre maker about what they love about theatre, the answer usually is about its magic — the magic of storytelling — or that feeling you have when you’re in a room with others, or the exercise of empathy that you often have. But the question is: Does the rest of the country value these things?

Now to the people in this room who are not artists — there are over 100 of you and some of you might be part of the state — I’d like to ask: What is the value of artists to you? What is the worth of artists to this country? And to that, I’d like to add: What is the worth of a soul to a body?

Of course, these questions are not new. We have always worked under these conditions. But at the moment, theatre is hurting. I think that pain has really brought the community together. People are thinking about similar questions and trying to find solutions — even if temporarily. What has been happening is that theatre makers are increasingly doing work online — new work online — such as the Singapore Repertory Theatre’s showcase of new plays on Facebook Live (*The Coronalogues: Silver Linings*).

People are making mistakes — and I am loving it. I love how technology is being used to experiment with the limits of storytelling, and the possibilities and impossibilities of theatre. There is a deliciousness of the trial and error where I am relishing more in the trial and fixated less in the error — in essence, supporting a kind of playfulness that happens to be taking place during a crisis.

Touch You Later! is an online participatory performance by Chong Gua Khee and Bernice Lee (full disclosure: I am now working with them on this project) that explores the relationship we have with physical touch, and it was done on Zoom. The first time I encountered these ideas, I had gone for a showcase in Dance Nucleus, called *Tactility Studies — Bodies in a Room. Bodily, bodied. Touch You Later!* was based on the same principles, but because of circuit breaker measures, they had to move it online. And as a participant, we were invited to not only consider our relationship with our bodies, but also our relationship to our spaces and our things (which has changed so much during the circuit breaker). There was this idea of tactility. Of loss of touch. Of social distancing. What is the impact of not being able to touch other people outside of your home?

The reason why I am talking about this, is to think about the new possibilities of performance making in this time. What are new intimacies we can find with our audiences? What are the interim vocabularies we are discovering, and could something “interim” become part of our work in the future?

It comes with willingness to try, willingness to learn and get things wrong. Like trying to high-five someone through your Zoom box. It might not work but the experiment can be exciting. Here, I would like to quote theatre director Jo Kukathas (with her permission). She is currently doing rehearsals for *Parah*, a play by Alfian Sa’at, over in Kuala Lumpur. These rehearsals are on Zoom. Like infants we are learning to walk all over again. “Like infants we are going to fall down. And pick ourselves up. It was a good feeling to be so on edge. Failure is a good teacher”.

I would like to acknowledge that many theatre makers in Singapore are also using Zoom. But what I found profoundly beautiful in Jo’s Facebook post was the willingness to lean into the possibility of failure and to be open about it. This is something we do not do as much here.

Vulnerability is difficult — when you are in a community that’s small, you do feel like you need to create narratives of success. This feeds into the idea of model minority — the ones who succeed, beat the odds — that can-do. So, when COVID makes you unable to do what you could do, what you’ve been doing for years and years, under I must say not easy conditions — the act of “not doing”, the total shift in the conditions in which you do work — that’s understandably very difficult.

The reason why I am talking about this is that leaning into vulnerability can create intimacy, can create new connections with people. And I really think that this will become part of our permanent vocabulary of theatre making.

Talking about openness and realness. I am part of a working group that’s currently talking to freelancers, to look at bad practices that exist in the theatre industry, and the grey areas, ethical concerns that practitioners have — recommendations of best practices in the industry, because there are none. We are asking a lot of the freelancers — which is to have these open and honest conversations. If we do not talk about things, nothing will change; on an industry level, things will go back to business as usual.

In an art form that talks about justice, fairness, equality, all these good ideals — are we complicit to any bad practices ourselves? Are we examining our power structures? Are our rehearsal spaces equal spaces for everyone? Are they safe spaces for everyone? Who is left out of the theatre space, and how do we invite them in?

In the *Angkat Rumah* tradition, practised especially in the past in villages in Malaysia and Indonesia, people would carry houses together, whenever someone had to move. You might want to Google it. I wanted to use this as a metaphor really: if you

think of theatre as the house, we need to come together to move this house to a new space. But let us also use this time to really examine this house. Look at what needs repair, what's rotting, what new rooms need to be built. How can we make this house safer, stronger, more welcoming?

To my fellow artists, I would like to say: We have been silenced before and we have always managed to find our voice. With hope, with courage, with heart, with allies, we will get through this. Thank you.

**Speaker 2: Robin Loon, Associate Professor, Theatre Studies,
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and
Social Sciences, National University of Singapore and co-founder,
Centre 42**

Thank you, Eugene, and IPS for the very kind invitation and the opportunity to talk to everybody about this very serious topic. I want to also refer to what Nabilah Said was talking about just now, about artists' self-perceptions of their worth during this period. I want to link that to the panic that everybody feels that "I am nothing if I don't produce something" and "I am nothing if the public does not come and see me or endorse me". Before I go into that, I want to step back, as an academic, and re-look at the conditions that enable theatre. What are these conditions that we do not have right now? How should we engage them? I probably will not have any of these solutions. But I am just opening up conversations on these.

