

Embodied Futurities: Alecia Neo's Socially Engaged Art Practice with Caregivers in Singapore

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Abstract

This article began as a critical essay of the same title, *Embodied Futurities*, commissioned to accompany the exhibition of the performance project and video installation *Between Earth and Sky* (2018-) by Singaporean artist and cultural worker Alecia Neo. Working with a community of caregivers of persons with mental illness and degenerative disease in Singapore, Neo's work and this article connect the physicality of care work and carer-choreographed movements as forms of embodied praxis. This article focuses on the co-created work by Neo, the Caregivers Alliance (CAL) caregivers, and the movement artists, as guided by Neo's commitment to socially-oriented art, a school of practice that seeks to problematise traditional models of authorship or creatorship through dialogic or collaborative processes. Neo's socially engaged artworks are situated in this article as forms of public pedagogy.

Embodied Futurities engages participatory ethnographic methods to develop a critical arts writing model which advocates for enhancing polyvocality in both art-making and critical discourse around work. Exploring art-making; movement as autopoiesis (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994); living with mental illness and degenerative disease; the act and arc of caregiving; and the everyday choreography of survival (Cox, 2015), this article's focal points are drawn from the perspectives voiced by caregivers. *Embodied Futurities* explores how *Between Earth and Sky* posits and reorients the body as a site for expression rather than maintenance, re-envision the potential of community support networks, and considers the possibilities of self-care for carers for whom mutuality may seem remote.

Keywords

care, socially engaged art, movement, advocacy

An intimate portrait of a community of caregivers presented through a performance project and installation, *Between Earth and Sky* (2018–) seeks to make visible the contributions and needs of caregivers of persons with mental illness and degenerative disease. *Between Earth and Sky* features videos of movement pieces and fabric kites by Singaporean artist and cultural worker Alecia Neo and members of the Caregivers Alliance (CAL), a non-profit organisation in Singapore. Neo, movement coaches Sharda Harrison and Ajuntha Anwari, and the CAL members worked together to create a series of movement pieces, which expressed the embodied experiences of caregiving, honed through a movement workshop. This article began as a critical essay of the same title, *Embodied Futurities*, commissioned to accompany the exhibition of the installation. Neo's work and this article both connect the physicality of care work and carer-choreographed movements as forms of embodied praxis. Beyond the work's exhibition as an art piece, through the workshop and creation of individual movement pieces, Neo and collaborators present the possibility of integrating a movement practice into the caregivers' future techniques of caring for their loved ones and for themselves, both palliatively and creatively.

Neo works in socially engaged art, which often seeks to problematise traditional models of authorship through dialogic or collaborative processes (Pillai, 2019; Chu, 2013; Kester, 2016). This article delves into Neo's foregrounding of reciprocity and co-production in her practice, as reflected in *Between Earth and Sky*, as well as her related work, *Care Index* (2020–). Disentangling altruism from advocacy, Neo holds that all parties involved stand to learn and benefit from working together, and highlights transparency about her own artistic investments in the project and personal takeaways from working with CAL.

This article began as a critical essay produced upon invitation of the artist to respond to *Between Earth and Sky* from when it was a work-in-progress till the time of its exhibition. As this invitation came mid-way through the project's preparation, I used participatory ethnographic methods in service of embedded criticism, relying on both engaged research and existing project documentation. The methodology and stakes of embedded criticism were informed by Maddy Costa's work in *The Critic as Insider* in which she draws on first-hand experience as a theatre critic "to build up an argument in favour of critics interacting with works in development" (Costa, 2016, p. 202), advocating for polyvocality in both art-making and critical discourse around artwork. I worked with video footage distinct from the completed film projection and interview transcripts collected by Neo's team members Chelsea Chua and Gracie Teo during the preparatory phases of the project. I then conducted follow-up interviews and engaged with participant observation with the caregivers and artists and interacted with the installation in its finished form in several iterations to produce a critical reflection of *Between Earth and Sky*.

As an ethnographic researcher who engaged with *Between Earth and Sky* to produce the critical essay that accompanied its touring exhibitions (beginning in 2018) and who has continued to collaborate with Neo in various capacities on another of her works *Care Index* (2020–), I also discuss Neo's projects in this article in order to situate these socially engaged artworks as forms of public pedagogy (Charman & Dixon, 2021; Sandlin et al., 2010; Pillai, 2014). Engaging with Neo's work, I seek to explore how socially engaged art practice, also referred to as social practice (Sanders-Bustle, 2019; Sholette et al., 2018), community-based arts (Pillai, 2014) or community arts (Lee & Sim, 2017; Trivic et al., 2020) can at once be a socially and relationally centred mode of artistic production, and an arts-based approach to public education and advocacy. Here, I examine how Neo's practice is oriented around working with communities over time in service of collaboratively

finding an expressive medium that furnishes public understandings of their experiences. In the case of *Between Earth and Sky*, Neo worked with the CAL members during this year-long project, to produce an installation allowing audiences to witness carers' embodied relationships to caregiving, encompassing its complexities and challenges.



