



IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series: Roundtable on Whither Arts Funding: Priorities, Values and Control

By Tan Tarn How and Shawn Goh Ze Song

Some artists criticised the difficulty in getting funding for works that “rub the government the wrong way”, which imply that the National Arts Council exercises some form of control over the arts through its funding. However, policymakers responded by assuring artists that there was no “funding blacklist” and that funding applications were considered on a case-by-case basis.

It has been acknowledged that the government gives a considerable amount of funding to the arts, but several questions have been raised about how and where the money is distributed. They include: What art forms should get more government funding and what are those that warrant less support? How should the pursuit of artistic excellence be balanced with the nurturing and support of new artists? Do conditions of funding undermine rather than encourage artistry, experimentation and criticality, and how? Should funding be disbursed at an arm’s length from the government?

On 2 March 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a roundtable discussion in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum, on “Whither Arts Funding: Priorities, Values and Control”. A total of 46 participants attended the event, which included policymakers, artists and arts practitioners, academics and experts from other relevant sectors.

The three presenters were Rosa Daniel, Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Council (NAC); Alfian Sa’at, Resident Playwright at WILD RICE; and Fong Hoe Fang, Publisher at Ethos Books. Following that, Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at IPS gave a response to the presentations.

Strategic Priorities for the Arts Sector (FY18–2025): A Public Sector Perspective

Mrs Daniel gave an overview of Singapore's current arts landscape and NAC's strategic priorities and challenges in the next five years. In the last 50 years, the arts and culture sector has been strongly funded in operating and developmental expenditure, and in infrastructural investments, she said.

Singapore enjoys a relatively high arts funding per capita compared to other countries that increasingly face a withdrawal of state support for the arts. To scale new levels of artistic excellence in the years ahead, NAC would need to take a holistic and differentiated approach to sector development in the visual, performing and literary arts, all of which present different opportunities and challenges.

One common challenge, as reported in NAC's surveys, is that Singaporeans indicate low interest in the arts despite greater arts access and participation. Hence, more research anchored in both academic expertise and arts practice needs to be done to understand the unique challenges faced by different art forms in reaching out to audiences, and to develop specific strategies and diverse skill sets to respond to these challenges.

Mrs Daniel also spoke about the importance of partnering other public sector agencies to nurture a facilitative environment for the arts to flourish. This includes working with the Ministry of Education to anchor arts education in schools, land agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority to activate community spaces for the arts, and economic agencies such as the Singapore Tourism Board to advance the internationalisation of Singapore arts.

A Manifesto for Arts Funding

Mr Alfian presented a manifesto for arts funding that provided a set of guidelines and executive limits on the role and tasks of funding agencies. The term "manifesto" was a deliberate choice, he said, as manifestos can be either artistic or political in nature. It addressed contestations around the word "public" and the tendency to conceive audiences as electorates. It also challenged the image of the artist as an adversarial, untrustworthy and self-entitled figure.

The 10 points in the manifesto were:

- 1) To fund the arts is to fund democracy.
- 2) Democracy involves dissent.
- 3) The public consists of diverse minority groups.
- 4) The public is not equivalent to the electorate.
- 5) Don't try to muzzle the mouth that you feed.
- 6) Taking funding away from anti-establishment art will not create pro-establishment art.
- 7) Censorship by funding might augment state power but destroys cultural capital.

- 8) Maturity is not merely a function of age.
- 9) Controversy is a test of the state of our civic discourse.
- 10) Bureaucrats need guidelines too.

At Sea with Literary Arts Funding in Singapore

Mr Fong spoke about the challenges that Ethos Books faced in obtaining grants since its foundation in the late 1990s, and the lessons it has learnt.

Singapore's strong poetry scene today is in no small way a result of NAC's grants and support for the literary arts in its early years, he said. While this support was heartening, a series of personal experiences convinced him that there were unseen political forces that influenced the evaluation of grants and funding beyond literary excellence alone. To overcome this, Ethos Books sourced for non-governmental support to publish books that might be seen as "politically problematic".



Mr Fong Hoe Fang, Publisher at Ethos Books, speaking at the IPS-SAM roundtable.

He stressed the importance of having arm's length funding from the government, and that while NAC is part of the government and should rightfully obey its political masters, it should also advise them after hearing inputs from the ground.

Corporate Funding of the Arts in Singapore

Mr Arun spoke about the importance of corporate funding of the arts, and gave his personal experience working with Mobil Oil Corporation, which had helped shape the Singapore Arts Festival in its early years during the 1980s.

He said the philosophy underlying corporate funding is “enlightened self-interest”. Mobil had funded the arts because it was the right thing to do to be in the good books of the government, especially when the government was beginning to see the importance of the arts differently and beyond its economic benefits. While it did not manage to benefit economically from funding the arts, its returns were in the form of political and community goodwill, and that it positioned itself as a pioneering and creative company to attract greater talent. He also urged arts organisations to consider corporate funding in tandem with government funding as a collective pool of funding sources.

Discussion

The main points raised in the discussion were:

- 1. The need to address the perceived lack of political neutrality in disbursement of funding.** Some artists criticised the difficulty in getting funding for works that “rub the government the wrong way”, which imply that NAC exercises some form of control over the arts through its funding. This needs to be addressed as it tarnishes NAC’s credibility and reputation as an advocate for the arts. Policymakers at the roundtable responded by assuring artists that there was no “funding blacklist” and that funding applications were considered on a case-by-case basis. They also urged artists not to talk about funding in a sweeping manner — some forms of funding are disbursed at greater arms-length (e.g., through partnerships and festivals) than others (e.g., commissioned works and community programming) as NAC is conditionally funded by its parent ministry, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.
- 2. New modes of funding to support interdisciplinary art forms, and to address unique challenges of different art forms.** Currently, NAC’s funding is targeted at distinct categories of art forms — music, dance, theatre, literary arts and visual arts. This makes interdisciplinary art production tricky as it becomes unclear as to which category funding should come from. New modes of funding that support interdisciplinary artworks would benefit by allowing artists to pool resources and share audience bases. As different art forms require different resources and thus face different challenges, new modes of funding should also cater to the unique challenges of specific art forms.

A full report of the roundtable discussion entitled “The Art of Funding the Arts” can be downloaded [here](#). More details about the event can also be found [here](#).

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