

# MAPPING 'WHAT IF' – WALKING, STUMBLING, REORIENTING, ACCOMPANYING

## PART 2: THE WHAT IF PROCESS – SO FAR



By Corrie Tan

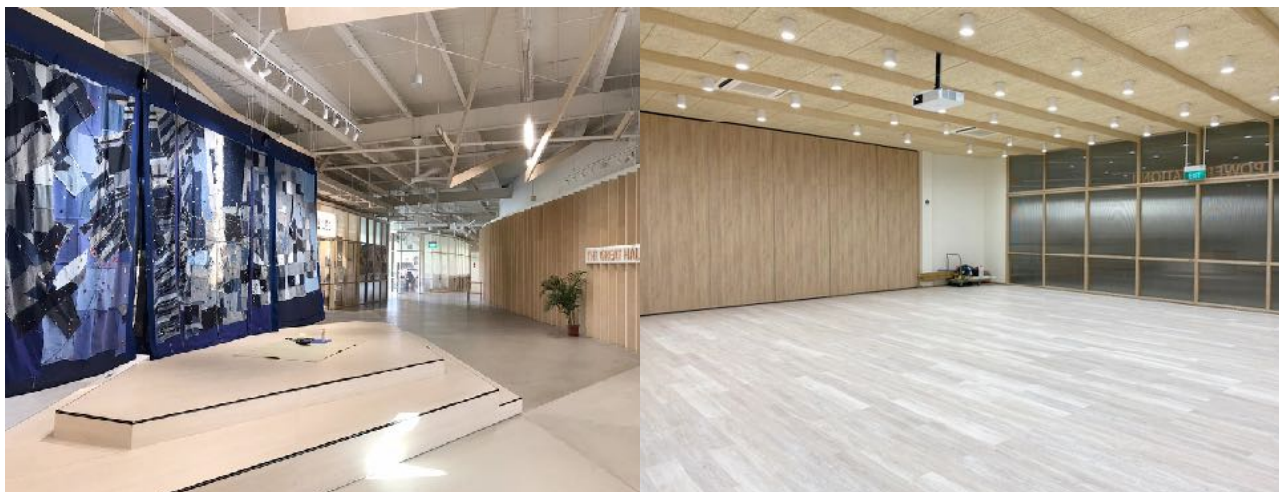
Cover Photo: The performers: Hidayat, Ka Wai, Shawn, Wai Yee and Yennefer  
(from left to right, top to bottom) Photos by Bob Lee, The Fat Farmer.

I'm going to try to sketch out what my own interpretation of *What If's* devising and rehearsal process has been like *from February to May*, under three broad sections: (1) **making acquaintance**, (2) **responsibility**, and (3) **articulating one's practice**. Before we plunge in, I wanted to briefly frame this piece of writing. These are my perspectives as a participant-observer and peripheral figure in the 2-3 months of rehearsals to date. As of writing this piece, we're about a third of the way through the entire rehearsal process. My fellow 'embedded' writer Ariane and I would initially try to press ourselves against the walls of Power Station 1 at the Tzu Chi Humanistic Youth Centre, to make ourselves as invisible as possible (sometimes actually invisible to members of the cast if we didn't speak). But we found ourselves invited into the action again and again, having to constantly adjust and readjust our proximities with the project. We both struggled with and enjoyed playing with conventional notions of distance and intimacy when it came to research and writing. We never asked Jing Hong or Beng Tian, the directorial team, about the trajectories they had planned for the rehearsal – we found out about and responded to each new exercise or project alongside the performers (**Hidayat, Ka Wai, Shawn, Wai Yee and Yennefer<sup>1</sup>**) and designers (**Moes, Oliver, Timothy, Sze Min and Yong Huay**). Later on, when the pandemic forced us to transition to the cramped new confines of Zoom and flattened out our bodily topographies, we found ourselves wandering through very different configurations of intimacies and distances, which I'll touch on in a bit later in the piece.



1. Alias requested by the artist

## (1) MAKING ACQUAINTANCE: GREETINGS, INTRODUCTIONS, ORIENTATIONS



The space in Tzu Chi Humanistic Youth Centre where the team rehearsed together from February – March 2020 . Left – the corridor that leads to the cafe. Right – the rehearsal studio.

