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Music Ethnography of Singapore's Art Spaces

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Collaborating Organisations:
Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre
Flame of the Forest
Taiko Drum Co-Curricula Group from ITE College East

This paper is a brief written exposition of a video ethnography, that follows the same procedures as a written ethnography, which is the main format of this research. The reader is advised to view the full video ethnography at https://youtu.be/Cy__NccteVE.

Abstract - The term 'art space' suggests a physical space that portrays an architectural structure and infrastructure that would cater for musicians and artists to create, work and portray their craft. Many iconic art spaces in Singapore such as the Esplanade Theatre has fulfilled that purpose and have even added to the overall Arts Landscape of Singapore. However, beyond its physical purposes, there needs to be an emphasis that art spaces also provide a social environment for music and art communities to interact with the public especially from our local artists and the community of Singaporeans. The research would focus on the exploration of pre-assigned and public art spaces located within Singapore's own suburban neighbourhood areas that showcase how local music communities and groups make use of them for their music-making purposes to connect and interact with the communities of Singapore. This research is explored using videography as the main empirical research process and presented with an ethnographic documentary as the final product.

Keywords - Art Spaces, Singapore, Music Communities, Local

INTRODUCTION

After Singapore's Independence in 1965, the state focused on emulating the economic advancement of the West. In the process, its own art culture was left isolated (Wee, 2003). In order to continue pursuing and succeeding in its Global City Aspirations to enhance the arts scene within Singapore, the Advisory Council on Culture and Arts (ACCA) began laying foundational arts infrastructure for arts and cultural spaces to be established and cultivated locally since the 1980s. Its aims revolved around structuring Singapore to be a culturally-vibrant society by building upon its arts infrastructure, education of the arts, public awareness and administrative organisation (Chang, 2013).

Major renovations thus began, which birth forth distinct art spaces that now form the picturesque landscape of Singapore such as the Victoria Concert Hall, The Arts House at the Old Parliament and the Esplanade Theatres. These art spaces have succeeded in putting this country on the international cultural map (Chang, 2013).

However, it is also argued that these art spaces are overtly commercialised (Chang & Lee, 2003). Truly, in my own personal visits to these iconic spaces, I had noticed three main things. Firstly, its architectural essence resembled much of foreign influence. For example, the Victoria Concert Hall underwent a 4-year renovation to restore the neo-classicism look which was a direct influence of the Singapore's colonial days from Britain. Secondly, these spaces were adorned with many advertising posters and banners, mostly showcasing non-local music groups especially of Classical music ensembles. As a conclusive observation, the third aspect would be that the pairing of foreign architectural influence and advertisement of famous but non-local music groups had attracted a large international crowd, in which very evident during my visits to these three art spaces.

As a Singaporean and a music student, I was determined to find other art spaces that catered more to the Singaporean community used mainly by local music groups. This ethnographic journey challenges the mindset that art spaces are created solely for architectural and commercializing purposes but instead captures the essence of how art spaces, those less commonly known, by exploring and capturing arts spaces that cater to aspiring local musicians who choose to engage in the musical activities

OBJECTIVES

1. How current art spaces paint the overall Singapore Arts Landscape
2. How local music communities and groups stage their craft using these art spaces
3. How local neighbourhood communities are connected through the interaction of the music portrayed by music communities and groups within the art spaces
GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Introduce yourself, your music group and the music activity that you engage with

2. Share the different art spaces your music group has rehearsed and performed in

3. Describe your experiences in the usage of these art spaces

Singapore Art Spaces and Music Communities

VISUAL ARTS CENTRE

A glass-house exhibition gallery that is situated in the green habitat of the Dhoby Ghaut Green. Modern Visual Arts fused with atmospheric vocal embellishment. I attended and documented a collaborative performance-installation that was organised by the art gallery in collaboration with the Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre. The performance was called 'Hearing Images & Seeing Sound'. The purpose of the performance was to portray a cross-blend of modern art alongside electronic music and vocal music. There was a free admission to the general public and the people were allowed to linger and appreciate the art exhibition after the performance. There was an opportunity to interact with the Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre whom informed me of another performance they were participating in the Church of the Good Shepherd in lieu of Christmas.

CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Within the Queenstown area, this roman catholic church is a space not just for religious purposes but organise outreach programmes as well. In collaboration with the Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre, they arranged for a three-day Christmas outreach event to spread the joy of Christmas. The Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre performed nostalgic Christmas carols which attracted a full-house audience that filled the entire cathedral. The event was open to the general public with no cost to attend the performance. Aesthetic lighting and snow-making machines were allocated at the open space in which a small flea shop market was commencing to cater to the large crowd.

