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FRAMING THE
DRAMATURG
AND EDITING
THE FRAMES

View

December 2021

Vol. 3

The third and final volume of ADN Re/View plays with the notion of framing in dramaturgical thinking and the work of a dramaturg.



ASIAN
DRAMATURGS'
NETWORK

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Vol. 3

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Asian Dramaturgy Network

ADN Re/View (Vol. 3)

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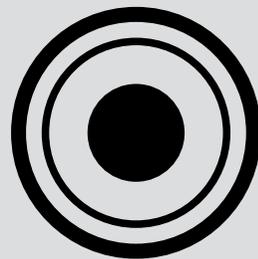
EDITORIAL NOTE

Framing the Dramaturg, Editing the Frames

Choosing a frame for a picture can be an enjoyable task if enticing options are available, and one has a strong sense of what would work for the image, the wall and the viewer. The frame may dominate, disrupt or enhance the dynamics of the image, tease meaning by shifting the point of focus, or fade into the background with barely a hint of its presence. The frame can also highlight what lies beyond itself, shaping an interaction between the frame, the image, and the spatio-temporal context. >>

David
Pledger

OPERATING SYSTEMS IN CONCENTRIC CIRCLES



EDITORIAL NOTE

>> The third and final volume of *ADN Re/View* plays with the notion of framing in dramaturgical thinking and the work of a dramaturg. Given that the processes of framing in performance-making are crucial to relationality and sonority, frames often intensify what happens within and beyond the lines and contours that delineate the space of a work. >>



David Pledger is an award-winning contemporary artist, curator, producer, writer and thinker working within and between the performing, visual and media arts in Australia, Asia and Europe. His live performances, installations, interactive artworks, documentaries, digital art, ideas and discursive events have been presented in books, journals, magazines, museums, galleries, arts centres, a city car-park, an abandoned

stables, a suburban house, hotels in Surfers Paradise, a Slovenian film studio and the Australian Institute of Sport. His work is notable for engaging publics in productive and provocative ways. From his initial practice, live performance, he has developed a cross-disciplinary dramaturgy in which a central platform is engaging with artists across artforms and experts from social, scientific, academic and philanthropic fields.

Practice interests include the body, the politics of power, the digital realm and public space.

Pledger is founding Artistic Director of not yet it's difficult (NYID), one of Australia's seminal interdisciplinary arts outfits. His current projects include *David Pledger is Running for Office* (2016-), a serial performance work contesting the space between artists and public office; the multi-platform futuring practice, *The Things We Did Next* (with Alex Kelly) which has produced *Assembly for the Future* (2020) and *The Planting* (2021), and *Meaninglessness* (with Su-san Cohn, 2018-2019) a performance work interrogating the symbiotic nature of Australia and Denmark's asylum seeker policy. He is the recipient of numerous career awards, grants and commissions from local, state, national and international entities

for his work as a director, designer, writer and actor in live performance and new media.

Pledger's curatorial practice focuses on creating optimal conditions for artistic production that generate provocative questions for contemporary culture and society. This has led him to initiate and curate an eclectic array of initiatives including the Brussels-based IETM-Australia Council for the Arts Collaboration Project (2009-2014); 2970° The Boiling Point (2015, 2017), an international art and ideas event; the locative art-series *Hoteling* (2016, 2017) and the Singapore-Australian Meeting of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network (co-curated with Lim How Ngean, 2017). He is currently Curator of ANAT SPECTRA 2022: Multiplicity, an artistic and discursive platform inspired by the intersection of art, science and technology.

>> Both frame and image can be provocative, yet the focus is all too often on the latter to the neglect of the former. How can we better attend to frames and framing? >>



David Pledger presenting his keynote address at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 in Adelaide on 1 Oct 2017.

This [keynote address](#) was presented at an ADN Satellite Symposium titled *Dramaturgies of the Social and Cultural* on 1 October 2017, in Adelaide, Australia. The symposium was presented in association with Australia Theatre Forum and supported by OzAsia Festival and the National Arts Council, Singapore.

We are here in Adelaide at the Asian Dramaturgs' Network's first Satellite Meeting in Australia on Kurna Country whose peoples I acknowledge as the traditional custodians of the Adelaide region.

The Network represents a very interesting configuration of artists and cultural operators from Asia, a configuration which in this instance includes Australia. For me, the ADN is a rather unique proposition, a mobile laboratory that reformulates its intentions in response to local conditions. Its ambitions are to make a contribution to thinking about the arts and arts practice regionally and internationally by not limiting or prescribing

“Whilst the word dramaturgy is certainly not a dirty word there is something potentially illicit in its usage.”

propositions and definitions. In this way, it aims to be a genuinely experimental space for thought and action.

Orientation

The first time I heard the word 'dramaturg', I was barely twenty years old and on a tour of a theatre with an eclectic bunch of reprobates, attempting to pass themselves off as artists, myself included. One of our party was the playwright, Roger Pulvers, who had recently returned from Europe and used the word 'dramaturg' countless times during the tour as if we all knew what it meant and appeared mortified at our ignorance when we declared we did not. Whilst it was impossible to ignore the referred cultural snobbery in his reaction, I will admit that as a group we were all somewhat seduced by the word as it sounded just a little bit 'dirty' - 'dramaturg' - a bit illicit, and I remember making a mental note to myself that I should find out what that word 'dramaturg' actually meant. Some thirty years later and I've still got no idea. Which is why I am not going to talk about dramaturgs today.

>> While notions of framing within the social sciences incorporate a wide range of ways that individuals and groups use to apprehend, organise and communicate about their worlds, these are nonetheless focused on how humans tend to interact and engage with each other. >>

As the opening keynote, I feel a responsibility to talk to a subject on which I do have a little authority.

So I'm not going to talk about dramaturgs, I am going to talk about dramaturgy. And **just to be clear, when I talk about dramaturgy I am not talking about the various activities of the dramaturg, although I am talking about something not altogether unrelated but which operates in multiple spaces simultaneously. And just to keep your interest up, whilst the word dramaturgy is certainly not a dirty word there is something potentially illicit in its usage.**

A disclaimer before I forge

ahead is that everything I say today is provisional even if my delivery and tone smacks of certitude at times. It is there only to frame the discussion sufficiently to amplify its quality through your responses and feedback.

To kick us off, I'd like to ask myself two questions: Who am I? What do I do?

My answer is that I am an artist and what I do is: work at making things. All the other activities I work at - producing, curating, public commentary and arts advocacy - stem from my artistic practice. Some of these I do within my company, not yet it's difficult (NYID), and some I do

outside the company structure.

This framing is important as it leads me to the matter at hand – dramaturgy. Because **for me dramaturgy has always been about how a thing works, whether it's a work of art or the world itself.**

For me 'dramaturgy' is quite a useful concept. It is flexible in as much as it can be transposed into different meanings depending on the artistic context and it can have meaningful value when applied outside the arts. This is what interests me. For some time now I have prosecuted the idea of dramaturgy as an 'operating system' in the circle of artistic practice and its application to cultural and social circles.

Today I will unpack the source of this approach and its trajectory outward from artistic dramaturgy to the stratospheric heights of culture and society.

Framing

Ten years ago in Australia, the Prime Ministership of John

Howard came to an end. His time was marked by what I would call a corruption of public discourse during which he waged a culture war that carved the Australian polity into rigid, discursive units, the consequences of which continue to resonate deeply in Australian culture.

It marked the beginning of a long-term project of mine to insinuate progressive ideas from artistic practice into the national conversation by valorising the language of contemporary practice in discussions inside and outside the realm of the arts.

Open, inclusive and underscored by a desire for discovering new ways of working, creating and making, the language of contemporary arts practice has the flexibility required to deal with change and experiment and which, if introduced into an amplified discursive space, has the potential to expand the quality and depth of civic discourse and civil action. It is of necessity a language of progress.

Central to my notion of

>> In performance-making, framing extends to all kinds of material, human and non-human, spatial and temporal, sensuous and spiritual. Frames are generated, explored, expanded and dismantled when discerning the needs of what occupies the frame and what surrounds it as well. >>

dramaturgy is the idea that an artwork is generated by an operating system driven by random and non-deterministic algorithms that are entered and extracted by human agency.

In applying the concept of dramaturgy more broadly, it reveals itself to be an adaptive notion that can embrace the idea of an operating system of culture or society. Because at its core is the element of change. **In fact, dramaturgy is defined by change, and the value of thinking of it as an operating system is determined by its capacity to be altered by a process driven by the algorithms of human behaviour.**

I have been quite influenced

in this approach by the Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, who wrote:

What is needed in the current situation is a widening of the field of artistic intervention, with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional spaces in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilisation of capitalism.

My response has been to argue that we need to develop not only an artistic dramaturgy but a dramaturgy of the cultural and the social. And I'd like to map a process outward from my artistic dramaturgy to a dramaturgy of the social or, for shorthand use, 'social dramaturgy'.

Artistic Dramaturgy

In an artistic context, dramaturgy is the process of connecting and mating ideas into practice. It operates in a way that is rarely fixed, necessarily adaptive and due to its reliance on collective, collaborative actions inherently resistant to the concretization and commodification of other practice-related words such as 'creativity' and 'innovation' which have largely been voided of their meaning.

In the context of the work of NYID, I'd like to map out for you the main way in which we work, how we operate. And I'd like to emphasise here that we have other ways of operating that have different shapes, speeds and frequencies. But the way I am going to describe to you now is what I would call our 'signature dramaturgy'.

We start with an idea. I don't have any loyalty to any art forms or any particular, artistic configurations so the idea is the centerpiece, the agent of motion in the creation of the

artwork or event.

How an idea emerges from a group of artists that work closely together is difficult to identify. Usually, the kernel of the idea is generated by a curiosity I bring to the collective table but which has grown out of artistic and discursive contexts that have history within the company. This dynamic changes, depending on the people who gravitate towards the company. In the early days when there was a core group of founding members working on every project, for example our dramaturg Peter Eckersall and technical manager Paul Jackson, the dynamic was centralised. These days, the dynamic is much more distributed as the NYID diaspora is quite extensive and artists are called on, or put their hand up for, specific projects. At the moment, artists such as Natalie Cursio, a choreographer and performance-maker in her own right, and Todd MacDonald, an actor, director and current Artistic Director of La Boite Theatre in Queensland, tend to feature regularly in NYID's artistic adventures.

>> A recurring challenge for a dramaturg, as with an artist, is to work out what really needs to be done and how best to do this. The context may change, the resources may differ and the ideas that matter may vary widely, but eventually something must be done that stems from an understanding of the needs of the project, process and people involved. >>

So we begin with an idea and then we invite a group of people to talk to us who know more about the idea than we do – they might be experts, academics or just people with specific, related experiences. As we gather information we invite a second group to respond to what we've been told and what we're thinking about what we've been told. And then we get a third group who help moderate this information through the filter of

our originating idea. This is our dramaturgy – generative systems that operate within concentric circles of action and activity.

Concentric circles have proven to be both a useful image, and a mechanism. In practice, though, there can be a lot of overlapping in terms of personnel, agency and knowledge. In some instances, the lines remain clearly delineated but often it's messy.

As an artist I've never really seen lines between art forms and it is also the case for me as a citizen. Art, society, human behaviour, they're all fluid and I've not discovered merit

“We need to develop not only an artistic dramaturgy but a dramaturgy of the cultural and the social.”

in keeping things separate. Separation has always seemed to be about territory and therefore power. I believe in the interconnectedness of things, at all times, in all circumstances. It is why I like circles. Circles are lines that resolve. And when resolved they tend to emanate rather than demonstrate. Vibration rather than static silos.

Probably the most concrete early example of this process in play is in the partner productions of *K* and *Blowback* that NYID created from 2002-2006. *K* collapses Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, George Orwell's *1984* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* into a direct response to the crackdown on civil liberties in the aftermath of 9/11. The other piece, *Blowback*, riffs off Chalmers Johnson's book of the same name and tracks a guerilla resistance to an Australia, militarily occupied by America, in the not-too-distant future.

In prosecuting these ideas, we brought into the process a diverse set of knowledges and experiences. So in *Blowback*, for example, over a two-week

'reading period' we entertained a professor of divinity, a neo-conservative journalist, a national security expert and an anthropologist specialising in racism, nationalism and multiculturalism, all of whom brought to the project a world we were unfamiliar with, using languages that were not our own. They spoke to a revolving group of collaborators including actors, dramaturg and technical staff.

In the first instance, *Blowback* was a writing project and it was my task to process the ideas into some sort of dramatic literature that could also serve as a score which I could follow as a director using discrete sound, image, spatial and corporeal elements. It also needed to be an artefact that could be used by all the makers of the work - actors, performers, film and sound editors, designers and production staff.

I wrote the script as I was listening to our experts talking, our collaborators processing and our company members proposing artistic responses to the swirl of new ideas - three circles

>> Varied options may emerge as to the kinds of frames and framing mechanisms that would best serve the work, and shaping the frames is an aspect of artistry that may not always be noticed. >>

of engagement emanating outwards and reverberating inwards amplifying the originating idea. What I became aware of was that our operating system, our dramaturgy as a company was being reconfigured in the operating system of the production. That is, our system of creation became the operating system of the production. It's a transpositional process that became normative for us and enabled us to develop and understand the mechanism for *2970° The Boiling Point* which we have recently become known for.

2970° is, depending on the audience, variously described as a festival of art and ideas, a durational event, or a 'biennial

happening' which is how I like to think of it.

I'm going to park *2970°* to one side for the moment because it is what I consider to be the closest thing we have to an example of a social dramaturgy, which is where I'm heading. On my way, I'd like to discuss the notion of cultural dramaturgy, and the role of the arts or lack thereof in the operating systems of our culture.

Cultural Dramaturgy

A major tendency in the current formulation of our discussions around culture is the marginalisation and compartmentalisation of the arts as a thing in and of itself,

as opposed to a thing in and of itself that is intimately connected to other things. This lack of relational thinking exposes the arts in policy settings, funding settings and most poignantly in social settings.

The reasons for the isolation of the arts are multifarious and specific to history and geography and they operate in varying degrees according to these and many other factors. In Australia, the isolation of the arts is often attributed to our perceived national attribute of anti-intellectualism and there is truth in that.

However, I'd like to make a bigger play and say that the arts are integral to theoretical and practical formations of democracy in a period where democracy is under siege from the ascendant ideology, neo-liberalism. It is necessary to isolate the arts – one of the main ways democracy expresses itself – in order to disable democracy which neo-liberal capitalism perpetuates, because democracy disrupts its singular

focus on profit maximisation. Democracy, and the arts, disrupt the flow of neo-liberal capitalism by valorising access, equity, sustainability and justice, all of which consume time and labor, two essential elements in the growth of unfettered Capital. This is a problem for the arts, and it's hard not to perceive the recent attacks on the Australia Council for the Arts by the current Government through this prism. So, we need to resist this push towards the isolation of the arts.

My argument, in this space over the last few years, has been to propose attack as the best form of defence. Attack by way of bringing the arts into the center of the national conversation.

We do not fully understand the workings of politics, the arts, the media, sport, health and education sectors until we see them in relation to each other. That is the task of culture: to create a system that shapes these relationships, constructs meaning out of them and folds them back on us, a process through which we create our identity.