Figure 1: Tea session during workshop practice at Pink Gajah with Ajuntha Anwari. (Courtesy of Alecia Neo).



Figure 2: Workshop practice at Pink Gajah with Sharda Harrison and Alecia Neo. (Courtesy of Alecia Neo).

Circulating knowledge about caregiving and mental health in Singapore

Due to continued stigmatisation and a lack of understanding of the nuances and realities of the experiences of persons with mental illness and degenerative disease are often opaque to society at large. According to a survey released in September 2018 by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the first of its kind commissioned in Singapore, most Singaporeans agree that more needs to be done to reduce societal stigma, but are also reluctant to proffer acceptance, much less understanding, on a personal basis.¹ Just as opaque, however, are the daily lives and inner worlds of the people who choose to care for them. Caregivers provide direct care to persons who are ill, disabled, or need help with daily activities and often do so as full-time livelihoods, making social and economic compromises to do so. They can often be lionised as unrealistically selfless and endlessly forbearing or questioned for their refusal to delegate the role of caregiving to professionals. The CAL members involved in this project choose to personally provide support for their loved ones. Drawing from their stories and reflecting the often routinised and physical nature of the act of caregiving, *Between Earth and Sky* seeks insights into the nature of caregiving through movement. In doing so, it also sheds light on many of the emotions and sensations generated by the long haul of caregiving, which lies in an excess of expressivity.

According to Sharon Gan, a former cluster head at CAL who serves as a psychiatric rehabilitation practitioner and senior counsellor, service gaps in the mental health and caregiving sector include a lack of respite and residential mental health services to help stressed-out caregivers when they need a break from caregiving. Gan notes that most caregivers are not forthcoming about sharing their challenges as they bear shame from the stigma of mental illness and therefore believe that the arts can be a powerful advocacy and recovery tool (2018). *Between Earth and Sky* is an interjection into this conversation that seeks to transcend the challenges of conventional articulation, facilitating expression and fostering support through bringing together a community of caregivers and artist advocates.

The physicality of care work is seldom acknowledged or critically examined. *Between Earth and Sky* draws an explicit connection between care work and personally choreographed movement as forms of body practice. Emphasis is then drawn towards the potential of physical movements for expressivity beyond functionality. In using the body as a central axis for expression rather than as a tool, attention is momentarily (re)centred on the caregiver who has long learned to bear weight but may have forgotten how to give weight. The movement and voice workshops were therefore designed to aid the caregivers in processing and harnessing their lived experiences in unfamiliar but potentially helpful ways, culminating in self-choreographed performances guided by Neo, who documented and wove the pieces of the performance together with photography and video for the installation. Rather than seeking to narrativise or dramatise trajectories that often do not follow a strict teleology, the works in this piece form a tapestry of the heterogeneous nature of caregiving,

¹ While it is difficult to represent, much less quantitatively sum up, the experience of living with mental illness in Singapore and its accompanying social stigmatisation, this survey provides some context for what is faced by the members of CAL and their loved ones. More than five in 10 respondents in a recent survey indicated they are unwilling to live with, live nearby or work with a person with a mental health condition (Ng, 2018). In the survey of 1,796 people conducted in 2017, six in 10 people said they believe that mental health conditions are caused by a lack of self-discipline and willpower, while half believe that persons with mental health conditions should not be given any responsibility (Ng, 2018). Yet seven in 10 respondents acknowledged that persons with mental health conditions experience stigma and discrimination in their daily lives, and eight in 10 said they believe the best therapy is for them to be included in society (Ng, 2018).

surfacing the repetition, frustration, tenderness, tedium, discovery, ambivalence, improvisation, intimacy, and commitment between those who care and those they care for.

Between Earth and Sky circulates knowledge of the complexities of caregiving in Singapore through its exhibition in various shows around the topic of care and mental health.² This not only places Neo's work in conversation with other artists working on aligned projects, but contextualises the work by the caregivers amongst a range of perspectives, inviting solidarities between marginalised groups and communities caring and cared for. In addition, these shows draw and educate audiences who are seeking to learn more about the issues of caregiving, disability and illness. Further, Neo's subsequent work which builds on *Between Earth and Sky* allows for even greater possibilities for participation and exchange with publics who encounter her work. Neo envisions her follow-up project *Care Index* (2020–)³ as an “experimental platform that collects and features diverse practices of care performed by people from all walks of life.” It encompasses a repository of open submissions of videos from the public, live and digital workshops, and a series of scores “where movements can be translated and reinterpreted by the audience, potentially offering tools for resistance and transference of sensations of well-being and aliveness to others” (Neo, 2022). Further, some of the CAL members have continued to collaborate with Neo beyond *Between Earth and Sky*, participating in the *Care Index* open call⁴ and co-facilitating *Scores of Caregiving*⁵ a public workshop at ArtScience Museum. These sustained and emergent collaborations foster an evolving network of reflective and embodied expression on care. This work has importance in the sphere of public pedagogy, both in terms of the possibility of immersive learning for members of the public, as well as for its positioning caregivers who are non-professional as artist-creators. Scholars of public pedagogy Karen Charman and Mary Dixon write about projects in which “members of the public are invited to move from their place in the membership of the public into the space of the professionals/the institution as curators and citizen researchers respectively” (Charman & Dixon 2021, p. 22), and indeed this project situates the caregivers as citizen artists within cultural institutions and spaces, as well as experts of their own embodied practice.

