

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

Plenary 1: Connecting the Arts with Audiences

Transcending Boundaries – Arts for Everyone

Full transcript of speech by

Mrs. Rosa Huey DANIEL

Deputy Secretary (Culture) of Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth &

Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council [Singapore]

Very good afternoon, Dr. Wilfred Wong, (Chairman, Hong Kong Arts Development Council), friends, colleagues in the arts. I have been asked to speak on a topic that is very close to our hearts at the moment because in Singapore it's been quite a journey. As you know we are 50 years as an independent country and over the last 20 years, we have been very busy with infrastructure. We have revamped our museums and in 2015, when we turned 50 as a young independent nation, it was an opportunity for us to put a lot of attention to sprucing up infrastructure which had been around for a while. Several of our monumental buildings now are housing our museums and galleries, and the new National Gallery Singapore is today boasting a collection of Southeast Asian art and Singapore art in one location.

The National Arts Council (NAC) together with its parent Ministry (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth) have also been spending a lot of time focusing on the basics to build our artistic capabilities and to establish arts groups, companies and communities. We also decided that we had to harness, beyond government funding for the arts, from the people and the private sector especially the corporate community. A significant step that we took a few years ago was to have a very generous support from the government in the form of the Cultural Matching Fund (CMF). The government match is about S\$350 million, which roughly translates to about HK\$1.5 billion. It is dollar-for-dollar matching, and that's the commitment the government decided to make to harness and activate private sector giving. It has worked and today, about half of that has been drawn down, and has shown that we've tapped into quite a rich vein of giving, especially from the corporate sector.

What we need to do a lot better is learn how to do crowd-funding and letting our Singaporean audiences know that every dollar count. We haven't done that very well, but I'm glad to say that the large amount of corporate giving has given us a boost. We have always had in place a tax deduction scheme of 2.5 times, and that has also helped us.

The next phase is a topic that is very close to our hearts. We are going to spend a lot more time to understand our audiences, and to understand how the arts can reach deep

to resonate with audiences, and through the arts to unleash many things which are good for the long-term in society.

So at the NAC, we do believe that the role of the arts is going to be increasingly important as we develop our economy and society. Connecting through the arts is very core to the NAC's mission and vision which I share here. Of course we want to nurture creative excellence and we, at the same time, also have to bring along audiences through deeper engagement and participation.

So our vision and mission really reflect our hope and ambition to, through the arts, engender a deep sense of connection with Singapore's unique multicultural identity. As you might know, Singapore is a multicultural society, and that speaks to our identity. And we've tried to do this through the arts- the way that we make art, the way that we reach out to audiences- to bring that alive to Singaporeans.

We recognise that the arts, if we do it well, can inspire Singaporeans of all age groups, connect communities of different types and also pave a way for us to position Singapore globally to bring our arts abroad, to get friends internationally to understand what Singapore is about.

We did a nationwide population survey ([the National Population Survey on the Arts](#)) not too long ago in 2015, and we were happy to know that attendance and participation in arts events had reached a pretty high point in a decade. We also know that those who have already engaged in the arts have actually stayed with the arts. So we've succeeded in anchoring people who really have an affinity to the arts.

But what we found challenging, and that's going to be really occupying our minds going forward, is how to tap into new audiences, especially those who currently don't engage in the arts or, for that matter, have little access or opportunity to access the arts. If we aspire to make the arts an integral part of life in Singapore, how can we better get the arts to be accessible to people from all walks of life? So that poses a challenge for us.

We, thankfully, are not alone in this. We are trying to get our arts groups to also think that way. So I just want to give acknowledgment to the importance of the arts community by putting them first, by saying that they have done their part. What you see here is Drama Box. It is a leading Singapore theatre group, and what they have done is create a pop-up theatre space in neighbourhoods as a means to connect communities, and allow them to experience community theatre.



Singapore is very small with a size of 700 square kilometres, so it's not difficult for us to bring people to the civic district where a lot of our institutions are. But we also realise that you have to go to where people live, work and play, especially when you're talking about people who don't often access to the arts. So community spaces are very important for us to activate, to make them vibrant so that we can reach out to those communities.

We've now got 15 community arts and culture nodes all over Singapore, and we work with libraries, schools, community centres, hawker centres, and even many housing estates. So that challenge has been to connect with people who are running those spaces, to understand too the demographics and the profile of that community, so that at the local level, we are actually delivering the arts in a manner that really makes sense to the character and identity of that neighbourhood. These kinds of programmes have become regular launch pads for us to bring arts activities to the doorsteps of where people live.

We've also tried to activate our arts practitioners to connect with these spaces and we've brought them also into the community to help us deliver these programmes. Certainly one of the very big strategies is of course how do we reach out to the young. This is where we are now systematically thinking through in terms of the different stages that they go through - all the way from preschool, as you can see here, to primary and secondary school. For example, we have recently launched [The Artground](#), a new incubator space that looks at developing arts for young audiences, from as young as a few months old. We have also collaborated with our partners like the Early Childhood Education Agency to bring our artists to pre-schools to enrich their first encounters with the arts.

At the school level, we are systematic about working with the Minister of Education as well to deliver arts programming at different levels of their education. We've had the opportunity to bring thousands of Primary 4 students to the museums. Some of the objects are now in the syllabus, and we want to furnish the experience of bringing them for very structured visits to the museums, where they relate the objects they read in the history curriculum, with objects that they are now seeing in the galleries. And we are trying to follow that through where teachers go back with online learning resources, so that they can follow through that experience.

I'll also talk very briefly about this fantastic experiment that seemed to have worked quite well, where we have introduced about 4,000 to 5,000 children, to the Singapore National Youth Orchestra, and with electronic music coming together to lower the barriers to entry to a space we call the Esplanade, which is our National Performing Arts Theatre. We take this for granted, but many children do feel that sense of awe and that sort of barrier to entering a 2300-seater huge auditorium. So that experience helps to break down the barrier and to hopefully build future audiences.

We have another platform, which is called "Noise Singapore" (Noise) and this originated from a small movement of just activating a few programmes and now it has become a big movement of young people who come together with the great support of industry partners to create together. I think this is where Noise has become a platform where we expect the young to create their own opportunities and reach out to other young people. Last year, this festival has attracted 41,000 people and many of them are young people.

It would not be complete for me to say what the arts does and not mention what we do for the other end of the audience spectrum: the active elderly. We have a lot of great opportunities to work with the elderly population, such as the "[Silver Arts](#)" programme. Of course, we also have programmes for people who are underserved as well as persons with disabilities.

We also haven't forgotten the need for digital engagement, and we've been working very hard for this piece. We understand online audiences are accessing many information, so we're working very hard, to see how the arts can reach out in different ways, especially to the young demographics.

Last, but not least, internationalisation is a very important strategy. There are international audiences who look to Singapore for the arts, and we also want to try and understand how to really profile Singapore arts overseas.

I'm going to stop here and I hope to take some interesting topics for discussion later. I'm convinced that many of us in the audience are facing challenging times, but I think the solutions can be jointly shared. Thank you very much.

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