



**IPS Seminar on "One Foot In: An ‘Arts NMP’ on
Politics and Activism in Influencing Cultural Policy”
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Speech by Ms Audrey Wong**

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When you are in a place like the Substation, people have no qualms about coming up to you and telling you what they think you should be doing, and you learn to take things onboard and take criticisms. You also learn how to think clearly about what it is that you feel you need to do, what you feel that the organisation should be doing, being clear about your reasons and being comfortable about your reasons for doing things. I think that was really crucial. The other thing that was important to me for my background was that when I was in NUS, I took political science as a minor, and I think that helped in understanding parliamentary processes.

What I am going to talk about today is my experiences in the last 21 months – my experience as an NMP so it will be a personal point of view, and I will talk about the strategies I adopted as an NMP and how I learned to do my job because it does not come with a job description. I’ll talk about the lessons that I’ve learned especially the possibilities and limitations about arts advocacy.

Community Node for the Arts

Arun has already talked about the Substation but I feel that it’s very important to talk about it to start as a background to understand what I did. I’ve been there since 1996. It is an independent, non-profit art space, dedicated to nurturing artists, experimental/cutting-edge art, pushing boundaries and promoting dialogue and discussion in arts and culture. Basically I think our work was about nurturing the thinking artist, beyond just putting up your artwork for show. It was also about what you do as a member of a bigger community which is the artists as well as the audiences. Since the time when Kuo Pao Kun was artistic director of The Substation, the arts centre had been a meeting point for people, artists and

communities interested in cultural issues. Pao Kun had initiated the annual Arts Conferences of the 1990s. I think a lot of people miss that and my post-NMP aspiration is to convene an Arts Conference at some time in future because those were really important forums for artists, commentators, critics, academics and others to engage in discussions about heritage, space for arts, censorship, and other areas of arts policy-making. With few channels for public discussion of these matters, The Substation had become a ‘third space’ for such discussion and for alternative voices. Collaborations between artists, the arts and other interest groups and NGOs/NPOs were commonplace – one example being a project for The Substation’s annual festival SeptFest called *Artists and Other Animals* (2004), which incorporated an exhibition, a conference featuring artists, academics, conservationists and scientists, and a carnival/fair with booths by environmental and animal welfare groups and performances by musicians and artists. Even today, we do see a lot of alternative communities gathering at The Substation for activities.

Coming from this history, artists who chose to present work at The Substation often incorporate social or political commentary in their work. They don’t always play it safe, in other words. In my role as Artistic Director since 2000, I saw myself as a cultural worker, and my role at The Substation was also to enable and build capacity for artists and creatives, as well as build communities that would nurture a Singaporean artistic culture. Community-building is very important, and people coming together, talking through issues and doing things that they can do as a group and not just individuals was an important aspect. There was also informal mentoring. In recent years when I’ve talked to people in the arts, they’ve actually been bemoaning the loss of such mentoring, and now people are talking about how to create such platforms for mentoring. I’ve worked with communities that included non-artistic people with events that include welfare organisations and civil society groups such as TWC2 (Transient Workers Count Too).

I was interested not simply in organising and presenting arts projects like shows and exhibitions; from my experience, it was hard for artists to make themselves heard and put their work out there unless they had the capacity, skills, networks and inclination to make things happen. In the 21st century, it was no longer enough for artists to remain in the studio and wait for presenters or dealers to take their work to the public; many of the artists I worked with, were becoming producers, public and youth educators, and arts advocates as well. People like Robyn Archer became an inspiration for me.

Arts and Cultural Policy Impact and Advocacy

One aspect of being an intermediary in arts and culture (as staff at The Substation and other arts groups, presenters and venues are) is advocacy work. You need to persuade the public, funders, sponsors, arts audiences, buyers, other artists, networks in the arts (local and global), the media, to support the artistic work and to share the values of the work to as wide a sector of society as possible.

There are two main aspects of arts advocacy in Singapore. One is the more rational, bottomline-focused work of persuading people to put resources into the arts, where you make your argument based on both the intangible and tangible (i.e., demonstrable or measureable) outcomes of the arts. Once there is arts funding, you have to report those indicators. A second aspect is what we call ‘opening up space’ for arts and culture, for expression of our views about who we are, in Singapore.

