

WHAT IF - FINAL REFLECTION



By Corrie Tan

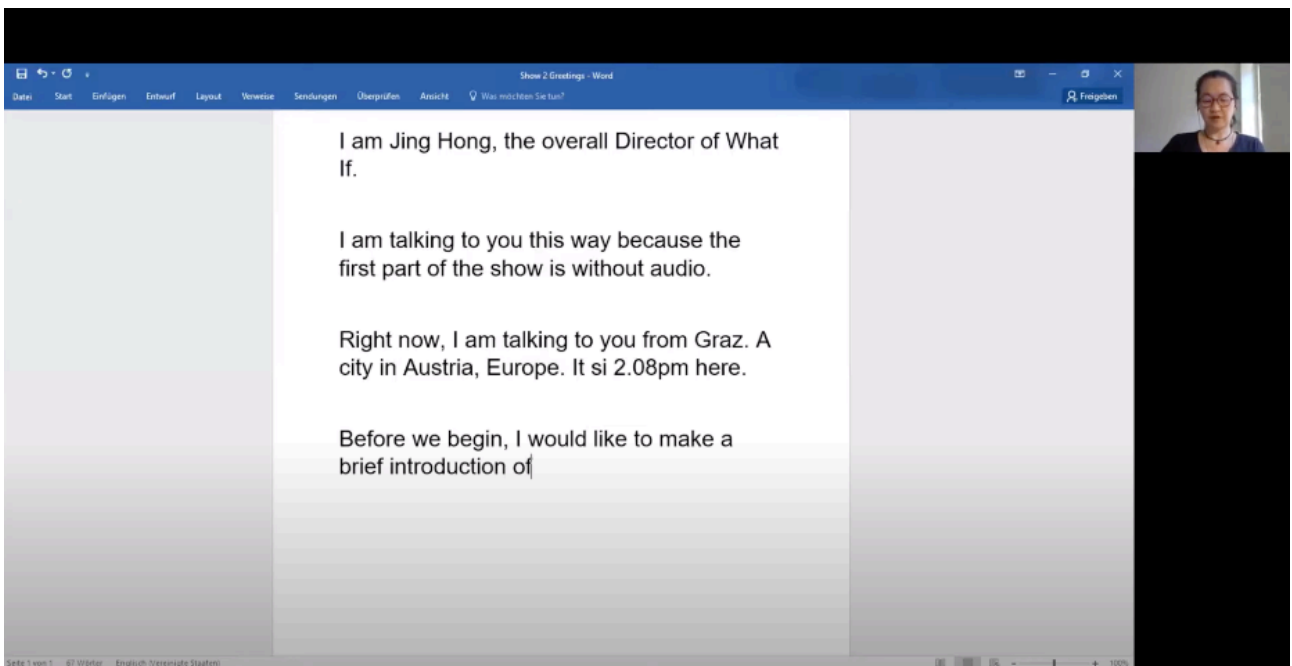
It's the opening night of *What If*, and audience members have started to filter into the theatre space. Some of them are chatting privately, others are sitting quietly by themselves – or with friends and family. *What If* director Okorn-Kuo Jing Hong welcomes the occasional friend and/or acquaintance into the space with a cheery

hello, while assistant director Tan Beng Tian makes an announcement to those gathered to hang tight while we wait for more audience members to stream in.

This sounds about right for the opening night of a theatre production – except that everything is taking place online, over the Zoom platform.

In the months since various city - and country-level lockdowns have rolled across the globe, performance practitioners have turned to the digital medium to continue their practice. *What If's* transition to the digital sphere has been [documented by Ariane Vanco in a previous essay](#), which details the specific struggles and breakthroughs of the production team, cast and designers as their rehearsal and devising process went online. From 4-15 August 2020, *What If* eventually unfolded as a series of “live” performances that could be read as standalone or interlocking episodes: [Frozen. Broken. Poof!, 0 dB, Fetching Sanctuary, Stained, and a stop-motion animation series titled What If Aliens](#). Each of the shows emphasized different kinds of access support structures: some were more oriented towards non-sighted audience members, others were towards non-hearing audience members, and there were optional pre-show Zoom orientation sessions that audience members could attend to get a feel of the digital space, and be provided with information that would support them in their experience of each performance.

