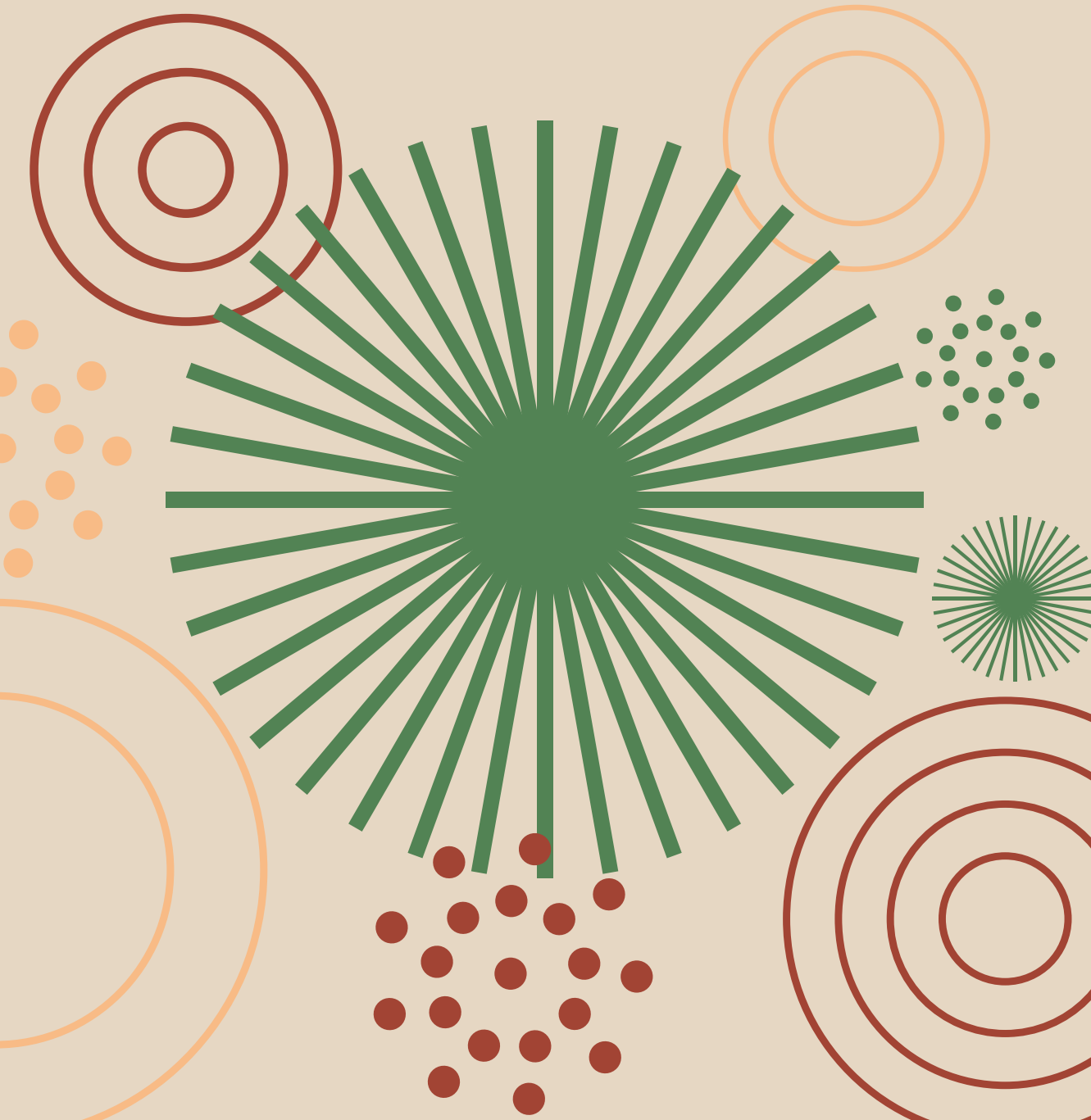
Impacting Communities Through the Arts II

12 More Case Studies of Arts Engagement in Singapore



Impacting Communities Through the Arts II

12 More Case Studies of Arts Engagement in Singapore

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Foreword

Connecting our communities remains a key strategic thrust in Our SG Arts Plan 2018-2022. The National Arts Council (NAC) is committed to working with artists, arts groups, and community partners to explore how thoughtfully designed arts projects can resonate and engage with the people. We believe that the arts can bring diverse communities together by encouraging self-expression and fostering a deeper appreciation of culture and societal relationships.

In this collection of case studies, the community-based projects involve a variety of profiles — from seniors with dementia to residents of various neighbourhoods. As these projects require tailored approaches unique to their contexts, the art forms, programme structures, methods employed and spaces used are adapted as necessary to engage the participants more effectively.

Often, the creative process needs to be carefully structured for participants who may or may not have prior arts exposure, such that the artistic experience and concepts are accessible without being any less interesting and satisfying for all. This publication draws insights from how artists facilitate such inclusive, participatory art-making processes, especially those for whom working with communities is an intrinsic part of their practice.

Another key feature common to the projects in this publication is the space given to the community to reflect and tell their own stories. This process of co-creating with artists empowers the community to make creative decisions and take active ownership of the arts projects. A successful project also requires the support of members of the community — be they volunteers, business owners, social service agencies, space owners, as well as families.

Following the first set of case studies published in 2018, *Impacting Communities Through the Arts II* hopes to capture best practices of another 12 community arts projects in Singapore. It also aims to share inspiring possibilities with artists, community organisations, place-owners and policy-makers, even as this field of arts practice grows to enrich lives and to foster a greater appreciation for the arts in various communities.

Engagement & Participation
National Arts Council
Singapore

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Expressing Place Identity

The arts is a form of self-expression, as well as a testament to the culture, heritage and identity of places. Bringing arts to shared spaces can enliven them and remind the community of their unique spirit and character, enhancing the community's sense of belonging and place ownership.

District 27 and District 18

Activating Community Spaces through Interactive Performances

2017 & 2019 | By P7:1SMA

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Involving the communities as active participants, *District 27* (2017) and *District 18* (2019) paid tribute to the heritage of Yishun and Tampines respectively. They drew inspiration from everyday life, lost landmarks and activated common areas for performance.

These two site-specific performances were commissioned by the National Arts Council as part of Arts in Your Neighbourhood, an initiative that brings enriching arts experiences to everyone at their doorsteps.

Project Aims

- Encourage the community to contribute to art-making
- Encourage residents to rediscover and appreciate their neighbourhood

Types of Art
Dance, Music

Participants
Communities in Yishun, Sembawang and Tampines

"Common humanity comes first. I am curious about what is a meaningful understanding of our relationship between identity, memory, and place. Creating site-specific activations like this *District Series* is only possible with the generosity of curious people. Through sharing of stories, history and heritage, artists can see eye to eye with everyone to create, maintain and evaluate our neighbourhood spaces."

— Norhaizad Adam, Artistic Director

During 'circle time', the artists jot down and share observations on the hustle and bustle of the food centre.

After some sensory activities, the artists use their collated findings to embody and play with architecture.

Some days, the residents at Tampines Round Market & Food Centre (TRMFC) would see a group of unfamiliar faces sitting on the floor sewing clothes. On other days, the same group was seen dancing and gesturing at the empty spaces within the market itself. This sparked the start of P7:1SMA's working process for their Arts In Your Neighbourhood performance in early 2019.

Titled *District 18*, this performance shared similar rehearsal processes and eventual performance formats with *District 27* held at Chong Pang in 2017. Some similarities included how most rehearsals were intentionally staged on-site so the performers could be inspired by the sights, sounds and architecture of the space. Artistic Director Norhaizad Adam shared, "We also believe there is an ethical need to increase visibility and have friendly conversations with hawkers, convenience store owners and also residents of the spaces we are working with." The team learnt that conversations about heritage and culture were only possible with the collective rapport, understanding and support from others in the community. Through close interaction with public, performers better appreciated how dance is a common language that brings people together.

To prepare for the performances, the team did extensive research on the neighbourhoods, especially into their historical and social aspects. Besides research into the landscapes of the neighbourhoods through online sources such as the National Archives of Singapore, they would also go on team excursions to experience the physical sites. Sembawang Park and the vicinity of Kampung Wak Hassan were places they visited to prepare for *District 27*, while also interviewing elderly resident Abdolah Lamat who is familiar with those two landmarks. The interview led Norhaizad to gain further insight into growing up in a close-knit *kampung* situated near the coastal areas of Singapore.

This dedication developed an ongoing relationship between the Chong Pang community and the performers. Convenience store owners happily contributed their recycled cardboard for props. The drink stalls at Chong Pang Food Centre generously provided bottled water and canned drinks for all of their on-site rehearsals. During the performances, the same stalls offered free-flow *teh-o* in jugs to audiences sitting around the amphitheatre.

Designed to mimic childhood games and to present familiar elements such as coconut husks and recycled cardboard, P7:1SMA's performance drew the audience in to take part in it. For example, they contributed to a hand-drawn map about lost landmarks and forgotten years in Yishun and Sembawang, and also shared stories and nuggets of information which were incorporated in the performances each night.

Performer Caroline Chin said, "Interacting with the people in the community was the most treasured experience of all. To hear their stories and receive their energy and love for their neighbourhood, one that I am unfamiliar with, was such an enlightening and heartwarming experience for me." With *District 27* being her first time performing in such a context, she felt that the performance was solely and purely for the community. This was further reinforced by the generosity of the performers and community. "Knowing this, I was most infected and inspired to share and work from my heart," she readily added.

Sharing joyful memories of Sembawang Hot Spring.

Audiences and artists are all excited to contribute to the experience.

For *District 18* in 2019, two years after their first foray into actively involving the community in their performance, P7:1SMA took on seven student volunteers from the dance Co-Curricular Activities of ITE College West and ITE College East and involved three elderly hawkers from the TRMFC. Although the stall operators were initially reserved, they eventually opened up and this allowed everyone to learn more about the iconic place.

"I think elderly hawkers that we interacted with have so much passion in their work. I can feel that they are really proud of what they sell as it belongs to them and it forms a large part of their happiness in life. I enjoyed learning more from the elderly about the history of the hawkers and market stall names, especially their many years of being in Tampines," volunteer Dewi Nisa said.

Artists got to know endearing aunties from Kayat foodstall at TRMFC and deepened the relationships over time.

Hawker stall owners were excited to share stories with artists and youth participants.

The hawkers' voices were also heard during the performances and sharing sessions with the performers themselves. Some issues the hawkers highlighted included their concerns regarding the upcoming closure of the food centre for renovation as well as their hopes and worries for the future. These themes found their way into the performance.

"We went around asking shopkeepers what the market meant to them, and working with the different community partners, we also had pictures taken of them holding up their responses. These were displayed in our exhibition during the performance and for a period of one month after it," said Norhaizad.

Art has the power to help us reflect on the human condition and effect change.

P7:1SMA believes that art has the power to help us reflect on the human condition and effect change, such as through community-building. Through their performances, *District 27* and *District 18*, they have created shared experiences that harnessed the power of dance to bring communities together and celebrate the space they inhabit.

Bringing life to the core of TRMFC, the artists brave the noon heat, using their bodies to question what it means to belong to a neighbourhood.

A performer clad in a costume made of materials commonly used in the hawker trade.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Spirit of collaboration

District 27's close collaboration between musicians, performers and the community-at-large through their rehearsals showcased its performance site as a genuine, living, breathing space. This mode of working, where they rehearse on-site and took time to speak to the community there, ensures that the performed material will stay true to and honour the neighbourhood it seeks to engage.

Privilege in public performance

Norhaizad frequently reminds his team that it is a privilege to perform in a public space. Artists should never assume that the neighbourhood is obliged to welcome their presence, and should therefore remain respectful to the community's values and seek to establish a strong mutual trust with the community. This will only strengthen future creative collaborations with the community.

Jumbo Fabrica

Celebrating Neighbourhood Legacy

2018 | By Sweet Tooth

OVERVIEW

About the Project

To engage the residents living in jumbo flats in Woodlands, the team collected household objects from them and set up pop-up 'clinics' to refurbish these items.Through this process, the objects were transformed and were used to create a large-scale installation at Kampung Admiralty Community Plaza. Additionally, an audio-guided walking trail was developed to bring audiences around Woodlands, where they heard stories from residents, and also encountered live performances inspired by the residents' stories.

Jumbo Fabrica was commissioned by the National Arts Council as part of the November 2018 edition of Arts InYour Neighbourhood.

