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Must Art Have a 'Place'? Questioning the Power of the Digital Art-Scape

Jason David Luger |

Introduction

> *Artist: June 2 at 11.26pm:*
> 'To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.' - Raymond Williams.
>
> (Singaporean Artists' public *Facebook* Post)

Can the critical arts exist without 'place'?

There is an ongoing debate on 'place' and where it begins and ends; on the ways that cities exist in both material and immaterial forms, and thereby, how to locate and understand place as an

anchoring point amidst global flows (Massey; Merrifield). This debate extends to the global art-scape, as traditional conceptions of art and art-making attached to place require re-thinking in a paradigm where digital and immaterial networks, symbols and forums both complement and complicate the role that place has traditionally played (Luger, "Singaporean 'Spaces of Hope?'"). The digital art-scape has allowed for art-led provocations, transformations and disturbances to traditional institutions and gatekeepers (see Hartley's " Communication, Media, and Cultural Studies" concept of 'gatekeeper') of the art world, which often served as elite checkpoints and way-stations to artistic prominence. Still, contradictory and paradoxical questions emerge, since art cannot be divorced of place entirely, and 'place' often features as a topic, subject, or site of critical expression for art regardless of material or immaterial form. Critical art is at once place-bound and place-less; anchored to sites even as it transcends them completely.

This paper will explore the dualistic tension – and somewhat contradictory relationship – between physical and digital artistic space through the case study of authoritarian Singapore, by focusing on a few examples of art-activists and the way that they have used and manipulated both physical and digital spaces for art-making. These examples draw upon research which took place in Singapore from 2012-2014 and which involved interviews with, and observation of, a selected sample (30) of art-activists (or "artivists", to use Krischer's definition). Findings point to a highly co-dependent relationship between physical and digital art places where both offer unique spaces of possibility and limitations. Therefore, place remains essential in art-making, even as digital avenues expand and amplify what critical art-practice can accomplish.

Singapore's Place-Bound and Place-Less Critical Art-Scape

The arts in Singapore have a complicated, and often tense relationship with places such as the theatre, the gallery, and the public square. Though there has been a recent push (in the form of funding to arts groups and physical arts infrastructure) to make Singapore more of an arts and cultural destination (see Luger "The Cultural Grassroots and the Authoritarian City"), the Singaporean arts-scape remains bound by restrictions and limitations, and varying degrees of de facto (and de jure) censorship and self-policing. This has opened up spaces for critical art, albeit in sometimes creative and surprising forms. As explained to me by a Singaporean playwright,

> So they're [the state] making venues, as well as festival organizers, as well as theatre companies, to ...self-police, or self-censor. But for us on the ground, we use that as a way to focus on what we still want to say, and be creative about it, so that we circumvent the [state], with the intention of doing what we want to do. (Research interview, Singaporean playwright)

Use of cyber-spaces is one way that artists circumvent repressive state structures. Restrictions on the use of place enliven cyberspace with an emancipatory and potentially transformative potential for the critical arts. Cyber-Singapore has a vocal art-activist network and has allowed some artists (such as the "Sticker Lady") to gain wide national and even international followings. However, digital space cannot exist without physical place; indeed, the two exist, simultaneously, forming and re-forming each other. The arts cannot 'happen' online without a corresponding physical space for incubation, for practice, for human networking.

It is important to note that in Singapore, art-led activism (or 'artivism') and traditional activism are closely related, and research indicated that activist networks often overlap with the art world. While this may be the case in many places, Singapore's small geography and the relatively wide-berth given to the arts (as opposed to political activism) make these relationships especially strong. Therefore, many arts-spaces (theatres, galleries, studios) function as activist spaces; and non-art spaces such as public squares and university campuses often host art events and displays. Likewise, many of the artists that I interviewed are either directly, or indirectly, involved in more traditional activism as well.

