

Beyond “Happy Arts for Happy People”: IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series – Roundtable on the Development of Community Arts in Singapore

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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.”



On 15 March 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a roundtable discussion at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) that brought together more than 70 participants comprising policymakers, academics, artists, and civil society activists. The roundtable

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examined the progress and impact of community arts initiatives, and discussed ideas for developing community arts in Singapore.

Panel I: Community arts policies and implementation

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.

Policymakers identified broadening and deepening community engagement with the arts as their key focus. This would involve bringing the arts into the “heartlands”, increasing access to the arts for disadvantaged communities, promoting arts volunteerism, and providing a greater diversity of programmes. 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. Lastly, policymakers also highlighted the benefits of community arts in instilling a sense of well-being and belonging, a gracious and cultured society, and a strong and cohesive Singapore identity.

Panel II: Responses to community arts policies and implementation

In the second panel, five artists gave their responses to the policymakers' presentations. They emphasised the need to increase the diversity of community arts programmes to go beyond co-creation and collaboration, and to address the contestations that emerge from the artistic process and the everyday difficulties people face. While many may see contestation as negative, the arts can bridge differences and help our society grow and mature. In short, community arts programmes should go beyond “happy arts for happy people”. Greater diversity would also mean having initiatives that are “needs-centric” and responsive to the ground, rather than “programme-centric” with pre-determined outcomes. 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.

Artists also pointed out that the success of community arts should be evaluated qualitatively and not just quantitatively. Numbers might indicate the reach of programmes, but qualitative assessments would reveal what community arts mean to the community, thus providing a more nuanced view.

Panel III: The work and beyond

In the third panel, nine community artists spoke about the impact and challenges of their community arts projects. These projects ranged from art for health and therapy, to art for addressing social issues such as poverty, and heritage and conservation. The community 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.

Discussion

The discussion session raised a few important issues that were crucial to the further development community arts in Singapore.

First, both artists and policymakers need 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 point out the “right direction”, but also as possibilities for identifying “detours” that might lead to new forms of creativity.

Second, 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.

Third, policies should ultimately facilitate communities to take greater ownership of community arts 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 closing, participants acknowledged that while many important questions were raised from this roundtable discussion, the conversation between policymakers, artists, and the community has to continue for Singapore to find the right answers to them.

A full report of the roundtable discussion titled [Beyond “Happy Arts for Happy People”](#) can be downloaded [here](#). More details about the event can also be found [here](#).

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