

# Maybe, Possibly, No, Yes

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## I. MAYBE

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*"Hi Propeller Group!"*

Three words initiate three years of conversation, discussion, experimentation, trial, error, trouble-shooting, and problem-solving that will finally culminate in the production of a new contemporary art project presented to the public by Grand Arts.

Of course, nobody knows this at the time.

At the time, Grand Arts Artistic Director Stacy Switzer's first email to the Propeller Group, a three-man collective based mostly in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is simply a typical example of Grand Arts's practice: initiating a dialogue with compelling artists who might (or might not) work well in the specific context Grand Arts offers.

Kris Kuramitsu, a curator who is now deputy director of the Mistake Room, in Los Angeles, had first brought TPG's work to Switzer's attention. The collective seemed like the sort that might come up with a project Grand Arts could support: The artists had a strong track record of idea-driven work and were at a stage when their practice could be significantly, demonstrably advanced by taking on a possibly risky but meaningful endeavor—a project that might never happen without support by, and deep engagement with, Grand Arts.

Switzer has many such exchanges. If the cheerful informality of her opening salvo seems unusual in the context of the art world, the reasons have little to do with, say, friendly Midwestern openness. Rather, what it hints at is the unusual nature of Grand Arts as a culture-making organization, in a way that transcends geography. It reflects a specific desire for open-ended connections with new voices, and thus new ideas, that deserve a chance to be heard.

As this volume establishes elsewhere, Grand Arts is not a space; it *has* a space. What it chooses to show there—and, indeed, what it chooses to bring into the public sphere beyond 1819 Grand Boulevard, in Kansas City, Missouri—might be art, but the works are more fundamentally artifacts of an artistic process. Grand Arts is also not exactly a patron; it *has* a patron, who provides the resources to enable this process. That patronage entails specific financial support, but also, and more crucially, surprisingly deep expertise: in fabrication, logistics, legalities, research, and the shaping of ideas for maximum impact.

So it's not unreasonable to consider Grand Arts to be something like a collaborator. But the story of this project, its final one, suggests a variation on that idea that was present all along: the arts institution as co-conspirator.

Upbeat demeanor notwithstanding, Grand Arts has spent twenty years engaged in a kind of struggle: to bring into the world creative expression that more familiar cultural mechanisms (the traditional commercial market, the museum/gallery art complex) would be unlikely to support. This effort often meant supporting work that challenged mainstream culture in unlikely ways, making Grand Arts a permanent underdog of sorts. While that could be a recipe for failure (that is, an inability to measurably influence or even register with culture at large), the happy thing about a robust conspiracy is that it can never truly be vanquished. As long as there are like-minded creators to recruit and conspire with, the enterprise is fundamentally undefeatable. It may never win; yet it cannot lose.

July 2012

After various stop-start attempts to connect remotely, Switzer and the three members of TPG—Phunam, Matt Lucero, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen—meet in person at a Creative Capital Artist Retreat at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The collective is on hand to discuss its project *Television Commercial for Communism*, which involves an advertising campaign to "rebrand" communism. (Tagline: "Everyone's Welcome.") Switzer is there to meet with artists, curators, and other attendees.

Drinks in a noisy cafeteria turns out to be less than conducive to deep and thoughtful conversation, but the meeting begins a dialogue that continues online and seems promising, if vague. Both TPG and Grand Arts are enmeshed in other projects, but Switzer encourages the artists to keep in touch and pass along specific ideas.

*"Just a few sentences would be a good place to begin—to see whether there's something that might stick for both/all of us."*

September 2012

Sissel Tolaas's *Smellscape KCK/KCMO* opens at Grand Arts.

January 2013

The staff of Grand Arts learns that the organization will close in mid-2015, its twenty-year anniversary. (The news will not be made public for several months.) While