

## **“Desiring mobility”**

Ong Keng Sen,

Director TheatreWorks, Singapore and Founder ANA, Artists' Network Asia.

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Mobility is a challenging concept for many of us. It is a double edged sword which promises enhanced opportunities but also seems threatening to our human instinct to develop homes, to root ourselves in one community, in one work environment. Often mobility is a flexible concept which turns out to be less than flexible due to local laws and local constraints.

Mobility is not an instant cure to all the evils that we face in our work contexts. Mobility is not instantly comfortable. Mobility has to be slowly cultivated. After the initial attraction of mobility, how can we deepen its meaning for each mobile individual specifically?

This morning, I want to encourage us to reflect on a mobility which is not bound by laws but is instead an ideal space where imaginations can take flight. In the increasingly complex and diverse global world, we have to harness the advantages of being inside and outside of our cultures, our reference points. This is what mobility provides. We become very aware of the difference in how our home city operates and how our host city operates. With mobility, we can see that our city is not the worse place on earth! But we can also crystalise the problematics of our local methods, our local strategies. Mobility demands us to engage with difference, we realize there is no standard way. Mobility reveals our own prejudices and implores us to conquer these weaknesses in ourselves.

Today, I spend only 4 months a year in Singapore, my home city. Often I traverse diverse terrains ranging from cultural capitals of Europe to burgeoning cities of the future such as ho chi minh city, Vietnam to metropolises such as post 9-11 new york. As a director of international performances collaborating with diverse cultures, competing

artforms and strong individuals, I have to make the journey to connect with traditional wisdoms of societies which are not mine. I have to link these wisdoms to my personal urban contemporary contexts. I have also to remember not to forsake the local knowledge of small communities.

I believe in this journey. It is a vital part of living a relevant life today. Memories, identities, our future existence need us to reconsider life outside of our preferred convenient comfort zones. The traditional, the multicultural is not separated from our realities but is coursing through our veins, impacting every part of our bodies, our experiences today. In order to be an engaged labour force, an engaged individual we have to become citizens of the world. Citizens of the world who are not afraid of borders, who are open to new experiences.

I desire mobility even though my body is weak. Many a time I have called myself a citizen of jet lag city. Many a time, I have woken up in a new hotel room walking into the wall in the middle of the night because in the last hotel room, that was where the bathroom was!

It is said that in a Buddhist retreat when the novice monk is able to conquer his body, he will start to levitate or to float above the ground. The willing spirit can conquer the human flesh. In the same way, I believe that when we live with mobility, we begin to become more liquid, to become more fluid, to levitate above the daily constraints of a fixed work environment.

In my view, this liquidity, this floatation is an essential quality in leadership training. A leader needs the ability to imagine a different way, to create new contexts from past experience. This is the benefit of living with mobility, one often develops an aerial perspective of the issues.

We have to build strategies to transcend our localities. In my work, in my travels, I am often nourished by new sights; new sounds; meeting soul mates who believe in the impossible, like me. These encounters with parallel souls tell me that I am not alone in my beliefs, that I can still transform the walls of my local contexts to pierce through ignorance, through history, through prejudice to regenerate our lives.

Perhaps it is only through mobility that we can approach and understand the multiple contexts of our world today.

Europe cannot remain a fortress but has to become porous to new ideas, to be in constant conversation with difference, with contesting memories, with migration, with global decision making. For example, it was only when I created an arts festival in Berlin from 2001 - 2003, that I understood the intricacies of cultural identities. There I was made aware of the new challenges that lie ahead of Asian artists working in an international market. I realized that it was important to break out of the ghetto of the asian experience to consider a more holistic Europe-Asia-US-Arab world dialogue. Similarly this holistic dialogue had to be communicated and shared with our audiences, the markets.

What is Asia today is rapidly shifting, what is Europe is under the microscope as well. Moving forward requires dialogues with the outside and not simply with the familiar. Mobility is one way to dispel an insularity which we all tend towards. Mobility projects us directly into a much more connected arena rather than a navel-gazing self-centredness.

In those three years in berlin, I had to transplant myself out of my familiar context to enter the federal bureaucracy of Germany. One of the crucial negotiations was to convince workers in the city about the importance of cultural exchange as art, about process as a way of developing the individual's capacity. Productivity, showing results, had to be balanced with the personal enrichment of culture and cultural workers. Most importantly, we had to allow time to enter into the equation. It was a great learning experience of negotiating differences in belief systems, in cultural practices, in work habits.

