The Maker's Assembly: Conversations

Sustaining the Maker's Practice: A Review of Our Personal Practices

10 March 2022, 8pm – 10pm
(Zoom Session)

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Preface

About The Maker's Assembly: Conversations

The Maker's Assembly: Conversations rounds up *The Maker's Assembly 2022*, an initiative by The Finger Players to gather like-minded makers to discuss and exchange ideas.

The topic of "*Sustaining the maker's practice: A review of our personal practices*" expands upon the theme of Puppetry and Sustainability and furthers the conversation started in 2020 where we discussed the climate of making in Singapore. In this iteration, we hope to reflect upon our personal practices and consider how we, as individuals or communities, can continue to sustain the maker's practice within our arts industries.

Attendees

The persons who attended *The Maker's Assembly: Conversations* were as follows (in alphabetical order):

1. Auderia Tan
2. Bib Mockram
3. Chan Silei
4. Daniel Sim (Organiser)
5. Jean Low
6. Joyce Gan
7. Junior Foong
8. Liew Jia Yi
9. Lee Yew Jin
10. Myra Loke (Organiser)
11. Oliver Chong
12. Petrina Dawn Tan
13. Regina Foo
14. Tan Beng Tian
15. Timothy Lucas Tan
16. Victoria Lim (Moderator)

The session was documented by Tanya Ang.

Programme Rundown

On 10 March 2022, our programme was as follows:

8pm – 8.20pm	Introduction to TMA and TMA:C
8.20pm – 8.30pm	Sharing of survey results
	Framing structure of small group discussions
8.30pm – 9pm	Small-group discussions
9pm – 9.20pm	Group sharing of their discussions
9.20pm – 9.50pm	Free response amongst participants
9.50pm – 10pm	Conclusion

Pre-Programme Survey

Prior to our session on 10 March 2022, we sent out a survey to find out about the challenges faced by makers in Singapore theatre. We had **25 respondents**, some of whom were unavailable to attend the online session. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Name
2. In which of your previous roles in the arts have you made performance objects?
3. What are the three aspects of making that you value most in your practice?
   - Health and safety
   - Cost management
   - Time management
   - Mastery of making skills
   - Climate-friendly materials and techniques
   - Accountability to hirers
   - Communication
   - Others
4. Which aspect of making do you think makers lack most in understanding?
5. How do you think the maker community can further address the issue mentioned above?
6. Within your personal practice, what would you like to improve most urgently? How do you think that can be possible?

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Based on survey results, the following four categories were identified for discussion:

- **Cost and Time Management**
- **Mastery of Making Skills**
- **Communication**
- **Health and Safety**

Cost & Time Management

Survey Findings

<u>Tight budgets and timelines</u>

- When budget and timeline is tight, people still feel pressured to deliver their best anyway due to makers taking pride in their own work.

<u>Negotiating fees and timelines</u>

- Negotiation process is unclear and employers have all the power.

- This stems from the lack of knowledge on how to charge.

- Makers sometimes do not have the confidence to gauge how much time is needed for the work to be done, hence unable to provide an ideal hourly rate.

<u>How do we support the arts and ourselves?</u>

- Make Rate Cards a standard practice across the industry will not only protect makers but also encourage hirers to be transparency and fair.

- Encourage makers to speak up and document work process so that other non-makers would also understand the plights and challenges faced by the makers community.

- Have open discussions with makers in the community to brainstorm and share past experiences.

Guiding Questions

- Where in cost or time management do you feel most lacking in?

- What steps can we take besides relying on change driven by the client or hirer?

Discussion

In the discussion with regards to time and cost management, some of the solutions brought up by respondents include:

<u>Allowing time for experimentation</u>

- Experimentation in making is a vital process not only for new makers to learn but also for makers to discover what is the best method/materials to use to ensure the best outcome.

- However, the experimental process can be unpredictable and may take longer than usual. How then can we communicate this delay in timeline without damaging our reputation?

- Hence, it is important to understand the types of clients/hirers we work with:
    - Clients who understand how makers work.
    - Clients who do not understand but they willing to learn.
    - Clients who do not understand and do not want to care.

- By understanding the types of clients makers are working with, we will be able to communicate and negotiate to include experimentation as part of the project timeline.

