

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

**Plenary 1: The Development of Cultural Ecology**

*Building a sustainable future for the arts – Singapore’s journey towards a sustainable arts ecosystem*

**Full transcript of the speech by**

**Ms Kathy Lai, Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council [Singapore]**

Indeed this is a very special platform for me. This was my very first classroom, learning from the experts, and I am delighted to share with you my journey of the last two years as the Chief Executive of the National Arts Council, Singapore. Last night I was described as the veteran. I am glad today that it is further explained that I am a veteran of two years. The more I learn the more I realise that there is so much more to learn, and I am really excited to hear what we will discuss this afternoon. What I will do is provide a bit of warm-up for the real experts who will speak after me. I will also ask a few provocative questions.

I am glad that Wilfred (Chairman of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council) cited that financial resource is but one aspect of sustainability. Many of you who may have observed Singapore from afar might have observed that the government has not been sparing in devoting a lot of financial resources to the arts sector in Singapore. But, we within the Council ask ourselves, would concentrating so much investment in so few years in a sector create some issues for sustainability? It does create some unintended consequences. In Singapore there is a high dependence of the arts sector as well as the audiences that the public sector has to fund all these public goods. So propensity to pay, to go and see an arts event may have been inevitably pressed below what it should be by the government funding so much of the arts in Singapore.

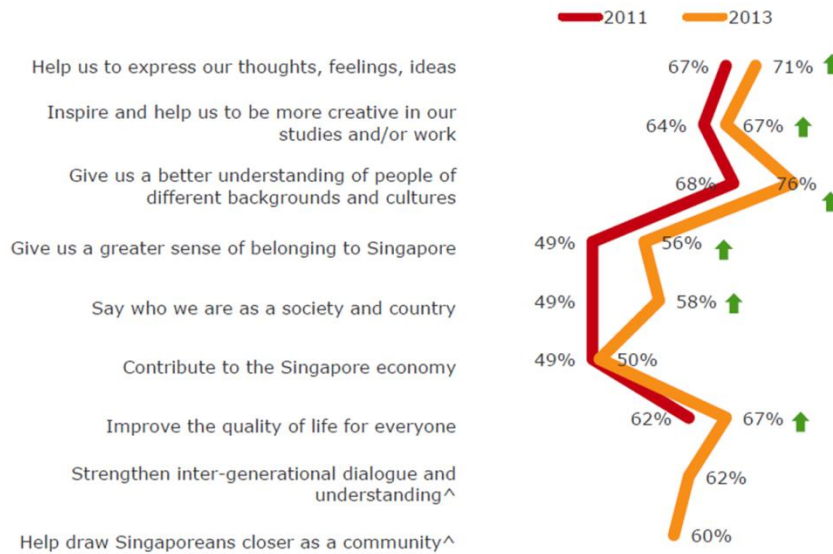
I will present a little stocktaking of what things are like in Singapore today, and tell you some history and where we are today. I will highlight some of the key developments in the last two years, and carry on to what we will focus on going ahead. Here is a quick description of the milestones of arts development in Singapore. I would of course consider much of these as some sort of pre-history. In the last decades, perhaps starting in the 2000s, many people observed a lot of investment by the government into infrastructure, for example, the Esplanade Theatres, the Arts House, and the National Art Gallery were inceptioned in the middle of the 2000s. All these carried on until the launch of the National Gallery late last year. We also, during my term, launched a Public Art Trust and a Cultural Diplomacy Fund, which I had described very briefly last time I was at this forum.

Two years ago, we did not really have a complete picture of the types of organisations in Singapore. But now we have done so, and there are actually more than 5,000 registered arts organisations in Singapore, of which 38 are major grant companies and 24 are seed grant companies, similar to what we call portfolio companies in England. These are companies which receive a grant from the Singapore government for their organisational developments. The grant is not project basis. The companies receive a grant for developments as arts companies. As everybody already knows we have two state orchestras, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

The level of arts activity has really gone very high. For 2015 alone, close to 40,000 activities happened. I have also listed some of the major platforms that attract not just a lot of artists in and out Singapore to participate, but also attract a lot of regional audiences who fly to see some of these events. Much of these activities are funded by the government, for instance, the Silver Arts Festival is meant for the mature audience; and Noise Singapore is a youth arts festival. And we are seeing the private sectors themselves are organising quite a few of these festivals.