>> Artist, curator, producer and writer David Pledger proposes 'Operating Systems in Concentric Circles' as an approach for framing the work of [not yet it's difficult](#) (NYID), an interdisciplinary arts company in Australia which describes itself as being "a maker of contemporary artworks, a research unit and a producer of cultural happenings". >>

The language that is currently employed to shape these relationships and create these connections is the language of managerialism, productivity and efficiency. That is the language of culture these days. And that is why it's A BIT sick.

In Australia, and my sense is we are not alone here, the operating system of our culture, our cultural dramaturgy, is in desperate need of a new language and my proposition is that we turn to the language of the arts and artistic practice.

So how might that work?

I can give you an example from the work of NYID.

From 2011-2014, we developed a project called *AMPERS&ND* which was a research-and-development laboratory that sought to develop a new artistic language across music, dance and performance by using as its foundation the body listening protocols we had been developing for some twenty years.

Body listening operates on the premise that all properly functioning bodies have a sense of physical presence (proprioception) which, when amplified, confers a heightened sense of awareness on itself and the external world (sometimes called exteroception). The

process of amplification through a refined set of exercises cultivates a capacity for sensing shifts in the space without seeing or hearing them. *AMPERS&ND* was a deep artistic exploration and inquiry into the practices of listening with our bodies.

Throughout the four years of the project, which took place in Germany, Australia and Korea, we became aware that some of the artistic inquiry begged to be unpacked in contexts other than performance research. So, we developed a model for international artistic collaboration that placed

“Our cultural dramaturgy is in desperate need of a new language and my proposition is that we turn to the language of the arts and artistic practice.”

artistic practice at the center of broader cultural conversations. We wanted to understand how culture might operate when you place artistic practice at its center. Rather than as an add-on, or a thing to be fetishised, or projected on, or as a diversion for foreign businessmen trying to close a deal.

So, we offered ancillary events to the research and public performance program that directly arose out of the artistic inquiry of sending and receiving information with our bodies in a heightened state of listening.

We offered a public workshop in body listening; we held a seminar by invitation called Not Just K-Pop which looked at the reverberations of the Korean Wave on global culture; we presented a large public forum called Asia + Europe = Australia in which we featured the Belgian Ambassador, the EU Ambassador and the Director of Asialink Arts, talking from their respective positions on Australia’s policy and

>> Pledger’s keynote address at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 in Adelaide is the feature article in this volume. In it, he identifies framing as linked to dramaturgy, which in his words is fundamentally “about how a thing works”. This leads Pledger to devise the idea of “dramaturgy as an “operating system” in the circle of artistic practice and its application to cultural and social circles”. *How it works, and what is done to make it work, are intertwined.* >>

behaviours in Asia and the EU. Each iteration – the public performance, the workshop, the seminar and forum - had distinct audiences and were generated as a set of concentric circles emanating out from our artistic inquiry.

Now, on their own, none of these elements are exceptional. Many of us consider one or other of these activities when formulating our artistic projects as we had been doing for some years. However, as a program that emanated outward from the originating artistic idea – that of an exploration of listening with the body – it stuck as a novel way of approaching the question of how culture operates, that is

through the impetus of artistic practice. For example, one of the more telling fold backs came from the EU Ambassador to Australia in the forum Asia + Europe = Australia. He remarked on the deficit of Australia’s capacity to listen to Asia in the foreign policy spaces. Translated through a body listening paradigm, Australia’s policy default setting with Asia was all about sending information not receiving it, and not even listening to, or for, it.

In this way, the language of our artistic practice had resonated in the foreign policy setting. It gave me a real appetite to discover how we might develop this trajectory further.

Before I do so, I would like to add a big whacking coda here. Which is that for many years I have considered that the culture of Australia's First Nations people represents best-practice operating principles. For good reason. Indigenous culture emanates concentric circles of knowledge and it does not separate art from culture nor culture from society. It is an astonishingly good template for the operation of culture and it motivated me to invite as the opening keynote speaker for 2970° *The Boiling Point*, indigenous elder Kyle Slabb to riff on the relationships between art, culture and society in the frame of a discussion about practising democracy.

Social Dramaturgy

I perceive the arts to be one of the most conservative sectors of Australian society. Mentally progressive, professionally conservative. That's how I describe the sector here.

One of the revelations I had during 2970° was a better understanding of the different contexts of the progressive and

the conservative.

There was a young high school student – one of about thirty or more at 2970° – and he stood up at the end and said: "I'm a conservative", after which he gave this big rave about how much he loved being at 2970° because people didn't shout at him like they did at school whenever he aired his conservative views.

And when he was raving it dawned on me that whilst his views were conservative, his attitude was progressive because he was prepared to change his mind and in fact was most interested in being challenged to change his mind.

In Australia, and particularly the arts here, there are a lot of people who identify as progressive but for whom change is anathema, something to fear and resist. It explains the inertia I often feel when I am in arts contexts – and I don't mean artistic contexts – I mean arts sector contexts. Change, here, usually refers to changing the people who are in charge rather than any

>> Pledger's dramaturgy, propelled by the work of NYID, appears to have a strong, socially-oriented vision and trajectory, fueled by a critique of conservatism in the arts ecosystem and a wider inertia in society. Rather than being limited to art-making, NYID stipulates that its mission is "to incite narratives of enquiry in the minds of our publics with the desire to engage them viscerally, intellectually and humorously about ideas, politics, art and the human condition". >>

systemic or values change. And I'm really talking specifically about the arts as a sector, how it behaves in relation to itself and in relation to other sectors. Its lack of interconnectedness is often remarkable.

The inertia of the arts sector was one of the motivating factors for me to develop a discursive context in which the arts and artistic practice could operate progressively as a language of change. So, I created 2970° *The Boiling Point* which is a biennial happening located on the Gold Coast (to explain the name – the boiling point of gold is 2,970°Celsius). Conceived as an alchemy of art and ideas it is essentially a

cultural provocation built on NYID's signature dramaturgy.

To reiterate: Take an idea, bring a bunch of people to the table who know more about the idea or its related parts than you do, invite responses from a diverse group of thinkers across sectors and develop that content from opinion to argument to action.

In the case of an artistic dramaturgy, that action is the production of an artwork. In the case of cultural dramaturgy, it may be considered the production of collective meaning. In the case of a social dramaturgy, at least in the most recent edition of 2970°, it is the

production of a law.

In 2017, the curatorial premise centred on practising democracy in an age when its value and agency is in question. The concentric circles created by this idea when dropped into the 2970° pool were represented by four keynote speakers, which created the first circle. They were invited to create a picture of the world they contribute to as a path to proposing a future they wish to live in. Each speaker was invited to ask the 2970° delegates to vote on a law or protocol they believe would help to make that future. In the second circle, each keynote's provocation was amplified by two respondents; this created a triangle of content, a discursive field if you like, that was processed by delegates at roundtables. For the third circle, a process was facilitated by a curated group of moderators to the point where each delegate voted for or against the law.

So, the architecture and the process of 2970° is basically an amplified version of our artistic dramaturgy and our

attempt at creating a cultural dramaturgy as outlined in the *AMPERS&ND* project.

Practising democracy was the second edition of 2970° following on from its inaugural edition in 2015, *The Future Is Here*. There were significant developments from the first to the second edition that I'd like to frame within my overarching notion of dramaturgy as 'an operating system driven by random and non-deterministic algorithms entered and extracted by human agency'.

In our artistic dramaturgy, we've used the phrase 'free radical', to describe these random and non-deterministic algorithms. In order to refresh our way of working, we often deliberately introduced into our operating system an unknown element, a free radical, which could act as an agent of chaos or order depending on how it was invited into the system; it could be a new member of the ensemble or a new artform.

For 2970°, the free radical was a change to the algorithm of

>> As a frame through which to view, experience and understand the work they do, the description highlights the need for change in the Australian context, and the responsibility of really affecting the publics who attend by involving them in potent experiences. >>

“In order to refresh our way of working, we often deliberately introduced into our operating system an unknown element, a free radical.”

the first edition. We introduced 'young people' into the second edition because in the first edition we had a very modest representation from this cohort.

We invited 30+ high school

students and 15+ university students to be directly involved in three different modes. Firstly, as roundtable participants. Secondly, as members of The Fourth Estate, a media group gifted the task of reporting on and critiquing the event. Thirdly, as members of an international collaboration between the local Robina State High School and two performance groups, Sipat Lawin from the Philippines and Shock Therapy from the Gold Coast, Australia.

A second change to the algorithm was 'the moderators'. Well actually, it's more that we re-wrote the code for the algorithm that ran 'the

moderators'. Unlike other such provocations, 2970° is a contest of ideas in which the protagonists are not the speakers but the delegates, the participants. So, the role of the moderators is crucial in terms of processing the triangle of information provided by the speakers and respondents and enabling the delegates to voice their opinion and shape it into an argument on which they can base a decision for voting. The objective is not to reach a consensus but for each delegate to arrive at a decision through the moderation process.

So, we paid a lot more attention to the curation of the moderators who, as a group, need to inhabit a familial sensibility, which the delegates can identify with as they progress from one roundtable to the next over the program's duration. We put together a group of individuals that had a strong background in a wide variety of arts practices as artists or cultural operators or both, and who came from around Australia.

We considered that they

needed a special set of characteristics. They had to be able to listen particularly well. They had to be confident enough to know when to follow and when to lead. They had to attend to the various needs of the delegate population, which was inter-generational, cross-cultural and cross-sectoral. Their agency needed to be unified by a capacity for empathy and a strong intuition.

It is in this group that the language of the arts and artistic practice is embedded in 2970°. It's not visible but it is present and centrifugal. And it's here that NYID's dramaturgy becomes a profoundly humanist enterprise.

In thinking our way through this trajectory, we are often asked and ask ourselves whether 2970° is an artistic event? It is certainly theatrical, dramatic and narrative-driven. Maybe it follows Chantal Mouffe's instruction and is an artistic intervention in a social space. Perhaps it is more of a conflation of the two – a social intervention that is generated by a singular artistic process in which the arts

>> To be able to “incite narratives of enquiry” is to know and sense the publics that are being reached out to, and then be willing to provoke them to feel strongly enough to take action. Pledger highlights how artistic, cultural and social dramaturgies relate through movements in and out of these spheres. >>

amplifies and also contests its discursive agency. And in which the language of the arts is the language of interaction. It is designed to expand the quality and depth of civic discourse and action by concentrating on the basic tasks of proposing, processing, talking and listening with a group of people who don't know each other and who get together to contest ideas in the spirit of productive criticism and an agreement to respectfully disagree. These are the rules of engagement. And they have been devised through years-long artistic practice and are projected out of an artistic impetus: to practise the act of listening in the art of democracy.

Commentary

In closing, I'd like to make some remarks about how I have begun to insinuate the idea of 'dramaturgy' when writing about things that are not directly about the arts.

Over the last few years, I've written around thirty articles and essays for various journals and books. In the last year, I have started to insinuate into these pieces the idea of a dramaturgy as an operating system as a way of introducing the word into a broader vernacular. For example, in the global daily journal *The Conversation*, I've written to the idea of the

playbook of American football as its operating system, as its dramaturgy. A couple of months ago I was commissioned to write a piece called *The Dramaturgy of Universal Basic Income* in which I frame a discussion on the potential, degree and kind of change imagined by the introduction of a Universal Basic Income around the notion of an expanded dramaturgy.

I start by talking about a social dramaturgy as I have

the idea of entering a new algorithm into the system – a Universal Basic Income (UBI). I talk about how there’s always trepidation when introducing a new piece of technology into an operating system whether it’s new media, like VR, into arts practice, or a new piece of legislation within an existing legal framework. I say that in order to prosecute this idea we need knowledge of both the system, the new piece of code and a sense of how the two might impact upon each other.

“By insinuating the language of the arts and artistic practice and the life of the artist into broader social conversation, we introduce a language of progress into our daily conversations.”

done here as the operating system of a society, as a flexible, evolving, series of interweaving ‘human algorithms’. I talk to

UBI – would alter the real living conditions of artists and arts workers, and by extrapolation workers in other sectors. This

And then because I have already established the language of the arts as the language of the essay, I use the arts sector as a prism by which to investigate just how this new algorithm – the

>> His framing of this interrelationship points to the porosity between different spaces, the circling of energies through diverse dimensions, and provides a way of thinking, doing and responding that is dramaturgically enticing, if not inciting! >>

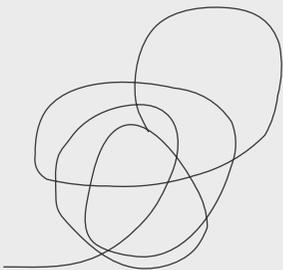
folding back or feedback is in and of itself an artistic process.

By insinuating the language of the arts and artistic practice and the life of the artist into broader social conversation - whether that’s through an intervention like 2970° or through public commentary, we introduce a language of progress into our daily conversations that does two things. It introduces new spaces in which to think and behave in a society that is deliberately polarised in order for the dominant hegemony to maintain control and, as a consequence, it brings the arts into the mind-set of civil society in a way that does not fetishise or marginalise but shows

multiple values that can be traced back to its intrinsic value. Its politics is at its deepest at this point.

FRAMING, FRAMER, FRAMED:

Chong Gua Khee



RE/VIEWING
THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN ART(IST)S
AND TECHNOLOGY

Framings.

Hi. Hello.

How are you?

For most people reading this, I'm guessing that you're doing so on a screen.

I'm reading these words on a screen too, as I type them out, and imagining the many different types of screens through which each of you might encounter this text.

Beyond the screen as a physical frame though, I am also thinking of the conscious and unconscious frames through which we view and relate to the world and what's around us – how often do we examine these frames?

For myself, it sometimes takes a specific invitation or a rupture to happen before I do so, and in the case of my longstanding reluctance to working with (digital) technology as an artist, I only really started to ask myself what and where that resistance is coming from in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive push for artists to 'pivot to using technology.'

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> Following Pledger's keynote, Chong Gua Khee examines the *Dramaturgy and Technology* panel at ADN Conference 2019. Chong invites the audience to navigate through questions about how we frame technology, and how these framings affect the way we approach or resist technology. >>

With that as a kind of personal frame in re-viewing the “[Dramaturgy and Technology](#)” panel at the ADN 2019 Conference (pre-pandemic!), I found myself really intrigued by the various narratives and counter-narratives that the speakers were offering around technology and the arts.

In this article, I’ve therefore tried to be quite playful in attending to not just what the speakers have shared, but how they seem to frame technology. I’ve also tried to trace where some of these framings might have emerged from, as well as question the helpfulness of certain framings. Towards the end, I also propose a different way of re-viewing the relationship between art(ist)s and technology, but I’m ultimately most interested in an arts ecosystem that is supportive of all kinds of art(ist)s-technology relationships, rather than only being celebratory about a particular direction.