What If - Final Reflection



Director Okorn-Kuo Jing Hong typing out the pre-show introduction to audiences of *0 dB*, a visual experience which is accessible to audiences who are deaf or hard of hearing.

My experience of *What If* was an incredibly rich one. To bookend [this series of essays](#), I will be focusing on three key areas in this final reflection that struck me the most: what it means to listen, what it means to participate – and what it means to represent “disability” in performance.



WHAT IT MEANS TO LISTEN

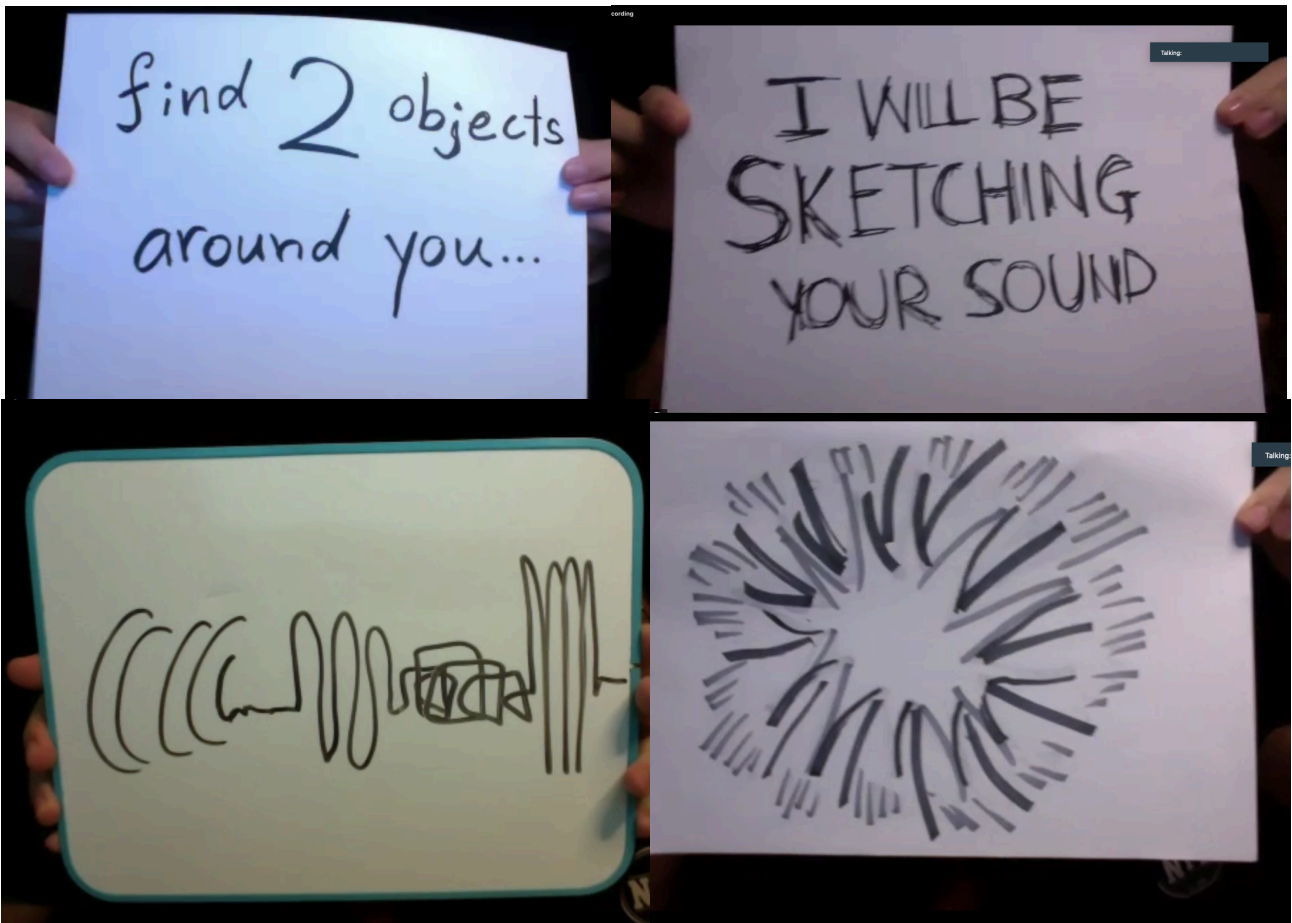
Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of reading *Listening to Images*, a beautiful text on photography and the Black diaspora by Tina M. Campt, a Black professor of modern culture and media at Brown University. Professor Campt describes her experience of not just *looking at* (nor gawking at) photographs from the archives – some deeply moving images of Black families; other harrowing images of Black convicts – but doing her best to *listen* to them, particularly to stories behind those images that are quieter and may otherwise have remained at the margins, of people who may be dispossessed or left behind. She writes:

