ESSAY

SINGAPORE: ART ECOLOGIES IN THE MAKING

Marcus Yee

'Late-Night Texting' exhibition, Centre 42, Singapore, August 2019 / Image courtesy: Centre 42

> Ecology is really an extension of economics to the whole world of life.
>
> H G Wells, Julian Huxley and G P Wells, *The Science of Life* (1935)[1]

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, the arts in Singapore faced a series of indefinite postponements and cancellations. A precarious reserve of art freelancers saw income losses, and swathes of arts institutions faced threats of closure or the loss of space. From greenhorn initiatives to veritable institutions, few were spared the stranglehold of austerity. The Necessary Stage (TNS), Centre 42, Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), DECK, ArtsEquator and the galleries along the Gillman Barracks — these organisations form a growing endangered list on the city's cultural circuits. Others, including The Substation and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (NTUCCA), have already been forced to close or move out of their premises. During this period of crisis, the rhetoric of survival was often couched in an appeal towards a wider 'arts ecosystem'. Everyone says, 'We are an essential part of the arts ecosystem'. At the same time, Singapore's arts funding arm and governmental statutory board, the National Arts Council (NAC) reaffirmed their commitment towards 'sustaining a healthy arts ecosystem'.[2]

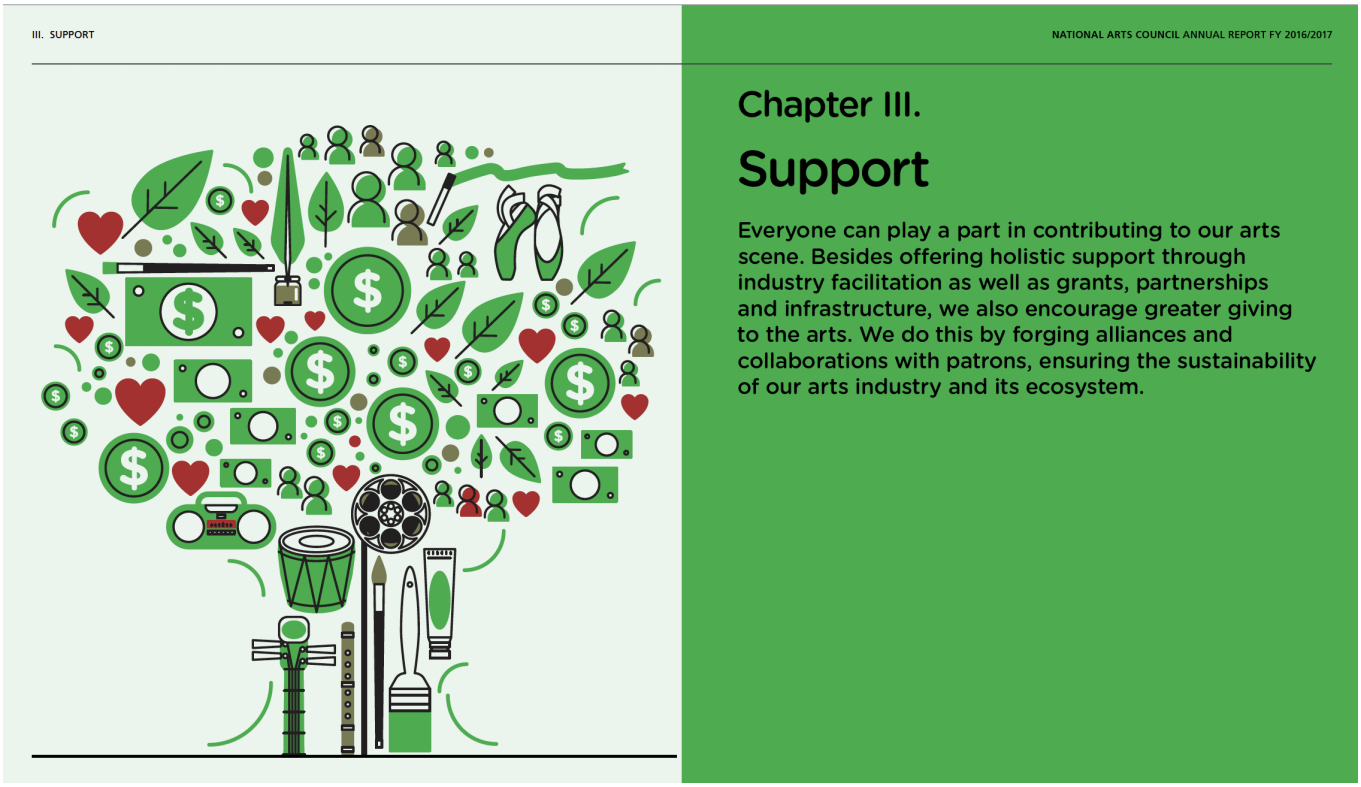
This pool of ecological metaphors — 'arts ecology', 'arts ecosystem' and 'arts landscapes' — has become shorthand for the totality of cultural activities, institutions and discourses referred to by arts bureaucrats, art makers, producers, critics and students alike. The more they are uttered, the less articulation takes place. What are the boundaries of an arts ecology? What makes an arts ecology healthy, resilient or sustainable? Who speaks *for* an arts ecology? What is it about the frame of ecology that appeals to cultural workers across a spectrum of power? Conversely, why do cultural workers measure the value of their work in relation to this amorphous term?