At this “Dramaturgy and Technology” panel, the three speakers were Jompert Kuswidananto, Martyn Coutts and Su Wen-Chi, and the moderator was Miguel Escobar Varela. During the panel, one particular framing around technology that was addressed was about how people tend to think of technology as being distinct from the human body, and both Coutts as well as Su notably wanted to offer a different framing of this relationship:

Coutts:

*There can be this kind of dichotomy about ‘human is good and technology is bad’, ‘human is organic and it’s fleshy and it’s alive, and technology is just cold and metal and it’s dead’, and I just don’t buy that dichotomy at all. There’s this beautiful quote from Tommy Orange, who’s a native American writer, and he unpicks this dichotomy by basically saying **the materiality that exists inside technology has actually come from the earth anyway**. So there can be spirituality and aura, like there’s spirit in the technology.*

>> In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s become almost impossible to avoid grappling with the usage of (digital) technologies in the arts. But the conversation around art and technology still feels deeply fraught, often circling back to the possibility or impossibility of the presence of the (human) body in technology. >>

Su:

While talking to a lot of different artists who work in different mediums, I realized that we all have a common term – ‘body’. It’s a ‘body’ of sound, the ‘body’ of the installation, the ‘body’ of technology, or the ‘body’ of the computer.

So this word, this term, is always shared. An aura.

At the beginning of the mechanical age, Walter Benjamin (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction) worried that art could be reproduced. And when it’s the reproduction of the

artwork, is it still called art? Where is the aura or I will say where is the spirit in my physical experience, where is my presence? So this idea of aura or presence helps me a lot to think about what actually disappears while I work with technology.

Su:

Marshall McLuhan has this book called The Extensions of Man. So I tried to find out what is the connection between, for example, my laptop and me, or this virtuality and me. And this book helped me to think about how **technology is actually the extension of the human being.**

When you are projecting your desires or creating another identity [of/for yourself] in the virtual space, actually you [are] try[ing] to extend your senses into the space. And when you are extended [in such a manner], somehow you become one body [with technology]. This helped me to visualise what technology is and can refer to.

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> Against such a backdrop, and with the imposition of a ‘technology hegemony’ of sorts by governments and corporates, Chong asks how we can find or bring more lightness and playfulness to this conversation around the arts and technology. What are the rules and logics for new games to be played that prioritise a sensing and quirky dramaturgical sensibility? How do we read the spaces between one part of the screen and what lies outside the screen – technologically and teasingly? >> p. 55

At the same time, Coutts acknowledged that as a species, humans have yet to fully process the meaning and semiotics of technology:

Coutts:

*We're incredibly visually literate as humans. We're able to parse a lot of visual information in an adept manner. But I think **we're only just beginning to be able to understand how technology works alongside the older media on stage.***

*A friend of mine who is a very talented sound artist and technologist once said to me "Why are we still calling it new media? It's not new." And I guess it's true for those of you that are dubbed millennials or even the generation after that; it may feel like this stuff's been around forever, but it's worth keeping in mind that the internet is only 30 years old and YouTube started in 2005 and Instagram started in 2010. So these things are new and my answer to him, to that question, is that **new media's still new, depending on your overall view of time. In relation to a piece of charcoal or a paintbrush, yes, new media is new.** So we still have a long way to go.*

*I think we're able to process language, we're able to process how the body moves in a choreography, we're even able to understand *mise en scène* on stage because we've been doing it for hundreds of years - in terms of reading bodies, we've been doing it for millenia.*

Whereas our ability to read surround sound, our ability to read projection or interactive devices, is just not at the same level yet. What does a projection mean in a space? What does a big rectangle of light mean? Why is there a projector in the ceiling? Why is it hidden? Why is it not in the space?

*In the theatre, we really hone in and go, "What does that chair mean? What does that piece of set mean? What does that costume mean?" And we need to be doing that for technology as well. **That's the job of the dramaturg,** and I feel like, as I've said, we've got a long way to go.*

In this respect, perhaps in order to be helpful, we need to be really specific about *what* technology we are referring to or using, rather than just using 'technology' as a blanket term for gadgets and machines when we talk about our relationship with technology, or technology in the arts.

For instance, what Coutts says about the semiotics of phones as a technology in a piece, or how he frames humans as a technology as well, is very different from how a television set onstage would be read, or how audiences might process the usage of videoconferencing platform Zoom as a 'venue' for a performance:

Coutts:

*There were all these stories from 9/11 about people in the twin towers trying to phone their loved ones before the planes hit, and how some of them got hold of their loved ones but some of them didn't, and [so] some of their [voice] messages went to the message bank instead. And then their families were trying to contact the telco [telecommunications] companies to retain those last messages, but it was super hard to do that. **So what does a phone mean? What is the semiotics of the digital devices that we have? It's not just a functional thing.** We talk to our loved ones on them, we watch our favourite shows, we find our way through the world using maps, we soundtrack our world through streaming music, **it's [phones] loaded full of meanings.***

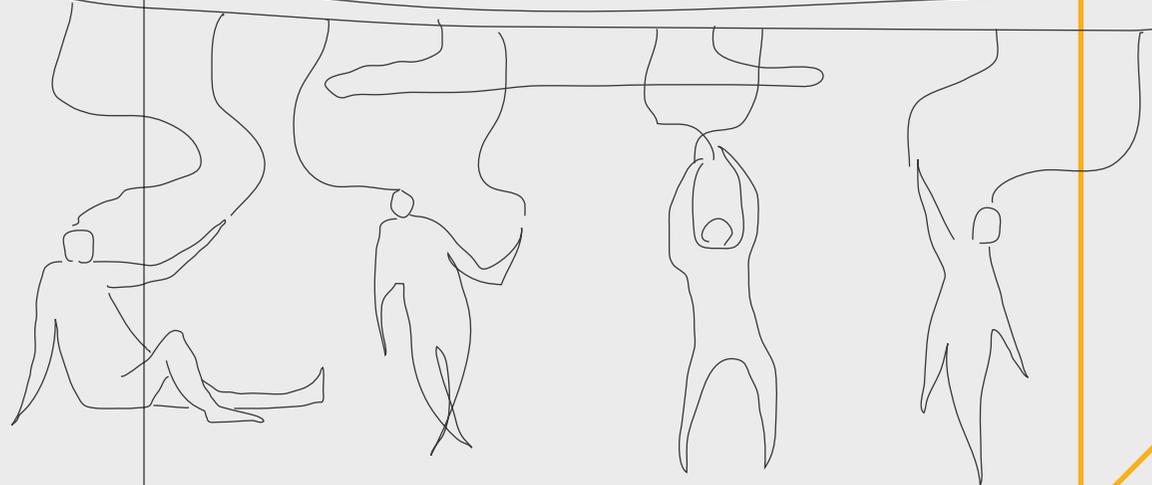
Coutts:

I made a work in 2007 called [Wayfarer](#), which was a live game work where audience members got to play the performers as if they were avatars in a game.

So they [the audience] would look into a screen and talk to them [the performers] live, and then they [the audience] would direct them [the performers] through a space that they [the performers] couldn't see. And we worked for two years to perfect the software and the hardware for this project, and the performers came in three days before the show went up.

*And I argued at the time that **performers are the most reliable pieces of technology that we had on that show. They're certainly the most flexible, the most adaptable and they didn't break as much.***

As soon as media content enters the stage space, it's already creating a series of complicated relationships.



Framers.

What is the relationship between a frame and the frame-r? How and when did we form the lenses through which we frame the world, and what might invite us to consider re-forming these lenses?

What does it mean to re-view ourselves, and to examine the biases and assumptions we carry around with us?

I suppose this is as good a time as any for a reflection –

I think my reluctance to engage with digital technologies is less about technology per se, and more about what feels like an increasingly hegemonic imposition of certain narratives around technology in the world today, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2019, governments around the world have implemented mandatory use of contact tracing technologies, innumerable workplaces now use Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms on a daily basis, and [tech giant Facebook has rebranded as 'Meta' to signal their focus on developing a seemingly all-encompassing metaverse ecosystem.](#)

And within the arts, amidst the devastation wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic on live performances, artists in Singapore and elsewhere are being strongly encouraged to 'pivot to technology' as a way to "reimagine [our] practice and find new ways to reach audiences" ([Arts x Tech Lab](#), 2021).

“Where is the thing that you can only do in the theatre?”

Against this backdrop, I was thus deeply drawn to Coutts' line of questioning about the essential nature of performing arts...

Theatre should be poor and dumb. Maybe. Maybe. I don't know. This is a great quote that I sometimes give to students that I teach at VCA: “It seems odd that theatre is seeking to emulate cinema, let celluloid do what it does best.”

*So film is best as film, and I would also say that some theatre, some mainstage theatre, could be TV as well. Do you know what I mean? If it's just some people talking on stage, where is the transformation? **Where is the thing that you can only do in the theatre?** Where is that? And that's why I very rarely go to the theatre, unfortunately, but when I do, I see a lot of dance; to me, dance is transformative, like it's shifting all the time.*

...as well as Su's approach to artmaking and technology..

*For me, working with technology is never- **it's never about technology, it's about what question(s) you want to address, and what kind of tool you can use.** [Someone at the ADN conference] had asked me if I define what kind of technology I want to use in the beginning, and I don't, I actually try to define my question first and then see what kind of tool I can draw from.*

...and also to Coutts' articulation of his hopes and desires as an artist in relation to technology...

For me, I want to awaken the audience by placing them in a new site and generating a new relationship. And I think that sometimes, technology can reset that relationship. That technology has the capacity to reset the relationship.

*It doesn't always work, but, for example, there are a lot of headphone works in Australia, and a headphone work enables you to be mobile, it enables you to transmit sound over long distances, [and it's] a very intimate quality of sound as well. So **there are technologies that can kind of shift the way that you [audiences] view theatre and performance.***

And in thinking about shifting the ways in which we view things, I found Kuswidananto's sharing at the panel to be a deeply generous provocation that reminded me of the importance of playing with frames.

Specifically, rather than presenting verbally, his sharing took the form of a series of moving and still images, and the following is an excerpt from a transcriber's framing of his presentation:

Video: ritual on mountaintop. *Sounds of nature and then music/singing of Merdeka as shift to people on streets.*
 A speech. *People climbing onto a truck.*
 Dancing music to people moving things/daily life.

Song changes. *Another more upbeat song with people waving to the music.* *Motorbikes starting up.*

(46:08) Back to mountaintop ritual. A bell being rung a few times. (46:34) Garden of The Blind, Sound performances, 2000-2002.
 Horn and other pipe sounds.
 Turbine or machine gun sounds.
 Rock band tuning with loud machinery sounds.
 Chanting/singing. Exercise thuds/beat.

Music to accompany the riding of a bicycle. (48:45)
Back to
 the folks ringing the bell on the mountain.

Grand Parade (Exhibition View), Installations, 2014.
 Drum sounds. Model for Mass and Explosion, Installation, 2014.

After Voices, Installation, 2016.

On Asphalt, Multi-channel video, 2012.



Jompet Kuswidananto's video presentation on 26 May 2019.

Framed?

In thinking about the possibilities that can be played with between frames and frame-r, I found myself wondering about the points of tension that exist in the relationship as well – when might the frame *frame* the framer, and box people in rather than being a kind of window that can open up to new vistas? This question lingered at the back of my head as Su reflected about her journey with *Wave*:

Su:

*With Wave in 2011, I wanted to create a perfect machine that can be like a human being. So I set up this goal: I want this machine [that] can move like my body, like [to be] as organic as it can be. I [spent] a lot [of money], and I learned a lot, but it was really... **how much money do we invest in technology? How much can we go without losing ourselves?***

In 2011, I didn't have much budget, so the technology functions but not really, it's kind of halfway. And I felt like creating this mass machine, I lost [a lot].

I wait[ed] a lot for this project; my body felt like it was waiting most of the time, waiting for the money to be burnt, waiting for my bank account to be empty, and waiting for all my team somehow [to] all [become] exhausted and collapse somehow.

It was important that I did the piece, because I didn't realise how much this machine can take [from us].

*But after this piece, I felt a bit lost, because then **what is still meant by technology, and where can it still go?***

*But after this, **when we had another budget in 2014 to do the upgrade [for Wave], I was thinking to drop that high tech ideology, and thinking back to how I can work without tech.***

So I went back to the environment of the theatre, and started from what is there, like theatre lights. And we oriented instead to create the illusion of technology.

It became all about hiding the machine, the mechanism working behind the machine or behind the system. So rather than putting up actual projections, we worked more to find patterned reflective material that will make people believe [the image] is from [a] really high tech graphic software design or from a really high definition projector.

Indeed, where else can technology, or technology in the arts, go?

In the face of the impossibility of opting out of a technological world, I find it helpful to keep trying to assemble thoughts to these questions:

What are the long-term implications of societies pursuing such a technology-focused or technology-driven direction?

Who thrives in the resulting futures that might emerge?

Conversely, who might not survive?

These are difficult and weighty questions that I think we will have to keep puzzling at for many more years within society and within the arts sector, and so as a counterpoint, I'd like to offer Italo Calvino's musings on 'Lightness' in his book *Six Memos for the New Millennium*¹:

*Whenever
humanity seems
condemned to heaviness,
I think I should fly like Perseus
into a different space. I don't
mean escaping into dreams
or into the irrational.
I mean that I have
to change
my
a
p
p
r
o
a
c look at
h, the world
from a different
perspective,
with a different logic and
with fresh
methods of
cognition and verification.*

¹ Calvino, I. (1988). *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. New York: Vintage Books.

Re/viewing.

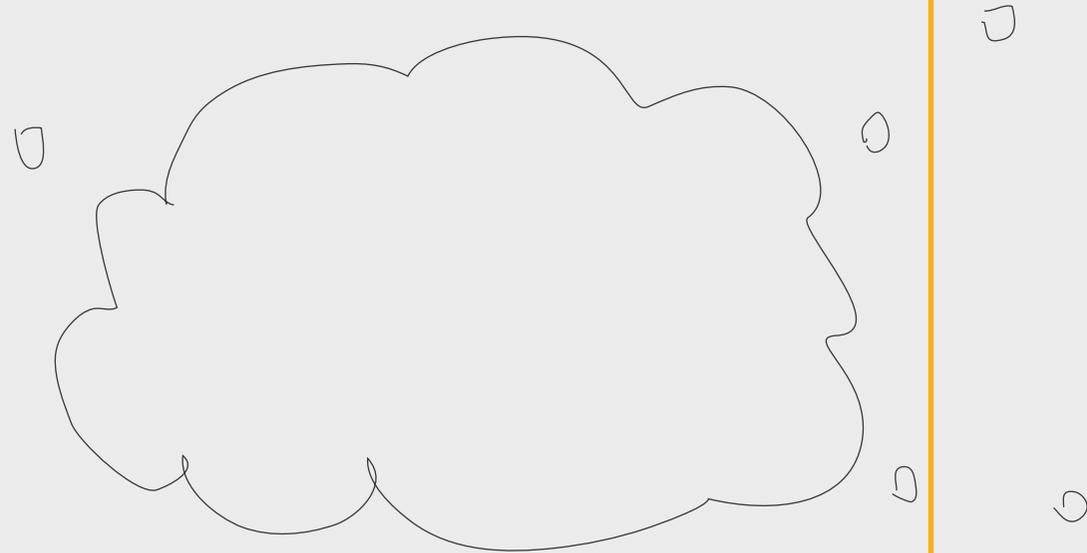
At this point, I wonder if it might be useful to also re-view 'frames' as a concept?