Singapore is an island-nation-city-state with a carefully planned urban fabric, the vast majority of which is state-owned (at least 80 % - resulting from large-scale land transfers from the British in the years surrounding Singapore's independence in 1965). Though it has a Westminster-style parliamentary system (another colonial vestige), a single ruling party has commanded power for 50 years (the People's Action Party, or PAP). Despite free elections and a liberal approach toward business, foreign investment and multiculturalism, Singapore retains a labyrinthine geography of government control over free expression, dictated through agencies such as *the Censorship Review Committee* (CRC); the *Media Development Authority* (MDA), and the *National Arts Council* (NAC) which work together in a confusing grid of checks and balances. This has presented a paradoxical and often contradictory approach to the arts and culture in which gradual liberalisations of everything from gay nightlife to university discourse have come hand-in-hand with continued restrictions on political activism and 'taboo' artistic / cultural themes. These 'out of bounds' themes (see Yue) include perceived threats to Singapore's racial, religious, or political harmony – a grey area that is often at the discretion of particular government bureaucrats and administrators.

Still, the Singaporean arts place (take the theatre, for example) has assumed a special role as a focal point for not only various types of visual and performance art, but also unrelated (or tangentially-related) activist causes as well. I asked a theatre director of a prominent alternative theatre where, in Singapore's authoritarian urban fabric, there were opportunities for provocation? He stressed the theatres' essential role in providing a physical platform for visual tensions and disturbance:

> You know, and on any given evening, you'll see some punks or

> skinheads hanging outside there, and they kind of – create this disturbance in this neighbourhood, where, you know a passer-by is walking to his posh building, and then suddenly you know, there's this bunch of boys with mohawks, you know, just standing there – and they are friendly! There's nothing antagonistic or threatening, whatever. So, you know, that's the kind of tension that we actually love to kind of generate!
>
> … That kind of surprise, that kind of, 'oh, oh yes!' we see this nice, expensive restaurant, this nice white building, and then these rough edges. And – that is where uh, those points where – where factions, where the rough edges meet –are where dialogue occurs. (Theatre Director, Singapore)

That is not to say that the theatre comes without limits and caveats. It is financially precarious, as the Anglo-American model of corporate funding for the arts is not yet well-established in Singapore; interviews revealed that even much of the philanthropic donating to arts organizations comes from Singapore's prominent political families and therefore the task of disentangling state interests from non-ideological arts patronage becomes difficult. With state - funding come problems with "taboo" subjects, as exemplified by the occasional banned-play or the constant threat of budget cuts or closure altogether: a carrot and stick approach by the state that allows arts organizations room to operate as long as the art produced does not disturb or provoke (too) much.

Liew and Pang suggest that in Singapore, cyberspace has allowed a scale, a type of debate and a particularly cross-cutting conversation to take place: in a context where there are peculiar restrictions on the use and occupation of the built environment. They [*ibid*] found an emerging vocal, digital artistic grassroots that increasingly challenges the City-State's dominant narratives: my empirical research therefore expands upon, and explores further, the possibility that Singapore's cyber-spaces are both complementary to, and in some ways, more important than its material places in terms of providing spaces for political encounters.

I conducted 'netnography' (see Kozinets) across Singapore's web-scape and found that the online realm may be the '… primary site for discursive public activity in general and politics in particular' (Mitchell, 122); a place where 'everybody is coming together' (Merrifield, 18). Without fear of state censorship, artists, activists and art-activists are not bound by the (same) set of restrictions that they might be if operating in a theatre, or certainly in a public place such as a park or square. Planetary cyber-Singapore exists inside and outside the City-State; it can be accessed remotely, and can connect with a far wider audience than a play performed in a small black box theatre.