Project Aims

- Celebrate the community's *kampung* spirit through art
- Artistically recreate stories shared by the residents

Types of Art
Multidisciplinary

Participants
Residents of Woodlands

"We are wired to connect through stories. As such, we apply our specific skills, disciplines and aesthetics to open up and discover ways of connecting, listening and experiencing. *Jumbo Fabrica* curated the space and set the circumstances, creating the environment and allowing for an atmosphere where people from different walks of life could gather, engage and listen to each other."

– Natalie Hennedige, Artistic Director

Performance inspired by residents' commuting experiences.

Inspired by generational furniture (eg. grandfather's clocks, antique cabinets) and the stories that accompanied them, *Jumbo Fabrica* by Sweet Tooth was a curated event of guided trails and public artworks that took audiences right into the heart of the neighbourhood.

Artistic Director Natalie Hennedige said, "We began by looking at the unique features of Woodlands. Jumbo flats stood out as a feature that the people of the neighbourhood were proud of. We then spent three weekends at the void decks conducting upcycling workshops, going door to door asking if anyone had a piece of furniture to give away."

Through the workshops, the creative team interacted with the residents. The occupied void decks became a community arts space where everyone could enjoy and entertain themselves. "Woodlands still retains a sense of the *kampung* spirit, a spirit of neighbourliness; a slower pace. The frame of mind shifts when things are taken at a slower pace. People were open to starting a conversation with us, telling us about the furniture pieces they were handing to us and that was a precious entry point to extend conversations," Natalie shared.

At 37 years, Woodlands is one of Singapore's older estates, and has 80% of the country's multi-generational or jumbo flats. Initial research into Woodlands was carried out in order to better understand its history, government policies and people. On-site observations and interviews also took place to better understand the residents and stories of Woodlands.

Interactive activity as part of the walking trail.

Residents participating in an upcycling workshop.

"If you just listen to people, they have lots to share. Especially if it's something they care about."

– Natalie Hennedige

Greater insights were gained about the signature features of Woodlands including its jumbo flats, good hawker food, greenery and proximity to Johor Bahru.

To fully explore Woodlands' heritage and present it in *Jumbo Fabrica*, the upcycled furniture pieces were then transformed into installation and set pieces placed at various locations within the area, along a 90-minute walking trail.

This walking trail included three stations with live performances inspired by the residents' stories. Split into three theme — living, eating and commuting in Woodlands, they were designed to bring the everyday experiences of the residents to the forefront.

Interviews were recorded and used in two aspects of the project: as part of the installation at Admiralty station, and layered with various soundscapes for the audio guide that accompanied the walking trail. Participants of the trail could identify the different languages used in the descriptions which encapsulate the neighbourhood.

The material gathered from the interviews also went on to inspire the performances put up. Natalie elaborated, "For instance, the father in one particular family said he situated his two sons in the room that was closest to his master bedroom so he could keep an eye on them. And someone else said she was comforted by the sound of piano playing at a specific time everyday." These tidbits of information were woven into the text of performances to add a more personal touch.

Performance celebrating the dizzying array of food in Woodlands.

The generosity and involvement of the residents did not stop at participating in interviews, contributing furniture and anecdotes. In the case of a jumbo flat installation along the trail, the original flat owner even participated in it. Wanting to better connect and relate with the space, audience members visited her actual home after the performance.

Audiences were led through the flat by the owner in batches of 25 at a time, demonstrating a keen interest from the community to understand their neighbourhood better through in-person interactions, once given the opportunity to.

Tactile, experiential and deeply personal, *Jumbo Fabrica* injected new life into the neighbourhood and connected the residents to their living spaces in new ways. For Sweet Tooth, it was about being able to listen to the residents' stories and experiences, and letting that inform their creative projects. Natalie elaborated, "If you just listen to people, they have lots to share. Especially if it's something they care about — their home, their neighbourhood. When it's something you know you intimately care about, you have things to share and that is the basis of this project."

Set pieces upcycled from residents' furniture.

Residents taking part in an upcycling workshop.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Connecting through shared stories

"Everyone connects to stories. We're wired to connect through stories. We're made to connect. The application of technological devices built thoughtfully into the process allows for more complex and varied ways of connecting and transmitting shared histories, memories and observations," shared Natalie.

Stories are universal tools for connecting people. Creatives and artists therefore have to find new ways to bridge people from different walks of life, and curate communal spaces that facilitate such exchanges.

On a more personal level, it is important to listen and open up to each other. The creative process is after all a two-way relationship to be built upon, with commitment, sincerity and a common interest for the things people care intimately about.

Adapting to change

Instead of going in ready to serve one's own project, it is important to stay adaptable and open-minded. This will help tailor each work to the subject's needs because people and the neighbourhood are ultimately at the core of community spaces and projects.

Our Gallery at Taman Jurong

Singapore's First Residential Art Gallery

2018 | By Taman Jurong Community Club

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Our Gallery at Taman Jurong aims to engage residents in visual art projects facilitated by established artists. The resulting co-created artworks are installed at Housing Development Board (HDB) void decks and spaces across the neighbourhood. In 2018, after relooking the community's entire art collection, two new works by artists Ivan David Ng and Juliana Ong were commissioned by Taman Jurong Community Club, and a self-guided trail titled 'Of Gardens & Dreams' curated by Shophouse & Co. to allow for a more coherent experience of the works amongst the neighbourhood landmarks.

Our Gallery at Taman Jurong is part of NAC's Arts & Culture Nodes initiative, developed in partnership with People's Association and Taman Jurong Community Arts and Culture Club. The initiative aims to increase arts touchpoints across the island, for Singaporeans to enjoy and engage in the arts regularly.

Project Aims

- Foster arts appreciation and social interaction among residents
- Cultivate a sense of ownership and belonging to the neighbourhood

Types of Art	Participants
Visual Arts	Residents of Taman Jurong

"Art and culture is vital to building a sense of pride within the community and the neighbourhood. We also believe that the stories of the place and its people should come alive in the built environment, public art, and its experiences."

– Adib Jalal,
Co-Founder/Director,
Shophouse & Co.

Trail participant at the Curator-Led Guided Trail during Singapore Art Week 2019 interacting with one of the featured works.

Taman Jurong is one of the most vibrant and colourful neighbourhoods. Here, residents work with artists to develop co-created artworks. These pieces of art are put on display at HDB void decks and various public spaces in the neighbourhood.

Rahayu Mahzam, the Member of Parliament (MP) for Jurong Group Representation Constituency (GRC) shared the reason why the district is supportive of these artistic endeavours: "Art is also a reflection of the residents' lives, the estate and it allows the generations after us to learn and embrace all that the older ones have to offer." Parents also reflected that the presence of art in the neighbourhood provided great opportunities to nurture their children's creative minds.

Since the beginning of Our Gallery at Taman Jurong in 2014, new artworks have been added into the residential public art collection every year. However, these additions were often ad hoc and lacked a cohesive narrative as a collection across the yearly commissions. This is where placemaking studio Shophouse & Co. came in.

The studio went through a process of studying and documenting the entire art collection, surveying their mediums, approaches, spread across the neighbourhood, and more. They also researched the urban history and future of the place, such as the many generations of existing HDB and Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) developments, and new developments anchored by Jurong Lake Gardens. All of this played a part in the curatorial direction, as well as in the selection of new sites, artists and new commissions.

Marked Stones by Juliana Ong was one of two commissions. This floor mural artwork features stone-shaped outlined patterns and markings co-created with residents. These markings are spontaneous, abstract line drawings and stroke writings which the artist termed "Automarktic". Seen as a form of decorative art, they connect the various drawings together through nature-inspired branching patterns, and serve as a visual representation of the residents' vibrant spirit and stories.

Trail participants examining the route on their trail handouts.

Close-up detail of a resident's creation that is embedded in the *Going Somewhere!* sculpture.

Artist Ivan David Ng co-created a sculpture called *Going Somewhere!* with the residents. Shaped like a bird, it comprises ceramic pieces made by the residents depicting images of their dreams and memories, such as visiting the seven-storey pagoda at Chinese Garden. It is intended to symbolise a community taking flight through their shared narratives. With the patterns in relief, the sculpture also serves as a good pedagogical tool for art teachers in kindergartens and primary schools in the area, as children are encouraged to discover some of these images and memories by placing pieces of paper over the patterns and shading.

Adib Jalal, Co-Founder and Director of Shophouse & Co., elaborated further: "We approached the project by exploring Taman Jurong's legacy and history, and also sought out the underlying 'spirit' of the people who lived there. This journey led us to be inspired by the early vision to make Taman Jurong a nature-filled neighbourhood with the name — where 'Taman' means 'garden' in Malay. Residents who moved to stay in this previous swampland, dreamt of a better future for themselves and their families. Not only that, Taman Jurong's street names also reflect various aspirations: Yung Ping Road translates to 'eternal peace', Yung Kuang Road to 'eternal bright' and Yuan Ching Road to 'scenery of gardens'."

The refreshed narrative of the gallery expresses the residents' progressive and lively spirit, and the place's close relationship with nature. It now also includes key community landmarks in the neighbourhood, such as the Taman Jurong Market and Food Centre, as well as two artworks that were co-created by youths of Taman Jurong and street art collective RSCLS, as part of Noise Urban Arts In The Hood.

Now, the entire neighbourhood is a public art gallery where one can figure out their bearings just by looking at the artworks displayed all around. There are also two suggested trails by Shophouse & Co. that visitors can take to experience the neighbourhood. A trail brochure which maps out the different trail routes is available online.

Adib shared the future possibilities that Our Gallery at Taman Jurong can take: "Beyond just a short-term project, it could be a long-term process to build up and share the continual changing narratives of the growing neighbourhood." With more time and resources, the artists will be able to form a deeper connection to the area and develop artworks that are better representative of the neighbourhood's story. This will keep the art growing together with the community.

A young participant at the Curator-Led Guided Trail discovering the image that is revealed from shading over the relief.

Going Somewhere! by Ivan David Ng.

Now, the entire neighbourhood is a public art gallery where one can figure out their bearings just by looking at the artworks displayed all around.

Detail of *Marked Stones* by Juliana Ong.

Participant at the Curator-Led Guided Trail contributing to the artwork titled *OCCUPIED!* by ANTZ.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Building relationships between artists and community

The artists planned workshops which were aimed both at sharing some art knowledge with the residents, and more importantly intended to help establish new connections and rapport with them. Juliana shared that her practice is mostly informed by solitary creations. Through this platform, she found herself able to share what she does with others while listening to how the participants interpreted and perceived their drawings.

The first session was an introductory technique-based session, followed by a co-creation session where participants used the techniques learnt to create part of the artwork which would eventually be displayed. Such hands-on, interactive initiatives naturally built a strong relationship between the artist and community, where the conversations and co-creative process benefitted everyone.

Structuring collaborative arts activities

It is crucial to establish an artistic framework that is carefully scaffolded while providing enough creative autonomy to participants. For example, while residents were free to make their own markings, Juliana limited the colours used for the floor mural in *Marked Stones*. Doing so reduces the level of intimidation encountered by participants during art-making, and frees them to express themselves without worry, while maintaining the robustness of the process itself.

The result is a work that feels meaningful, true and collaborative, while achieving the artist's vision of the final artwork.

Community Arts Residency at Stamford Arts Centre

Reconnecting Communities to their Past and Present

2018 | By Artist Duo

OVERVIEW

About the Project

As part of the NAC Community Arts Residency at Stamford Arts Centre (SAC), resident art collective, Artist Duo, comprising Joanne Lio and Karen Koh, proposed this line of inquiry: "Do you define the community, or does the community define who you are?"

Through guided walks, art-making workshops and participatory art activities, the art collective engaged with the residents, visitors and shopkeepers in the Waterloo Street area.

The NAC Community Arts Residency aims to provide artists with opportunities to inquire and co-create artworks with communities that will shape communal spaces and reflect the collective stories of people.

Project Aims

- Allow the community to engage in the arts in a meaningful way
- Explore the intersections between places, people and histories

Types of Art
Visual Arts

Participants
Stamford Girls' School alumni; residents, business owners of and visitors to Waterloo Street

"We believe in empowering the community through the arts to have an awareness of their strengths, to reflect on what matters most in their life, and be well-informed of their networks and communal resources for collective growth and wisdom."

– Artist Duo

This Stamford Arts Centre studio was a holding space where conversations were shared among Artist Duo, Waterloo residents and volunteers for the residency.