To a physicist, audiologist, or musicologist, sound consists of more than what we hear. It is constituted primarily by vibration and contact and is defined as a wave resulting from the back-and-forth vibration of particles in the medium through which it travels. The lower frequencies of these images register as what I describe as “felt sound”—sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration. Audiologists refer to such frequencies as infrasound: ultra-low frequencies emitted by or audible only to certain animals, such as elephants, rhinoceroses, and whales. While the ear is the primary organ for perceiving sound, at lower frequencies, infrasound is often only felt in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body. Yet all sound consists of more than what we hear. It is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact. (Campt 2017: 7)

I think of sitting in a theatre space together, where you might feel a fellow audience member brush past your knees and toes as they pick their way to their seat; or the thud of a performer on stage slamming a door and how it reverberates across the floorboards to where you are. *What If* felt like an exercise in being attentive, in tuning ourselves to those vibrating lower frequencies of performance when we couldn't be in a room together. There were three episodes of *What If* in particular that encouraged listening at different registers and in different ways – beyond a notion of “listening” that is defined by one's sense of hearing.

The episode *0 dB* is a visuals-only experience loosely inspired by visual designer Timothy Hua's own experience of being profoundly deaf. In the first part of the show, co-creators Tung Ka Wai and Timothy engage the audience in a participatory segment that prompts us to imagine what certain sounds might look like on paper, such as the sound of applause, or the clatter of two household objects knocking against each other. It made me think about how sound transmutes and transforms across mediums, and how we might be able to reconfigure our relationship with sound in the way we represent it to others. A subsequent animated piece follows the journey of an adorable blob as it encounters sound for the first time – with unexpected consequences.





Stills from *0 dB*. On the first top two, Timothy and Ka Wai have written on paper instructing audience members to find two objects around them to make noise with, which Timothy would be making sketches based on. The subsequent bottom two are of imaginary sound waves based on the sounds made.

In *Fetching Sanctuary*, sound designer Ng Sze Min struggles to listen to and understand her collaborator, performer Muhammad Hidayat Rahmatullah Mohamad Yaakob, when he shares a story about a nurse on the frontlines of the pandemic that resonates deeply with him — but less with her. This audio-only experience features Sze Min narrating her personal journey and excerpts of interviews with Hidayat against a lush audio soundscape, and demonstrates listening as a practice of empathy, negotiation, and mutual understanding.



Stills from *Stained*.

Finally, the episode *Stained*, written by Yennefer (an alias chosen by the artist), requires audience members to choose between an audio-only room and a visuals-only room on the Zoom platform. I chose the visuals-only room, which was a delicate exploration of the flow of ink across different textures and materials – paper, plastic, water – as plumes of ink unfurled, dripped, splattered and ran through the ridges of these materials like veins. There were brief instances of writer-practitioner Yennefer in shadow or silhouette against a blank wall, interspersed with video footage of her creating her paintings, which were complex and stunning galaxies of ink. Later on, as part of the performance, audience members were asked to describe and share their experiences of being in each room to others who may have had a different experience. Because I chose the visuals-only



room, my co-writer Ariane later described the audio room to me this way:

Yennefer's narration echoes and it feels like she's talking in an empty cave. Sometimes she gets really up close, and it's like someone whispering in your ear, and it feels discomfiting because it's so close and you can't see anything – yet her voice is so gentle. There were these parts which just had a series of sounds with no narration, and the first one sounded like a searing, slicing kind of noise? It could be someone cutting up a photograph? I'm not sure. This noise made me feel like the "story" was much more sinister though...