Embodied understandings of care in *Between Earth and Sky*

The *Between Earth and Sky* installation consists of two primary components, a video projection, and bamboo kites with photography-printed fabric. The video work, shot in collaboration with director of photography Khairul Amin and edited by Neo, features the CAL members performing solo or duet movement pieces developed during movement workshops. Over the course of the year-long project, Neo collaborated with movement artists Sharda Harrison and Ajuntha Anwari to design

² *MENTAL: Colours of Wellbeing* (ArtScience Museum, Singapore, 2022); “*Traces on Caring*” (National University of Singapore, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Virtual Conference, 2021); the *Singapore Mental Health Film Festival* (The Projector, Singapore, 2019); and “*Personally Speaking: The Art of Caregiving*” (Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film, Jurong National Library, and Punggol Oasis, Singapore, 2018).

³ *Care Index* is an on-going artistic research project on embodied care, performed through everyday gestures and rituals initiated by Neo. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Singapore propelled Care Index, into being, as Neo sought a way of listening to our own bodies and attuning to internal rhythms and wished to take stock of shared experience of a global pandemic through open call submissions (Neo, 2022).

⁴ Caregivers Carol Ee and Alvyana Han also served as two of the lead artists creating movement scores for a Care Index workshop for the 2021 Listening Biennial.

⁵ Caregivers Alvyana Han, Carol Ee, Frank M and Nur Hidayah co-facilitated [Scores of Caregiving](#) with artist Alecia Neo at the ArtScience Museum, as part of the closing programme of the exhibition *MENTAL: Colours of Wellbeing*.

movement and voice workshops to aid the caregivers in processing and harnessing their lived experiences, culminating in self-choreographed performances.

The video projection of *Between Earth and Sky* features movement pieces by participating caregivers: Nur Hidayah and Sulis; L.M.; Janet Koh Hui Kheng; Ng Sook Cheng; Carol Ee; Frank M.; Rita Minjoot; and Alvyna Han.⁶ Beginning with scenes of domestic life, the video of the caregivers moving and attuning to their embodied senses shifts into depictions of them moving in and through other contexts such as nature and cityscapes. They move slowly and contemplatively to internal rhythms; some of their movements adopt gestural tropes that suggest nurturing, while other movements are more hesitant and exploratory. At times, they perform the act of trying to breathe. Many of their movements, seemingly when recalling daily physical tasks, suggest the activation of muscle memory of practised caregivers. Neo's technique of intercutting the movement footage draws out the mirrored movements amongst the group, demonstrating solidarities and common understanding amongst the group, as well as the routinized nature of care work.

The final two minutes of the ten-minute video dwells on the scene of carer Janet Koh Hui Kheng's life at home with her elderly mother. The soundscape blends the music that Koh moves to with the audio of her mother's television, which plays in the background. Even as Koh seeks expression through movement beneath an orange sheet with which she has covered her entire body in the kitchen, her mother's presence in the nearby living room remains on her mind. Koh is first shown crouched over on the kitchen floor under the translucent sheet, which is a caregiving tool called a slide transfer sheet which Koh uses to move her mother from bed to wheelchair. Koh rises as she casts the sheet slowly off her head and onto her shoulders. She proceeds to sweep it behind her like a cape as she moves with intention through the kitchen and into the living room, draping it over herself and her mother, who is lying on a recliner. She bends to soothe her mother who appears to be having a moment of distress, then straightens and looks into the camera before looking down at her now restful mother, and the video cuts to black. Koh's work conveys the never ceasing nature of being a caregiver to a person in need. Her attempts to move through space are directed not only by the purpose of caring for her mother, but by her own expression.

Between Earth and Sky also features bamboo kites as part of the installation, which are symbolic of both vulnerability and freedom. Created by Neo as a response to caregiver accounts, a total of fourteen kites shaped like shields were crafted to feature close-ups of clothing belonging to each caregiver and their loved one. The materiality of the kites, and the everyday interconnection forged through the association of clothing, bring another layer into the performance that is nonetheless connected to the body. Constructed with sheer fabrics in muted blues, greys, and skin tones, the kites float over the work as audiences view the video works, bringing an atmosphere of gentle abeyance which holds both the tenderness and ambivalent 'greys' of caregiving. As the kites are also flown by the caregivers during certain iterations of the work's exhibition, they may be viewed as representative of alternative futurities of caregivers and the realities of persons with mental illness and degenerative disease, as surrogates taking flight where their bodies cannot yet go.