Rehearsals began in February with a series of exercises around what I call “making acquaintance” – whether it was with other people, bodies and objects in the room, or with the space(s) we moved through. This was a tentative, slow process – a process of encountering a variety of physical and cognitive positions and coaxing out different ways of working. The first two sessions were almost entirely devoted to kinesthetic and spatial orientation journeys around the Tzu Chi Humanistic Youth Centre<sup>2</sup>, particularly for cast members who are non-sighted or have mobility requirements. Everyone was present, from the cast to the co-directors to designers to access workers to writers to volunteers. We made our way around

2. The Tzu Chi Humanistic Youth Centre offered venue support for the rehearsal process of *What If*. Located in Yishun, the centre is a non-profit startup by the Tzu Chi Foundation (Singapore) that specifically seeks to support the local youth community.

the building in small groups, mapping out each cafe, each studio, each wooden table and water cooler.

Our first session on Zoom was, in a sense, quite similar: figuring out the constraints and fuzzy edges of the online platform, troubleshooting harsh buzzes of static, glitchy microphones, faltering internet connections... how to prop up a tiny fiddly mobile phone from a good vantage point, how to cue our arrivals and departures, when to disguise our environments with a background display picture and when to invite others into our homes. Both discursively and physically, the cast and creative team were mapping out their terms of engagement with each other.

In these early weeks, there were also discussions about the extent to which each cast member wanted access structures (such as audio description, or alone time), or preferred less support. There were also some disagreements around terminology that arose, including:

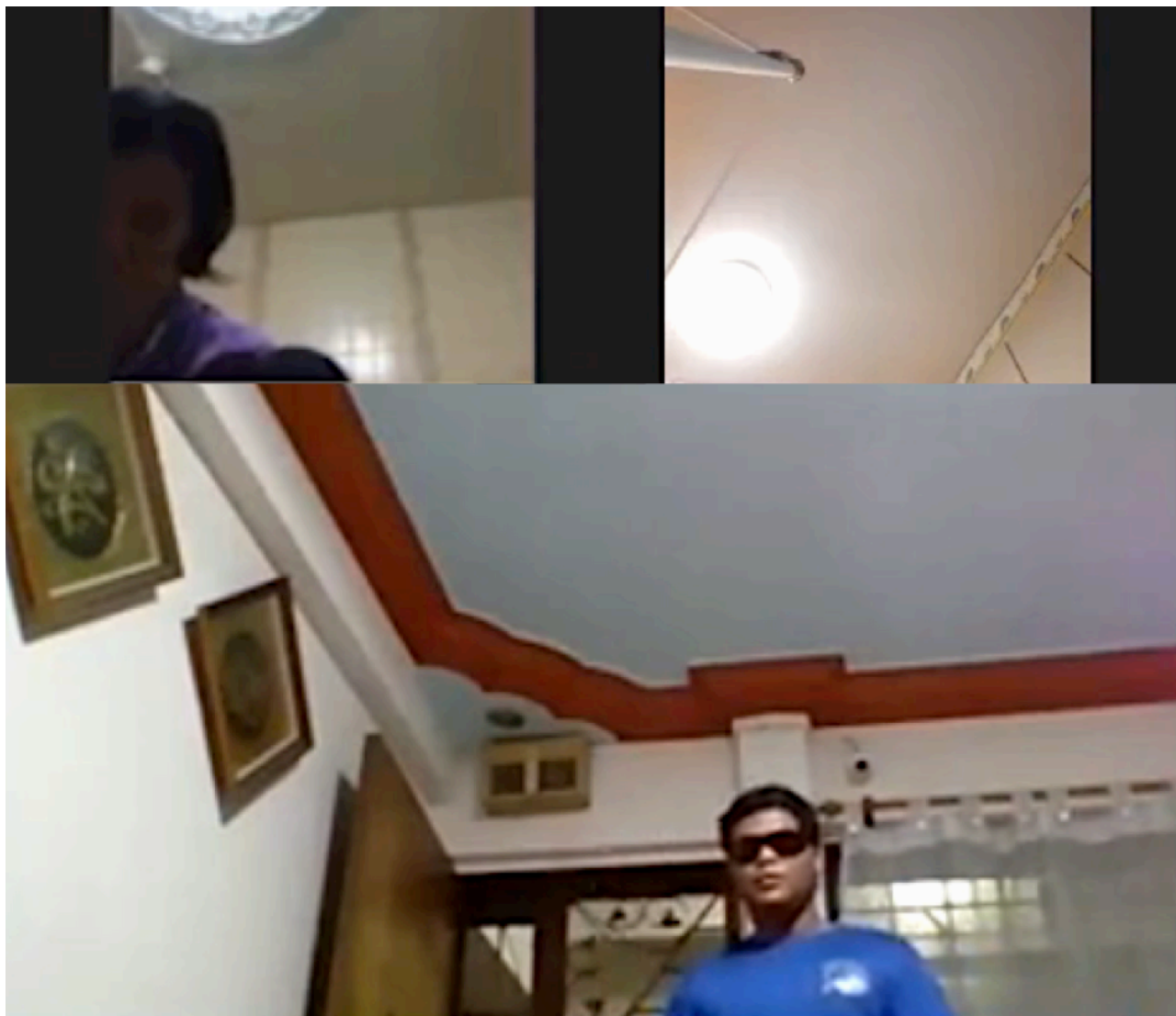
“differently abled” [maybe not?] or “disabled” [yes]