However, you might have noticed that the rise in participation and attendance has not matched the rise of the number of activities. This chart shows that in 2013/14 we are stabilising at the same level. The spike in 2011 can be explained by a lot of novelty factors in play. It was the time when we opened the two casinos in Singapore, and, as art of the deal, there are Integrated Resorts, so there must be arts components in the resorts. Both the Resorts World Sentosa as well as the Marina Bay Sands have got performance venues as well as museums. When they were new, they attracted a lot of curious attendees. But it is noticed that the participation has taken down and it hasn't quite risen. 2015 might have witnessed a spike because of our celebrations of Singapore's 50<sup>th</sup> year as a nation, but it is something that preoccupies us and the arts groups as well, with regard to whether there is really any new, loyal, sustained audience for the sector. What we have noticed also, however, is that non-ticketed events, as known as free-of-charge events, are seeing a rise. Whether they are events of arts, heritage or literature, the attendance has been quite healthy.

Luckily, despite stagnating attendance and participation, the attitude towards the value of the arts has improved. We see a step change, in fact. These are findings from the biennial Population Survey. In the survey, we ask questions about what people think of the value of the arts? Does it inspire them to be more creative? Does it create better understanding between cultures? Does it create a sense of belonging to the country? As you see the latest trend represented by the yellow line shows a lot of improvement and a lot of positive movement of what people believe are the value of the arts. It seems that even though they might be hard-pressed to buy a ticket and attend, and hard-pressed to bring their families to some of these events, they do believe that these events are very valuable to their lives.



How does the Council tackle the long-term issues of the sustainability of the arts? It has three pillars. We still think that even in the new world, the relevance of the arts still needs to be advocated continuously and strongly, so we devote a lot of resources to engage communities using the arts. We promote the value of the arts for learning, for reflection, for bonding the community, and bring the arts to their doorsteps.

Of course we also have to do our core business, which is to promote artistic excellence among arts practitioners. We have quite a few new items and new activities with our artists as well. And finally we have a bigger question about infrastructure. By infrastructure I mean both hard infrastructure, e.g. arts buildings and arts spaces, as well as soft infrastructure. Perhaps we can call it ecology. These are the three pillars of our work.

**COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT**

Promoting the Arts for  
Expression, Learning,  
Reflection and Community  
Building

**ARTISTIC  
EXCELLENCE**

Shaping our Cultural  
Development, through the  
Arts

**STRONG  
INFRASTRUCTURE**

Developing a Sustainable  
Environment that Enables Artistic  
Creations to Entertain, Enrich and  
Inspire

First, for community engagement, in the last two years we actually devoted a lot of resources to bring arts to the doorsteps of different segments of society. For instance, in schools, we have a programme to enable teachers and principals to bring arts into their schools. We also fund a lot of collaborations between artists and teachers. We have an educational programme. Close to 850 performances, book shops, and shows have been brought into the schools, engaging 290,000 students in 2014. About 350 schools are active participants in our arts programme. I should also mention that my financial resource for these is greatly boosted by the Tote Board, which is a lottery organisation body. They have devoted a lot of funding for us, both for the schools which can get it directly, as well as for the artists who can be funded by the Tote Board Arts Fund.

We have also been active working with Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWO) and community centres to bring the arts into their organisations for their beneficiaries to experience. A lot of practitioners now appreciate the rehabilitative power of the arts. They can see their beneficiaries, who could be Alzheimer's patients or disabled patients, are uplifted by the arts. We have been working closely with community centres and health centres, and in fact, we have also launched a specific fund called the WeCare Arts Fund. All these organisations can tap on these funds to engage artists and also to train workers to make use of the arts to interact with their beneficiaries. Part of this is also to bring arts into special education for autistic children, seeing arts as a channel to reach out and educate these children. I mentioned silver arts and youth arts earlier. Again, lots of these activities are very customised and designed to suit the needs of the specific segments of audience.

On top of these, we have two horizontal programmes, one of them is called Community Arts Nodes. Community Arts Nodes are basically community centres and community clubs across the island, which are using the arts to reach out to their residents. The Council helps them in two ways. One is to advise them on how they can programme and what kind of artists they can engage and bring programmes into their community centres. Besides community centres, we also work with entities such as regional libraries and some hobby clubs. Basically the idea is that the pace of life in Singapore is fast, and transport is becoming an issue. It is going to be a bit inconvenient and expensive for families to come to the Esplanade or the National Gallery. We will bring some of these events to their doorsteps, hoping that this would enable them to enjoy and appreciate the arts at their convenience. We have launched the Arts Nodes in 2013, and expanded it in 2014 and 2015. Today we have about seventeen Arts Nodes across the island. This is what has been happening in the last two years.