Artist Duo reached out to engage members of the public with participatory art activities during their residency at Stamford Arts Centre. They connected and had conversations with community partners such as the residents' committee, business and hotel owners, and heritage enthusiasts, to better understand the history, culture, people and happenings in the Waterloo Street Area.

"The first few weeks was us discovering the neighbourhood, getting to know and figuring out what we could do around. Explorations of the surrounding HDB flats and religious temples led to having conversations with the residents, trishaw uncles, shop owners and fortune-telling street vendors. It was through the process that we slowly unfolded and learnt to understand the community around. Also, we connected with the various community partners to explore opportunities for collaboration and support," shared Karen Koh.

Stories of Stamford Arts Centre and its past lives were also excavated, as Artist Duo reached out to their acquaintance, Lily Bok, an alumnus of Stamford Girls' School. As Artist Duo were new to the space, it was through this opportune contact that they learnt more about the Centre's history as a primary school campus.

Art-making workshops for Waterloo residents led by Artist Duo.

Lily shared her excitement to see how her old school had been revamped, and the artists invited her and her group of Stamford Girls' School friends and teachers to visit the newly renovated site. It was intriguing to understand its history by speaking with the alumni — a community that once occupied the space.

The late-1950s batch of alumni were thrilled when they first stepped into the space, enthusiastically remarking on the changes made to the interior and sharing many memories of school life. Lively conversations were held over coffee, tea and snacks, with black-and-white photos of the old days passed around. It was an intimate school reunion, a bridging of past and present as their shared memories were physically embodied in the site itself.

This nostalgic sharing led to a session of art-making where fabric and yarn materials were woven onto a frame, with different colours representing love, wealth, health, peace and growth. The artists were particularly heartened by the close relationship between the students and teachers even after so many years, with the students guiding the teachers in a tender role reversal.

Engaging with members of the public through a participative art activity around Stamford Arts Centre.

Guided walks around the landmarks of Stamford Arts Centre where Waterloo residents rediscover their neighbourhood through the lens of arts and culture.

These same art activities were also brought around the neighbourhood where passers-by were similarly invited to tie different coloured ribbons on a frame. They were asked about what they hoped for, and the things that they were grateful for.

This sparked the start of artist-curated walks and art-making workshops. Participants took slow-paced walks along Waterloo Street to observe the colours, shapes, and symbols of the architecture. Cultural and historical aspects such as demographics and architectural aesthetics were also

The artists were particularly heartened by the close relationship between the students and teachers even after so many years, with the students guiding the teachers in a tender role reversal.

The installation speaks of Artist Duo's discoveries of their Community Arts Residency experiences and engagement with the diverse Waterloo Street community.

discussed during the walks, based on the surrounding landmarks like Stamford Arts Centre, Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, Sri Krishna Temple and Chapel in Middle Road (the current space of Objectifs).

Participants were encouraged to take photographs of what captured their interest during the walks, and to use these preliminary observations as sources of inspiration during their workshops. The canvas artworks were visual reflections of each individual's memories and lived experiences, that somehow influenced their interpretation of the space.

This research-driven process culminated in an exhibition at the end of the residency. Karen shared, "To celebrate the individual and collective narratives of the Waterloo Street community, we invited participants and our supportive community partners to share our space in the final showcase." Participants were overjoyed to witness their own artworks be part of a larger exhibition. With each artwork reflecting the uniqueness of each individual, Artist Duo carefully curated the collection to express the complex nature of community relations as a whole.

BEYOND THE WORK

Reflections from the working process

Reconnecting people through shared spaces and stories

The art of fostering good relationships with various community partners, past and present, can start with visiting a shared space. In an ever-changing landscape like Singapore, each space is often imbued with a rich history and in the case of Stamford Arts Centre, will have seen many different individuals pass through its doors. Inviting the Stamford Girls' Alumni to visit and explore the revamped space was significant as it allowed naturally for memories of the space to come up, but more importantly for discussions on new energies and new possibilities to also surface. Artist Duo was glad to witness the continuity of past relationships that are very much alive in the present community manifest itself.

Breaking out of the comfort zone

Artist Duo's practices have seen them largely in more structured settings of healthcare and education. In those settings, individuals in front of them are mostly ready to take in what they had to offer.

In a cultural and historical district like Waterloo, Artist Duo had to explore different ways to introduce themselves and the reason for their presence in the neighbourhood. These included visiting store owners personally to share what they were doing in the neighbourhood and to learn more about the Waterloo community.

Leaving behind initial expectations and having an open mind was key to ensuring that all their encounters were honest and insightful.

Mutual respect

Artist Duo believes that a community arts practice requires artists to be mindful of others, and to have mutual respect and empathy for the community.

It is essential for artists to understand the community's needs before implementing programmes, and by extension, understand how a work affects the community during and after its occurrence.

Pop-Up Noise: Soul Searching

Enlivening Community Spaces in Chinatown

2016 | By Jalyn Han, Joseph Nair and Xu Jingyi

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Soul Searching was a site-specific project in Chinatown which featured a total of 31 artists and arts groups. It provided a platform that connected young artists to the community there. Through a series of workshops, interviews and interactions, the artists discovered and showcased the histories and personal narratives of the merchants, residents and visitors of Chinatown through varied artistic means.

An initiative by the National Arts Council, Noise Singapore offers a platform for youths to learn, co-create and showcase their artistic expressions, and enables them to connect meaningfully with one another in and through the arts.

Project Aims

- Encourage young artists to create through a process of experimentation and discovery
- Activate public spaces for shared community experiences

Types of Art
Multidisciplinary

Participants
Residents, merchants of and visitors to Chinatown

"Instead of an artists' impression of the community, community arts is really about working with the space, studying it and finding the voice of the people within that community."

– Joseph Nair, Co-Creator

P7:1SMA artist Hasyimah performing *Sago Lane* to the Kreta Ayer community.

Chinatown was buzzing with activity as *Soul Searching* made an appearance in the neighbourhood over three weekends in October 2016. The project was part of Pop-Up Noise, an initiative of Noise Singapore which aims to offer the public greater access to young artists and their creations. Elderly residents could be seen sitting around the performance areas, rearranging the chairs to their preference, and witnessing the live performances happening in their own neighbourhood — first curious, and then gradually more interested and involved. By the end of it, one gentleman had asked the team: "When will you be back again?"

Held at Kreta Ayer Square, the entire project leveraged the community's rich heritage and history. Artist-participants experienced a series of four workshops in which they learnt from an antiques collector and historian. They also spent time playing and experimenting with the space using all their senses, and in so doing, interacted with the community living, working, and moving in the area.

Performer Muhammad Al Hafiz Bin Sanusi shared that he did a lot of groundwork and research to prepare for his performance. He spoke to members of the community, visited the National Archives of Singapore and even learnt how to play chess with the uncles. For him, it was about bonding and listening to what the people there had to say.

The set itself was iconic as well, modelled after an old five-foot way. It served as an arresting and conversation-starting art installation, but also as a gallery, living

Artists Lim Jun Jie and Germaine Cheng picking up dance moves with residents.

room, seats for audiences, and stage as well. One of the set designers Xu Jingyi explained, "We were initially looking at a pop-up space that could foster an intimate relationship between the works of visual and performing artists, and the vibrant community life in the surrounding living spaces. It had to function as an exhibition space as well as a performance set, whilst also remaining open and inviting to the residents and public.

The idea of evolving time, vanishing landscapes and bridging of generations fitted well in a five-foot way and balcony bridge formation which acts as a versatile space for interactive artwork and performance. It could naturally weave in the surrounding communities, residents, tourists and members of the public from all walks of life to become a vibrant, inclusive and intimate living space."

"Listening to their stories, interacting with them, and also watching how everyone comes together has reinforced my decision to do community theatre. It has strengthened my belief in arts being an agent of change. Arts helps to tear down the walls between people," reflected artist Lim Meng Jiat. For her own work, she made use of a puppet created with the elderly and made out of everyday household items. Although she was not sure of how the residents would react, she was thankful for the positive responses from audience members who interacted with and applauded the work, and took this as a learning point to inform her own artistic practice.

One of the last surviving *amah (majie)*, affectionately known as Wah-jeh, inspecting images featuring her in a photography-in-installation work by artist Charmaine Poh.

"It has strengthened my belief in arts being an agent of change; arts helps to tear down the walls between people"

— Lim Meng Jiat, Artist

Balcony bridge atop the five-foot way gallery extending out from the Kreta Ayer Square stage.

One memorable moment was during a jam session where musicians were invited to play their own genres of music. One of the musicians was Bani Haykal, who is known for experimenting with acoustic and digital instruments, text and data. Introducing such a new sound to an older neighbourhood, nobody knew what to expect from the residents but the music was met with favourable responses. Residents sitting around, used to the homely atmosphere, were spontaneously passing a microphone around to add to the soundscape. By the end of the evening, they were even dancing and moving to the music, playfully uttering words and observing these new forms of art that they have never experienced before.

Co-creator Joseph Nair said that this experience reinforced his belief that artists should not second-guess the audience. By producing work and then observing the responses of the audience, the results can be surprising, and open up more possibilities than working based on assumptions about the audience. As co-creator Jalyn Han put it, "They were having fun and this reminds us to not judge ourselves and others. In the arts, there are no borders and it is just about communication."

Residents joining in a Cantonese and Mandarin Oldies Sing-Along session with artist Steven Ang.

Opera-te, a cinema-on-wheels installation projecting old images of Chinese Opera performers in the 1960s and 70s, by artists Ben Yap and Lim Cheng Jun.

BEYOND THE WORK

Reflections from the working process

Be open to possibilities

When embarking on *Soul Searching*, Jalyn stressed on how there was no expected specificity in outcome. By keeping things open and flexible, the project was able to create many different outcomes and unexpected surprises. Initially the community kept their distance, but after a few days, they started making themselves at home by moving chairs around, talking to the artists and interacting with the art in their own ways. None of this could have taken place if the project was rigid and fixed.

Take risks

During the course of this project, many artists and the team took risks with their artistic choices despite being unsure of how the demographic would react to these new forms of art. Overcoming any reservations about audience response, the artists took a leap of faith to give the community a chance to experience the creative works and make their own choices, finding that this often yielded a positive outcome.

Empowering Communities Through Arts Access

The arts has the potential to include and empower people from various walks of life. This is achieved through inclusive arts experiences which provide more platforms for under-reached communities to express themselves, tell their own stories and cultivate ownership over their own narratives.

Not in My Lifetime?

An Inclusive Theatre Performance
2019 | By The Finger Players

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Performed in English with closed captioning (CC) and audio description (AD), this inclusive theatre performance shines a spotlight on the field of Special Education, exploring the educational system in Singapore and people involved in it. Through collaborations and feedback from People with Disabilities (PwDs), these conversations provided insights on a new model for inclusive arts, culminating in the play *Not in My Lifetime?*, where personal stories from the community were presented and shared in an inclusive and accessible manner.

Not In My Lifetime? ran for 14 shows from 5 to 17 March 2019.

Project Aims

- Embrace inclusivity in theatre
- Acknowledge the experiences of Special Education teachers

Types of Art
Theatre

Participants
General Public

"I hope *Not in My Lifetime?* sparks a conversation among all of us on why Special Education matters, how we can give it the respect and attention it deserves, and what inclusion truly means."

– Alvan Yap, Playwright

Children characters played by object puppets made from household items such as bags, plates, towels, mops and dustpans. All eight of them pose in two rows as though taking a family portrait. (Photo credit: Alvan Yap)

Attending theatre performances might be the norm for some groups of people, but for others, this may be difficult when performances do not cater to their needs. Tan Beng Tian of The Finger Players mused, "After going for workshops and engaging with the differently abled, I realised that we have been taking things for granted in mainstream theatre. It is important for artists to think from different perspectives and yet, we have not considered people in the differently abled community as part of the equation."

This line of questioning brought Beng Tian and her team together to stage *Not in My Lifetime?* in early 2019. Her team consisted of actors, Special Education educators and PwDs who chose to come onboard with this shared goal of creating inclusive theatre despite limited resources.

The play is about two Special Education teachers and their varied experiences in navigating school life. Audience members got to witness the challenges they faced in their interactions with authorities, parents and the students themselves. It sought to address why teachers in the Special Education sector choose to stay in the field or move on to other schools, and what more could be done to empathise and help the community.