First thing, theatre in my opinion is a public art. It is meant to be appreciated and engaged in a public space communally. What happens when it is in your cell phone and you are watching alone, completely divorced from the communal element? How does that impact the appreciation aspect of what theatre is? Theatre has been designed in a way where it is meant to be consumed as a public art and as a communal art. So, when it transitions onto Zoom and screen, it is going to come up to a lot of difficulties and a lot of obstacles in accessing it.

The second thing I want to talk about is how theatre is a social ritual. You have to make an effort (whether you dress up or not) to actually leave your house and be in a space. So, the physical movement from one space to another and agreeing to inhabit the space for a particular moment is very much part of this ritual. What happens when this ritual is truncated and completely obliterated when we are unable to leave our houses?

Another thing is that theatre is about being in person, in space and in time. These three elements need to be together in order for theatre to be so powerful. So, the in-person is about a certain presence, an embodied presence, a co-presence with everybody else with that kinaesthetic empathy just to be in the same space as another. Then you have the whole idea of physical co-existence in a physical space. And of course, the most wonderful element of theatre is the unfamiliarity. It is there, you experience it and then it is gone. And what you experience is a form of uniqueness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that is theatre's unique selling point (USP). What you see is individualised and something that other people will not be able to experience.



A work-in progress documentation of *GEL* and *Old Lines New Meanings* at LT 13 in NUS. Photo courtesy of Centre 42.

I want to draw people's attention to the whole idea of audienceship. We watch theatre very differently from other mediums. We consume theatre very differently from the way that we consume media that comes through our various devices. So, again, these are the considerations I want artists to really consider if we can interrogate that? Can we reformat and reintroduce that? I like Jo Kukathas's and Nabilah Said's point on how it is okay to fail and learn from the failures. I also like the idea of how this is an interim. I would also like to share that I attended an e-learning forum at NUS yesterday and the Dean of Law Professor Chesterman talked about how we need to be aware of a lot of doom narratives out there — such as how we are never going to emerge from this crisis. As what Eugene had mentioned

earlier, we survived the earlier pandemic well. Similarity, I think we need to understand that we will emerge from this. As a person who really practises art, I have a lot of faith in the sciences to come up with a solution. But again, we need to understand that what we do during the interim is important.

How do we, as artists and a community, empower ourselves and continue our practices in a different format and in a way that still connects us to the audience? Let the audience find out what is it that we do rather than just show them the end product. So, I am quite interested in that way of thinking rather than churning out or rushing out to generate content that is really questionable and is really more a product of anxiety, rather than actual creative imagination, just like what Nabilah Said had mentioned.

So, the last thing I want to say, and this is in my opinion, how artists, art makers, arts practitioners and researchers in humanities differ from scientists in STEM is that scientists in STEM are driven by curiosity. They see a problem and think about the ways to solve it. For artists, we are driven by our imagination. We imagine alternatives in different ways. And I think that is a powerful thing that we should try to bank on and try to communicate to whatever types of audiences who are still there. Maybe, just continue to connect them through the community. We should just wait and be patient that we will emerge from this and come back and meet them face-to-face again. Right now, it's a long-distance relationship. But when all things are done, we will still be in the same space and same country again and we will be fine. That is all I have for now. Thank you.



Theatre Lab students from NUS adapting a stage performance of *Ties That Bind* over Zoom. Photo courtesy of Centre 42.

Speaker 3: Nirmala Seshadri, dance artist and researcher

I will speak as a dance artist and about my observations and experiences in the field in the current scenario. Now more than ever, I think the relationship between the body, the performing arts, physical space, and the notion of gathering — has become so very evident. Dance is about bodies moving, bodies touching and the coming together of artists and audience. And in that gathering, the art happens — it touches, it moves.

Now we are forced to suspend the ways in which we traditionally gathered, based upon which our dance forms emerged and evolved — whether in the rehearsal studio or physical performance space. What does this mean for dance? In attempting to respond to this question, I will broadly speak on:

1. Push towards digitalisation
2. How artists have been coping so far
3. The question: How shall we dance?



Dancers Tishani Doshi and Shaji John performing *Sharira* by Chandralekha. Photo courtesy of Mr Wolfgang Kirchner.

Let me start with:

1. The heightened emphasis on digitalisation

During this time of uncertainty, isolation and trauma, I think art can play a central role in people's lives. Many of us would have seen those memes that did the rounds on the increased consumption of the arts at this time.

At a time when so much in every sphere is migrating to online platforms, dancers' bodies too have begun moving into digital space.