For instance, rather than imagining frames as something that is stiff and unyielding, like picture frames or your phone/laptop screen, what if we thought about frames as speculative, malleable and porous structures that we can play with?



What if, as David Pledger proposes in his keynote, we view culture or society as an Operating System that we can programme? Can we frame technology as a game to play, rather than as a given or inevitable parameter within the operating system?

And if technology is just a game, then what are its rules and logics, and how might we subvert those or perhaps introduce our own ways of playing the game? What might 'hacking' this game of technology look like?



In my imagination, here's how I would play the game:

1

We're not allowed to use any piece of technology in the way that they were intended to be used. So a vacuum cleaner can be used as a noisemaker or as an instrument, but it cannot be used to pick up dust. Or a projector can be used as a lighting source or as an altar, but it cannot be used to show images.

2

We pay attention to the insecurities of each piece of technology. For any given hardware or software, where are the soft spots on its body? Where are its joints? What are its vulnerabilities?

3

We can and should propose the kinds of technologies that we want to see, and not just take the cue from existing technologies. While it's great to work with limitations as creative restrictions, it's also important that we don't limit our imagination to what seems feasible, but that we can speculate and dream about new technologies that are directly inspired by the kind of future we want.

What about you? How are you already playing this game of technology, or how else can you play (with) it?

Also, after playing for some time and getting a better understanding of the complexities and politics of technology, if it's not feeding into the future we want to see, can we dream up other frames or games (or alternative operating systems!) that are as compelling if not more compelling?

For now though, in the same way that I'm interested in re-thinking frames as soft structures, I'm curious about how I can be more porous myself as a frame-r, to sit with my resistances and play this game of technology more seriously – as Coutts notes, “we're only just beginning to be able to understand how technology works”, and there's so much more I'd like to explore before I decide on the frame(s) with which I'd like to approach technology in my work as an artist.

In the meantime, thank you for sharing this time and space with me across our screens, and take care!



Chong Gua Khee

THE DRAMATURGS' GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Daniel Teo

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> Next,
Daniel Teo was inspired by the concentric circles imagery from Pledger's keynote and its similarities to the heliocentric model of our Solar System. Through a frame of cosmology, Teo plays with the works cited in the *Human Futures and Histories* roundtable at ADN Conference 2019 through the frame of cosmology. Like space exploration, art-making is often about going on a journey into the vast unknown, bridging seemingly insurmountable distances across space and time. >>



I've always thought of the work done at ADN as similar to that of deep space exploration. We look up and see the immensity of dramaturgy and the inky darkness of 'Asian', but also, we gaze in wonderment at the immense field of stars, the constellation of performance works created and produced across the region.

It's also not a far stretch for ADN to use the vocabulary from other fields to describe dramaturgical observations. In past ADN discussions, dramaturgy has been spoken about in the language of architecture and culinary arts. So why not cosmology?

ADN's efforts feel astronomical, what with the intrepid but also perhaps foolhardy attempts to connect the dots across these vast stretches of time and space, and cultures and ideas. With every move we've made, with every new revelation, we discover there are even more universes to be explored, and more mysteries to be unravelled.

So, when presented with David Pledger's imagery of the concentric circles of artistic dramaturgy, I couldn't help but liken it to our contemporary understanding of our solar system.

In his keynote, Pledger outlines a dramaturgy for creating work. Like the sun with the galaxy revolving around it, at the centre sits a core team of artists who plan and create an idea. They then seek out further information and

verification from a group of experts or informants in a wider circle. And in the third and outermost circle is the group of people who test and evaluate the work based on the intentions of the core team of artists.

Between these three concentric circles, ideas flow back and forth, both emanating from and moving towards the centre. It's a wonderful picture where the birth of art creates a gravitational pull that draws all these various groups of people together.

Then, like the seeming serendipity of celestial events, I had to look at the transcript for the [Human Futures and Histories roundtable](#) at ADN Conference 2019. I read Jo Kukathas, Jean Tay and Loo Zihan speak about their works, which respond to history and imagine alternate futures using fundamentally different approaches.

From what these three artists have shared about their work, I am able to observe three different kinds of cosmic artistic dramaturgy with unique implications for each one. (Please note though that what I've cited from each artist's presentations only represents a limited field of view on their entire body of work.)

In my headspace, the frames of space and art-making collided. What new worlds may be birthed from the impact? Strap in and let's find out.

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> With artists at the helm of these deep space and interdimensional voyages, Teo also probes what various cosmological dramaturgies mean for audiences who are along for the ride. It's an intergalactical, time-warping exploration into how differently artists play with time and space, and its implications for audiences. >> p.73



Jo Kukathas presenting at ADN Conference 2019 in Singapore on 26 May 2019.

Gravitational Dramaturgy

The heliocentric model describes the Sun as occupying a central point, with all other celestial bodies orbiting around it. Jo Kukathas built her career in theatre creating and playing satirical characters as political commentary, placing herself squarely in the centre of her work, much like the Sun that sits in the centre of our solar system.

"I think my work has always been to ask what the state of the nation is, and then, whose story is it? And I had often been made to feel that I've had no right to tell the stories of my nation, or had to tell it in a very marginal form. So I felt, no, the only way then is to actually claim your right to have a place to tell the stories. And I thought if I cannot tell the stories as myself because I felt I could not, then I began to invent characters."

Kukathas' voice rings loud and true through her characters. And much like the Sun, Kukathas' performances are illuminating, shining light on important issues and alternative perspectives.

"The first character I invented 30 years ago was called Ribena Berry. And Ribena Berry is Chinese because I was really annoyed by this notion of race, because everything was always about race and class. So I created a Chinese beauty queen from up north and she spoke in her own kind of English language. That's how she speaks and through her very naive voice, she spoke a lot of truth about politics. She completely believed everything she heard, but she would say it the way she heard it."

"And through her character I was able to say very critical things about the government. She's not saying anything bad about [them]. She's praising the government through her naiveté. So she was a very useful character for me to be able to say things that otherwise I wouldn't be allowed to say. And it was a time when you were told basically you can't say things you'll get into a lot of trouble."

Kukathas has good reason for occupying the centre of her art-making universe – she sees her personal history as indelibly intertwined with the history of her country, to which most of her work responds.

"[Malaysia] is 56 years old. It was formed in 1963. My theatre company is 30 years old. I mean when I realize that some of the characters that I play, which I created 30 years ago, you know more than half the age of my country [which is] only twice as old as some of my characters, our histories are very interlinked. And I think that's why my work is political..."

"My father was a writer, a journalist, a government critic."

He used to work for the government for Radio TV Malaya [RTM], then later for the government as a diplomat. But he very quickly became a critic and a thorn in the side for many people in the government. And the first job I had after university was to come [back to Malaysia] and help him edit his book which was a fiercely anti-government book. So my early education was completely political...

"So my public history and my private history would therefore collide from a very early age. My family was deeply political, so I grew up thinking in political terms. I grew up thinking also about my extended family and their lives as well. But what did I do? I formed a theatre company 30 years ago to do political satire, and the history of my company and the history of my country I feel are very interlinked."

The Sun, as the largest body in our solar system, has such massive gravity that it draws in and holds together all the planets and other smaller celestial bodies and matter. Kukathas' *tour de force* character performances and the productions of her company, The Instant Café Theatre Company, have a similarly attractive force that pulls audiences in.

"I remember going to Penang once many years ago to perform in this ballroom. [After the performance,] this electrician came up to me and said, 'I love it! I love Instant Café! I love your company.' And I'm like, 'Oh, pakcik [Malay for 'uncle', a commonly-used honorific when addressing older men in Malaysia], when did you see us? I've never seen you.' And he said he just liked the fact that we existed."

"He'd heard what we did and that we made fun of the government and he said that he loved it. He had switched

his [work] roster that day so he could work in the daytime, then sneak into the ballroom to watch us in the evening."

Kukathas continued to locate herself in the centre of her work, and with that gravitational trajectory, it seemed inevitable that she would eventually begin to look inwards.

"Part of me wants to leave [political satire] behind and go into the more personal narratives. In one of the plays that I did, a friend of mine came to watch it. And this was a very personal narrative that I wrote with nothing to do with

the State at all, and she said to me, 'Oh, in some ways I think this work is more subversive, because when you watch this play, no one can deny that you are also bumiputera, you are also a person of this soil. You belong.'

"And I thought that that was very interesting, that these personal narratives are also subversive in their own way. Maybe more deeply because they are not

propaganda, they're not oppositional, they're not reactive. They are story, and therefore, fundamental."

"These personal narratives are also subversive in their own way... They are story, and therefore, fundamental."

Kukathas described her work as "activist", an agent of social change. In a context where her Self doesn't seem to have space, she claims a spot right smack in the centre. Her characters, stories and very bodily existence become objects of subversion and displacement, creating space for alternative truths as well as attracting witnesses to them. And that makes her work truly revolutionary.

Time Travel Dramaturgy

Jean Tay's play-writing career began much like Kukathas' in that she too drew from her own upbringing and memories to create work. But later on, Tay grew interested in writing plays about the untold and forgotten histories of others. For Tay, these plays were about reviving memories, as well as keeping them alive and relevant for future generations.



Jean Tay speaking at ADN Conference 2019 in Singapore on 26 May 2019.

“One of these first pieces was actually a play called Sisters. I was approached by a director, Jeffrey Tan, and it was actually produced in The Arts House. It was about the Sisters Islands which are offshore islands in the South of Singapore and they’re a pair of small islands.

“There is a myth about their founding, about a pair of sisters who drowned and were turned into islands when they were being pursued by a pirate. But there is also a history of a crime that was committed there in 1963, when this man, Sunny Ang, was accused of drowning his girlfriend there. It was on a diving trip because the currents there are very treacherous, and she was a first-time swimmer and diver. But all the evidence was circumstantial. It was that story that was set in 1963, an actual historical event that was covered at length by the press in the 60s.

“But by the time we started to explore it in the early 2000s, it was about 50 years later, and this story had pretty much all but been erased from the national consciousness. But if you ask my parents’ generation who Sunny Ang is, they all know the guy. But not my generation. I thought, okay, that’s interesting that this history or this story that we once shared is no longer being explored or discussed, and so what happens when you bring it to stage and you share it with an audience that is both young and old? It was very interesting because we had more mature audiences telling me, oh, I remember this story. But we also had young girls who could identify with the story of young sisters and they felt for it emotionally.”

Her work documenting these histories bends space-time, bringing the past into the present, and the future. To create her verbatim theatre work especially, Tay acts much like a time traveler, traversing a wormhole into the past and returning to the present with their stories to be shared.

"I wrote a piece called Ignorland of Its Time, about Bukit Ho Swee. Bukit Ho Swee is an old housing estate in Singapore that is most famous for having been a kind of a slum area that suffered the worst fire ever in Singapore in 1961. I was fascinated by that event in history, but at the same time, I think we were also very interested to explore what were the memories of the past and present residents of that place.

"And so what we did was we conducted many interviews with different residents who were still living there, but also with those who had already left. What happened during the fire? Do you know how it started? Some people say it was a bakery oven that caught fire or something. But there were other conspiracy theories, like a few

"As a playwright, my responsibility is to the story... What I do is I try to craft a narrative based on whatever skills I have and whatever material I have."

men came and they threw lighted pieces of material and set the place on fire. And then there were other versions that these were not just any men, these were government men and this was the best way for the government to clear

the slum. To some people, Bukit Ho Swee was home, but to others, it was kind of a cesspool of crime and the slum was not a very desirable place.

"So it was interesting to figure out and piece all these stories together and eventually what we created was a promenade theatre piece that took the audience through different areas of Bukit Ho Swee."

In science fiction, time travel lore is fraught with a variety of complexities and challenges, chief among which is the dire warning that the time traveler should only observe the past and never interfere with it. The consequences of altering the past are also varied and unpredictable, from minor changes to their present, to a catastrophic space-time meltdown.

Tay seems aware of this immense burden as she reflects on whether she's even the right person to delve into the pasts of other people.

"I did not want to write [Senang, a play based on the history of a small island]. I didn't think I was capable of writing this play set in the 60s about a bunch of gangsters, because I'm neither a man nor have I been in prison in the 60s. So you know I can't come at it from a personal point of view, which is usually how I write. So how do I then enter these characters lives? How do I create vivid characters or even you know semi authentic characters? And everyone from that period pretty much had passed on or was hanged as a result of that episode."

Moreover, Tay wonders how her work is able to preserve the veracity and authenticity of the stories she collected.

"I wrote a show [called Chinatown Crossings] that covered three different periods in [Chinatown's] history, from the 60s and 70s, to the mid-80s (which was when the area was officially renamed "Chinatown" by the authorities), and the present. The subtitle of the show is actually Bringing Home the Ghost, because I think a lot about how do you create this? How do you give voice to these ghosts? How do you recreate their presence through live performance?"

As in most time travel films, a foray into the past is never without complications. There are always consequences to messing with the fabric of space-time. At some point in the film, the time traveler comes to the conclusion that being a non-participant observer is not possible. Then the film arrives at its dramatic last act in which the time traveler takes the reins and makes deliberate alterations to the past to create a desirable present/future.

In creating her work, Tay assumes the role of the meddling but cognizant time traveler who consciously

welds the past as a means to shape the present and future.

"Like I mentioned from when I was doing Senang and all the research for that, I remember there was a point of time when I was very pleased at all the research and pieced together for this play. I presented a draft of that to my mentor who said to me, 'Now forget about the history and write the story.'

"So I think as a playwright, my responsibility is to the story. So I always say I'm 'inspired by'. I'm not a historian and I do not pretend to be one. What I do is I try to craft a narrative based on whatever skills I have and whatever material I have. You may or may not agree with me, but this is my raw material."

The artist as time traveler is indeed going back to the future – they do the important work of stringing together different points of the space-time continuum. That work, however, needs to be done with the recognition that their intrusion into the past always has an impact. But with that impact also comes the opportunity to use yesterday to imagine a better today and tomorrow.



Loo Zihan speaking at ADN Conference 2019 in Singapore on 26 May 2019.

Quantum Dramaturgy

This is the part where we descend into the murkier depths of cosmology and science. In quantum theory, everyday logic fails and chaos reigns. A cat can be both dead and alive. You can, and have lived, multiple parallel lives.

At first glance, Loo Zihan's work is the antithesis of chaotic. In fact, it is highly measured and calculated in his goals for his audiences.

"I see the role of artist or theatre-maker or somebody who is producing work in Singapore as providing alternatives and inculcating a sense of criticality in the viewer or the reader or the audience. In my perspective, there are different strategies of achieving this criticality and I've adopted some strategies of allowing the audience or the reader or the viewer to pay attention to the minute or the everyday or the mundane in my works.

"At the same time also providing them with a sort of paradigm shift in thinking-through and visioning collectively, counterfactual history or a counterfactual imagined future. This collective utilising of art in a way to imagine what is not permitted to be imagined or seen or heard."

One of Zihan's primary investigations in his body of work deals with archived objects and the stories that are told and untold.