As *Between Earth and Sky* is a multi-sited and multimedia project, its form also productively challenges "art's own negotiation of its existence and its reality in the world" (Chu, 2013, p. 23) including the durative component of the creation process. The choreography process, for starters, took place in both the movement workshops and the caregivers' subsequent personal choreographies

⁶ Names have been listed in order of appearance, and as they wish to be credited.

that were documented by Neo. While the edited movement pieces were shown on the video and Neo's handcrafted kites displayed as part of the piece, these two elements did not remain static in their relation to each other or become finalised as material outcomes of the project to be exhibited. As part of the roving art show *Personally Speaking: The Art of Caregiving*, the project was exhibited around Singapore first at Oasis Terraces in Punggol and Jurong Regional Library before landing at Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film. During a celebratory tea session during the work's opening at Oasis Terraces, Neo and the caregivers who created the work took the kites down from the exhibition space and flew them at the open space next to it. I too participated in kite-flying. Till this point, I had thought of the video components and the kites as separate elements, but as I joined in with the caregivers and Neo, cheered each other on, and helped each other's kites catch wind by throwing them into the air. The kites afforded another act of shared movement and demonstrated the consistent relational and emotional components of solidarity and possibility that flowed through the other stages of this project. As the kite-flying was also photographed by Neo and Objectifs staff members for the exhibition, the act of creating came around once again even after the project's presumptive completion.



Figure 3: Documentation of kite flying sessions outdoors during the 'Personally Speaking: The Art of Caregiving' exhibition period. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

The choreography of daily caregiving

In *Between Earth and Sky*, the caregivers' choreography of daily caregiving is translated and enacted through their self-directed movement pieces. These movement pieces draw out what cultural anthropologist and dancer Aimee Meredith Cox calls the "everyday choreography of survival," a term referring to the aesthetic practice for self-expression as well as a theoretical framework that defines the subtle movements of negotiating a life fraught with structural and day-to-day challenges (Cox, 2015). Cox bridges the quotidian practices that form the foundation of lives shaped by social and structural inequity, manoeuvres of nonconformity, and acts of dreaming as creative acts of

navigation and choreography that are necessary for survival. While the subjective forces faced by CAL members and their loved ones are much different from those experienced by the communities with whom Cox works,⁷ the term carries powerful weight when considered in both the context of mental illness and degenerative disease, and long-term caregiving as everyday calibrations and strategies of living out their realities. This is exemplified by the reflections of caregiver and contributor Frank M.:

[The movement exercises] gave me a better understanding of what I've been going through, which I've been hiding all this while. So when I came out to do all these gestures and movements, I thought it was like a dance. But actually, it's not just a dance. Initially I was thinking I must be able to dance to do this, but actually, no. It's the movements we're trying to capture. What your inner feelings are trying to tell you. (M., 2018).

As Frank M.'s framing of his compositional process shows, transposing everyday emotions and embodied experience into movement provides a non-verbal vocabulary and deeper self-knowledge for the caregivers. M. says of his movement piece:

Here I'm trying to tell you that I'm in deep waters... I'm walking on difficult terrain, on difficult ground, where I feel all the pins and needles. I'm showing that I'm trying to balance my family, my career, my family, my wife, everything. I should keep this balance and not tilt it [too much to one side] and cause a disaster. And what keeps you going is always faith and trust. (M., 2018).

In the first video section featuring Frank M., he stands with his back facing the camera by the water's edge and dons a matte white masquerade mask which obscures face. In the next, he rises from a foetal position onto his knees, adopting a supplicating pose and pointing his upturned palms towards the sky. Frank's plaintive gestures at once reflect the difficult struggles of balance he faces, and his seeking a restorative faith which will carry him through it.



Figure 4: Documentation of participating caregiver Frank M's performance. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

⁷ Cox's *Shapeshifters, Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* shows the ways in which young people of colour in the U.S. manage their lives in under-resourced and overly policed environments.

Breaking down the act of choreography into minute navigations rather than a sweeping dance, *Between Earth and Sky* aids audiences of the work in confronting the truer reality of the acts of improvisation and getting by in daily life, disrupting more dominant notions of heroism and noble intentions of caregiving. Focusing on routines can show how caregiving lies in habituated activities and suggests that we can look to the patterning and embodiment of habituated actions in general to understand the values people enact and how they maintain social worlds through the physical practices of providing for others. Only with attention to the mundane, the banal, the everyday can we begin to piece together a semblance of the lived experiences of caregiving, reflected through the subtlest of gestures (Aulino, 2016, p. 93).

Situating complexities of care

The contemporary usage of the English word ‘care’ may contribute to the tendency to assume a correspondence between particular internal states, such as feeling affection or being concerned (care about), and the act of best providing for another (to care for). Yet presumptively emphasising the ‘right’ emotional or attentive orientation can lead to ignoring the possibility that caregivers experience ambivalence or struggles at points, even though they undeniably love the ones they care for (Aulino, 2016, p. 99). Exertions, gestures, and voice work within a piece of movement can thereby allow caregivers to express emotions that they would normally not be comfortable articulating or even admitting consciously. As caregiver and creator Carol Ee shared:

[These performances] also send light to our frustration, when we are dealing with a difficult situation. We have our blind spots when dealing with our loved one. We can’t see or think logically at times and most of the time our reactions involve our own emotions. When I am telling a story, I’m able to see myself, from a third person point of view, rather than just me and my loved one.” (Ee, 2018).

