

THOUGHTS ON ART IN SOCIETY

Curated Conferences

Revealing Contexts: A Meeting Point on Art & Social Action in Asia | May 2021



This document is shared as background reading for people planning to join the session: Thoughts on Art in Society, on May 21st and 22nd, 2021. It includes statements on the practice of socially-engaged art from the participants of the Curated Conference, based on a series of exchange and discussion around their respective contexts. The statements include a brief description of their practice for context, and reflect their respective philosophies and approaches.

It is accompanied by two illustrations, which are visual interpretations of these statements. These illustrations were commissioned by the group members, from Chari Loke. Please note that the images are supplied for purposes of discussion in the Thoughts on Art in Society sessions. They will be made available on the MCH website after the Meeting Point; please do not distribute them elsewhere before then.

With thanks to Janet Pillai for curating and facilitating the Conference, and Sunitha Janamohan for compiling and editing these statements.

The session(s) take place on May 21st and May 22nd from 14:45 – 16:15 ICT (Bangkok).

You can access the sessions using the following information:

<https://zoom.us/j/93202898039?pwd=TGpaVU1KYmFEd28rZ2tyN1hNVVdhdz09>

Meeting ID: 932 0289 8039

Passcode: 49204

I. Ngiam Su-Lin (Singapore)

Profile

As an arts practitioner and community cultural worker in Singapore, I have witnessed the unique value artistic methodologies and processes bring to engaging on difficult, taboo issues, fractured and marginalised communities, and those who are disconnected and feeling disempowered.

My training in theatre and psychology, and coming from a family of social workers and educators provided me with a deep grounding and purpose, for what I do. It led me to work in theatre, working with very socially-conscious companies, to doing counselling and also pastoring an inclusive church (the only LGBTQ-affirming church in Singapore) for a period of time. The vision for my practice has been to intersect the various areas that are important to me – arts and culture, community development and spirituality.

This led to the co-founding of ArtsWok Collaborative in 2013, a non-profit which works at the intersection of arts and communities, for community development. Specifically, community development that understands the inherent agency in individuals and communities, that everyone is creative and is able to collaborate on what we want to see changed, different, or transformed. It recognises that individuals and communities exist within systems and structures that can be dehumanising and unjust, and requiring change. In a market-driven, competitive and highly structured society like Singapore, our work calls us to work with communities that are invisible or marginalised, and issues that are complex, challenging and often avoided.

I believe artists have a crucial role to play in society, through a particular curiosity and questioning lens the artist brings to different contexts and situations; to the way physical and psychological space is created when inviting participation; how relationships are developed through deep listening and facilitation of dialogue, movement and other forms of expression. This is then combined with encouraging the agency, and the connectedness that emerges when working creatively and collaboratively to co-create, to make, and bring into reality what was once only residing in one's imagination.

Statement on socially engaged arts practice

The arts practitioner plays an important role in re-contextualising, re-framing and re-humanising societal issues which are often subject to state political agendas and market forces.

By locating one's practice within communities, artists are closely connected to societal issues and their complexities in the lived experience of the everyday. Through adopting a questioning, reflective, creative and imaginative lens, the artist is able to work with individuals and groups to emerge new meanings, perspectives, practices and connections which place communities at the centre.

Arts processes encourage spaces to embrace discomfort, uncertainty and the unknown in order to create what is new or alternative; thus being able to take on complex and challenging issues and ideas. The competencies of artists to communicate, negotiate and facilitate are crucial.

Through participating in artistic processes and forms that encourage reflexivity and embodiment, new rituals that enable us to practice and evolve our identities in ways that are empowering and healing can emerge.

Participating in the arts involves play and experimentation, and allows new practices, behaviours and ways of relating and meaning making to emerge. This is powerful when it is inclusive and emerges vocabularies and practices across difference without negating individual identities and cultures.

II. Dao (Piengdao Osathairatana, Thailand)

Profile

My name is Piengdao. I have lived in Bangkok since I was born, and grew up hearing about social issues as a big metropolitan would have, especially because my father is an activist. He uses our home as his office, and, thus, I have been exposed to many NGOs in Thailand. I have also traveled to many provinces in Thailand with him. All this has helped make me realize and understand how diverse our society is and the struggle for balance.

The experience of growing up amongst a network of social and community activists has given me tools and inspired me about how social and cultural activities can contribute to community empowerment, and specifically, the experience of art for society.

Working on the Sampraeng Community Art festival, I have become focused on the relationships between art and social issues. This festival requires much interaction between staff, local people, and artists –it involves many different publics. Nowadays, the intersection of art and society has become my main area of interest, both professionally and politically.