A number of blogs and satirical sites – including TheOnlineCitizen.sg, TheYawningBread.sg, and Demon-Cratic Singapore, openly criticize government policy in ways rarely heard in-situ or in even casual conversation on the street. Additionally, most activist causes and coalitions have digital versions where information is spread and support is gathered, spanning a range of issues. As is the case in material sites of activism in Singapore, artists frequently emerge as the loudest, most vocal, and most inter-disciplinary digital activists, helping to spearhead and cobble together cultural-activist coalitions and alliances. One example of this is the contrast between the place bound "Pink Dot" LGBTQ event (limited to the amount of people that can fit in Hong Lim Park, a central square) and its *Facebook* equivalent, *We are Pink Dot* public 'group'. *Pink Dot* occurs each June in Singapore and involves around 10,000 people. The Internet's representations of *Pink Dot*, however, have reached millions: *Pink Dot* has been featured in digital (and print) editions of major global newspapers including *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. While not explicitly an art event, *Pink Dot* is artistic in nature as it uses pink 'dots' to side-step the official designation of being an LGBTQ pride event – which would not be sanctioned by the authorities (*Gay Pride* has not been allowed to take place in Singapore).

The street artist Samantha Lo – also known as "Sticker Lady" – was jailed for her satirical stickers that she placed in various locations around Singapore. Unable to freely practice her art on city streets, she has become a sort of local artist - Internet celebrity, with her own *Facebook Group* called *Free Sticker Lady* (with over 1,000 members as of April, 2016). Through her *Facebook* group, Lo has been able to voice opinions that would be difficult – or even prohibited – with a loudspeaker on the street, or expressed through street art. As an open lesbian, she has also been active (and vocal) in the "Pink Dot" events. Her speech at "Pink Dot" was heard by the few-thousand in attendance at the time; her *Facebook* post (public without privacy settings) is available to the entire world:

> I'll be speaking during a small segment at *Pink Dot* tomorrow. Though only two minutes long, I've been spending a lot of time thinking about my speech and finding myself at a position where there's just so much to say. All my life, I've had to work twice as hard to prove myself, to be taken seriously. At 18, I made a conscious decision to cave in to societal pressures to conform after countless warnings of how I wouldn't be able to get a job, get married, etc. I grew my hair out, dressed differently, but was never truly comfortable with the person I became. That change was a choice, but I wasn't happy.
>
> Since then, I learnt that happiness wasn't a given, I had to work for it, for the ability to be comfortable in my own skin, to do what I love and to make something out of myself. (Artists' *Facebook* Post)

Yet, without the city street, Lo would not have gained her notoriety; without use of the park, *Pink Dot* would not have a *Facebook* presence or the ability to gather international press. The fact that Singaporean theatre exists at all as an important instigator of visual and performative tension demonstrates the significance of its physical address. Physical art places provide a crucial period of incubation – practice and becoming – that cannot really be replicated online. This includes schools and performance space but also in Singapore's context, the 'arts-housing' that is provided by the government to small-scale, up-and-coming artists through a competitive grant process. Artists can receive gallery, performance or rehearsal space for a set amount of time on a rotating basis. Even with authoritarian restrictions, these spaces have been crucial for arts development:

> There's a short-term [subsidised] residency studio ...for up to 12 months. And so that –allows for a rotating group of artists to come with an idea in mind, use it for whatever- we've had artists who were preparing for a major show, and say 'my studio space, my existing studio space is a bit too tiny, because I'm prepping for this show, I need a larger studio for 3 months. (Arts Administrator, Singapore)

Critical and provocative art, limited and restricted by place, is thus still intrinsically bound to it. Indeed, the restrictions on artistic place allow cyber-art to flourish; cyber-art can only flourish with a strong place- based anchor. Far from supplanting place-based art, the digital art-scape forms a complement; digital and place-based art forms combine to form new hybridities in which local context and global forces write and re-write each other in a series of place and 'placeless' negotiations.

Conclusion

The examples that have been presented in this paper paint a picture of a complex landscape where specific urban sites are crucial anchoring nodes in a critical art ecosystem, but much artistic disturbance actually occurs online and in immaterial forms. This may hint at the possibility that globally, urban sites themselves are no longer sufficient for critical art to flourish and reach its full potential, especially as such sites have increasingly fallen prey to austerity policies, increasingly corporate and / or philanthropic programming and curation, and the comparatively wider reach and ease of access that digital spaces offer.