“wheelchair bound” [absolutely not] or “wheelchair user” [yes]

“visually impaired” [uncertain/no consensus] or “non-sighted” [more acceptable]

“I’m a blind artist” [uncertain/no consensus] or “I’m an artist who happens to be blind” [preferred by some]





Moments during Zoom rehearsal, where casts have unusual angles of view (Pictured: top left – Wai Yee, top right – Yennefer’s room, bottom – Hidayat)

These processes of disentanglement helped to build a small but shared vocabulary around disability within the creative and production teams – with the recognition that there would continue to be dissensus around these terms beyond this rehearsal space. Jing Hong would repeatedly invite anyone in the room who had





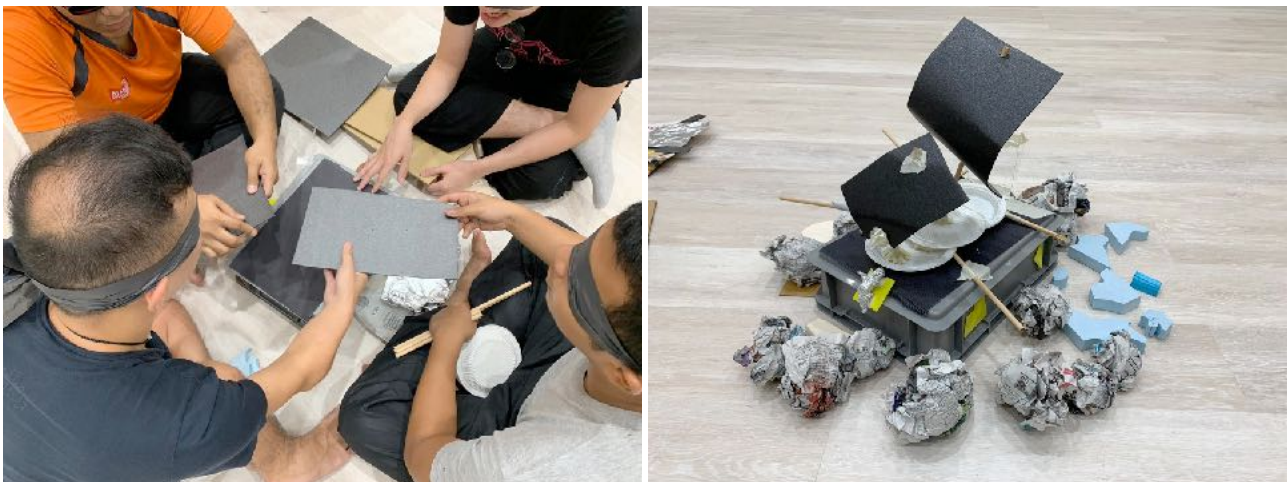
disagreements or points of concern to “table” these grievances with her, whether publicly or privately, doing her best to assure everyone that she would resolve or engage with these concerns as responsibly and candidly as possible. I appreciated this invitation, and have myself texted or spoken frankly with Jing Hong about situations or circumstances I felt discomfited by. But I also wondered about the power dynamic that remained – that as much as Jing Hong had generously offered herself as a site of refuge and calm, or sought to establish herself more as a facilitator than a director, concerns might still go unspoken. Would folks in the room take up this invitation given the various layers of pressure around speaking up in public – or was this a longer process of setting up *group agreements*<sup>3</sup> that might extend beyond the work of a single production?