Contemporary arts in Singapore has, for decades, been a public space for discussion about socio-cultural issues. When you push too hard, there’s always a backlash. We still remember of course, the performance art controversy of 1993-1994 at 5th Passage Gallery, which led to the withdrawal of funding for performance art in Singapore for 10 years – a *de facto* ‘ban’ on the art form. Theatre groups have always been inspired by social, political and cultural currents of the time, with W!ld Rice and The Necessary Stage being two popular examples. (We know of course that W!ld Rice recently had their funding cut.) Issues of freedom of speech, the Internal Security Act, migration and more, have been explored on the Singapore stage. In some respects, Singapore theatre often appears to be a kind of dialogue with the state. This is something I have discussed with other practitioners before. Because of the Public Entertainment Act which states that all scripts for public performance need to be approved by the Media Development Authority, artworks very often become test cases of what is permitted to be said in public. This has led to some artists feeling vulnerable – but, interestingly, we do not speak of our vulnerability very much.

Ironically, despite the Renaissance City plan and all the state investment in the arts, there has been a growing sense among artists of being disempowered. There are times when I feel that the economic argument for the arts has been won; yet, despite the commitment of the government to developing the arts in Singapore, the benefits have not been equally or fairly distributed or trickled down to practicing artists – or so it seems, if you talk to individual artists. Artists are still struggling to find space for studios, for opportunities for paying work, for professional development, and public recognition. Here again, artists feel vulnerable and

at the mercy of socio-economic forces and policies which they may perceive to be beyond their control.

I think my experience as an intermediary, understanding and seeing first-hand the impacts of arts policy on the players in the scene, the state of affairs and the very strong sense of struggle, and also my experiences negotiating with ‘the authorities’ whether they are the National Arts Council (and through them, MICA [the Ministry for Information, Communications and the Arts]) or the censors, were important in ‘training’ me for the NMP role.

Arts and Cultural Policy circa 2009: Possibilities and Limits

There were a few interesting developments around the time when I was appointed as NMP in 2009, and this also made me very aware of the possibilities and limits of speaking up. Recent amendments to the Films Act and the Public Order Act had been passed in Parliament, and while they were cast as liberalising the existing laws, there were also aspects of the new laws which to many, were cause for concern. For instance, the requirement for ‘political’ films to be considered by an advisory committee, and the narrow definition of what was permissible in a political film (e.g., only objective and factual portrayals were permitted, without animations or distortions of shot footage). In the arts, we had also seen cases where a film or art event had been granted a licence or rated by the censors and the MDA, but were not permitted to be screened or staged in state-owned buildings and properties. For myself personally, I had just gone through protracted negotiations with the National Arts Council about the enforcement of conditions on The Substation’s annual grant and lease of the building - we had been advised to “stick to the arts” and avoid non-artistic civil society activity.

In early 2009, MICA had a problem with an arts project, *Tank Man Tango* by Australian artist Deborah Kelly, a video and performance which had as its theme, the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen incident. The Substation was presenting the project as part of a simultaneous worldwide art event which also involved the cities of Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Taichung (Taiwan), Seoul, Weimar, Leipzig, London, Bristol, Washington DC, and Mexico City. The art event had been granted a licence by the MDA; however, just a few days before it was due to be presented, we were informed by other authorities in MICA that we had to cancel the event. A flurry of discussions finally led to the authorities allowing the event to proceed at the last minute.

How does one make sense of this contradiction between policy (of Singapore as a global, Renaissance arts hub) and practice (where artistic expression is curtailed due to anxiety on the part of policy-makers and government agencies)? How do you push for the opening up of spaces for artistic expression of views and opinions which may not be completely palatable to government, or are critical of policy and policy impacts, without losing the trust of the powers-that-be? Because if there is one thing that history has taught us, it is that alternative and critical voices can easily be viewed by government as being subversive and untrustworthy, and something to be ignored.

In my maiden speech in Parliament, the debate on a motion by fellow NMP Viswa Sadasivan on the Singapore Pledge, I spoke of the climate of fear in Singapore. When I said this, senior Cabinet members who were then present in Parliament said “no... no... no”, clearly disagreeing. Yet, I knew friends who, at that time, had lost their credit with the powers-that-be because of views that they had expressed; how could that not make people worry and lead to self-censorship?