In the context of Singapore's political cultures, human–nature interactions and art histories, the art ecology is tinted by control, ambivalence and amnesia. Tracing the discourses surrounding arts ecology through the archives of arts policy papers, independent art spaces and histories of science, these metaphors emerge less as empty signifiers and more as discursive zones brimming with indeterminate and contested meanings. Consider the inheritances of scientific ecology itself. Ecology is the heir to contradictory ideas within the Western lineage of 'nature' as a concept; hence, the field today oscillates between the mechanistic and organic, rationalistic and romantic, competitive and cooperative, the homeostatic and chaotic. However, with the postwar prevalence of 'New Ecology', ecological theory began to borrow the metrics and vocabulary of modern economic theory, where 'consumers' and 'producers' can be measured for their efficiency, yield and productivity.[3] As a site of labours, desires, rituals, socialities and hierarchies, the arts also draw on polyphonic interpretations of nature, whether this is an arena of art professionals engaging in an individualistic 'survival of the fittest' or an harmonic assemblage of interdependent actors, they can all be measured against cultural production metrics.

By intimating the arts ecology, I am attempting neither to police the circulation of art-ecological metaphors, nor to write about ecology as an artistic subject. Neither am I attempting to question its metaphorical appropriateness; rather, I wish to show that art ecologies, as discourses, are hothouses of the neoliberal creative economy, a lost Eden, the dust of refusal. These are worlds in uneasy coexistence, their porous borders open to mutual contamination.

These reflections are written both from my standpoint as a co-conspirator in Singapore's arts ecology and as an organiser of the collaborative project soft/WALL/studs, which developed out of necessary conversations with colleagues. 'It matters what thoughts think thoughts', writes Donna Haraway. 'It matters worlds world worlds.'[4] Faced with a horizon of staccato crises, it is important to flesh out the world of arts ecology.

Neoliberal botanical chimeras, or whither entanglement?



A chimerical vision of the arts ecology / Image Courtesy: National Arts Council Annual Report FY 2016/2017, National Arts Council, Singapore

From one perspective, an arts ecology is unambiguous. This lack of ambiguity stems from an all-encompassing reach. Consider an illustration of a botanical chimera that graced the third chapter of the NAC's 2016–17 Annual Report, titled 'Support'.[5] A trunk of art-making instruments props up a canopy of hearts, faceless individuals, dollar bills and coins, and the salutary addition of leaves. Chapters like this are annual assessments surveying Singapore's arts ecosystem, waxing statistical on the year's indices of 'skills development', 'infrastructure' and 'funding and patronage'. Crucially, this state projection of an arts ecology is not merely a crude money tree, but an enmeshed economy of affect, appearances and labour, prefiguring an ethics of neoliberalism that profits off entanglement and mutability.