Besides the chosen topic, the team took great effort to ensure that the performance experience was an inclusive one as well — that is, that differently abled members of the community could enter the theatre and appreciate the performance.

During the creation process, the team conducted many open rehearsal sessions and sought feedback from different audiences, including PwDs, the vision impaired, deaf and hard of hearing communities. Some of the feedback they received included the need for more visual information such as facial expressions of characters to be included into the AD.

Set model providing non-seeing audience with a mental image. A right hand is feeling the miniature set on a shallow tray that is a scaled down model of the theatre. (Photo credit: Tuckys Photography)

The lack of such information made it difficult to understand the narrative, especially during moments when characters were not talking on stage.

Some access features such as audio description were not introduced merely as additional elements, but were seamlessly integrated into the aesthetic of the project since its inception. For example, the pace of acting slowed at certain parts to make space for the AD and to make sure that audience members listening to the AD would not miss out on any dialogue happening on stage. The team even decided to move their stage manager out of the control booth, so the AD could take place without interruptions from light and sound cues.

PwDs also had an equal choice of show dates and presentation types, and could select what was most comfortable for them. One such option was the Relaxed Performance, designed for audience members who may benefit from a relaxed environment with less sensory stimulation. This resulted in volume control for sound and use of gentler lighting.

Surrounded by three students played by object puppets, Teacher lovingly looks at one in the eye and refers to them as "Monkeys". (Photo credit: Alvan Yap)

For theatregoers with vision impairment, touch tours were also held an hour before each show. During the 30-minute tour, they were given a model of the set and selected props to explore through touch. This offered them the opportunity to create a mental image of the set, and helped with their ability to follow the performance.

Sign language interpretation and live note taking for the post-show dialogue was also available. This made sure that the deaf and hard of hearing community could participate too. The dialogue turned out to be a fruitful one, with audience members sharing their personal experiences with Special Education. Many meaningful discussions on what it really meant to achieve equality, inclusivity and empowerment for PwDs were had.

Sound artist, Danial Bawthan wearing an orange cap, introduces himself while three performers point to his sound station on the right. (Photo credit: Alvan Yap)

This willingness to accommodate was also extended to individual audience members. Despite the show being recommended for adults, a lady had expressed her wish to bring her young son with autism, and so preparations were made to ensure a fruitful experience for both parent and child. Prior to the show, the mother was introduced to resources and facilities should her son require them during the show. One such facility was the quiet corner, which was a space with minimal visual and audio stimulation to help calm and soothe anybody who might have been feeling overwhelmed.

> "Inclusivity shouldn't be an afterthought. Neither should it compromise artistic choices."
>
> – Inch Chua

Despite the countless revisions of their work, the team stood by their ethos that inclusivity should be the basis of all performances, and was as important as any other artistic choices. Performer Inch Chua shared, "Inclusivity shouldn't be an afterthought. Neither should it compromise artistic choices to the extent of bubble wrapping the audience. I think it's important for practitioners to experiment more with it and eventually share their working experience, challenges, enthusiasm and reluctance, to open more dialogues about this."

A child puppet being carried overhead and passed along by the joint forces of the teacher, parent and authority. (Photo credit: Tuckys Photography)

The team's receptivity to feedback and change did not stop at the rehearsal process. Change continued to take place between shows when necessary. For instance, captioner Shai made use of creative captioning techniques like colour-coding surtitles to help deaf and hard of hearing audience members differentiate between lines uttered by various characters. When a small proportion of audience gave feedback that certain colours were difficult to see due to colour sensitivity, she had discussions with Beng Tian to make immediate adjustments based on their feedback as the shows went on.

A quilted blanket plays a child experiencing a meltdown. The young Teacher stands beside the child in anguish while the Veteran Teacher watches on calmly at the background. She is seated with her legs crossed.
(Photo credit: Tuckys Photography)

As Beng Tian shared this particular experience to showcase how impactful inclusive efforts could be, she reiterated that this will be more efficient when more join in to create inclusive theatre.

The playwright Alvan Yap agreed and spoke about his hopes for shows in the future: "Someday I hope I don't have to check if theatre productions are inclusive or not, because I know they will be inclusive without mentioning it. What we are doing with *Not in My Lifetime?* is hopefully the first step."

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Be receptive to change

The script for *Not in My Lifetime?* went through multiple revisions, with each rework taking in suggestions from the entire creative team. Some characters were added, or removed when they impeded the inclusivity of the performance. These changes throughout the process helped as many audience members as possible to enjoy and experience the show.

Performer Nix Sang found the team's open mindset to change motivating, and appreciated the safe space that encouraged her to share ideas and suggestions without fear of judgment. The team's genuine advocacy for inclusivity heightened her confidence in theatre as an agent for social change.

Choose inclusivity whenever possible

Nix felt that inclusivity and equality of choice should be fundamental rights. Inclusivity can have a range of interpretations and applications. Particularly for *Not in My Lifetime?* some design choices and resources allocated kept diverse communities in mind through CC and AD.

Alvan articulated that *Not in My Lifetime?* was "an inclusive theatre production not specifically for PwDs. It's about the idea that anyone can take part when they want to". This reflects the basis of inclusivity — to give as many people that choice as possible.

Take Flight

Encouraging Self-Expression Through the Arts

2017 | By Jasmin Wong, Lionel Tan, Mervin Wong, Rachel Ho and Yelyn Yeo

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Take Flight was a pilot programme conceptualised by five local creatives to introduce the performing arts to youths from the Singapore Girls' Home. Twelve workshop sessions were held over the span of five weeks from 23 August to 22 September 2017, in which music and drama instructors guided 15 girls to explore and create a performance piece of their own design.

This month-long programme culminated in a private showcase for family, friends and staff of the Singapore Girls' Home. It was organised by the National Arts Council and supported by the President's Challenge.

Project Aims

- Empower the youths to make their own creative decisions
- Provide a safe and creative outlet for them to express their emotions and identities
- Encourage artistic appreciation while imparting new musical and theatrical knowledge

Types of Art	**Participants**
Theatre, Music	Youth-at-risk

> "*Take Flight* is a great reminder of the power that lies in the people, that lies in their stories, that lies in the voice, and we need to give them avenues and outlets to explore their voice. Because they can do so many great things, we just have to listen."
>
> — Jasmin Wong, Drama Instructor

T'ang Quartet (from left: Ng Yu-Ying, Ang Chek Meng, Leslie Tan and Lionel Tan) performing a classical music piece for the Singapore Girls' Home.

Expressing initial hesitation and skepticism, the girls were quiet and reserved at the beginning of the programme. "I was doing my N-levels and it was actually very difficult juggling, because this programme took place three to four times a week. I wasn't really interested," reflected one girl. After a couple of sessions, however, the girls changed their minds and started taking part proactively.

To encourage the girls to open up, the team of artists played music and drama games with them, and introduced to them new artistic vocabulary. This enabled the instructors and girls to share a common language during their workshops to create their final performance.

Guided by musician Mervin Wong's expertise in electronic sounds, the music instructors — Lionel Tan, Mervin Wong and Rachel Ho — encouraged the girls to experiment with various parameters of sound. Besides getting to play around with instruments such as the piano and the guitar, familiar everyday objects ranging from trash bags to egg cartons were used to create sounds as well. They learnt about the foley art process and used these regular items creatively. This got them curious and eased them into the working process which saw them producing, writing and making their own music.

Eventually, the girls also came up with their own rap and arrangement of pop songs. This allowed them to showcase their personalities and different elements of music that they were interested in.

The girls also brainstormed ideas and themes, and wrote their own scripts to accompany these music workshops. These were done during drama workshops led by Jasmin Wong, together with assistant instructor and producer Yelyn Yeo, who guided the girls in creating and performing an original play. Using the fairytale Cinderella as a reference, the girls took charge of the entire creative process.

Jasmin explained the extent to which the girls owned the project: "It was basically a devising process and the girls were in charge every step of the way.

Lionel Tan sharing how music can become the narrative in silent movies.

From the kind of story they wanted to stage and how they wanted to present it, they made the decisions. It was all up to them. Within two sessions, they had the story out and we were ready to go."

The staff of Singapore Girls' Home shared, "Trust was built after the sessions went on and the youths routinely shared aloud their thoughts, emotions and struggles. They also shared their hopes and aspirations which were in turn translated into the storyline of the play." As their scripts were derived from personal stories and experiences, the girls developed a strong sense of ownership for their project, staying committed to new and challenging tasks such as memorising the script, even while studying for exams.

The programme's emphasis on the autonomy of the girls was pivotal to its transformative impact. "After observing the programme, we discovered hidden strengths and talents of the youths which we did not know about previously. Many of them have a flair for singing and acting. With constant affirmation and encouragement, the youths were able to gain greater confidence and develop their potential," the staff reflected.

The staff also observed that the girls developed teamwork and collaboration skills from this project, supporting one another through the process. The team found it heartwarming to watch the girls grow and could gradually let them work independently without any facilitation. By the time the girls performed for their audience which comprised of their parents, staff and friends, they could effectively juggle the musical and theatrical aspects of producing a performance, including songwriting, playwriting, props and wardrobe management, creating live soundscapes, performing music and acting.

Various sections of their script were paired with live sound effects, creating unified scenes supplemented with soundscapes. Lionel said, "It was so nice to see the instructors just standing around on the performance day as the girls ran the entire show."

Audience members at the final showcase also received programme leaflets which included a special section on the girls' aspirations. It was through this that one of the girls shared her dream of studying Psychology with her mother, and was happy

To Wander, a creative piece created and performed by Mervin Wong and Jingyun Ng for the Singapore Girls' Home.

to learn that her mother was supportive of her. As similar conversations were sparked among the families present, the girls were able to express their plans for the future and deepen their relationships with their families.

The programme's positive impact on these relationships was apparent on the day of the showcase, and Rachel shared: "I was privileged to be part of the music performance, so I could look at the faces of the audience. It was so nice to see all the parents looking very proud of their daughters and I think that's the best part of the performance."

The staff reaffirmed this sentiment and shared that after witnessing *Take Flight*, they were able to see how the arts could be used to evoke deep reflection, stimulate creativity and foster strong bonds. The experience of making music and developing their own narrative also helped the girls to pay attention to their inner self, as well as develop empathy by seeing things from another person's point of view.

Rachel Ho, music instructor, opening up the possibilities of what sounds a plastic bag could mimic.

Participants creating sound effects with everyday objects to complement their storyline.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Being open-minded

Although initially nervous about working with the girls, who had little to no experience in the arts, the team went into the project with an open mind and a collaborative spirit. Once they got to know each other, the team found that the girls' stories added a new layer to the creation process. Being quick learners, the girls also took charge of their own creation process after picking up skills from the instructors. This positive attitude and open-mindedness helped the team work well with the girls, without unnecessary presumptions about what they could or could not do.

Building relationships

Instead of adopting a student-teacher approach, the team emphasised the importance of building a relationship with them as friends, listening and actively guiding them to make personal creative decisions. It was a collaborative environment driven by the girls instead of a typical classroom or hierarchical setting. Through this approach and with the help of ice-breaker games, the girls eventually started actively taking charge of the process while feeling comfortable enough to ask the instructors for guidance when necessary.

The Community Theatre

Empowering the Community to Make Its Own Choices

2015 – Present | By Beyond Social Services

OVERVIEW

About the Project

The Community Theatre is an initiative by Beyond Social Services that rallies youths from rental flats and different backgrounds to co-create shows with each other. These performances tell the life stories of children and families from low-income backgrounds, and invite audiences to share their thoughts as well. Performed at different rental housing neighbourhoods, the shows aim to strengthen community bonds, and encourage audiences to contribute their time, energy and resources to their own communities.

The Community Theatre also collaborates with other groups such as ArtsWok Collaborative, an arts-based community development organisation, to showcase the work of these young people.

Project Aims

- Provide a safe, creative platform for youths from different backgrounds
- Give voice to community members from all demographics

Types of Art
Applied Theatre

Participants
Underprivileged youths

"The Community Theatre is a gentle way of engaging people in conversations about the well-being of disadvantaged children and their families."

— Izzaty Ishak, Community Worker

A forum theatre performance titled *Sayang* (2016) held in Whampoa Community Centre.
(Photo Credit: Beyond Social Services)

In the words of Ranganayaki Thangavelu, Beyond Social Services' Deputy Executive Director, the organisation believes that "any social issue is for the community to gather around and come up with their own solutions. It's not simply a problem for an external expert to fix."