- Another suggestion brought up is to have companies to consider having full time makers:
    - Having full time makers allow companies to provide time to train the makers.
    - However, full time arrangements might mean higher cost for the companies.

Terms & Conditions

- Having Terms & Conditions clearly communicated at the beginning of the project may also help clients to understand and be more receptible to the maker's process.

- Also, it encourages makers to safeguard themselves by communicating their base rates and how cost may be added on during the process when the making process becomes extended due to various factors.

Maker's guild

- Setting up a maker's guild builds a community amongst makers to consult each other in their making process.

- The guild can be a form of resource for new makers. Some of the things that new makers can consult includes:
    - How to determine base rates?
    - How long does specific methods of making take?
    - Which materials could be the best in making specific objects?

- One example would be **@citrus.practices**
    - CITRUS stands for Care, Intimacy, TRaUma-informed and Safer practices in the arts.
    - The group comprises of various art workers who are interested in cultivating better practices in artmaking in Singapore.
    - They have a Library of Care, an online resource of practical concepts and tools around care in artmaking processes.

Mastery of Making Skills

Survey Findings

Desire to improve making skills

- Although makers would like to master their making skills, they sometimes do not know where to go or where to find an appropriate mentor.

- Sometimes makers also feel that they are not 'good enough' for a project that demands specific skills.

- Apart from hard skills such as making, the respondents have also indicated their desire to gain soft skills such as collaborating and experimenting with others.

- Makers also expressed that the lack of time, space, community and funding (both personal and within the project) are the predominant circumstances that hinder makers from mastering their skills.

Materials

- The lack of time in a project usually means that many makers would prefer to stick with their favoured materials and methods since they do not have time to experiment.

- Makers also tend to use materials that are most readily available to them but there could be a more suitable material or method in achieving the end product that the maker is not aware of.

Environmental Impact

- Some of the materials and the methods used by makers tend to create a lot of wastage resulting in costs to the environment.

- Apart from mastering skills, makers should also think or learn about how else they can be more environmentally responsible in their practices.

Guiding Questions

- What prevents you from mastering a particular skill or material?

- What would help you do it? What resources, attitudes?

- Is mastery of a specific skill or material needed for personal success? Who else would individual mastery benefit?

Discussion

Due to the absence of a few participants, the participants who were initially assigned to this topic for were reassigned to a different group to allow for livelier conversations. Hence, there was no direct discussion on the topic of *Mastery of Making Skills*.

Communication

Survey Findings

Mismatched expectations

- Difficulty getting on same page as collaborators:
  - Different departments (in charge of different design elements) tend to lock designs at different points which results in inconsistent outcomes.
  - Makers and performers do not understand one another's work and processes well enough.

- Communication breakdown between client/employer and maker
  - There are mismatched expectations of the design and fabrication, as well as the job scope which was not ironed out at the beginning of the project.
  - Such miscommunications might result in missed milestones and burst budgets.

Possible solutions to avoid miscommunications

- Share good practices with clear templates and effective processes with each other in the makers community.

- Encourage a more organized and conducive creative process.

- Encourage an attitude shift to want to understand each other's limitations and considerations.

Guiding Questions

- Where does communication break down the most?
- What immediate action can we, as makers, take?

Discussion

Relationship between makers and performers

- Performers are sometimes fearful or hesitant to interact with the object or reflect on their experience with the object.

- It might be due to the hierarchical structure of a production where performers are expected to communicate directly with directors in fear of overstepping boundaries
  - If this is the case, do directors understand the process of making to be an effective mediator between performers and makers?

- Also, makers are often not present in the rehearsal room. This would result in the maker not understanding how their made objects are being used.

  - Without having a first-hand observation, the feedback for the makers would often have gone through multiple channels, such as through Stage Manager, or rehearsal reports, which might result in miscommunication.

- Hence, it is important for makers to be included in the rehearsal process during the course of the production.

Who hired the maker?

- Oftentimes, the maker is hired by the producer where the direct line of communication for the maker is through the producer.
  - Such communications between the maker and the producer may not be known to the director or other creative departments.

- The practice of the maker is undoubtedly creative which heavily affects the other creative departments, such as lighting, sound, costumes, etc.
  - By segregating the maker's process from the rest of the creative departments, this may result in miscommunication, where each department has different expectations, and discrepancies of the final outcome.