Carol here demonstrates how movement practice can create a self-narrative that lifts out of a selfhood defined by the caregiving relationship.



Figure 5: Documentation of participating caregiver Carol Ee’s performance. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

Movement practice can also provide a reprieve by temporarily creating an alternate, even a normalising sense of space and time for caregivers. In everyday existence, temporal experiencing mutates when sheer physical and metaphysical demands ground mentally ill persons and their caretakers in the present moment, requiring a disproportionate attention to the here and now. Through creative expression and manipulation of the body, caregivers experience an alternative modality that brings about new perspectives to what they are often too pressed up against to see beyond. Further insight can be gleaned from an embodied sense of balance.

Here, I draw on the notion of autopoiesis, which identifies movement as a key modality of creative practice but can also be used to understand caregiving in how it ropes in the body into the forces of the work. As set forth by Deleuze and Guattari:

creation and self-positing mutually imply each other because what is truly created, from the living being to the work of art, thereby enjoys a self-positing of itself, or an autopoietic characteristic by which it is recognised. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 11).

The physical routine of the caregiver, rendered as ritual, provides insight into a phenomenological reality that escapes forms of referential meaning and instead brings to light an important way of being in and understanding the world (Aulino, 2016, p. 93). The self-constitutive nature of an autopoietic movement practice has further resonance in the at-times weighty necessity of generating and maintaining a fragile wholeness and constancy as a caregiver for mentally ill persons. Moving through the performance and lived space alike, the body is the constant that interpolates, that moves and is moved, is halted, is unsettled, is vulnerable, is subject/ed to. Through the workshops and subsequent performances of *Between Earth and Sky*, the movement is explored as a way of ownership and self-authorship that instantiates and creates yet cedes to flow and force.

At the same time, the recuperative gesture of remapping personhood through expression, pleasure, calibration, and catharsis through a movement practice cannot stop short at the individuated process in this project. While undeniably worthwhile for fostering the wellbeing of caregivers, the caregivers' reality is inextricably tied to that of the loved one they care for. Within the paradigm of the project, too, the movement of the caregiver always circulates the awareness of the relational practice at the heart of their role. As caregiver Janet Koh Hui Kheng says:

Caring is to focus on what a person with dementia can still do or feel, not just on what they might have lost. This will help support my mother to live well with the condition. It's to see that there is a person behind dementia. Caring is to know and understand my mother better than dementia. It's seeing my loved one as separate from her condition and to value her more than the disease. Caring is to see that her behaviour, no matter how unreasonable it may seem, is due to the underlying disease and the changes it effects on the brain. It's to support her feelings, which is most important. I'm getting to know my mother all over again – building a new relationship. (Koh, 2018).

What is called for, then, is not a freewheeling solipsistic self-discovery or self-expression, but the drawing out of pockets of freedom, given the limitations of their reality, into fully-realised moments of humanity and truth. In fact, in the everyday choreography of survival, awareness and navigation of the limitations of the spaces that the body moves in produces meaning, highlighting the expertise and mastery in the care of both themselves and their loved ones.

Crucially, it is just as important to affirm the personhood of the caregiver as it is to uphold that of the ones they care for, particularly because of the dehumanisation faced by mentally ill persons and those with and degenerative disease in both social and discursive contexts. In the case of the

caregiver moving in the world, to posit and to generate is thus more like the grafting of two intimately entwined fully-fledged life forces, rather than the strict autopoiesis of one.



Figure 6: Janet Koh Hui Kheng, caregiver to her mother living with dementia, photographed together post-workshop. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

Alecia Neo's Socially Engaged Art Praxis

The school of practice of socially engaged art, which Neo works within, centres on dialogical and collaborative processes as a departure from and critique of traditional models of creatorship. Malaysian arts researcher, practitioner and activist Janet Pillai defines socially engaged arts as such:

Social-engaged arts practice is a new kind of public art where artists work on sustained creative practice with communities or groups of people within a social context with intention to bring about humanistic transformation or social change. It may be initiated by practitioners from a wide variety of arts: visual art, theater, media art, architecture, craft, and culinary art. Socially engaged arts practice in Asia today has multiple and hybrid manifestations ranging from collaborative performances and exhibitions with the community to public space activation, cocreation of

community festivals and events, or rejuvenation of community cultural assets and practices. (Pillai, 2019, p. 1)

Socially engaged art in Singapore falls under the wider umbrella of community arts, a term which can refer to art projects with a range of community involvement and ownership (Sim, 2014, p. 2). In the Singaporean context, its prominent usage dates back to a 2008 state planning report, which stated that “engaged community” was to be fostered through participatory artmaking with artists “to reflect community identity and heritage, address community issues, as well as enhance community bonding” (MCCY, 2008, p. 30). Singaporean policy and culture researchers Justin Lee and Sim Jui Liang emphasise the importance of understanding “the nature of arts and cultural policy and the history of state-supported community development in Singapore to fully appreciate the context within which local community artists operate.” (Lee & Sim, 2017, p. 392).