Emerging from the steroidal transformation of the cultural landscape just as the Renaissance City Plan (RCP) of the mid 2000s was coming into high gear, official articulations of art-ecological metaphors are unambiguous in their ambitions. Prior to the millennial turn, state cultural policy saw the arts as a mere instrument for nation-building or as a magnet for tourist dollars.[6] With the RCP, these goals were not forgotten; rather, these utilitarian visions were articulated through the 'creative economy'. Drawing on Richard Florida's gentrifying utopianism of 'creative cities', bureaucrats recognised the arts through the promise of capital and more — raising Singapore's profile to attract foreign investment, foreign technical expertise ('foreign talents') and multinational companies. The first elaboration of the arts ecosystem in NAC's 2008–09 Annual Report was already instructive:

> The arts are a conflagration capable of illuminating the mind and enriching lives, and stoking that flame is the province of NAC. For it to burn brightly, the right conditions matter; for the Singapore arts ecosystem to flourish it needs strong support — funds, programmes, and infrastructure — from the state and private sector, coupled with an appreciative audience.[7]

An ecology of fire is conjured here. The statutory board nominates itself as both catalyst and overseer of the 'conflagration', implicitly casting the arts as both an ambivalent source of illumination and danger. It is important to recall the state's adversarial role towards the arts at numerous points in history. More suggestively, this figurative conflagration resonates with capital's 'eschatology of infinite combustion' as the planet wades deeper into the fossil fuel–addled climate crisis.[8] Another way to look at this vigorous, almost violent, state-led flourishing is through the symbolic architecture of the 'hothouse', as proposed by Susie Lingham. The hothouse is a

> technological testament to the human desire for power over supposed inevitabilities: to defy and domesticate nature, to delay decay, to accelerate growth, and bring whatever one desires of the world to one's doorstep, whenever one wants.[9]

Even the more banal definitions of the arts ecosystem, such as one proposed by cultural policy advisor Arun Mahizhnan, which includes 'critics', 'lighting technicians' and 'businesses related to the arts', are not shy about their economic, developmental orientation.[10] The issue is not the contamination of the arts by capital — an art-historical boundary breached centuries ago — but the mediation of art and capital through the frame of ecology, as though theories of entanglement unwittingly prefigured the operationalisation of the neoliberal creative economy.

In the hothouse, Singapore's political ecology and the global neoliberal economy incubated the nascent arts ecology. Of former Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo's menagerie of misguided metaphors, his gardening analogies remain the most pernicious:

> In tending this garden, which is Singapore, we must not see all plants as healthy. In any garden, there are weeds whose growth we have to curb. Of course, we should not classify all which we do not like as weeds and get rid of them … But neither should we take the other extreme view and think that there are no weeds in the arts, that all growths are natural, that nothing is good or bad.[11]

State power figures itself as an overseer making moral classifications between weeds and plants and possessing a legitimate authority to apply political power to 'weed out' the bad. This gardening is also thoroughly literal, manifesting as the incessant trimming, fogging and manicuring of the island's landscape, which Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing liken to 'paramilitary gardening'.[12] After all, one of the explicit aims for the 'greening' of nation-building Singapore was beautification, in order to raise the city's foreign investment profile. This intersection involving politics, aesthetics, economics and the ecological could be traced back even further, where previous lives of the arts ecology could be found in the colonial plantation, botanical and museological projects initiated during the island's British regime, which were formative in defining later relations and representations of nature.[13]

Denaturalising endangerment and autonomy

Ecology, economics and politics are intimate bedfellows in Singapore; however, cynicism should not reduce the arts ecology to a mere effect of hegemonic capitalist structures or soft authoritarian governance. An arts ecology contains worlds, of which the vagaries of global capital and state control are only a few of many. I turn now to other worlds in contestation, namely the imminent loss of Singapore's many independent art spaces during the global COVID-19 pandemic, and articulations of art-ecological metaphors by cultural workers grappling with endangerment.

Between July and August 2020, a slew of reports announced that independent arts groups in Singapore risked losing their respective spaces.[14] Earlier that year, performing and literary arts development space Centre 42 began renovations into a co-working space, co-managed by NAC. NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (NTUCCA), Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI) and The Necessary Stage (TNS) were to lose their spaces. In March 2021, Singapore's first independent contemporary arts centre, The Substation, announced permanent closure due to NAC's plans for the institution to return as co-tenant of their existing Armenian Road space, implying not only 'the loss of autonomy', but also 'the loss of income from venue hiring'.[15] A spat between NAC and The Substation board ensued, leading to a statement of clarification from the arts community with more than 500 signatories.