We have to admit this is not completely new. In Singapore as I would imagine in some other countries, there has already been a strong focus on audience development, with digitalisation seen as a way of serving this end. But now, the scene is being pushed into this mode of working, creating, and presenting, sooner than anyone might have ever imagined. Nuanced conversations that happened previously regarding the digital space are now getting flattened due to COVID.

We know that COVID is not going anywhere anytime soon. So clearly, this push to digitalise will happen over a prolonged period and will in all likelihood remain for a very long time. For one thing, it is seen as a way to draw in new audiences from around the world. This migration into the digital space perhaps allows for some extent of inclusivity, affordability, and democratisation of the arts in light of the increasingly precarious world we are struggling to exist in. It is a whole different medium, but even when live performance returns, it will in all likelihood have to find a way to co-exist with the digital. Or not? What if art resists the pulls away from the "live" medium? I daresay, because of its corporeal nature, dance to a great extent might just resist it, especially the forms that are completely based on the intimacy of human bodies, and that live connection between the dancer and viewer. And as for audiences, I wonder how long they would want to engage with dance or other art forms on screen? Already, many people are getting really tired of being glued to the screen. If it becomes an overkill, then it may be detrimental to what we are hoping for. In any case, digitalisation has to take its own course. It cannot continue to be about archival material alone, or dancing in the kitchen. It is all very fluid, and we cannot actually determine sustainability at this stage. Much of the material online is going out for free so there are discussions going on how this could actually impact the arts negatively.

2. How have artists been coping so far?

From independent artists like myself to big companies, it is very clear that this is a very, very challenging time. Most of what artists wanted to do in 2020 were affected. We will be the last people to be allowed to get back to our work spaces. Right now, either independently in our respective homes or together online, we try to continue working.

For myself and my colleagues, our work in all spheres — from residency programmes to collaborative studio work and presentation, have been materially affected by being entirely online.

In a nutshell, I would say artists are trying to:

1. Stay visible and relevant, and respond to the situation;
2. Tap financial support (the artists' struggle for financial sustainability has always been present but now it is accentuated);
3. Stay connected — with audiences and also with one another;
4. Build knowledge;
5. Engage in artistic creation and exploration of new possibilities to be able to stay in the practice;
6. Just do nothing and be silent.

We have very few answers at the moment but with the whole world at a critical juncture, I believe that it will be difficult to visualise the way forward without the work of artists. How can we take cognisance of the present moment and allow the arts to speak about it? Because this is not only about a pandemic — it is about much more than that. Writer Arundhati Roy has described the pandemic as a portal or gateway between one world and the next.

This leads me to the next question:

3. How then shall we dance through this portal?

There is something dissonant about trying to replicate dance in ways that we did earlier, and organising online festivals when people are dying everywhere.

This is a valuable time for reflection — which is also an important part of the artistic process. In a rapidly changing environment, we all need that time to absorb what is actually happening. Can there be a reflection grant that allows artists to just be, to focus on creation rather than production? Would the wider society be willing to acknowledge the centrality of the arts and do what it takes to support the pause instead of consuming the frenzy? Especially since the ground has shifted, artists will have a lot of perspectives to bring vis-à-vis what this current situation says about being human. What are the boundaries of humanity?

At a certain level, every art form is threatened. At another level, there are differences. Theatre hinges so much on people coming together; writing is more disembodied. Dance is corporeal, and like theatre it is ephemeral and has been happening in diverse settings.

As a dancer trained initially in Bharatanatyam, I am excited not by the digitalisation of the dance but of the possibility of a return to its earlier mode of presentation — in small and intimate settings. Somehow the subtler nuances and texture of the form was lost when it had shifted onto the large proscenium stage.

There is a power and synchronicity in live art. Despite so much happening online, when people in Italy stepped out onto their balconies to sing, it moved us. Reading about the live dance performance in Santa Monica, California that was recently presented in a parking lot and how audiences watched from their cars with their headlights providing the lighting, made us sit up.

There could be scope for new forms of art, forms which may not sit comfortably with people but COVID-19 shouldn't sit comfortably with people anyway. The devastating effects of COVID-19 across the world are not just because of a virus. There is a range of issues for which I strongly feel society needs artists' perspectives.

As artists, it may prove more worthwhile to pause to reflect deeply at this time of rupture rather than rush to perform. Art is after all not only about the performance; it is also about research, creation, education, discovery, conversation and also just silence.

Silence to process the collective grief of this moment, to hold the massive weight of the loss of human life. Through art, to cultivate a greater empathy for humanity even as we speak of a return to normalcy.

I want to conclude by quoting Arundhati Roy who says: "We can choose to walk through [the portal], dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."



Dancer Chan Sze-Wei at the Contact Festival Kuala Lumpur held in 2013. Photo courtesy of Mr David Lim.