As I had more encounters with policy-makers and those who implement policy at MICA and NAC, I realised that they were also in a conundrum of sorts. They wanted to hear views from and include more people working ‘on the ground’, yet they could not or would not listen to those who were too obviously vocal and critical. The question of who to trust, is tricky for them, as it also is for activists and advocates. We as advocates want them to hear our views – all views, regardless of what these are and who expresses them. Why should we wait to be invited into a circle of trust? Shouldn’t they, as public servants, listen to the public?

For the longest time in Singapore too, the word ‘activist’ has had negative connotations of being a troublemaker or worse, a subversive. ‘Activists’ were the people who were not allowed into Singapore during the 2006 IMF-World Bank meetings, the image is that of people who cause public disorder. In the arts community, there is a loose network or grouping of people called ArtsEngage, who initiated and drove the process of sending a paper outlining an alternative position on censorship to the Censorship Review Committee in 2009. That’s a form of activism, but people don’t really openly identify themselves as ‘arts activists’, although in ArtsEngage meetings we had recognised that what we are doing is activism. It is also about raising awareness or consciousness-raising. It is education and therefore activism.

Roles of an “Arts NMP”: Possibilities

The question was, could I do this as an NMP and in Parliament? Could I push for the government to publicly recognise the ArtsEngage position? Would that be construed as personal activism, too partisan, and lead to doors being shut to further dialogue? I was also aware that, coming from a background of English-language contemporary arts, I might be seen as representing a particular segment of the arts community (the ones who were vocal and always getting media coverage), whereas I had to try to speak for as many in the arts as I could, including traditional arts and arts educators, as far as I believed in those causes. I decided that I had to pick my battles and be strategic. It would be too much to expect the government and policy-makers to change deep-seated beliefs and philosophies during my brief term – for example, the belief that Singapore society is still largely conservative, and not ready for more liberalisation. I could argue for liberalisation, but what I would be doing is adding to the numbers – which is also necessary, but is long-term, slow, and incremental.

What could be possible, is to work for change by leveraging on existing values underpinning policy – for example, the idea that the arts and creative ‘industries’ contribute to Singapore’s economic well-being. One area I decided to focus on was the improvement of conditions for freelancers in the arts and creative sector, as after all, these are ‘Singapore workers’ in an ‘industrial sector’. Most of all, I focused on trying to develop an understanding among policy-makers, of the artistic processes and day-to-day concerns of being in the arts sector in Singapore.

This brings me to the benefits of having someone representing the arts in Parliament: the access it gives the artists and arts communities to policy-makers and government. I could directly approach senior officials and even the Minister for the arts, to request for meetings and offer input on policies based on my experiences of working ‘on the ground’ with artists and my understanding of how policies have impacted on people. There are obviously limits to this kind of approaching Ministers or senior officials directly, because you don’t want to be seen as taking advantage of your access to them to push ‘partisan’ or personal issues or ask for personal favours! But it does help to draw senior officials’ attention to certain issues.

In approaching policy-makers and senior officials in government, I learnt from tips given by former NMPs. One told me that officers in the public service were often helpful in answering queries, and that sometimes Ministries might actually want to table issues or enact certain policies which you also want to push for. If the timing is right, the NMP’s voice in parliament

could carry policy-making further. The NMP can also draw public attention to issues that statutory boards and ministries can't, but which might be necessary for policy-making.

An example I can discuss here, is my work in terms of pushing the issue of poor working conditions for freelancers in the arts and creative sector. Many talents in this sector are underpaid, unpaid, and often unprotected. While freelancers themselves could group together to help one another, it was also important for government to recognise their problems as issues that affect the long-term development of the creative sector, and take steps to address bad practices in the industry. MICA had already started to look into this area, but I think that, in asking questions in parliament and giving interviews to the media, I was able draw public attention and interest from creatives who were directly affected, and in doing so, helped to push the issue into the forefront. I was also able to speak to the Senior Parliamentary Secretary about this, and had a meeting with MICA officials to offer more information and feedback from 'the ground' about particular problems. And, having been invited to sit on the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, I am able to put the freelancers issue on the table for future policy-making consideration as well. I think it's safe to say that I would not have been invited to the ACSR if I wasn't an NMP.