On top of the ongoing self-organising around the Substation's future, for other independent spaces, emergency fundraisers, outpouring of solidarity on social media, petition signing, and closed-door conversations were not uncommon during pandemic times.[16] A self-organised secretariat has also been formed to consider possible future venues for The Substation. These events came at a point that former Substation co-director Audrey Wong aptly called the 'post-Renaissance hangover', as the dust from the festivities began to settle and hairline cracks from breakneck developmental acceleration yawned open.[17] In rapid response to these events, in August 2020 a group of four students and cultural workers formed Saving Spaces, an advocacy group that aimed to publish a position paper on 'the importance of the existence and preservation of art spaces in Singapore'.[18] When asked about resistance to the project, one organiser said:

> People have been like, 'You should just let the space live out its natural life cycle and die off when it needs to', which is quite unexpected because I don't see this life cycle as natural at all really. We also had to justify to ourselves and others why we think artists and art companies deserve a right to a space.[19]

In one stroke, the organiser denaturalised the 'natural life cycle' of independent art spaces, questioning the structural conditions that render their lifespans short.

The advocacy by Saving Spaces for cultural workers and their 'right to a space' recalls anthropologist Timothy Choy's reflections on the ambivalent politics of endangerment, drawing on his ethnography of ecopolitics in post-Handover Hong Kong.[20] Choy writes that the operation of endangerment requires two gestures: 'threat and specification'. In the Singaporean arts ecology, the first is evident: new policies, such as the Framework for Arts Spaces (casually termed the '3 plus 3 plus 3 policy'), subject tenants to review every three years, capped at nine years, keeping art spaces on tenterhooks and unable to make long-term plans. Another naturalised cause of endangerment is that of land scarcity, despite the state's control of land and authority to parcel it out based on state- (and real estate-) determined values. Gestures of 'specification' play out in Saving Spaces' efforts in publishing interview snippets with the leaderships of ITI, The Substation, TNS and Centre 42 alongside an open call for creative responses towards these spaces.[21] These actions affirm the uniqueness and value of these institutions, and the grounds for their right to persist.

The Substation garden and its iconic banyan tree c.1990 / Image courtesy: The Substation

From its inception, The Substation's founder, Kuo Pao Kun, was made aware by state bureaucrats that the provision of space had strings attached, where the subservience of cultural workers was expected in return for state benevolence.[22] Over the years, The Substation was no stranger to loss. Many accounts of changes in the institution and its neighbourhood were documented in the commemorative book, *25 Years of The Substation*. Ecology became grounds for articulating memories, especially The Substation garden and its iconic banyan tree, as the volume's editor, Audrey Wong, observed.[23] At the same time, Wong was wary of mythologising The Substation of the early 1990s as a lost Eden. One vision of the garden back then was furnished by theatre-maker Kok Heng Leun, who wrote about his vision of a 'carnivalistic world'.[24] Then, under the towering fig trees, one could find 'nooks for solace and quietude', alongside storytelling, buskers and music performances.

As the well-rehearsed story of modern disenchantment goes, in 2005 development seized on The Substation garden, when a large portion of the garden gave way to a bar operated by the Timbre Group, co-founded by Member of Parliament Edward Chia under the reigning political party. By then, The Substation's neighbourhood was steeped in gentrification, as a nearby university's voracious appetite for urban sprawl squeezed out affordable spaces for artists to gather, such as the local hawker centre S11 Food House. In *25 Years of The Substation* then artist-in-residence Loo Zihan focuses on a cutting he made from The Substation's banyan tree as part of a crowdfunding campaign to support the arts centre.[25]

‘Harrison’ the banyan sapling adopted by Loo Zihan / Image Courtesy: Loo Zihan and The Substation

In the process of caring for the sapling that grew from this cutting — which he called ‘Harrison’ — Loo’s Arcadian visions of nature and the plant’s historical aura began to wear off. ‘Harrison was a plant like any other’, Loo writes, pointing out the sobering fact of the banyan’s parasitical behaviour as a strangling fig; banyans initially encircle other plants, crowding out other organisms, eventually suffocating their hosts.