Speaker 4: Zarina Muhammad, artist, educator, and researcher

My immediate response is that we do not have the same access to resources and support networks. Since the escalation of this pandemic, I feel so many of us are grappling with how we are individually and collectively making sense of, unlearning and re-learning what grief, isolation, care, and solidarity means to us. How have we as individuals and as a collective arts community responded to the anxieties of this crisis? How have we negotiated varying forms of precarity underpinning cultural labour and the insecurity, fear, vulnerability many were facing? While there has been a proliferation of online content and a rapid hurtling shift towards digitisation of content, the bigger question of what needs to (systemically) change (within our practice, community, industry) looms large.

What are the entry points from which we can talk through strategies and inherited understandings for thriving and surviving in these times where new thresholds are being re-drawn or in a state of necessary and much needed destruction?

As liminal areas that simultaneously embody transformation and vulnerability, how do these “thresholds” necessitate and accelerate the unlearning/re-learning of:

- How to best sustain communities of care and mutual aid. How can art practice in these times further build on existing frameworks of care, empathy and sharing/redistributing resources? Artists have organised initiatives and come together to support families and individuals in need via social media platforms like Instagram — for example, #waresbookfair and the Facebook group #masks4migrantworkers.
- What is useful/essential/relevant across different disciplines and in our practice. Many art-focused panels in recent weeks have tackled this concern. (For example, “In Conversation: Pivoting for the Future” at the Singapore International Festival of the Arts — featuring Gaurav Kripalani and Nine Years Theatre, Toy Factory, The Necessary Stage, and The Finger Players). What needs to change? How can we rest without guilt and diminish certain pressures to continually be working and producing? How can we rethink “productivity” and the need for our work to fit into certain constructed “models”, “markets” and “career pathways”? How do we overcome the digital divide and rethink what “accessibility” means? How can there be greater democratic participation and revised ways of making and engaging with art?
- Solidarity structures in relation to climate injustice, social movements, and equitable and sustainable futures. I have listened to and reflected on the many urgent ongoing conversations on the issues of inequalities, access,

and human rights. What Alvin Tan from The Necessary Stage said at the SIFA panel mentioned above has stayed with me: “How can we be better human beings and practitioners?”

- Re-organising social/spatial relations. How have artists historically/previously utilised public space (or were disallowed to)? How can we rethink the ways art can intervene, assert itself, be situated, performed, activated in public/shared spaces? (Refer to the image at the end of this section, of the processional performance which was part of seven activations organised in response to my work *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold*. It was the work presented for the President Young Talents exhibition at 8Q, Singapore Art Museum. As there was a last-minute change to the venue of the performance and we were required to cross a short distance within a public space *without* a license, this created a fair bit of concern for some of the museum staff. Fortunately, the curators agreed to go ahead and allow the performance to take these few [unapproved by the authorities] steps, crossing the street to the other side of the SAM building for the second half of the performance. The other activations included poets, historians, theatre-makers, and musicians).
- Coping with the range of negative mental health impacts in this age of disruption and imposed isolation.
- Working through what has been perceived to be fragile or resilient aspects of the ecosystem. This loops back to the visceral, pragmatic, emotional and psychological. We are responding to this state of crisis, which perhaps is an exacerbation and amplification of an already present and ongoing crises our world has long been facing.

A running theme in many of my recent works have revolved around acts of mourning, gestures of reconciliation and the knowledge passed down through the generations in the form of lullabies, mementoes, *pusaka* (heirloom), instruction or storytelling that we end up believing as fact. Objects or intangible things that comfort or burden us.

Exactly a year ago, I was commissioned to create an installation for Noorlinah Mohamed’s N.O.W. (Not Ordinary Work) Festival at 72–13, TheatreWorks. It was titled *Apotropaic Texts* and it was a work that was in response and conversation with Ovidia Yu’s play *Three Fat Virgins (Unassembled)*. It was also part of a series of works created across 18 months from mid-2018 to early 2020. At the core of that particular work was the question of what we might (ritualistically/practically) do to help ourselves, and others, to feel safe, to cope with the micro and broader terrors of the everyday and the banal. The *tutup bumi* plant figured prominently in the installation. I was inspired by and drew from the fragments of “traditional” knowledge, particularly plant remedies, family specific rites, rituals of renewal, catharsis and

purification. Because of its leaf form which lies flat on the ground and covers more than its share of space; it is said that the Malays equate the *tutup bumi* with the pentacle seal of Solomon which confines the *jins* underground, and would plant it around the perimeters of their home, serving as a protective threshold.



Image of a *tutup bumi* (Seal of Solomon) plant, which is often used in specific rituals, rites and purification ceremonies. Photo courtesy of Ms Zarina Muhammad.

