



ANCER LAB: HO CHI MINH CITY

REPORT

ASIA PACIFIC NETWORK FOR CULTURAL
EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

ANCER LAB 02: HO CHI MINH CITY (2019)

The Asia-Pacific Network for Cultural Education and Research (ANCER) was spearheaded by LASALLE College of the Arts in 2011 as an initiative to stimulate inquiry amongst artists, practitioners, researchers, and interested parties who engage in the field of arts/cultural management and cultural policy in the Asian context.

One of its projects is the ANCER Lab, a platform for critical conversations to take place on the development and management of arts and culture in Southeast Asia. The ANCER Lab aims to foster the development of wider and deeper participation in a sustained reflection on arts and cultural work. Held in specific locations in Southeast Asia, it is a fora for scholars, arts practitioners and researchers to engage in dialogue on arts and cultural developments particularly in that location. In Ho Chi Minh City, the Lab focused on independent arts and cultural spaces, their networks and systems of support, patrons, and the factors that sustain them.

Each Lab incorporates a programme of visits to arts and cultural sites for ANCER participants from other countries, roundtables or discussions with local interlocutors and a public forum, the ANCER Lab Conversations which involve speakers from the location as well as other Southeast Asian countries.

In Ho Chi Minh City, visits were made to the Social Life Research Institute, The Factory, MoT+++ , San Art and A.Farm. The ANCER Lab Conversations public forum was held at Salon Saigon on 4 October 2019.

This report is a summary of the public forum.

For more information about ANCER, please visit: www.ancernetwork.org.



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ANCER LAB CONVERSATIONS TRAO ĐỔI

The word 'salon' originates from the French language and is associated with a gathering of people in an exchange of ideas and knowledge, often in the home of a patron. The patron has emerged as a vital enabler in the Southeast Asian arts ecology - whether it is an artist opening studio spaces or residencies for younger counterparts, a private collector, a private enterprise, or a cultural institute. How do these systems of support function, what is their role in developing the 'grassroots' in arts and culture and what are the limitations or opportunities for future enterprise? How do they connect with a city's or country's aspirations in developing its arts and cultural infrastructure in the age of creative cities? The ANCEr Lab is a platform for critical conversations to take place on the development and management of arts and culture in Southeast Asia. Our gathering in Ho Chi Minh City hopes to be a 'salon' where these questions on independent arts and culture spaces, their networks and systems of support, patrons and enablers, will be answered.

SCHEDULE

9:00 - 9:15 am	Registration
9:15 - 9:45 am	Welcome and Introductions Adam Knee , Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts, Media & Creative Industries Audrey Wong , Head, School of Creative Industries LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
9:45 - 10:30 am	Keynote: Marco Kusumawijaya , Urbanist at Rujak Center for Urban Studies, Jakarta
10:30 - 11:00 am	Coffee break
11:00 - 12:30 pm	Vietnam: arts, culture, and change Le Thi Thuy Duong , Programme Manager, Arts and Creative Industries, British Council Vietnam Thuy Tran , Independent Researcher Luc Pham Quynh Nhi and Dang Thi Ngoc Tu , Cultural Community Discourse Quynh Nguyen , Founder, Nguyen Art Foundation and co-founder A.Farm, and Thanh Ha Tran , Founder MoT +++, co-founder A.Farm Moderated by Audrey Wong , LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
12:30 - 1:30 pm	Lunch
1:30 - 3:30 pm	Independent spaces, Private Initiatives and an Ecology of Support Meta Moeng , Kon Len Khnhom, Phnom Penh, Cambodia June Tan , Five Arts Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Nhung Walsh , Noi Projects, HCMC, Vietnam Moderated by Sunitha Janamohanam , LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
3.30 - 4:00 pm	Coffee Break
4:00 - 5:00 pm	Final thoughts

Date: Fri 4 Oct 2019
**Venue: Salon Saigon, 6D Ngo Thoi Nhiem,
Ward 7, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City**

