

# Beyond “Happy Arts for Happy People”

Full Report on the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series:

Roundtable on the Development of Community Arts in Singapore

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# Executive Summary

Community arts have been one of the main planks of Singapore’s cultural policies since the release of the *Renaissance City Plan III* in 2008 and the *Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* in 2012. Major initiatives that have since emerged include the National Arts Council’s *Arts for All*, which aims to bring “the arts to our shared spaces — where we live, work, and play”, and the People’s Association’s *PAssionArts*, which “aims to make arts and culture more accessible to the people by bringing it right to the heart of every constituency in Singapore”.

This roundtable discussion of policymakers, academics, artists, and civil society activists examines the progress and impact of these initiatives, and discusses ideas for further developing community arts in Singapore.

In the first panel, policymakers from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, the National Arts Council, and the People’s Association spoke about their community arts visions and initiatives.

1. They identified **broadening and deepening community engagement with the arts** as a key focus. This would involve bringing the arts to the “heartlands” so that arts and culture can be part of people’s everyday lives; increasing access to the arts, especially for disadvantaged communities; promoting arts volunteerism; and providing a greater diversity of programmes.
2. **Adopting a participatory approach to community arts** was also mentioned as another key focus. This would involve developing capabilities for artists, bridging the gap between artists and communities, and collaborating with cross-sector partners to provide the infrastructure for artistic co-creation.

3. Policymakers also highlighted the **benefits of community arts** to instilling well-being and belonging, a gracious and cultured society, and a strong and cohesive Singapore identity.

In the second panel, artists responded to the policymakers with the following points.

1. **The need to increase the diversity of community arts programmes.** Programmes should go beyond co-creation and collaboration to address the contestations that emerge from the artistic process and the everyday difficulties people face. While many see contestation as negative, the arts can use it to bridge differences and to help our society grow and mature. In short, programmes should be more than “happy arts for happy people”. Greater diversity would also mean having initiatives that are “needs-centric” and responsive to the ground, rather than being “programme-centric” with pre-determined outcomes. This would also help identify new measures of aesthetics and value, which often change with the evolving needs of society. There should also be programmes that de-emphasise the “spectacle” of community arts and create more spaces for “backstage” community arts, that is, where artists and communities can co-create art that is not purely for show.
2. **The need for both artists and policymakers to critically examine and be reflexive about their work in community arts.** Artists might know how to create art, but they also need to acknowledge that their training might limit them from working with the community effectively. Thus, artists need to exercise internal evaluation and use critical frameworks to evaluate their practices as part of their professionalism. Policymakers on the other hand should think about community arts as a form of “community development”, constantly changing to suit the needs of an evolving community. They should not merely see policies as roadmaps that map out the “right direction”, but also as possibilities for identifying “detours” that might lead to new forms of creativity.

3. **The success of community arts should be evaluated qualitatively and not just quantitatively.** Numbers might indicate the reach of programmes, but qualitative assessments would tell what community arts mean to the community, thus providing a more nuanced view.
4. **The arts should not be seen as a “higher need” that is attainable only after bread-and-butter issues are solved.** Instead, community arts policies should encourage people to reimagine the position of the arts in their lives.
5. **Policies should ultimately facilitate the communities to take greater ownership and organise more ground-up programmes on their own.** However, such an approach would also require room for the inevitable failures that might happen as part of the community’s learning journey. Thus, trust between the government and the people would be crucial.

In the third panel, community artists spoke about the impact and challenges of their projects. These projects ranged from art for health and therapy, to art for addressing social issues such as poverty, and heritage and conservation. The artists spoke about **how to define *community* in community arts, the difficulties of evaluating quality and impact, and the challenges in ensuring sustainability of programmes.** This panel showcased the diversity in community arts approaches and practices, and highlighted the gaps that future policies could fill to facilitate the work of community artists on the ground.

# Introduction

Together with the Singapore Art Museum, the Institute of Policy Studies organised a roundtable discussion on 15 March 2017 to reflect critically on the development of community arts in Singapore. Held at the Singapore Art Museum, the roundtable examined the progress and impact of existing community arts initiatives, and offered ideas for the further development of community arts. More than 70 participants attended the roundtable, which included policymakers, artists and arts practitioners, scholars, and representatives from voluntary welfare organisations.

The roundtable was chaired by Mr Tan Tarn How, Senior Research Fellow at the Arts, Culture, and Media Cluster at the Institute of Policy Studies.

The title of and speakers in the three panels were as follows:

## **Panel I: Community arts policies and implementation**

1. Mr Lim Teck Hong, Senior Assistant Director, Arts and Heritage Division, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY)
2. Ms Chua Ai Liang, Director, Arts and Communities, National Arts Council (NAC)
3. Mr Patrick Sim, Director, Engagement Cluster — Arts and Culture, Community Arts and Culture, People’s Association (PA)

**Panel II: Response to community arts and policies and implementation**

1. Mr Alvin Tan, Artistic Director, The Necessary Stage
2. Dr Felicia Low, Director, Community Cultural Development Singapore
3. Dr Woon Tien Wei, Co-Founder, Post-Museum
4. Dr Jay Koh, Founder and Director, International Forum for InterMedia Art
5. Mr Kok Heng Leun, Nominated Member of Parliament

**Panel III: The work and beyond**

1. Ms Alecia Neo, Artist Lead, Brack
2. Assistant Professor Michael Tan, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University
3. Ms Danielle Hong, Co-Founder, *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru*
4. Ms Noor Izzaty, Community Worker, Beyond Social Services
5. Ms Li Li Chung, Founder, Exactly Foundation
6. Ms Berny Tan, Assistant Curator, OH! Open House
7. Mr Terence Tan, Director, Artsolute
8. Ms Beverly Hiong, Freelance Musician
9. Mr Jeffrey Tan, Theatre Artist



# Opening Remarks

TAN TARN HOW is a Senior Research Fellow in the Arts, Culture and Media research cluster at the Institute of Policy Studies. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy. He has written on the development of the arts in Singapore, in particular, fostering partnerships between the people, private and public sectors; the creative industries in Singapore, China and Korea; cultural policy in Singapore; and arts censorship. His research interests also include arts education and role of education in cultural and human development. He has also carried out research on the management and regulation of media in Singapore; the impact of the Internet and social media on society; the role of new and old media in the 2008 Malaysian election and the 2006 and 2011 Singapore elections; and the way in which the Internet and social media have influenced the development of civil society and democratic development. He is working on a book called *Flourishing Life*, which examines issues arising from instrumental economics-oriented thinking in politics, society and education, and argues for more comprehensive and humanist indices of development and education achievement. He was a journalist for nearly one and half decades before joining IPS. He has also been a teacher and television scriptwriter, and is a playwright and arts activist.

## Development of community arts in Singapore

Mr Tan Tarn How opened the roundtable by noting that it was timely one.

Community arts have been one of the main planks of Singapore’s cultural policies since the publication of the *Renaissance City Plan III* in 2008 and the *Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* in 2012. Among the major initiatives launched was the NAC’s *Arts for All* initiative that aims to bring “the arts to our shared spaces — where we live, work, and play.” Another was PA’s *PAssionArts*, which “aims to make arts and culture more accessible to the people by bringing it right to the heart of every constituency in Singapore.”

Mr Tan Tarn How said he hoped the roundtable discussion would address the following questions:

1. What is community arts? Is it even the right term?
2. Why do we need community arts?
3. Who is community arts for? Who is left out?
4. What are the different intensities of engagement in community arts?
5. How do we assess the impact of community arts?
6. Do artists have sufficient capacity to engage in community arts?

Mr Tan Tarn How said we often forget that the arts are embedded within the community. One of the earliest examples of community arts was Wayang Kulit. More recent examples of arts within the community include Ms Priyageetha Dia’s “golden staircase” (see Figure 1A) and Mr Or Beng Kooi’s “artistic tower” (see Figure 1B). These examples would be useful starting points for reflecting on community arts, he said.

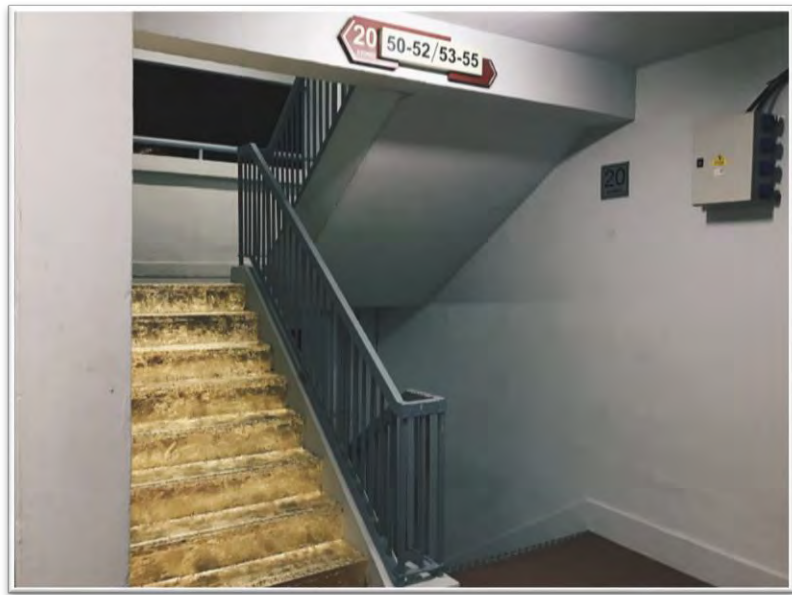


Figure 1A: Ms Dia’s “golden staircase”. Photo taken from Priyageetha Dia’s Facebook page.



Figure 1B: Mr Or’s “artistic tower”. Photo courtesy of Shirley Soh.

**Panel I:**

**Community arts policies and  
implementation**

# Mr Lim Teck Hong

LIM TECK HONG is currently a Senior Assistant Director in the Arts and Heritage Division in the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, overseeing planning, research, community arts and manpower in the culture sector. Mr Lim has more than 14 years of working experience in the public service in the areas of education, media and arts.

## MCCY’s strategic thrusts

MCCY has three strategic thrusts on community arts (see Figure 2). Under each, the strategy for the culture sector has been identified and key sector initiatives launched. The strategies thrusts are:

1. **Promoting shared responsibility through active citizen engagement.** The aim is to achieve active participation and excellence in arts and heritage. Under this, the strategy for the culture sector is to enhance engagement of audiences and to promote excellence in the culture sector. The key initiatives for Financial Year 2017 to 2018 are to review the sector plans for the arts in literary, performing, and traditional arts, and enhance infrastructural support for the culture sector via the building of the Esplanade Interim Theatre and the retrofit of the Singapore Art Museum.
2. **Creating shared experience through enlarging social commons and fostering social mixing.** The aim is to achieve trust and respect between communities, strengthen the social compact between citizens and the government, and achieve an active and caring citizenry through volunteerism and philanthropy. Under this, the strategy for the culture sector is to develop social capital and strengthen enablers to create a sustainable ecosystem that supports the culture sector. The key sector initiatives for Financial Year 2017 to 2018 are to engage under-reached communities, enhance placemaking for arts and heritage, and promote cultural philanthropy. Community arts policies and implementation fall under this strategic thrust.



Figure 2: MCCY's strategic thrusts. Image courtesy of MCCY.

3. **Fostering shared endeavours through inspiring the Singapore spirit.** The aim is to achieve a strong sense of identity, commitment and resilience in crisis, and strengthen youth commitment to Singapore. Under this, the strategy for the culture sector is to build national identity and pride through arts and heritage. The key sector initiatives for Financial Year 2017 to 2018 are to develop a *Heritage Strategic Plan*, promote Singapore's cultural assets through cultural diplomacy, and develop milestone learning visits for students to cultural institutions.

### **Community engagement under *Arts and Culture Strategic Review***

In March 2010, the *Arts and Culture Strategic Review* was launched to chart a course for Singapore’s cultural development till 2025. The *Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* published in 2012 recommended community engagement as one of the strategic directions to achieve the next phase of our cultural development, which was supported by the goal to bring arts and culture to “everyone, everywhere, every day”.

There are four main strategies to achieve this goal:

1. Promotion and advocacy efforts to raise awareness of arts and heritage to all Singaporeans.
2. Develop capabilities for community engagement in arts and heritage so that people who are involved will have the necessary skills and abilities to do so.
3. Targeted outreach to the heartlands and under-reached segments to increase access to arts and heritage.
4. Grow participation and deepen engagement through interest groups and ground-up initiatives to encourage people to participate and be more involved in creating art.

Many agencies are involved in implementing these strategies. They include NAC, PA, the National Heritage Board, National Library Board, as well as Companies Limited by Guarantee under MCCY like the Esplanade, National Gallery, Singapore Art Museum, and Singapore-Tyler Print Institute.

### What is “community engagement”?

MCCY sees community engagement as working in collaboration with groups of people to address the needs or issues that the community experiences, and community arts as collaboration between artists and communities to create art in a community setting.



Malay Culture Fest. Photo courtesy of MCCY.

“

*At the highest level of community engagement, the participant community organises its own activities and advocates for its own needs without government support.*



Figure 3: Four levels of community engagement. Image courtesy of MCCY.

There are four levels of community engagement, each with its own set of benefits (see Figure 3):

1. At the first level, the public is a mass participant within an arts process. Individuals either passively consume or engage in simple artwork.
2. At the second level, the participation deepens and volunteers are co-opted into the creative process of the work.
3. At the third level, individuals come together to brainstorm on what they want to do and work with relevant agencies through a co-developmental approach to craft a creative process relevant to the participant community.
4. At the highest level of community engagement, the participant community organises its own activities and advocates for its own needs without government support.



## Impact of arts and culture

MCCY believes that arts and culture benefits the individual, the community, and the nation.

Firstly, arts and culture benefits the individual by lowering stress and improving a sense of well-being. Multiple studies have shown that participation in the arts results in a statistically significant reduction in cortisol levels.

Other studies also demonstrate a correlation between engagement with arts and cultural activities, and reported health and sense of well-being, possibly due to reduced stress levels. Based on the 2015 *Population Survey on the Arts* conducted by NAC, 73 per cent of Singaporeans believed that engagement with arts and culture improves everyone’s quality of life.

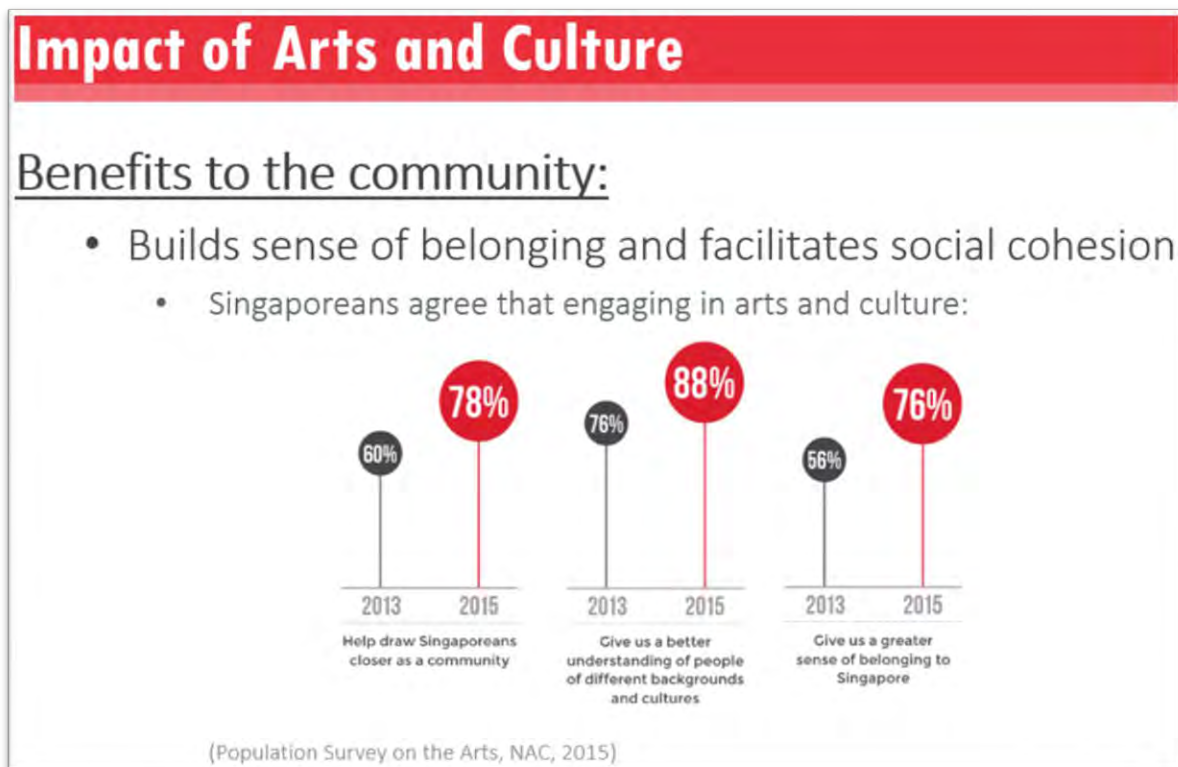


Figure 4: Impact of arts and culture. Image courtesy of MCCY.

Secondly, arts and culture benefits the community by building a sense of belonging and facilitating social cohesion.

Studies have shown that engagement with arts and culture can help create a sense of belonging and strengthen community networks, thus increasing a sense of collective identity.

Another study also found that Canadians who either visited a public art gallery, attended a theatrical performance, or visited a historical site were 21 per cent, 16 per cent, and 13 per cent (respectively) more likely to have a very strong sense of belonging to Canada, as compared to those who did not.

Based on the *2015 Population Survey on the Arts* conducted by NAC, Singaporeans agreed that engaging with arts and culture helps draw Singaporeans closer as a community, gives individuals a better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures, and gives individuals a greater sense of belonging to Singapore (see Figure 4).

The *2014 Heritage Awareness Survey* conducted by the National Heritage Board also found that 66 per cent of Singaporeans agreed that a better understanding and appreciation of Singapore’s history and heritage would help them develop a greater sense of belonging to Singapore.



Quotes about the Silver Arts Festival 2016. Image courtesy of MCCY.

Lastly, arts and culture benefits the nation by revitalising public spaces and promoting safe, inviting, and liveable neighbourhoods. Studies on participatory art showed that the qualities that made a space suitable for arts and cultural events were often the same qualities that made spaces approachable and welcoming.

**MCCY’s family agencies and their roles in community engagement**

MCCY partners with four main agencies to fulfil its goal in community engagement through community arts — NAC, PA, the National Heritage Board, and the National Library Board (see Figure 5).

NAC	NHB	PA	NLB
Broad outreach to the general public			
Advocacy for <b>arts</b>	Advocacy for <b>heritage</b>	<b>Social outcomes</b> , for people to connect through the arts	Building a <b>learning community</b> , encouraging appreciation and awareness of Singapore’s history
Focus is on <b>deep engagement</b> with arts and heritage		Focus is on <b>mass participation</b> and deep engagement with people	
Targeted programmes for <b>under-served groups</b>			-
Capability development of <b>arts and community</b> sectors	Capability development of <b>heritage and community</b> sectors	-	-
Volunteer engagement			

Figure 5: MCCY’s family agencies and their roles in community engagement. Image courtesy of MCCY.

All four agencies are involved in broad outreach to the general public, and volunteer engagement to bring people in to help with the level of engagement in community arts.

However, each agency also has its own specific focus.

NAC does advocacy for arts while the National Heritage Board advocates for heritage. Both NAC and the National Heritage Board focus on promoting deep engagement with arts and heritage, and facilitate capability development of the arts and heritage community sectors. They also have targeted programmes for under-served groups.

PA and the National Library Board on the other hand focus on promoting mass participation and deep engagement with people. PA focuses on the social outcomes and for people to connect through the arts, while the National Library Board aims to build a learning community, encouraging appreciation and awareness of Singapore’s history.

# Ms Chua Ai Liang

CHUA AI LIANG is Director of Arts & Communities at the National Arts Council. She is responsible for the implementation of the Council’s Community Arts Engagement Plan, which aims to deepen and broaden arts engagement across different communities in Singapore. She has many years of experience in the cultural sector and has been involved in national arts events and initiatives in the performing, visual, and literary arts including the Singapore Arts Festival (1999–2008). She was also involved in *the Renaissance City Plan III* (2005–2010) and *Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (2011). She has previously helmed portfolios in the Council, including Audience Development (2005–2009), and Arts Education and Youth Arts (2009–2010). She has served as Secretary-General of the Asian Festival of Performing Arts Association (2004–2006) and participated in the UNESCO Network of Arts Education Observatory Meeting, UNESCO Second World Conference on Arts Education (2010) during her stint in Arts Education. More recently, she was invited to present the Council’s community-based initiatives at the Seoul International Symposium for Arts and Creativity (SISAC) (2011), EnAGE Ageing Symposium 2016 organised by Temasek Polytechnic, and Singapore Insights Forum on the theme “Without culture, there is no future for cities”, organised by the Singapore International Foundation (2017).