During these initial sessions, it felt like the creative team were collectively finding their synchronizations and syncopations with each other. This also involved building a shared warm-up set that at first seemed daunting. Could the same set of gestures be useful to both Hidayat and Wai Yee, who are non-sighted performers and athletes (including goalball and long-distance running) – as well as for Yennefer, a writer-practitioner with cerebral palsy who is also a wheelchair user? Ariane’s **accompanying piece** explores this a bit more. The warm-ups felt like embodied introductions to each other, allowing the group to observe and recognize a variety of different physical languages and access requirements. For example, Ka Wai invited Hidayat and Wai Yee to do a “touch tour” of his limbs so that they could get a better tactile understanding of how his body moved. The design team also began introducing aspects of their practice to

3. A term used by intimacy director Carly D. Weckstein in a Directors Lab West Connects discussion on May 25, 2020



the rest of the group. The team of three student spatial designers from the Nanyang Polytechnic School of Design, in particular, found themselves responding to difficult questions about previous school assignments that did not take accessibility into account. There were also in-depth discussions about the access-unfriendliness of Singapore's urban spaces, including the nation-state's constant desire for redevelopment and renovation that could completely disrupt non-sighted practitioners' muscle memory of a space or site. It felt as though the group was building reference points around which more complex or interlocking rhythms could be built.



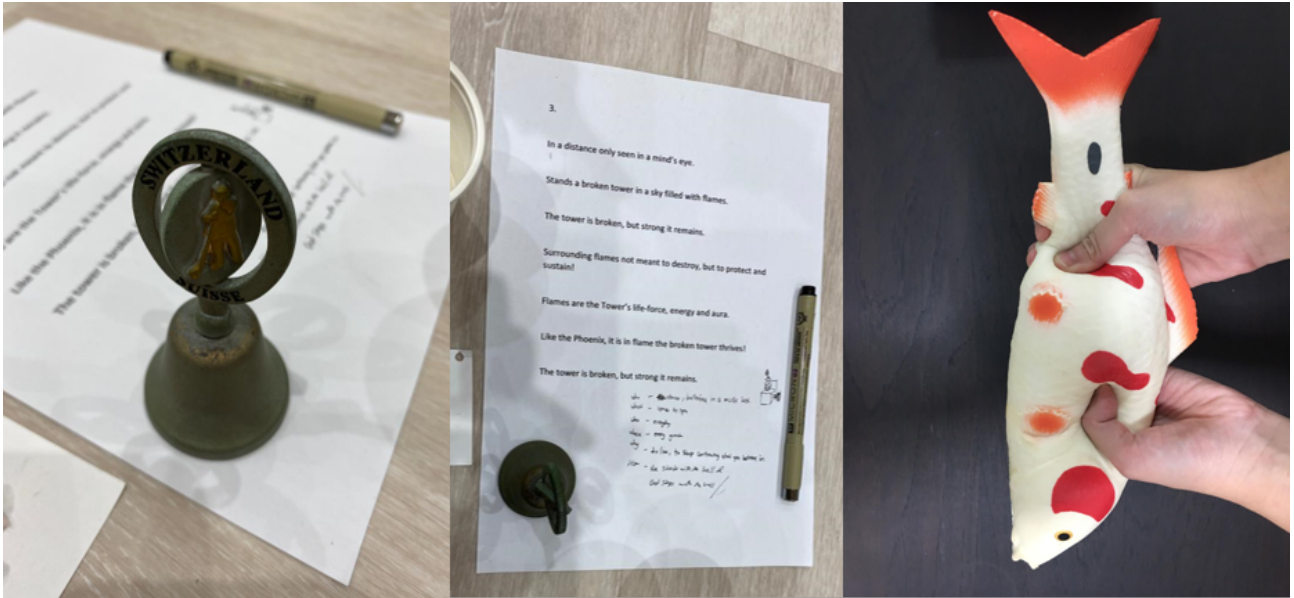
One of the spatial designers, Moes, conducted an exercise with the team where they had to build something they wanted to say with the provided materials.

Right – One of the finished products was a ship!

Photos by Moes Mulyadi Bin Ruizan.



## (2) RESPONSE-ABILITY: THE RESPONSIBILITY WE TAKE FOR OUR RESPONSES



The bell, poem and toy fish Yennefer and Ka Wai used for their lesson.  
Photos by Timothy Trung and Corrie Tan.