This plant has been used traditionally for herbal remedies and is reputed to be potent for all diseases. The work also had a lot to do with *angin*, or wind, a word that carries multiple meanings of “dis-ease” but also embodies curative treatments in Malay. (Such as *angin dalam hati*, *sakit angit*, *kepala angin*, *ikut angin*, *ada pokok ada angin* — you can refer to Carol Laderman’s *Taming the Winds of Desire: Psychology, Medicine, Aesthetics in Malay Shamanistic Performance*). The performance in question here refers to the spiritual ritual theatre, *Main Puteri Mak Yong*. Within these ritual performances, it is believed that those with more creative dispositions are likely to contain more *angin* within them. In other words, it is believed that artistically inclined individuals carry the force of a hurricane, as opposed to a gentle breeze — and this force can only be tempered (and the wind released) through artistic expression such as dance, movement, song, and music. It is believed an artist without an art form or a mode of creative expression is a dangerous thing.

I am wondering how much this might be relevant or applicable to many artists in this current moment, stricken with the limitations and stumbling blocks of this present crisis. This pandemic has led me to reflect on the uses/power of language, the metaphors, figurative, poetic or pragmatic ways in which we speak about dis-ease, illness, crisis, fraying mental health, instability, vulnerability (the fear of vulnerability), loss, grief and how we are finding ways to create new modes of being, thinking, speaking, making and embodying that are more restorative and curative.

In this isolated state of being in lockdown (even if it is somewhat partial in Singapore), I have been doing a fair bit of time-travelling in these timelines in my head. What were we doing a year ago? What would we be doing now if this pandemic had not happened? How much has changed? Have I been resistant to any of these changes? What have I been doing to alleviate, support, allay these fears and offer aid to others? While there was a need to recalibrate and find some footing in this altered reality, there were too many real fears related to thriving and surviving in these times. In these last few months, there has been an acceleration of unlearning and re-negotiating our relationship to time, to routines, to spatiality, presence and bodies in space, and really asking the tough questions on what counts as meaningful ways of re-engaging with our practice while crossing thresholds we might be unfamiliar with. Or just be with/for each other? And ourselves? What are the limits in which we can organise ourselves in public space, as artists or as citizens? What new rituals are we creating? For many of us whose practice is research driven, collaborative, participatory, requiring communal presence, we have really had to rethink how we are playing with distance and intimacy.

How do we cross these newly marked thresholds? As asked by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonising Methodologies*, how do we go about “rethinking the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play” as well as how artists participate and are inextricably entwined across multiple spheres of the world that we occupy?

In crossing these new thresholds and reflecting on the (obliterated or renewed) rituals we are now constructing to make sense of everyday life, I'd like to end with a short recitation or mantra or lullaby (however you'd like to call it) that my grandmother, mother, sister and womenfolk in my family would recite when they were with child, when they were crossing the threshold of creating space for new life, when they wanted to allay their fears and calm what was living yet unborn within them. *Amit-amit jabang bayi ojo kaget* — a saying in Javanese that quite simply translates to gently assuring a child that all will be well and there is nothing to fear.



The closing performance of *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* in 2018. Photo courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

Speaker 5: Marian Pastor Roces, independent curator, critic of institutions and active member of resistance politics in the Philippines

I will end with my remarks, this morning, on arts policy. However, I begin with the vast matters, with your forbearance.

COVID-19 is apparently survived well in societies that: a) are transparent; b) maintain social equality; and c) have a deep technical/scientific bench.

These features interlock in non-linear ways. They do not necessarily form causal chains. And do not necessarily remain in place for long. To say that the features are dynamic, and dynamically interacting, is an understatement.

The present pandemic has of course given us to understand how important the complexity sciences are, for quickly grasping multi-system, multi-disciplinary responses to an ill-understood contagion.

The pandemic forces the big picture upon us. The ability of nations and human beings to grasp the next 10 years of climate change is being rehearsed right now, by the entire human species as a species. This pandemic is not a one-off. This is clear. This is frightening.

And this brings all of us — it does not matter if Singaporean or Filipino or Somalian — to the outer limits that the capacity of human imagination can grasp. I cannot think of art and culture making, and policy, outside the scale of what needs to be thought out and thought through. I believe that the craftsmanship of policy under these circumstances requires a combination of humility and mastery.

Our metaphors, to begin with, are inadequate. Dystopia now sounds a bit romantic. Nation seems conceptually and perhaps in practical terms small. The word “pandemic” in an interconnected world seems conceptually inadequate.

However, art, science, and to philosophy do try to grasp complexity as verily job description. Artists, scientists, and philosophers succeed when they are in part the other. They also fail because — working within institutionalised conventions of thought and practice that are confined to epistemological regimes — many are unable to see from outside these regimes.

The philosopher Bruno Latour in an interview just this week, was asked about James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis. Latour answered: “He and [Lynn] Margulis spotted Gaia. Lovelock from space, taking the question as globally as possible; Margulis from bacteria, taking the question from the other end, both realising that

Life, capital L, has managed to engineer its own conditions of existence. For me that is the greatest discovery of this period, though it is still not very much accepted by mainstream science. This may be because we do not yet have the tools to receive it.”