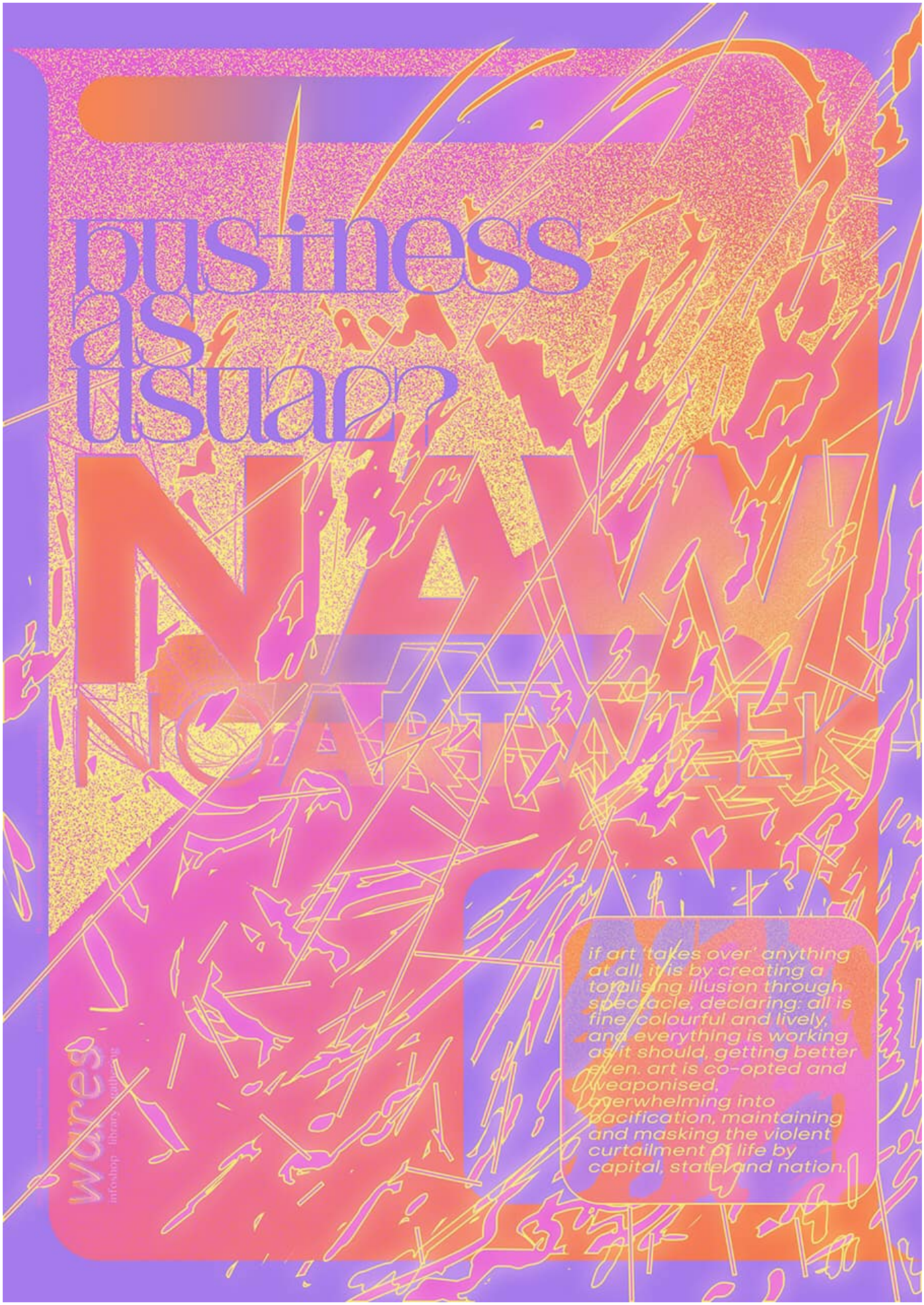
Robert Zhao Renhui / Singapore, b. 1983 / *Substation Malayan Banyan* 2014 / Canvas light box / 140 x 210cm / Image courtesy: ShangART Gallery

Much of the pathos of Loo's text stems from his description of the transplanted plant as 'held in a caged pen and artificially resuscitated'. This scene was documented by photographer Robert Zhao, who found the gesture 'patronising' — 'an act done more to placate outraged humans rather than for the tree's welfare'.[26] In his series 'How to Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended' 2015, the artist discovered that a hanging root he had salvaged from the tree was slowly being eaten from the inside by the larvae of powderpost beetles. Subsequently, Zhao spent nine months sanding down the root, speeding up the process of the banyan's eventual transformation into dust.

