

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2017**

**Full Transcript of
Panel Discussion of Plenary 3: Exploring Boundaries of the Arts**

**Moderator: Professor Samuel LEONG, Deputy Director (Academic),
Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts**

**Panellists: 1) Mr. Patrick CHIU, Founder, Hong Kong SingFest
2) Ms. Jane CHU, Chairman, National Endowment for the
Arts [USA]
3) Dr. Richard GRANT, Former Chair, Creative New
Zealand**

Samuel LEONG: Thank you for your presentations. I think they are very rich and diverse. In fact, I think we have talked a lot about crossing boundaries. We cross boundaries in terms of genres, in terms of age groups, in terms of social boundaries, interdisciplinary, even class boundaries. I like the "Hot Shop Heroes" shared by Ms. Chu, with the wounded soldiers coming home to alleviate their tension through blowing glass. And I think crossing boundaries can also be interpreted in terms of age groups, or in terms of professions. And we want people to have freedom to imagine. For this first round of questions, I think it is useful for us to look at boundaries. Are they really boundaries or are they barriers? So, I would like to throw that open to the panel.

Jane CHU: Well, in the United States we are seeing far less of the definitions of barriers. And we see artists embracing boundaries as a good thing. So, what it used to be in the United States was that the artist would be in a couple of different categories. There were plenty of artists who would create in healthcare, but now we say similar artists who were trained in a certain way also cross those boundaries and go back and forth. And that is different from what we used to see. But we embraced boundaries and we do not see them as barriers.

Patrick CHIU: In terms of artistic boundaries, I think the term of cross discipline has been discussed for more than half a century, especially when the computer came to our lives. And, especially today, everyone has a small computer (smartphone) at hand. But I do not. I am still using a Nokia which actually frees me up to some ancient music. And personally, I do not quite see a

lot of boundaries when I work. Maybe the thing that challenges me is to understand everyone: every performer, every designer that I work with, to understand their feelings. That might pose as boundaries, or that might be challenges, or that might be something that we need to work on. Like what I mentioned in my presentation that usually, at some moments, we have to stop during our productions because of some technical issues, artistic challenges encountered. But those are also moments for discussion. So, at that moment, we actually know more about everyone, and this is the thing I see when I work.

Richard GRANT: One boundary obviously is funding. Do you have enough money? Seriously, what is the role of funding? Is that a boundary or is that a barrier? In terms of artistic expression, New Zealand is a very vibrant society. And we have creative people coming out every year. So, I do not see there is a barrier at the area of creativity. One of the things we notice in a small country is the question of access, and this is a barrier. Can everybody get access to the arts? And that is something that is going to challenge whether it is technology-driven or not. But I think the creative side does not really find a boundary. It is the poor people who come behind them, funding them, who got the barriers.

Samuel LEONG: We talk a lot about risk-taking. We talk about innovations. And obviously it is about perceptions. A lot of people can cross into their innovative space. So, when we try to cross, what lessons can you share with us in terms of making that crossing? What kind of crossing are we having? Are we transgressive? Are we migrating? And how would you get your children to enter into the space? And how do we take risk there? Are there lessons to take from your work? You are most welcome to share your experiences with the audience.

Patrick CHIU: When I work with the Yat Po Singers, I see a lot of new ideas from my partners. Those are the moments that I really treasure because we are putting bits and pieces of what we know together like a puzzle, and it turns out to be a grand picture. So, it is really, really important for us to always remain open to any opportunities and to respect what the others would think. This is the way I would love to work with my partners.

Jane CHU: I really appreciate what Patrick has done. We also see a lot of artists when they are starting to brainstorm about their ideas, they sometimes will brainstorm by talking with engineers instead of artists. "What do you think about my art project?" And they all come from different perspectives. So, bringing those multiple perspectives together, they seem to be able to embrace different ways of thinking at different dimensions. We sometimes even notice that several universities in the United States now require engineering majors to take art classes before they graduate. Because they believe that the creativity will help them, also have another

dimension to their own studies.

