

4	<p><u>Research Sharing 3</u></p> <p>Both Sides, Now: Spaces of Connection, with Living and Dying</p> <p>Dr Charlene Rajendran, Assistant Professor, Visual and Performing Arts (Drama)</p> <p>Academic Group, NIE</p>
4.1	<p>Dr Rajendran shared about her role as both researcher and dramaturg in <i>Both Sides, Now</i>, an interdisciplinary arts-based community project about end of life issues in Singapore produced by Drama Box and ArtsWok. The project was carried out in 3 phases in 2013, 2014 and from 2017 to 2019 (ongoing) where conducive spaces were created for members of the public, particularly seniors, to engage in the difficult and often avoided issue of death. These public engagement sessions were primarily located in open air spaces near public housing to motivate access by people who would not otherwise seek out arts events.</p>
4.2	<p>While the initial phases presented audiences with different ways to connect with the issue, Phase 3 focused on co-creation between the artists and seniors, with their final productions presented in public spaces.</p>
4.3	<p>The work was based on calls (material that elicits audiences’ responses) and responses, which in turn become other calls, as well as the concept of relational aesthetics. Citing Nicholas Bourriaud’s definition¹ where the art work is presented as a social interstice, she explained that the social encounters and relationships established were at the centre of the process. Participants were encouraged to bring in their ideas, perspectives and imagination.</p>
4.4	<p>In 2014, a case-study research process investigated if this arts-based process managed to engage the public in reflection about end of life issues, and in doing so improve literacy about the demands of death and dying. The research team contextualised the work, examined the views of the creative team and stakeholders, and analysed the responses that audiences made. They also interpreted why the project was significant in the local community arts landscape, how it contributed to ongoing attempts to develop and gauge participatory art work and the gaps that needed to be addressed.</p>
4.5	<p>In developing the work, Drama Box’s Artistic Director, Kok Heng Leun was responding to a need for art that encouraged deep listening. This empathy was achieved, evidenced by audiences’ responses which demonstrated that the process of open communication and consideration for others’ perspectives encouraged deeper reflections. However, while participants were positively impacted by the process, Dr Rajendran highlighted the need to consider those who were less or not willing to participate, to balance difference sensitivities, and posited that longitudinal studies</p>

¹ Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”.

<p>4.6</p> <p>4.7</p> <p>4.8</p>	<p>could be carried out with the various parties involved to examine the long term impact of the process on artists, producers, stakeholders and guides. This could in turn provide insights on the impact of the arts on individuals.</p> <p>While it would be naïve to expect an arts programme to resolve social issues, the arts activities were shown, however, to help build identity, encourage critical thinking and develop empathy.</p> <p>While <i>Both Sides, Now</i> allowed for open dialogue around real concerns about death and dying, the lack of essential resources, such as affordable palliative care and medical advice, to those who require them, could exacerbate tension and feelings of helplessness when discussing this issue. To mindfully build collaborative, supportive and engaged dialogue, artists who dialogue on such sensitive issues should be well-prepared and informed.</p> <p>Backgrounded by pragmatism, preparing for mortality and loss is often viewed as inconvenient in Singapore. To strengthen the role of <i>Both Sides, Now</i> in larger social dialogue on end of life issues, this existing research could be furthered through longitudinal studies to inform societal gaps in knowledge and understanding.</p>
	<p>Q&A Facilitator: Dr Sharon Chang, Chief Research Officer, NAC</p>
<p>4.9</p>	<p>Pigeonhole: <i>Were there ethnic differences in the public’s responses to death and dying? How do you plan to communicate what you have learnt to the key stakeholders, and how do you keep this dialogue going after the event?</i></p> <p>Dr Rajendran: Ethnic, language and religious differences came up often, especially as a means of response. Observing that English and Mandarin were the most common language used, the team felt it necessary to enlarge that scope, and step away from the initial intent to focus on the Chinese community, who regard death as a taboo topic.</p> <p>When the piece was re-staged in 2017-2019, variations to the characters’ ethnicity highlighted to audiences the similarities, rather than differences, between how different ethnic groups dealt with the issue. Nonetheless, apart from ethnicity, generational differences would be another aspect to navigate.</p> <p>To sustain dialogue on the work, the research findings have been shared with a range of stakeholders in health care, government, social services, and the arts. [Ngiam Su-Lin from ArtsWok added that these stakeholders are regularly engaged in conversations to support people on the ground doing this work and the production team also participates in policy discussions on this issue through the Institute of Policy Studies.]</p>

4.10	<p>Pigeonhole: <i>How would you measure the longitudinal impact of Both Sides, Now on participants?</i></p> <p>Dr Rajendran: This question requires more expertise, particularly if there is a quantitative aspect included as I am a qualitative researcher. A longitudinal research process would need to engage the artists and stakeholders involved, as well as the community. This would need to be centred on conversations with the parties involved in the work, whether in the production or as participants, to understand if they had become more conscious about the need to have conversations around such difficult topics. It would also need to understand the ways in which the production took on a life of its own after it was staged.</p>
4.11	<p>Pigeonhole: <i>Are there specific examples of how the research informed subsequent iterations of Both Sides, Now as it continues to be restaged?</i></p> <p>Dr Rajendran: The most significant change was the involvement of seniors in the community in the creation of the work during the 2017-2019 staging. The works that were exhibited belonged to the people who were living in the community, and they were visibly part of the works. While there had to be more time and effort invested by both the organisers and seniors from the community, the seniors, too, shared their sense of pride with their friends and families when taking them to the exhibitions.</p>