This double act of listening – 1) paying extra attention to every detail in the images, or listening to a narrative unravel over one's headphones; then 2) listening to each other describe this experience (whether verbally or textually, in the chat box of Zoom) – is an invitation that runs through many *What If* episodes, and leads me to my next section on participation in the digital space.

WHAT IT MEANS TO PARTICIPATE

Almost all of the *What If* episodes featured some kind of audience participation or interaction in the desire to invite audiences to sustain "co-presence" with the performers and each other despite encountering the performances through a screen. Over the past few months, I've been starting to figure out what I feel might become genre markers of online performance. Many of them tend to be



confiding in nature, or draw on modes of confession – the way a character might have a private conversation with a friend on screen and we, the audience, feel like we're voyeuristic non-video participants in the same chat. Invisible, but present nonetheless. This has come with a growing familiarity with the side-by-side grids of video conferencing platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Google Meet or Teams. Live closed captioning, sign language interpretation, and translation have also become fixtures in many webinars and workshops across the globe as various platforms race to equip themselves with accessible features.

Online performance also tends to emphasise its liveness – that even if certain sections of a work might be pre-recorded, each performance tends to gesture towards or heighten its "live" components, or encourage some kind of response from the audience either through the chat or Q&A function of various online platforms, or in an interactive segment. In the existential panic that performance has had to reckon with over the course of this pandemic year, there seems to be a general desire to assure audience members that what they see online doesn't fall into the category of "film" or "TV", which suggests a kind of unidirectionality of experience (e.g. the audience is alone, watching a reproducible artifact of performance, such as a video clip). Online performance has been striving to capture what performance scholars call "co-presence", which often presumes that an audience is physically present with the performers in the same space. As theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte puts it:

[...] the specific mediality of performance consists of the bodily

co-presence of actors and spectators. Performance, then, requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance. (2008: 38)

Other scholars, such as Sarah Bay-Cheng, have noted that this idea of “co-presence” is a condition for performance that many staunchly feel “can only be simulated but not created by media” (Bay-Cheng 2016: 78). In a time of pandemic performance, however, sharing the same physical space could prove impossible – even dangerous and irresponsible. Virtual and mediated performance has had to take the place of the “live”. Bay-Cheng herself makes the case for not ignoring the emotional and sensory impact of mediated performance:

A conventional view of performance and presence claims that to understand the full work, it must be experienced in real time and physical space. [...] But anyone who has ever been startled or frightened while watching a horror film, even in one’s own living room, knows that this performance affect is not limited to the live or even lived experience. (2016: 80-81)

What If draws from all these markers of online performance: there is a sustained interest in closeness and intimacy; the inclusion of live captioning; and the desire to assert “virtual co-presence” – and it often does so by inviting audience members to take part in creating access structures for each other. These were largely early-stage



What If - Final Reflection

experiments with a new vocabulary of access conventions, but every convention does need to begin with testing and implementing and refining.

I've mentioned the audio description exercise that audience members participated in for *Stained* and the exercise around mapping and drawing visual encounters with sound in *0 dB* in the previous section. Assistant director Beng Tian also led audience members in an audio description exercise during *Frozen. Broken. Poof!*, where she introduced two approaches to audio description: one a more technical and literal approach, and the other more interpretive and figurative (e.g. "on the table there is a circular styrofoam object painted brown, and a candle has been placed on



Still from *Frozen. Broken. Poof!* in which Beng Tian leads audience in audio describing the cake prop which was part of the show.

top of it” versus “there’s a chocolate birthday cake on the table with a candle in it”). I read these as preliminary but gentle invitations for audience members – particularly non-disabled or ableist audience members – to reconfigure their relationship between their bodies, their senses, and the world around them.