Extending on Choy's concept, the logic of endangerment calls for the preservation of life, no matter how perverse the conditions.[27] The act of placing the banyan on 'life support' freezes the plant in a state of arrested autonomy, being kept alive while being utterly dependent on externalised material conditions of survival — the same circumstances in which The Substation existed.

Living and dying in art ecologies

> They tell us this is good for the industry, necessitating the hardening of professionalised hierarchies, as if this programme could get infinitely bigger, in denial that the competitive system of art being modelled after is designed to not accommodate everyone.
> wares infoshop library[28]



wares, Singapore / *Business as Usual? NAW!* 2019 / Image courtesy: wares

The arts ecology and its discontents are not only the province of state bureaucrats. Cultural workers of all stripes, myself included, have investments that also feed into a productive, developmental arts ecology — despite the somewhat toxic, uncertain and uninhabitable structural conditions that some of us face. The botanical chimera shows us that entanglements of the economy, ecology and the arts are at the heart of the neoliberal creative economy envisaged by the state, but the image also reveals another subterranean anxiety, temporarily relieved by the balm of statistics — this efflorescent growth is held up by the precarious nature of cultural workers' labour.

Ecological thinking in Singapore's arts ecology has been underpinned by incessant progress, the diminution of cultural and care work, as well as the quick fixes evoked by the hothouse. Under this metricised arts ecology, independent art spaces and their extended, non-productive durations are domesticated by attempts to quantify the unquantifiable. Failing that, these spaces are slowly weaned off material support until it becomes morally permissible to pull the plug. In a biopolitical city-state keen on experimenting on life's fungibility, cultural lives and livelihoods are as quickly produced as they are extinguished. The highly orchestrated 'ecology' in Singapore's arts ecosystem points less towards an 'undamaged and unscathed' nature without humans, and more to the emerging paradigm of general ecology along a natural–technical continuum that could help frame the implications behind transforming cultural worlds into ecologies.[29] Perhaps, as critic Lee Weng Choy suggests, it is also not about abandoning ecology altogether, but rather examining the very nature of knowledge that constitutes the arts ecology.[30] Consider again the banyan tree, which is not only arborescent but also rhizomatic at various points of its life, both 'a model of dominant political structures *and* of possible subversions'.[31] Could the logics of ecology in the arts be reimagined less in terms of the imperatives of productivity and growth and more in terms of nourishment, equitable abundance, ethical possibility and restful pleasures?

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ENDNOTES

(1) HG Wells, Julian Huxley and GP Wells, *The Science of Life*, The Literary Guild, New York, 1935, p.961.

(2) Tay Tong, 'Forum: Ensuring arts ecosystem stays resilient', *The Straits Times*, 31 August 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/forum-ensuring-arts-ecosystem-stays-resilient, viewed May 2021.

(3) Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* , Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp.291–315.

(4) Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* , Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2016, p.12.

(5) *National Arts Council Annual Report FY 2016/2017*, National Arts Council, Singapore, 2017.

(6) Lily Kong, 'Ambitions of a global city: Arts, culture and creative economy in "post-crisis" Singapore', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol.18, no.3, 2012, pp.279–94.

(7) *National Arts Council Annual Report FY 2008/2009*, National Arts Council, Singapore, 2009, p.41.

(8) Jeremy Walker, *More Heat than Life: The Tangled Roots of Ecology, Energy, and Economics* , Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020, p.339.

(9) Susie Lingham, 'A quota on expression: Visions, vexations, & vanishings, contemporary art in Singapore from the late 1980s to the present', in Iola Lenzi and Tash Aw, *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 2011, pp.55–70.

(10) Arun Mahizhnan, 'Conceiving, creating and conjuring a Renaissance city', in Terence Chong (ed.), *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, World Scientific, Hackensack, NJ, 2018, pp.269–94.

(11) 'Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts and Minister for Health, at the Opening of the National Institute of Education (NIE) Festival of Arts on 1 September 1995 at 10.15am', National Archives Singapore, 1995.