Free Admission, Lunch is provided.
Due to limited seating, please
RSVP by 30 Sep at
<http://bit.ly/ancerlab2019>



www.ancernetwork.org

ANCER LAB CONVERSATIONS PANEL 1 Vietnam: Arts, Culture, and Change

Keynote by Marco Kusumawijaya, Urbanist, Rujak Center for Urban Studies (Jakarta)

The keynote presentation, given by Marco Kusumawijaya, an urbanist at Rujak Centre for Urban Studies in Indonesia, set the tone of discussion: *arts x communities = common challenges but also common futures*. The notion of taking communities into consideration when developing the art scene is crucial, especially in the post-colonial era where there are ecological crises in different regions of Southeast Asia. Colonialism left a disruptive aftermath to Southeast Asian cultures, where different areas (city centre vs. rural areas) within the same country can have different narratives of heritage and history. Furthermore, the rapid urbanisation of communities often led to ethical and moral concerns that some voices are not fairly represented. The State's appetite for the arts dictates the amount of support that will be available for the sector, and instrumentalisation of the arts is often the only justified approach.

Marco reminded the attendees that the arts should be a critical factor in social and human development because it takes space and energy from the ecosystem - the system we live in - and therefore it is an essential part of living. The meaning of art is never isolated, but contextual and has a collective dimension - artists are bounded by their communities and societies. Whenever there is criticism about the government and the system, one should remember that governments were created by the people to serve communities.



As arts and cultural workers take on responsibilities as critics of social injustices, one should keep in mind that connecting with ordinary people in the community (non-artists) is an important process that can yield creative ideas and solutions. Whether it is an independent art space or private initiatives, the ecology of support should come from communities, which can open up different directions in the market. Marco concluded that space is constructed and indeed, politically constructed; hence, forming communities is the key to bridging gaps for groups who are misrepresented.

Presentation by Le Thi Thuy Duong, Programme Manager, British Council Vietnam

The discussion on the Vietnamese arts ecosystem commenced with Le Thi Thuy Duong, Programme Manager at the British Council (BC) Vietnam. Similar to the operations of other British Council branches, the programmes of the BC in Vietnam continue to provide creative opportunities for artists and creative practitioners to build long-lasting partnerships. In partnership with the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS), BC led creative projects in the span of three years to support Vietnam's National Strategy for the Development of Cultural Industries 2020-2030.

Duong further explained the context of Vietnam, where there are very few safe spaces for artists in the post-war era. Since 2014, the BC has commissioned research into the cultural sector and found that there were three ways to promote the right to create and participate in shaping cultural values. The Creative Cultural Hubs (CCH) which have emerged are a key link for the government with the artistic and creative communities. The functions of these CCHs also help improve capacity in management, create inclusive arts activities, and foster creative spaces for marginalised communities. The BC's Cultural and Creative Hubs programme organised in partnership with VICAS works with the CCHs and a wide range of artists and creative practitioners with the communities as their final audiences. The areas of this work can be broken down into three clusters or domains:

- Cluster A1: This cluster focused on capacity building for CCH, whereby workshops are provided for thirteen members who are hub owners/managers. This work takes on a participatory approach and fourteen hubs in Vietnam were surveyed to see what the needs are in domestic training. The training is provided in collaboration with UK and EU partners. The goal of the training is to extend the knowledge to more CCHs in Vietnam (in Hanoi, Danang, and more).
- Cluster A2: The cluster looks into government advocacy for CCHs. It connects the local government and the CCH network by facilitating dialogues in the form of symposia. Representatives from the Ministry are invited to the discussion sessions. This work also includes partnering up with law firms to set up or change the legal status of CCHs (most CCHs do not have the proper legal status for their work and cannot receive appropriate support). However, despite the suggestion to formalise their legal status, some hubs do not wish to proceed with the complicated process and get involved with the government.
- Cluster A3: CCH Networks Development – it provides technical support such as domain set up for creative hubs in Vietnam. Once the website is established, it will be handed over to the hub administrator to maintain and update. This cluster also introduces foreign hub owners via heritage tours and other activities to interact with local CCHs to encourage exchange of knowledge and experiences locally and internationally.



