

Chapter 18

Arts–Based Community Engagement in Singapore: Success Stories, Challenges, and the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Socially engaged artists have to work within a landscape of state-sponsored grassroots organizations and controlled community development in Singapore. This has created both constraints and opportunities for artists. Arts-based community engagement that focuses on building national identity and inter-racial harmony receives much government support and funding. Community art that helps support therapy, health and social care are also welcomed by the arts administrators, social service providers, hospitals and community organizations. Art that is politicized or calls into question government policies are discouraged, and the socially conscious artists who use art for advocacy or public education often have to negotiate with the state where these boundaries should lie. Nonetheless, a strong supportive ecosystem for socially engaged artists is growing in Singapore, made up of intermediary organizations, capability builders and market aggregators.

INTRODUCTION

In present-day Singapore, not a month goes by without a community arts project taking place, suggesting a vibrant community arts scene in the country. A typical project may entail artists working with various ‘vulnerable’ populations for the purpose of achieving socially positive outcomes: a dance troupe providing creative movement sessions for the seniors in nursing homes; music lessons that culminate in a concert performed by people with disabilities; or art exhibitions that showcase the artistic talents of inmates and

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ex-offenders. Besides projects involving ‘vulnerable’ communities, arts activities abound in the different neighborhoods across the island, for residents to pick up the brush to paint a mural or to act in a skit.

Despite the hive of activity, there is a paucity of academic and research attention specific to community arts in Singapore. This chapter examines how national arts and cultural policies and the unique style of community development in Singapore have influenced the content of such arts-based civic engagement and the type of community artists that have emerged. We identify the salient characteristics of community arts practices in Singapore, discuss the challenges and issues at stake, and conclude with several policy recommendations for improving the state of community arts in Singapore.

ARTS AND CULTURAL POLICIES: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR NATION BUILDING

Concerted state involvement has played a critical role in the direction and significance of the arts in Singapore. It is necessary to understand the nature of arts and cultural policy and the history of state-supported community development in Singapore to fully appreciate the context within which local community artists operate. As sociologists Victoria Alexander and Anne Bowler (2014) point out, government policies set the opportunities and constraints confronting the arts, which include funding, the amount of institutional support provided, and whether the arts may be used “as a stand-in for other policy agendas” since governments are “part of the wider societal shift toward the enshrinement of neo-liberalism” (p 8).

From ‘Hardware’ to ‘Software’

In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of the Singapore government was on economic development, defense, housing, healthcare and education. Following Singapore’s independence in 1965 and faced with the immediate challenges of poverty, unemployment and housing shortage, policymakers were focused on developing infrastructure and the economy. Policies pertaining to the arts and culture therefore took a backseat (Kong, 2012). It was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that policymakers began to turn their attention to the arts and culture; and even then, only as a sector with economic potential. The evolution of the state’s interest and thinking about the arts and culture can be tracked in government reports such as the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) (1989), the three Renaissance City Plans (RCPs) (2000, 2005 and 2008) and the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) (2010), which document the national strategic plans related to the arts in Singapore.

The ACCA was formed in February 1988 to review the state of the arts and culture and make recommendations on how to turn Singapore into a culturally vibrant society by 1999. The ACCA report argued that arts and culture broadens the mind and deepens cultural sensibilities, promotes social bonding, fosters national identity, enhances a city’s vitality and thus improves the quality of life; but also highlighted the economic contribution to the tourist and entertainment sector, in addition to attracting talented manpower and investors to the island-state.

The report pointed out that cultural development was hampered by a lack of funding, limited opportunities to pursue an arts education, an inadequate pool of arts professionals and insufficient purpose-built cultural facilities such as performance arts venues and rehearsal space. It also noted that there were not enough Singaporeans showing interest or knowledge of the arts. As a result, recommendations were made that the government provide funding and facilities, including a world class performing arts center

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