"We've been talking about excavating histories and speaking on behalf of the dead, but I'm also while working through archives, constantly struggling with the ethical repercussions and implications of speaking for and on behalf of especially for people who cannot speak back, people who cannot tell you that they do not want their stories represented. Particular to my own personal practice as excavating queer narratives and queer memory, this is a real struggle.

"When is it an invasion of privacy? When is it that private lives are forcibly made public against one's will? And how do we negotiate with what thrives in being invisible and what insists on refusing representation? Especially because of the social stigma that pervades the disclosure of one sexuality in Singapore due to very real legal laws. [Penal Code] 377A is still in place and it criminalises consensual homosexual sex between two adult men.

"So and what does it mean when we come to wrestle with objects in the archive? Because everything in the archive has been permitted to survive and if we only allow

ourselves to excavate the memories that survive, are we doing an injustice to those that cannot be permitted to survive or actively suppressed that are not within the National Archive? How do we represent and address these narratives?"

Like Tay, Loo's work has the ability to bend and warp space-time. *Catamite*, a performance lecture-workshop which Loo presented in 2019, pulls together several points in distant and recent history.

"What belongs in a queer archive, queer Singaporean archive? This was the installation I did in 2015 [called Queer Objects and Archive for the Future], in response to that hypothetical reimagining. I sent an open call to the queer community to send in their objects and I collected them and I displayed them, in an installation. So I had 81 objects from various people within the queer community..."

"With Catamite, I was specifically honing in and zeroing in on one particular object as a way of thinking about what other potential narratives are like in all the other 80 objects [...] This Casio watch with a black strap was one of the objects contributed by Casey to Queer Objects And Archive for the Future. Time is arrested at 5 minutes and 21 seconds past 6 o'clock. This is Casey's account of the narrative of the object from our email correspondence: 'This was the first gift I received from my father when I entered Raffles Institution in 1974. So this watch [has been] with me for around 45 years...'

"In the second half of Catamite, we actually examine a trial from 1942 which is one of the first high-profile trials in

British colonial court where [Article] 377A was introduced and enforced, and a British staff officer was caught having a relationship with a young male prostitute and the male prostitute stole the watch because you know his expectations of remuneration was not met and this watch became evidence in a trial between this colonial officer and the young boy."

"How do we grapple with manipulating an audience? Do we have the skills and the ability to guide them through it and out of it, in a sensitive and attentive manner?"

In *Catamite*, three different points of the past collapse and converge in this one work – the trial in 1942, the 2015 installation, and the wristwatch from 1974. Loo doesn't just time travel, he creates multiple folds in the fabric of space-time, weaving together several timelines. But there is one more element to the work that threatens to throw the order of the cosmos into complete disarray.

Audiences of *Catamite* are invited to present objects of meaning to them and tell their stories. They also get to examine fellow audience member's objects and stories. Corrie Tan, moderator for the roundtable, had attended *Catamite*, and was able to share her experience of the work.

"I think what was interesting about [Catamite] is we also had brought our own objects into the space. They

become part of this strange present, past, future historical collection that we kind of assemble in front of us and it gets us to interrogate how we got here, how our personal histories intersected with the kind of longer stretch of the past of this country. How have the kinds of difficulties of hidden stories come to light? I think it's really interesting to see how this also refracts through. We all became kind of characters in your work."

With the audience contributing to and becoming part of the work, *Catamite* becomes a complex event of quantum proportions in which the past collapses into the present, and the personal into the political. One teeters staggeringly close to the edges of memory and imagination, and self and society.

But when an artist plays god to this degree, what are the implications to audiences brought into the chaos? Fortunately, this is something Loo has given some thought to.

"How do we grapple with manipulating an audience? Let's call a spade a spade. We are basically shaping an audience experience and asking them to go onto a very introspective, personal, reflexive, safe journey. Do we have the skills and the ability to guide them through it and out of it, in a sensitive and attentive manner?"

The artist on a quantum level can rewrite the very logics that hold all our realities together. The work they create then allows multiple parallel universes to co-exist in the very same moment. And for audiences of the work, that's a really wild trip that can have you examining and

questioning your very existence. I just hope the artist has a map.

Creating Space(s)

If there's anything I learned through this exploration of Kukathas', Tay's and Loo's works, it is that the more the artist messes with space-time, the greater the possibilities there are for light and imagination, but also the bigger their responsibility to not create an insurmountable mess!

In this brief jaunt through dramaturgy and space, I've become aware of how each piece of art created is really a galaxy unto itself, with its own order and logics. Art has the power to connect people and ideas across space, time, and even multiple realities.

And if ADN were to follow the trajectory of cosmological inquiry, we'd continue questioning how these art galaxies were born, how they operate now, and how they might possibly die out and be reborn elsewhere. And we'd be curious about how different galaxies relate to and affect each other, even across vast light-years, to infinity and beyond. We'd examine more closely our position within this vast canvas we call the universe, and then perhaps, come to know ourselves a bit better.

As astronomer Carl Sagan once said, "The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself."

THE REFLECTIVE PRODUCER

INTUITIVE DRAMATURGIES IN ARTISTIC LEADERSHIP

Adapted from
“Artistic Direction as Thought Leadership”

17 February 2018

BankART Studio NYK, Yokohama, Japan

A Roundtable Discussion at
Asian Dramaturgs’ Network
Satellite Symposium 2018

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> In the penultimate article, Dominic Nah draws from the 2018 panel titled *Artistic Direction as Thought Leadership* to examine the intersections between dramaturgy, artistic leadership and producing. Nah frames ideas from the discussion between panelists and audience members as a programme booklet. >>

Featuring
Bilqis Hijjas,
Linda Mayasari,
Hiromi Maruoka

Provocateur
Charlene Rajendran

The *Artistic Direction as Thought Leadership* Roundtable on 17 Feb 2018. (L to R) Hiromi Maruoka, Bilqis Hijjas, Linda Mayasari, Charlene Rajendran (provocateur).



A MESSAGE FROM THE ARTICLE DIRECTOR

THE REFLECTIVE PRODUCER

It is my pleasure to round off *ADN Re/View (Vol. 3)* with an article on dramaturgy and artistic leadership entitled “The Reflective Producer: Intuitive Dramaturgies in Artistic Leadership”!

When I first took on the responsibility for synthesising material from the panel “Artistic Direction as Thought Leadership” from the 2018 ADN Symposium as part of TPAM (Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting), I was first struck by the all female line-up of the panel. To have three Asian women helm a panel on artistic direction in a symposium on dramaturgy was surely a provocation in itself, even though having female leaders in arts organisations is not a new phenomenon by any means. At the same time, such attention to their gender and alluding to the anomaly of a female-dominated panel on leadership runs the risk of overlooking the contextual strategies adopted in their leader-

producer capacities. Following the overt focus on identity politics in “On Dramaturgy and Body Politics”, an article in [ADN Re/View Vol. 2](#) (pg. 100 - 133), I wondered if we could reflect on dramaturgical concerns that did not always need to be explicitly influenced by our presenters’ gender positionality?

During the course of framing this article, I observed how the panellists intuitively referred to their work as leaders of their respective organisations in terms of how they grapple with the demands, needs and limitations of various stakeholders. Clearly, these reflections and interventions stem from a strong producer’s scope: be it Hiromi Maruoka’s deliberation of the ripple effects of TPAM*, Bilqis Hijjas’s strategic disruptions and the relinquishing of control to facilitate spaces of artistic exchange, or Linda Mayasari’s questioning of the hegemonic “Master” forces that influence artmaking.

In this article, I wish to invite you, our readers, to consider how intuitive dramaturgical activity can be performed by arts leaders in the capacity of reflective producers. We can reflect on how the circles of dramaturgy and leadership overlap: how the dramaturg performs a decentralised, emergent form of leadership, as well as how any arts practitioner in a leadership capacity necessarily engages in dramaturgical activity and deliberation regardless of their consciousness of the terms. Let us discover through our panellists’ shared reflections how they account for the “random and non-deterministic algorithms entered and extracted by human agency” – as posited by David Pledger in this volume – as well as how the relationship between artistic direction, thought leadership and dramaturgy remains intertwined with institutional interventions.

Ultimately, these forms of dramaturgical activity in artistic leadership seem to arise from concerns of organisational survival, initiatives to address structural gaps in our arts ecosystems, and responses to practitioners’ needs and demands, with a hopeful eye towards the growth and flourishing of fellow artists.

Dominic Nah
Article Director

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> Staging their programmes as performances, with synopses and reflections that offer insights into the workings of their craft, Nah reframes the producer and foregrounds their positioning in relation to the dramaturgies of artmaking. >>

*Translation note: In this article, Hiromi Maruoka’s sharing is drawn and edited from the live English translation provided by a Japanese interpreter during the panel which was also recorded.

I: FROM STRATEGIC DISRUPTIONS TO RELINQUISHING CONTROL

On funding and framing the terms of artistic exchange

Produced by Bilqis Hijjas

SYNOPSIS

A group of emerging contemporary dancers from the ASEAN region live and work for one to two weeks in Malaysia: partially funded by international cultural agencies and facilitated by an established contemporary dance choreographer. This exchange is set within the Southeast Asian Choreolab at [Rimbun Dahan](#) – produced by Bilqis Hijjas together with [MyDance Alliance](#) and [World Dance Alliance Asia-Pacific](#) – with 5 iterations thus far (2014; 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019), and a voluntary developmental project with SEA Choreolab's alumni, as part of an annual site-specific dance event called [Dancing in Place](#), also at Rimbun Dahan.

How do funding sources shape the terms of artistic exchange? How might their structures favour certain exchanges and exclude others? How can one take advantage of them, yet intervene and produce new opportunities for the development of local, personal and regional networks? Even then, while a producer's resourcefulness can enable this exchange, could it inadvertently enable the acceptance of scarce resources for artists, leading to (un)sustainable financial models that compensate for their artistic labour and practice? Apart from funding concerns, how could the terms of artistic exchange be established in a collaborative space? How distributed or centralised would dramaturgical work be? What expectations can we set for artists seeking collaborative opportunities without forcing productivity?

“ I think there is a distinction between the thought leader and someone involved in thought leadership. Much like there's dramaturgical thinking at work even though there may not be a dramaturg in the room.

In that vein the idea of a thought leader is slightly different from being involved in thought leadership. But they are somehow linked. And one can refuse to be associated with thought leadership.

The curiosity here is what is it that creates 'impact'? This is a word that is used a lot now, whether you're doing research or whatever because of this wretched KPI [Key Performance Indicator] that plagues the life of so many people, in so many industries. The kind of things, or the kind of people, platforms, movements, organisations, programmes, situations that have had powerful impact or continue to have powerful impact and sustain this impact, are very often linked to at least a few people, if not one person sometimes, who is doing some very significant thinking and doing. For me, that is leadership.”

– Charlene Rajendran, Provocateur

In these reflections, Hijjas considers how the opportunity for artistic exchange is both the reward and aim, how the importance of relinquishing control and autonomy to participating artists in an exchange space can be the crucial dramaturgical service needed, compared to the deliberate interventions in funding structures that facilitate the very space of exchange to begin with.

EDITORIAL NOTE

>> Much like an Artistic Director who leaves a message in the programme booklet, Nah assumes the role of 'Article Director'. Nah directs the reader to put together concerns of local, regional and international circulations within and across multiple arts ecosystems and points to key questions: >>

Bilqis Hijjas reflects:

**[Funding the terms of artistic exchange:
Tensions and interventions]**

*“It wouldn’t be possible to do this without the involvement of the international cultural organisations. Because if you follow the money, that’s how it works. Which when you look at it, it’s something that I feel very strongly about in Malaysia and also in Southeast Asia in general, in that **many of our cultural encounters are structured inalienably by the structures of our funding in every part of the world. And the structures of our funding are mostly such that they come from these various different international cultural organisations.**”*

“We continually have incredibly influential and incredibly encouraging growth opportunities but with very certain cultural players from very certain parts of the world. So, my intention with the Choreolab was to try and slightly disrupt this pattern by also using the pattern as it exists. This is something that we have to think about doing, how we are both complicit in the terms of power and how we also strategically negotiate that, in order to achieve perhaps, slightly different outcomes.”

“I would like to advocate for the values of the local, the values of personal networks, of creating webs of personal obligation which are much more proximate to you, rather than going halfway across the globe to have our cultural organisations and our cultural products largely dictated by funding provided by our former colonial masters.”

“But I also think how complicit I am in enforcing a kind of oppression upon artists whom I’m not paying. None of these artists who participated in Dancing in Place 2018 were paid, they did not receive an honorarium, they received nothing. They received food. They had to pay for their own flights, I gave them absolutely nothing. The entire project of 16 international artists and 2 days of performance with 300 audience members which all took part over 10 days cost me US\$1,700 – in cash. Cost me, because that doesn’t take into account all their unpaid labour and how much they paid to be there.”

“So, despite the, ra-ra-ness of self-sufficiency, it’s self-sufficiency at what cost? Yes, we get these beautiful works out of them. But maybe, this IS the most sustainable model or maybe it is a totally unsustainable model, maybe it’s a totally unfair model. And I think we need to think about that.”

**[Framing the terms of artistic exchange:
Low stakes and easy wins]**

“My intention for the Southeast Asian Choreolab is that the choreographers from the region who are participating take away from the project this experience of having met and suddenly becoming energised by the idea that: There are other people out there like me who are excited by dance like me, who are not that far away and Gosh! we could do something together.”

>> What dilemmas and decisions emerge when artistic leaders attempt to facilitate sites and spaces of exchange for fellow artists? What are these intuitive reflections of producing and (re) configuring conducive artistic spaces and exchanges? >>p.103

“But it ended up that most of the dramaturgical support was provided to each other. So, they were rehearsing during the day and in the evening we would go out and we would eat together and they would talk about their works to each other and invite the choreographers from the other group to come and see them rehearse in the morning and give them feedback and tell them what they thought and this. So, in the end I did extremely “light” dramaturgy. Basically, just sort of talking them through the sites and the way the audience was likely to react and that kind of thing. But they dramaturge each other, which was an outcome that I didn’t predict in the beginning but which I think worked extremely well.”

*“First of all, **allow the artists to choose their own collaborators so that you are not forcing them into a situation where they are collaborating with people that they don’t know. Put them in a kind of “easy-win” situation where there is not that much pressure on what comes out of it.**”*

“And then to allow them to make their own decisions about whether or not they create something that they want to present. One of the groups came up to me halfway through and said, “Oh, we don’t know if we will have anything to perform”. I said: “That’s fine, you don’t have to have anything.” As an actual first step, well, you can afford to fail and also it’s very short, five days to make a whole new work together. Doesn’t go well, the group implodes, you hate each other by the end, it doesn’t matter since you’re not required to put on a performance, you’re fine.”