(12) Comaroff and Ong explain how gardening was not only a metaphor for governance, but a technology of governance in itself. During the heady days of civil unrest in 1968, landscape designers of the National University of Singapore's Kent Ridge campus deliberately designed 'banking plateaus of lane and paving' to discourage gathering. See Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing, 'Paramilitary gardening: Landscape and authoritarianism', *Why Singapore Blog*, 6 September 2016, whysingaporeblog.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/paramilitary-gardening.pdf, viewed November 2020.

(13) Since colonisation in 1819, Singapore has experienced 95 per cent habitat loss due to deforestation. This has resulted in a catastrophic extinction event with rates of up to 73 per cent. This period also saw the spread of the plantation, as a way to organise nature and labour, alongside the work of imperial science in collecting, describing and displaying the island's flora, fauna and people. See Barry W Brook, Navjot S Sodhi and Peter KL Ng, 'Catastrophic extinctions follow deforestation in Singapore', *Nature*, vol.424, 2003, pp.420–3; and Timothy Barnard (ed.), *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore*, NUS Press, Singapore, 2014.

(14) Ong Sor Fern, 'ITI, Necessary Stage losing their homes, while Substation may lose much of its space', *The Straits Times*, 20 July 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/iti-necessary-stage-losing-their-homes-while-substation-may-lose-much-of-its-space, viewed May 2021. H G Masters, 'Singapore loses major exhibition and residency platform', ArtAsiaPacifc, 20 August 2020.

(15) K C Chew Chairman, The Substation Board, 'Townhall: Permanent Closure of the Substation', 2 March 2021, https://www.substation.org/blog/subclosure-townhall, viewed May 2021.

(16) On 2 March 2021, The Substation announced the decision by the board to permanently close the independent arts space, which was replied by a statement by NAC on the same day. Three days later, The Substation issued another statement in response to NAC's reply. A concerned group of members from the arts community have written this statement of clarification because they feel 'some claims made by the NAC statement maybe misleading or require further contextualisation'. See 'Statement of Clarification in Response to the National Arts Council's Media Statement on the Permanent Closure of the Substation', https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-knNPompCiAcmv-cESKtSjGkn07qJO2E8IaE2gONRnY/edit?usp=sharing, viewed May 2021. For an updated timeline of The Substation controversy, see Ke Weiliang, with assistance from Nabilah Said, 'The future of The Substation: A timeline of events (Updated)', 28 April 2021, *ArtsEquator*, https://artsequator.com/the-substation-timeline-armenian-street/, viewed May 2021.

(17) Audrey Wong, 'Post-Renaissance Hangover', paper presented to 'Space, Spaces and Spacing 2020', The Substation, Singapore, 2020, youtube.com/watch?v=I7QEemvoKGM&ab_channel=TheSubstation, viewed November 2020.

(18) Saving Spaces, facebook.com/saving.spaces2020/about, viewed November 2020.

(19) Saving Spaces, Zoom interview with author, 28 October 2020.

(20) Timothy Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* , Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011, pp.29–31.

(21) Saving Spaces, Zoom interview with author, 28 October 2020.

(22) Kuo Pao Kun, 'Open discussion', in *Space, Spaces and Spacing: The Substation Conference 1995* , The Substation, Singapore, 1995, pp.184–5.

(23) 'Introduction: The "backstory"', in Audrey Wong (ed.), *25 Years of the Substation: Reflections on Singapore's First Independent Art Centre*, Ethos Books and The Substation, Singapore, 2015, p.8.

(24) Kok Heng Leun, 'The place of The Substation', in Wong, pp.43-4.

(25) Loo Zihan, 'Within ourselves: Starting over', in Wong, pp.134–41.

(26) Robert Zhao, 'On nature', in Wong, p.46.

(27) Choy, pp.67–70.

(28) wares, 'Business as Usual? NAW!', 17–28 January 2019, facebook.com/events/1228107044012798, viewed November 2020.

(29) Erich Hörl, ‘A thousand ecologies: The process of cyberneticization and general ecology’, in Jeffrey Kirkwood et al. (eds), *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside* , Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013, pp.121–30.

(30) Lee Weng Choy, ‘A horse for the arts: Looking back at the future’, Kwok Kian Woon, Arun Mahizhnan, Thirunalan Sasitharan (eds), *Selves: The State of the Arts in Singapore* , National Arts Council, Singapore, 2001, pp.264–7.

(31) Eben Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power* , Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2012, p.57.