Richard GRANT: I think one point I would make for us is that it is the international cooperation aspects which is very important. And the more that we can get out from those very small islands at the bottom of the South Pacific, the better it would be for our artists and our audiences. And that is one the messages that we have learned from the transformation of creativity is that international cooperation is a very vital tool.

Patrick CHIU: I have one more example to add to my previous remark. Sometimes, we must compromise because we want everyone to be happy on stage. It is very important for people working together as performer, or designer, or the artistic team, to be happy. For example, one really big challenge in working with early music musicians is that they use very delicate instruments. In every venue, there will be different temperature or humidity. If I ask the artists to walk from this end to the other end of the stage, carrying their instruments, they may turn me down due to the difference in humidity. "I want to stay in this place, because only in this place my instrument would feel the temperature and humidity, and it would be stable. If I move, it would not be stable and I will go out of tune, etc." Or maybe after 15 minutes of the show, they would request to stop because they need to re-tune the instrument. I, however, may not want to interrupt the smooth flow of the show. It is then time to compromise. For example, I may ask "Could you tune when the organ is playing? Would that be possible?" There would be some kind of chaos, but that would be quite special. We need to make a lot of compromises, but always stay creative to bring up something that everyone would like.

Samuel LEONG: When we compromise, how would we maintain the quality? And what do we mean by quality for different groups of people? How do we balance that?

Jane CHU: In our case, because we are funder of the arts, we only fund based on two criteria. One is excellence and the other one is merit. So, we are always paying attention to the quality of the production or the project itself, or the level of ability. That is a very important piece of it and we do not want to let that go. But we also do not believe that it has to be that if you compromise you lose quality. You can have both. But being open-minded just as you have been is also paying attention to the organic quality of everybody having a different perspective without force-fitting everybody to always be exactly alike. But yet, you do not want to let go of the quality because it brings the project to its dream and you want it to happen. So, we do not think it is either/or, but you have to be mindful of both.

Richard GRANT: There is a real debate around excellence. We are funding excellence, but at the same time we have a legal commitment to make sure that people

participate. You are not always going to get excellence at that level, but you are going to produce, as Jane says, merit. I will be very interested in hearing views from people out there about what is excellence and how do you define them?

Jane CHU: I would like to add one of the things we do as an illustration. I am not sure if it is the best illustration, but sometimes I use an illustration to describe how we looked at the art environment in the United States, and very often the illustration is we like to think of ourselves as food system. For example, if you look at all the different ways we participate in eating food; sometimes we eat in a Michelin Star restaurant, sometimes we eat in diners, sometimes we eat in small restaurants, sometimes we eat at buffets, sometimes we cook our own meals. But not everybody eats the same way all the time. And so, if we are evaluating excellence at a Michelin star restaurant, that is wonderful. Maybe we should eat only in Michelin star restaurant. But sometimes, if we look at a buffet, we want to evaluate as, "Is this the best buffet we could possibly produce?" So, we have to evaluate it in different ways of excellence.

Samuel LEONG: Diversity is important. In diversity, we have things like "low tech" versus "high tech", "to have" versus "not to have", "high art" versus the "low art" and the "in-between art" versus "evolving art" or whatever. So, how do we manage all these dynamics as funders? I just want to say something, because I feel that a lot of artists have great fears, and insecurity is the reason behind their fears. For example, they have the fear of not getting funding, venues, and stability in the art group. So, there are a lot of issues and I think they are very much at the heart of the community, including arts practitioners, and arts administrators. From your experiences what can you advise us, that we can foray into that space to try and have creative solutions.

Jane CHU: We have a 3-step process when we evaluate any grant proposal applications that comes to the National Endowment for the Arts. We probably get about 6,000 applications a year and for every proposal that is read, the first people who read it are people in the United States who are experts in the field from all across America. We bring those experts and they recommend whether it is really excellent or not. Afterwards, another group of council members read it and then the chairman read it. So, there is something related to people. When you have been out in the field and you know what you are talking about, you can look at the proposal and say, "You know, they are really good." And sometimes, they may not have the top artists they want, but they are really good at being able to create it, and they will make a recommendation. So, we actually evaluate every proposal that way.