Panel 1 Speakers and Moderator. Left to right: Thanh Ha Tran, Quynh Nguyen, Thuy Tran, Le Thi Thuy Duong, Luc Pham Quynh Nhi, Dang Thi Ngoc Tu and Audrey Wong.

Presentation by Thuy Tran, Independent Researcher

The focus of the discussion shifted to an academic research viewpoint when Thuy Tran introduced her ongoing project of observing independent art spaces in Vietnam. The research called TRYSACES took place over the course of five to six years and it was coordinated by the University of Montreal in a team of interdisciplinary researchers, students, artists, and urban professionals. The project created a comparative framework for four different cities - Hanoi, Montreal, Paris, and Mexico.

The key focus of the project was about looking at ideas of transgression, regulation, and intervention with regards to virtual and physical public spaces between the four cities. These spaces are often formed by youths who are using the space for the arts - specifically creation and creativity. Co-working spaces are not considered. The usage of the space connects the world views of creatives and youths and their sense of selves through creative expression. The research identified common challenges faced by artist-run spaces that include existential questions, financial sustainability, business development, and human resources.

At a policy level in Vietnam, *Resolution 33-NQ/TW on Culture and Human Development* was drafted in 2014. This was an interesting point in the development of the arts and cultural sector in Vietnam as this was the first time for the government to place importance on the arts. In 2016, another document was approved by the Prime Minister, the *National Strategy Decree 1*, to list more explicit goals to extract the economic values in the arts. The National Strategy focused on five sectors - cinema, performing arts, fine arts/photo/exhibition, advertising, and cultural tourism.

At a practitioner level, the first mapping of CCHs started in 2014, an exercise which recorded 40+ hubs in Vietnam. In 2016, UNESCO did a comprehensive research that showed many of these hubs struggled financially, were not legally recognised, and had no supporting policy framework. The situation remains today. However, despite the volatile situation, the number of hubs increased to more than 140 by 2018.

Thuy observed that there were many ways of defining the meaning of CCHs. The Ministry and UNESCO organised dialogues which focused primarily on the creative economy. Others in the sector focus on youth and urban lifestyles, or even acts of deviance (though this is not always necessary in a hub). There was a big gap in understanding why and how the phenomenon of this movement has happened, and it was important to recognize that transgression is relational amongst different people. CCHs are too diverse to be generalised, with each being different than another; however, the core similarity was the desire for freedom to experiment, to collaborate, and to express creative selves.

On a final note, Thuy summarised that the sustainability strategies of CCHs vary between being adaptive or being resilient. The balance between independent existence versus commercial collaboration is a very personal decision of hub owners. In the end, creative hubs should be seen as assemblages, and whether they are successful long term or not does not matter. The hub is for people to collaborate and eventually mutate it into something fruitful during their time together.



Presentation by Luc Pham Quynh Nhi and Dang Thi Ngoc Tu, Cultural Community Discourse

While the arts and cultural sector continues to focus on contemporary trends and the production of what is “current”, Cultural Community Discourse (CCD) in contrast, is an initiative that focuses on traditional arts and Vietnamese culture. The organisation was

co-founded by Luc Pham Quynh Nhi and Dang Thi Ngoc Tu, who aim to connect interested public with the community of scholars / researchers and the cultural practitioners and create a space for discourse concerning what gives communities their identities. Recognising the lack of proper liberal arts education offerings in Vietnam, CCD bridged the knowledge gap between youths and academics through their activities which included free libraries, book talks, cultural tours, and training workshops.

Their work saw positive growth, and CCD expanded into more singular thematic talks (about cultural and symbols in heritage), and more side projects about the study of traditional music, an area that hitherto had seen less participation from youths. The innate interest of the youths to learn more about traditional crafts and the response of youths to CCD's activities was a solid foundation that CCD built upon.