## Community arts engagement

NAC started thinking about community arts engagement in 2009. In the beginning, seniors were one of the immediate communities we worked with given Singapore’s ageing population. Eventually, our community arts engagement with the seniors laid the foundation for our recommendations in the *Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* that was published in 2012.

NAC’s community arts engagement framework continued to evolve through working on the ground with the community to meet social outcomes, and also through rethinking how arts content and artists themselves should fit into an evolving community arts landscape.

After reviewing diverse approaches and definitions of *community arts*, we decided on the following definition of *community arts* as a reference — “*community arts is a practice that is based on the belief that cultural meaning, expression, and creativity reside within a community, such that the community artist’s task is to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity. The collaboration between artists and others is central and necessary to the practice of community arts*”.

NAC aims to deepen community arts engagement in three ways:

1. Increasing arts participation.
2. Developing cross-sector partnerships.
3. Building capabilities.

All three avenues would be supported by research and advocacy (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Deepening community arts engagement. Image courtesy of NAC.

## Increasing arts participation

### Increasing arts participation for various demographics and communities

NAC increases arts participation for various demographics and communities. Some challenges faced in this area include understanding what outreach programmes mean to the communities, how arts speak differently to different communities, and how to define *community* to begin with.

While these continue to be a challenge, NAC adopts a broad definition of demographic groups and communities by their age and social background to develop community arts engagement programmes. For example, *Silver Arts* is a platform that advocates the meaningful possibilities seniors have in the arts. Another programme called *ArtReach* brings the arts to the social and healthcare sector for wellness, intervention, and rehabilitation.



**Silver Arts**  
Advocating meaningful possibilities seniors have in the arts



**ArtReach**  
Arts in the Social & Healthcare Sector

*Increasing arts participation for various demographics and communities. Photos courtesy of NAC.*

### Increasing arts participation through arts volunteerism

NAC also increases arts participation through arts volunteerism. NAC believes that arts volunteerism has broadened the definition of community arts engagement, and has opened up a space for individuals to be engaged in the arts without being directly involved in the creative process.

However, NAC also believes that the relationships volunteers have with community arts will grow over time through arts volunteerism, and that they will eventually go beyond being “helpers” of community arts, to being “friends” of community arts.



*Increasing arts participation through arts volunteerism. Photos courtesy of NAC.*



## Developing cross-sector partnerships

### Developing partnerships to open spaces

The typical way of experiencing the arts is usually a designed process where people have to make trips to particular arts spaces or particular spaces defined by artists.

However, NAC believes that the arts have to be brought into the community in order for the arts to be present within the community.

SAFRA Jurong  
*Pots and Hands by Amit Gilboa*

SAFRA Mount Faber  
*An Effort Most Futile by Tan Zi Xi*

SAFRA Toa Payoh  
*The Rainbow Toymaker by Cake Theatrical*

SAFRA Punggol  
*MICAppella*

“We see the arts as a very dynamic avenue where we can **encourage more interesting and meaningful interactions among the NSmen community and their families**. Hence, we’ll have many more programmes at our clubs this year that promote active participation in various genres of art like interactive, performing, and visual arts. We are certainly looking at having more workshops conducted by well-known artists to engage and benefit SAFRA members and also ground-up initiatives where NSmen can showcase their creative talents, **creating a vibrant arts scene within our clubs.**”

Ms Kris Ho, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, SAFRA

I really enjoy Bedok CC’s Bedok Arts Kaleidoscope programme very much. Many residents like it as well, as some of us do not have the opportunity to go to the theatre venues.  
– Han Ah Lai, Bedok resident

“These community arts programmes liven up the entire precinct – adults and kids alike enjoy it. My 10-year-old son loves the *Art Fresco* drama programme at the Woodlands Regional Library node. The programme instils a sense of confidence in our kids and teaches vital soft skills in bringing out the potential in our next generation.” – William Tan, Woodlands resident

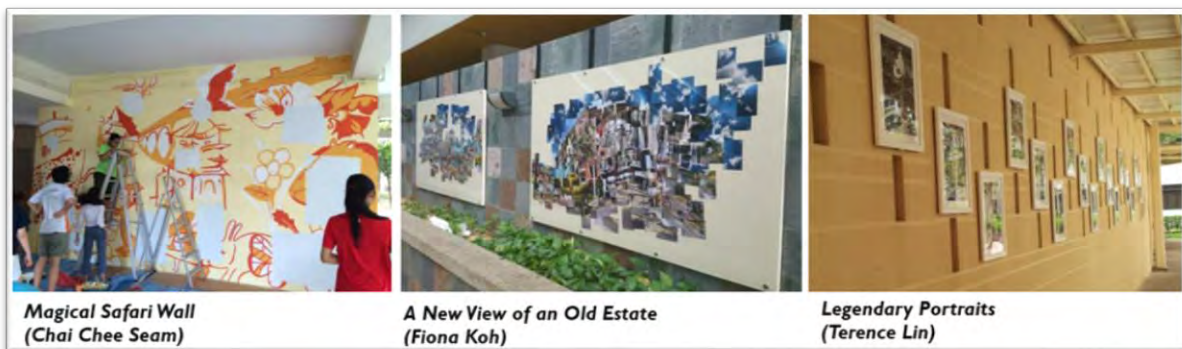
“I really enjoy Bedok CC’s Bedok Arts Kaleidoscope programme very much. Many residents like it as well, as some of us do not have the opportunity to go to the theatre venues.” – Han Ah Lai, Bedok resident.

Developing partnerships to open spaces. Images courtesy of NAC.

Hence, NAC started looking for spaces for the arts within the community. However, NAC did not see “space” as a purely physical and geographical concept, but also as a “mindset”.

NAC started looking for people who owned physical spaces and infrastructure and who were willing to offer them to us. We did not want to build another distinct and defined space within the community for this purpose, as we believe that the arts need to exist in a shared space in order to allow the arts to be part of the peoples’ everyday lives.

Some of NAC’s partnering community organisations include Community Centres, Regional Libraries, and SAFRA Clubs.



*Our Gallery @ Taman Jurong. Photos courtesy of NAC.*

NAC believes that working with the community is always a “work-in-progress” and a shared conversation — *Our Gallery @ Taman Jurong* is an example of this.

*Our Gallery @ Taman Jurong* has gone through three years of open call for artists to come on-board the process of working with the space and the residents. This allowed the content of the artworks to be relatable to the community, embody different perspectives of the estate, and allowed residents to contribute ideas on what the artworks meant to them.

However, one challenge NAC faced was sustaining the engagement beyond immediate interest.

### Developing cross-sector partnerships to increase access

Besides partnering with community organisations to increase arts participation, NAC also works with partners in the under-reached sectors of society to integrate the arts within these sectors and increase access to the arts for these communities.

Some of these partners include the Alzheimer’s Disease Association, the Singapore Association for Mental Health, and the Singapore Association for Visually Handicapped.



*Developing cross-sector partnerships to increase access. Photos courtesy of NAC.*

“

*One challenge we faced was sustaining the engagement beyond immediate interest.*

### Activating community spaces for the arts

There are often potential spaces for the arts that already exist within the community. Thus, NAC works with partners to present broad-based programmes and activate these community spaces for the arts.

One example of this effort is the *Arts In Your Neighbourhood* programme, which aims to present diverse and enriching arts experiences by established Singapore artists and arts groups, often covering many different art forms and genres.



Activating community spaces for the arts. Photos courtesy of NAC.

## Building capabilities

### Capability development for community artists and community partners

NAC sees providing capability development for both community artists and community partners as a way to bridge the gap in facilitation and engagement between artists and communities.

NAC believes that artists should be introduced to the social sector in order for them to know the ground. Thus, NAC provides the tools, approaches, and materials for artists to collaborate with community partners, and equips a wide base of artists with skills for engagement.

One example is the *Practical Approaches on Participatory Arts Workshop*, which provides artists with a hands-on experience in using tools and methods to enhance existing artistic practice and engaging communities.

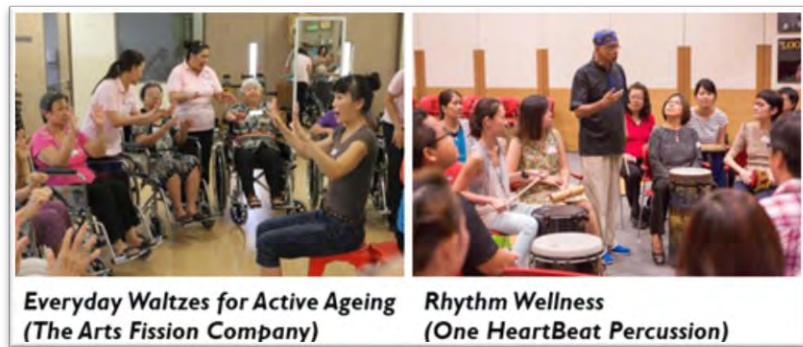
NAC also has community arts mentorship programmes for young artists who may have the passion to work with the community, but lack the knowledge to do so.



Capability development for community artists. Photos courtesy of NAC.

Similarly, NAC also provides capability development for the staff and volunteers in the social sector in order to integrate the arts within these sectors.

One example of such efforts is *Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing*, a programme where arts group The Arts Fission Company engages the elderly using arts and dance to stimulate their cognitive abilities and creativity.



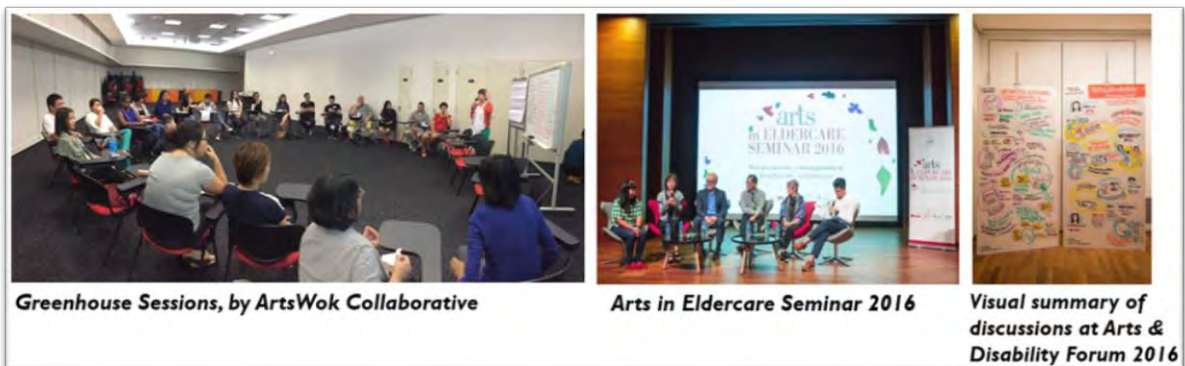
*Capability development for community partners. Photos courtesy of NAC.*

### Capability development for community arts

NAC also provides platforms for advocacy, networking, and sharing knowledge.

NAC’s efforts in this area started with *Let’s Connect!*, a community arts speaker series aimed at giving people a common space for discussion.

NAC also supports other similar platforms such as *Greenhouse Sessions* (a platform for practitioners doing work in the field of community arts to gather and engage in peer learning), *Arts in Eldercare Seminar* (an annual platform that brings together social and healthcare practitioners, aged care policymakers, and artists to explore how the arts can engage and empower our elderly for creative ageing), and the *Arts and Disability Forum* (a platform that aims to raise awareness on how arts and culture can shape an inclusive society).



**Greenhouse Sessions, by ArtsWok Collaborative**

**Arts in Eldercare Seminar 2016**

**Visual summary of discussions at Arts & Disability Forum 2016**

Capability development for community arts. Photos courtesy of NAC.

### Providing support for ground-up initiatives

NAC also provides funding to artists who do projects that are community-based.

Some examples of such projects include *Superhero Me*, *Octopus Residency*, *Unseen: Constellations*, *Both Sides, Now*, *My Queenstown*, and *Awaken the Dragon*.



***Superhero Me*, led by Jean Loo, in collaboration with children from lower income backgrounds and special needs schools**



***Octopus Residency*, based in Little India, exploring creative placemaking through the arts**



***Unseen: Constellations*, by Alecia Neo and visually-impaired students from Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School**



***Both Sides Now*, by Drama Box and ArtsWok Collective, exploring end-of-life issues through arts**



***My Queenstown* by My Community, a festival centred and inspired by Queenstown neighbourhood**



***Awaken the Dragon* by Jennifer Teo, raising awareness of Singapore's artistic heritage at the last 2 Dragon Kilns remaining**

*Providing support for ground up initiatives. Photos courtesy of NAC.*



Moving forward, NAC will continue efforts in community arts in three areas:

1. To increase the mindshare of community arts, bring on board community partners who integrate the arts into their core services, and roll out sustained community arts programmes.
2. To garner greater interest in building capabilities for community arts to thrive.
3. To increase relevant and strong artistic content tailored for the community.

# Mr Patrick Sim

PATRICK SIM is the Director of Community Arts and Culture Division at the People’s Association, where he is responsible for driving the *PAssionArts Programme* with his colleagues. Before this, he spent four fulfilling years working with youth leaders from the People’s Association Youth Movement (PAYM) on various youth outreach programmes as Director of Youth Division after joining the People’s Association in 2012. He was also a member of the SG50 Education & Youth Committee chaired by Senior Minister of State for Education, Ms Indranee Rajah. Prior to this, Mr Sim spent 17 years with the Singapore Police Force where he completed various tours of duties including a secondment to the Ministry of Home Affairs as the Senior Assistant Director (Technology Planning). He has also helmed various divisions in the Police Force in areas such as service development, innovations, manpower personnel and planning, IT system planning and organisational development, where he had extensive policy-formulation exposure in these areas. He held appointments in major Police operations including General Elections, Presidential Elections and Singapore Youth Olympic Games and was also the first Commanding Officer of Bedok North Neighbourhood Police Centre (2000-2003).

## *PAssionArts* — Building and bonding community through arts and culture

*PAssionArts* began as part of MCCY’s *Arts and Culture Strategic Review Implementation Plan*.

It aims to achieve two main objectives:

1. To increase arts participation by bringing the arts to the community.
2. To use the arts to forge a Singapore identity and build community bonds in order to create a gracious and cultured society.

Since its inception, *PAssionArts* has adopted “participatory arts” as a key approach to generate greater interest, appreciation, participation, and volunteerism in the arts within the community.

This approach also provides ample opportunities for artists and arts groups to work with residents to co-create quality artworks, and stage performances in the community.

### Platforms to engage residents through *PAssionArts*

*PAssionArts* uses a variety of platforms to widen its outreach and deepen its engagement.

One example is *PAssionArts Festival*, an annual flagship event held between June and August. Others include engagement programmes like the *PAssionArts Inspiration Series* and *Festival within Festival*, as well as local programmes such as interest groups development, ground-up initiatives, hotspot programmes, and *PA-NAC Arts and Cultural Nodes* (see Figure 7).

Through these platforms, *PAssionArts* has reached out to 500,000 residents annually over the last two years. In the current Financial Year, *PAssionArts* is expected to reach out to another 400,000 residents, of which 50,000 would have been involved in its participatory arts approach through one platform or another.

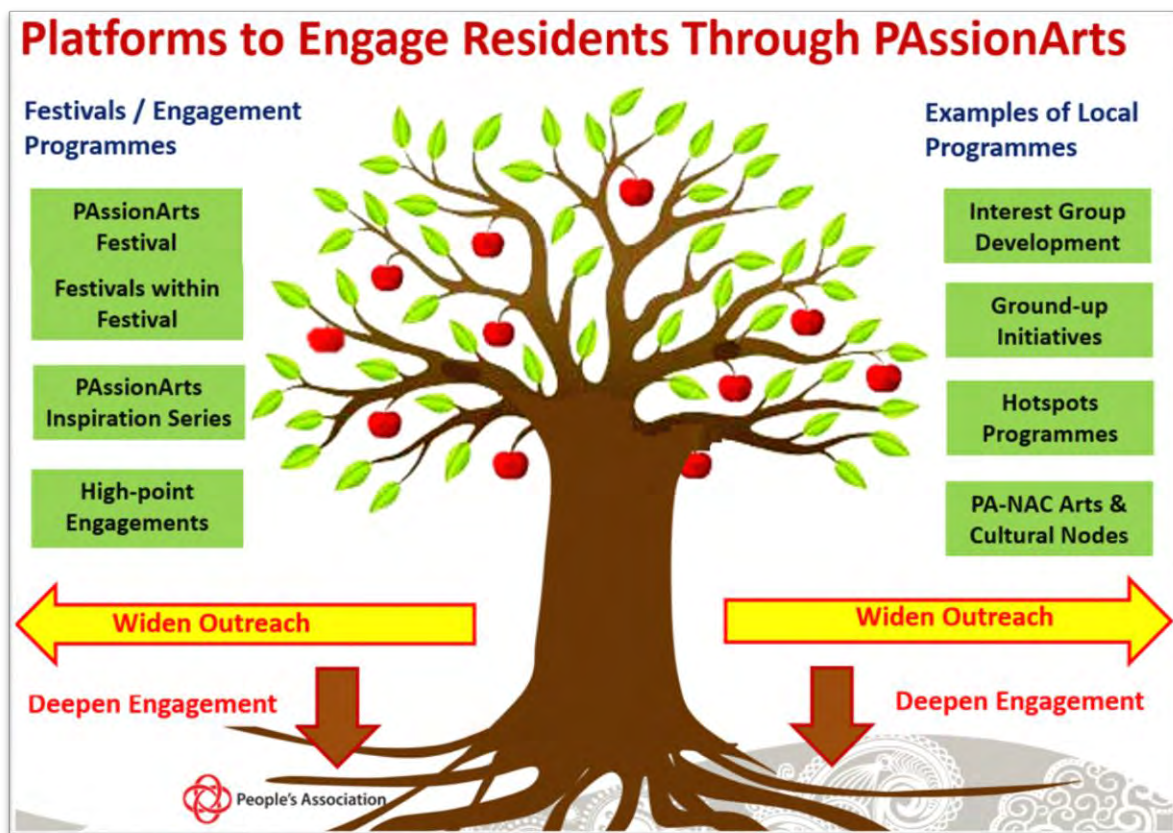


Figure 7: Platforms used by *PAssionArts* to widen outreach and deepen engagement. Image courtesy of PA.

### *PA*ssionArts — Outcome and output

Since 2012, PA has set up 86 Community Arts and Culture Clubs with about 1,000 members and 250 active Arts and Culture Interest Groups based in Community Clubs across Singapore. It also has 100 *PA*ssionArts Hotspots showcasing over 1,000 performances per year, as well as 200 Community Art Galleries engaging about 1,000 residents as “community artists”.

This co-creational approach has provided many opportunities for artists and art groups to work with the community, involving about 200 artists and 100 art groups in the last two years. This in turn allows *PA*ssionArts to maintain the standard and quality of the artworks produced, and at the same time achieve its goal of mass participation in terms of numbers.



*Outcomes of PA*ssionArts. Photos courtesy of PA.

### *PAssionArts Festival 2016*

In *PAssionArts Festival 2016*, PA’s 86 Community Arts and Culture Clubs presented 58 art villages across the island that involved 30,000 art volunteers.

Within the two months of the main festival, plus three months of pre-festival workshops, PA’s Community Arts and Culture Clubs engaged 250,000 residents to participate in the arts. In fact, 30,000 residents and artists came together to co-create 160 pieces of large-format façade art for the *PAssionArts Festival*, as well as to celebrate National Day. These façade art pieces were also exhibited outside HDB flats to invoke a sense of co-ownership between the artists and residents.



*PAssionArts Festival 2016. Photos courtesy of PA.*

### *Festival within Festival*

Besides the main festival, *PAssionArts* also started a *Festival within Festival* initiative to add to the richness of the *PAssionArts Festival*.

This *Festival within Festival* initiative provides Singaporeans with more opportunities to build new friendships, and presents more platforms for Community Arts and Culture Clubs to work with artists and arts groups.

One example of this was the *PAssionArts Theatre Festival 2016 Taxi-On-Call* community theatre series, a joint project with PA and the National Taxi Association. *PAssionArts* engaged professional theatre artists (e.g., creative director Lim Hai Yen and three writer-directors Candice Goh, Irene Lee, and Justin Chin) to help showcase the artistic talent of the 25 taxi driver community actors. *Taxi-On-Call* had a total of eight shows at Cheng San-Seletar, Nee Soon South, Choa Chu Kang, and Empress Lawn. This project also paid tribute to the taxi drivers who have contributed to Singapore’s economy.



*Festival within Festival: Taxi-on-Call. Photos courtesy of PA.*

Another example was the *PAssionArts Chinese Opera Festival 2016* spearheaded by Queenstown and Marine Parade Community Arts and Culture Clubs. PA partnered with the Chinese Opera Institute and Nam Hwa Opera Limited to put together a total of 15 shows over three months, involving about 45 Community Clubs and community opera groups, and 510 performers. This project enabled PA to play a part in promoting and preserving Singapore’s traditional arts.