Statement on socially engaged arts practice

Using the arts to exposes issues and stories, either for community or ourselves.

Participatory procedures bring us a social engagement, and bring community a project ownership.

In Thailand's context, there are many social issues that need to be addressed and arts play a big role in addressing it. It is kind of boring to just explain or address the issues plainly, so we need the tools to involve people in the issues. And arts are good tools to use. Art gathers people from different places and acts as a shared middle ground. Art can be used to experiment and discover new things within ourselves or with others. The discovery is not necessarily to resolve the issues but could be a discovery of ourselves or the way we work.

Using art to communicate also can make different stakeholders be more comfortable and open-minded. Art and social engagement can help find non-offensive and softer ways to address problems and negotiate the solution. It can then become a “co-power” that people and authorities could share.

The diagram below illustrates the evolution of form from flash mob and street market to the festival as a new kind of social movement creator. Events organized by the government typically have a top-down system and are not from the people. But we can introduce to the public a new style of event that everyone can be involved in, with no conflict of position or hierarchy and power. In this position shift, people gain more power to order and negotiate with authorities and government. From this, we can establish and make a manifesto of cooperative power, that can be owned by people and government sector together



III. Ren Xin Lee (Malaysia)

Profile

#who seneigh borhoodproject

I was interested in what I could find to do together with people who live here. One theme that

could live together --acknowledging that “we” is not a fixed monolith, is messy, and evolves with time. And “living *together*” could mean many different things. Perhaps living differently is how we can live together.

In lived experience and the personal, there are always exceptions. Or rather, there are no defaults. I will only always know one part of the picture. So I work with this awareness.

In January 2021, for an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur (*Di Situ* at KongsikL), I made the following two image-text journals to share parts of my journey in the past two years or so:

On what I found to do with folks living here: <https://youtu.be/HeJZ21qSjF4>

On how it all started --walking and finding what it means to inhabit a place:
<https://youtu.be/BmOY1Vx4Rnk>

Additional media: A local newspaper report on one part of the work

<https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/groove/2020/09/620971/showbiz-connecting-dance>

A video documentation of some days in 2019:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eDqT6AqhXKYUCZUVbRKWEyhq2OOP_mHO/view?usp=sharing

Statement on socially engaged arts practice

1. Art and social action: It is about *inhabiting* i.e. *being in this place*, and finding what could be and then how it could be, together with folks in this place.
2. Relationship-building comes first, before the “work”.
Or, relationship-building *is* the work. (Relationship with folks; relationship with the land.)
3. Finding art *in* the place rather than bringing art *to* the “community”.
The inhabiting artist as the instigator to make visible what isn’t apparent at first, or of what could be. Folks give shape to the *what* and *how*.
4. Art in society is the embodiment and practice of agency (personal and then collective), especially in a very urbanized and post-industrial place.
5. Starting small is important: Personal connection, interest.
6. Recognizing the conceptual limitation of the words “art” and “community”.

IV. Bunga Pratiwi Siagian (Indonesia)

Profile and Statement on socially engaged arts practice

ON INHABITING

I moved to Kampung Wates, Jatiwangi 4 years ago. Firstly, working as an independent curator and writer in Jakarta, my occupation enabled me to move to a different place while still being able to do my work remotely. I had the privilege to choose where to live or stay. Secondly, it also made me think about the term of ‘work’, which I just realized the consequence of which recently. In Bahasa there are two words to translate the term of work: first *kerja* and the second one is *berkarya*. *Kerja* means working as labour where you spend most of your time in the workspace, while *berkarya* is specific to what artists do, and these are really different scenarios. Work as *berkarya* also means having mobility and having extra time to think, to reflect, even to do nothing.