This inspired the formation of The Community Theatre, with facilitators Izzaty Ishak and Afriyanto Ayub working closely with the communities mainly based in neighbourhoods such as Lengkok Bahru, Ang Mo Kio, Lavender and Whampoa. The Community Theatre members mainly include youths from rental and purchased flats, as well as social workers and teachers.

Using theatre as a creative medium, the facilitators engage with the community through twice-weekly gatherings at enclosed community spaces, such as community centres and family service centres, to reflect on challenges faced by children and families from low-income backgrounds. Responding to these issues, the group then creates interactive performances that are held in open community spaces such as void decks and multi-purpose halls. The performances are toured to various rental flat neighbourhoods, serving as a way for the youths to share their experiences and creativity with their own communities, while audience members are also encouraged to contribute their own thoughts as well.

The creation of the performances begins with the group gathering to devise, rehearse and refine their original work. This phase consists of research, revision and rehearsals, and can take as long as three months, while creative decisions on sound, lights, set and costumes are made by the youths as well.

The works explore themes that come from the lived experiences and stories of the youths, and past performances have touched on teenage pregnancy, abusive

An Interactive Theatre performance titled *Tangled*. (Photo Credit : Digital Media Crew from Temasek Polytechnic)

relationships, and 'parentification' — when a child is obliged to act as a parent to his own parents.

To introduce the topic, audience members get to view the set and props before the actual show. This gives them a glimpse of the characters' inner lives and backgrounds, which will influence how the themes play out during the performance.

Typically, the performance employs Forum Theatre, where the audience has the power to interact with the actors, and to stop and change the story. They can raise their hands to share their thoughts, or take the place of any character to bring about a new conclusion. This gives the community an opportunity to have a conversation, reflect on different perspectives, and reassure individuals that they are not alone.

While providing such a space for community conversations to take place, facilitators such as Izzaty and Afri are there to ensure that everyone is able to speak their mind freely without facing judgement — that they may be vulnerable and trust the community space. Izzaty refers to the team as "gatekeepers of emotional boundaries" — they constantly check in with the audience if they are comfortable with sharing. The facilitators are there to ask, "Shall we stop here? How is everyone feeling about carrying on?", so that the community is able to effectively pace themselves, build resilience and keep learning from each other's experiences without burning out.

A performance by The Community Theatre entitled *Block Party* as part of M1 Peer Pleasure Theatre Festival 2019 presented by ArtsWok Collaborative, in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay.
(Photo Credit: ArtsWok Collaborative)

> Any social issue is for the community to gather around and come up with their own solutions.
>
> – Ranganayaki Thangavelu, Beyond Social Services' Deputy Executive Director

This task of facilitation is also undertaken by various community workers and volunteers outside of the theatre, which continues the conversation after the performance so that positive action plans can be made by the community itself. This brings otherwise disparate groups of people together, and encourages them to take ownership of their community and neighbourhood.

Izzaty recalled a performance on the topic of family conflict where a nine-year-old child intervened. He wanted to stop the father in the performance from slapping the mother by shouting "Stop!" at him. When he finally managed to carry out his chosen action after some deliberation, the facilitator asked him why he took time to do so. The child responded, "I was scared of what would happen to me? And I didn't know if I could do it." This displayed to the rest of the audience the fear children face when observing a fight between their parents. A mother then stood up to share her experience of an argument she had with her husband, where her son similarly shouted at her to stop. She then went on to advise the children present to not be afraid to stop a fight, because it only shows that they care about their parents and their family.

Izzaty explained that it is a challenge getting audiences to watch shows since there usually isn't any theatre in HDB common areas. However, it becomes rewarding when the residents turn up, because they do respond to shows that they can relate to. "It was quite inspiring because I think people

M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival 2019 presented by ArtsWok Collaborative, in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. (Photo Credit: ArtsWok Collaborative)

responded by not just wanting to participate, but also with anger, saying, hey, that should not happen in our community," said Izzaty.

During the post-show segment, The Community Theatre encourages audiences to write reflection letters in the shoes of a character. All these letters are selected and combined by actors, culminating in a closing monologue in the post-show discussion to conclude the session. This gives the audience who may not be comfortable voicing out their thoughts to write them down and have their opinions heard as well.

Through it all, the community gathers to participate and be a part of this self-directed conversation, with them being very much in-charge of how the session turns out. As Ranganayaki puts it: "I think the basic premise is that when there is a social issue, it's an opportunity for the community to gather around and try to discuss how to work it out because they know their own situations best."

M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival 2019 presented by ArtsWok Collaborative, in collaboration with Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. (Photo Credit: ArtsWok Collaborative)

BEYOND THE WORK

Reflections from the working process

Cultivating a safe space and strong community

Afri stressed that everyone's opinions are given due attention and respect in The Community Theatre sessions. In valuing a variety of perspectives across demographics, a safe space is created for youths to share their personal struggles and voice their thoughts, and children are even encouraged to role-play as adults onstage to explore alternate points of view.

When asked what differentiates The Community Theatre from other social services, Izzaty emphasised that the diversity of the community makes it special. The mutual support and care among the community members makes the group like a family. Older members have taken greater ownership of the theatre group — beyond suggesting activity ideas and instructing the younger ones, they also share the collective responsibility for each other's well-being within and outside of the theatre space. By growing these support networks, The Community Theatre fulfills its ultimate purpose of strengthening the community.

Sustainability of the project

This project is not a one-off event but a long-term programme. It offers youths a community that they look forward to being in, and a place to discuss social issues. As Afri shared, "People come and people go, but you have to keep the idea and the symbol of this group going."

To sustain the project, past participants become long-term volunteers, taking on leadership roles to support the younger ones. Even those who move to another neighbourhood still choose to travel back to keep participating in the theatre sessions. This grows the group and keeps The Community Theatre going in the long run.

Unseen: Constellations

Nurturing the Artistic Potential of the Vision Impaired

2014 – 2016 | By Alecia Neo

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Unseen: Constellations is a two-year programme done with seven students from Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School who live with vision impairment. This programme is a platform for them to explore their future selves through a creative process led by artist Alecia Neo and a team of dedicated mentors.

The programme culminated in an exhibition presented from 18 March to 17 April 2016 at Objectifs. It also kickstarted Unseen Art Initiatives, a non-profit arts platform that harnesses the creativity in individuals, communities and the living environment to make art and empower the under-reached.

Project Aims

- Challenge and disrupt established perceptions about life
- Give voice to the community living with vision impairment

Types of Art
Visual Arts, Performing Arts

Participants
Students living with vision impairment

"Art can function as a powerful means towards reconciliation. In my work, I have always been motivated to collaborate and work with non-mainstream groups, for I see that individuals often possess much more potential and possibilities than they are perceived to. This work wants to challenge and disrupt established perceptions about life, providing opportunities to critique what has been normalised, and provoke the audience into reimagining a future from dreams."

— Alecia Neo, Visual Artist

String Theory of Friendship (2016). A mixed media artwork by Adelyn Koh, guided by mentor Sarah Ismail.

Walking into the *Unseen: Constellations* exhibition at Objectifs, viewers could experience a variety of works done by seven vision impaired students and their mentors over the course of two years. Centred on the students' dreams and aspirations, there were music videos about friendship and discrimination, an audio storybook featuring a blind criminal investigator, and even a proposal for an alternative orphanage.

These works were the final presentations of the students who were each taken under the wing of a professional that works within the field of their dream vocation.

This is exactly what inspired artist Alecia Neo to found Unseen Art Initiatives: the opportunity to empower communities to take charge of their own stories and to share their perspectives the way they choose to.

On the importance of *Unseen: Constellations* and how it aims to bridge communities within society, Alecia said, "I believe this project has a voice that is not only important to the community living with vision impairment; it is also critical for society to be aware of its impact upon all of those who exist within it. This is not just a project about blindness; it is a project about rejuvenation and learning to see from a completely different perspective."

The programme included an eight-day creative workshop where the participants had a chance to role-play their future selves. This was a space where they had the freedom to explore their aspirations before embarking on the mentorship with their chosen mentor, whom they later met two to three times a month to learn and further develop their projects, working towards the final exhibition.

Participant John Danesh, who aspires to be a criminal psychologist, crafted and produced an elaborate murder mystery. He was paired with Peter Lim who works for Prison

Nurul Natasya Zain at Redlight Studios working on her original composition, *Protecting Star* (2015) with mentor Zaidi Sabtu-Ramli.

Fellowship Singapore and Dr. Majeed Khader who is Chief Psychologist at the Singapore Police Force.

Starring as the main protagonist in his film, he became a detective who relied on senses other than sight to crack the case. Through this programme, John observed court hearings, visited police headquarters and held public readings to receive feedback on his script, and incorporated these experiences into his final work.

For fellow participant Adelyn Koh who dreams of being a professional singer-songwriter, she decided to present three music videos for *Unseen: Constellations* under the guidance of singer-songwriter Sarah Ismail. These music videos showcased three original songs about the challenges of integration she faced in school, and how she turned to her close friends and family for support.

Adelyn shared, "I want the public to know that I have a passion for music and I'm not writing and singing just to raise funds for my condition. This also means that I can share my experience and life to the public and just express my views on friendship and life. Hoping that others will value what they have."

Unseen: Shift Lab Workshop with Dialogue in the Dark Malaysia, led by Alecia Neo, Musician Ng Chor Guan from Toccata Studio and theatre-makers Christopher Ling, Nandang Abdul Rahman, and Nicole-Ann Thomas from theatrethreesixty.

While the students had the opportunity to learn new skills and showcase their creations, the mentors found the experience fruitful as well. On mentoring Adelyn, Sarah shared: "The mentorship really became an extended friendship. Through it I got a glimpse into Adelyn's world and friends. All I did was mainly to help her understand the ways to shape these people, backstories and experiences into the language of the larger universe. The showcase was Adelyn coming full circle."

Music Video still, *Life is Beautiful* (2016) by Adelyn Koh Xinhui with mentor Sarah Ismail.

> "Today, more than ever, we find societies divided in such complicated ways. These conditions create lacunas that art finds its purpose within."
>
> – Alecia Neo

Sharda Harrison, who mentored Claire Teo, shared a similar sentiment, "Claire takes on her role as artist, leader, student and even mentor to me at times, with such zeal and compassion that I feel I have learnt as much, if not more from her. Pink Gajah also involves Sean Harrison, who works with videography and multimedia, who has been Claire's major guide — filming with her, creating songs and directing her as well. This process has shown me how to mentor someone by guiding them subtly into the art of creation where the sky is limitless." Sharda and Sean are part of Pink Gajah Theatre, which is an intercultural theatre company that focuses on educational drama programs to schools and devised theatre performances.

Claire, who aspires to be a professional musical actress, acted, directed and composed the music for her final works: three films that each explored love, danger and freedom. These themes were chosen because she felt that each was present in life and she wanted to show others her perspective on the matter. These films also reflected her occasional lapses into triple

Neo Kah Wee at his exhibition installation for *Unseen: Constellations.*

vision and night blindness. To recreate the effect of triple vision in this installation, viewers were made to pick between passages in her installation tent that each led to a different video.

On her artistic vision, Claire explained, "I'm on the road so if I take the wrong path, I might get killed. This is what I'm creating with the pitch black place and the audience has to choose a road no matter where it leads to; whether its freedom, love or danger, that will be just their fate. No matter where they go, they will end up in a danger room because I feel that danger is an element in life that cannot escape from. You have to embrace it."

Presently there is the Unseen Art Initiatives, which is a long-term art community engagement programme. Through art forms such as visual arts and performing arts, it aims to directly engage communities such as the seven students in *Unseen: Constellations* to become co-creators for future arts projects and showcases.

Alecia shared, "These workshops encourage the progress and professional development of artists living with disability and artists committed to working with communities." Workshops have been organised since 2018,

Video still from *Journey Through Army Life* by Neo Kah Wee, developed with mentors Loo Bin Hui during *Unseen: Constellations.*

conducted by artist-facilitators who are chosen based on their deep involvement with community arts and/or lived experience with disability. One such example is a charcoal drawing showcase titled *You And I* as part of the *Strangers* exhibition in 2018, that featured artworks done by 59 participants of their workshops.

Led by Kok Choon Choo, a visual artist living with vision impairment, a three-day workshop was conducted for 28 participants living with varying degrees of vision impairment. Since it was their first exposure to the medium of charcoal and pastels, they drew self-portraits as well as those of their fellow participants. They did so through the sense of touch. Participant Chandra Mohan said, "I haven't touched art since 1969, so this workshop brings back many fond memories from when I was in secondary school drawing. This introduction of new medium allows new ways of expression for me."