SINGAPORE POCKET OPERA THEATRE

The Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre is a choral and string ensemble which started in 2016. It consists of classical singers ranging from Sopranos, Altos, Tenors and Baritones. The ensemble includes an in-house resident string ensemble of about nine people. The ensemble carries the idea of portability such that they are able to carry their music anywhere and everywhere with the main purpose of bring their music into the spaces within the community. They have had thirteen performances in 2016 alone and have performed in many spaces within Singapore, which includes the Visual Arts Centre and the Church of the Good Shepherd.

Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre uses different locations for rehearsal spaces, one of which is the rent out studio at the Aliwal Arts Centre and the Black Box. Due to its medium to large size ensemble, depending on the performance requirements, the studios and black box allow them to do rehearsals and have performances there.

ALIWAL ARTS CENTRE

As a multi-dimensional arts centre within the Kampong Glam District, the building provides facilities and space that supports performing arts and artistic development that ranges from modern contemporary to traditional art forms.

FLAME OF THE FOREST

A local music band known for its idiosyncratic blend of Western and Eastern music traditions, incorporates styles of Indian Classical and Folk music. It consists of a mix of Western and Eastern instruments ranging from the sitar, tabla, violin, keyboard and guitar. In collaboration with the Sounds of Singapore, the Flame of the Forest performed at the black box at Aliwal Arts Centre as part of a four event series.

ALIWAL URBAN ARTS FESTIVAL 2017

In the midst of exploring the Aliwal Arts Centre as an arts space, there was an opportunity to document and participate in an Urban Arts Festival that was to occur in alignment with the Singapore Art Week from between 11th January to 27th January 2017. Many art and music-related activities took place at the Urban Arts Festival within and around the Aliwal Arts Building, ranging from street artist performing art graffiti, skating board facilities, flea market, barter workshop market and local music bands performances.

CEMTA (CENTRE FOR MUSIC AND THE ARTS)

WITHIN ITE COLLEGE EAST & TAIKO DRUM CO-CURRICULA GROUP

The centre for Music and the Arts (CEMTA) is an art space within ITE College East that provides studio and rehearsal spaces for music and arts co-curricular groups use. One of the co-curricular groups include the Taiko Drumming group in which an alumnus of ITE College East founded the Taiko drum co-curricular group. The school provides different platforms within the premise for such groups to perform, which ranges from the Indoor Sports Hall, auditorium and the amphitheatre.
METHODOLOGY
The collection of data through secondary sources such as articles from online scholarly database or archival documents. The collection of primary data through fieldwork by exploring the nature of the social engagement of the people through the musical activities held at the respective art spaces. The fieldwork mainly comprises of documentations of the cultural behaviours, perspectives and practices of the research participants within the settings of which they engage their musical activities through the collection of video footage alongside interviews of these local music communities and individuals that result in a video ethnography.

LIMITATIONS
Due to the need for video documentation for rehearsals, performances and interviews, there were limitations of how much footage could be filmed.

1. Due to the performance platforms, there was little space to move around to take enough footage that could showcase the entire ensemble of performers.

2. In the context of interviews, there was a difficulty in finding a suitable space and environment. Difficulties such as having too much noise or not enough lighting were evident.

There were limitations to getting a response from the respective music communities. Initially, there was an engagement with two other music communities who were available for interviewing. However, due to little to no follow-up response, the time required for waiting was not productive.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, art spaces are important to allow interactions to occur. This produces a social environment for musicians, artists and the public to participate and occupy the art space. Music groups share a common purpose of using their music and arts to reach out to the public. The Singapore Pocket Opera Theatre and Flame of the Forest stated that the importance of the existence of art spaces such as the Visual Arts Centre and the Aliwal Arts Space cater to opportunities that allow direct interaction with people from the neighbourhoods. There is also a give-and-take element in which these music groups require the support of the participating audience.

Another important aspect of these art spaces is for community building. In an interview with a participative member of the public of the Aliwal Urbans Arts Festival, she had voiced out her observation that all kinds of people which ranges from children, locals and foreigners were attracted and participating in the Festival activities. This creates the opportunity for the this mix blend of participants to appreciate the music and arts culture together as a community which is made available and accessible for them in such spaces.

The art spaces also accumulate sentimental value that creates possible emotional attachments for the people who make use of them. For example, the students from the Taiko Drumming Co-curricular group have voiced out how the Centre of Music and the Arts (CEMTA) in their school reminds them of being part of a family. During rehearsals, they coordinate and harmonise their thoughts and feelings through the Taiko drumming activity alongside their school mates.

Overall, after visiting the four art spaces and interviewing the specific music groups, I realised that art spaces in Singapore portray more than just the physical aspects of adding onto the overall Arts Landscape of Singapore or providing commercialization purposes. There is an allowance of art and music-related activities to occur that open doors to social interactions in which local music groups and artists make use of these art spaces for their arts and music related activities with a universal purpose of drawing the people from all around the neighbourhoods to appreciate and celebrate their work within the art spaces itself.

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