- That being said, the producer or director cannot impose how involved makers should be in the other creative processes or in rehearsal room as this involves additional time for the maker.

- Hence, it is important for the maker to initiate communication with other creatives and producers on how the maker would like to be involved in other departments so that their process of making can be most optimal.

<u>Definition of roles</u>

- The role of 'a maker' is sometimes not clearly defined, complicating how the maker is involved in a production.

- The role of 'a maker' can include various expectations of coordinating, designing, making, or varying combinations of the previous three aspects. The varying definitions of 'a maker' impact the companies' expectations of the maker's involvement in the creative process. For example, a props coordinator is usually understood to not be needed at creative meetings as opposed to a designer who has to be present.

- In such cases, it is essential to take initiative to communicate with other creatives on your involvement and whether you are required to be present in the creative process so as to streamline the maker's process.

Health & Safety

Survey Findings

<u>Low priority</u>

- Health and safety for the makers is often the lowest priority in a project.

<u>Unsafe working environments</u>

- Makers have little to no support and infrastructure for health and safety in projects.

- More often than not, makers are working in informal and not purpose-built working environments:
    - There is no designated working space within a company. Makers are often made to borrow spaces (e.g. workshops) by linking up with others who may have the infrastructure.
    - There is also a lack of consistent working space. Sometimes, costumes and set makers may have a designated working space, but prop makers might have to find other obscure places to work (i.e. green room or along corridors)

<u>Tight timelines and budgets</u>

- The pressure to complete projects with a tight timeline and budget would result in corners being cut which forces makers to take unsafe alternatives.

Guiding Questions

- What are the gaps in health & safety in your practice?
- How do we solve that? What do we need?

Discussion

Mental Health

- More often than not, health and safety are always discussed with physical health involved. However, mental wellness also contributes significantly to the safety in the maker's practice.

- As freelancers working with low budgets, makers are sometimes required to take on multiple projects at the same time. However, juggling multiple projects would also mean tighter deadlines, hence makers might sometimes feel burnt out and overworked thus leading to mental fatigue.

- Even within a project/production, timelines may already be tight since timelines are usually arranged based on the amount of budget we have, or in favour of the directors and performer's process. Hence, it is essential to relook at the way the project timeline is managed/arranged in consideration of the makers' and designers' work process.

Toxic working environments

- Apart from tight timelines, toxic environments is also another factor which contributes to the overall mental health and safety of the makers.

- Sometimes expectations from superiors/clients could be unreasonable due to the pressure of producing quality work within tight timelines. If work is not delivered within expectations, the makers would risk not being hired again.
    - How can we advocate for ourselves without being blacklisted?

- Makers would sometimes feel that there is no one looking out for them within such a working environment where little support is provided.

- Once again, it is important to communicate and set clear boundaries to safeguard yourself at the beginning of the project.
    - Setting boundaries also means knowing what your own skillset and limits are.

Free Response

Free Response

At the end of session, the participants were also invited to share any additional thoughts regarding the topics mentioned above. Below are some of the responses:

<u>Fair practices in budgeting and payments</u>

- Often, hirers/clients set the tone of how makers work. The budget of the project is one of the examples where makers do not have access to.

- Available budget of the production should be transparently communicated to makers so that it is conducive for both parties to set realistic expectations of what can or cannot be done by the maker.

- When there are budget constraints, makers should also be given the agency to communicate what areas needs to be compromised in order to achieve certain objectives. Makers should also have negotiating powers in this aspect.

<u>Setting boundaries and standards</u>

- When setting boundaries, there are always a fear of repercussion in saying 'no' as an individual. Will saying 'no' too many times lead to clients eventually stop hiring?

- Setting an industry standard that is collectively agreed upon as a community would help to safeguard one another. This will prevent undercutting by hirers/clients or other makers.

- When projects are especially vague, makers should first be clear of your own boundaries – such as knowing your skill sets and what they are capable of helping. Makers can then take the initiative to suggest a comfortable timeline and job scope.

- Producers and other stakeholders should also be educated on the makers' process so that they can be realistic in their expectations when engaging makers.

END OF REPORT