The CCD organizers recognized that society changes very rapidly; therefore, their roles were actively changing as well and they do not claim to be gatekeepers about what should constitute cultural identity. The humble sharing of their experiences did not focus on operational challenges or financial outcomes, but on the intrinsic benefits of understanding within communities - especially the younger and senior generations. The cross-generational understanding was a valuable experience that CCD tried to cultivate and more talks in the coming years will move into other areas like architecture. CCD's founders recognise the importance of small gestures in the preservation of something of value to the community: "We don't need to do something big to preserve what we have, we just need to do a small token of appreciation by purchasing a ticket to support the traditional craft," said Luc Pham Quynh Nhi.

Presentation by Quynh Nguyen, Nguyen Art Foundation and co-founder of A.Farm and Thanh Ha Tran, MoT+++ and co-founder of A.Farm

It is a rare occurrence when supporters and patrons of the arts are open to discussing their experiences and thought processes, and this ANCER Lab was fortunate to have Quynh Nguyen and Thanh Ha Tran as speakers. Their passion for the arts is palpable and they began their involvement in the art scene as collectors since 1995. After visiting private museums in America, Ha was inspired and motivated to do the same in Vietnam. She was a co-founder of the Post Vidai Vietnamese art collection. MoT+++ was later founded in 2014 and the artist collective has managed and presented exhibitions featuring local and international artists. A.Farm artist residency was established in 2018 in collaboration with Quynh Nguyen to host diverse groups of artists and is housed in a converted factory.



Ha is also an artist and indicated the difficulty to pinpoint what exactly is her career after being involved in the art scene for more than 20 years, saying: “art is more so my life than my profession.”

The team members of MoT+++ maintained the philosophy that it is not only about accumulating art or the beauty of art, but also supporting artists to realise their work. A.Farm has an ongoing effort to connect young and new collectors with new artists by

offering a space to learn about the artistic processes and to understand the value in art creation. It also focused on bridging the gap between established and emerging artists, where they can meet and share their networks.

Final Thoughts: Organic Development

The kaleidoscope of knowledge and opinions from the diverse speaker group in this panel presented many insights. The organic development of these projects (grassroot initiatives, creative hubs, exhibition spaces, artist residencies) occurred with little to no state support and top-down governance. The lack of involvement from the government in a way gave these organisations a stamp of approval that they were “certified organic” and truly grounds-up. Under such conditions, artists and creative expressions were able to thrive. However, there remains the issue of censorship which is notorious in Vietnam; yet the innate desire to continue to produce and to challenge the status quo in the Vietnamese art scene was admirable. This phenomenon contrasted with the Singaporean realities (where this report’s author is based), where there is plentiful government investment and infrastructures in the arts, yet it does not appear to yield the same result in terms of grounds-up development, private patronage and overall audience interest.

Community Focused

As Marco stated in his keynote presentation, communities play a key part in shaping the arts scene, and vice versa. This was proven to be true in the context of HCMC’s art space developments, where there was a laser sharp focus on bridging knowledge gaps and introducing projects that could achieve maximum social good. The British Council Vietnam showcased the possibilities of partnerships between an institution and a specific neighbourhood. Thuy’s research in creative cultural hubs gave examples of people coming together for collaboration regardless of their backgrounds. Cultural Community Discourse recognised the need for cross-generational understanding and took an active approach to cultivate that relationship via creative programming. Finally, MoT+++ and A.Farm had their artist-centric approach in building a community where patrons and artists could freely interact. Altogether, each organization served a different set of audiences and it showed that ‘community’ is not an one-size-fits-all buzzword. It carries different weights depending on the surrounding

environments, and catering to 'community needs' should be a highly specific endeavour.