The limits of the imagination do confine scientists, artists, and philosophers — *except* that scientists, artists, and philosophers are also rewarded for and by curiosity for the unknown and nearly impossible to comprehend. If they are to thrive professionally, they have to cultivate a hankering for dark matter, so to speak; for forms and structures that elude comprehension, but must somehow, urgently be grasped.

But it is clear that Utopian aspiration can no longer energise their work. The desire for an ideal society can no longer serve as the quasi-religious moral call. There is only one motivation now for ambitioning to grasp the scale of what is upon us as a species, and it is avoiding extinction. Or even to comprehend extinction through human agency.

How does policy encompass this scale of things, in enabling art and its relation to what we might call the end game of the human race? How do we articulate the need to think complexly without, say, sounding like a repeat of Theodor Adorno at the end of the Second World War?

Without suggesting a global template (templates should be regarded suspiciously), here is my enumeration:

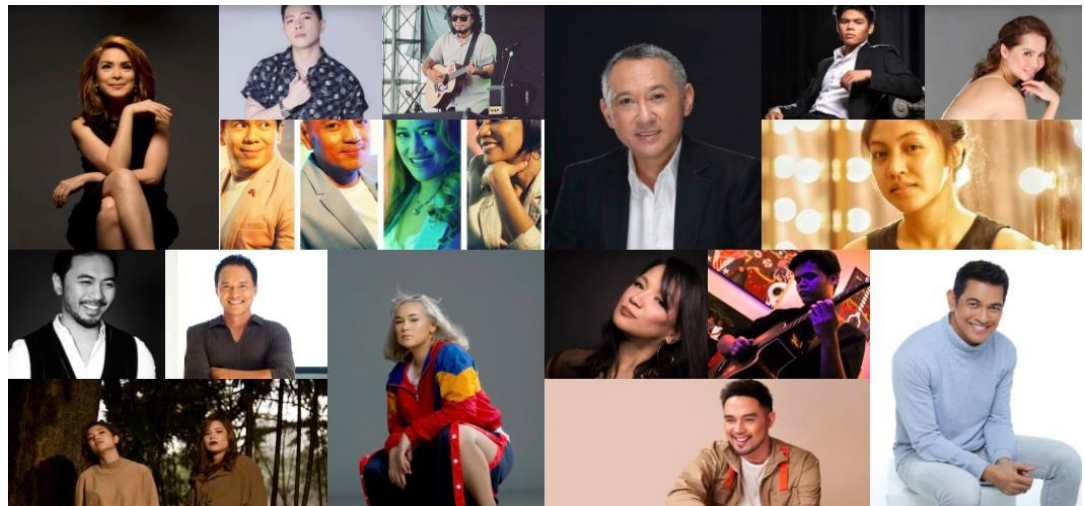
- Enabling policy for even stronger academic support for art-making than during and after the postcolonial turn during the 20th century.
- Enabling policy to critique the rhetorical structures under the rubric of cultural industries and the econometric view of the use of the imagination.
- Enabling policy to facilitate liberation from regimes of thought that instrumentalise art — because there is nothing more damaging to the intensification of the imagination than to constantly find ways to make art useful.
- Enabling policy to empower artists to engage in sophisticated ways in the manipulated reality campaigns in cyber-space.
- Enabling policy to institutionally deepen interaction between and among art, science, philosophy, *and* civil society action fronts.

As the human race reconsiders the meaning of food, clothing, shelter, community, travel, work, politics, the biosphere, nature, and so forth, exhibitions and performance included — art must be free from instrumentalising imperatives.

As a final provocation. Art must be freed from needing to be relevant. Now is no longer the time to worry about silly art made from intra-art concerns, created with inordinate carbon footprints. That stuff will not adapt. Art will be scientific, philosophical, and activist, or it will simply be empty.



An online performance, titled *Bayanihan Musikahan*², organised by Mrs Marian Pastor Roces and four others in March 2020. More than 200 artists were involved in this online performance that lasted about two-and-a-half months. They raised more than US\$2 million for massive food distribution to the urban poor in Manila. The organisers partnered with Philippine Business for Social Progress, a 50-year-old foundation that manages funds for corporate social responsibility projects and the biggest urban poor network for targeted food distribution. Photo courtesy of Mrs Marian Pastor Roces.



Some examples of local artists who were part of *Bayanihan Musikahan*. Photo courtesy of Mrs Marian Pastor Roces.

² More information on *Bayanihan Musikahan*, can be found at <https://www.bayanihanmusikahan.org/>

Epilogue

The draining of life from streets, from cities, is now suddenly reversed. Trying to stay alive in homes is suddenly switched, thrown awry by the rawness of life and death decisions. Mr Trump walled himself in the White House. The wall he built around the White House overnight became a performative gallery. It seems to me that art marks the space between life and death.