Opening up new opportunities for the vision impairment community, *Unseen: Constellations* will take future programmes further with more artist-facilitators and participants. These will not only leave an impact on those directly involved but on the audience as well.

As mentioned in Parliament by then-Nominated Member of Parliament, Kok Heng Leun, "As we move towards the future, we should encourage more of such deep and engaging work. The depth and process will result in profound learning experiences for the community that is creating and participating in the process, and will also result in artistic work that is aesthetically rich. It moves the audience, changing their sensibilities, by making the invisible visible and the unheard heard."

Unseen: Constellations workshop involving John Danesh, who was mentored by Peter Lim and Dr. Majeed Khader.

Conversation Circle Workshop session by Dallon Au and mentor Allen Lim.

Streaks of Red (2016) by Claire Teo with mentors Sharda & Sean Harrison.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Having curiosity

The curiosity and willingness to discover how to include new individuals into art-making processes led Alecia to found Unseen. During a month-long Taipei art residency in 2012, she first collaborated with vision impaired individuals to create a one-on-one photography workshop for six selected participants. Through that process, she realised how much potential they had and how much they could do.

Initially a pursuit that was part of her own art practice, Unseen evolved into an exhibition and finally a collective that actively carries out workshops for the community.

Finding like-minded collaborators

For the Unseen workshops and mentorships, Alecia worked with several creatives such as theatre practitioner Sharda Harrison, painter Kok Choon Choo and sculptor Victor Tan Wee Tar. These collaborations led to fruitful experiences because each artist shared a common vision to work with the community and make the arts accessible.

Currently, through the Unseen platform, Alecia is working with *Unseen: Constellations* alumni and emerging performance artists Claire Teo and Kira Lim to develop a new performance project with youths living with vision impairment.

Giving Voice to Seniors

In a rapidly ageing society, many of our seniors continue to be involved in a variety of activities. With the advent of social media platforms, where they may perhaps be less visible, these arts activities ensure that we continue to hear and learn from them.

Here and Now

Rediscovering Oneself Through Drama

2018 | By Chang Mei Yee

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Using applied theatre techniques, 10 workshops were conducted for 12 beneficiaries from St. Joseph's Home with moderate dementia. This project worked with the principles of improvisation drama and reminiscence work, which involved sharing memories with others to help generate a stronger sense of community and self.

Improvisation drama sessions took place once every two weeks while reminiscence sessions took place once every week.

Subsequently, the artist co-created improvisational scenes together with them, based on their memories and ideas.

Project Aims

- Foster a sense of achievement and joy among seniors
- Support seniors in maintaining their sense of identity

Types of Art
Applied Theatre

Participants
Seniors with dementia

"I understand from research studies that the arts plays a positive role in maintaining the psychological and social well-being of people with dementia. I wanted to try using drama to engage this specific group of elderly."

— Chang Mei Yee, Artist/Lecturer

A participant shows how he flies a plane as a pilot.

Chang Mei Yee has always been interested to work with the elderly through the combination of reminiscence work and applied drama techniques. Having worked with a group of active seniors over a few years, she witnessed how they appreciated the experience, spurring her to expand her practice in engaging people with dementia.

"In Singapore, reminiscence work is not new in senior activity centres or nursing homes. However, the combination of reminiscence work and drama seems rare," Mei Yee observed. To make this project happen, she did thorough research into dementia, the profiles of the youth volunteers, residents and their group dynamics, as well as the space she would be working with.

Since dementia can easily cause someone to progressively lose their concept of time, events and people, Mei Yee decided to use drama as a vehicle to instill more confidence in the seniors while letting them celebrate their identities.

The choice of applied theatre worked well, since it is a practice in which the engagement of the participants is key, and their own contributions form the core of the work. Mei Yee elaborated, "I provide a context but the participants will always chart the direction of the session. The participants are given the freedom to explore the stimuli, to create their own narratives and respond to each other."

The average age of the seniors in this project was 70 years old. They are all mobile either independently, with a mobility aid or with physical assistance. Regardless of the range of profiles, all of them enjoyed play-acting during the sessions with many voluntarily taking on roles in the stories the artist created. Props and familiar objects such as photographs and hats were also used to help them physically connect to the drama. The seniors were observed to naturally assume the various roles in a story when given a prop to cue them on how to behave and act.

The artist sets the context to the drama.

Interacting with one another with little facilitation, they resolved issues together with ease in the drama. Scenarios included that of a parent marrying their child off, and in other sessions, seniors were also invited to role-play different professions such as pilots and policemen.

One particular story centred around advising a young girl, played by a volunteer, on her career choices and the various prospects she had to consider. In this case, even their quieter seniors came alive. Although they may have been slow to respond verbally, they made eye contact with the artist and volunteers while engaging with the activity. They reminisced about their own jobs and shared stories of their working years with such enthusiasm that the volunteers too could feel their passion.

When asked to help cut and style the hair of the character in an improvisation drama, one senior did so confidently since she used to be a hairdresser when she was young. She combed and parted the character's hair before securing it with a pin. Another senior who was an air stewardess relived her career by welcoming passengers onto the flight during an improvisation drama.

Chit-chat sessions enable the youth volunteers to find out more about the participants.

May Wong, Head of Allied Health Services at St. Joseph's Home, shared, "We even had residents who normally have short attention spans and no interest in other activities, join in when the artist and her volunteers came. I think the medium and the new faces provided a fresh way to connect our elderly with people from the community."

Besides the collaboration and support given by St. Joseph's Home, youth volunteers from Singapore Polytechnic's Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology

Youth volunteers and a staff member engaging the participants with pictures as stimuli.

programme were also integral to the programme as they allowed for more personalised attention to each senior, and were able to provide additional support through strong facilitation and translation capabilities.

"There was a good ratio of almost 1:1 volunteer or staff to senior. The involvement of volunteers and staff helped in translating instructions to different languages and also in caring for the seniors' physical needs, such as resting and toilet breaks." Mei Yee also shared that the residents had a good time throughout the drama process because of their interactions with the youth volunteers.

Student volunteer Pearlyn Goh said, "It was initially a challenge to coax the seniors to share but through using the group's responses to transform their past memories into a piece of drama right here and now,

> "We even had residents who normally have short attention spans and no interest in other activities, join in when the artist and her volunteers came."
>
> — May Wong, Head of Allied Health Services at St. Joseph's Home

A participant takes on the role of a father whose son is getting married.

they all smiled as they connected through similar experiences during the group activities." The youths' involvement began simply as facilitation for the sessions, but friendships eventually blossomed despite the age gap of 50 years. Importantly, these relationships brought much joy and connected the seniors to a larger community outside the nursing home.

A staff member engages a participant using objects and pictures as stimuli provided by the artists.

BEYOND THE WORK
Reflections from the working process

Understand your participant's profile

To carry out this particular project, the artist did intensive research into dementia as well as profiles of the group she was working with. Some topics she looked into were how other artists used different art forms with people with dementia, as well as the different types and stages of dementia.

This ensured that she knew exactly what activities were suited to their needs and that she was prepared for any outcome, allowing for a fruitful experience for herself and participants. The information gathered helped her to map out key considerations and goals for the workshop.

Readiness of the volunteers

Mei Yee also ensured that young volunteers who were involved, who may not all have had opportunities to encounter or work with people with dementia, were briefed by the residence unit before the programme began. This helped the volunteers be better prepared to deal with behavioural inconsistencies of the residents. For example, a senior might be cheerful and enthusiastic in one session but reluctant and moody in the next. Sometimes these changes could take place within a single session, so the youth volunteers had to learn to expect the unexpected.

magic mARkers

Digitally Drawing Childhoods and Past Memories

2018 | By Lee Sze-Chin, Woon Tien Wei and Nigel Chen

OVERVIEW

About the Project

Fifteen seniors worked with augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) tools over seven sessions through the months of May to July. Under the guidance of three artists, they learnt the basics of drawing and digital sketching, layering on AR digital tools, and 360°/VR photography and videography. With these new skills, the seniors conceptualised their own stories and worked towards digitally augmenting their experience of a place of their youth.

This project was commissioned by the National Arts Council for Silver Arts 2018, an annual festival dedicated to celebrating seniors and creative ageing.

Project Aims

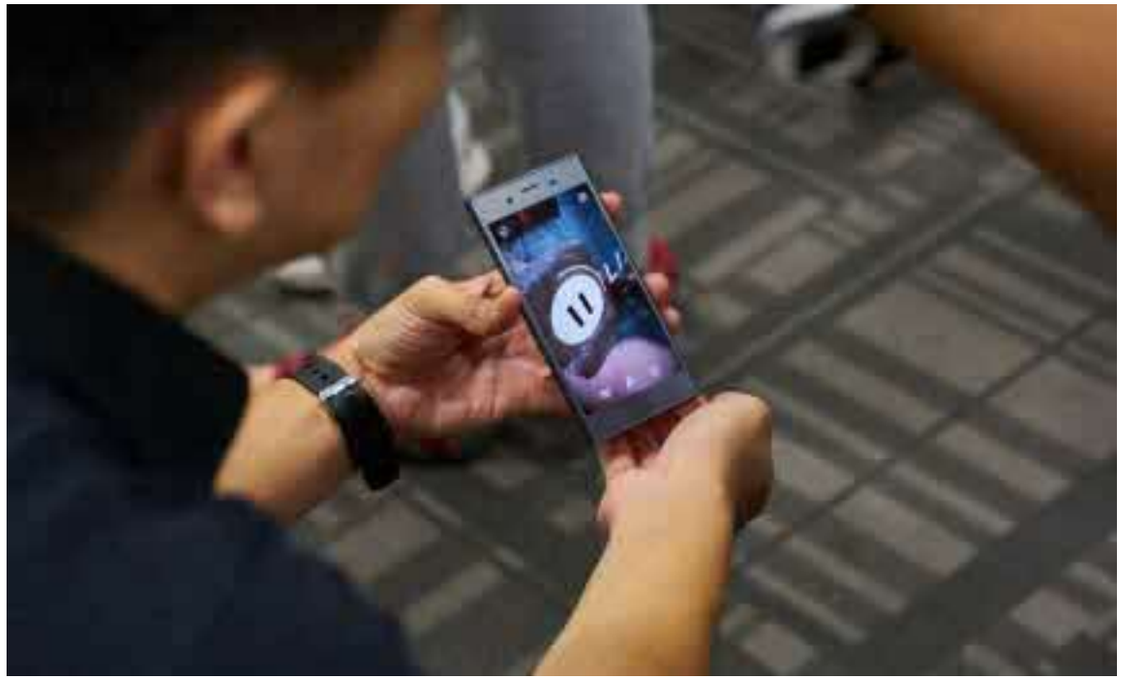
- Enrich experiences of childhood places through the use of AR and VR
- Empower seniors to become active contributors and communicators of their own stories

Types of Art
Digital Art

Participants
Seniors

"I wondered what it would be like to use digital tools to 'annotate' and tell the story of my childhood to someone else who would be able to experience my childhood in its actual environment, but in an enhanced (augmented) way."

— Lee Sze-Chin, Artist



Demonstrating the use of augmented reality on a smartphone.

In today's digital age, tools such as AR and VR bring about a whole new world of experiences and possibilities. "Technology seems to be a realm for the young, especially 'new' technology. We were interested in how we can provide a platform for the silver generation to access new technology, and explore how they will interpret and use it," shared artist Woon Tien Wei.

Through Silver Arts 2018, 15 seniors came together to explore this new medium. Over the course of seven workshops, the artists Lee Sze-Chin, Woon Tien Wei and Nigel Chen invited the seniors to share a place of their childhood or youth with the rest of the participants. They were then guided to use AR and VR as tools to convey their experiences, with each participant working towards a final piece on their chosen place.

magic mARkers was based on *Virtually Home*, Sze-Chin's Silver Arts project in 2017, where digital media provided seniors common ground to connect with one another through their stories.

For this *magic mARkers* project, Sze-Chin had revisited a childhood haunt to gather inspiration. Sparking many fond memories, the visit led him to decide on youth and childhood as a theme to explore for *magic mARkers*. He elaborated, "I was walking through Redhill and Bukit Merah, and it reminded me of the time when I was young and visiting the shops with my parents. I wondered what it would be like to use digital tools to 'annotate' and tell the story of my childhood to someone else who would be able to experience my childhood in its actual environment, but in an enhanced (augmented) way. This eventually led to the use of AR technologies when Google ARCore was released."