The mobile stranger who arrives in an ancient town was always looked upon as a mysterious personality who had the power, the magic to transform the out-dated visions of the town, to mobilize new beliefs. I would like to optimistically attribute these characteristics to a mobile worker, that she or he can make a difference to rigid contexts. Mobility agitates any system - this agitation could be good, it could be harnessed to create better systems.

I am a firm believer that mobility alleviates the poverty of knowledge, the poverty of empathy, the poverty of imagination, the poverty of spirit. I don't want to be poor, to be poor in knowledge, to be poor in empathy for another human being, to be poor in imagination, to be poor in spirit.

In 2003, as part of my curation work for the in-transit festival in Berlin, I visited West Africa - Benin to be exact. There I learnt that the African kings who colluded with the Portuguese traders to sell their own people insisted on the erasure of memory of the exported slaves. Before passing through the gate of no return to be sent to Brazil, the slaves had to walk around the tree of amnesia. In this way, without memory, the captured Africans would be perfect slaves, ready to absorb new identities. Crossing the Atlantic, displaced memories reclaimed in these foreign sites ironically became seeds for new beginnings, new identities, new cultures.

Remembering, forgetting, mythology.

In considering a completely different culture far away in West Africa, I was able to reflect on my own beliefs of past, present, future memory. Finally these thoughts germinated into a project for Göteborg this summer, three years later. The stored knowledge from mobility retains to fuel our imagination in unexpected directions.

Finally some thoughts about the interphase between the mobile worker and the new host site.

I directed an exercise in mobility, Connection Barents in June 2006. Connection Barents was a platform in Kirkenes Norway, for cultural negotiations across national, traditional and artistic borders. Kirkenes is located at the border of Russia, it is the northern-most frontier of the fortress of Europe. Artists were brought together with local experts, local connectors to explore new strategies for interrogations between contemporary artistic creativity and everyday life.

During the two weeks, a research laboratory/conference explored the local contexts of Kirkenes and the Barents Region which spans Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia.

The laboratory examined the tensions and differences due to changing circumstances of the site. As mobile workers in the art sphere entering this very local context, there were initially many misunderstandings which we had to work through. At the core was a conversation between perceived 'insiders' and 'outsiders', between the specific and the global, between the evolving local traditions and the urban contemporary.

In the perpetual 24-hours light of summer, the mobile and local workers developed a series of collaborative strategies, through introductions, discussions, provocations, collaborations and travels. Employing the combined languages from the sites, from the local connectors, from the sharing of experiences, from the multiple art fields, from ordinary lived experience in Kirkenes, the participants drafted working proposals, dream proposals, fantastic proposals for 'museums' of everyday life in the Barents.

Some of the research subjects included the emerging economies.

The two major changes during the last decades, the opening of the border to Russia and the closing of the local mining company AS Sydvaranger, transformed everyday life in this small town on 9000 people. How are the local resources and the local wisdoms being harnessed or exploited? The laboratory of mobile and local workers also researched nature tourism as an evolving industry. They absorbed crucial ecological perspectives, mapped new economical networks and potentialities. Other subjects of interest were the border-crossings, the contact between the guardians and workers at the physical border of Norway and Russia. The border structures existed as power and control sites reinforcing existing politics. How do the workers and users negotiate these power structures and live with this daily condition of border-crossing?

what happened in kirkenes?

how does it manifest in our future work?

is it wasted money, time?

how can we measure its success?

an experiment in outsiders (for we are all outsiders....) coming to a physical site

to engage with local connectors, local wisdoms

of skolt samis, ecologists, everyday people, marooned sailors at the border

the objective: perhaps to suggest museums of everyday life

perhaps the mussels we encountered are museums of everyday life

in the streams, embedded in the soil, they can live up to 200 years  
in the miniature is the universe.  
success indicators, private moments  
in the miniature is the universe  
doubts but also new paradigms of making work  
collaborating rather than appropriating  
as to foreign and local  
perhaps we are still foreigners in our localities  
perhaps we are still border crossing within ourselves, daily  
perhaps we can still learn from the other's optimism  
attempting to communicate,  
translating,  
understanding something else from another's intention  
we carry these away  
individual experiences like mussels of time  
stored memory, stored energy,  
actions for the future.

Thank you.