Electronic or digital space – ranging from e-mail to social media (*Twitter*, blogs, *Facebook* and many others) has opened a new frontier in which, "... material public spaces in the city are superseded by the fora of television, radio talk shows and computer bulletin boards" (Mitchell. 122). The possibility now emerges whether digital space may be even more crucial than material public spaces in terms of emancipatory or critical potential– especially in authoritarian contexts where public space / place comes with particular limits and restrictions on assembling, performance, and critical expression. These contexts range from Taksim Square, Istanbul to Tiananmen Square, Beijing – but indeed, traditional public place has been increasingly privatized and securitized across the Western-liberal world as well. Where art occurs in place it is often stripped of its critical potential or political messages, sanctioned or sponsored by corporate groups or sanitized by public sector authorities (Schuilenburg, 277).

The Singapore case may be especially stark due to Singapore's small size (and corresponding lack of visible public 'places'); authoritarian restrictions and correspondingly (relatively) un-policed and un-censored cyberspace. But it is fair to say that at a time when *Youtube* creates instant celebrities and *Facebook* likes or *Instagram* followers indicate fame and (potential) fortune – it is time to re-think and re-conceptualise the relationship between place, art, and the place-based institutions (such as grant-funding bodies or philanthropic organizations, galleries, critics or dealers) that have often served as "gatekeepers" to the art-scape. This invites challenges to the way these agents operate and the decision making process of policy-makers in the arts and cultural realm.

Mitchell (124) reminded that there has "never been a revolution conducted exclusively in electronic space; at least not yet." But that was 20 years ago. Singapore may offer a glimpse, however, of what such a revolution might look like. This revolution is neither completely place bound nor completely digital; it is one in which the material and immaterial interplay and overlap in post-modern complexity. Each platform plays a role, and understanding the way that art operates both in place and in "placeless" forms is crucial in understanding where key transformations take place in both the production of critical art and the production of urban space.

What Hartley ("The Politics of Pictures") called the "space of citizenry" is not necessarily confined to a building, the city street or a public square (or even private spaces such as the home, the car, the office). Sharon Zukin likewise suggested that ultimately, a negotiation of a city's digital sphere is crucial for current-day urban research, arguing that:

> Though I do not think that online communities have replaced face to face interaction, I do think it is important to understand the way web-based media contribute to our urban imaginary. The interactive nature of the dialogue, how each post feeds on the preceding ones and elicits more, these are expressions of both difference and consensus, and they represent partial steps toward an open public sphere. (27)

Traditional gatekeepers such as the theatre director, the museum curator and the state or philanthropic arts funding body have not disappeared, though they must adapt to the new cyber-reality as artists have new avenues around these traditional checkpoints. Accordingly – "old" problems such as de-jure and de-facto censorship reappear in the cyber art-scape as well: take the example of the Singaporean satirical bloggers that have been sued by the government in 2013-2016 (such as the socio-political bloggers and satirists Roy Ngerng and Alex Au). No web-space is truly open.

A further complication may be the corporate nature of sites such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Youtube*, or *Twitter:* far from truly democratic platforms or "agoras" in the traditional sense, these are for-profit (massive) corporations – which a small theatre is not. Singapore's place based authoritarianism may be multiplied in the corporate authoritarianism or "CEO activism" of tech titans like Mark Zuckerberg, who allow for diverse use of digital platforms and encourage open expression and unfettered communication – as long as it is on their terms, within company policies that are not always transparent.

Perhaps the questions then really are not where 'art' begins and ends, or where a place starts or stops – but rather where authoritarianism, state and corporate power begin and end in the hyper-connected global cyber-scape? And, if these power structures are now stretched across space and time as Marxist theorists such as Massey or Merrifield claimed, then what is the future for critical art and its relationship to 'place'?

Despite these unanswered questions and invitations for further exploration, the Singapore case may hint at what this emerging geography of place and 'placeless' art resembles and how such a new world may evolve moving forward.

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