Resilient Leadership

Despite the grounds-up nature in most of these initiatives, there were still leaders who took on multiple roles to bring these organisations to fruition. Given the turbulent political conditions, gaps in the legal framework for arts enterprises and undefined art market, the leaders take on many uncertain risks and end up in difficult situations (ie. funding issues, police arrests, etc). Exceptional resilience from the leaders is crucial to sustain the organisation and to enrich the overall arts ecosystem. The precarity in the arts industry will continue to breed new problems that leaders have to resolve - the ability to recover quickly from difficulties is a valuable trait that arts leaders should pursue and nurture.

Report by Wennie Yang

**post-event note: in 2020, A.Farm residency had to vacate its space. Its past projects are housed digitally on MoT+++’s website*





ANCER LAB CONVERSATIONS PANEL 2

Independent Spaces, Private Initiatives & An Ecology Of Support

The role that independent art spaces and initiatives play within their local arts ecology and the relationships they have with their respective artist communities was explored in the second panel discussion titled “Independent Spaces, Private Initiatives and An Ecology of Support”. Four speakers from different independent groups in the region were asked to share more about the role of their own independent spaces and projects and their thoughts on the arts ecosystem they operate within.

This report summarises the four presentations and offers some conclusions and reflections on the role of these independent art spaces in their respective countries and explore some issues that need to be addressed if such initiatives are to continue serving their local artist communities in a meaningful way.

Kon Len Khnhom: The Invisible Infrastructure by Meta Moeng (Cambodia)

As an independent co-working space known for its residency programmes, Kon Len Khnhom (KLK) has become a creative hub and platform for students and artists in Phnom Penh. Moeng shared that she decided to fund the project on her own and founded KLK in 2017 when she realised how difficult it was for artists and students in Cambodia to find their own space to work and experiment in their craft. In Khmer, Kon Len Khnhom translates to “my place” and Moeng pushed forward very strongly the idea of ownership by the community through this space and its programmes. Drawing reference to KLK’s logo (a door), Moeng also shared that the space is meant to be a point of connection, not just between artists but also between the public and the private so that there can be further opportunities and mutual understanding.



Delving further into the work that KLK does, Moeng shared how its residency programmes helped enable local artists in Phnom Penh. She invited university students to use the space and use it to build their creative communities. The residencies are divided into three separate programmes: Student-in-Residence; Creative-in-Residence and Researcher-in-Residence. Moeng gave examples of the projects that have come out of these residencies such as Chhiv Exthai's study on Sahakom (Cambodia's vernacular housing), communal space and urban development in Phnom Penh and the ROUNGKON project which aimed to promote and document all the 1960s-era cinemas in Cambodia after its independence from France. Through a diverse range of residencies at any one point of time, and also by allowing its residencies to open up KLK to a wider audience through their own events, Moeng managed to create opportunities for collaborations and dialogue to take place organically within the space.

Five Arts Centre – A Performing Arts Collective by June Tan (Malaysia)

The second speaker, June Tan, took a different approach in analysing space by discussing the necessity of a less physical form of space created by collectives and coalitions to allow for the artist to grow, experiment and offer up alternative perspectives. Tan shared that her performing arts collective, Five Arts Centre (FAC), was a multi-disciplinary one which led organically to a need to redefine the idea of 'space' within the collective in order to facilitate what the various artists wanted to do. Through the creation of intellectual, emotional space and space for change, the collective had allowed for differing viewpoints and perspectives to occur and be exchanged freely as its thirteen members came from drastically different sectors including education, the arts, and the corporate world.

Tan continued to explain further that central to FAC's framework is the idea that the collective's ecology equates to "Oikos", an ancient Greek word that translates the concepts of family and home. Tan highlighted the need to understand that each member has a niche and individually fits within a larger ecosystem based on who they are and what they offer. By focusing on individual skills and trajectories, each member can find ways to support the collective. This creates a culture which Tan terms as "Structure + Non-structure" where individuals fall naturally into certain roles and do not feel like they are being pushed into roles they do not want to be in. This space then enables organisations to adapt to the shifting ideological trajectories of its members as it is based on the understanding that everyone evolves over time, and members and artists might not always remain on the same track. This can be seen in FAC's shift from creating work to programming and also shifting focus to archiving and advocacy. Its system had allowed for that space to adapt when ideals and the ecology have changed. Tan then moved on to share about the various projects under FAC and also highlighted how its physical space, KOTAK, allowed the group to organise more events for the local community from civic activities to artist-led activities. She concluded her presentation by reiterating how coalitions and collectives can exist.