The other thing that we have also done is Arts in Your Neighbourhood and Arts@Work. Apart from the Nodes, there are also pockets of spaces with high traffic, for instance, a business or industrial park where people go and work. During lunchtime we also organise quite a lot of outreach activities, such as a performance or a talk, for workers to spend their lunch hour

enjoying the arts. We are working with a few industry partners for such programmes, and also putting events in neighbourhoods that may not be an arts node.

Here is a video that shows how we have used arts to engage active ageing population. (Youtube video: [Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing](#)) We have gotten very positive reactions to the project. More and more community organisations are signing up for arts as one of the instruments to rehabilitate their beneficiaries.

I would like to highlight this particular slide, because this is one of the things we have learnt from the last Roundtable two years ago. We had two very good speakers from Arts & Business in England and also Americans for the Arts. They talked extensively on how we still need to advocate the relevance of the arts. We can't take it for granted. After the last round of Roundtable I went back to the Council and relooked at how we see the values of the arts to the audience. It is about dealing with our customers' customers, in other words, to help our artists convince the audience that their arts is very relevant to their lives. One of the interesting things we heard is that Singapore's arts calendar gets so packed that it is a challenge for the audience to find out what is happening. Once they find out what is happening it is also a challenge for them to understand what is the arts group trying to put across through their performances and exhibitions. Therefore, we launched this website as well as a bi-weekly magazine called The A List. It is very brief. The work is outsourced to an editorial team outside the Council. My instruction to the team is reach out to people who may never have encountered the arts, so no jargons and have a lot of people-centric stories, talk about the artists, and talk about people who experience the arts. Through this, we put all these magazines and have social media to reach out to people and families who want to learn about the arts. This is what we have been doing with The A List. We have extra money from the Ministry to do so.

We have also launched, as I mentioned earlier, the Public Art Trust. This brings arts out of the galleries, out of the museums, and put it in high traffic areas for people to enjoy as they go about their daily lives. We launched that in 2014. In November 2015 we commissioned three pieces of art and put them in public spaces. This is part and parcel of our arts advocacy campaign to make arts integral to everybody's daily lives. They do not have to go to a gallery or museum, they do not have to go to a performance centre, and they can still encounter very high quality arts.

We still focus on arts excellence. We still try to create platforms for artists to hone their skills. In Singapore we like to have master plans for each of the art form. All these master plans can be found on our website. We have also gone onto campaign to bring arts outside the shores of Singapore, so that artists can hone the skills playing to new audiences they may not be used to, and therefore learn more and develop more of their arts practices. We also signed a few MOUs, and we have a few more in the pipeline to collaborate with other countries for artists to have exchanges, residencies and collaborative projects. In terms of arts spaces, a few more were

introduced into the market last year. One of them worth mentioning is Centre 42. It is not a performance stage or a presentation venue; it is a home for theatre practitioners to do workshops, document and research text-based artistic productions. We have also relaunched the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall in the Civic District. It is a very community-flavoured performance venue open for hire. Anybody can hire the space. The National Gallery opened with much fanfare last year.

What we had also done in the ecology is trying to do something about the over-dependence of our arts sector on public funding. What we did was launching the Cultural Matching Fund, which is an effort to help artists and arts groups convince private money to be donated to them, because the government would match it dollar-for-dollar. I am happy to say it went really well for us. As I speak now, the amount that has been matched has been increased up to 80 million. Before 2013, every year around 40 million of private money went into the arts. After the launch of the Fund, 60 million has been matched. Instead of 40 million per annum we have climbed up to 60 million per annum, matched by government, so the arts sector is getting around 120 – 130 million dollars a year. This is a real step change for the receiving organisations.

Looking ahead, we are at very early stages of devoting more resources into digital engagement. This is something we spoke about at the last roundtable. In terms of using digital technology to grow audiences and also present arts products, we know that we are a bit slow, because as a city we do not have the preoccupation of reaching audiences who live in the rural areas outside performing centres. We realise now that we need to catch up. We are in a midst of strategising and devoting a lot more resources into enabling artists to use digital technology. We had a digital arts festival just ended yesterday.

The other resource we should tap on is volunteerism. This is a deeper engagement of audiences because just seeing would not be as deep an engagement as they are volunteering their time and efforts to work hand-in-hand with artists and arts groups. We are working with another agency in Singapore to build a pool of volunteers and help our arts groups manage their volunteers. These are the things we will focus on in the next year or two.

Besides arts groups and public entities, we also realise we have neglected strong allies who may be engaging arts and artists for profit. We call them intermediaries. We quite like to get to know them more, and make sure that they are also going in tandem with the artists. These intermediaries include venues and impresarios who are able to programme and bring the artists to other countries to engage audiences overseas. Thank you so much.

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