Of the Singaporean community arts landscape that has since developed, Lee and Sim observe the significant amount of interdependence between community members, artists, volunteer welfare organisations, and statutory boards like the National Arts Council and the People’s Association (Lee & Sim 2017, p. 403). Philanthropic foundations in Singapore have also increasingly entered this landscape as short or long-term partners for community arts projects, such as the Lien Foundation, which provided the funding for *Between Earth and Sky*. Even so, the Singaporean state remains the dominant funder and organiser of community arts, and concerns have arisen over the artistic autonomy of Singaporean community arts practitioners who navigate satisfying funding criteria defined by social policy (Lee & Sim, 2017, p. 402). Lee and Sim note of the 2008 report which ushered in the development of community arts:

[It] called for arts programs to be specific to the interests of groups such as the low-income families, elderly, youth, people with special needs and at-risk individuals. Another recommendation was to locate arts and cultural groups in the community, in amenities like the public libraries, shopping malls and community centers.’ (Lee & Sim, 2017, p. 395).⁸

Between Earth and Sky features caregivers of persons with mental illness and degenerative disease whose perspectives are marginalised, needs are underserved, and who also often face socio-economic hardship. Of its various exhibitions, one took place at a public library and another at a community gathering space in a public housing complex. These aspects of *Between Earth and Sky*, namely where it was exhibited and which members of the community it engages, recognizably resonate with some of the state-led goals for community arts in Singapore. Yet, I argue through further analysis of Neo’s work that her approach to artmaking with communities through socially engaged art is distinctive for its deep concern with honing praxis and reciprocity, beyond meeting benchmarks that may determine funding or recognition within the emergent field of community arts in Singapore.

As an active practitioner working in this modality in Singapore and the co-founder of *Brack*, a platform for socially engaged art, Neo’s work is in formal and informal dialogue with those of scholar-practitioners, actively shaping and reconstituting how social and community art practice is produced and discussed in Singapore. I will now discuss how socially engaged art or social practice critiques and challenges the institutions of art and education, beginning with the former.

⁸ For a comprehensive study of the evolution of the Singaporean state’s interest and thinking about the arts and culture as tracked through government reports, as well as situating the opportunities and constraints faced by socially engaged artists who have to work within a landscape of state-sponsored grassroots organisations and controlled community development in Singapore, (see Lee & Sim, 2017).

Malaysian artist, researcher and cultural producer Chu Chu Yuan, a frequent interlocutor of Neo's, notes that a dislocation of traditional notions of authorship has arisen. She highlights in particular the issues of autonomous or shared authorship, and problematises the ethical positionality of artists' interventions into the lives of collaborators (Chu, 2013, p. 20). As Filipino art theorist Pristine L. De Leon notes:

The term collaboration calls up an appearance of solidarity between agents with a shared objective. Deployed loosely, it implies a degree of consensus that tends to conflate divergent modes of coming together: through alliance, collective authorship, co-ownership, commissioning and patronage." (2021, p. 405).

Operating under reflexive consciousness of this "appearance of solidarity" as De Leon puts it, Chu's work addresses conceptions of the artist-collaborator relationship in hopes of moving beyond one where the artist is the facilitator, to one in which the artist is equally invested, entangled and exposed in the process (Chu, 2013). Here, it is also helpful to make a distinction from the use of art in social work contexts (Huss & Bos, 2019) or in fields such as art therapy. While there may be cathartic or clarifying effects of both participation and viewing of socially engaged works, social practice does not make claims to therapeutic or palliative functions, premising instead creative grounds upon which dynamics and forces may be explored, problematised, teased out, critiqued, or left open-ended. Chu argues that "the artist is there to lend her/his skills and expertise," and notes crucially, that "as artists we are not neutral facilitators" (Chu, 2013, p. 23). Instead, Neo's stakes in socially engaged art praxis are firmly based in a belief in reciprocity and co-production. Disentangling altruism from advocacy, Neo holds that all parties involved stand to learn and benefit from working together, and highlights transparency about her own artistic investments in the project and personal takeaways of working with CAL. She stresses reciprocity as the key process the project was designed with, as well as the genuine form of interaction and relationality produced by it (Neo, 2018a). Attention was therefore given to creating environs and conditions, which fostered reciprocal behaviours, such as empathy, mutual reflection and reflexivity, raised awareness, deep listening, and attentive observation.