WHAT IT MEANS TO REPRESENT “DISABILITY” IN PERFORMANCE

What If’s engagement with audience members and its introduction to access structures takes place within the theme of this year’s *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival: “disability”*. During the festival’s open community dialogue on August 16, a question emerged around the notion of a “disability aesthetics”, and how the cast or creative team who co-created *What If* felt about the term. An audience member asked: “Do you think that the ‘disability aesthetic’ is something deliberate in the creation process, or happens organically when working with artists with disabilities?”

There was no consensus from the team around the term, which wasn’t defined during the conversation – and this may have led to some confusion around what the term meant for different people before the conversation moved on. As I understand it, the phrase “disability aesthetics” seems to be drawn from the work of disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers and his book of the same name. He writes that “disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but



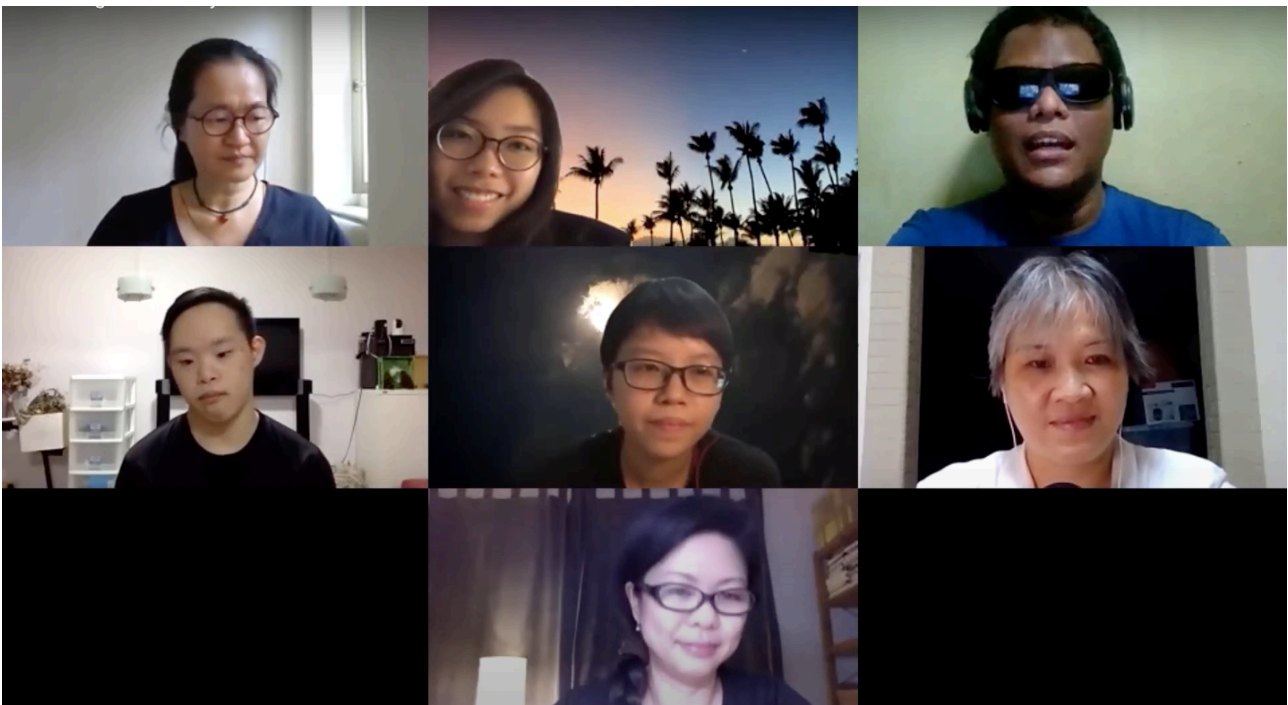
more so, as a result" (2010: 3). His argument is that "disability acquires aesthetic value because it represents for makers of art a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is", and "enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics" (2010: 3). That is to say: disability aesthetics makes us rethink what we take for granted about what is judged as "good" art or "bad" art.