II: THE DELIBERATION OF RIPPLE EFFECTS *On negotiating the terms of artistic exchange*

Produced by Hiromi Maruoka

SYNOPSIS

In tracing the evolution of the Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting (TPAM), Hiromi Maruoka shares how the shift from its beginning as a “Market” for Japanese artistic works to be promoted to an international audience, towards framing TPAM as a “Meeting”, allowed for more reflective exchanges where not only can new places be found for works to be shown, but also how value systems and ways of thinking can continue to be reaffirmed and reexamined in this platform of artistic dialogue and sharing. Highly cognisant of the ripple effects TPAM can inspire, she notes how the platform has the ability to influence leaders of various ecosystems and how her artistic leadership is grounded by the belief in the public value of art. She then shares examples of how she curates works that examine existing values while also continuing to question the cycle of artistic consumption that TPAM enables.

Hiroshi Maruoka reflects:

[Influencing leaders of various ecosystems]

“TPAM, as you may be familiar with as performing arts professionals, is a festival that we are presenting for you. And I create the event for all of these people. People who work in theatre and artists, the producers, people who work in theatre or festivals, arts managers, critics, researchers. These are the people that I try to work with. Today’s leaders, and future leaders are the ones that we think are important. There are hundreds, thousands, of audiences beyond or behind every single one of you. How, and what the experience of TPAM was - is going to be fed back into these local ecosystems and their local events. This is what I always try to think about when I’m working on creating TPAM together with my team.”

[Believing in the public value of art]

“It’s difficult to think about where to start from, but the basic premise is whether it’s publicly funded or not. Arts and culture, I believe, must always be regarded as something which is public. For the public sphere. Making work and providing it to the public sphere. I think it’s an action which really questions or raises issues or points to be considered relating to the current situation. The world in our society is always continuing to change, we are always going to be caught in double binds and paradoxes, which sounds pessimistic, I know. My hope is that we can try to think about these issues and about the circumstances and try to bring about some change or something new, some kind of a tweak. That is basically what I always have in mind when I’m trying to think of what we can do.”

[Curating works examining existing values]

“I think that the works which I bring to your attention have really been kinds of work which will change your perspectives of how you experience work in the past and also in the future as well. We hope that all the work that you experience will be a trigger for that sort of change.

“For example, Jessica Zafra and Raya Martin’s performance ([“Exporting Positive Disposition since 1417: A Theory for World Domination”](#)) was presented yesterday and the very last scene takes place in a Filipino restaurant. But in order to be able to capture what is occurring there, you need to have an ideological trigger or something that you need to protect, that you need to guard. And whether or not to have that or will you have that kernel of thought within yourself that you want to really keep to is going to be something that you are going to have to face up to and to think about.”

[Questioning the cycles of artistic consumption]

“In the TPAM debates, there are some which are productive, at the same time, there are unproductive discussions. So, as professionals, what we are doing is, in effect, feeding into a consumer cycle by delivering the works to audiences, which theatre professionals will look at in horror because they tend to really not like the concept of consumption. But then I’m also aware that we need to really question whether we really understand the concept and limitations of this concept of consumption.”

III: FROM THE MASTER'S FORCES, TO MUSTERING NEW FORCES

*On exposing and experimenting
with the terms of artistic exchange*

Produced by Linda Mayasari

SYNOPSIS

As Director of Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society, Mayasari is keenly aware and critically questions the influence of various hegemonic power structures (what she calls "The Master") that determine the underlying conditions and structures for artmaking – ones that artistic leaders need to negotiate and navigate. Even so, how can one use the criticism from other local artists to reflect on one's own organisational purpose and practices? In the sociocultural context of artmaking in Yogyakarta – where struggling and surviving are constant realities – how can artistic leaders facilitate spaces of artmaking outside institutional capacities and managerial systems, to establish semi-formal opportunities for collaboration, experimentation and even alternative economies for artists?

Linda Mayasari reflects:

[Who are our "Masters"? Questioning the influence of hegemonic forces on artmaking]

"Through my personal reflections, I actually realise that there is always "The Master" before someone is instituted as a leader. When someone has been instituted as a leader, then they get closer to The Master. Indeed, we usually do not realise the presence of The Master who has been calling and speaking to us, unconsciously. Our thoughts, reasons, directions, pace, feelings, desire and all of our humanity are led by "The Master" that we love unconsciously.

From that historical chapter [post-Suharto; post-1998] of Cemeti, we can see that the authority of the state, and also in our [internal working] system, has changed. Then cosmopolitanism and internationalism occupied The Master position. But the market has transformed into another shape and is still becoming one of the Masters until today. Of course, as the world has been becoming more complex and difficult for us to identify between reality and fictional identity, I want to deliver some questions for all of us. Do we need a leader, at least for ourselves? Or are we institutionalised leaders led by a certain Principal Master? Who, what is The Master who leads us in our context now? Or do we really have the courage to negotiate with The Master? If yes, then, how so?"

[Reflecting on criticism by local artists]

“By the year 2000, new spaces were emerging and Cemeti started to receive criticism that the “alternative spirit” which it had spearheaded and established for more than ten years had changed. Some people perceived Cemeti merely as established organisation, another agent of neo-liberalism, just working on exporting and importing artists all the time, becoming disconnected locally. So that critical point was very good for us to reflect on. The Directors then were keen to tackle this issue and find new directions. So they changed the platform, from Cemeti Gallery, to Cemeti Art House. Again the criticisms emerged during our 15th year celebrations. Finally, the art space decided to not only focus on exhibitions and promoting the artist but also developing an artist laboratory, which was why we then had an open residency as a main project.”

[Collaboration, experimentation and alternative economies]

“I take a multiple strategy dealing with my responsibility and commitment with the institution but keep trying to not be co-opted by that.

First of all, to engage with other institutions or initiations in a particular involvement such as the Indonesian Dance Festival with Taufik Darwish working as Associate Curator Assistant, and to host [ADN in Yogyakarta](#). The second thing is experimenting and testing out the idea outside of the institutional fence. For example, my independent research about the first institutionalised residency in Yogyakarta. SPASI is a study group of art history and cultural practices. Since there is no educational platform on art history and

collateral in Yogyakarta, we think that we need to navigate and develop our practice. We create our own study platform, formulate curriculum, study method, collectively. We are 13 people, consisting of curators, artists and researchers and art managers who are freelancers or affiliated with certain institutions. We get together every two weeks, after working hours, nomadically, sometimes in Cemeti, and sometimes we use the Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA) space or in someone’s house, moving all the time. The group members take turns presenting the reading materials or observations upon matters related to the artistic or curatorial practice and continue with the discussion.

Also, I am part of the Thing Thang Partnership for Performing Art Artist Collective. This is also part of my concerns about an alternative economy and support system because we face the same problem. There is no funding body, it is very limited, very hard to access money from the government. There are foreign institutions that are working a lot for the contemporary art scene in Indonesia but it is very hard for us to access it, and young people have no idea what to do.

There is also the alternative economy support system that I make with the Delapan Studio in Yogyakarta. The idea is how to get the money and distribute the resources among the artists. So we make a direction for leftover materials, sets for the stage, or even old costumes or whatever related to the stage with a consignment system. I also get involved with some of the artists coming from other backgrounds like visual artists. I ask them to help by donating not money but their drawings and we create merchandise and then we sell it. With a lot of the small projects, the artists can get some support from these things.”

CAST

**BILQIS HIJJAS (MALAYSIA)**

Bilqis Hijjas writes, produces, performs and teaches about dance in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As the President of MyDance Alliance, a membership organisation supporting dance in Malaysia,

she has programmed and produced recurring performance platforms, dance festivals, and mentorship programmes for emerging choreographers, as well as various other local productions and workshops.

Bilqis also directs the dance programme at private arts centre Rimbun Dahan, outside Kuala Lumpur, which offers residencies for contemporary dance choreographers. Bilqis lectures in dance criticism and performing arts theory at University of Malaya. She runs Critics Republic, an online platform for written criticism of Malaysian art, which seeks to encourage critical discussion among the audience.

Bilqis is also the Vice President for Southeast Asia for the volunteer regional organisation World Dance Alliance Asia-Pacific. In this capacity, she would like to continue her work building bridges between the contemporary dance communities in the region: facilitating discussions, collaboration and performance circuits.

**HIROMI MARUOKA (JAPAN)**

Hiromi Maruoka is President of the Japan Center, Pacific Basin Arts Communication (PARC) and Director of the Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama (TPAM). In these roles, she provides opportunities to

connect people with people, and people with places, both in Japan and overseas. In 2003, she set up the Postmainstream Performing Arts Festival (PPAF) to bring foreign productions to Japan. Maruoka also conducted the Asia Satellite Meetings (2008, 2011) of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), and in 2012 initiated the festival Sound Live Tokyo. She is Vice President of the Open Network for Performing Arts Management (ON-PAM) and also one of the founders.

CAST

**LINDA MAYASARI (INDONESIA)**

Linda Mayasari is Director at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society, where she has worked since 2010, as well as a member of the associate curatorial assistant for the Indonesia Dance Festival. She is currently

completing a Masters programme in Religious & Cultural Studies at Sanata Dharma University, whilst pursuing personal research and writing exploring the intersections of art, politics and post colonialism within the cultural and historical context of Indonesia. Occasionally she works collaboratively with artists from various fields (particularly dance and visual art) to produce independent research based projects.

Previously, Linda worked as a program manager at Bagong Kussudiardja Foundation (2008 - 2010), a performing art space in Yogyakarta, and was a member of Gandrik Theatre (2009 - 2015). She has attended numerous international forums on the visual and performing arts including Asia Arts Space Network, Korea in 2015, Setouchi Asian Forum, Japan in 2016, Monsoon Platform, Belgium in 2017.

**CHARLENE RAJENDRAN (SINGAPORE)**

Charlene Rajendran is a theatre educator, dramaturg and writer, whose involvement in experimental performance began when she was a teenager in Malaysia. She has performed, directed, dramaturged and

written for the theatre, as well as facilitated theatre workshops and dialogues. Charlene researches contemporary performance, issues of identity and play-based pedagogies, with a view to expanding contextually-based discourses on performance-making and arts education. She is currently a Co-Director of Asian Dramaturgs' Network.

1. ON ETHICAL DILEMMAS

“What do you do when there is a decision you have to make that creates conflict, ethical conflict, like you feel you should do this but you have to do something else?”

– Charlene Rajendran

Hiromi Maruoka on responding to ground-up demand by participating artists at TPAM over time:

“I have never encountered decision-making which forces me to go against my ethical values. But when you’re managing this kind of project, there are two facets, two phases. One, to pursue your idea and by doing so you may develop, you may grow. Two, the other work you have to do is to survive, you have to make yourself survive. In order to make it happen, sometimes you need to make some compromise. It can happen but this is for the purpose of survival.

But in order to make sure that we protect the core value, we may sacrifice the other lesser values. For example, contributing to the public value or to change from ‘market’ to ‘meeting’ for the TPAM at that time was logical. Consequently, we found that it was not our decision. We only responded to what TPAM members wanted to do. In other words, to be more simple. At that time, the TPAM mission was to introduce Japanese works to those outside Japan, mostly to Europe. At that time. And then contemporary performing arts players came to see the market but they hated it. The participants wanted something else. Not the market and we just responded to their desire and that’s why we changed from ‘market’ to ‘meeting.’”



Bilqis Hijjas on the inevitable complicity in questionable systems in accepting funding sources:

“We could go back to this idea of funding. Do you take the money? This is something that I think about very frequently, especially in Malaysia. When there is any funding, it is necessarily somewhat “tainted”. One of our major funders of, especially dance, is Sime Darby which is an enormous corporation in Malaysia and, as some of you may know, is probably the most major player responsible for deforestation due to palm oil plantations in the world. And, probably one day we will all die from it. But Sime Darby gives a lot of money to the arts. When you take Sime Darby’s money, then you know that you are helping with that greenwash. When you take our Prime Minister’s [then Najib Razak in 2018] money that he has earmarked for the arts, does that make you complicit in his regime? Or when you take Goethe-Institut’s money or when you take Japan Foundation’s money? Does that make you complicit in the expansion of particular geopolitical soft power in the region? And so, I constantly feel like I’m wrestling with these ethical problems and I’ve taken the money. Quite a lot. And do you feel like a total sell-out? Yes, sometimes you do.”

Linda Mayasari on the dilemma between seeking local government funding and upholding organisational principles of independent status:

“We wanted to do a young curators’ forum, and international funding was very hard to access at that time. At first, we got a lot of money from the Dutch government but they had financial regulations, and then they cut off the money for arts and culture. So then I told [the team at Cemeti] I have to approach the local government. [Co-founder Nindityo Adipurnomo] was initially hesitant and disagreed because for 25 years Cemeti never took any money from the government. It was a huge dilemma for me. As part of a younger generation, I say that this is the time for us to engage with the government because that’s public money. Yes, even with [all the associated] corruption, it’s better that we access it. Indeed, it is not for us, this is for the public programmes. Finally, [Nindityo] agreed.”

2. ON DRAMATURGING LEADERSHIP, (DIS)CLAIMING AUTHORITY

“Do you, the three of you, and I see you as actually like power houses, do you see yourselves as thought leaders? And if not, if you feel uncomfortable about that, why?”

– Audience Member

“I don’t think I will articulate myself as a thought leader as I also don’t articulate myself as a dramaturg usually. I would like to think of myself as an action leader in that I hope that the projects that I do can inspire more projects in a similar direction, working regionally, working towards a regional audience, rather than an international audience. Incorporating sometimes overt political dissent. So, I offer these things as, I guess, by leading by example through action. But I don’t think of myself as leading necessarily through thought. Maybe I don’t think enough.”

– Bilqis Hijjas

“In the field called PARC (Pacific Basin Arts Communication), I’m the Director. So as a representative of this organization, I need to be a leader, I guess. Ethically I should be leading. That part I am the leader, yes. When I do TPAM, rather than calling myself a thought leader, I am trying to go towards a certain direction I recommend. I have the opportunity to recommend certain directions. So I’m just one of the ones contributing to that thought. I wouldn’t be the exact thought leader that [the audience member] is referring to.”

– Hiromi Maruoka

“My conscience about why I am not really calling myself a leader, even if I have a certain position at an institutional level, is because I am already overwhelmed with the power games and power contestation in my country. Everybody wants to be a leader. Everybody wants to have power over other people. But then, the only thing is they are just there, and we have no vision, we have no heart for people, other people and the wider society. So, I think now it is time for us to re-contextualise what leadership means in our context and our situation, which is very diverse, of course, in Asia.”

– Linda Mayasari

3. LEADERSHIP AS AN ASIAN WOMAN

*“I think it’s interesting listening to Linda’s and Hiromi’s responses, and then thinking about my own, and noticing our discomfort with adopting this label of ourselves as leaders. And I wonder if, you could put a positive spin on that and think that we are ducking the label, somehow, as an example of resistance against the sense of very established hierarchy in which you have the Master, such a patriarchal and hegemonic concept. Or perhaps, because **there is some vestige of the fact that we are all Asian women and we are uncomfortable claiming our position of leadership and labelling ourselves as leaders. I think this is perhaps not a small thing in this conversation.**”*

– Bilqis Hijjas

“And would it have made a difference if the title today was “Artistic Facilitation as Thought Facilitation”? And then, what would have happened? I mean, how would we have spoken to it? Because I take on Bilqis’s point about a certain idea of the Asian female not wanting to assert leadership or take on being a leader. Not that there aren’t any, of course, there are. Historically there have been for a long time. But as part of a resistant subversive alternative politics, is there a need to then find a different way of articulating it? I think these are questions that are emerging in the process.”