This year, PA will develop the *PAssionArts Chinese Opera Festival* into a *PAssionArts Multi-Ethnic Traditional Arts Festival*. This will showcase more Community Club’s interest groups, provide more opportunities for artists and communities to co-create, as well as preserve and promote the traditional arts, especially for younger generations to learn more about Singapore’s rich cultural heritage.



*Festival within Festival: PAssionArts Chinese Opera Festival 2016. Photo courtesy of PA.*

### Social outcomes of *PAssionArts* — Friendship building and family bonding

Besides increasing arts participation, *PAssionArts* is also able to bring about important social outcomes.

*PAssionArts* is a useful platform for families, friends, and residents to forge new relationships through doing art together. Many *PAssionArts* programmes are free with low entry barriers, making it easy for both the young and old to enjoy, thus fostering family bonding.



*Friendship and family bonding through PAssionArts. Photo courtesy of PA.*

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*While we encourage residents to appreciate the arts and participate in our free workshops, we also hope that they will volunteer and champion the arts in future.*



**Social outcomes of *PAssionArts* — Inclusiveness and caring for others**

*PAssionArts* projects are also extended to the less fortunate in the community, thus increasing awareness among the residents to help the less advantaged community.

One example of this was the *Art with a Heart* project by Bedok Community Arts and Culture Club, where residents living in one- and two-room flats in Bedok collected old clothes and created an art installation out of them.



*PAssionArts: Art with a Heart. Photo courtesy of PA.*

### Social outcomes of *PAssionArts*– Volunteerism

*PAssionArts* programmes are also designed to use the arts to bring out active volunteerism in our residents. While residents are encouraged to appreciate the arts and participate in free workshops, PA also hopes that they will volunteer and champion the arts in future.

### Social outcomes of *PAssionArts* — National identity

Lastly, *PAssionArts* also uses the arts to celebrate National Day, thus fostering national identity and promoting a sense of belonging within the community.



*Fostering national identity through PAssionArts. Photos courtesy of PA.*

### **Critical success factors of *PAssionArts***

There are three critical factors behind the success of *PAssionArts*.

First, one of the core strengths of *PAssionArts* is the network of 86 Community Arts and Culture Clubs set up in 2012. This laid the foundation for a thriving *PAssionArts* movement. While different Community Arts and Culture Clubs may be of different maturity levels, having a strong leadership and active volunteerism allows PA to increase arts participation and volunteerism in the community.

Second, PA’s Community Arts and Culture Clubs are also able to tap into the support of the wider PA grassroots network.

Third, PA’s participatory arts approach of co-creation between artists and residents also maintains the quality of the art while achieving mass participation.

### **Next steps**

Moving forward, PA hopes to steer *PAssionArts* towards the following areas:

1. To continue strengthening PA’s Community Arts and Culture Clubs as part of the community arts movement and use them as an engine of growth.
2. To put in greater efforts to promote art volunteerism at the community level.
3. To strengthen *PAssionArts* programmes to promote cross-cultural appreciation for residents.
4. To use the arts to reach out to children of lower-income families.
5. To continue to offer opportunities for artists to co-create arts with the community.

**Panel II:**

**Response to community arts policies and  
implementation**

# Mr Alvin Tan

ALVIN TAN is the Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage and a leading proponent of devising theatre in Singapore, having directed more than 70 plays which have been staged locally and at international festivals. He has been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and was conferred the Young Artist Award for theatre in 1998. In 2010, Alvin was conferred the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture, in recognition of his significant contribution to the arts. The following year, he was awarded Best Director at 2011 The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards for Model Citizens by The Necessary Stage. Alvin was previously invited by the Ministry of Education to design a drama syllabus at ‘O’ level for implementation in schools. In 2014, Alvin was conferred the Cultural Medallion for his artistic excellence and contribution to Singapore’s arts and cultural landscape. He is also currently the Artistic Director of Peer Pleasure, an annual youth-oriented theatre festival in Singapore.

The Necessary Stage’s definition of *community arts* focuses on interest groups, because we feel that Singapore is so small that the cultures and subcultures in different parts of the country are not very different. In bigger countries, the differences between rural areas and city centres are more pronounced. Of course, there are differences in Singapore, such as class and other markers, but The Necessary Stage focuses more on interest groups when it comes to community arts.

For example, the communities we have worked with include migrant workers, dementia patients, seniors (under our *Theatre for Seniors* programme), and mental illness patients (which our play *Off Centre* deals with). With that, we are then able to go deeper into that community — the caregivers, the patients themselves, their relationships to society — and deal with the intersectionality of these communities.

Of course, we did not know all of that in the beginning. When Haresh Sharma and I started university, there was no theatre studies course. Both of us took literature; Haresh took language specialising in socio-linguistics, while my other major was sociology, in which I was also studying anthropology. So, all these influenced our theatre-making, and in turn, our interactions with the communities. The research content, after being used for our community projects, can be extracted and applied to our main season or international works.

For example, our production *Mobile* was a collaboration between Japan, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. We were looking at the mobility of Asians in Asia, in particular that of migrant workers. We visited a shelter at a non-governmental organisation in Thailand founded by Thai and Japanese women that takes care of traumatised Thai sex workers who have returned from Tokyo. We interviewed them as we feel that artists should be educated into each other’s reality, instead of just using our imagination from the word go, because then we would use examples from Hollywood. When we

google “post-natal depression”, for example, we often get many accounts from Western celebrities. We were looking more for indigenous or local examples, and with that, the fieldwork becomes important. Of course, volunteering in the field and the time spent in the field investigating social realities can be improved in terms of time invested and/or how we design our excavation of research data.

All of these went into our theatre-making, especially in terms of the language, and the class reflected in the language used. And this is just one example, among other examples, that we have. We are celebrating our 30th anniversary this year and there are several projects that we are also doing in this kind of an approach. The community exists in our main season plays as well as our international works.

As I was listening to the three presentations from Panel I, the words “participation”, “co-ownership”, “collaboration”, “co-creation” kept repeating themselves. I think all artists working in the community also use these terms. However, there are differences, real differences, when they are applied and I do not want to shy away from the politics of it.

Through our engagement with PA over the years, we have come to understand that the numbers matter to them, and that reaching out to a lot of people on the ground is important. We have also come to understand and accept the role and validity of this quantitative measure.

However, there are several ways of employing different methodologies and arts creation approaches. The example I cited had elements of “participatory approach”, “co-ownership”, “collaboration” and “co-creation” as well, but there were also a lot of contestations and confrontation of issues.

Let me give you one example about a pro-indigenous Filipino playwright with whom we worked. He was very upset that the non-governmental organisation was teaching English to the sex workers at the shelter, and did not understand why the sex workers did not want to use their own indigenous language. The organisation had to

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*Will the numbers objective impede the diverse approaches in artistic programming?*

explain that learning English is actually empowering because it allows the sex workers to have a direct relationship with their clients, thus removing the need for a third party that will take a certain percentage of their commission.

So, it becomes ironic and paradoxical that he (the playwright) had to deal with the tensions with his “pro-indigenous-ness” versus being “Westernised”. In the Philippines, he uses Tagalog and is very proud of it. But in the context of global change, knowing and using English rather than just using one’s indigenous language becomes empowering. One’s resistance to learning and using a Western language may be an effective post-colonial strategy, but if you do not know English today, you may continue to be disempowered. We come into confrontation with these developments and changes when doing field research, and these are the things that actually help theatre practitioners benefit exponentially from our intercultural processes.

There were also confrontations when our work went out to the public. When we staged our migrant worker play in Japan, a Filipino woman confronted my Japanese actor during the Question and Answer session by asking, “Now that you went through the process, do you know how we feel in your country? What have you done about the situation?” So, I had to respond by saying that the actor has already done her part to put the invisible voice onto stage. She can do more, but that is not her job. It is also very multi-faceted, as we have to take into account things like social worker policy.

In Singapore especially, people find such confrontations negative and are averse to it. Perhaps these kinds of confrontation are important because society can grow from them when we bridge the gap of difference. Through confrontation, realisation, awareness, and reflection, followed by response and action, the arts can improve the quality of life of others. So, my question today in response to all three presentations is, “How is art increasing the quality of life and making people happy?”.

I look at interculturalism, interdisciplinary, and intersectionality because we have to look at things in interaction. I am not interested

in multidiscipline or multicultural — “multi” just means “many” and there is no interaction of the “many”. So, the politics of it is missing. For example, a musical is multidisciplinary. Although other art forms like music and dance may be present, their respective importance is still defined by the written text being at the apex of the hierarchy of theatre-making. Whereas for interdisciplinary projects, the soundscape and/or the movements employed by the choreographer will replace the literary in the composition. The weightage of the non-literary devices would be the same as the literary presence. We are looking at the equitable distribution of the varied disciplines in the work. If we look at “inter”, we have to interact with that difference, and when we interact with difference, there will be conflict and tension. We cannot evade that.

So, I want to ask PA and all those who have a lot of resources, whether the “numbers” objective will impede the diverse approaches in artistic programming? Can other sorts of approaches also be included in the future so that the artistic repertoire expands?



# Dr Felicia Low

FELICIA LOW is a graduate of Goldsmith’s College and has been a practicing visual artist since 1999. Her projects have mostly been site-specific, performative, and community-specific as she works collaboratively with different sectors of society. A Lee Kong Chian scholar of the National University of Singapore, Felicia obtained a PhD in Cultural Studies in Asia in 2015. Her research focused on the politics of participatory visual art practices with subaltern communities in Singapore. Felicia is also the Founding Director of a not-for-profit organisation, Community Cultural Development (Singapore), which aims to provide a critical discursive platform for artistic practices that engage with communities in the region. She was the recipient of the Outstanding Youth In Education Award 2005 and was selected for the President’s Young Talent Show 2009 organised by the Singapore Art Museum. Felicia is also an Associate Lecturer with UniSIM and teaches Anthropology at The School Of The Arts, Singapore.

My response to all government initiatives, including those presented by the three speakers from MCCY, NAC, and PA, is that they all fall into the two categories of “general engagement” and “intervention towards reform”. What do I mean by “reform”? It ranges from the very broad Singaporean identity, heritage, and national unity (as done in PA), to talking about marginalised and disadvantaged groups, and being a better person.

## Representation

However, what we Singaporeans are very weak at is representation. By representation, I refer to the presentation of various groups, highlighting their particularistic abilities or issues and concerns that they face. Representation is political. Every single government programme is programme-centric and is determined by the politics of national unity and social cohesion. This portrays a very simple story, when the story is not that simple in reality. Singapore is made of many groups and individuals that do not fit into a homogenous nationalistic unity. Representation, therefore, expands the scope of the arts agenda with the people beyond general engagement and reform. To address the weakness of representation of communities is to ask more questions. It presents us with more challenges that cannot be resolved through surface unity and cohesion.

The following are some unresolved issues that will surface when we try to approach arts practices with communities through representation.

### Needs-centric versus programme-centric

Instead of programme-centric approaches, we need needs-centric programmes that are based on the needs of the people. This means being responsive to the ground. And we cannot be responsive to the ground if our programmes and outcomes are very structured. If we need openness to meet less structured demands, how do we compose or articulate the demands and needs of the people? This needs to be very flexible because the world is changing.

Let me give you an example. China has printed a brilliant primary school sex education book in response to an increase in child sexual abuse cases. The cartoon book covers all sexualities and all issues of sexuality. There is massive online furore over it, but to me, that is the Chinese communist government responding to the needs of the people, and being ready to change if necessary.

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*I would love to see Singapore being innovative and articulating new measures of value that apply to everyone across the board.*

### Communal cohesion versus conflicting identitarian positions

My next point is on communal cohesion versus conflicting identitarian positions. While we actively promote community cohesion, this position reduces and ignores the reality of conflicting positions that different groups take, based on the ideologies or beliefs that they identify with. The latter is very difficult to address, almost impossible to resolve into a common cohesive stand. This difficulty of managing conflicting identitarian positions is not particular to the government alone. The example that Mr Alvin Tan described (of how the Filipino indigenous playwright questioned the Thai non-governmental organisation’s teaching of English to the sex workers) is actually about indigenous localised positions taken by the Filipinos versus conflicting positions of globalisation on the part of the Thais. As artists, we get entangled in this too.

### **Identity versus identity**

My next point is on identity versus identity and “anti” versus “pro”. If we were to take on the reality of conflicting identitarian positions, then we have to examine the cause of the conflict. These conflicts arise because one’s position is “pro” something, and “anti”. Thus, this indicates the problem of differing interests. How do we co-exist when everybody has differing interests? The question then becomes one of ethical behaviour rather than one of communal cohesion. How do we, as artists, actively address different needs and interests in a way that is responsive, and does not negate or ignore one side? What are the terms of co-existence? Can we write this together? In addressing the reality and the cause of the conflict, the means of establishing some kind of co-existence within a common space becomes possible through ethical relating, as opposed to verbal or physical attacks that seek to assert the dominance of one’s ideology. This is why it is important to acknowledge both the beliefs of the “anti” and the “pro”, and to also acknowledge the plurality of a shared common space.

### **Aesthetics versus art**

My last point is on aesthetics versus art. Museums like the Singapore Art Museum have a lot of formalism (structured and academic notions of aesthetics). Aesthetics is an expression of what society values as beautiful, and these values change over time. At the Singapore Art Museum, aesthetics is formally tied to “Art”. The “Art” it displays is aesthetically valuable because it can be defined along a Western formalist historical structure, which has its own particularistic ways of defining and valuing a particular form of aesthetics.

However, the aesthetics that I see from the ground is spontaneous. I conducted an art jam for the national pre-university seminar that involved 550 17-year-olds across 30 institutions. The art that they produced was not based on these formalistic structures set up by the Singapore Art Museum. The art that they produced was new. I love

to work with the community because they always produce new ideas of aesthetics, which is what aesthetics is about. Aesthetics changes according to the needs and changes of the world because it is a consolidation of what society thinks is beautiful and what society wants to value. Aesthetics will always change with time.

So, as an artist, I ask myself, what am I going to do?

I realised that we need to look at community arts comparatively. So, I looked at my own work in prisons (a governmental organisation), in a non-governmental organisation that supports sex workers, and in an independent art project with three young women with whom I worked to create a comic book. I did a cross-comparison of these three projects for my PhD, where I analysed how everything was organised, the different purposes and agendas, and how the community was used and abused across the three areas — governmental, non-governmental, and independent. We often focus only on the governmental when life actually exists beyond the government. Thus, it is through a comparative analysis of the various agendas of community arts that we can get to the depths of why we do what we do.

Eventually, I came up with this solution — “Autogenous culture as political form”. “Autogenous” refers to how our heart beats automatically. It just does what it does automatically. Autogenous cultural practices do not rely on art museums, government structures, or key performance indicators, but come about from everyday life. People simply come up with them. If we paid more attention to them, we can find out the latest and different forms of life, the different measures of value, as well as what we want from our society in this situation of globalisation and risk. These measures of value become innovative and alive and are not stuck in pre-determined institutional forms.

I would love to see Singapore being innovative in this way, articulating new measures of value that apply to everyone across the board. This is why autogenous culture is a political form. We often take overt forms of political action as “political form”. We often think that Singaporeans are passive at politics. However, we just

need to look at what is happening on the ground to discover how people live their lives, and find forms of life regardless of the limits of big “P” political forms — such as policies that determine how a Singaporean citizen should live. These forms of life exist in ordinary places — like the marketplace or by the wayside — and they are often ignored or taken for granted. These are autogenous forms of culture. By making them *the main* focus, these forms of autogenous culture *will* bring us to understand life in different ways.

Autogenous cultural practices already exist. During my comparative study, the three young women, who were of different sexualities, did not pay attention to any of the LGBT acronyms or pro- and anti-LGBT notions. They simply lived their lives. It is just that such practices are not recorded. But when we as artists enter these spaces and lives, we try to give them some form. This is where they do take political form, because my project eventually culminated in a comic book that represented their lives, regardless of recognised or rejected sexual identities. It carried its own politics beyond the political dichotomies of “for” or “against”. Its politics lies in its very presence. Autogenous culture *is* there, whether or not we recognise it. If we choose to value lives with certain structures, we will miss the “chaos” that actually has value because we call it chaos.

# Dr Woon Tien Wei

WOON TIEN WEI is an artist-curator based in Singapore. His work focuses on cultural policies, collectivity in art, social movements, community engagement, land contestation, urban legends, and social movements. In his practice, he works with independent cultural and social space Post-Museum. In addition to Post-Museum's events and projects, he also curates, researches, and collaborates with a network of social actors and cultural workers. With Post-Museum, he worked on Bukit Brown Index (since 2014), an ongoing project that indexes the land contestation case of Bukit Brown Cemetery.

One of the very basic things about community arts that interests me is the idea of evoking some sense of empathy. In a world that we think is getting and more chaotic (although not like the “chaos” Dr Low talked about), how do we make sense of where we live, and how should we interact with the world and to re-make a better one?

The first point that came to my mind was the idea of “keywords” used in talking about community arts. As artists, or as the artist I am and the kind of work that I do at Post-Museum, many of us tend to be critical of the development of the community arts movement in Singapore. But if we were to read the policies, they often contain positive “keywords” with altruistic goals. As historians, how do we read what goes on, how do we make sense of it, and how do we make sense of the dominant ideology within policies? However, not everything is absolute. Nothing is entirely good and nothing is entirely evil. In movies, villains are so evil that they are 100 per cent evil, and heroes are almost always 100 per cent good. Nowadays, heroes are 70 per cent good, and 30 per cent struggling with their evil. Hence, in reality, policies act as roadmaps. They map out the direction where we want to go. I do feel that things are taking a positive general direction for the arts. However, as historians, we need to be able to read the outcomes from the policies. We should be evaluating if the outcomes are more of good or bad for our worldviews.

My second point is on the idea of placemaking or creative placemaking, which came from the discipline of human geography. One of the interesting things about creative placemaking in Singapore is that it is often very “visual” and about “colours filling up a place”. This deviates from the original concept of placemaking, as can be seen in how Singapore talks more about creative placemaking, but not placemaking in general. Thus, it is important that we go back to the original concept and think about placemaking in terms of asking, “What is our place in this?”. We should also

advocate the idea that every single one of us is a geographical agent and is engaged in some process of placemaking.

Placemaking engages in the act of including and excluding things. Thus, the very act of inclusion and exclusion provides an interesting moral decision on how we make a place. The current policies seem to advocate that almost everybody is involved — a sense of openness. But if we look very closely, there is the question Mr Tan Tarn How asked earlier — “Is it overly happy? Should the places that community arts make only be about ‘being happy’?”. As a person, I love being happy and I love watching people being happy. However, my experience with some community arts projects is that they really fail to provide a place for people to have other meaningful ways of engaging with the issues they face every day. This is my main critique and this is a missed opportunity to provide other ways of engaging with the community.

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Should the  
places that  
community  
arts make  
only be about  
being happy?  
Are they  
overly  
happy?”

Historically, we are very key performance indicator-driven and we think largely in terms of quantitative measures of arts. Earlier on, Mr Tan Tarn How raised the question of coming up with a different metric of measurement for the success of community arts. I am not sure if Dr Koh would agree with me, but sometimes metrics are very inadequate ways of judging an artwork, or of morally judging what is good, what is bad (in terms of placemaking), and of judging how the arts function in communities. Thinking about key performance indicators in terms of quantitative measures is a problem because we are focusing on “spectacle”, and the spectacle of the spectator. Community arts are interesting because the production of art inverts itself and the people who are involved in the spectacle become the producer. We stand to lose valuable knowledge learnt from working with communities if we are only interested in abstract numbers. What gets lost in translation when we rely so much on traditional key performance indicators in this case?

Another interesting point is the concept of delegates. We vote for delegates of our community, who have a lot of power because they speak on behalf of the community. But how much does what the delegate say truly represent everyone in the community? This is the

irony and contradiction in the symbiotic relationship between the delegate and his or her community, when we claim that “everybody” is involved in community arts, and the current spectrum of spectatorship is one of happiness. Is there place in community arts to represent other experiences? How do we co-create artworks that would express the sadness that someone feels? How do we talk about poverty in more complex ways? In the field of social work for instance, there are a lot of Victorian values and poverty still implies something seriously wrong with the poor. However, poverty is mainly a systemic problem of an entire society. It is essential for policymakers and artists who are working with the community to understand our roles as delegates and the power that comes with it. Therefore, it is only right that we take our commitment seriously when we want everyone’s involvement in community arts at the policy level. Community arts need to cover a larger spectrum of life to be truly “involving everyone”.