Discussion

Possibilities of creating without producing during the interim

A participant who was from theatre agreed with Ms Nabilah that artists should recognise the value of creating rather than producing during this period. He asked the panel to provide their suggestions on what can be done to encourage this.

Ms Nabilah said the NAC could give grants and other forms of assistance to support works that are currently in progress by artists during this period and encourage more Research and Development (R&D). She has been trying to work with fellow artists on ideas and ways to continue working during this period. She stressed that it is important for them to use resources that they have, to continue working because working is what gives them the motivation to remain resilient. Some of the available resources that artists use to stay connected with one another might have their own shortcomings (e.g., technical lags in Zoom), but artists should continue exploring them and creating solutions to successfully overcome some of them.

Assistance from the government

Another theatre artist asked the panellists how the government has helped artist cope with the pandemic. According to the participant, he felt that the government has not provided any direct relief or funding and has only discussed the difficulties of artists in a generic and uniform manner.

Responding to this, National Gallery Singapore's Dr Tan said that when exhibitions were cancelled at NGS and SAM, they started an initiative to work with other organisations in Singapore to support independent artists, art spaces and cultural workers. More details on this initiative will be made known soon. He also said NAC's digitalisation grant is aimed at helping artists use online platforms to remain visible. He asked the panellists if the government should further step up on its current efforts to help more artists and arts groups during this period.

Ms Nirmala agreed with the participant's observations. She said that if economic gain is going to remain as the key focus of the government during this period, it is inevitable that some artists and arts groups will be left behind. This is a loss that was allowed to happen and therefore, society has to gradually accept this unless there is a change in the government's perspective.

Mrs Roces said artists in the Philippines have been more successful than the government in helping vulnerable members of the community. An example was how a group of five artists, including herself, organised a series of online musical shows featuring many of the country's top artists for about two months. The shows raised over US\$2 million, which was used to feed the urban poor in Manila. Many of the artists and crew members supported this effort despite their own financial problems, she said. On Ms Nabilah's call for artists to be open in experimenting with new modes of presentation, Mrs Roces said many of the artists in the online musical shows also faced technical problems. Yet, they persevered, and this should be the way artists should respond. Even if the government is not able to do anything, artists

and vulnerable members of the community can and must step forward to do what they can.

Ms Zarina gave examples of similar initiatives in Singapore such as artists making face masks for migrant workers and using social media platforms like Instagram to raise funds and resources for the vulnerable.

Associate Professor Loon added that artists in Singapore have always been willing to help one another in times of need and that they should continue to do so if help from the government is not sufficient or does not come fast enough. There should be more intermediaries such as Centre 42, which was set up to connect artists and arts groups. Such connections are important as they help artists to have access to resources and manpower to stay visible and relevant during this period. For example, he suggested that dance artists could collaborate with technical experts to stream performances online. During such a challenging period, it is important that artists are willing to actively seek for help when needed. Although financial capital is essential, artists should also look for ways to develop more human capital via support networks and volunteer platforms.

Ms Nabilah also said that the relationship between arts and the government has always been complex even during non-disaster periods. As such, it is now suddenly difficult for artists to put these aside and ask for the government's assistance. Apart from disaster relief, she asked what is it that artists can use to rebuild their relationship with the state. There are so many other questions that need to be answered before talking about disaster relief, even if it is the most urgent issue that needs attention at this point of time, she added.

How can art forms that rely on social proximity sustain themselves?

Mr Tan Tarn How asked if all of the art forms that rely heavily on social proximity would be "dead or at least in comatose" since there were many who felt that the effects of the pandemic would last for a year or two, and what artists could do in such a situation.

Associate Professor Loon said theatre and other artists need to react accordingly to the different stages of the circuit breaker measures. He suggested that when Singapore moves on to Phase Two of the circuit breaker where the government will start to ease on its limits on social gathering, small-scale performances could be allowed to cater to smaller groups of audiences. He added that these small-scale and intimate performances could prove to be a moving experience for audiences. Theatre companies can present shorter plays and use technology such as multiple-camera systems to offer audiences the experiences of being in a physical theatre as much as possible. However, he also recognised that this can be costly, and artists need to look for ways to offset some of these costs. Since the return to large-scale productions will not be possible in the near future, theatre artists need to strategically make the best use of the interim to empower and develop the current theatre business development model in Singapore.

How can artists move forward?

In response to Mrs Roces' presentation, a participant asked if it is possible to design a policy that can effectively integrate the arts, sciences, and civil society in Singapore.