– Charlene Rajendran

“Well actually, in relation to dealing with my gender, I have no problems with this actually. All this time, I have been working, maybe just already beyond gender and my body limitation. Because I started working in the theatre as a lighting man. Working as a crew. So this kind of thing may be stereotyping. Oh Javanese woman, patriarchal, blah, blah, blah. Sometimes that is a construct, like something constructed by something that is outside of you. And if you will agree then you become what they want. But I prove it in my practice that I already have no issue with that.”

– Linda Mayasari

UPCOMING PRODUCTION

SUSTAINABLE ? SUCCESSION

How can arts organisations negotiate the delicate and deliberate work of leadership succession?

“Because that kind of thinking involves profound knowledge and insight that needs to be unpacked. It also needs to be demystified. It doesn’t happen by magic, such that if this person is no longer there then how can the work continue? For me sustainability is an important dimension in this matter. If a key person is no longer there, what are the skills and strategies that can then be shared across other people for the work to continue, for new work to continue, for the kind of changes that you’ve talked about to emerge.”

– Charlene Rajendran

“I guess this is inbuilt into the idea of leadership that the best sort of leader is the one who puts themselves out of a job by enabling other leaders to grow up and mushroom in their own presence. Some of those organisations that tend to be more equitable, that tend to have flatter hierarchies, have managed to, or seemed to be able to negotiate succession with greater success than those that depend upon a single charismatic leader. So how do we, especially, if we might be the single charismatic leader, how do we do something about that?”

– Bilqis Hijjas

“Yes, I’m the successor. Of course, that’s very hard, very hard. Even though I already worked for eight years in Cemeti, it doesn’t mean that I understand everything about the structures, the strategy and the history behind it, and so on. It’s like double-work for me, going forward and going back. I, together with two others, as old staff of Cemeti, have our own attachments to this organisation. The first encounter was very hard, because we had to deal with differences of practices but also the way we imagine the public.”

– Linda Mayasari

ADN REPORT:

THINKING,
REFLECTING,
REVIEWING,
FRAMING

CHARLENE
RAJENDRAN



>> And to wrap up, Charlene Rajendran asks if there are frames for ADN that clarify and deepen its meaning, much like dramaturgical frameworks are intended to serve the process and practice of performance making. How does framing the work of ADN, as we have sought to do in *ADN Re/View*, offer lenses for rethinking the potential of dramaturgy in the work we do as artists, producers, researchers and dramaturgs? >>

EDITORIAL NOTE



The *ADN Report* presentation at ADN Satellite Symposium 2018 on 16 Feb 2018. (L to R) Lim How Ngean, Charlene Rajendran, Robin Loon.

ADN has been described as multiple things to multiple people – a mobile lab, a nomadic project, an artist’s-centred network. ADN does different things to meet the needs and demands of different people, and perhaps that is one way it will continue to evolve. But what is critical is how it responds to changing environments of performance and dramaturgy, developing its own algorithms for making sense of what matters and how to make choices. Material resources are invariably limited, but dreams and ideas should never be.

At the ADN Satellite Symposium 2018 titled *Dramaturgy and the Political* held on 16 and 17 February 2018 in Yokohama as part of TPAM 2018, the Co-Directors of ADN, Lim How Ngean (LHN), Robin Loon (RL) and Charlene Rajendran (CR) delivered [a report of ADN](#). They reflected on the work of ADN since its first meeting in 2016, articulating some aspects of what ADN had done, how ADN is thought about and what else ADN hoped to be.

Since February 2018, ADN has organised other events and programmes that are not reflected in this report. They include: [Points of View](#), a nine-day programme for young performing arts writers and makers to explore various ways of viewing and approaching artistic works held from 4 to 12 May 2018 under the auspices of the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA); [ADN Lab](#), a structured experimental space for practice-based research in dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg, held from 7 to 10 September 2018 in Yogyakarta; and an [ADN Conference](#) titled *Dramaturgy and the Human Condition* which engaged key questions for the dramaturg navigating an increasingly complex world in need of critical action and speech, held on 25 and 26 May 2019 as part of SIFA 2019 .

As a work in progress, ADN is a space of potential for anyone interested in dialogue and practice about dramaturgy and dramaturgs. People are invited to meet and consider each other’s perspectives, they can listen to and question frameworks

>> Talking about dramaturgy and being a dramaturg has led to particular vocabularies and stories being presented and discussed at ADN, in the attempt to understand these working processes with more insight and nuance. Varying contexts pose differing challenges, and the connections between one circumstance and another reveal shared purpose or principles that might appear to transcend the particular. >>

EDITORIAL NOTE



ADN has been described as multiple things to multiple people – a mobile lab, a nomadic project, an artist’s-centred network.

and principles of performance making, they are encouraged to rethink their own modes of making and interacting. In the process, ideas arise about what else can be done and how to move towards more practice-based approaches to engaging a dramaturg’s work, and watching or hearing dramaturgs in action. This is what led to the [ADN Lab](#), which allowed for observation and responses to how dramaturgs operate in rehearsal and workshop settings, as well as in dialogue with artists.

The excerpts below from the [ADN Report](#) in 2018 point to some key considerations that have emerged in working through the value of ADN and how ADN aims to expand its scope as a platform for dialogue and as a network of practitioners interested in dramaturgical thinking and doing. Yet, the question that lingers is: How ADN will ideate its next chapter in the journey?

A) FRAMING ADN

A1) LHN:

“ADN is an artist’s-centered network, where most of the time we get together to talk about processes and artistic creation – whether it’s thinking or doing.

“ADN has a sort of mission to gather knowledge. We have been doing that in the events we organised, where we set up all kinds of different panels and roundtables. And we are also actively archiving, documenting. Perhaps in the future, we will find a way to share this archival repository.”

A2) LHN:

“I see ADN as a roving or nomadic project and network with a home base in Singapore. ADN is a sort of a roving entity – not quite physical, made up of people, ideas, thoughts.

“We do have a home, and that home is in Centre 42, Singapore. Centre 42 is very unique and special – it is probably the only formal space in Singapore that is an incubator first

>> The ADN Report that was presented in 2018 by ADN’s three Co-Directors raised questions about the future of ADN and how to consider its evolution. As an experimental and nomadic entity geared towards dialogue, ADN has thus far focused on talking, thinking, questioning and responding. >>

EDITORIAL NOTE

and foremost. It is text-based. It is a hub where new work happens, and where process work is encouraged. It is a hub where original writing goes into production development. And it is a hub for archiving and documentation. And all of these activities are centered on looking at theatre in Singapore, historically and also in the present. So it was great that Centre 42 magnanimously opened their home to ADN.”



A3) LHN:

“So in terms of what we’ve been trying to do, there is a focus on dramaturgy, and the function of the dramaturg.”

“We make a very conscious effort to connect regional thinking from an Asian point of view. The term ‘Asian’ here, is problematic, but it’s problematic in a productive way. Because it offers layers of interpretation based on sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts.”

“And we’ve been lucky to have invited participants from countries all over the region, focusing on very specific kinds of practices, whether it’s theatre, dance, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work.”

“The people who join us in this discussion have one thing in common, which is that the making of the work follows a certain kind of criticality. There is an emphasis on structure, but the structure can remain open, and it changes because there is a need to change it. And more importantly, it’s self-reflexive.”

A4) LHN:

“We are actually still struggling, in a healthy way, to talk about what we are. We are at the moment very activity based. And the idea is to have a network where we do open sharing of knowledge and exchange.”

“It is also formalised because our activities are formalised. Thus far in the shapes and forms of symposia, discussions, roundtables. And we do tend to do that in a more structured manner for the simple reason that dramaturgy is messy. And there must be some form or a way that we can talk about dramaturgy in its many forms, disciplines and arguments.”

A5) RL:

“Most of us come into dramaturgy, not as our main practice, but as a peripheral practice. We would have main practices in the performing arts or in any of the arts. But how much should that inform our practices? What is the nature of this information? How do we get informed and not let it dominate?”

>> While these invariably lead to further insights about dramaturgy and becoming dramaturgs, there is scope for more creating, experimenting, rehearsing and theorising in a collaborative and dialogic mode that enriches the dramaturgical ethos of the Asia-Pacific region. But how? >>

EDITORIAL NOTE

“We’re not here to make big academic theorisations, although that will occur. But I think it’s very important that as practitioners, as dramaturgs, practicing in our fields, that we find meaningful ways to talk about the work we do. Something that works for us in the practice.”

A6) CR:

“For many of us who are involved in ADN, the work stems from a contemporary sensibility in which the text is important, but has a very different kind of importance. It’s important even when it’s resisted, fragmented, deconstructed, made polyphonic, made multiple, mediated etc.

“And the understanding of what constitutes text has also become very complicated. Whether you want to talk about it in a postmodern sense or just using the word ‘contemporary,’ which is more open because it allows for what is traditional to be part of that discussion.”

A7) LHN:

“So what is ADN not? We’re not a professional body who’s looking for, or giving out accreditation. We are also not consultants. We are not a body who is made up of dramaturgs who can offer you a diverse range of services, so to speak.

“Dramaturgy can be conducted in a professional manner when we work with our fellow makers, whether it’s in dance, art, theatre. But we’re not seeking to be that kind of professional association yet, because I think we still need to talk about it, and perhaps do something about it later on in terms of what it means to engage in dramaturgy.”

B) FRAMING ADN EVENTS**ADN 2016 – SINGAPORE**B1) RL:

“The main purpose of the ADN 2016 event, which was themed ‘mapping’ was to gather people. It was a gathering. And a gathering primarily of dramaturgs. A gathering of artists who’ve worked with dramaturgs.

“And most interestingly, we had a huge group of practitioners interested in the work of the dramaturg, and just wanting to know a lot more of what it constitutes, and what it is.

“So one of the key things we accomplished was just bringing people together. Where are you from? How are you? What is the work that you do? And so forth. And we had various rigorous sessions where there was a lot of talking over topics, over their own works.”

B2) RL:

*“The second thing about the 2016 gathering was about matching terms. What are the terms of engagement? **Is there a common language for dramaturgs in their respective contexts? Should there even be one? How do we communicate our practices across***

>> Could enlarging the possibilities of dramaturgy in the Asia-Pacific be something that we work towards in future publications? We could look at generating vocabularies that exceed words to include sounds, gestures, images, forms, and fashions of dramaturgy that extend beyond the boundary, but remain conscious of its presence. >>

EDITORIAL NOTE**boundaries – are there standards?**

“And this horrible word that I don’t like to use, but my institution uses – is there any ‘benchmarking’ of these practices? Because isn’t that one of the first few things to talk about when professionalising – establishing a kind of parity?”

B3) RL:

"I think the most important thing that ADN 2016 brought about was conversation. It opened up conversation so we could really find out what each other does. I think that's most important as a starting off point.

*"This led to conversations about how active is the role of the dramaturg. Any common kinds of practices or any kind of common benchmarking. **What is the relationship between the dramaturg and the artist? And most importantly, what does one expect a dramaturg to do? Indeed, what is a dramaturg's own expectations of the work?***

"From there we went on to conversations about ethics, responsibilities. There were many conversations about how does the dramaturg configure his or her subjectivity, cultural background, training and discipline, when dramaturging a piece of work.

"We talked about the difference between a dramaturg and a curator, a dramaturg and a programmer, a dramaturg and a producer. Should a dramaturg also be a producer? Can the creative producer double as a dramaturg? Should these roles be separate? So what are these new roles and what are these designations?"

**ADN 2017 – YOKOHAMA**B4) LHN:

"At ADN 2017, when we were at TPAM, we wanted to experiment and explore the possibility of different dramaturgies from different disciplines. And in the course of three days, we presented, offered, suggested, recommended different kinds of discussion formats, panels, roundtables, that revolved around actually very different subject points, different kinds of performances, different genres of performances, that stretched from contemporary performance, to dance, to theatre.

*"This idea of Asian dramaturgy and the Asian dramaturg was inherent in the conversations and discussions. **But what was really interesting was looking back at some of the kinds of rubrics or manuals or ideas about performance-making from a traditional, not so far away distance, with Asian roots.**"*

>> New frames are probably needed to look at what has emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic began and altered the planet, transformed our interactions and shook the foundations of several kinds of performance making. Framing the distancing is a whole new kind of spatial maneuvering. >>

EDITORIAL NOTEB5) LHN:

"It became very apparent that we could not do a network of dramaturgs that were literally consisting of dramaturgs. So we had practitioners from all fields, whether they were dance-makers, theatre-makers, producers, playwrights, talking about dramaturgy. And it remains one of the driving forces when I speak to people or when I want to invite certain people to join us in our discussion of dramaturgy and the dramaturg."

B6) LHN:

“At ADN 2017 we had 10 sessions of different formats that made up 16 hours of dialogue. Why are these numbers important to us? Because it translates into important documentation and archival work. If you go to our website, we have actually uploaded most of the video recordings of our meetings, according to different panels, sessions and formats.

“Why is video documentation important to us? We did not want to lose any of the nuances in terms of the language in which we talk about dramaturgy. And therefore it was important – 16 hours of documentation.

“We’re still trying to look at different ways of how to communicate, to disseminate, to distribute, to talk about this documentation. How can we then draw on documentation to actually further layer our conversations and our activities in the future?”

“How can we then draw on documentation to actually further layer our conversations and our activities in the future?”

ADN 2017 – ADELAIDE**B7) CR:**

*“The 2017 ADN mini-symposium in Adelaide was a smaller event. It was also quite particular because for the first time it was just two nations, Singapore and Australia. It was part of a larger event, OzAsia Australia Theatre Forum, and more significantly, held in conjunction with a special government level meeting between Singapore and Australia. That meeting had come out of a larger government-to-government memorandum of understanding that pertains to economics, education and particular kinds of visas. The motivation to create this small meeting was to bring together people who are Australia-based and Singapore-based to talk about what they’re doing in their own context. **It was to look beyond dramaturgies performance as the only way of thinking about dramaturgy, to the idea of dramaturgies of the social and cultural.**”*

>> This Editorial Note has stretched across the articles in *Vol. 3* to suggest that as a possible frame for the volume it does not merely sit at the start, but finds its way into the volume and attempts to render porous the lines between one article and another, one idea and the next. We hope you read it as a continuity *and* as fragments. We have written, edited and dramaturged these volumes in varied ways – at times wondering if the frame exceeded the contents, and at times adjusting the smaller frames to suit the larger ones, and vice versa. At times, we have wondered how we might have re/ viewed ADN differently. >>

EDITORIAL NOTE

“The idea of participatory democracy became part of the dialogue.”

B8) CR:

“In looking at performance and the sociocultural, the idea of participatory democracy became part of the dialogue. People are making work, whether it’s called engaged arts or community arts, or even interactive or immersive arts, towards this end. It dates back to the avant-garde and experimental work and all the rest of it.

“This idea that participation is important because you don’t want the passive observer raises questions - what does that participation lead to? What kinds of thinking emerge through the participation and are we then complicit in a larger attempt to ignore, if not deny, a certain lack of responsibility that larger structures like the State are not taking on, for dealing with certain kinds of sociopolitical problems?”