My last two points are similar to Mr Alvin Tan’s. How do we include diversity in community arts? I liked it when Ms Chua said NAC is still learning. Among the three presentations, Ms Chua has suggested a very reflexive approach. As much as we like to think that policies are very successful, policies are broad instruments of managing the direction of where community arts is going. Then the interesting and perhaps liberating thing about policies is that they are not fixed in stone. From the idea of placemaking, how do we as agents — as geographical agents in the arts council, as artists, as spectators, and as participants — make valuable changes in this world through the places that we make? We do need to be reflexive like what Ms Chua suggested. We need to be constantly open to learning how to make community arts meaningful for the community. Allowing diversity in community arts is essential in allowing the community to make sense of their reality, which already embodies diversity and participates in making better worlds.

The last point I want to mention regarding the problem of key performance indicators is the lack of a “backstage”. We see the PA doing a great job at bringing people together, but I am also interested to see if there is space to create a “backstage” where



communities and artists can come together to do things that are not for show. Currently, a lot of what is done is about showing and telling the rest of the world what a community is about. However, I think it is equally important to think about spaces that are “backstage” and semi-transparent, where people can work together without the pressures of key performance indicators.

I am not sure whether people know about the *Pulau Ubin Artists-in-Residency Programme* that originated from Mr Jeremy Hiah and his friends? I think it is a kind of community-based project with a community element in it in the sense that it wants to locate a residency on the island. For many, Ubin is the last remaining island with inhabitants. The population there is dwindling, as no new residents are allowed to move there. Then I realised that Ubin is not the last, as Sentosa Cove is the new island where upscale condominiums, oceanfront villas, and mansions provide a very different idea of “inhabiting” islands. Mr Hiah’s programme is important and meaningful because it allows artists to experience this “dying” definition of “island living” through working amongst the Ubin population.

So, how can artists deal with very complex projects that critique the general direction the country is going with regard to our land development? For example, how would artists or the community rally and consider how to protect a place like Sungei Road Flea Market? Is this going to be a troublesome thing for policymakers? Are we going to negate or ignore them all together at a policy level? It would be a missed opportunity if community arts funding cannot fund or support projects which deal with difficult or contentious topics. There is so much potential if we are able to think of the diversity in community arts. Instead of it being “showcases” of community, community arts can be a “backstage” where people can work together through art to openly discuss and think freely about topics that really matter.

# Dr Jay Koh

JAY KOH is a cross-disciplinary artist, curator, teacher, and consultant focused on socially-engaged art. He has practised his art and lectured in over 40 countries in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Recently, he convened the conference “People-Centred Processes: Arts, Education, and Cross-Sector Collaboration” at the Asia Centre in Bangkok and taught at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi and Bangkok University in Thailand, and at Glasgow Sculpture Studios in Scotland. His present collaborations in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore centre on art and health, art and pedagogy, and arts education. His book *Art-Led Participative Processes: Dialogue & Subjectivity Within Performances in the Everyday* discusses holistic and ethical art processes in building relationships and seeking affirmation across sectors and disciplines. It is based on his Doctor of Fine Arts thesis. His forthcoming books include *Performing Politics: Arts & Society* and *A Reader on Praxis/es: People-Centred and Public Engagement Processes*. In 1995, he founded the International Forum for InterMedia Art (iFIMA) and in 2000 was joined by Ms Chu Yuan to initiate public, participative, and socially-engaged art projects. In Singapore, he collaborated with Ms Chu to initiate the public project Investigating Public Engaged Art in Singapore (2001) and organised the International Symposium on Public Engaged Art at The Substation (2002). He curated the M-Spaces: Crossover or Assimilation, a public project in Millenia Walk for Nokia-Singapore Art 2001. Jay was a Singaporean who served his National Service and had his primary and secondary education here. He is now a German citizen.

## Responding as an evaluator

I am responding as an artist-curator and a professional evaluator of public and community art development programmes, such as those carried out by city councils in the West.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I need to show accountability from the position that I speak. As a curator and in the evaluation, I look at best practices and the inclusion of certain values (universal), such as ethical values, responding to localness, and democratic structures that uphold society. For example, we have an understanding that as participants of this roundtable, we ought to speak out openly, respect each other, let each other speak to the end, and listen to feedback. This concerns people-centred processes — processes that combines autonomy of the individual and social connectivity in complementary ways and also relates to the local values in Singapore, both of which I will elaborate on below. Individually, we have a personal subjectivity that is constructed by our personal experiences of growing up within a society. We also have a distant subjectivity which we inherit from a certain culture and narratives, a heritage that we cannot deny. Together, this forms the complexity in us.

<sup>1</sup> I have performed evaluation on a public art project in Western Ireland and art development activities undertaken by a local district council in Dublin, and in Northeast Scotland during a cultural diversity project under CREATIVE Scotland.

Thus, we need to acknowledge this complexity when we look at community work and when we engage individuals. We cannot simply attempt to classify a collective or a “community”.<sup>2</sup> This is especially problematic when we define *community arts* because community arts in Singapore are typically defined either by geographical location, race, or interest groups. However, such designations are weak because they can also be used to classify groups with negative intentions, like fascist groups and terrorist groups. In fact, such communities may be even more sincere and committed in their way of working together.

We also have to acknowledge that knowledge requires experience, and that we do not become knowledgeable enough through the present art education or attaining competence in certain kinds of art, for example, socially-engaged art, public participative art, community art, or by attending just a few days of a workshop. This needs to accommodate our personal experience, which always triumphs over insufficient knowledge (as mentioned before) because we are each biased in certain ways.

### **Policies should engender governance, critical knowledge, and professionalism**

My policy recommendations involve how governments can contribute in terms of space, duration, and research. As Dr Woon mentioned earlier, space (in terms of placemaking) automatically creates a kind of control. When there is an authoritarian control of a space, it acts as a kind of censorship. Thus, policies should not seek to control, but instead should guide and facilitate open and safe spaces for open exchanges.

Also, artists who practise socially-engaged, public participative, and community art often work in real-world situations, whereas policies are often created based on theories and discussions like the one we

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<sup>2</sup> Labelling a group as a community brings with it many problems such as representation or attaching a group with property of characters or assets. Any attempt to define a community should include the stages and presence of transition, instability, and “unfinalisability”.

are having now. So, how can policies accommodate these organic real-life situations, and how does the space allow for a durational engagement to take place?

Furthermore, the research that goes into creating these policies should acknowledge the complexities of the individual, the autonomy, social connections, and inherent bias I mentioned earlier on. We always start with the individual whether we talk about interactions between institutions, groups, or communities. We cannot bypass the individual and his or her complexities, and we cannot take away his or her autonomy either. But at the same time, we live in a society where we are socially connected to one another. So, are these oppositional forces that tear us apart, or are these complementary forces that keep us together?<sup>3</sup> These are the issues we need to think about when working with individuals.

### Critical language

Critical language is needed to facilitate our work with individuals, used in self-reflection, dialogue, and to create critical understanding of what we are doing, point out weaknesses and limitations in our understanding and practices, and listen to and work with others with different approaches. These languages provide processes and structures for analysis, openness, and connection to other knowledge systems and enable engaged listening, which can create empathy and bonding.

Community arts projects that are “top-down” and forms of “domesticated participation” are very common today. Participants are only allowed a very narrow range of choices in materials and themes, criticised as “orthopedic intervention” by Grant Kester, for example colour choices or templates, or given a square-metre to demonstrate their emotions and individuality, which creates “standardised creativity”.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bakhtin’s dialogism, both autonomy and social connection exist as dynamic forces within each of us and their complexities need to be considered. As in most real-world situations, nothing is one sided and can stand alone without regard of other mitigating factors.

In fact, many of the products and outcomes of current community arts projects are quite similar. For example, there may be variations in colour, but the objects are of the same size. However, do we want to create this all the time? Is this the aesthetics of community arts? Besides numbers, what else can be used as benchmarks? For individuals who take part in community arts, their subjectivities change with how they speak about themselves and how they handle interactions with each other. This cannot be quantified in numbers.

When individuals who participate in community arts projects change and develop their mindsets, they will certainly desire to take greater control and ownership like what the speakers from Panel I intended to achieve. But as they change, their embedded anxieties also surface (this is shown in Mr Alvin Tan’s example of one actor challenging another, and Dr Low’s example of one identity challenging another). How can we allow these embedded anxieties to come forth without censorship and fear? I think that people are always waiting for the state to take control because they have certain fears and anxieties about dealing with uncertainties.

However, the real world is full of uncertainties and how we deal with them is part of everyday life, and is affirmation of our maturity. It is the confidence we cultivate in facing uncertainties and in how we deal with power relations that shows the positive results of community arts. Perhaps you may think I can speak freely because I am no longer subjected to a certain type of control? Dominant values and perceptions do have certain effects on the articulation of individuals.

### **Professionalism**

My last point is on professionalism. Professionalism is not exclusive to the people or institutions that organise community arts events. This professionalism also has to be acquired by artists themselves. We should begin by using critical language to think about our status as artists going out to and working with the community. Artists are often considered specialists because we are empowered with

education, possessing a lot of constructive intentions and passion. These are necessary, but not enough.

We artists also need to qualify ourselves and acknowledge that we are trained in a certain way that might limit us. For example, classical arts education in Asia is not anchored to the field of public engagement of arts and community arts. There are a few short courses in Hong Kong and Taiwan on this, but they are inadequate. So, when we talk about enhancing artistic practices, we as artists need to acknowledge our shortfalls and re-learn to acquire a critical framework that is no longer ego- or author-centric, but practice-centric, that is, an inclusive practice that incorporates reciprocity, openness, uncertainty, contradictions, and everyday experience. It is part of professionalism to exercise internal evaluation of our own practices even though many artists do not like evaluation models. One of the key questions we ask ourselves must include “What kinds of critical frameworks do we use to look at our own practices?”

I hope that such considerations can lead to an in-depth review and reworking of Singapore’s cultural policies, especially pertaining to participative and community arts practices.

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*We artists also need to qualify ourselves and acknowledge that we are trained in a certain way that might limit us.*

# Mr Kok Heng Leun

KOK HENG LEUN is the Artistic Director of Singaporean theatre company Drama Box Ltd, and a prominent figure in both the English- and Chinese-language theatre in Singapore. He has directed over 80 plays thus far. Mr Kok strongly believes in engaging the community in his works to promote critical dialogue. He is a foremost theatre practitioner in Singapore advocating applied and engaged arts and one of the most respected Forum Theatre practitioners in Asia. He has also ventured into multidisciplinary projects such as *Project Mending Sky* (which deals with environmental issues), *PRISM* (which looks at issues of governance in Singapore), and in recent years, *Both Sides, Now*, (which looks at living and dying well). *Both Sides, Now*, which is in its fourth year, uses theatre and arts installation, and involves the healthcare sector and community. He is a Nominated Member of Parliament.

As a theatre practitioner, I started to think about policies in the process of working with and for the community because the policies that were put in place are the first hurdles I had to deal with.

## Community service, community building, and community development

First, I want to clarify three points on the definition of *community work*.

We often talk about “community service”, “community building”, and “community development”. However, I think there are differences and we must be aware of the differences. “Community service” involves people providing something for the community so as to engage the community, whereas “community building” involves the community being built towards a certain form because the word “building” implies a certain structure. “Community development” provides the most fluid definition because “development” always moves with time, and the identity of the community changes along the way.

So, which definition of *community* do we talk about when we talk about community arts? In “community service”, the community is often provided with opportunities and activities. For example, we might engage the elderly so that they will not stay home, or engage youth at risk so that they will not get into trouble on the streets. Thus, “community service” involves putting people in certain conditions, time, and space. On the other hand, “community building” involves promoting what we want, and building the community with a certain ideology in place. Thus, artworks would be created to articulate this ideology and to get people to “buy into” that identity. And we cannot deny that this is very political.

However, the ideas of “community service” and “community building” become challenging because they do not account for how the community changes along the way. The identity of a community keeps changing because it evolves in response to everything surrounding it. Thus, I am most interested in the most fluid definition — *community development*.

## Methodology

During the recent budget debate in Parliament, “deep” was the buzzword. One of the recommendations of the *Committee for Future Economy Report* was for Singaporeans to build “deep skills”. In community arts, we talk about “deep engagement”. One example of “deep engagement” was given earlier by PA in which the engagement process had deepened from “participation” to “appreciation” to “championing” of the arts.

However, I see “deep” in a different perspective. For me, both “deep skills” and “deep engagement” require “deep thinking”. “Deep thinking” in turn needs the community to be critical and requires the art to be critically creating creative possibilities. This deep-thinking process has to be reflected for the engagement to be deep.

In Singapore, the idea of “relational” is often restricted to the relation between two individuals — human and human. However, this definition of *relational* is limited and should be further extended. “Relational” should not just between a person and another person, but should also include our relationship with politics, history, philosophy, class, and the environment we live in. It is important that the definition of *relational* reflects who are as individuals in relation to the community, city, and state we live in. All these define us as individuals within a community and need to be explored in community arts. Of course, individuals have a “self”, and we see ourselves as an evolving agent and as a critical human being.



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 do things?”

I agree with Dr Woon and Dr Koh that many of the images, visuals, and movements shown in the presentations from Panel I look similar even though it might be unfair to make such a judgment based on those videos. Thus, I wonder why we need 160 pieces of artwork to communicate the same idea of what Singapore is. From a resource point of view, expressing the same idea again and again is a waste of resources. Indeed, it is a spectacle, but how far does it go?

Another buzzword we hear in policy discussions recently is “movement”. “Movement” is also a very political word, even though it seems less political nowadays, for example when used in the term “the SG50 movement”. Being a science student, I describe “movement” as follows. First, there is inertia, meaning a push is required. Next, depending on the strength of the push, the object traverses across time and space before it stops. So, my question is, “For every pulse of energy added, when does the ‘movement’ stop?” “What happens after the ‘movement’ stops”? For example, NAC’s and PA’s community arts movement was a result of the *Arts and Culture Strategic Review*. However, what is going to happen when the community is no longer on their agenda? It is important that at the end of the moment, the community must feel that the arts are not just a “thing to have”, but something that is important to every human being, and hence the community.

#### Community resources

I am very impressed by what PA has achieved in terms of their outreach. However, we cannot deny that PA’s hegemonic power is not solely because of the Community Arts and Culture Clubs that it has formed throughout Singapore. PA has a lot of power and resources, such as funding and physical locations that allow community arts to happen (e.g., Community Clubs), networks (e.g., grassroots connections since 1959), and organising capabilities. All these have allowed PA to reach out so widely.

However, has the community become dependent on PA’s organising power? Has the community become disabled in its ability

to mobilise and to gather resources? A healthy community development would need the community to be able to mobilise and organise. We have to re-learn the art of organisation. Would PA consider sharing their resources for the community to develop its own work, even if the work may not sit in well with the agenda of PA?

I will not dwell on the issue of funding because funding is never enough. Instead, I want to talk about infrastructure because we always need a place for things to happen, whether they are planned or spontaneous. Based on my personal experience, many public spaces are centralised with various bodies of power holding onto the permission to use these spaces. Hence, the community needs to negotiate with these powers (e.g., PA, Town Councils, or Park Boards). Furthermore, this process is not easy. Sometimes we question whether our work must agree with the preferences of the party or political power. If it does not, they will get uncomfortable with the work that we do, and we will have to go to some other places. These are the tensions we have to manage.

I think many community arts projects are done spontaneously. They sometimes also question the way public space is being managed. One example is Ms Dia’s “golden staircase” artwork. Thus, my question is, “Who manages and owns public space?” If we call it a public space, then who owns it? How do the people who manage public spaces decide how these spaces are being used? What are the rules governing public spaces? How does Article 14 of our Constitution frame the kind of community engagement we can do? I think it is time we relook at Article 14 because community engagement inevitably involves people coming together. Thus, what makes a gathering illegal or not? What makes a gathering creative or not? What makes a gathering political or not? How do we know if it is “disorder”?

## Policies and agencies

First, I acknowledge that MCCY, NAC, and PA have gone through a process of thinking and reflecting about their community arts programmes, although we hear more of Ms Chua’s reflections in today’s presentation. I agree that this reflexivity is important in policymaking. However, Rebecca Solnit said the point of having a roadmap is to allow for detours. Thus, can our policies allow for “detours” instead of just mapping the “right” way to do things? Policymakers should look at all the “detours” because that is where we get creative ideas of placemaking and arts-making.

Second, since community development involves working with different agencies, my question is, “How knowledgeable and well-versed is each agency in terms of understanding the idea of a community?” Heritage issues such as the conservation of Sungei Road Flea Market always reflect this problem. We cannot deny that heritage is part of the community. However, for the National Environmental Agency, the issue is often about management, maintenance, and whether it “blocks the way of residents”. But we also need an assessment of cultural impact. This means that policymakers need to have the capacity to think culturally instead of just bureaucratically.

Third, many of our policies are made such that it boils down to the idea of seeking permission. Ms Dia’s work is interesting because she did not want to seek permission before doing it, as she knew that the artwork probably would not happen once she sought permission. I think this is the most jarring thing about doing community arts that we need to be aware of.

Lastly, as I listened to the three speakers from Panel I talk about community arts, I realised that besides focusing on figures and numbers, they also focused a lot on narratives. This is important because when it comes to community arts, we must not just talk about figures but also about narratives. Thus, can other agencies also understand that we have to talk about narratives on top of figures? Nevertheless, in the photographs showed to us, we see groups of people in front of an artwork, but we do not see an individual

looking at an artwork in a very introspective manner. These are the narratives that we need to think about.

Ultimately, community development is indeed a process of placemaking in a bigger sense. I think we need to contain two things in this process — dreams and dissent. “Dreams” so we can grow old and feel happy and sad, and “dissent” so we can be critical and not just consent.

## Panel I responses to Panel II

Before the first discussion session started, the Panel I speakers, as well as Mr Nah Juay Hng (Group Director of Engagement Cluster Arts and Culture at People’s Association), responded to the responses from Panel II.

The following were their responses:

## Mr Nah Juay Hng

I would like to respond to two points made by the respondents from Panel II.

The first point is on the question of whether community arts can allow for a space for “confrontational arts” or “arts with diversity”, as brought up by Mr Alvin Tan, Dr Low, and Dr Woon. The second point is on the “pursuit of numbers”, which has been mentioned together with *PAssionArts* and PA quite a bit.

I would like to re-emphasise the purpose of *PAssionArts*. From the beginning, our purpose was to bring arts to the community. Especially within the first two years of the launch of *PAssionArts*, we were very clear on the two outcomes that we wanted to achieve. One was for Singaporeans to enjoy, appreciate, volunteer for, and champion the arts. So, we built up our community arts initiatives through our 86 Community Arts and Culture Clubs in this tiered manner. Another was to use the arts to bring people together, promote community bonding, reach out to the needy, build a loving and caring Singapore, and celebrate the Singapore identity. On top of building a national identity was also the aim of building an identity at the community level because residents will have a shared memory as a result of coming together to do arts over a sustained period of time.

Of course, *PAssionArts* still has room for improvement and to accommodate many more different approaches. However, I believe that any new approaches will still have to be evaluated in reference to our purpose and what we want to achieve. This means assessing

whether it benefits the individual, the community, and Singapore as a nation. If a certain arts form or approach brings such benefit, then we should definitely do it. But at the same time, we also need to pay attention to the people who are involved in community arts. These people are ordinary citizens from different schools, different family backgrounds, different religious organisations, et cetera. Thus, we have to bear in mind whether or not they are comfortable with new approaches. If the majority of them are not comfortable with it, we need to find another way to express this type of arts.

On the point about “numbers”, our attention during the first year of *PAssionArts* was on participation. However, we quickly learnt that participation alone will not be good for community arts in the long term. Therefore, from the second year onwards, *PAssionArts* adopted a participatory approach. We also knew that the implementation of such an approach required artists and arts groups to play a role as well. This approach allowed us to achieve the numbers in terms of participation, while maintaining the quality, freshness, and creativity of the art.

As mentioned by Mr Sim earlier, every single piece of the 160 pieces of façade art is different in terms of its design, the idea behind it, and also message that is put across to the community. For example, the art pieces that the artists and residents co-created in Choa Chu Kang were specifically about remembering the old days when there were still farms and *kampung*s in the area. These art pieces may look the same from far, but the idea, concept, and message behind each one of them is different.

## Mr Patrick Sim

I will not respond to questions pertaining to the liberalisation of the arts and pushing the envelope or whether we are multi-racial or interracial. However, there are some points that I would like to add.

When we first started *PAssionArts*, one of the most important things that we had to think through very carefully was about our first few steps. We had to convince policymakers and funders that our programme has produced results and is sustainable. While these may seem very simple and fundamental questions to most, they are real hard-headed practical questions that every policymaker and programme-designer has to think about. Ultimately, the government’s budget is finite and there are many other things that also need to be done. So, we decided to focus on participation during the first few years of launching *PAssionArts*. But when we realised that participation was not necessarily the best outcome, we quickly went into community development, which Mr Kok has mentioned.