Patrick D. Flores presents an aligned approach to Filipino art critic and historian Alice Guillermo in his analysis of the practice. For Guillermo, the historically, materially, and socially mediated are "emplace[d]" alongside art "as coordinates and therefore are made co-extensive and intersubjective, open to reciprocal conversions" (Flores 2019, p. 127). Art historian Grant Kester's note on reciprocity in social practice further provides important nuance to understand this practice:

Within a given dialogical situation it's not uncommon for insight to be generated that challenges normative values and beliefs (in fact, that transformative process is really at the basis of a dialogical aesthetic). This is a byproduct of a reciprocal context, but there's nothing about reciprocity per se (as a formal transformation in the way in which art is produced) that guarantees this outcome. Rather, the outcome is dependent on the fluency with which the artist and their collaborators respond to a reciprocal dynamic." (Kester, 2016, p. 3).

Kester here reminds us that a reciprocal dynamic serves as a foundation but not a guarantor of intimacy and collaboration. In Neo's work, however, reciprocity and collaborative praxis are mutually constitutive.

Prior to the workshop with Harrison and Anwari, many of the caregivers had expressed apprehension and scepticism about their own ability to immerse themselves in a movement practice or make art. They subsequently expressed surprise at the degree to which they found themselves

committing to the process, first finding empathy, and understanding in their fellow CAL members' reflections. This empathy allowed them to embark on a dual process of seeing outside of their own journeys within the context of more deeply into themselves through collective reflection. They credited Neo's guidance with easing the way towards translating their experiences, motions, and emotions of and from daily caregiving into movement, and then eventually into cohesive, choreographed pieces over which they could take ownership. Throughout this arc of discovery, Neo highlights deep listening as a technique that was integral to each stage of the project, referring not only to attentive engagement with their collaborators but to their own bodies. In Harrison's and Anwari's workshop, constant awareness to 'states of being' was a key focus, with participants observing each other's breath, pace, stories, and gestures.

On an individual level, Neo also notes that deep listening crucially entails "being able to listen to ourselves and carve out space for personal well-being" (Neo, 2018b). For caregivers who are sometimes accustomed to deferring or deprioritising their own needs and inner voices, creating this space for listening to themselves, and other corroborative or even contrasting voices of other caregivers, is not only beneficial, but necessary. Neo shared:

I observed a genuine sense of trust and exchange amongst the participants with us artists, especially those who attended the workshop, which offered a safe space for sharing, experimenting, letting go and just being. The caregivers have also become my pillars of support in the process of this work and learning to care for others (2018b).

This work of socially engaged art, therefore, creates the opportunity for carving out new configurations of collectivity, bringing together imbricated perspectives on the complex realities of living with mental illness and degenerative disease.



Figure 7: Installation documentation from 'Networked Bodies', Gillman Barracks, Singapore. Courtesy of Alecia Neo.

Tiered collaboration towards a public pedagogical approach

Each work of socially engaged art requires a bespoke negotiation of means and levels of engagement calibrated to the specific needs and interests of the community and participants involved, understandings of which are gleaned through the aforementioned training of modes of attention. As noted by Chu, such negotiation takes place not just between parties involved in the co-creation of a work but is “also internal to art’s own negotiation of its existence and its reality in the world, manifest through the artist’s negotiation with notions and processes of autonomy and shared authorship.” (Chu, 2013, p. 23). Neo explained to me in an interview that her approach towards social practice is structured around understanding that “collaboration is tiered” (Neo, 2019). For *Between Earth and Sky*, she worked with movement coaches Anwari and Harrison to create workshops which helped structure the project’s intentions and guided approach towards unpacking caregiving through movement practice. Following this, she collaborated with the caregivers as they participated in the workshop, and she filmed their solo or duet performances for the video installation. While Neo had greater aesthetic control over the work and she and the movement coaches framed the project’s approaches to movement, this work also emphasises the caregivers coming to have ownership over their performances over the year-long process.

Between Earth and Sky presents the complexities of caregiving in Singapore through its exhibition in various shows around the topic of care and mental health, some of which took place outside of conventional art gallery and museum settings such as the show *Personally Speaking: The Art of Caregiving*, which was exhibited at the Jurong National Library, and the Punggol Oasis, a common space in a public housing complex. Lynn Sanders-Bustle notes, “socially engaged art might animate the publicness of schooling by opening new social spaces (Sanders-Bustle, 2020, p. 50), and with the *Personally Speaking* show set up where pop-up food or clothing bazaars normally might at the residential space, it created an alternative social space that transcended expectations of those who came into contact with the work, most of whom were curious and open to listening.

