

IPS roundtable discusses impact of pandemic on the arts

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The last big pandemic, the Spanish flu in 1918, came on the heels of World War I and inspired the Dada movement and the Bauhaus school of art and design.

Dr Eugene Tan, director of National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Singapore Art Museum (SAM), noted this before asking: "What can we expect out of the current pandemic? The important question is what effect this has had on art, and what lasting impact it will have."

His question kicked off an online roundtable discussion about arts in the time of Covid-19, which drew 100 participants yesterday.

Organised by the Institute of Policy Studies in partnership with NGS and SAM, the Roundtable Discussion On Art In The Time Of Pandemic: Meaning, Relevance And Future is part of the institute's Spotlight On Cultural Policy Series Ten.

Over 11/2 hours, five artists and researchers spoke about how the pandemic had impacted their practice and touched on issues such as the role of the arts in society and the impact of a mass migration to digital platforms.

Playwright and theatre critic Nabilah Said said that in Singapore, standards of productivity and success are applied to the arts just as they are to other sectors of society, which has caused her anxiety as a practitioner hobbled by theatre closures.

"If I'm not writing, am I still a playwright? I've been valuing myself so much in terms of the work that I'm doing, in terms of the product that I've been creating or helping to create, and I'm so entrenched in this capitalistic structure that when I'm not working, I find almost no value in myself," she said.

The financial impact of Covid-19 on the arts was also raised. Dance artist and researcher Nirmala Seshadri pointed out that the content that arts groups are putting online is currently free and therefore not sustainable.

"While theatre and dance writ large may survive, many theatre and dance groups and artists... will almost certainly not. And we have to come to terms then with the loss that was allowed to happen."

It was not all doom and gloom, as the panellists pointed to how the arts community has rallied to help one another and society at large.

Filipina art critic and curator Marian Rocas helped start a charity drive to feed the urban poor by getting musicians to perform live on Facebook. She said some 200 artists took part in online performances every night for 21/2 months, raising some \$2 million in the process.

"Many of the artists themselves were suffering. The crew had no jobs. But they all helped," she added.

Seshadri said: "This is a valuable time for reflection, which is also an important part of the artistic process. In a rapidly changing environment, we all need that time to absorb what is actually happening."

She suggested a "reflection grant" which will allow artists to focus on creation rather than production. "Would the wider society be willing to acknowledge the centrality of the arts and do what it takes to support the cause?"

There is also reason to hope that there are routes to reviving live performances and audience attendance. National University of Singapore's associate professor of theatre studies Robin Loon suggested that in phase two of Singapore's exit from the circuit breaker, small performances might be allowed, with small audiences gradually reintroduced to venues.

He added: "What we need to understand is that we will emerge from this. What should we do in the interim, that is important. How do we, as artists, as a community, empower ourselves to continue our practices in a different format that still empowers us and connects us to the audience?"