In community development, it is important to reach out and help the people, and get them to express what they feel about the community. Here, the important question is, “How big a collective group of people should we define as a *community*?” Typically, policymakers define *community* as a large entity at the start. Subsequently, the policy is improved by making it more granular to satisfy the needs of different segments of the community. However, increased specialisation also risks increasing the size of our civil service beyond its tipping point, where it is no longer contributing effectively and productively. These are questions that confront every policymaker and every programme-designer.

We see a similar situation when we look at Singapore’s national development. In the beginning, we had to prove ourselves and show that we can survive in this hard and cruel environment. The first few steps were very important for us, and we eventually developed a machinery that brought Singapore to where it is today. We are now in a position where we can talk about the arts and arts budgets in a



roundtable discussion, even though our economy is not as vibrant. Although this machinery has proved to be very effective in the first 50 years of Singapore’s history, it is evolving with the changing times. Similarly, *PAssionArts* is evolving from what it has been in the past five years. Change can happen. But someone has to first set the machinery in place and address what is closest to the heart. For *PAssionArts* that is about participation and bringing arts closer to the community.

As Mr Nah mentioned, the façade art pieces may look the same from far. But if we look deeper, each art piece expresses the dreams, aspirations, and the local characteristics of the estate. For example, the art pieces in Nee Soon featured pineapples because Nee Soon used to be a pineapple plantation, and that is something close to the hearts of the residents. These art pieces are impressive and visually colourful, and we are able to attract people to join our ranks to promote and publicise the arts because of that.

## Ms Chua Ai Liang

I would like to address two points raised by Mr Tan Tarn How before I respond to the respondents from Panel II.

Mr Tan Tarn How asked whether the government should and will continue to play such a major role in community arts moving forward. This is a question NAC has been thinking about since the beginning of our involvement in the scene. In fact, NAC has been thinking about a community arts landscape without us, as it is not our aim to maintain control. This is why partnerships and collaborations are important to us in order to create a shared conversation and journey. However, the landscape is often very uneven. While we can envision an ideal situation where people of different levels come together, we need different approaches to cater to the complicated landscape instead of having a one-size-fits-all approach. We have to look at community arts as a continuum.

I would also like to acknowledge Mr Tan Tarn How’s point on the importance of developing a set of qualitative indicators to assess community arts projects. This will be one key area we will be focusing on following this discussion, as well as to have more discussions on this.

Now, I would like to respond to some keywords that emerged from the Panel II responses, which resonated with me:

1. “Space” — How should we create space for exchange and for things to happen?
2. “Product” versus “process” — An artwork that is less aesthetically pleasing does not speak any less about the community. Is focusing on the end product really that important? I like Dr Woon’s point about “how the artist works with the community” and “the role the artist plays” being equally important in community arts.

3. “Research” — This is definitely an area NAC is lacking in. We need research to have deeper discussions, stimulate more ideas, and to understand the ground better.
4. “Diversity” — Currently, community arts in Singapore are generally about “happy people doing happy arts”, and there is definitely room for more diversity. However, we must also take into consideration the larger context of the society and community. The fact that the police was not immediately mobilised in Ms Dia’s case suggests to me that this space for diversity is being created.
5. “Voice” — Whose voices are we currently hearing more of? Who makes decisions? Policymakers, artists, or the community? I feel that we hear more of the policymakers’ and artists’ voices, and not enough of the community’s voice. However, the community is also very uneven. Some know what they want clearly, while others are happy to accept whatever is provided. Regardless, moving forward, the community should be our focus.
6. “Detour” — I like Mr Kok’s point that we should always look out for detours to reflect on and to acknowledge that this is not the direction we want to go, and then make a U-turn. These are signs we should keep in our view.

## Mr Lim Teck Hong

I would like to reassure that MCCY certainly wants to hear the views of artists and communities. In fact, MCCY recently met with a group of artists for an engagement session. We also actively hear from the ground to understand the views of various stakeholders even as we drum out policies, in order to review and improve them.

I would also like to emphasise that MCCY also supports arts excellence on top of supporting community arts. We support cultural institutions such as the National Gallery and the Singapore Art Museum, as well as arts events like the Singapore Biennale. Regarding Mr Kok’s point on encouraging more introspective engagement of the arts, I feel that the government’s support of the artworks showcased in the Singapore Biennale 2016 is an excellent example of how we encourage individuals to use the arts to think and reflect.

However, community arts and arts excellence are not mutually exclusive but instead complementary. For example, PA shared some examples of outstanding community arts groups that kept improving to eventually win competitions at the national level, achieving arts excellence. Community arts are also good platforms for the masses to have the first contact with the arts. Many Singaporeans lead busy lives, and community arts bring the arts to them, making the arts more accessible, and slowly exposing people to the arts. These people are also the audience that artists and arts groups would want to help better appreciate and understand the arts, as they will become the future audience for performances and exhibitions. Thus, I believe that community arts and arts excellence are definitely complementary.

Similar to Ms Chua’s response to the importance of having a qualitative key performance indicators, MCCY is also struggling with this issue. It would be great if we could share ideas on how we can better measure the qualitative effect of community arts, instead of just measuring it in terms of numbers. This is certainly a

weakness that policymakers recognise, and we want to be able to better assess community arts. We hope to hear ideas from the community on how we can better measure the impact of community arts from a qualitative angle.

## Discussion I

The following issues were raised during the first discussion:

### **Need for more diversity in community arts**

A number of participants agreed that there was a need for greater diversity in community arts in its approaches, practices, and forms. However, artists and policymakers among them had different ideas of what “diversity” meant and should include.

Ms Chung said while both Panel I speakers and Panel II respondents talked about enriching community arts in Singapore, they differed in their approach, philosophy, intent, and the vocabulary used. For example, Mr Nah stressed that Singaporeans need to be comfortable with new approaches, and that these approaches should aid the national cause, she said. However, the Panel II respondents focused on using the arts to “challenge” and were generally comfortable with “discomfort”. She asked if there was room to have a completely different group of people explore community arts that have a completely different set of plans and objectives.

Dr Low also agreed with the need for diversity in approaches and gave the example of addressing “homelessness”. Homeless people are now placed in relatively isolated areas of the island, such as in Tuas or Hougang. However, if we were to use community arts to reach out to the homeless and ask them about their ideas of “home”, we would be able to better address the present social issue of people dying at home alone, she said. Such new approaches can widen and deepen our understanding of what “home” means to Singaporeans.

Assistant Professor Michael Tan argued for diversity in “discourse”. He asked how Singapore can facilitate the emergence of a discourse that is outside of the dominant narrative of nation-building seen in current community arts initiatives. Policymakers should allow for a wider range of issues to be included in community arts projects, he said.

Mr Sim agreed with Ms Chung and Assistant Professor Michael Tan that there can be more room for the emergence of discomforting and alternative discourses, but wondered how many in the community would embrace it if it is “art of discomfort”. If enough people do, new societal norms will be set, and policymakers will respond accordingly, he said.

A participant said the government seems to be very interested in reaching out to “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns” in youth development and social innovation. These refer to people whom the government has never engaged with or heard from before. Interestingly, the arts have the potential to create an unusually safe space for exploring what these people are thinking and feeling. Hence, if community arts remain largely as “happy arts for happy people”, we might never be able to engage these people because they may not even be happy to begin with, she said.

Mr Nah agreed that community arts should allow more space for greater diversity. Community arts should not be only about “happy arts for happy people” and creative industries can help the government achieve greater diversity in community arts, he said.

On the “divide” between policymakers and artists, Mr Lim acknowledged that there is indeed a fundamental difference between how artists and governments think. Historically, this tension between artists and governments has always existed, even across different civilisations. However, this tension should be allowed to stay, as it is a healthy tension, he said. Nevertheless, we should try as far as possible not to let tensions boil over, and find ways for artists and governments to work together, and understand each other’s viewpoints. He said he could understand that it is the artists’ “bread-and-butter” to push the boundaries and speak out for the people. But artists should understand that the government also needs to consider larger perspectives such as international perspectives and perspectives from other areas within the government. The government supports diversity within the arts community, but it has to balance that with respect of societal norms. However, Mr Tan Tarn How disagreed with Mr Lim that the



government considers wider perspectives than artists. Policymakers tend to see issues solely from the point of view of policy, and artists would claim to have a wider perspective as they see issues from the point of view of life, he said.

Both Ms Hong and Mr Tan Tarn How further questioned the seeming “divide” between policymakers and artists. Ms Hong said this was not necessarily a “divide” as the government and artists are in fact in a symbiotic relationship. Similarly, Mr Tan Tarn How said this oppositional positioning is inaccurate. Panel II respondents were neither arguing against PA’s and NAC’s current community arts programmes, nor denying their success. Rather, they were arguing for a kind of diversity that includes deep thinking and reflexiveness, on top of PA’s and NAC’s efforts, he said. He asked if it would be possible for PA and NAC to include community arts programmes that allow for artworks such as Ms Dia’s and Mr Or’s artworks for example.

### **Space for “consensus” and “confrontation” in community arts**

One participant said although the word “community” brings a nice warm buzz to most people, it could also impose homogeneity. As the Panel II respondents pointed out, there are many conflicts, tensions, and contestations within communities, she said. Current community arts initiatives that aim to bring communities together through participation often presuppose a consensus of what needs to be done and achieved. Other activities that encourage co-creation also often presuppose consensus in certain boundaries. For example, co-creation is often only allowed within certain parameters and using certain tools. However, Ms Dia’s and Mr Or’s artworks demonstrate that they are individuals within place-based or interest-based communities expressing themselves. In fact, we can expect to see more of such forms of expression, which can lead to disagreement, dissent, and conflict, she said. In response to the Panel II respondents’ call to allow conflicts and tensions surface, she asked whether they (as artists) have encountered issues that were almost irreconcilable, if they have any recommended strategies and

approaches for such situations, and also whether there might be room for policymakers to play a mediating role under such circumstances.

Another participant quoted Jan Cohen-Cruz in her book *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*. Cohen-Cruz writes that one of the greatest appeals of cities is “density” — the energy of diverse people going about their lives, and that art-making and art-viewing can create experiences for people to be surprised by the “pleasure of difference”. She also asked how the process and product of art can provide an experience of the multiplicity of a place, where multiple identities can either be a source of richness, conflict, or both. She said this is something place-based/neighbourhood-based community arts in Singapore can continue to work on. Currently, the kind of community arts championed by PA focuses a lot on celebrating homogeneity within a neighbourhood with standardised artworks that depict generic narratives. However, we should not discredit what PA has achieved thus far, but instead question whether we can expand the space and resources for showcasing other aspects of the community, including the tensions, struggles, and questions as well.<sup>4</sup>

### **Towards a qualitative evaluation of community arts**

Participants generally agreed that the impact and success of community arts programmes should also be measured not just by quantity (numbers) but also by quality (the impact on participants, their artistic experience et cetera).

Ms Hong wondered if policymakers have the patience to even consider using qualitative measures. Although her own community arts project *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* had only nine participants, these youths now have new social capital and life opportunities through the project.

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<sup>4</sup> This comment was given to us by the participant after the roundtable session.

A participant also cited her project to show that scale is less important than emotional significance and impact. Her project uses emotional metrics to track how the dominant emotions of participants change as a result of their participation. Instead of merely quantifying how many participants became happy, this approach could show how they shifted from feeling resigned to feeling hopeful, for instance. This should be what “deep data” means — the level of emotional shift and emotional connection — which can be used as a better way to evaluate community arts, she said.

Another participant said the experiences from producing and consuming community arts are too varied and complex to be reduced to a set of statistics. Numbers can hardly tell us if residents spend more time watching and discussing a particular performance or taking selfies, for example. Thus, qualitative methods like ethnography enable artists, policymakers, and participants to better understand the myriad meanings people attach to the art-making process and the artworks themselves, he said. Ethnography primarily uses observation and interviews to discover these meanings — for example, a researcher might make copious notes on the interactions between the artist and the participants, their conversations and body language even, as part of the fieldwork. Such notes can help us to make sense of the “backstage” happenings leading to the final artwork. The data produced from ethnography can be rich, nuanced, and at times, contradicting. Context is also central to ethnography, and the reasons underlying how we think and behave are often found in the wider socio-political and cultural environment.<sup>5</sup>

Mr Nah agreed that numbers were not the only measure of the success of community arts. Capturing the narratives of people who have enjoyed and benefited from participating in community arts programmes should also be done. Such stories can show others in the community how the arts can change their lives, he added.

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<sup>5</sup> This comment was given to us by the participant after the roundtable session.

However, another participant said numbers do matter, and urged artists to pay attention to numbers as well. She asked how policies can ensure that community arts activities and their assessments continue to develop in a multidimensional manner post-PA or post-NAC.

### **The position of the arts in society**

Participants also talked about the role of the arts in our society and there were differing views on this issue.

Mr Kok emphasised that although Singaporeans have the privilege to talk about the arts in a peaceful and comfortable place, the arts remain important even in less peaceful places. In his recent trip to Salzburg, Austria, he spoke to people who were in Syria and Lebanon who told him that the arts were their means to survive and to have hope. He disagreed with the contention made that Singapore in the past needed to go up Abraham Maslow’s theory of Hierarchy of Needs before it could fulfil the “higher needs”, such as the arts. We must do away with a Maslow-determined positioning of the arts in our society, he said. In fact, this is an ideological and paradigmatic shift that we need, as it will change the way we make arts and cultural policies.

A participant also questioned this Maslow-determined positioning of the arts in our society. She said the assumption that human beings function in a hierarchical way is problematic as people do not necessarily organise their lives and aspirations in an ordered manner. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs would not be able to explain complex behaviours like parental love, where parents would not hesitate to sacrifice their survival need to ensure the safety of their child(ren), she said. She agreed with Mr Kok that there were many examples (e.g., Hurricane Katrina, the Khmer Rouge) across the world which showed that the arts still thrive in times of extreme difficulty, as it can repair and rehabilitate the human soul when hope was lost. Thus,

it would be more constructive to search for alternative models of “needs” to expand the possibilities of policymaking, she said.<sup>6</sup>

Mr Nah also agreed with Mr Kok that the arts are not exclusively for the well-off, but also for the less privileged as well. He believes that people from less privileged backgrounds can also enjoy, volunteer, and champion the arts. Hence, PA’s community arts programmes should target the entire Singapore population, he said.

Ms Hong said both the government and artists should create the room and possibility for people to reimagine the position of the arts in their lives. Using the example of *Kapor Chatparty* organised by Octopus Residency (a ground-up initiative aimed at fostering a closer sense of community in Little India), she pointed out that audiences did not know how to engage the space or interact with the artworks. They also did not want to step into places that were perceived as out-of-bounds. While governments and artists may provide these spaces and opportunities, audiences often do not know that they can ask for them. Thus, both the government and artists should inspire people and give people ideas to reimagine the role and position of the arts in their lives, she said.

### **The role of education in the arts**

A participant asked whether exposing people to the arts in schools would facilitate a more organic development of the arts. She said our current education system provides our youth with few opportunities to engage the arts regularly, and PA’s efforts tend to parachute the arts to people of different constituencies and interest groups. In response, Mr Sim said the example of Ms Hong’s mother picking up the ukulele and the recorder through *PAssionArts* programmes is anecdotal evidence that some level of parachuting is necessary. Things might take too long to happen if everything is being left to the community to evolve organically, he said.

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<sup>6</sup> This comment was given to us by the participant after the roundtable session.

Mr Lim said the government sees great value and importance in building arts education into the psyche of Singaporeans. For example, recent pilot programmes and plans by the government include bringing students into museums and concert halls to help them understand and be exposed to the arts from a young age. This experience will also teach students to think and develop greater introspection instead of simply engaging the arts for pure entertainment. He also said MCCY has been working closely with the Ministry of Education to incorporate visits to arts venues into the curriculum.

Ms Chua said bringing the arts out to the community is education in itself. In fact, this is a never-ending form of education because there are always new groups of people who are inexperienced with the arts being exposed to it through programmes. This is also why there needs to be a range of programmes with different levels of engagement, she said.

### **Politics and community arts**

Participants also talked about the politics of community arts in Singapore.

A participant echoed Mr Kok’s point that all spaces are politically contested. Singaporeans may be generally uncomfortable with talking about politics, but policymakers and artists should not be. Questions such as “Who occupies the space?”, “What is included in the space?”, and “How things are included in the space?” all contribute to the politics of space, he said. However, he added that “politics” does not mean that people should be up in arms and protesting. Instead, “politics” should be a discussion of questions such as “Who owns the space?” and “Who is the space for?”.

Responding to Mr Sim’s earlier point about the Singapore “machinery” being willing to change despite being proven effective in bringing the country from third world to first, a participant disagreed that changes in policies were solely due the government’s willingness to change, but rather that the government *had* to change

simply because the environment has changed. For example, Singapore’s move towards building an innovative economy is driven by real political reasons that require individuals themselves to be creative and innovative rather than relying on a single entity of an “innovative nation”. Similarly, Singapore’s move towards an inclusive society was driven by real issues such as terrorism, which can no longer be effectively addressed by a single organisation like the police, but instead also requires community effort, she said. She remained sceptical that changes in policies were due to a willingness to change, but instead driven by *realpolitik*. Mr Sim agreed with the participant that the impetus to change is no longer solely a “willingness” but both a “willingness” and a “must change” mindset.

Mr Kok pointed out that PA’s organisational structure is too closely affiliated to the ruling political party. He said this is a political problem because developing communities should have the possibility to envision alternatives to that given by the ruling party. As an agency that aims to develop communities, PA should do more than solely what is prescribed by their direct bosses. He added that communities should be built with the capacity to mobilise, organise, and heal themselves should future governments fail. Currently, our communities have many assets but are unfortunately disabled in learning how to use these assets. Thus, it is important to build the ability to utilise these assets within the community itself, he said.<sup>7</sup>

### **Role of government in sustaining community arts**

Participants also asked whether NAC or PA will continue to play a prominent role in spearheading community arts in the future. Mr Lim said the government hopes that people will eventually take up greater ownership and organise more ground-up activities. One of its strategies is to promote cultural philanthropy through the \$150 million *Cultural Matching Fund*. This will encourage arts groups

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<sup>7</sup> PA provided an after-note that clarified that PA is a government statutory board promoting racial harmony and community bonding, and supporting the government of the day, which is no different from any other statutory board in Singapore. PA is also affiliated to the ruling party.

and artists to raise their own money to start their own projects and have it matched from the fund, he said. Having independence in terms of resources will give both artists and the community greater freedom to do the artwork that they want.

Ms Chua said NAC is working on enabling the community rather than dictating and prescribing it. This includes supporting different community arts approaches, practices, and forms, as well as pedagogical and ethical aspects involved in community arts. Because the landscape is complex and uneven, there should be a wide range of community arts programmes. She added that sustaining the happiness people derive from participating in these programmes beyond the programmes themselves is a huge challenge for NAC to tackle in the future.

Mr Nah said community arts will continue to play an important role for the community to achieve both “art for art’s sake” and “art for a cause”. However, both NAC’s community arts programmes and PA’s *PAssionArts* are only means to that end, and there may be other programmes in future that contribute to this objective. Most importantly, these programmes should help individuals, communities, and Singapore as a nation benefit from the arts, he said.

A participant said sustaining community arts should be done in a “teach people how to fish” rather than “giving them fish” approach. She asked if policymakers can support the community by providing resources such as funding, spaces, and networks, and by allowing the community to learn through experiential learning. However, she acknowledged that such an approach would require allowing room for failure in the learning process. This is only possible if the trust between the government and the people is strengthened. In other words, the policymaking process must demonstrate a willingness to be transparent and have an appetite for dialogue with people who are affected by the policies. Similarly, the community must be courageous in taking responsibility and ownership, and show that it can deal with conflicts without society disintegrating, she said.



### **The importance of artists’ reflexivity**

There was a brief discussion on the importance of artists to be reflexive about their role when engaging the community.

Mr Kok said artists should reflect on themselves more and acknowledge that not every artist may have the right capabilities to work with the community. Artists’ skills and knowledge in the arts do not necessarily translate into an ability to engage the community well. Thus, they need to have a critical discourse on their own practices, he said.

Assistant Professor Michael Tan stressed that engaging people through the arts is a very complex process that needs to be critically examined. While the idea of arts volunteerism sounds pleasing, the process needs to facilitate the complexity of the emotional exchange, which in turn shapes people’s experiences through the creation of the arts, he said.

### **The ethics of practising community arts**

Mr Terence Tan was concerned about ethics and good codes of practice. He said stakeholders including government officers, professional caregivers and guardians, and artists need to ask themselves whether they are doing community arts in an ethical way, he said. He cited the case of one of his projects where the commissioning party threw one of the beneficiaries into the media spotlight because her artwork was good. However, the beneficiary was not ready for the media attention as she was simply using art for exploration. He was ultimately forced to smuggle her artwork away from the organisation in order to protect his beneficiary from the manipulation, he said. The artwork of another beneficiary was also used for an opening ceremony without any monetary compensation or credit, he said.