The immersive quality of the technology made it an appropriate medium for this experiential project. Many senses are engaged in a VR setting, where sight and hearing work in tandem to bring one into a different environment that entirely surrounds the person. This complete immersion brought the seniors into a

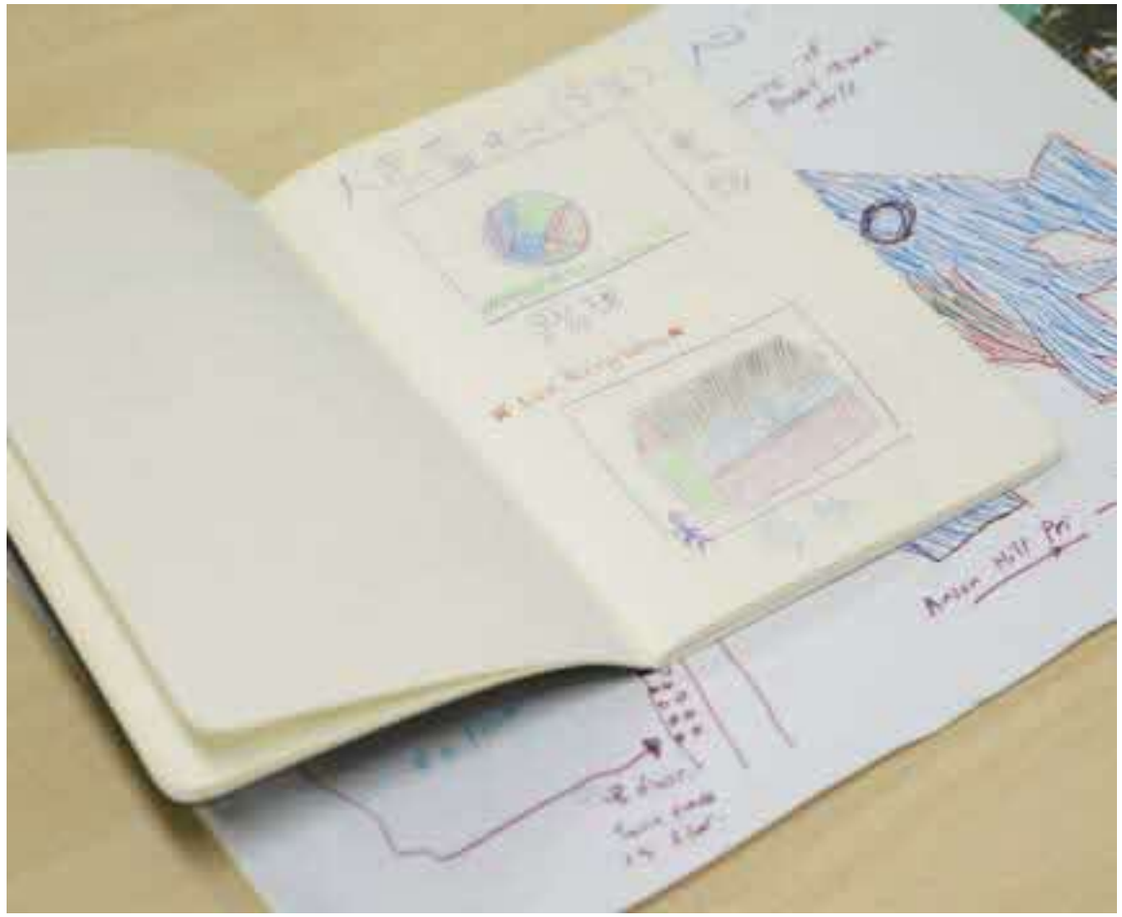
Participants working on storyboarding and the narratives for their childhood stories.

whole new world of their choosing, which connected to their personal memories and childhood. Tien Wei recalled, "When one of the participants first experienced VR, he was watching a 360° video of a Japanese flea market. He watched for a longer time than the rest of the participants and I couldn't forget his smile. When someone asked him how the experience was like, he grinned and said, 'I went to Japan'."

As the seniors explored personal topics such as childhood places through these new digital tools, they were slowly guided to use technology to bring some of their memories to life. Participant Liew Yin Wan especially liked sharing what she remembered of Singapore's history and heritage, and reflected, "I have an innate fear of technology. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised that I managed to complete this little 'production' that I could call my own." Besides enjoying the process, most participants were also happy that they picked up new digital skills, and were confident in putting them to good use after the programme. This confidence could also translate into more ease in engaging with digital tools in daily life such as paying bills online and using digital applications on their mobile devices.

Participants were supported by facilitators who helped them record and craft their stories using various mediums.

To make these workshops happen, all three artists had to draw on their knowledge of AR and VR technology. Nigel happened to be working on the application of AR technologies and was keen to explore its usage in art. Sze-Chin suggested focusing on AR since Google ARCore had just been released. This tool allowed 3-dimensional objects to be created and placed against a real-life background, just with the use of a smartphone. Ren Ci @ Ang Mo Kio (Nursing Home) and Ngee Ann Secondary School offered the use of their spaces for the workshops, while Ngee Ann also had their students join in as assistants to the seniors. Sony came in to support the project with an equipment loan of 20 smartphones. With accessible technology and the support of community and commercial partners, they were able to realise the project by capitalising on available resources.



Preliminary sketches for object-based storytelling with augmented reality.

The immersive quality of the technology made it an appropriate medium for this experiential project.

"Some apps the participants got to use were a 3D Creator app from Sony, various audio recording apps, Insta360 Air and Insta360 One software and the VideoPad video editor. They surfed the internet for suitable 3D assets from the Google Poly Store, and also used the Tilt Brush and Google Blocks software on the Oculus Rift to create some of their objects from their childhood. Nigel then helped to compile the digital assets for the AR projects using the Unity software," said Sze-Chin, describing their process.

A participant trying his hand at using Tilt Brush and Google Blocks software on the Oculus Rift.

Besides the artists, facilitators were also brought in to provide one-on-one guidance so the participants could grasp the technology more quickly. The facilitators aided the participants in navigating the app and other technical aspects.

This was also a fitting follow-up from Sze-Chin's *Virtually Home* project, since some of the facilitators were participants from the 2017 project. Facilitators were able to revise their skills and share the knowledge they had gained with a new group of seniors, creating, in Tien Wei's words, "a space for the silver generation to give back to the community."

Many facilitators expressed delight at being able to interact with and learn alongside their peers. Facilitator Derek Thong found this to be a great opportunity to hone his workshop facilitation skills and to meet others with similar interests. A younger facilitator, Tan Chao Min, found the theme of childhood useful in connecting with seniors. Speaking of the senior she partnered for the project, she shared: "He was really excited to tell me about his old home, his *kampung* and the cows he used to rear in his *kampung*. He invited me to improve on his artwork too. I felt that it was an inclusive and collaborative process which we both enjoyed."

Sze-Chin brainstorming with a facilitator and participant on the flow of her story.

BEYOND THE WORK

Reflections from the working process

Adjusting the programme according to participants' needs

Throughout *magic mARkers*, the artists and facilitators had regular discussions after the workshops. Instead of sticking to what was originally planned in terms of allocation of resources and content produced, they constantly tweaked the workshops to make them more engaging and educational.

For example, the workshops hosted an open group and a group from Ren Ci @ Ang Mo Kio. The Ren Ci @ Ang Mo Kio group needed more facilitators due to the profile and physical condition of the seniors. Most of the workshops ensured one-on-one interactions between the facilitators and the participants. This ratio allowed the participants to provide constant feedback on what they needed throughout the art-making process. The resources could then be better allocated to meet these needs accordingly.

Working with community partners

The artists brought in community partners to help meet the changing demands of the workshops. Ren Ci @ Ang Mo Kio's programme coordinator Lisa Wee expanded the group of participants by encouraging more seniors to participate, while Ben Khor, Ngee Ann Secondary School's lead art teacher, arranged for his students to help facilitate some workshops. As the community stakeholders were invested in the project, the logistical and manpower support they provided allowed the project to run smoothly despite its shifting needs.

Mapping Our Lives

Mindmapping to Rediscover The Self

2018 | By Michael Lee

OVERVIEW

About the Project

As part of Silver Arts 2018, eight workshops were conducted for 11 seniors to create personal mindmaps that were inspired by autobiographical art, self-observation and museum field trips. This explored the personal and private, inviting the participants to challenge and rediscover themselves while engaging in art-making.

A final exhibition of the seniors' artworks was held at the National Library.

Project Aims

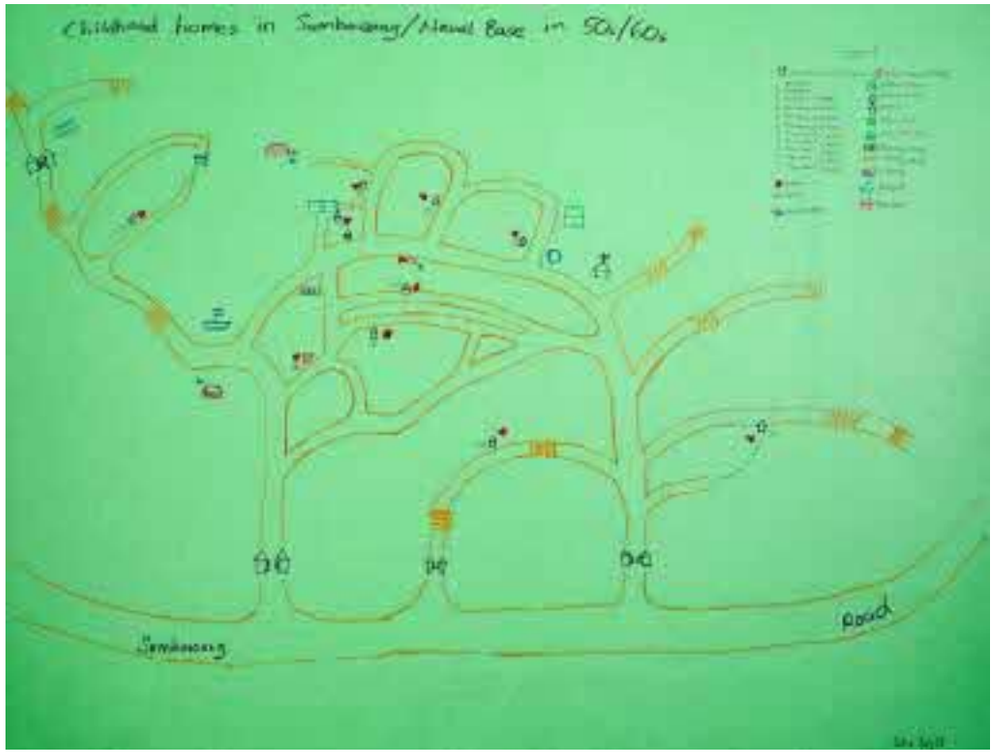
- Encourage seniors to explore their various roles in life
- Encourage the sharing of personal stories
- Enable self-expression and self-discovery

Types of Art
Visual Arts

Participants
Seniors

"Revealing unexpected connections, mindmapping helps us see things that are easily overlooked, by forging new links between previously unrelated ideas. *Mapping Our Lives* is about finding meaningful connections as well as surprises from their experiences, aspirations and the art-making process."

— Michael Lee, Artist



My Childhood Home (2018) is Edna Lim's topographical map of Sembawang Naval Base in the 1950s and 60s, where her parents worked and lived consecutively in some 11 homes of their British Naval Officers' families. (Photo credit: Ng Wu Gang)

Most of the participants who took part in Michael Lee's workshops had art-making experience in various forms such as painting and sculpting. To make this project different and more interesting, he decided to introduce them to a new creative tool of expression — the mindmap.

"Mindmapping is a medium of expression that showcases my interest in urban memory and fiction," shared Michael, "Sometimes through daily life, the personal gets lost but I think these senior participants have stories to tell. I want them to tell their personal stories in their own way, rather than in a way they feel they should."

He referenced maps such as palm lines and MRT maps to make the concept more accessible and familiar. Through the workshops, the seniors tried their hand at different mapping exercises such as modifying existing maps, and hand-drawing their own mindmaps and charts using their memory and imagination. They also got to map their preferences, needs, desires, and anxieties, and create statistical charts of daily encounters.

