

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2016**

**Panel Discussion of Plenary 1: The Development of Cultural Ecology
[Transcript]**

Moderator: Dr WONG Ying-wai, Wilfred, Chairman of Hong Kong Arts Development Council

Panellists:

- 1) Ms Kathy LAI, Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council [Singapore]**
- 2) Mr Rupert MYER, Chair of Australia Council for the Arts**
- 3) Ms Elaine YEUNG, Assistant Director (Performing Arts), Leisure and Cultural Services Department [Hong Kong]**

Wilfred WONG: Ladies and gentlemen, as you have heard from Elaine about the sort of pressure she is under, it is not easy to run an ecosystem in Hong Kong with different demands from the community and the public. When Hong Kong people are used to the speed that things should be done, anything that is slower than lightning is not good. We have a lot of sympathy for government servants these days in Hong Kong. Of course the ADC is lucky that we are not a government organisation, although our funding comes from the government. The government gives us a much bigger free hand in doing things, and the ADC is located in a good part of the ecosystem. For the group discussion, I would like to see if the panellists on the stage, after hearing what the others have said, have questions or points you want to make, before I throw it open to the floor. Maybe we can start with Kathy because you started off. After hearing two other speakers, would you like to say more about the situation in Singapore and how would you see the world developing?

Kathy LAI: Heartening to see some commonalities that we are all preoccupied with common issues. Without actually engineering it we also have very similar approaches. It heartens me that I am on the right track backing up the right tree.

Rupert MYER: I think it is very interesting that the metaphor we use here is ecosystem. The expression itself is relatively new and describing in which the arts is infused in the community. But I think it is a very valuable one because it does create the same sense. If one part of the ecosystem is not doing well, then the likelihood is that another part of the ecosystem won't do too well either – in other words, they react to each other. I think it is also helpful to think of another metaphor: the sense of the big bones that move and the importance of nurturing the ligaments in the sinews, which cause that movement. The reason why I like this metaphor

is that it really goes into the heart of why we are engaged in this. We are working with artists. Artists need support, nurturing, recognition, acknowledgement, investment, time, space, and thoughtfulness, and a respect for their community to make what they want to do happen. Reflecting on that in the arid experience in Australia on what I've heard from this morning, some of the "software" is around access to artists' studios, the ability to present, the first exhibition for artists coming out of arts school, for there is a receptive audience that actually understands and anticipates keenly the role of the artists in the community. What I am hearing from Kathy and in the descriptions of Hong Kong is that the big bones in all our communities are working really well. The focus can now be getting those ligaments, sinews and the connections between all of that. I think this will be an interesting way to reflect upon.

Elaine YEUNG: Interesting enough, actually there are so many similarities between us in our concerns and in what we want to do. Especially with Singapore, we are always looking at each other.

Wilfred WONG: Because we are the tale of two cities.

Elaine YEUNG: Actually I see Hong Kong can make good use of our position to reach out to the mainland and the globe. I see the future. Don't get me wrong. The problems I presented just now are real problems but we should be able to find solutions with cooperation and better hope. You can treat me not as a civil servant. I treat myself as part of an artist. I've always been in the field. I have crazy thoughts. It is always when crazy thoughts are here, we are flexible and we can think of good solutions, because government and civil servants are not always very humble. I think partnership is really what we should look for in future.

Wilfred WONG: Two notions here. First, government and civil servants are not very humble. That could be true but it is not always true. Second, artists are crazy. I think most of the time it is true, because if you are not crazy you do not dream and you do not fetch for the impossibilities.

Due to time limits we should throw the floor open to the participants now. They are all from the local arts community, and many of them are leaders of their own fields. Please feel free to use any language. We've got simultaneous translation. Just raise your hand and we will deliver you the mic.

Tisa HO
(Executive
Director of Hong
Kong Arts
Festival): I was fascinated by both Rupert's and Kathy's presentations about the acknowledgement by the community of the importance of the arts in Singapore and Australia.

How did you do that? Working in the arts I feel that we need to justify advocating the value of the arts all the time with varied levels of success. How did that come about?