For Neo’s subsequent work which builds on *Between Earth and Sky*, she created the *Care Index*, a repository of video submissions and movement scores from the public, as well as live and virtual workshops, which she describes as a “space for co-learning” in which she is “fully prepared to be surprised at the shapes and forms it adopts over time.” She has created such a space as “it is important to [her] that the research and making process is done collaboratively” (Neo & Tan, 2022). I observe that in creating the *Care Index* repository portal for public submissions, Neo has also opened up another capacious alternative social space conducive for public learning, expression, and co-creation. She characterises this work as an attempt at indexing care practices and transmitting them [within this] place for making sense of all the discoveries, contradictions, failures and also grappling with not knowing (Neo & Tan, 2022). Neo reflected:

The contributions to the first open call were quite diverse and each one taught me different modes of listening and caring that people across cultures were practising in their daily lives. Amongst art and dance films, I also received contributions of everyday gestures and activities which lifted people’s spirits and brought pleasure, comfort, strength, or symbolic movements which reflected on time, loss, fatigue, recovery, maintenance and endurance. There were numerous interactions with human and non-human bodies, exploring a myriad of ways to come closer, set boundaries and co-exist. People also sent in care practices they observed, such as how locals were gathered together to provide food and aid to flood victims in Bintan, Indonesia and death rituals. It was important to

me that each contribution lived with its own story and credits on the website, and that when their videos were exhibited, they would be aware of it. (Neo & Tan 2022)

As it evolves and accumulates submissions, and as Neo continues to reflect and hone the heterogeneity of ways in which care can be taken up, the *Care Index* has moved towards addressing the at times fraught navigation of care infrastructures and institutions which provide care, in addition to attending to care gestures and practices. My work with Neo has grown from conducting participatory research for *Between Earth and Sky*, to participating in a movement workshop for *Care Index*, and now co-creating and co-facilitating an interactive workshop, *Recipes for Wayfinding (Care Index)* for The Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre, in September 2022 (Neo, 2022a). Our workshop reflects this development and movement towards understanding structural issues with care, while still continuing to centre embodiment. In this workshop, participants work with movement and everyday objects such as pipes, wires, yarn, cloth, and paper to form personal lexicons (care indexes) of their experiences with enacting care practices and receiving care. Participants made body maps reflecting on personal injury, then applied materials to a shared canvas as they charted paths to form a collective terrain. They then explored different vantages on the terrain through embodied exploration and weight bearing exercises, to consider different levels of access to care and ease in navigating bureaucratic requirements. While not limiting reflections to this, participants were asked to consider the context of the ongoing and protracted experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic. They could consider how the pandemic had affected them and changed their views on vulnerability, needs, caregiving responsibilities, and the reach of healthcare infrastructure.

Neo and I both note how this transforms the aesthetics of depictions of care beyond gentleness and a likely association with wellness, and Neo notes that “what is interesting for me is how the journey of attuning to others creates space for diverse or even contradictory forms of aesthetics to develop.” Neo describes this as “an embodied, relational perspective will contribute new knowledge to the current methods of researching health and wellbeing indices” evolving not only public learning but how we might consider collective knowledge (Neo & Tan, 2022). Neo's approach to public engagement and pedagogy, then, is one that is not only reciprocal but deeply porous, in being with and learning from the people who come into contact with and contribute to the *Care Index*.

Conclusion

Between Earth and Sky poses an invitation for caregivers to perform self-possession in ways that rescript the gestures of coping, being, and giving as meaningful life trajectories, flowing against the stream of neoliberal notions of success and citizenry. In the face of long-term emotional and mental stresses of caregiving and economic realities, the work prompts both caregivers and audiences to imagine alternate futurities for caregivers. Imbricating heightened intimacy and labour flows, the rescripting of the non-teleological nature of long-term caregiving and the life course of caregivers as spotlights their complication but affords worthwhile envisionings of a future. This is even more so the case for their loved ones with mental illness, for whom social death encroaches before the biological, but whose lives caregivers defiantly insist upon supporting, maintaining, and cherishing. By building upon itself through each encounter between its co-creators, the project sees the artist Neo calibrating and placed in various creative and relational capacities who exerts creative force but shapes it around accountability and collaboration. This article explored how *Between Earth and Sky* posits and reorients the carer's body as a site for expression rather than maintenance, re-envisioning the

potential of community support networks, and considers the possibilities of self-care for carers for whom mutuality may seem remote. By engaging with both *Between Earth and Sky* and Neo's follow-up project, *Care Index*, this article has demonstrated how Neo's work fosters an evolving network of reflection on the practices, infrastructures, and embodiment of care, through sustained and emergent acts of collaboration and co-creation.

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Biography

Jill J. Tan is a writer, artist, and researcher committed to collaborative practice and multimodal exploration through games, performance, and poetics. As a PhD candidate in Anthropology at Yale University, she studies death and dying in Singapore, working with funeral professions and public-facing death literacy efforts. Her research is supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation; a National University of Singapore Development Grant; the Tan Kah Kee and Tan Ean Kiam Foundations; a Social Science Research Council Graduate Research Fellowship; and various bodies including the Council on Southeast Asian Studies and MacMillan Center at Yale University. Tan's work appears or is forthcoming in *City and Society Journal*, *Guernica*, *Mynah*, *Brack*; and the edited volumes *Resistant Hybridities: Tibetan Narratives in Exile* (Lexington) and *Death and the Afterlife: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from Asia* (Routledge). Tan's multimedia hybrid poetics project "Notes on the bicentennial of a f/l/ound/er/ing (2019)" was awarded the 2022 Theron Rockwell Field Prize at Yale.

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