## **Conclusion**

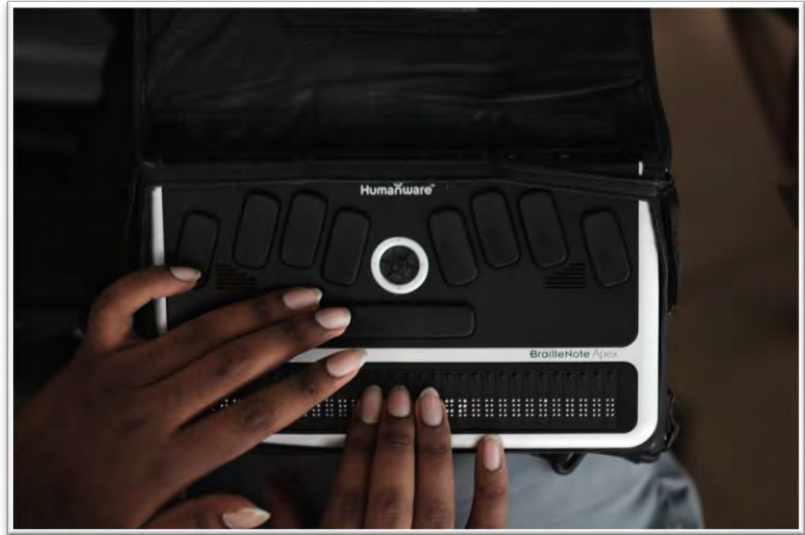
Mr Tan Tarn How concluded by saying that although there were fundamental differences between policymakers and artists — some of which may even be irreconcilable — there were also common areas as well. Sustained dialogue between policymakers and artists is important and must continue, even though they may disagree very heatedly. It is also important that both sides are willing to do experiments and do things differently, he said.

**Panel III:**  
**The work and beyond**

# Ms Alecia Neo

ALECIA NEO is Founder and Artist of Unseen Art Ltd, a non-profit arts company that believes in art's significant role in harnessing the creative potential of individuals, communities, and our living environment. She is also an Artist Lead with Brack, a trans-border arts platform for socially-engaged artists. She is deeply interested in how people live and build relationships with one another. Ms Neo debuted in 2011 with a site-specific project at the residence of the late Dr Nalla Tan. She has since been active in group exhibitions including Sensorium 360 at the Singapore Art Museum (2014) and Art & Faith at the M1 Fringe Festival, Singapore (2012). In 2012, she spent four months as an artist resident with Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto's UNIDEE University of Ideas programme in Biella, Italy. Cittadellarte was established in 1998 by Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto. Alecia has been developing projects with communities living with visual impairment since 2012. Working together with project participants and a diverse range of collaborators, they explore how meaning and personal narratives are translated in the absence of sight.

## An eye for art: About *Unseen: Constellations*



*Unseen: Constellations. Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo.*

[\*Unseen: Constellations\*](#) provides a platform for youths living with visual impairment to explore their future selves through creative processes led by the artist Alecia Neo and a team of dedicated mentors. Through the diverse worlds of these youth and collaborators, the project engages and documents the intimate relationships between art and experience. It stages the complex axes of engagement that can be reimagined between artist and community, medium, and interaction, between art and audience. The ultimate revelation is symbology, a constellation of the ties that bind public and private agents in the living of lives and of dreams. The project explores the complexity of human relationships, ideas about inclusion and raises questions such as, “What kinds of individuals are valued by contemporary society?”.

I am speaking both as an artist and as an artist-lead for a socially-engaged arts platform called [Brack](#).

Brack is a self-funded group that does projects ranging from reaching out to minority communities, to building knowledge and content through working with non-governmental organisations, as well as less well-known art groups. I wish to talk about my project titled *Unseen: Constellations*, which is a platform that engages and empowers youth with visual-impairment through art.

Through working on the ground with volunteers, artists, and students, I realised the importance and need for a critical language and framework that many of the Panel II respondents talked about. In particular, I feel that the concept of subjectivity should be woven into the assessment of community arts in terms of social impact and social cohesion, as mentioned by Dr Koh earlier. When a community is being engaged through a process over a period of time, it is important that we understand their experiences, and collect and analyse their experiences in a way that can be used in other forms of research. When we build close relationships with strangers over time, we will also inevitably encounter differences through dialogue and making the art. It is when we challenge each other’s perspectives that we begin to shift our perception of the world, and start to feel more empowered to engage more deeply in the issues that are important to us.

One of the challenges faced during my project was how to articulate the ideas and processes to a mass audience that has not gone through the engagement, especially when condensing the experiences collected over a span of two years into a short amount of time. While artists need to do work more on this, I think policymakers can also help support artists by providing more funding for research to be done in this area. Art has the ability to “cross boundaries” and communicate with different aspects of our social fabric. By crossing boundaries, I am referring to the fact that any kind of social engagement will inevitably be messy, and there will be personal, social, political, and even spiritual boundaries and territories, moved, crossed, affected, influenced, and disturbed.

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Can  
different  
artistic  
approaches  
potentially  
transform  
areas of  
conflict into  
spaces of  
dialogue and  
positive  
action?”



*Unseen: Constellations. Photos courtesy of Alecia Neo.*



*Unseen: Constellations. Photo courtesy of Alecia Neo*

We faced this challenge when Brack worked with the human rights non-governmental organisation MARUAH on a project titled *Freedom Boat* as part of *Project 50/100*. *Freedom Boat* was a privately-funded private event that had performances, visual artwork exhibitions, and dialogue sessions held on a rented boat. Even though it was a privately-funded private event, we received a letter from the (then) Media Development Authority after the event which said that we had not applied for a license, and that it was not a private event. For me, this illustrates the complexity of practising socially-engaged art in a highly-regulated city, which requires fluidity on the part of the artists to be responsive to such challenges. What happens when we unexpectedly “cross boundaries”, whether it is with a person or an institution, in a public setting? What are some strategies and open approaches that can help both the community and the artists to cope with these potential challenges? Can different artistic approaches potentially transform areas of conflict into spaces of dialogue and positive action?



*Freedom Boat. Photos courtesy of Alecia Neo*



# Assistant Professor Michael Tan

MICHAEL TAN is a visual artist, educator, and researcher in Singapore. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University. His research explores the role of creative practice in shaping the culture of care in various care settings. He is particularly interested in the role of the artist and designer in addressing issues on ageing, well-being, and care. He has actively advocated arts and health development in Singapore by engaging and collaborating with local key stakeholders in care settings and national agencies.

Some of his projects have involved the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and the Alzheimer’s Disease Association. He has spoken at events on arts and ageing such as AIC’s Forum on Community Care (2013) and Arts in Eldercare Seminar 2016. He also serves on the art advisory committee at Ng Teng Fong Hospital, Singapore.

## We art to remember: About *Let’s Have Tea at the Museum*



*Let’s Have Tea at the Museum.* Photo credits: Kong Chong Yew. Photo courtesy of Michael Tan.

*Let’s Have Tea at the Museum* was a six-week pilot participatory visual arts programme developed for the Alzheimer’s Disease Association to help foster activity and social interaction for clients with early or moderate dementia. The programme involved three creative projects and an integrated museum visit to the Peranakan Museum. The programme was found to encourage a space of self-discovery, growth, and socialisation. The multi-sensorial experience also encouraged imaginative play, social exchange, and positive emotions such as sense of achievement and pleasure. The sustained attention displayed by participants indicated a high level of interest and participation by participants. This suggests the potential and suitability of the programme to be implemented in other dementia daycare centres.

I would first like to frame my art practice before I talk about my project titled *Let’s Have Tea at the Museum*. My practice is in the field of arts for health. I am interested in exploring the impact of the process of art-making on the well-being of my participants, and also to study how well-being and health can be accorded to them through this process. Specifically, I am interested in the process of art-making under long-term, acute, as well as community care settings. Through my practice, I delve into issues regarding ageing and the impact on the quality of life of older adults under these different settings. I realise that my practice is a very person-centred approach, as the element of care is required in the process of facilitating the art practice. In addition, the environment that the process occurs in also plays a role in affecting the quality of the programme.

*Let’s Have Tea at the Museum* was a project that my team did in collaboration with the Alzheimer’s Disease Association and Peranakan Museum from 2014 to 2016 with funding from NAC. It looked at the issue of rising numbers of people living with dementia, and the impact of the disease on the person and the community in terms of reduced activity, social isolation, and well-being. It was a six-week programme designed to create social spaces and visual experiences for people living with dementia through three creative projects and a museum visit. The programme was implemented at two dementia daycare centres in two phases.

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*The biggest challenge I faced was in the idea of cultural shift.*

By framing my art practice in terms of arts for health and well-being, I also developed a qualitative method to both evaluate the impact of the programme and reflect on my own practice. The qualitative findings showed that the programme indeed fosters opportunities for self-development, and encourages imaginative play and verbal communication for people living with dementia. It was also evident that the programme improved their sense of self-esteem and morale. There were also surprising outcomes from the programme. As the programme was designed to be multi-sensorial (comprising sensorial, cognitive, and social stimulations), the daycare centre initially advised that our programme should not be more than 45 minutes. However, when our programme overran by an additional 45 minutes, the participants still exhibited focused attention, and

this actually shifted the centre’s perspective of the patients themselves.



*Let's Have Tea at the Museum. Photo credits: Kong Chong Yew. Photo courtesy of Michael Tan.*

Some of the challenges of my work include developing the capabilities as an artist to evaluate and reflect on my practice and its impacts, as well as developing sustainability in funding. However, the biggest challenge I faced was in the idea of cultural shift. As my work is located at the intersection between the social and healthcare sectors, I have to think beyond the artistic practice itself but also about creating a common language to use with the partners I work with. The establishing of this common language is especially important in creating tangible objectives and outcomes, assessing the impact and findings, and understanding the issues and challenges faced by practitioners and stakeholders. Moving forward, these are some areas I think other community artists can look into as well.



*Let's Have Tea at the Museum. Photo credits: Kong Chong Yew. Photos courtesy of Michael Tan.*

I also have other broader questions in mind — “Where can art occur and with whom?”, “What kinds of activities can be done with people?”, “What is the impact of these activities on their health and well-being?”, and “How can we theorise the process through which ‘well-being’ emerges?”. Thinking about such questions will certainly guide our practice and help us be more mindful of the concerns of practitioners, ethical considerations, health and safety issues et cetera. This is the kind of consciousness I encourage all community artists to begin to be mindful about.

## Ms Danielle Hong

DANIELLE HONG is a Researcher with the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre. She was previously a Research Associate with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Institute of Policy Studies, where she worked on local socio-cultural issues such as migration, integration and multiculturalism. She is interested in cultural activism and new forms of social collectives in relation to civil society. She is also part of The Substation’s recently completed experimental *Co-op* programme.

### Art through new lenses: About *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru*



*Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru. Photo courtesy of Danielle Hong.*

Rental flats look the same as any other from the outside. While it can be a temporary living situation for some families, others have lived in one for decades. Although circumstances differ, these families are not unlike the Singaporean norm, where everyone strives to make the best of difficult situations. Through the lens of nine photographers aged 13 to 18 who stay in Lengkok Bahru flats, the [\*Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru\*](#) project invited the audience to gain insights into their public and private lives — around the neighbourhood, at home, or in school. Through volunteer-led sessions in diverse forms of storytelling (e.g., drama, dance, and photography), weekly photo assignments, and a field trip, the project gave these youth free reign in constructing their own personal narratives through photo compositions. This project culminated in a roving photography exhibition, including an “artist” sharing session held at \*SCAPE, Artistry, and Lengkok Bahru in 2015.

**The concept:****“Have you ever noticed the rental blocks in Lengkok Bahru?”**

The *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* team of five people started with a particular research question in mind — “Have you ever noticed the rental blocks in Lengkok Bahru?” — which was inspired by sociological questions of urban inequality and social stratification. Comprising social science researchers, *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* linked up with Beyond Social Services, a non-profit organisation with a prominent base in Lengkok Bahru. A social worker helped us get to know the youths and their families living in the neighbourhood. Nine youths, aged 13 to 18, eventually joined us for the programme.

In the six months between September 2014 and February 2015, we embarked on an arts syllabus with the youths, revolving around the theme of storytelling, as seen through different artistic mediums. While the primary storytelling medium was photography, external volunteer instructors also came to give the youths lessons in drama, lyrical ballet, and music. We also gave the youths second-hand film cameras, and weekly photo assignments left purposely ambiguous. These were themes of “Everyday life”, “My spaces”, “Family”, and “Important stuff”. In six months, they took over 400 photos. Collectively, we picked 50 for two public exhibitions at \*SCAPE and Artistry Café in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Mohd Khamasya bin Khidzer and Sim Jui Liang. (2015). Dreaming in Light Leaks: Reflections on a Quasi-Experimental Research and Mentoring Programme with Underprivileged Teenagers in Lengkok Bahru, Singapore. Retrieved from: <https://writingfoto.wordpress.com/2017/04/11/dreaming-in-light-leaks-reflections-on-a-quasi-experimental-research-and-mentoring-programme-with-underprivileged-teenagers-in-lengkok-bahru-singapore-2016/>.

## Issues and tensions: Intent and purpose

### Self-representation

Throughout the process, *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* was very careful to abide by the unspoken rule that the programme would empower the youths through facilitating their self-expression and self-representation via the photographic exercises. The choice to use film cameras instead of going digital was also a strategic one to allow careful composition of the photographs, so that what the audience was allowed to view would not just be of the constraints faced by the youths, but what they also aspired to project out for the external world.

### Prioritising needs

The issue of curation was also significant in the course of the process. While we set out to examine the issues of social inequality, we were extremely careful not to angle the exercise as one that would encourage “poverty porn”. Through setting up of the four photo themes, we were engaging the youths simultaneously as friends, facilitators, and lastly, researchers. This meant we had to take numerous steps back if the youths were unwilling to share more private aspects of their lives. In the course of curating the photos for the exhibition, we also questioned the benefits of engaging the youths in choosing their own photographs. Some questions we asked ourselves included, “Are we over-interpreting the significance of these photos?” and “How do we move away from transposing our pre-conceived notions or ideals in these photos?”. For example, did a photo showing a milk carton in the fridge translate to the photographer’s awareness of nutrition? Eventually, we decided to proceed with curation without input from the youths due to the exhibition deadlines and an awareness that we would not have time to train them in qualitative methodology in identifying relevant themes. However, we made sure to routinely check in with them on every batch of photographs so as to better understand their motivations and intentions.



*Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru. Photo courtesy of Danielle Hong.*

### **Advocacy**

With the public audience in mind, we organised the exhibitions into three overarching themes — 1) Lengkok Bahru, our home, 2) Strategies, and 3) Aspirations. Using basic principles of visual ethnography, we addressed stereotypes of lower-income impoverished families by showcasing the close communal and familial ties the youths have. Through the placemaking process that the photographers experienced, we were also able to shine a spotlight on the appropriation of public spaces used as a strategy by the Lengkok Bahru youths. Under the theme of “Aspirations”, we also intended for the photos of one youth’s Malay dance troupe and another’s clean soccer boots drying out on a window ledge to symbolise the tentative hopes and dreams each had for themselves. While acknowledging the structural impediments the youth were constrained by, we also hoped to showcase the human agency and empowerment that they embodied.



## Issues and tensions: Efficacy and sustainability

### Efficacy

As *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* was funded by *Project 50/100*, a clear deliverable was outreach; for audiences new to the issue or at such events to be engaged meaningfully. We attempted to measure change both internally and externally.

Externally, both our public exhibitions saw a healthy turnout with about 200 members of the public engaged at \*SCAPE, while our “artist” talk at Artistry Café featuring the youths themselves was also attended by a cosy group of 25. Most successfully, the project was covered by Channel NewsAsia, *Berita Harian*, *The New Paper*, *Suria*, and *The Online Citizen*. Although we did not do a thorough media analysis on all the news angles, the spotlight on Lengkok Bahru as a neighbourhood and the youth as informal ambassadors was a positive achievement in enabling conversations around social mobility and stratification.

Internally, we have seen the youths blossom in indirect ways, such as becoming more comfortable in public speaking or advocating for their needs. Two years on, we have also witnessed their growth via their graduations from Institutes of Technical Education and moving onto other tertiary courses, or acquiring employment. As informal mentors, we continue to provide information, our social networks, or soft skills to aid them. Although these progressions are not quantifiable, we understand the longitudinal aspect needed in charting the personal growth of each youth.

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*We were extremely careful not to angle the exercise as one that would encourage poverty porn.*



*Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru. Photo courtesy of Danielle Hong.*

### **Sustainability**

We attained further funding in 2016 via the National Youth Council, but were unable to continue the programme as the youth themselves were moving onto different phases in their lives (e.g., tertiary education). There were other things to assess; among them, if photography was still the most relevant medium to advocate the community’s needs.

Although we initially presented Phase II as a design thinking project where the youth could initiate micro-projects to address community problems around Lengkok Bahru, it did not gain the same enthusiasm and buy-in from them. The question of ownership also arose; although we wanted the youth to step up and co-create the project, they had considerations that prevented them from doing so. As of now, the team is still in reassessment mode.



*Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru. Photo courtesy of Danielle Hong.*

# Ms Noor Izzaty

NOOR IZZATY is an applied theatre practitioner who believes that art allows people to empower themselves. It has been three years since she graduated from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama with a BA in Drama, Applied Theatre and Education. Since then, she has utilised her skills with various communities such as female prisoners, children with trauma, children in hospitals, people with dementia, and under-privileged youths. Her journey as a practitioner recognises the value of un-learning and re-learning each time she enters a community, and acknowledges that every community is different and each is special in its own ways. As an adaptable and versatile tool of engagement, art can be valued by each person differently, allowing them (i.e., the participant, beneficiary or community member) to empower themselves.

## Art with a “HE(ART)”: About *The Community Theatre*



*The Community Theatre: Sayang. Photo courtesy of Noor Izzaty.*

[\*The Community Theatre\*](#) is an initiative by Beyond Social Services that rallies volunteers from different walks of life to co-create a show that engages its audience to reflect on the social challenges faced by children and families from low-income backgrounds. Since 2013, volunteer artists were recruited to produce interactive/forum theatre performances that are toured to various rental flat communities. The audience, which mostly consisted of rental flat community members, were encouraged to contribute their thoughts about the issue through a safe and interactive experience of theatre. This experience of sharing and reflecting will be furthered through continuous conversations and positive action plans on the issue, thus bringing the community together to take responsibility for the social issues within their neighbourhood.

“  
*The aesthetic  
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 compromised  
 when it  
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 genuine  
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 community.*

I am a community worker and an applied theatre worker at Beyond Social Services. We are a voluntary welfare organisation that aims to curb youth delinquency through community building. We focus on the youths and their families living in rental flats, because we realise that the realities they live in are very different from the rest of ours. They have seen domestic violence in their families, the arrest of their own parents, bloody fights that happen right outside their houses, and also constant discrimination against their race and socio-economic status.

We created *The Community Theatre*, which uses forum theatre to give these youths an outlet to share their experiences, articulate their emotions, and offer a platform for their voices to be heard. Forum theatre is a technique established by Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal that allows audiences to come onto the stage, perform, and intervene in the theatre performance. This form of aesthetic engagement plays a crucial role in providing these youths with a different dimension to make sense of their struggles and also to find the beauty within it. The beauty that they discover is then given back to their community as a symbol of hope. Through these performances, the cycle of giving back continues within the community, as people share their own gift of hope. For example, one mother who watched our performance on family violence said the performance made her feel the need and responsibility to take care of the children in her community. She then started to engage in dialogue with Beyond Social Services, with other parents, as well as with the Member of Parliament of the community to advocate for these youths.

So, how can we ensure that more vulnerable communities experience the gift of theatre? How can we put the “(HE)ART” back into community arts?

First, we need to increase the accessibility of the arts, especially for vulnerable communities that need the space and time to find their own beauty within their struggles. It is also important to have someone (like myself) who works full-time as a community artist in order to understand the community in-depth, and to develop and

advocate for the arts as part of the social change process. We also need to create more opportunities for applied theatre artists in general. I am aware of other applied theatre artists who may have the necessary skills, but lack the opportunities to put their skills to use in this area. Thus, I would also like to see more conversations between NAC and the National Council of Social Service in order to create possible pilot programmes for more applied theatre artists, as well as to provide assistance in terms of funding voluntary welfare organisations to hire artists on a full-time basis.



*The Community Theatre: Sayang. Photo courtesy of Noor Izzaty.*

Second, we need to implement platforms that create opportunities for researchers and artists to collaborate and develop effective, empathetic, and relevant community arts programmes. Research plays a pivotal role in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our programmes, and to critically analyse them to ensure that they continue to be relevant to the needs of the community. *The Community Theatre* is blessed to have a volunteer researcher with whom I work closely to evaluate the effectiveness of our programme. This is especially important for artists who do not have the appropriate skills to evaluate their own work. However, not many other artists are lucky to have this.