C) FURTHER FRAMING QUESTIONS

C1) AUDIENCE:

“As a producer primarily, I find myself often being the cultural dramaturg. So not just the dramaturg for the work and the structure of the work...I’m not a specialist and I don’t fit into any of the silos but I’m a very good generalist. And then there’s that outside eye that really contextualises the work in a wider cultural frame. And I’m wondering whether that’s come in to your discussions.

*“You’ve kind of touched on it in different ways through your various presentations, but I’m wondering whether that has been identified as a kind of quite particular piece of work. Because I feel like I that’s the missing link for me. Often, **I can see the work dramaturgs do within the context of other performing arts works, but not necessarily where it fits in to this much bigger sociopolitical context.**”*

C2) AUDIENCE:

“So then the question that I find myself asking is, and I know you guys say that ADN is not about giving accreditation, how do you know that somebody qualifies to be a dramaturg for your work? And it’s not just some poser charlatan? And yeah, no offense to

>> As editors, we have invariably played with and modified meanings, occasionally altering the initial foci to suit the frame. At times, we have reflected on the frames that govern our perspectives, and through dialogue become attentive to the lenses we have grown accustomed to, and occasionally exchanged for a different view. >>

EDITORIAL NOTE

*anyone. But when you have a piece of work, and you feel that right, I would like somebody to come in and be a dramaturg, **how do you know who to call and whether that person qualifies for that job or can satisfy that role effectively?**”*

C3) RL:

*“That ‘A’ in ADN. The whole idea of making a claim that it’s Asian dramaturgy. I think it’s not a generalised notion of certain characteristics that are specifically Asian or Asian defining. I think we started off mostly geographically within this region. How is it practiced here? Yeah. So it’s more in terms of demarcating a category we’re looking at – this particular region or what has now come into the public consciousness as Asia. So the ‘Asian’ is not a kind of a deep defining feature of Asian-ness, but more within this region. And as an academic and researcher, **the research questions I like to ask are, how much is your practice affected linguistically in terms of your geography as a dramaturg?** And what does that do? So I think within the particularities of the region, and the area and the topography and the geography, I think those are things that we would like to look at.”*

C4) AUDIENCE:

*“I’m an artist and producer for other artists in Europe. And my question would be from the point of view of artists. I can imagine you’re reaching quite far with Asia. It’s a big thing with a lot of different cultural and political contexts. **How do artists realise that they might or might not need a dramaturg? Or are they aware of the necessity of having one in different parts of Asia?**”*

C5) LHN:

“This was one response that I had back in 2015 when I asked someone, “Do you think there’s space to do a network for dramaturgs?” The person actually said, and I remember it very clearly, “Oh my god, that’s so trendy. That’s great. Do it! Do it!” Because of that response, I almost didn’t do this network because I really resisted it being ‘trendy’. And then I found out as I was going through the hoopla of applying for funding, that funding bodies came up to me and said, “That’s very trendy.” So how do we avoid that?

*“One way is what we’re doing today. Talk about it in different ways from different types of disciplines and peoples and hopefully get to a place where there is value. There is some kind of integrity. And the word that I have been locked on in fact was – ethics. **How do we do right by what we do? How do we do right by the maker? How do we do right by the concept of dramaturgy?**”*

>> Perhaps that is why we have felt at times like dramaturgs, more than editors, who recognise that they work with material generated by others. Yet, when providing a response and framing its potentiality, we acknowledge a further resource is created that alters what once was. >>

EDITORIAL NOTEC6) LHN:

“My question is always what kind of problems or issues do you think you’re having with your artwork? And if you say, I need an outside eye, for sure, you need a dramaturg or you may want to work with a dramaturg. That is my response usually. How do I work with the dramaturg then becomes something that we are still happily talking and happily playing with and negotiating. It’s building a new relationship.”



More probing and diverse questions will continue to emerge about what is dramaturgy, what a dramaturg does and what it means to develop a space for an “Asian Dramaturgs’ Network”. Yet, even as the planet is changing at a pace all too hard to keep up with, and dramaturgy is tasked with adapting and responding to these shifts, the questions to ask will also need to reflect these alterations, prodding ADN towards expanded, emergent and chance dramaturgies of how to make sense of itself as well.

Perhaps, with the various calls to rethink priorities as a result of living through and with the COVID-19 pandemic, this will also consciously bring into the dramaturgical fray, the capacities for dreaming, playing, mucking about, inventing, theorising, analysing, creating, cooking, singing and dancing together, as elements of a network that will surprise and surpass itself when it sets out to reflect on and review the work done for a future report. Here’s to you, ADN!

EDITORIAL NOTE

» In writing this editorial, we combined our words and voices – sometimes quite obviously, and sometimes inaudibly. We hope you will take up the invitation to fill in the spaces between and write in your editorial frames as you see them – from your point of view, framing it in ways that work for you. The choice is yours – *to dramaturg as you choose, to frame as you desire.*

The Editorial Team

Charlene Rajendran
Daniel Teo
Chong Gua Khee
Dominic Nah

ONGOING MAPPING



To build a stronger sense of a network, we invite you to locate yourself on a map and share vocabularies on dramaturgy. Head to [our Padlet page](#) and let us know what dramaturgy is like where you are.

Instructions:

1. Click the plus sign on the top-right and drop a pin in your location.
2. Let us know what 'dramaturgy' is called in your local language, with a brief explanation of what it means.
3. (Optional) Write a bit about a dramaturgical practice! (Note: You do not need to call yourself a 'dramaturg' in order to have a dramaturgical practice.)

Feel free to leave comment on other people's tags as well. (We only ask that you be kind and respectful.)

You can leave us questions or comments on the Padlet page, or write to us at info@asiandramaturgs.com.

CREDITS & BIOS

EDITORIAL TEAM

CHARLENE RAJENDRAN is Co-Director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. As dramaturg she has worked on interdisciplinary and community arts projects including *In the Silence of Your Heart* (Kaylene Tan, 2018), *Both Sides, Now* (Drama Box and ArtsWok, 2013-2018), *Ghost Writer* (The Necessary Stage, 2016), *The Malay Man and His Chinese Father* (Akulah Bimbo Sakti, 2016). Her publications include *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, Politics and the Contemporary* (co-editor, 2020), and *Excavations, Interrogations, Krishen Jit and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre* (co-editor, 2018), as well as academic articles and creative works. She is currently Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

DANIEL TEO describes himself as an ardent theatre-goer and supporter. He previously worked as a researcher, archivist and documenter at theatre development space Centre 42 for seven years, where he oversaw the development of a Singapore theatre digital archive, and documented theatre-makers and their creation journeys. He has also been an on-and-off theatre critic, writing about theatre for the likes of *ArtsEquator* and his own Instagram page. Daniel will be dipping his toes into theatre-making in his first role as a dramaturg.

CHONG GUA KHEE / 张月崎 is deeply interested in opening up space and time for emergent, intimate and joyful conversations. In her work, she seeks to invite others to collectively play with and imagine ways of better caring for ourselves, one another, and the worlds we live in. This often manifests in the form of performances or workshops, for which Gua Khee takes on directorial or dramaturgical/ facilitative roles, but can also translate as research/writing or organising work. Her recent projects include: *Tactility Studies: Hold to Reset* (Singapore International Festival of Arts; Co-Director), *HOT POT TALK: The Measure of a Meal* (Director and Co-Producer), *SEEDLINGS* (Esplanade; Co-Lead Facilitator), and *Rethinking Practice and the Practitioner: Pandemic Purpose* (Centre 42; Facilitator). quakhee.com

DOMINIC NAH is a researcher, dramaturg and educator. Currently a PhD student at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, he is examining student responses to ethically-oriented Literature pedagogies in Singapore schools. He was Company Dramaturg of The Second Breakfast Company, a not-for-profit theatre group, where he worked on the revival of early Singapore theatre plays including *The Singapore Trilogy* (2021) and *The Moon is Less Bright* (2018). Previously, he graduated from the University of Warwick, UK having read World Literature (Masters) and English Literature (Honours). He has worked with ADN as a rapporteur for several events, including ADN Lab 2018 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

DESIGN & LAYOUT

HUANG SUHUI is a visual artist and graphic designer based in Singapore. She often explores more conceptual themes in her art practice includes painting, sculpture and performance art works. In 2020, she received the Prize for Excellence of International Takifuji Art Award. Besides, Suhuai is also into literature and theatre. She has written and translated many theatre plays, including plays for young audiences.

freyahuang.wixsite.com/graphicdesign

TRANSCRIBERS

Adelyn Tan	Josh Babcock
Cheryl Tan Yun Xin	Karen Liew
Corrie Tan	Lim Si Qi
Daniel Teo	Melissa Lim
Fezhah Maznan	Michelle Tan
Gillian Ong	Nathaniel Aaron
Gloria Ho	Tan
Ho Yi Lin	Neo Kim Seng
Ivy Chen	wei
Jaclyn Chong	Woo E-Hui
Jee chan	

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CREDITS & BIOS

SPEAKERS' BIOS

BILQIS HIJJAS is a dance producer, arts manager and critic based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She runs the residency program at private arts centre Rimbun Dahan, and serves as secretary of MyDance Alliance, the national non-profit dance service organisation. Her website [Critics Republic](#) supports critical discourse in the Malaysian arts scene.

HIROMI MARUOKA is President of the Japan Center, Pacific Basin Arts Communication (PARC) and Director of Yokohama Performing Arts Meeting (YPAM). In these roles, she provides opportunities to connect people with people, and people with places, both in Japan and overseas. In 2003, she set up the Postmainstream Performing Arts Festival (PPAF) to bring foreign productions to Japan. Maruoka also conducted the Asia Satellite Meetings (2008, 2011) of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), and in 2012 initiated the festival Sound Live Tokyo. She is Vice President of the Open Network for Performing Arts Management (ON-PAM) and also one of the founders.

JEAN TAY has written more than 20 plays and musicals, which have been performed in Singapore, the US, the UK, and Italy. She was attached to the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) as resident playwright from 2006-2009, and helmed SRT's Young Company Writing Programme from 2012-2016. She is also an adjunct lecturer for playwriting at Nanyang Technological University and conducted playwriting masterclasses for Masters of Writing for Performance students at the Victorian College of the Arts (University

of Melbourne). Her plays *Everything but the Brain* and *Boom* have been published by Epigram Books, and have both been used as 'O' and 'N' Level literature texts for secondary school students. Jean was also the scriptwriter for the National Day Parade for both 2015 and 2018, and for the 2017 Home Team Show and Festival. Her other corporate work include scripting short films for Temasek Holdings and the Ministry of Communications and Information. Jean is the founding Artistic Director of Saga Seed Theatre, set up in 2015 to bring Singaporean stories to the stage, and provide a platform to showcase and nurture local talent.

LIM HOW NGEAN is a performance-maker, dramaturg and dance researcher who has been actively involved in the performing arts for over 20 years. He is also the founding co-director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. Earlier in his career, he performed in productions in Singapore and Malaysia as well as wrote reviews and features on dance and theatre for the Malaysian press. In recent years, he has served as dramaturg for dance performances at the Singapore Arts Festival and Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. He was conferred his PhD in 2014 from the National University of Singapore for his research on contemporary dance choreography in Southeast Asia.

LINDA MAYSARI is Director at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society, where she has worked since 2010, as well as a curator for the Indonesia Dance Festival. She is currently completing a Masters programme in Cultural Studies at Sanata Dharma University, whilst

pursuing personal research and writing exploring the intersections of art, politics and post colonialism within the cultural and historical context of Indonesia. Occasionally she works collaboratively with artists from various fields (particularly dance and visual art) to produce independent research based projects.

MARTYN COUTTS creates public artworks which challenge an audiences understanding of space and place. He uses a multi-platform approach to work - using performance, technology and interactivity - to create specialised dramaturgy that engages and enlightens. Martyn is a founding member of Field Theory, a nine-year-old artist collective which was named Cultural Leaders in Live Art by the Australia Council in 2012. He is a key member of The Unconformity festival's Artistic Directorate, programming the 2016 and 2018 festivals. Martyn has also worked extensively as a dramaturg, video artist, producer, university lecturer and consultant.

ROBIN LOON is an Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a practicing Dramaturg, Educator and Researcher. His research interests include Singapore Theatre; Theatre and Gender; and Theatre and Media. He is also a co-founder of Centre 42 and a co-director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network.

SU WEN-CHI is a choreographer, new media artist, lives and works in Taiwan. She founded YiLab. In 2005, an experimental group of new media and performance artists working on integrating new technology with the

performing arts, and seeking to present new performing formats. Her works have been presented by Taiwan International Festival of Arts, Taipei Digital Arts Festival, Asian Arts Theatre (Korea), Arcadi Hors Saison (France), SCOPITONE (France), Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Belgium), Potsdamer Tanztage (Germany), InShadow (Portugal), Kalamata Dance Festival (Greece), La Bâtie (Switzerland), Performance Space (Australia). Recently, she gave workshop in West Kowloon Cultural District HK, Indonesian Dance Festival, Critical Path, and Center of Art and Technology TNUA.

ZIHAN LOO is pursuing a PhD in performance studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his MFA in Studio Practice (Filmmaking) from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and MA in Performance Studies at New York University. He is researching transnational resistance under illiberal regimes. Zihan is an educator and artist working in performance, dance, theatre and the visual arts. He has taught at various arts institutions including Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the School of the Arts, Singapore. He received the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council in 2015 and he won 'Best Multimedia Design' at the 2017 M1-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards for his work on The Necessary Stage and Drama Box's *Manifesto*. Information on his work is available at www.loozihan.com.



ASIAN DRAMATURGS' NETWORK (ADN) is formed with the intent of mapping and networking the region's dramaturgical experience and knowledge. ADN is collaboratively conceptualised with Centre 42 and held its inaugural ADN Symposium in Singapore in 2016. Since then, various gatherings of dramaturgs, performance-makers and arts educators from around the Asia-Pacific region have taken place in Indonesia, Japan and Australia. ADN is part of Centre 42. Learn more about ADN at asiandramaturgs.com.



CENTRE 42 is a theatre development space committed to the creation, documentation and promotion of texts and writings for the Singapore stage. The Centre incubates original writing for production development, provides space for artists and new work creation, and runs a functional archive documenting the histories and processes of Singapore theatre. Importantly, the Centre functions as an independent intermediary amongst makers, enablers and consumers, and strives to be a bridge to connect people by helping and supporting. Centre 42 was developed in collaboration with the National Arts Council (NAC) Singapore, and officially opened in 2014. The Centre is a non-profit organisation with Institute of Public Character (IPC) status, and is supported by the NAC for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2023. Learn more about Centre 42 at centre42.sg.



A recurring challenge for a dramaturg is to work out what really needs to be done and how best to do this. The context may change, the resources may differ and the ideas that matter may vary widely, but eventually something must be done that stems from an understanding of the needs of the project, process and people involved.

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We hope you will take up the invitation to fill in the spaces between and write in your editorial frames as you see them – from your point of view, framing it in ways that work for you. The choice is yours – to dramaturg as you choose, to frame as you desire.