While this seems to champion the use of "disability aesthetics" as an expansive and inclusive term, some members of the production seemed uncomfortable with being so closely identified with disability, considering their practice as an artist to supersede the identity markers associated with their disabilities. I personally found the lack of consensus from the team deeply meaningful. It reminds us that "disability" is not a monolith – neither is it a fixed community. Disability is defined and interpreted in a variety of ways by different practitioners who may either identify strongly with their disability, or see it as a secondary or even inconsequential part of their identity, or move between positions.

During the post-show discussion of *Fetching Sanctuary*, Hidayat fielded many questions on blindness, and had to reiterate that he could not speak for an entire non-sighted community; he himself had become blind later on in his life and emphasised that his experience would be markedly different from someone blind from birth. Many audience members also applauded the various performances as "brave", or implied that the practitioners had a kind of particular

What If - Final Reflection

resilience “despite” their disabilities – which is something I recognise that many of the performing artists in *What If* strongly resist. Public discourse around disability is still nascent in Singapore, and I understand that there is still an outdated narrative around “overcoming disability” that is difficult to dismantle. But I also wonder how a continued representation of a wide spectrum of disabilities on stage (including *What If*) could help to make sure that theatre productions featuring artists with disabilities do not remain at “Disability 101” – and also help audience members to disentangle one person’s experience of disability with an entire community’s multifaceted experiences of disability. This is often the case when a person from a minority community is represented on stage, whether that minority is one to do with race, gender, sexual orientation or



Hidayat speaking during *Fetching Sanctuary's* post-show discussion.



disability – that these artists are somehow expected by their audiences to speak for their entire community (instead of being allowed to speak for themselves), or put forward stories that are constantly mining personal traumas. Because of this, I really appreciated that *What If* gave itself permission to be experimental, abstract and even darkly funny in its various episodes, allowing audience members to move away from the expectation of a certain kind of “realist” representation.

A production is also not only its aesthetics. For example, the *What If* team found it difficult to publicise the production – while they had carefully prepared access-friendly audio advertisement clips and publicity materials that could be easily circulated over WhatsApp and other social media platforms, they came up against a barrier that was beyond their control: many online ticketing platforms in Singapore are completely inaccessible to non-sighted members of the public. This isn't a problem specific to SISTIC, a major arts ticketing platform in Singapore, but also extends to sites where one might purchase flight tickets, for example. The team had to come up with a system tailored to non-sighted members of the public who wanted to purchase tickets to the various shows. If we are committed to having disability more widely and diversely represented in Singaporean performance – the infrastructure around performance must also develop in tandem. How can we as an arts industry adapt to the access requirements of others – instead of forcing them to cohere to a rigid and exclusionary system?

In her work on “pro-body aesthetics”, Singapore-based scholar Liang

Peilin observes that in performance in general,

the aesthetics that we generate for the stage with our bodies has largely been antibody rather than probody. That is, theatre-making often entails the body taking care of the artwork by molding itself, in some instances even to the extent of self-sacrifice, for the theatre that it makes. Consider the deformed hands of puppeteers, the misaligned posture of musicians, and the repeated injuries suffered by dancers and acrobats. (2018: 3-4)

She advocates instead for a body-centric practice of performance that is informed by ergonomics, which “proposes that the material environment of the theatre should be adapted to the specificity of the individual performer’s body”, whether this is through scenic design or the design of props. I do think this can be extended to areas such as the development of ticketing infrastructure, or how companies and practitioners approach stage management. Part of my hope for more widespread and dedicated work in disability-led performance in Singapore is that this can continue to develop much better support structures around care for performers and their well-being.



IN CLOSING

There's so much more I wish I could include about *What If's* process of coming to life in the middle of a global lockdown – and I'm astonished at the team's commitment to the project, which seems to have been enriched by the challenge of adapting to a completely new medium, and despite most of the team working in physical isolation from each other. This does not mean to say that *What If* was without its processual hiccups and difficulties; there was plenty of new terrain the group had to navigate, and the abrasions of learning to collaborate with one another that come with any devised project. That said – while *What If* concluded just over a month ago, I hope the possibilities engendered by its process will continue. There's something about the open-endedness of its title, unencumbered by punctuation, that prompts us to move from “what if” to “what next” – be it a question? an exclamation! a comma, a semi-colon; or perhaps simply a space for us to decide for ourselves



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