Once these budding acquaintances and shared vocabularies had been set in motion, Jing Hong began to take some time to introduce new structures of collaboration and relationship-building between the cast and designers.

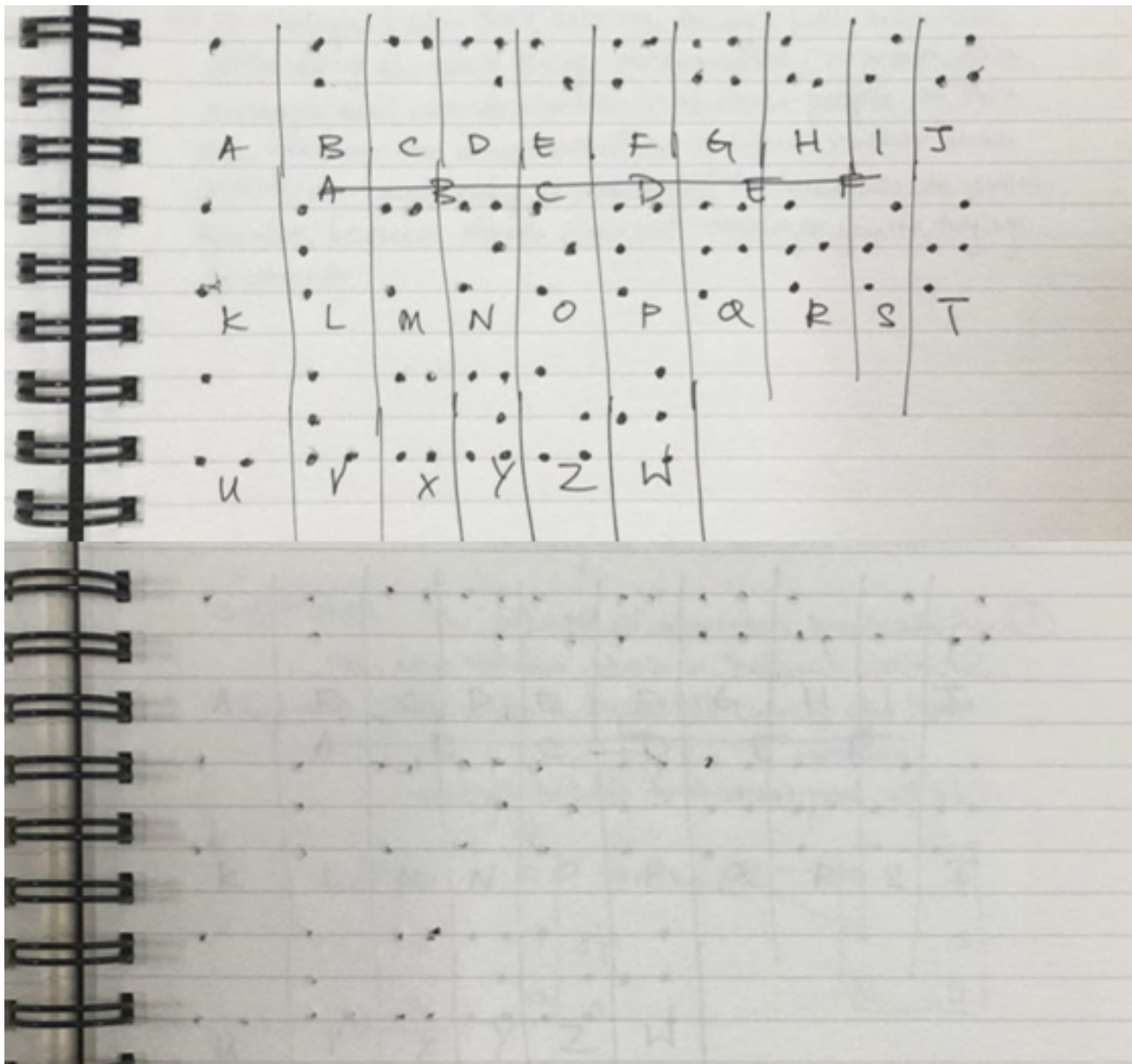


In one of the earliest exercises, the cast members were paired up with each other, and invited to teach the rest of the group anything they wanted to teach.