*The Community Theatre: Sayang. Photo courtesy of Noor Izzaty.*



*The Community Theatre: Sayang. Photo courtesy of Noor Izzaty.*

Third, we need to give the artists and community the time to build trust in order to develop and sustain the art form within their community. Artists must go beyond being service providers, but instead be partners with the community and develop the work together with the community. There should be co-creation in terms of the pedagogy, strategy, and the art form. While some might fear a compromise of the quality of the art form in the process of co-creation, I feel that the aesthetic value of art will never be compromised when it comes from a genuine sphere of the community.

Putting the “(HE)ART” back into community arts does not only mean putting happiness, but also the sadness, pain, and struggles of the community as well. These are the things that we have to acknowledge within the community, and I feel that art is the universal language that we can use together.



# Ms Li Li Chung

LI LI CHUNG established Exactly Foundation in Singapore in 2015 upon her return from three years of postgraduate studies in art history and contemporary art theory at Goldsmiths and School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. She retired in 2011 from nearly 30 years in Asia-Pacific regional sales and marketing at American multinational companies. Ms Chung was born in Taipei and is now a Singapore citizen, having lived most of her life here. She received her BA in International Relations from Rhodes College and MBA from Emory University and while working, an MA in Art History from LASALLE College of the Arts. She is also mother to a 28-year-old son who lives in Montreal, Canada.

## Unhurried art: About Exactly Foundation



*Exactly Foundation: Who Cares? Photo credits: Kelvin Lim. Photo courtesy of Li Li Chung.*

[Exactly Foundation](#), established since 2015 in Singapore by Li Li Chung, commissions photography projects to visualise social concerns, with the aim to host micro-conversations among invited viewers — 15 images, 15 viewers, two months of engagement. To date, five residencies have been completed, which include land custodianship, HDB living, forgotten history, Rochor Centre demolition, and elderly caregiving. The Foundation’s aim is not to just support producing images but to encourage viewers to talk and write over a two-month period about an issue. Its goal is to stimulate knowledge production through photography as a transformative gesture. Its collaborative, process-driven approach assists in locating the challenges of urban living (e.g., one starting point is engaging with inhabitants who live/work/play in Bras Basah and Punggol). Central to each project is to complete the circle of dialoguing through viewing and discussing the images amongst stakeholders and private audiences. What actions to take thereafter are up to the viewer. Exactly Foundation is completely non-profit and 100 per cent privately-funded.

I was looking at the list of attendees for this roundtable and it had policymakers, artists, and people from non-governmental organisations and voluntary welfare organisations et cetera. I am none of the above. I am a retiree, dredging up hope. I am also a spender. I spend money on commissioning photography projects. I am as interested in the consumption of art as in the production of it, but more importantly, I am focused on what happens when we take the time to “consume” art.

I would like to start off my presentation by having us take a quiet moment to look at these [slides](#).

These slides show the work of one of the projects I commissioned. By flashing very quickly through these photographs without giving you time to really look at them, I want to illustrate that this is how we consume photography — two seconds per image. So, where is the discussion? What new questions came to you as you watched the photos in silence? Not many, no time, we move on quickly.

These slides show images from an Exactly Foundation project done by the fifth resident photographer, Kelvin Lim. It is titled *Who cares?* and it is about caregiving of the elderly. Similar to the other commissioned Exactly projects, this project presents visuals to stimulate questions. For *Who cares?* we started with the observation that photographs of the elderly often show happy seniors or infirmed seniors. Where are the stories? Any other stories not heard? What is the current caregiving practice? Such questions often lead to discussing a social issue, and invariably, how can they ... we ... affect a change in policy. Exactly does not do a project just because the anticipated images could look good.

In this project for example, the artist said Singapore’s policies encourage the elderly to be cared for by their children and family members, with foreign domestic workers as a secondary caregiving option. However, do our policies really help the elderly and help foster intergenerational bonding? What exactly is our understanding of aging? Who are the real caregivers? What binds people with their seniors, and do our policies play any role in this relationship? There

are always many questions and discussions on policy, as well as on what we, as citizens, can contribute to positive change.

The vision of Exactly Foundation is for people to become better thinkers, be open to social engagement, and to ask more questions. Exactly is non-profit and completely privately-funded by myself. To follow up on what Mr Kok mused about “deep skills”, what is “deep skills” without deep thinking? To me, photography is a tool to stimulate knowledge production. It is a transformative gesture to people living in Singapore.

The output of Exactly focuses only on issues in Singapore. It is collaborative and process-driven. The photographer and I engage with people who live, work, and play in certain neighbourhoods as a starting point. The project then ends with a viewing session where stakeholders, private audiences, and residents from the neighbourhoods discuss the photographs.

The methodology of these projects involves walking, talking, eating, photographing, and sharing. At the end of the project, all involved would have asked many questions that would hopefully spur new thinking. To start, I find a topic or am told one by a practising photographer, followed by commissioning the photographer (thus, by private invitation only). The making of the photographs takes place over two to three months. I then gather up to 15 people for dinner at my home and also co-conduct a peer dialogue (an on-site mini-portfolio making session led by the photographer, with fellow photographers). Each dinner guest keeps a journal and shares what they have written, as well as the prints of the photographs with their family and friends. Two months after the dinner, all participants come back for another sharing session of their responses, over tea at my home. As such, each project has already garnered 50 to 100 written responses. Only after 18 months would the photographer and I think about exhibiting and publishing the works.



*Exactly Foundation: Who Cares? Photo credits: Kelvin Lim. Photo courtesy of Li Li Chung.*

Exactly has completed five residences so far, and each one looked at a different issue. For example, one is on living in HDB estates and exploring the *kampung* spirit — the blurring of public and private space and the convenient trotting out of *kampung* spirit to drum up communal happiness all the while sounding a tad coercive. Another project was on the tearing down of Rochor Centre and thinking about “what to keep” — a musing on just what is important in our Singapore heritage. Other projects include one on the unknown history of Little Japan that was Middle Road and the Bugis area, and the question here is, “Why do we not know?”. Another question has to do with land custodianship — “Do citizens have a say, and how?”.



*Exactly Foundation: Who Cares? Photo credits: Kelvin Lim. Photo courtesy of Li Li Chung.*

One huge challenge of my projects is finding residents to come to the viewing sessions and participate in the two-month engagement. I also chose to keep all projects private because I did not want to deal with meeting key performance indicators and the bureaucracy of grant applications. Also, I find artists and art managers far too concerned with impact/results; isn't it more liberating to think of the unmeasurable?

Also, there is often a fear of “something”, saying or doing the “wrong” thing. It can be risky when we think that art can alert us to our human condition of living in Singapore today and to be reminded that our socio-cultural context has its blind spots. That perhaps to speak out, write down our perspectives, and importantly taking time to do so, would help us realise that we are better off having a broader view, if we are to truly call ourselves tolerant and gracious. Ideals no doubt, but photography gives us that new eye and pause to get there.



*Exactly Foundation: Who Cares? Photo credits: Kelvin Lim. Photo courtesy of Li Li Chung.*

Lastly, I would like to raise my issue with the word “community”. As many in this event have already said, the word is simply too difficult and broad to define. We end up asking questions like “Who?” and “For whom?” which can become excluding. For example, where are the programmes for the LGBT community or people who want to talk about teen mental health? Many artists in Singapore have told me that they do not want to talk about “community” as it has a top-down feel to it, and that it is all about doing “happy things”. The idea of “community” has many features and angles to it, and right now, the main funding of community art seems to me to be geared towards promoting fun, hobbies, and happy times. My suggestion is to re-launch the whole thing, as I think that we have an opportunity here, to add more layers, to expand, to take more risks by bringing up the inconvenient but yet so real ... rather than a problem that calls for the need to contract.

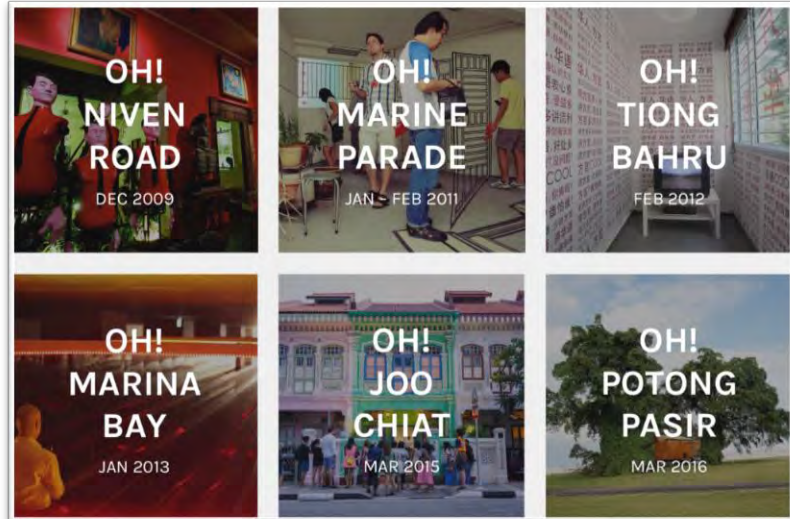
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*I find artists and art managers far too concerned with impact/results; isn't it more liberating to think of the unmeasurable?*

# Ms Berny Tan

BERNY TAN is an artist, curator, and writer. She is currently the Assistant Curator with OH! Open House. She received her BFA (Hons) in Visual and Critical Studies from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Her art practice employs the visual language of diagrams to surface emotional depths in her personal history.

## “Out-of-museum” art: About OH! Open House



*OH! Open House programmes. Photo courtesy of OH! Open House.*

[OH! Open House](#) began as an annual art walk bringing art out of museum and galleries. It has since evolved into a non-profit art organisation that explores Singapore’s neighbourhoods and cultural geography through the eyes of our artists. Its programmes seek to give artists the opportunity to experiment with site specificity in our local everyday spaces, and challenge audiences to think deeper about their immediate environment. OH! Open House is currently presenting its 2017 art walk in Holland Village, with particular emphasis on the area’s diverse urban spaces and their histories.

OH! Open House has evolved since we first started in 2009. We began as an art walk that brought art outside of “elite” spaces like museums and galleries, into private domestic spaces (starting with shophouses in Niven Road). But over the years, we transformed into a non-profit organisation to receive seed funding from NAC. Now, besides relying on NAC, we also receive funding from private donations and foundations.

Our art walks explore Singapore’s neighbourhoods and cultural geography through the eyes of our artists. They seek to give artists the opportunity to experiment with site specificity in our local everyday spaces, and challenge audiences to think deeper about their immediate environment. Hence, OH! Open House is not specifically about community arts, as we are at the juncture of art, history, heritage, culture, and geography. Instead, we try to give artists a platform to explore local narratives. We also have other upcoming programmes as we expand our focus.

When OH! Open House first started at Niven Road, there was no curatorial narrative like the ones we see in our recent art walks in [Holland Village](#) and [Potong Pasir](#). Over the years, we became more neighbourhood-specific. Each year we would go to a different neighbourhood and construct an entirely different narrative based on the history of that neighbourhood. For instance, our work in Tiong Bahru in 2012 (called [Occupy Tiong Bahru](#)) was on gentrification, while our work in [Marina Bay](#) in 2013 was in response to the Happiness Index that year, which showed that Singaporeans were among the unhappiest of people in the world. Thus, we explored the relationship between wealth and happiness within our business district.

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*The  
underlying  
challenge was  
how to define  
community.*



We took a break in 2014 to reorganise ourselves, and returned in 2015 with an art walk in Joo Chiat, where we focused more on the community. We also started a fringe programme called [Hello Joo Chiat](#) that involved various workshops, talks, and performances. For example, participants could have a chat with a Peranakan tailor or the man who cooks Hokkien Mee along Joo Chiat Road.

We also organised a fringe public art programme called [OH!pen Call](#) in Potong Pasir, where the main curatorial narrative focused on the urban transition in Potong Pasir as a parallel to the political transition the neighbourhood was facing (from an opposition party ward to a People’s Action Party ward). The public artworks could be found in void decks and staircases and had a very different quality to them.



*OH! Tiong Bahru. Photo courtesy of OH! Open House.*



*OH! Joo Chiat. Photo courtesy of OH! Open House.*

For each art walk, we publish a journal. These journals contain information about the art, the neighbourhood, and the history of the place. For our latest walk in Holland Village, we published four zines. The first of the four zines was disseminated to 12,000 households in Holland Village and neighbouring areas. It was about Holland Village as seen through the eyes of Holland Road Shopping Centre (one of Singapore’s first suburban malls), via photos submitted by people who work in the shopping centre. Our efforts were also shared by other people on their social media platforms. Those who received the zine said it brought back memories of the history of the neighbourhood, and we felt that this was one way of giving back to the community.

Nevertheless, one big challenge we faced for every art walk was how to engage the community. To overcome this, we experimented with different aspects of community engagement in each art walk. We

were also unsure of how to engage our own volunteer community and the artist community.

The underlying challenge was how to define *community*. We did not start out as a community-oriented programme, in the sense of what has been discussed in today’s roundtable. Now, we define *community* to include our full-time team, artists, volunteers, homeowners who open their homes, as well as the guests. However, we still struggled with how to engage the local community, especially when we are only in a neighbourhood for about nine months to a year to do the research and the artworks.

Managing our volunteer community also proved to be another challenge as most of them do not come from an arts background, but were expected to be art advocates. Thus, it was a challenge for us to build these capabilities in them. We started by doing our own exhibition tours and organising artists talks just for the volunteers. We also believe that these are the people on whom we can have a lasting impact, more so than the people in the neighbourhoods that are the locations for our art walks. Nonetheless, the community in the neighbourhood still matters. They are a necessary resource for us to tap into, particularly through collecting their stories. We still want to find different ways to give back to them.

One important aspect of the local community is grassroots organisations, as our work inevitably requires us to work with them. However, their involvement would sometimes mean that they have their own agenda to pursue, or that their idea of “community arts” does not gel with ours. Thus, sometimes we just inform them about our work as a matter of courtesy and leave it as that.



*OH!PEN Call. Photo courtesy of OH! Open House.*

Another stakeholder that we worked with was the Singapore Land Authority. We had to contact the Singapore Land Authority as our Holland Village art walk featured Chip Bee Gardens, which is owned by them. We then realised that the Singapore Land Authority actually owns various other properties that they have no plans for, which are potential places where we could bring the arts into. One example was a three-story building near MacDonald House that we visited. We tried to formulate plans to work with the space. Most of the time, however, arts organisations do not have access to these Singapore Land Authority -owned/managed spaces because there are no officers or policies that can facilitate access to such spaces. This is definitely an area where we could encourage policy changes for the benefit of independent artists and arts groups in Singapore.

# Mr Terence Tan

TERENCE TAN is an arts practitioner and advocate based in Singapore who has produced and led local and regional projects for people of a diverse range of ages, cultures and needs. Holding a Master’s Degree in the Arts for Theatre Studies from National University of Singapore, his prior experience was in the theatre as an actor and producer. Since volunteering for former Arts Nominated Member of Parliament Audrey Wong (2009–2011), he switched focus to develop and advocate community-based arts projects with a social conscious for both artists and their audiences. To do so he set up the non-profit entity Artsolute ([www.artsolute.asia](http://www.artsolute.asia)), which focuses on developing and supporting communities through the arts. Projects initiated and led by him include *Artwards* (since 2013) to develop empowering relations between volunteers, caregivers and hospital inpatients; *Puppets and Passages* (2012–2016) to empower children and youths undergoing the impacts of disaster and poverty; *Lovebuds* (2015–2016) to develop and rekindle relations between caregivers and persons with dementia; and the *ASEAN Puppet Exchange* project (since 2015) to develop a regional identity for ASEAN’s 10 member states alongside their traditional and contemporary puppeteers.

## Art remedy: About *Artwards*



*Artwards*. Photo courtesy of Terence Tan.

*Artwards* was initiated in 2013 with a focus on improving inpatients’ well-being in acute and rehabilitative healthcare in the hospitals. It was initially supported by the National Youth Council for developing youth volunteerism, and attracted young students and amateurs of the visual and performing arts. Approximately 120 patients, young and old, were engaged that year with storytelling, playback theatre, dance, and visual arts activities. Since then the project has continued on an ad-hoc volunteer basis, self-funded by Artsolute. The outcomes of the project include the development of empathy and compassion among its volunteers, and a keener understanding of the social impact of the arts. Artsolute is also exploring the health impacts of such an interpersonal interaction through the creative and expressive space offered by the arts. By employing the outcomes, knowledge and skills developed at *Artwards*, community art projects for persons with dementia, children, and youth with socio-economic needs and victims of natural disasters (*Lovebuds*, *Puppets and Passages*) were further developed. The project therefore continues to be run at the Yishun Community Hospital to support the rehabilitative care given in its wards.

Should this patient’s painting be considered as “art”?



*Artwards. Photo courtesy of Terence Tan.*

To her, what makes her painting of four flowers unique (compared to her previous paintings) is her choice and act of colouring one odd flower blue instead of yellow, unlike the three other flowers in the picture. Because she was proud of this moment, she imprinted her thumbprint next to the picture of flowers (she is illiterate). So, to her, it is art. The question we learned to ask after four years of *Artwards* was, “Did she experience an artistic process?”

From working with hospital inpatients every one or two weeks on average, *Artwards* has encountered a diversity of needs in Singapore. Sometimes it is loneliness, anguish, or simply boredom from staying at the hospital. Sometimes we encounter persons who have suffered or are suffering from abuse, depression, or anorexia. Sometimes it is physical and mental conditions such as stroke, schizophrenia, and dementia.

The project by Artsolute started in 2012 with the support of the National Youth Council, where we worked with professionals, students, amateur artists, and volunteers to liven up the acute wards in the National University Hospital. Eventually, we decided to self-fund the programme and work with volunteers so the programme may operate person-centrally, as opposed to a programme-centric one.

To run *Artwards*, volunteers are invited to facilitate art workshops after undergoing workshops with Artsolute, whenever the space and time allow. For professional and amateur artists, it is important to learn how to work with the public space, while sustaining the interest of beneficiaries in spite of their artistic disciplines. It is a process much like busking, where we have to earn our audience. Therefore, listening and adapting to the needs and interests of the inpatients are crucial. For volunteers without artistic training, they learn how to facilitate an artistic process in a way that benefits the patient more than themselves.

One great obstacle that remains is the inpatients' families we sometimes encounter, who are important for the long-term impact of our workshops. They dismiss their child's or parent's ability to engage in any creative activity even before seeing them try. They say, "She cannot one." But we say, "She can". They say, "It's too expensive." But we say, "Anything can be used."

Here are some examples of the outcomes.



*Artwards. Photos courtesy of Terence Tan.*



This is an obstacle encountered when working in the public sphere, which we must turn into a stepping stone.

Another obstacle we have yet to overcome is our institutions and policies. Government grants ask either for a quality of artists we do not need for our programme, or have a target number of beneficiaries we should not fulfil if proper human development is to take place. This is in spite of the fact that we have been doing these programmes successfully, long enough to know what are the necessary training, experience, and costs. Likewise, hospitals put community and volunteer projects like *Artwards* under corporate communications, for publicity. This results in poor community arts practices due to the wrong goals and means assigned. Hence, I stopped fussing over the grants and focused on the work. I took *Artwards* away from the “grants mechanism” and focused on what I have seen works best for people. Nevertheless, I believe this project can be improved, and that there are outcomes worth sharing.

So, I asked myself, “Is what I do at *Artwards* ‘art’?” From what I have learnt and applied in other areas of Artsolute’s work in Singapore, Japan, Cambodia, ASEAN, and the International Puppetry Association, the answer is yes. The art of listening has helped me investigate and solve problems in the act of creation. We have become better facilitators and teachers to support the act of transformation. As a result, Artsolute has been involved with collaborating and supporting other artists in their own cultural developments.

The stories and understandings I have gained from working with communities have developed me both as an artist and a citizen, as I am both giving and receiving as an artistic person who interacts with a relatively wide spectrum of people. While comparing myself to other artists, I have realised that this concept of “community arts” is not an in-between space — between the art and the community. My practices were shaped uniquely from my peers due to my different, perhaps somewhat broader, search and journey based on my communal experiences. Thus, I would like to think that “community arts” should be a community’s general knowledge and appreciation

of artistic processes, from which an amateur and someday professional artist may be borne. And — to paraphrase Dr Woon’s and Mr Kok’s points — if this community’s narratives were not reduced to a single tale, and if the “backstage” of everyone’s collaborative processes was visible for all to see, what an amazing artist this might have been! The question is, “How can we move from the first to the second paradigm?”

#thisis2017. We need to change our people’s idea that the emotional and mental development of an individual is less important than his or her physical maintenance. In this matter, I disagree with working with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. It does not explain why children forego their food and health for their parents’ ideals. We need to go beyond the community prices of \$3,000 or \$5,000, and at the same time have more dialogue and an improved working relationship with other community leaders, managers, and caregivers, regardless of jurisdiction and ministerial funds.