Rupert MYER: Thank you for the question. I don't think we are there yet. It is an argument that has to continually reinvent itself and re-energise itself. I am going back to an Australian Council meeting tomorrow. One of the items on the agenda is a paper all around advocacy. The discussion of advocacy and the importance of the role of organisations to advocate for the arts doesn't go away. The agency that we represent, one point of commonalities is that they are both of government, but also of the arts sector. Managing that relationship and presenting the arts sector to government and government to the arts sector is, if you like, an intermediary role we play. The challenge comes when we advocate for the arts across the whole of Australia, for example, we have all of the companies using common language, common expressions and relevant data, and talking about the world of the arts from an artist's perspective, not exclusively from a health perspective, economy perspective or tourism perspective. There is an artistic heart that is beating within the function of that. That is something we try to move towards, not to ignore the other benefits of the arts, but actually to make a case about why culture matters on a general terms, not just for what it does.

Kathy LAI: I think it is a very long-term effort. Several elements need to be in place. First of all, for people to appreciate the value of the arts is not an intellectual exercise. They have got to experience it. Second, for them to experience it and then translate it into an "A-HA" moment when they realise what they have benefitted. That is where the advocacy campaign comes in, where we actually try to distil what such encounters really can translate into an impact of how they live and how they plan ahead for their own lives.

One key lesson I learnt from the last roundtable, also interacting with the two speakers I mentioned earlier on a one-on-one basis, is we need to distil the meaning of the arts to the relevant segment. For instance, what a young person is deriving as a value from experiencing the arts is very different from a person who has retired. We did this exercise in Singapore right after the last roundtable. We did a lot of focus group discussions. In Singapore, the development was a bit like a pendulum. For a few decades arts has been very important, then it sorts of waned, and then it waxed. From these focus group discussions, we realise, for instance, for the youth the encounter of the arts is a platform of self-discovery of who they are as individuals. That is a preoccupation of the youth. For the elderly, for instance, encountering the arts is an exercise of nostalgia that reminds them of the past. It gives them an avenue, either to write or to interact with other generations, to link the past to the future. From all these conversations, another example, young working adults see the arts as perhaps a way to become more creative and innovative in their workplace, and give them an edge above other competitors. Each segment of the community is actually deriving a different value. As a council, when we advocate the value of the arts, we have to be precise. I saw this lofty statement - "the transformative value of the arts". That was on all the banners. Unfortunately, when a man on the street sees "the transformative value of the arts", it does not strike a chord. It doesn't mean

anything to him. From that exercise, we thought for advocacy campaign or other messages we either put in our magazine The A List or we as public servants ourselves to express what we do. We need to be precise as to how we are touching the lives of the community who are out there encountering the arts. I really have to give full credit to this roundtable I learnt from the last edition.

I have a question to Rupert though. I think we are way behind Australia, because of what people say about the value of arts. In Singapore we are not paying money for it (the arts). In Australia, as Rupert shared earlier, the income outstrips what Australians pay for internet charges. That is quite amazing. I am curious how they achieve that.

Rupert MYER: Perhaps to come back to the metaphor of ecology, within this sector, it is important that there is a balance of cultural events, those that are paid for and those that are made available without charge to very broad audience. And access is a really important issue. But I think the point that Kathy makes is, if people are able to pay for the experience, they should be certainly encouraged to do so. One of the trends that happened in the performing arts is that whereas perhaps ten years ago there might have been a three times differential between the least expensive seats in the house and the most expensive seats. Now that ratio is more like eight or nine times. To sit in a prime spot in the stall, you are now paying between eight and nine times of what you might expect to pay with a student's rush seat. Pricing strategy is actually very important. Similarly, access to the public collection of arts is generally without charge. However, in order to see a special exhibition, you are expected to pay a market price. We have seen that gradually increased from twelve dollars to now maybe twenty Australian dollars for a very major exhibition. The audiences come with us because they anticipate quality and an excellent experience, provided that is what's offered. I think then you can start to charge a respectable price.

LEUNG Chi Cheung (Music Advisor of ADC): I have a question for Kathy. As you talked about allies, I would like to know what kind of allies you want to have. How would Singapore's National Arts Council like to have different types of allies? Is it a strategic move for Singapore to promote its arts with allies?