Ms Nabilah said that while many artists, including herself, wish to see the integration of the arts, sciences, and civil society in policymaking, it is quite difficult to achieve this in Singapore because of the ways in which different departments within the government are being run. Despite advocating for a whole-of-government approach to develop the different industries and sectors, she observed that the arts sector is often left alone. For example, artists often find that they cannot directly talk to the heads of the different departments under NAC. They are usually only able to talk to individual officers who can be sympathetic to their different causes and needs but may not be able to adequately offer the support that artists may need. Adding to the discussion, Ms Zarina said that art educators and institutions need to better recognise and understand the overlapping relationship between art, activism and civil society when designing lessons for students.

Apart from these, Ms Nirmala also emphasised the need for artists and arts groups to show greater care, concern, and empathy during this period. For a long time, people in society have been accustomed to the spirit of competition. However, the pandemic has taught artists and arts groups on the importance of working together to overcome the challenges that they face. She highlighted the example of Indian musician T. M. Krishna's launch of a music festival in South India to raise funds for artists who were dissociated from the digital economy. She acknowledged that the local arts community has also been actively involved in similar community-building efforts and encouraged it to continue doing so.

Agreeing with the need for artists and arts groups to forge stronger cooperation and solidarity, Associate Professor Loon also reminded them of the need to be aware of other "fault lines" that can emerge as they experiment with new ways of presentation. For example, the switch to online and digital platforms can exclude audiences with unequal access to technology. They may not have access to stable bandwidth, which can prevent them from enjoying online performances. Therefore, while online and digital platforms may be the most feasible solution in the present moment, artists and arts groups need to consider the different context and environment of different groups of audiences before rushing to create online content.

Similarly, Ms Roces said that there are now many "gruelling" problems such as social inequalities created by manipulators that need to be resolved. She said many of these problems could be solved by artists who use their imagination and sense of curiosity. Mrs Roces defined policy as "the crafting of the interface between different operating systems". Based on this, she stressed that policymakers need to know how to bring the different interfaces together in a way that can effectively address many of the existing problems together with artists. This is a complex process and policymakers need to start thinking deeper about this as the pandemic continues.

About the Speakers

LOON, Robin is an Associate Professor in Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a practising playwright, dramaturg and is one of the four co-founders of Centre 42 (a partnership with National Arts Council). Centre 42 is dedicated to the promotion, creation and documentation of texts for the Singapore stage. He researches mostly in Singapore theatre, and the relationship between theatre and gender & popular culture. He is also interested in translation, having translated Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* and Haresh Sharma's *Sea* into Mandarin.

NABILAH Said is a playwright, poet, and editor of regional arts website *ArtsEquator*. She has won awards for recent works *Inside Voices* (2019, VAULT Festival, London) and *ANGKAT: A Definitive, Alternative, Reclaimed Narrative of a Native* (2019, M1 Singapore Fringe Festival), the latter winning Best Original Script at the 2020 Life! Theatre Awards. She is the founder of Malay playwright collective Main Tulis Group. Ms Nabilah was an arts correspondent with *The Straits Times* from 2014 to 2017 and worked in the museum and heritage sector prior to that. She has a Master of Arts in Writing for Performance from Goldsmiths, University of London.

NIRMALA Seshadri is a dance artist and researcher who seeks to recontextualise her classical dance form, Bharatanatyam. Her social justice perspective leads her to use the body and performance space to interrogate existing inequalities and the problematising boundaries of time, place, gender, and caste, among other social constructs. Her quest for autonomy and sensorial perception led her to Butoh. Bridging dance practice with theory, her research interests include kinesthesia and corporeality, gender, tradition and transition, site specificity, cultural hybridisation and the politics of identity. A recipient of the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council (Singapore), she graduated with a Master of Arts in Dance Anthropology (Distinction) from the University of Roehampton, London.

ROCES, Marian is an independent curator and critic of institutions. She founded and leads a corporation, TAOINC, which curates museum, public art, and park projects. Her work in criticism is published globally, and an anthology was released in 2019: "Gathering: Political Writing on Art and Culture" (Museum of Contemporary Art and Design). Ms Roces is active in resistance politics in the Philippines.

TAN, Eugene is Director of the National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum. His previous appointments include Programme Director at the Economic Development Board, where he oversaw the development of Gillman Barracks; and Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. He received his PhD in Art History from the University of Manchester. He is a member of the Bizot Group and also serves on the boards of CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, and the International Advisory Committee of the Mori Art Museum.

TAN Tarn How is Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Policy Studies. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and internet policy.

ZARINA Muhammad is an artist, educator, and researcher whose practice is deeply entwined with a critical re-examination of oral histories, ethnographic literature and other historiographic accounts about Southeast Asia. Working at the intersections of performance, mixed media installation, text, ritual, sound and moving image, she is interested in the broader contexts of myth-making, haunted historiographies and role of the artist as “cultural ventriloquist” who lends multiple voices to spectral matters and speculative histories. She has been working on a long-term project on Southeast Asia’s provisional relationship to the occult, ritual magic and the immaterial against the dynamics of global modernity and the social production of rationality.