Nối Projects and the Art Ecosystem in Vietnam by Nhung Walsh (Vietnam)

Formed to connect contemporary visual artists to other creative people from different backgrounds, Nối Projects, founded by curator Nhung Walsh, facilitates exhibitions and projects that allow for inter-disciplinary dialogues and opportunities to expand the scope of conversations in contemporary art in Vietnam. In discussing the creation of work and the curation of exhibitions, Walsh pointed out the importance in recognising that every artist has something to offer and the collaborative efforts to create the end product might not necessarily be something that is planned but is nonetheless significant in its message. With Saigon Blueprint, a collective project that invites a cohort of artists and practitioners from various fields to reimagine Saigon based on their own recollection of the past and their own interaction with the city's heritage, Walsh gave space for the participants to collectively map out their own memory of the city that can be shared through the exhibition.

Walsh then moved on to look at the division within the arts ecosystem highlighting the “Big Guys” on one side which included the government, the funders and the commercial market and on the other side, the artist's needs which included training, networks, museums. The attempt to bridge this gap between needs and resources can be seen in Nối Projects' creation of a digital resource space (Vietnam Resource Group) to provide artists with support in their art-making process and capacity building by connecting artists with exhibition opportunities, residencies, research and publishing opportunities and providing consultation and advice in grant writing, legal and contracting matters, project development and so on.

Finally, Walsh discussed the need to develop audiences and looked at ways to cultivate the appreciation of the arts. Walsh suggested the benefits of more intimate one-on-one experiences that would allow an audience member to experience art their own way and allow them space to decide for themselves how they want to define art and place it within their own lives, rather than simply just being a spectator.



The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre by Bill Nguyễn (Vietnam)

Bill Nguyễn, curator for Vietnam's first purpose-built space for contemporary art, framed his presentation by raising questions regarding three aspects of the arts ecosystem in the country: 1) Independent 2) Private and 3) Support. Nguyễn brought up the dynamics of the independent spaces existing alongside the state, pointing out that experimental activities often take place outside of state-sanctioned venues. He asked if that meant that the state and independent spaces work only in opposition with each other, and if not, where there can be room for more collaborative efforts.

Secondly, looking towards the audience that independent spaces should serve, Nguyễn also questioned the integrity of private events and who they are meant for. Do private events cultivate a sense of exclusivity that only leads to the alienation of a



general public to accessing contemporary art? The idea of inclusivity in the arts then led to Nguyễn's view on how the artists support each other from within the ecosystem – he points out that such support might not be sufficient and there needs to be ways for artists to look outwards for resources and also the need to educate the general public on the impact of the arts such that it builds a larger case for support.

Nguyễn continued to share about The Factory's Spirit of Friendship project that in some ways seek to address the questions he had brought up. The project is an ongoing one that aims to build a historical archive and resource to document the role of artist friendships in furthering the development of contemporary art in Vietnam and acts as a proposal to inform about the independent, private ecosystem of support by offering critical insights to past generations of artists and the climates that they operated within.