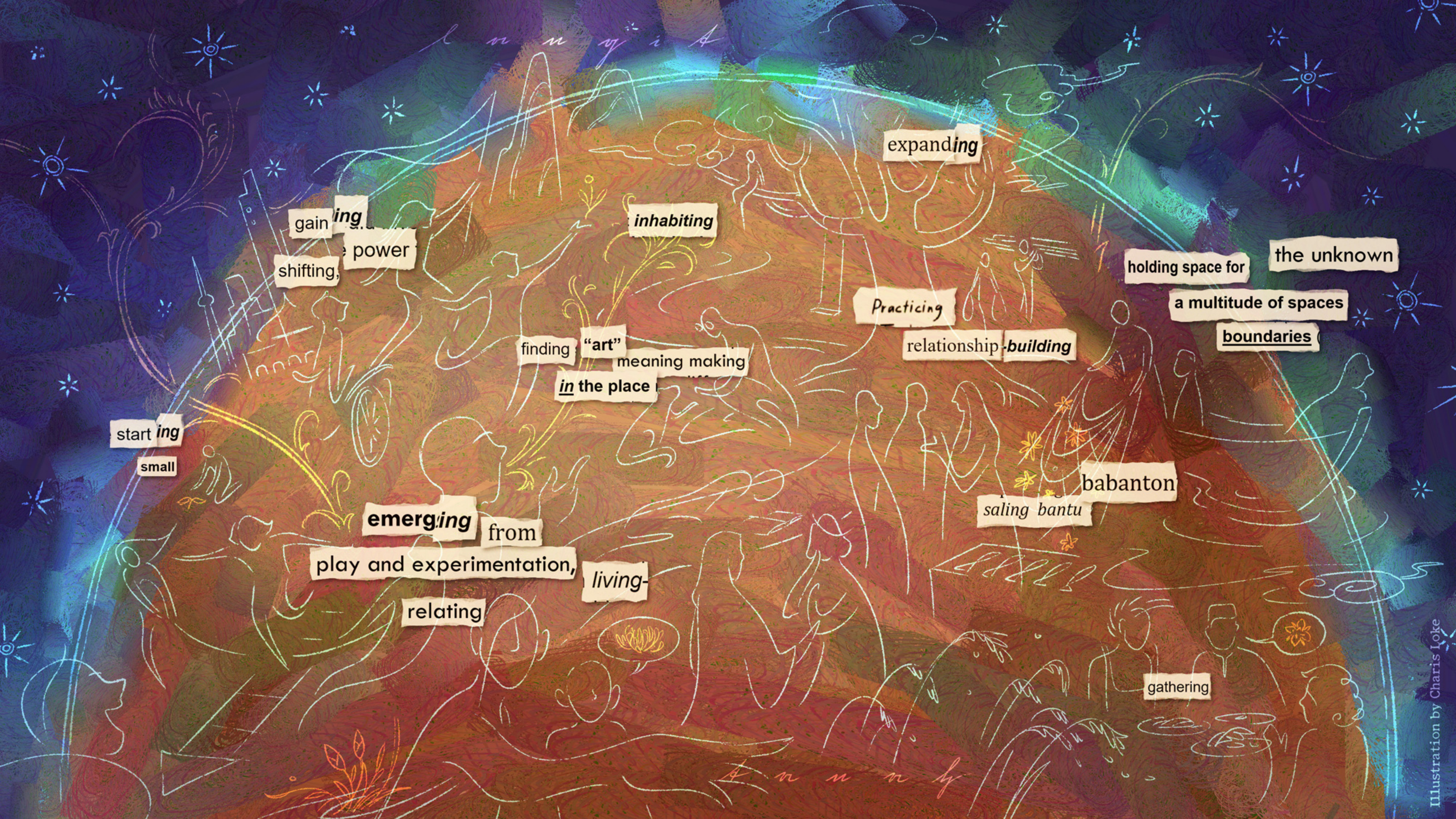
A privilege of mobility, of moving to another place, a chance to choose your own space to stay, having extra time, also means a privilege to think how to function in society. How to be relevant to/for the place where you stay. This impulse is not only because you have a good intention. In my case, it is part of a strategy of surviving as a human being.

I remember those first weeks after I moved. I had difficulties to communicate with neighbours, since I used to talk about art in specific terms within my circle in Jakarta – talking about video art, culture, anything that my neighbours in Jatiwangi might not relate to. What should we talk to each other about then? How do I survive here? How do I actualize myself in this new space? As a social being, in order to survive and to live (and thrive?), you can't escape society. My thought at that crisis time was : I have to be relevant.

The need to be relevant for the place, for the society, is to find a new way of togetherness and create 'new community' that contains yourself and the neighbours, us together. To engage myself as part of a bigger group or community is to be engaged with the dailyness, to be made together in commons. This togetherness, this state of commonality, leads us then to a question of what is important for our life together?

Later, as I have privilege for having an extra time to think, to imagine, the question was shaped into: how to respond to a situation –whether political, economic, or social transformation—that is affecting our lives, in this place, through art? A kind of art that we desire together is a collective action for a better future of all of us. In my case, my new position as part of this community pushed me to care and think about the struggle towards the land that have been a big part of this community in Kampung Wates. At the same time, I have a chance to actualize my occupation as a cultural worker, and my existence is made relevant in this place and with this society.

[end]



expanding

inhabiting

Practicing

relationship-building

holding space for

the unknown

a multitude of spaces

boundaries

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gathering

emerging from
play and experimentation,

living-relating

relating

finding "art"
meaning making
in the place

gain ing
power
shifting,

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small