In the first workshop, everyone got to know one another through a simple mapping exercise: filling in 16 prompt boxes about their emotions and sharing them with the group. Senior participant Florence Foo got the ball rolling by openly sharing about her health condition, breaking the ice for the participants. By the end of the day, there were hugs given and more forthcoming conversations shared about their family lives and interests.

The second workshop saw the seniors drawing 24-hour clocks to represent their routines in a span of a week. This included

Benny Ong (rightmost) shared what he learnt about himself upon completing the exercise of recording his hourly activities the past week, as his workshop mates look on. (Photo credit: Samuel Chng)

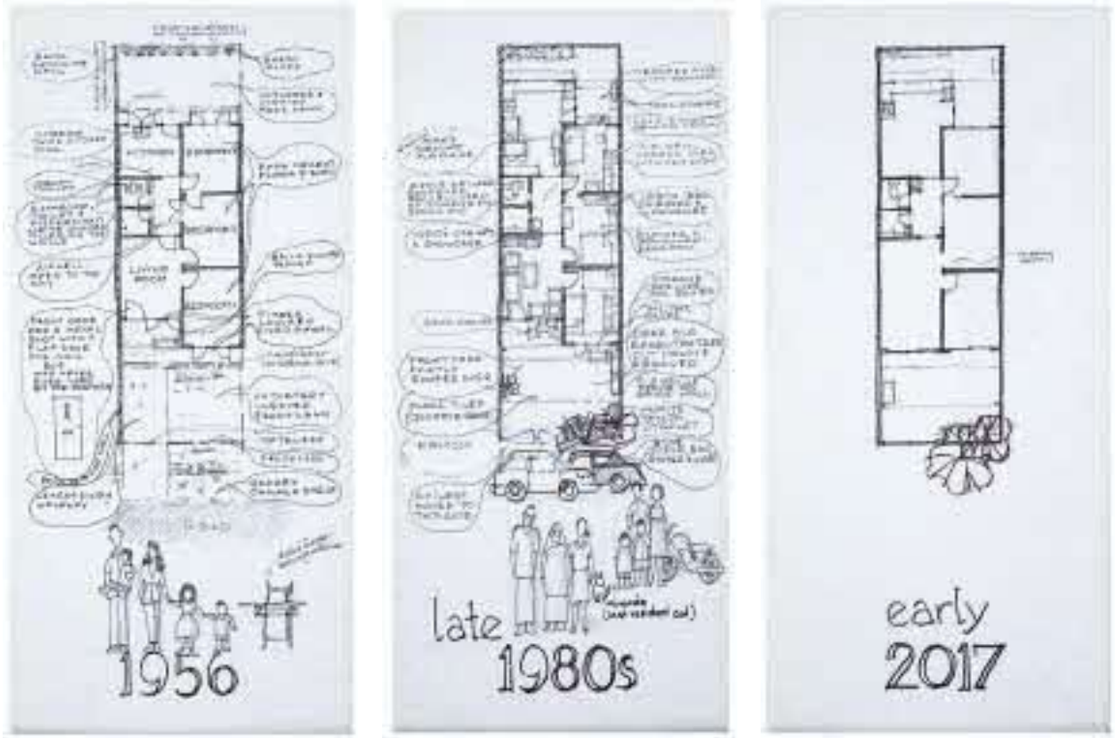
indicating when they woke, went to bed and what they did in between. Although skeptical of its purpose at first, the seniors came to an awareness of themselves through the activity. After looking at his own clock, one participant even remarked: "This does not match what I want to do. I've been sleeping too much."

Through such reflection and group sharing, the programme encouraged the seniors to rediscover and express themselves through relatable themes such as childhood homes, activities they enjoyed, and family trees.

> "Sometimes through daily life, the personal gets lost but I think these senior participants have stories to tell."
>
> – Michael Lee

Friendships grew as personalities started to come through the different exercises over the course of the workshops. In one activity, the seniors mindmapped one another's personal objects, and candidly shared their perspectives. Michael recalled, "You can sense that people found it both challenging and interesting. Some comments were very celebratory while others were more judgmental with a list of reasons why." Due to the sharing and icebreaker games that had taken place in the introductory sessions, the seniors had warmed up to each other and all felt safe enough to voice their honest opinions.

Besides the hands-on workshops, the seniors visited the National Museum Singapore to find out what an art exhibition entailed and to get inspiration for their own artworks. Although initially anxious about the prospect of a final showcase, the visit showed them various ways of presenting art, and spurred them to create something meaningful for themselves and others. Most of the participants attended the subsequent workshops and one-on-one artist consultations well-prepared with various project ideas, gaining the confidence needed to create works for public display.



Rohaya Mustapha created *No. 50* (2018), a series of 10 detailed floor plans (3 pictured here) of her parents' home where she spent 20.5 years of her initial life and feels forever connected to through memory and imagination. (Photo credit: Ng Wu Gang)

Through the art-making process, *Mapping Our Lives* invited the seniors to venture out of their comfort zones and just be creative. During the final exhibition at the National Library, most of the participants actually displayed more than one work, and each work was unique. Ranging from diaries to mixed media artworks, the exhibition showcased sixteen works in total about childhood, aspirations and their daily lives.

In her infographic, *A Peranakan Matriarch and Her International Descendents* (2018), Khor Poh Kim traced members of her family with inter- ethnic marriages, starting from her grandmother and spanning six generations across the globe. (Photo credit: Ng Wu Gang)

(L-R) Florence Foo and Olive Chern were amused by Edna Lim's analysis of a fellow participant's personal object. (Photo credit: Samuel Chng)

Participant Khor Poh Kim (seated left) brought her sister (seated right) to the Show-and-Tell session where she presented her partial family tree. (Photo credit: Samuel Chng)

Senior participant Khor Poh Kim reached out to distant relatives, some of whom she had never heard of, to help her with her family tree project. Titled *A Peranakan Matriarch and Her International Descendants*, it was a partial family tree done in digital print. The family members had helped her gather information on the various inter-ethnic marriages that spanned six generations. It also included the diverse nationalities of her grandmother's descendants.

Rohaya Mustapha, a retired architect, found herself discovering a new mode of expression. In her work titled *No. 50*, she drew different floor plans of how her old parents' home had evolved over the years. She said, "I usually see myself as communicating better in words and using language especially when I am talking about myself and my thoughts. But I feel like I grew somewhat from using drawing and indeed there are parts where I couldn't have expressed in words."

BEYOND THE WORK

Reflections from the working process

Trust the participants

Most activities for seniors are usually simplified, but they are able to gain much more when tasked with more challenging activities. Initially, the participants struggled with engaging in mixed media art and mapping out their childhood homes, as recollection was not a simple task. However, they managed to achieve fruitful results in the end, which included reconnecting with old family members and creating an artwork they were proud of.

By providing thorough support and giving participants the room to tackle arising challenges, more complex activities can be fulfilling for both the artist and participant.

Renewing a sense of self

Focusing on the art-making process, instead of what may be wrong or right, can empower participants to engage with art in ways that may surprise them. Senior participant Mary Agnes Ng initially struggled to draw and this made her feel insecure about what she can do artistically. She believed that she "could not make art". With encouragement, she employed tracing and colouring — techniques she was more comfortable with — and created a visual diary of 40 to 50 images of personal objects. She felt proud of her final work and gained a new perspective on her artistic abilities.

About the Projects and Artists

District 27 and District 18

P7:1SMA invites everyone to exist in a state of in-betweenness. Drawn into mystery and wonderment of grey voids in life, we create shared experiences that use the power of dance to question our belief systems and life's balance, in hopes of our contemporary works uplifting the wisdom and worldview of Malay philosophy to the international stage.

https://www.p71sma.com/district-27
https://www.p71sma.com/district18

Our Gallery at Taman Jurong

Taman Jurong Community Club has been a Node Partner under the National Arts Council's Arts and Culture Nodes Network since 2014. Our Gallery at Taman Jurong by Taman Jurong Community Arts and Culture Club is Singapore's first residential gallery featuring co-created artworks by established artists and residents.

Shophouse & Co (SHCO) is a placemaking studio that endeavours to create lovable places to live, work, and play. It does this by developing sustainable placemaking strategies; catalysing communities through creative programmes; and designing interventions that reimagines urban private and public spaces.

https://www.shophouseandco.com/ofgardensanddreams

Jumbo Fabrica

Sweet Tooth, Cake Theatrical Productions' education and outreach branch, creates and curates plays, performances, workshops, events and fun-filled experiences made especially for youths and communities. Celebrating stories, the wonders of the imagination and the spirit of creativity in every person, Sweet Tooth reaches out anywhere and everywhere, bringing the arts into the spaces and places where anyone and everyone can gather for a special artistic encounter, or a surprising journey or a boundless adventure of self-discovery and expression.

http://www.caketheatre.com/sweet-tooth/4576018251

Community Arts Residency at Stamford Arts Centre

Artist Duo is an art collective consisting of visual artists Joanne Lio and Karen Koh. Central to the art collective's artistic practice is their process-driven and co-creative approach when engaging with communities to encourage creative self-expression and self-discovery.

https://artsforall.sg/events/community-arts-residency-showcase-at-stamford-arts-centre-by-artist-duo.aspx

Pop-Up Noise: Soul Searching

Watch a place, its community and history stir the souls and imagination of 30 young artists. In this experimental edition of Pop-Up Noise co-curated by creative team Jalyn Han, Joseph Nair, and Xu Jingyi, contemporary artistic responses to Chinatown's rich stories are presented, ranging from visual art to interactive performances.

https://soulsearchingpopup.wordpress.com

Not in My Lifetime?

The Finger Players is one of Singapore's leading theatre companies, known for its visually and emotionally charged productions, and its signature style of puppetry. The Finger Players is a non-profit company with charity status.

Together with playwright Alvan Yap, director Tan Beng Tian joined performers Danial Bawthan, Evelyn Chye, Inch Chua, Myra Loke, Nix Sang, Shai, Timothy Nga and designers Choo Ying Tong, Lim Chin Huat and Woo E-Hui to create an accessible production for the under-reached community.

http://www.fingerplayers.com/not-in-my-lifetime

Take Flight

Take Flight believes in the transformative power of the arts. Through the use of music and drama, the team empowers programme participants to own their creative processes, decisions, and voice. This multi-disciplinary programme gives the youths space to explore their emotions, identities, and issues closest to their hearts. This team of artists consists of Lionel Tan from T'ang Quartet, Mervin Wong and Rachel Ho who share an expertise in music and sound. Meanwhile, Jasmin Wong and Yelyn Yeo share a passion for drama education and performance, working together with the team to introduce the arts to youths and communities.

https://artsforall.sg/resources/casestudy/take-flight-a-transformative-arts-programme.aspx

The Community Theatre

The Community Theatre is an initiative by Beyond Social Services that rallies volunteers from different walks of life to co-create a show that engages its audience to reflect on the social challenges faced by children and families from low-income backgrounds. It is a gentle way of engaging people in conversations for the well-being of disadvantaged children and their families in our community.

https://www.facebook.com/pg/thecommunitytheatrebss/about/

Unseen Art Ltd.

Working primarily with photography, video and participatory workshops, Alecia Neo develops long-term projects involving a variety of individuals and collaborators, overlooked communities and their spaces. Her work draws from ideas of mobility, reciprocity, caregiving and disability. She is founder of Unseen Arts Initiatives, a Singapore-based platform for differently-abled professionals and emerging artists. She is also co-founder and artist lead at Brack, a platform for socially-engaged artists in Southeast Asia.

https://alecia-neo.squarespace.com/unseen-constellations-2015

Here and Now

Chang Mei Yee is a senior lecturer, teaching applied drama at the School of Communication, Arts and Social Sciences at the Singapore Polytechnic. She has a special interest in working with senior citizens and their memories through Reminiscence Theatre projects.

https://www.facebook.com/reminiscencetheatre/

magic mARkers

The team, Lee Sze-Chin, Woon Tien Wei and Nigel Chen, for *magic mARkers* was formed in response to the growing possibilities of new technologies and how these could reframe art-making for different communities.

https://artsforall.sg/uploads/files/magicmARker_poster.pdf

https://szechinlee.wixsite.com/portfolio

Mapping Our Lives

Michael Lee researches urban memory and fiction, especially the contexts and implications of loss. He transforms his observations into diagrams, models, environments, events or texts. Among his curatorial projects is "what it is about when it is about nothing" (2015) held in Mizuma Gallery, Singapore.

http://michaellee.sg/archive/2019/4/20/mapping-our-lives-2018

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