Richard GRANT: I think one of the things that we are noticing more and more is

interdisciplinary work. And that has been a bit of a challenge because you need a different way of looking at it. But it does encourage artists to work together, and it does produce new form of artworks which may expand the boundaries even further.

Patrick CHIU: I would really love to thank Prof. Leong for talking about fear. As artists, we do have fears because we are fragile. I think it is interesting to be in this state of fear because that would somehow inspire artists to think about who we are and where we are, and then the next step would be the creation of our works. Cross-discipline is also about working in fear. For example, you do not know anything about videos and you need to work with video designers to create one. Sometimes, the projection would have conflicts with the lighting while the video designers also have their stand to make their work really shine on stage. So, it is about really working in some kind of ignorance, but that is the most interesting part of the creation of a new show.

Samuel LEONG: Indeed. I think maybe it will be useful to get some voices from the audience. Anyone with a comment or ask more questions?

Andy STRATFORD (Managing Director of FutureEverything [UK]) I think it was an interesting set of words used in your introduction, Prof. Leong. You talked about the term trans-disciplinary, and Mr. Chiu used the word cross-disciplinary, and Dr. Grant used the word interdisciplinary. I would like to offer another one which is anti-disciplinary. Because I think that actually now, we are in the place where I do not think the artists actually want to be recognised as practicing in a single discipline or even as crossing discipline. They actually want to be seen as totally transcending that completely. So, I would like to offer anti-disciplinary as the new other disciplinary.

Jane CHU: I like that. I know we see a number of artists not wanting to be forced into a category that somebody else has labelled, but to be able to create a category that they want to create out of their own creation. And so, we certainly want to honour that, but it does speak to anti-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary or transcendent disciplinary.

Patrick CHIU: But Ms. Chu, I would love to talk about this with you considering you being a funder. When we apply for funding, we must tick which discipline we are in, and I always do not want to do that.

Jane CHU: Well, the way do it is to be able to honour what we just talked about and, at the same time, make everybody tick a box on whatever they are supposed to. Let's say, for example the project includes music but it also includes dance. I am just making this up but this certainly happens many times. When somebody is applying and they do not know which one to check, they call us and we guide them through the process and we talk

with them about the nature of their project and we say, "You know, you might try this instead of that one." "We think you have more options to apply than just being forced into only music." "If it includes visual art it may be that you are applying under the visual arts category better than includes music." So, that is how we work it as we talk with them and linked about that.

Simon BRAULT
(Director & CEO of
Canada Council for
the Arts)

Just on this question, where we are at Canada council right now is that we decided to make all of our programmes non-disciplinary. So, it is not anti-disciplinary. It is non-disciplinary. It is a big change that we went from like 156 disciplinary programs to non-disciplinary program. But when the artist are registering, they could tick as many boxes as they want in terms of what they consider to be their discipline for a good reason which is assessment. We want to make sure that even if their project is submitted in the context of a non-disciplinary project, or if they have one or two disciplines involved, we will come with jury that is able to assess what they do. So, we are trying to combine those two things, but it is clear that the biggest change we made is to move on from this obsession of eligibility. Because art councils have been very protective of the small amount of money they have, so everything is about eligibility. So, what we separate right now is the eligibility and the programmes. We are telling everybody we are less and less interested in who you are. We are more and more interested in what your project is exactly. And that is a very important move.

The last thing I want to suggest is the contribution to excellence. Where we are now is we consider that in fact it is a little presumptuous or false to pretend that you can support excellence. What you do support is the quest for excellence. We are in a constantly changing environment. So, what we are trying to do now is to redefine what we do in terms of supporting the integrity of the quest for excellence in a constantly evolving social context. So, there are things that we will now consider as assessment criteria, like reflecting diversity in Canada is critical. And to disconnect the quest for excellence from the quest for diversity would be wrong. Because it would be the road for elitism and it will be the road for isolating yourself from society. So, I think for those kinds of vocabularies that we have been carrying on for around 60 years, we need a real re-foundation. Because these things were made at the moment where the world was more static, and it is not the case anymore.