- Shawn and Adelyn (who's no longer with the production)<sup>4</sup> had us learn a catchy song from the movie *Frozen II* without any access to written lyrics, the way Adelyn, who's non-sighted, often memorises her music.
- Yennefer and Ka Wai crafted a workshop around the use of sensory and textual stimuli – the smell of spices or breath mints, or an especially squeezable toy fish, or a fragment of vivid poetry, or the crisp ding of a bell – where various groups created short pieces in response to the objects and scents they were given.
- Hidayat and Wai Yee gave us a crash course in Braille and how to use a Braille, then converted the entire rehearsal space into an obstacle course, where sighted people were blindfolded and had to rely on a cane and our very under-developed senses of hearing to navigate a room full of obstructions, then type short Braille messages to each other.

4. Adelyn chose to leave the production in early April for personal reasons.





When learning Braille, Corrie poked through her notebook to create tactile notes of the Braille alphabets.

Top – The alphabets in Braille. Bottom – The other side of the same paper where the poked holes gain a tactile quality.

Photos by Corrie.



These participatory sessions conjured up both panic and delight – there was nervousness and excitement from both the “teachers”, some of whom were running workshops for the first time, and the “students”, who very often had to create work on the spot. After each session, Jing Hong would prompt the rest of us for responses and feedback. This nudged us into a kind of rhythm that extended to the next few weeks: each performer and/or designer would present something – an invocation perhaps, or an invitation – and we would always respond. We could choose how to respond: verbally or with our bodies, with specific feedback or with our emotional reactions. These responses were tentative at first, marked by pauses and anxious silence. But this discomfort gradually gave way, and the responses became small performances of their own. A piece involving a crumpled blanket casting shadows on a projection of a beach on the wall might lead to another performer wheeling and waltzing around the dark room with a torchlight, dancing with their own shadow. Another presentation involving a percussive motif – the performer “playing” their own body and the environment around them like an instrument – led to the same motif passing through and around the audience and their bodies.

Jing Hong would occasionally remind us of our responsibility to respond, and to consider other ways of having a conversation with the work and the practitioners who had presented. She would ask: “What were some of the thematic threads from the last four works you’ve presented? What might you create next based on that? When responding to others, do you think: Do I have nothing to say? Do I not feel safe about responding? Which of the pieces you’ve



witnessed had you never experienced or tried out before?”

At this point, I'd like to borrow the term “response-ability” from the performance theorist Rebecca Schneider, and I have to thank Singaporean performance artist Loo Zihan for introducing the term to me. Schneider says:

Let's imagine that I wave my hand and call to you, saying hello. Perhaps only a moment later you respond. You wave and say “hello.” The time of my hello is not the time of your hello. And yet, the two times are also imbricated, one in the other. When I call out to you, I extend time in one sense. My word is a gesture by which I reach across one time, into another time. And you, in responding, double back (though “back” may not be the only direction) across my time and respond to me. Our times become one time, one might say. Or might we say that the time of your “hello” carries, through reiteration posed as response, my time? Perhaps my “hello” has returned to me, as one time in another time. My word in your mouth. My wave in your hand.

(Rebecca Schneider 2017: 112)

Between each presentation and response was a growing connective tissue where time and space folded over each other. From the greetings and orientations of the first few weeks to the responses to each short presentation or performance in the weeks after... I found that each response seemed to go back in time to shape our memory of the work, even as our responses were shaped by encountering the work. It seemed that generosity in responding – witnessing everyone



gaping in awe, or sharing belly laughs or sharp intakes of breath, or sending “thumbs-up” signs over Zoom, or grooving along to music, or accompanying others with imitative gestures – was part of what secured our engagement with a performance, mapping and imprinting its emotional trajectories and micro-actions into our bodies and memories.



A screenshot of Shawn and Beng Tian’s performance on Zoom.

I’m especially reminded of a gripping presentation by Shawn and Beng Tian in early April that made simultaneous use of the liveness of performance and the mediation of the online Zoom platform.