Kathy LAI: The whole discussion about needing allies is because we recognise there is a sudden element of monopolistic power if we do everything ourselves. And it also arises from the point of view of sustainability. Going through our development, it is inevitable, like most mature markets, that public funding to the arts, even if we increase, should become a lesser and lesser slice of the pie.

So how do we make sure that some of the things we do? Should we stop something if there will somebody else to continue the good work? It is an uphill task, because some of the intermediaries and allies were actually created by us as well. We seeded them. We gave them a starting fund, in the hope that they can find other revenue stream and become sustainable. But there is also another type

of creature we, as a council, have neglected – the for-profit organisations. In the past, we always said that there is a commercial arts world and non-profit arts world, which is excellent, and never shall the twin meet. We operated in different worlds. But after talking to artists, I think all of them want to make money. Some of our visual artists have now become quite rich, even if they started on a very esoteric path. We also should engage arts organisations who also play a role in the ecology. I don't think we should make any kind of conclusion that if it is commercial it would be not artistically excellent. I don't think that is necessarily true. I also challenge my management team to get to know some of the more commercial arts organisations to see how we can collaborate.

Alice MONG
(Executive
Director of Asia
Society Hong
Kong Centre):

All four of you have tapped upon the software, the human resources. We have an Australian running the Asia Society in the art museum in New York. And now, a Singaporean Boon Hui Tan has been working in New York. I know there is a lot of interest in terms of ecology. I am just curious if any of you thought about the software development. Right now we have Asian running the UN General Assembly. As we are speaking right now, the Oscars is going on and the discussion in the United States is the lack of diversity in that race. So in terms of the ecology of the global arts management space, when are we Asians going to play a better role in the arts and new world? What do you all think of the software – the human resource development?

Rupert MYER:

Thanks Alice. Maybe I will start. It is interesting to have here what you describe as an international conversation. It certainly feels that way. We are speaking across jurisdictions, across art forms, across ideas in a number of different ways. I think what you've described is the element of mobility that is taking place within the arts sector. It is absolutely correct. Those involve in curatorship, administration and arts leadership are moving effortlessly between different places and sharing ideas across different cultures around how that might be. Both those in full-time roles as well as those in part-time roles are working on projects. Similarly the arts have no borders anymore. The arts are working seamlessly between jurisdictions. That is very much the nature of what we are doing.

The one comment that I make a relation to is somehow we mustn't let the market take over the dialogue. There is a dialogue between artists and arts organisations. Those who spend their lives working in the arts exist without relationships to the market place. A lot of what we hear is actually defined by the market place, price and some of those other characteristics. The dialogue you talked about is one around ideas, around intellectual development of the story of arts. That is a story that takes place in all sorts of ways random and otherwise.

Wilfred WONG:

As Rupert suggested there is really no more boundaries, no borders anymore in this world. There is only one standard – international standard. If you are good enough you are there. Everyone in Asia is competing with everyone in Europe and in America. I do believe that in our arts world, in the movies, in everywhere

we see, there are a lot of Asians emerging now. One day they will be there. We are in the learning curve in the curatorship, because this is an area where Asians haven't fully caught up. That is why the Hong Kong Government started this scheme two years ago. They inject some funding for us to work on training people in arts administration and curatorship. This is a very important area. If you want your arts to be understood, and if you want the world to really appreciate you, you need to be able to tell the story. I think this is an area we all need to work at.

I'd still like to go for one last question by MUI Cheuk-yin.

MUI Cheuk-yin
(ADC Council
Member):

Thank you very much. We have heard a lot from you. As the representatives of the arts world you can help us resolve many difficulties. Perhaps you can provide a better environment and promote collaboration. However, as an artist, we will always feel this difficult situation in front of us – macro-level approach such as implementation of government policies does not resolve the real situation. In Hong Kong, for example, artists want to use public space but they feel unsupported by the government. I would like to ask you, representing government bodies and wanting to bridge the arts world with the government, what experience can you share with us?

Kathy LAI:

I think we need to be constantly in dialogue with our stakeholders. Of course the most important stakeholders to us are the artists themselves. And also we need to be very transparent, as to where we come from. When we change our policy, what is the motivation behind it? What necessitates is a very open, candid dialogue, whether it is in the open space such as the media, or within close doors when we conduct our industry consultation. It is like hygiene – something that we have to do on a day-to-day basis, so that we are not so divorced in our thinking, hopes and aspirations as to what we want for the arts sector.