Samuel LEONG:

I have a question for Mr. Brault. You mentioned yesterday about buying time, and you are now talking about the quest. So, what are you buying as a funder? Are you buying time? Are you buying project? Are you buying people? Are you buying outcomes or are you buying quests?

Simon BRAULT:

You have two types of situations: organisations and projects. You have

organisations who are presenting their plan of development for the next 3 to 4 years. So, what we do buy and support there is a trust that their projects are relevant, are still relevant for their mission and in the context in which they operate. And, in that case, we really take into account the scale of the organisations. Because you cannot impose outcomes to organisations that are smaller, say one choreographer and two dancers, the same way you should with the national ballet company which has a bigger annual budget. So, scale is really important.

In terms of the project, what we always support is trying to understand what the relevance of this project is for the artists involved, for the discipline if there is a discipline involved, for the community. And we will try to see if it is feasible. What we will consider as the most important factor is the process they are following. Therefore, we will pay a lot of attention to time, to realise the time.

Jane CHU: I wanted to add onto that good comment about not only the quest for excellence and buying time; it is that in the big picture, what I like so much about all of that is that the arts provide us an avenue to always be a life-long learner. So, we are never really ending something without growing to the next piece if we really want to be that creative person. So, buying time, or a quest for something, I hope we will always be on a quest for the next piece or the next learning because that is what the arts give us.

Samuel LEONG: I want to move slightly onto education, because I think we talk about this non-discipline, trans-discipline, or whatever, but we have the STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). That is the reality for a lot of us, but we do not have the "A" (Arts) in the STEM. So who are the gate-keepers then? Are we the gate-keepers?

Jane CHU: We are strong advocates of the STEM including the arts. And we even have members of the Congress who so want to see the arts involved in STEM that they started their own STEM caucus. And there are schools out there in the United States that are integrating the arts into the full curriculum. We can create an environment that is not one versus the other, but STEM projects along with the arts. We think it is a better environment.

Samuel LEONG: Mr. Chiu, you cross a lot into the school, right? So, how do you feel?

Patrick CHIU: I am lucky to have met some really open-minded people. Usually I work within an environment like here, a roundtable. No matter what age or what experience we have, we work in this manner. So, everyone would have equal opportunity to talk. They can share their difficulties or experiences. I think this is for me the best way to work. Because usually I learned a lot from the young people. So, I would never think that I must

make them do the way I want, but to talk about what is the best way for a particular situation.

Samuel LEONG: Someone mentioned trust in yesterday's panels, and I think that is really important. The trust in the funders, the trust in the artist, the trust in the system, etc. Anyone want to comment on that?

Richard GRANT: From the funders' point of view, you have to trust the preferment to be able to deliver what they say they came to deliver. But, at the same time, when I made those remarks in my proprietary text, you have to take risks. You cannot be an arts funder without taking risks, while risk and trust are not equally balanced. So, you have got to have faith that they can do what they say they do, but sometimes you have to say to them: take the risks as well. So, I think that is a very important part of funding.

Jane CHU: Well, we feel the same way. Trying to encourage people to be innovative, understanding that trust between the funders and the artists. But having said that, after the project comes in and if they did not do what they said they were going to do, it is not acceptable. In such case, it really does likely lower the level of trust for future projects because we do pay attention to the final projects themselves.