This brings me to another point, of being a 'bridge' between the community and policy-makers, between the people's sector in the arts and government agencies. I'm in contact with Six Degrees, which is developing a network for capacity-building for the creative sector in Singapore, and we have had focus groups with artists and creatives to find ways of addressing the question of better working conditions for freelancers. Yet, because I'm not actually part of Six Degrees or any organisation working on behalf of creative talents, I can be perceived as impartial to some extent and act as a bridge between the people's sector and the government agencies looking after the development of the sector.

In similar (but different) vein, when NAC embarked on developing a new framework for arts housing and decided to convene focus group discussions involving diverse representatives in the arts, they asked me to facilitate these discussions, I suppose because I understand that concerns of arts housing tenants (having been one before), but as I am no longer involved in running an arts housing space and being an NMP, I presumably have a wider overview of arts housing policy and therefore also communicate the policy-maker's perspective to the artists.

“The Community Has to Raise its Game”

Does that help to enact change though? I can't answer with a direct Yes or No. What I can say is that my experience has taught me that policy change has to occur as a combination of government initiatives and people's advocacy and initiative. The community has to raise its game, build its capacity to help themselves – for instance, through professional associations or strong people's sector and private institutions – even as government needs to embed the lessons from existing policy impacts into future policy-making. And dialogue is necessary between the two, because each party sees issues and benefits in the light of their own, occasionally limiting, experiences. The government is now saying that they need to really listen to the people – their challenge is how and by what means to include differing views in their consideration.

As for the people or people's sector, those who are on the receiving end of policies, they too need to consciously raise their game. It's not simply making demands from the government. It's also about equipping themselves with the knowledge, know-how, networks, structures, and having the will to make things happen for themselves. I believe that as advocates, we are still lacking in this areas. And I'm also hearing from the younger artists that say that censorships don't affect them. I'd like to keep working to develop this kind of capacity in the arts – to pass on knowledge of arts policy and what's involved in policy-making to others, to nurture leadership, strengthen networks, and help others to start initiatives to benefit the community as a whole.

On Making Political Speeches

I will end with a note about making political speeches. Parliament obviously is where you can make your voice heard, but I have also learnt there are limitations on how far you can be heard publicly. Firstly, a lot of speeches get made in parliament and only those that are picked up by the media generate a lot of public discussion. A politician therefore, learns to make the 'right' kind of speeches or say the things that would capture press attention. Whether government and decision-makers pick up on what you say in Parliament, is another matter. Again, picking your battles becomes a strategic matter. I learnt that the Committee of Supply debates and budget debate are the arenas where MPs argue their most passionate causes, and so this year I chose to focus my speeches on the MICA debate, which as it turns out, proved to be timely as the Finance Minister announced an increase in arts spending. Strict rules in parliament and the lack of opposition MPs, do limit real debate – for example, during parliamentary question time, you cannot raise points in rebuttal to a

Minister’s reply but can only ask supplementary questions. The other avenue for getting government to do something, is to raise a Motion, and I have to say that during my 21 months in parliament I did not find a compelling topic to raise a motion on, although I supported Viswa Sadasivan’s motion on Preschool Education and contributed to the debate on minimum wage (asking government not to shut the door on future discussions on this) during the debate on Mrs Josephine Teo’s motion on Inclusive Growth tabled in January this year.

In conclusion, it’s possible that there are more expectations on an “arts NMP” than the average NMP, being a representative of a community and its voices, as well as an individual citizen with his/her own voice and convictions. The bridge and intermediary position of the “arts NMP” to policy-makers is also important in Singapore where very often, critical voices are ignored by policy-makers and those in power. The ‘foot in the door’ I feel, is still a tiny foot, and there’s more work to be done to keep the door open. More intermediaries must be found. We need to find more leaders and mentors. It’s been a real privilege to be a lawmaker, and I feel that if people are really committed to this work, they should go for it, because I feel that I’ve really exercised my rights as a citizen. With other communities as well – not just the arts – I also feel that I was able to represent other voices as well.



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