In the National Arts Council we have several platforms to do that. We have open town halls that we invite anybody, may you be an educator, a practitioner or a funder, to come and have a presentation or discussion that normally lasts half-a-day, together with the artists. We also have close-door discussion where we invite and consult people who care about certain topics. That is how we try to understand what they need and also have a way to explain our constraints. Some of the constraints Elaine talked about are very real. We experience it too, because government does have procedures to follow and we do have funding constraints. Unless we explain it, the complaints will be coming from all over the place rather than from something real to them.

Elaine YEUNG:

I don't think any of us can answer your question today. It has been a long discussion. If you listened to what I tried to present just now, whenever there is space, there would be different usages. A great leap forward with the ADC is making use of government school premises and factory spaces, but there are limitations. Could we just see a step at a time? The issue is particularly

complicated in Hong Kong with such a small space. Singapore has the Fort Canning Arts Centre and the Arts House. These are special examples. I am sure it was with a lot of hard work before Singapore's government can set aside a space. Same as in Hong Kong, we have to work with the Development Bureau when land is so expensive. It is a big policy change, which I understand from the development lately with the ADC, that in a land lease or a land grant, there are special provisions requiring developers to set aside the space for the arts. This is a step forward. Let's give time.

Rupert MYER:

I think one of the things we all must do is to define the ambition. Part of the ambition we should have is to find mechanisms to give feedback to artists. One of the issues that young artists face is they don't hear from each other, which isn't a bad starting point. But because there are limitations to their ability to present work, they are not in dialogue with a broader group of people. Actually presenting arts and creating opportunity either through public art displays or access to the studios, through artists-run initiatives or other sorts of spaces create a dialogue between artists and a broader audience. That actually defines the ambition. If that is great to be an ambition, then I think it is a case in developing policies to try and find a way realising that ambition. In Australia there are some quite successful percent for arts projects around public arts in jurisdictions often at local government. They have been very successful in drawing artists' work into public spaces, but more often they are established artists selected by some juries. It does not quite go to the heart of providing the sense of dialogue between younger artists and their perspective audiences.

Wilfred WONG:

Thank you our panel speakers. It has been a very productive morning. We have learnt a lot of what is happening in Singapore, Australia and Hong Kong. There are some key words we take away from this session. The first key word is advocacy. There must be continuing advocacy for policies, for what we do, and among the population. Don't take anything for granted. Secondly, we need to extend our network and cultivate allies. We all need allies, particularly in this world of artists and arts development. We need the support of different organisations, working together with the government and intermediary agencies like ourselves. Thirdly, we need to have continuous dialogue. Don't assume that anything is understood. There are a lot of things that the government is doing, and the Arts Development Council is doing, but the artists and the arts world outside do not know and do not understand. We need to continue the dialogue and communicate with them.

Because of the shortage of artistic space in Hong Kong, the Arts Development Council started to create arts space three years ago. This was never done before. In our twenty years of establishment, only two or three years ago we started to do this. We got tremendous support from the government. The HKSAR Government gave us the funding, we created the first arts space where close to 30 artists are now working in Wong Chuk Hang. The Government then went on to give us a secondary school with 90,000 sq. feet. We are now working with the

Tai Po District Council. This will be an arts centre where we would accommodate performing arts groups and train young people. Besides, we had just gone through the Legislative Council that the government will put in the lease of a new commercial building that they need to reserve certain space for visual artists and for the office. This will become the permanent office for the ADC.

As Elaine said, it was a step at a time. It was not fast enough, but we are in the public arena, so a lot of things will have to take time. It is the same as the West Kowloon Cultural District. We are seeing a lot of ground breaking there already, but of course before we start there is a lot of planning that we need to do. Things are happening. We all hope it could happen faster, but there are certain motions, procedures in the public arena that we have to go through. Dialogue is very important. For arts development, in the new world, we need to think of engaging the young people, the young artists, because they are the future. As an intermediate agency, our role is to make sure that the road map we plan for the future takes into account the aspirations of the young artists. Thank you very much for attending this morning session.

END