Lynn F. C. YAU
(Chief Executive
Officer, The
Absolutely Fabulous
Theatre Connection
[Hong Kong])

I think advocacy obviously is very important for us to put back into STEM. At the moment in Hong Kong, we are so extremely STEM-focused, and I think that is why the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) is doing the society a good favour by having this kind of conference. More importantly, we need a critical mass before we are able to tip the balance. Well, we are not yet at a tipping point. If I may give an example, about 6 years ago, I went to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), saying to the medical students that as important as technology is, it is equally important to put human values back to the equation. So, we wrote them a proposal to say we would like to put performing arts into the curriculum. We were very fortunate that, at the same time, the Faculty was planning a Medical Humanities programme, which was actually part of their former curriculum. So, the minds met. It was just totally fortuitous. I would not put it down to anything but luck that we started this Performance Workshop, a performing art module of Medical Humanities at HKU 6 years ago, working with year one and two medical students.

And the important point I would like to make here is that it is examined. The students have to repeat if they fail in their first year. They will need to do a lot of catching up in the summer. It was a challenge in the first two years because we were new to them, while they were also new to us. So, this is where the trust comes in. There are a lot of discussions all the time on what works, what does not, and how we compromise. So, after 6 years,

we are at a higher level of the playing field and there is a bit of Medical Humanities culture at HKU. But the position of the arts is still not well understood. I think if we are able to penetrate the STEM side of things, then, hopefully in 5 years, we would be able to create a critical mass that will help the arts move into a very important position in 21st century living.

Jane CHU: We have a saying in the United States that it takes a long time for something to happen suddenly. So for all the work that you are doing, now you can celebrate all along the way. For example, there are plenty of hospitals that do not want to participate. But the ones that do, they are where you can run in and really have a successful story and more people will pay attention.

Samuel LEONG: I think we still have time for one more question.

Interviewee My question is about risk taking. As arts administrators, we work with artists and young people who are risk takers. But the risk takers that I need to try my hardest to convince is my board. So, how do you convince your board? How do you convince them that risk taking, especially here in Hong Kong right now, is really exciting? I am really curious also to hear from Ms. Chu. From your perspective and the National Endowment for the Arts in the US, speaking as an American, how do you change that thinking? And how do you promote cross-generation collaboration as well.

Jane CHU: Before I came to the National Endowment for the Arts, when I ran a performing arts venue and lots of programming, there did have a board that we needed to work together. And now, I do not have that same type of board. So, convincing a board for me has been bringing in along in the process, socialising people way before things happen. There are lots of explaining and questioning, and a lot of not being blindsided. Those things I remembered doing with my earlier board was that I would never surprise a board member. I brought them along in the process. If they do not want to do something, do not do it yet, but keep that quest going. So, the only thing is how you approach it.

Richard GRANT: Yeah, I think risk-taking for a board is basically a question of leadership and management of the process. If you are going to take risks and you are going to convince your board to take risk, you have to be the chairperson prepared to say so, and take risks. Gradually, you can convince your colleagues to take risks. When you are at a public funded arts organisation, you are subject to questions of the parliament, or to the official information act. All those processes that come exposed your processes. But if you have prepared to say, "We are going to take a risk." and you lead your board through, I think you can get there in the end.

And, over a period of time, they will see that risk taking is actually worth the effort.

On the second thing about generations, I think the interesting thing in New Zealand is that the changing demographic – the non-European side is much younger than other ethnicities, and the older generation particularly still wants to see and wants to see funded traditional forms of art. The younger people of different ethnicities want other things. So, the question for the public funders is how do you strike that balance? It is not always easy and you get criticised for the decision, one way or the other. But, that is just the reality of a New Zealand society with 89% of the people responding to surveys that the arts matter in life.

Patrick CHIU: I have encountered 3 boards in my life. I was in the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra for 4 years, and of course the two boards at Yat Po Singer and Hong Kong SingFest. As the only local artist on stage, unfortunately, I do not have good reference for you, because all these boards are excellent.

Samuel LEONG: Excellent. I think we do have a lot of good practices, good people who are open-minded, adventurous, risk-takers, creative, innovative, entrepreneurial, leaders and so on. But we also have the challenge, I think, that if the arts really matter and if the arts are valuable for everybody, then we need to work together to penetrate into those other boundaries that have too many gate-keepers. On that note, thank you very much for your questions and answers.

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