Insights and Concluding Thoughts

The importance of building platforms for connection amongst artists as well as between the artist, audience and the state was discussed quite thoroughly by all the speakers, emphasising the role of these independent spaces and collectives as intermediaries in the local arts scene. As a co-working space, KKL sought to bridge artists through its residency programmes, to nurture the next generation of creatives and also be a space that invites the public to peek into the artist's practice through their events. For FAC, they saw their ability to break silos that communities in Kuala Lumpur tend to be in and become a connecting point for Malaysians through projects like Projek Angkat Rumah. FAC is the secretariat to the coalition ReformARTsi which aims to advocate for reform and policy changes particularly in areas of arts education, funding and censorship to the Malaysian Government. ReformARTsi is another example

of the importance of coalitions and collectives, in playing the role of the intermediary between the artist and government. Similarly for Walsh, her work through the Vietnam Resource Group seeks to address the gaps between artist needs and what she had termed as the “Big Guys”. With limited resources and minimal support from the state in most of these countries, it is necessary that such intermediaries exist to act as a link for artists, to educate the public and funders by creating space for dialogue and become a voice to canvass for more support.

With rapid modernisation and the state’s focus on economic and commercial growth in many Southeast Asian countries, another key theme running through the presentations was the preservation of identity and the creation of collective memory. FAC’s existence was motivated by the search for a Malaysian identity in a post-colonial era 35 years ago. In Nôi Projects’ Saigon Blueprint, this urge to preserve memories is prevalent in the platform for artists to create works from the material collected from bulldozed sites in Vietnam, opening up a means for them to interact with the lost heritage of Saigon and capture and preserve it through the materialisation of their work. With The Factory’s Spirit of Friendship, the mapping of political and social moments in Vietnam against the timeline of artist groups and their works also reflected the desire to preserve the stories and outline the struggles of Vietnamese artists.



Panel 2 Speakers and Moderator. Left to right: June Tan, Meta Moeng, Nhung Walsh, Bill Nguyen and Sunitha Janamohanan.

Lastly, the ideas of trust and friendships that exist within the artist communities and the role of the independent spaces in facilitating that support was discussed extensively particularly during the Q&A session. In KLK’s case, Moeng’s decision to readily give keys to the artists and students that utilise the space demonstrates her commitment of trust to them and her belief that they should feel like they have a share in defining the space. She acknowledged that there was risk involved but sees that as a small risk to take in exchange for being able to create a home for the local community. She also mentioned that it takes time to build that trust amongst people

and she does so through conversations and getting a sense of their personalities. She noted: “Trust is very important. If you lose or take something from the house, it still can be bought or replaced, but my trust that you can take care of this place given to you for this period of time, will be gone.”

Nhung Walsh also takes the same view and pointed out that it is a long process with many possible failures but continually working on projects together can help to develop the relationship further. For FAC, the idea of niche differentiation and trusting that each person is an expert in their own field is key to multi-disciplinary collectives. June Tan likened the group to a family that had a shared sense of responsibility towards each other. The Factory’s Spirit of Friendship ongoing archive project no doubt also seeks to present the dynamics of the relationships among local artist communities, however however during the Q&A discussion it was evident that approaching the development of contemporary art in the country through the lens of “friendship” was a contentious subject. Despite being a delicate topic of discussion, it is clear that the support system for many of these artists could not have existed without the elements of trust and friendship, and perhaps further platforms for open critique, frank discussion and reflection might further deepen the relationships that artists have with each other and their intermediaries.

Independent art spaces and private initiatives within the arts ecology in Southeast Asia have become increasingly important as they provide a platform for alternative artists to be heard and for more experimental practices to grow. The panel discussions managed to shed light on the role of some of these initiatives in creating support for the local arts communities particularly in climates of authoritarianism and non-existent state funding or infrastructure. In Singapore, there remains a need for more independent art spaces and collectives as well: even though local artists are heavily funded and resources from the state are abundant, the arts is still a sector that is heavily regulated while larger institutions which are typically backed by state support tend to serve national agendas and are constrained in the spectrum of voices they can represent.

Report by Jacklyn Ho

**post-event note: in June 2020, Meta Moeng decided to close Kon Len Khnhom “until the right time comes again.”*

Acknowledgments

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All invited panellists and speakers

All who participated in the Conversations



The student rapporteurs



Photo Credits: Darshinee Sai Seeraz

Report edited by Audrey Wong and Sunitha Janamohanam