The pair used Zoom's split-screen screen-sharing function to allow the rest of the group to view Shawn's performance with a torchlight in the darkness of his home on the right side of their screen – as well as a video-recorded shadow puppet performance by Beng Tian on the left. Beng Tian curated the musical and sonic non-verbal narrative of the piece – an excerpt from the majestic, churning score of the film *The Dark Knight* accompanied by new sound effects of sword fights and war. She paired this with an in-ear set of instructions for Shawn so that the video and his live performance would be in sync. They then invited the non-sighted performers to interpret – based on the textured sound and music score – a narrative based on what they had heard. There were mixed responses to this: Hidayat had an incredibly precise summary of the performance: "Shawn was a young warrior in an epic battle – and at the end... either he died, or he won." Adelyn was enthusiastic about the piece, talking breathlessly about what she'd gathered from the intricacy of the score. Wai Yee was less enthused – she'd have preferred a more detailed audio description of the work and felt that music alone did not give her a nuanced idea of the performance. This continuum of feedback has been integral to the development of work, and has built further cycles of response-abilities: how to incorporate responses into the work responsibly, and how to leave responses aside if they wound others and/or don't ultimately nurture the work.



### (3) ARTICULATING A PRACTICE: WHAT DO YOUR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS REVEAL ABOUT YOURSELF?

Throughout April and early May, *What If* shifted into a more reflective, interrogative space. While the responses of the previous weeks encouraged free association and playful, performative gestures, this more recent phase took a microscope to each practitioner's process. The larger group was divided into smaller groups to experiment with making short pieces together. Within these exercises and the presentations that followed, there was a focus on the kinds of instinctive decisions that each individual or small group makes. What makes a collaboration stick – and what makes it come apart? What constitutes a “good” collaboration: A roughly-sutured video of three different performers' works bound by the same theme? Visuals selected and produced by one practitioner and scored by another? I find that asking questions about process tends to disorient practitioners (myself included) at first. We find ourselves in a kind of panicky crisis of the 'meta': “Wait... is this how I always do things? Does knowing *how* I do it make me overthink *why* I do it? Is it better *not* to know?” The philosopher Michael Polanyi calls this *tacit knowledge* – the kind of knowledge that is really difficult to give to another person by writing it down or talking about it. The examples most often used are cycling or swimming; you can describe the bodily mechanics of swimming to a non-swimmer all you like, but it's pretty tough to demonstrate what swimming *is* without some water and a pool for you to swim through (Polanyi 1958: 51). I could see several practitioners (all highly competent



“swimmers”, if you like) floundering below the water as they attempted to explain their “swimming” processes – the way they design, create, make work – to others in the group.

In one instance, sound designer and composer Sze Min was trying to describe her process of creating music and sound for a video piece she’d worked on with Timothy and Ka Wai. She used the term “story” to describe her part in the collaboration in a way that some of the other practitioners were not accustomed to using. It took several minutes of highly-specific questions and mild confusion for the team to figure out their assumptions and misconceptions around “story”: how the term was interpreted from a musician and composer’s point of view – and from a theatre practitioner’s point of view.

These dissections were often protracted and could be frustrating. But these lines of questioning weren’t just about individual practitioners – they also applied to how each loose group of practitioners worked together. They prodded each group to think about who had more agency in certain situations, who was content to support the visions of others in some contexts, and who was more excited to initiate projects and narratives of their own in other contexts. Less visible creative differences and divergent perspectives emerged as the rest of us chipped away at the surface of the collaboration. Each presentation became a mini archaeological site for excavations of process to emerge.

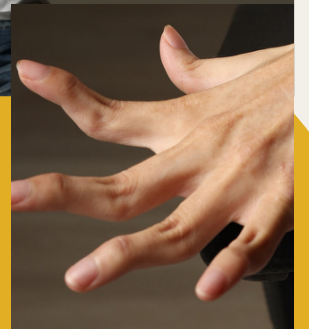
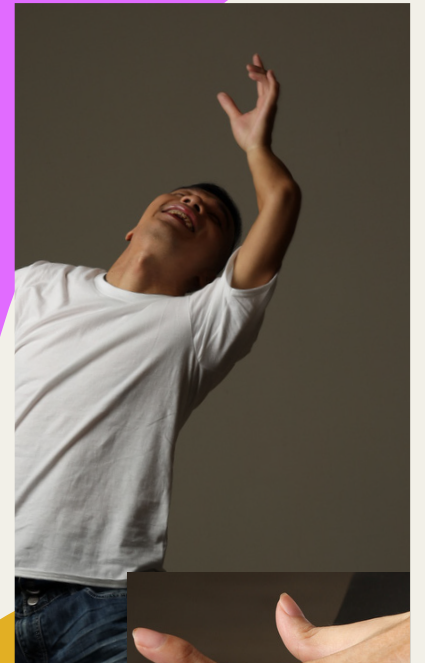


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# WHAT IF

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