*Artwards. Photo courtesy of Terence Tan.*

What I hope for programmes such as *Artwards* is the sustainability of our volunteers, both with and without artistic training, so their interests and livelihoods can be simultaneously maintained. I disagree with the idea that volunteering for the arts should feel like community service that the arts are like a wounded animal that needs tending to. The artistic experience should be an enjoyable one, so much so that two hours per week of facilitating others' artistic experience is not enough. With the right intentions feeding the right resources, we may then help the artistic process to be sustained for everyone who wants or needs it, as any good member of the community should do for himself or herself and others.

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*Hospitals put community and volunteer projects like Artwards under corporate communications, for publicity. This results in poor community arts practices due to the wrong goals and means assigned.*

# Ms Beverly Hiong

BEVERLY HIONG considers herself an advocate for and enabler of the arts. After attaining a Bachelor’s degree in Economics (First Class Honours) from the London School of Economics, she returned to her passion for classical music by pursuing additional studies in cello performance at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore. As a Sistema Fellow at the New England Conservatory (Boston, United States), Ms Hiong was able to explore the intersection of music education and youth development, and she feels privileged to have witnessed the scale and impact of “El Sistema” during a month-long residency in Venezuela. She has worked at the National Arts Council in the Music Sector Development team. *Music and Makan* is her favourite passion project as it brings people together to experience live classical music at its best, while providing additional performance opportunities for Singaporean classical musicians.

## Food for art: About *Music and Makan*



*Music and Makan*. Photo courtesy of Beverly Hiong.

*Music and Makan* is a brand of salon-style classical music concerts in living rooms. Spearheaded by a classical music junkie with an insatiable desire to create delightful experiences to share her love for the art, *Music and Makan* was born out of the desire to make classical music accessible and to provide a platform for musicians to perform solo and chamber works, with an emphasis on innovative ways of audience engagement. *Music and Makan* has featured 15 musicians in five performances and has reached 100 audience members. The vision and hope is for Singaporeans to enjoy intimate live arts experiences in living spaces across the country.

*Music and Makan* is a series of classical music house parties aimed at demystifying classical music for young working professionals in an intimate setting. It also provides accomplished young Singaporean classical musicians with a much-needed platform to perform solo and chamber works. The format of each session is a 50-minute concert performed by three or four musicians, followed by mingling (with musicians and other guests) over food and drink after the performance.

*Music and Makan* aims to make classical music accessible in two ways.

The first is by breaking away from traditional formats of consuming classical music. Instead of having a one and a half to two hour-long concert in a performance venue such as a concert hall or recital studio, I chose to reduce the length to 50 minutes, as that is usually the length of time people are comfortable with for an introductory experience, which might perhaps even leave them wanting more.

The second way is by breaking down the barrier between the musician and the audience by emphasising innovative audience engagement techniques. Thus far, we have tried incorporating elements such as improvisation and an open dialogue with audiences. In my opinion and in line with the international trends in audience engagement for classical music, the development of such peripheral skills is essential for musicians to better engage and grow audiences for the genre. In fact, this is a challenge recognised by NAC. In response, NAC’s music sector development team started a capability development initiative for classical musicians to build these skills. For example, NAC recently invited renowned teaching artist Eric Booth to conduct a three-day workshop on teaching artistry for classical musicians. On a separate note, the field of classical music has been very concerned about accessibility in recent years.

On the participatory front, numerous community arts programmes have been developed to provide marginalised youth with intensive, ensemble-based classical music education programmes inspired by *El Sistema*, a national social programme using music for social

development in Venezuela that started 42 years ago and has reached over 700,000 youth in 400 centres, which is now changing the trajectory of youths’ lives in over 60 countries.

To me, *Music and Makan* is the very definition of a ground-up initiative as the concerts are held in my living room (typically on Sundays), and thus far have been “community-funded” — guests bring food “potluck” style and musicians are happy to perform (many are friends and do this as favour). At first glance, *Music and Makan* does not naturally fit the definition of *community arts*, especially since the target audience is young working professionals between 25 to 35 years old, and is not the immediate demographic that would come to mind when thinking about creating access to the arts. On reflection, I think “community” is about creating a safe space for experimentation — in this case, for new audiences who are unfamiliar with classical music to experience the genre in a non-judgmental way, as well as for classical musicians to be free to step out of their comfort zone to try new and innovative ways of engaging audiences. Also, the mingling over “Makan” is an intentional creation of an atmosphere (with arts as a social lubricant) for communities to be built over food and drinks. With this intentional focus on the human aspect of the arts experience, can we borrow lingo from the design sphere and broaden the definition of *community arts* to a more encompassing “human-centred arts experience”?



*Music and Makan. Photos courtesy of Beverly Hiong.*

So far, we have had five *Music and Makan* sessions in my living room, featuring 15 Singaporean musicians and reaching nearly 100 people. Beyond measuring the impact of the project in terms of numbers, what really matters to me is knowing how much people have enjoyed *Music and Makan*.

I can break this down into two levels — the first would be them indicating their interest in attending the next event, and asking if they can bring friends along. The next level of commitment to the project would be their desire to open up their homes to host future concerts.

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*Will the introduction of ticket prices erode the community element of Music and Makan?*



*Music and Makan. Photos courtesy of Beverly Hiong.*

Moving forward, the intent is for *Music and Makan* to grow, to reach out to new audiences, and to continue being a platform to showcase accomplished Singaporean musicians.

Moving away from the community model of potluck and musicians performing for free, I would have to find a model that would be financially sustainable. I had envisioned that removing venue cost (having this in a living room!) would remove the most prohibitive cost of staging an arts event in space-constrained Singapore, but even then I am left with a few pressing questions — Will the introduction of ticket prices erode the community element? Will money supersede the inherent value of this project? What will money do to *Music and Makan*?



# Mr Jeffrey Tan

JEFFREY TAN is an experienced theatre director, drama educator, and creative producer. He was Resident Director with The Theatre Practice (1997); Drama Lecturer with LASALLE SIA (1999); Associate Artistic Director with TheatreWorks (S) Ltd (2002–2006); Assistant Director with the National Arts Council (NAC) (2007–2012); and Assistant Director, People’s Association (2012–2015). He has been appointed to the National Arts Council’s Arts Advisory Panel (2016–2018), NAC External Assessor (2016–2018), and the “Best Production for the Young” Award in the MI-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards (2016–2018). Jeffrey is now an independent theatre director. He was last commissioned by the Association of Muslim Professionals to write, direct and produce *CROSSROADS, You, TERRORIST* in 2016. He has been commissioned by the Singapore International Festival of Arts to produce *OPEN HOMES*, a theatre production sited in 30 homes, in August 2017.

## At home with art: About *The Crane and the Crab* and *Open Homes*



*The Crane and the Crab*. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Tan.

[\*The Crane and the Crab\*](#) is a creative writing workshop that was inspired by the late SR Nathan’s children’s picture book. The workshop was created as part of the inaugural #BuySingLit festival in February 2017. It aimed to provide free creative writing workshops to the community at the Residents Corners to inspire the love for buying local literature.

[\*Open Homes\*](#), a theatre in the home, was created in 2015 as a collaboration between PA and the Singapore International Festival of Arts. The original intention was to provide a sustained platform for residents to co-create a theatre experience with professional theatre specialists in their 25 homes. In 2017, the Singapore International Festival of Arts has commissioned *Open Homes* to take place over three weekends in August in 30 homes across the island. For the first time, HDB flats will be included, following condominiums and landed properties.

I feel that this discussion on the development of community arts in Singapore is a timely discussion to have. Previously, I used to work with NAC and PA, and I have been executing arts policies. Now, I am an artist creating projects for these policies.

My first project was part of the inaugural Buy SingLit festival. The idea of the project was to create a creative writing workshop inspired by a picture book by our late former president, Mr S. R. Nathan, titled *The Crane and The Crab*. NAC funded this project through the Book Council, and I had planned to run a free creative writing workshop in two Residents' Committees as part of the programme.

However, I was soon told by the Residents' Committees that the workshops would not happen as their dates were too close to Chingay. Nonetheless, I decided to look for alternatives instead of cancelling the project and returning the funding. Eventually, I found four new partners and doubled the number of workshops from two to four. Although the workshops were much shorter than originally planned, it reached out to more children as a result.

The workshops also made positive impacts. For example, we managed to get children who were jumping around to sit down, write, and read their own stories. We also received feedback from a teacher who said that this was the first time in a long while she saw children referring to a dictionary in class. As for myself, I learnt so much about the power of words, and how our choice of words (whether positive or negative) can change culture and perception.

My second project, titled *Open Homes*, started two years ago as collaboration with the Singapore International Festival of Arts when I was still working with PA. The idea behind *Open Homes* is “theatre in a home”, where we engage homeowners to open their homes to provide a sustained platform for residents to co-create a theatre experience with professional theatre specialists in their homes. It is about conversation, celebrating the diversity of stories we rarely hear, and meeting people we rarely encounter. With the help of the Residents' Committees, we managed to reach out to 25 families to open their homes.



*The Crane and the Crab. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Tan.*

This year, the Singapore International Festival of Arts is planning to do *Open Homes* again, with “Singapore stories” as its focus. This time round however, I did not have the support of an organisation PA, nor did I have the networks of the Residents’ Committees and Neighbourhood Committees to help with finding potential home owners. Thus, I started early, improved on the methodology and process, and created a “Frequently Asked Questions” for myself. One of the questions I had was, “Why should people open up their homes to talk about their stories?”. And the bigger question was, “Why do we — as policymakers, artists, community leaders — do what we do?”. The answers to these questions were important to giving potential homeowners a convincing reason to participate in the project. Eventually, I managed to get 30 families to open their homes. I found these residents by going on “blind dates” and through word-of-mouth. Of course, not every homeowner I spoke with agreed to take part in the project. Sometimes, those who had initially agreed to open their homes had to drop out as their family members did not agree.



*Open Homes. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Tan.*

My experience with *Open Homes* made me think about how success should be defined. Now that I do not have bosses to report to, how do I know whether my projects are successful? How do I measure this process? As an artist, I go back to the key question of “Why we do what we do?” because it challenges me to articulate three measures — Is the project important? Is the project necessary for who I work with? Is the project relevant to Singapore and its people? This is a methodology I am learning and developing.

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do what we do.*

## Discussion II

JASMINE NG is a filmmaker and educator with extensive experience in directing and executive-producing award-winning shorts, feature films and documentary work. This includes one of Singapore's first independent feature films, the award-winning, *Eating Air*. She also conceptualises cross-disciplinary works for social causes and community engagement, including multimedia for civic awareness projects like PRISM and for installation project *Both Sides, Now*, by engaging with communities in public spaces on issues about death and dying, with support from the Lien Foundation. As an educator, she has taught at the National University of Singapore, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, LASALLE College of the Arts, etc. As a mentor, she also works with youth and senior citizens on various initiatives, including those with the National Arts Council and the Singapore Film Commission. She continues to work with fellow artists-collaborators on studying and initiating new explorations about creative place-making and place-keeping.

Ms Jasmine Ng moderated the second discussion session.

Ms Ng said every speaker from Panel III was concerned with questions such as, “What are the outcomes?”, “What should happen next?”, and “Why should their project exist?”. Numbers do matter, but they matter in a way (as exemplified by the outcomes of *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru*), such that the impact on nine individuals matters as much as the impact on 900 people, she said. There should also be more dialogue about questioning what artists should do, how to keep things open, and how to develop them.

Dr Low started the discussion by posing a question to each speaker from Panel III. However, she added that they could just think about the question without having to answer it.

1. She asked Ms Neo whether *Unseen: Constellations* managed to bring more resources for the visually-impaired students on top of bringing them art.
2. Having worked with dementia patients at the Alzheimer’s Disease Association herself, she noted that the patients have not been brought out to the Peranakan Museum since the last instalment of *Let’s Have Tea at the Museum*. Thus, she asked Assistant Professor Michael Tan, “Who could continue the programme given its success?”
3. She asked Ms Hong and Ms Ishak whether *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* and *The Community Theatre* could be brought to “elite schools” to address the issue of elitism. That would be an example of how autogenous culture can be used “educate the educated”, she said. In response, Ms Hong said when the *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* exhibition was brought to Yale-NUS, they received interesting responses from the participants as students from a privileged background (who previously only talked about poverty and social inequality theoretically) had to confront the photographs taken by the youths directly.

4. She asked Ms Chung how financial grants by Exactly Foundation were given out, as she felt that private funders were often stricter than the government in her experience. However, Ms Izzaty said based on her experience with *The Community Theatre*, funding from private sectors or community foundations often allow artists greater flexibility and freedom to do what they want to do.
5. She said OH! Open House addressed the issue of consuming nostalgia as a result of gentrification. Thus, she asked Ms Tan whether OH! Open House managed to bridge the nostalgia that is consumed by the middle and lower class.
6. She asked Mr Terence Tan, “Who gets to value art?” and “Is art under-valued or over-valued?”.
7. She asked Ms Hiong whether classical music could also be made accessible to people with disabilities. In response, Ms Hiong said the field of classical music has been very concerned about accessibility and inclusivity. For example, *El Sistema* is a programme in Venezuela that uses ensemble-based intensive classical music education to change the trajectory of youths’ lives. In Singapore, The Purple Symphony, which is an inclusive orchestra comprising musicians with and without special needs, is one example of making classical music accessible.
8. She asked Mr Jeffrey Tan how *Open Homes* addresses the issue of homelessness and how it can expand the idea of a “home”.

Participants also raised the following issues:

### **Beginning, ending and sustaining community arts**

Participants asked how artists should begin and end (if needed) a relationship with the community. They also talked about how to sustain community arts programmes after artists leave the picture.

Dr Koh said all the Panel III speakers engaged in projects that they were able to do and urged artists to also think about potential community arts projects by looking at the problems, limitations, and dilemmas of a project. However, this requires experience on the part of the artist, he said.

A participant asked how artists should exit a project when there is a need to do so, and who should continue the work?

In response, both Mr Terence Tan and Mr Jeffrey Tan agreed that working in community arts is about forming relationships. Mr Terence Tan said he has both given and received through his work *Artwards*. Similarly, Mr Jeffrey Tan said *Open Homes* has led him to people who have taught him a lot about relationships.

However, both speakers disagreed on the issue of “exiting relationships”. Mr Jeffrey Tan felt that artists should not start a relationship with the community if they were already thinking about ending it. Instead, artists should think about making the experience sustainable for the community. It would be dangerous for artists to receive a financial grant, implement a one-off community arts programme, and then bid farewell to community, he said.

On the other hand, Mr Terence Tan felt that artists should think about an ethical way to exit a relationship. While he can “befriend” 4,000 people on Facebook, he simply cannot befriend 400 patients he has who participated in *Artwards*, he said. Thus, artists should think about what the responsibilities of artists, and what ethics are involved if individuals from the community want to stay in touch with them. *Artwards* promotes sustainability by giving patients resources like drawing materials, and also by communicating to



direct caregivers on how patients can continue the art experience, which hopefully will be enough for them to sustain it themselves, he said.

Dr Koh said artists should not continue a personal relationship with the community beyond a project as it is part of an artist's professionalism to not allow his or her relationship with the community to develop into a personal one.

### **Space for “confrontation” in community arts**

Mr Tan Tarn How asked whether confrontations could be a starting point for community arts. He said none of the community arts projects presented in Panel III demonstrated a fraught contest between different stakeholders (e.g., artists, residents, the community et cetera) that led to an epiphany for further action. He wondered whether such confrontations did exist but were not presented, or whether there was a lack of space for such confrontations to exist.

In response, Dr Koh said confrontation can only happen when societies allow a space for dissent to emerge, and when artists have the ability to listen to dissent and be open-minded even in the face of criticism. Artists should learn how to listen to criticism without subverting the understanding of his or her own work, even though he or she might react emotionally to the criticism. However, such a space is absent in Singapore's society, he said.

To further his point on confrontation, Dr Koh asked Ms Izzaty whether she had encountered youths who were not comfortable in expressing themselves, despite being given a platform to do so through *The Community Theatre*. For youths who were not used to expressing themselves, giving them a platform to speak for themselves can be antagonistic and might have created some anxiety for them, he said. In response, Ms Izzaty said she has worked with the youths for three to four months in order to create a safe space for them to share their views and express themselves comfortably. However, many of these views are often not heard beyond the safe

space they created even though they might have the potential to influence policymaking, she said.

Lastly, Dr Koh said there is a lack of space for confrontation to emerge because members of the public are now acting as “gatekeepers”. He said Mr Or’s artwork only came under public scrutiny after a member of the public had complained about it. He suggested the need for new approaches to deal with similar incidents in future, such as giving the community a time period to reach a consensus instead of immediately removing the artwork. This would empower society and encourage members of the community to engage one another, he said. He added that no single individual should define the meaning of *public space*.

Mr Kok agreed that there is indeed a lack of space for confrontation in Singapore, and that obstacles Ms Neo faced in her *Freedom Boat* project illustrated this point. However, he also feared that community arts may empower individuals and communities, causing larger systemic issues to be overlooked.

Ms Hong said there was a confrontation between relating to the experiences of the youths in *Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru* and representing them on their behalf. Artists should not pretend that they can fully understand what the community feels about its own experiences. Instead, artists should serve the role of an enabler to help the community express his or her own stories and narratives through various artistic mediums, she said.

Ms Chung said she was more interested in art that confronts the audience. Through such confrontations, deep critical thinking can take place. Such thinking is necessary especially for individuals who are making decisions about how the country is run and who gets elected, she said.

### **Ambiguity in measuring outcomes in community arts**

A participant raised a question on measuring outcomes in community arts. She said when artists receive funding for a project, they often have to be accountable to their funders in terms of the outcomes of the project. More often than not however, outcomes might take a long time to materialise, and transformations might be difficult to measure concretely. Thus, she asked if it would be possible to look at open-ended outcomes instead.

Speaking on the same issue, Mr Kok said while his work often aims to answer a question, sometimes his work also addresses a question that he does not have the answer to. In fact, sometimes he unearths more questions than he originally had as the project continues, he said. Through his project *Both Sides, Now* (a project that deals with end-of-life issues) for example, he realised that individuals were not only preoccupied with dealing with death per se, but were also preoccupied with other issues such as housing and financial stability. However, this state of ambiguity was comfortable for him and has actually led him to think about the next iteration of the project, he said.

### **Critical listening and public engagement in community arts<sup>9</sup>**

Dr Koh said when artists engage the community, the community is typically seen as the recipient. However, when the community gives feedback to the artist, the artist in turn becomes the recipient of the information. Thus, it is necessary for artists to engage in this process of critical listening and create empathy towards what others say. He added that “listening” is an essential quality in public engagements, as is acknowledging the different “others”. “Listening” not only expresses respect and support, it also leads to the understanding of the essence of exchanges and allows empathy to grow. The fact that the majority of the Panel I speakers did not stay to listen to the

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<sup>9</sup>This comment was given to us by Dr Koh after the roundtable session.

practitioners in Panel III could indicate an elitist mindset, disinterest, or a view that there is little value in listening to them, he said.

However, Dr Koh also pointed out that the practitioners largely articulated opinions and anecdotal narratives without reflecting and examining the work from a critical distance. This could result in a lack of constructive learning points that can be shared with other practitioners and audiences from different disciplines and sectors. He added that this could be the outcome of local control systems (as mentioned earlier) that do not encourage rigorous exchanges and debates, and seeing things from a larger context, thus creating limitations for growth and development of practices and mindsets. Such limitations are manifest as quite a few speakers did not really address the aim of this roundtable, which is to focus on the criticism of existing policies or the creation of new policies that could further develop community art practices, he said. Perhaps practitioners are anxious about giving open and critical feedback in public. Thus, cultural policies should open up convincing and nurturing spaces for people-centred processes, he said.

# Conclusion

Mr Tan Tarn How concluded the session by listing several steps that artists and policymakers could take to move the discussion on community arts forward.

He said while the roundtable discussion was a good start, it certainly did not cover all issues. Furthermore, while the discussion raised some of the right questions, it also did not provide many of the right answers. The discussions that follow would depend on what policymakers and the artist community want, and also how policymakers engage artists.

Mr Tan Tarn How suggested some ways to achieve this.

First, policymakers and artists should find a “test bed” for “difficult” projects, such as projects that are more exploratory and open-ended in nature, as well as projects of which the outcomes are uncertain.

Second, policymakers should develop a metric different from NAC’s and PA’s current one to measure success. In fact, it would be more meaningful if policymakers conduct consultations with artists to develop a richer array of measurements of success in community arts.

Third, artists need to come together in conversation to ask questions such as, “What are the ethics of practising community arts?”, “Do artists need guidelines for practice?”, and “Should there be a manifesto?” et cetera. Artists should also engage other stakeholders like non-governmental and voluntary welfare organisations (e.g., National Council of Social Service) in this discussion. This would provide these organisations with the necessary education and capacity building and enable them to be involved in community arts effectively.