

# INTRODUCTION

The drive to become more digital has brought with it a whole slew of new technologies, opportunities and challenges. The digital wave has had an impact on all sectors of society, including cultural institutions. The question is: How will cultural leaders approach innovation and remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The 2018 Malraux Seminar sought to answer this.

Established in 1994 by the French Ministry of Culture, the Malraux Seminar was designed as an intellectual platform to facilitate dialogue between France and a host country. Over the years, Malraux Seminars have been held in countries like Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, and USA, and reached Singapore's shores for the first time in 2012. Named after novelist, art theorist, and France's first minister of cultural affairs, André Malraux (1901 to 1976), each seminar addresses issues relevant to the topics of art, culture and heritage.

The 2018 edition, jointly organised by the French Ministry of Culture, Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), the Culture Academy Singapore and the Embassy of France-Institut Français Singapore, was themed *Cultural Innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Staying Relevant, Creating Value and Embracing Everyone*. This publication is a compilation of the papers presented at the seminar.

Keynote speakers, Ms Chong Siak Ching, Chief Executive Officer of National Gallery Singapore (NGS) and Mrs Catherine Pégard, President, Versailles Castle, Museum and National Domain, opened the seminar emphasising the importance of innovation as cultural institutions are closely intertwined with national identity and play an important part in cultural diplomacy.

For example, Versailles Castle stands as a cultural symbol of France and hosts over 180 diplomatic visits a year. The same can be said for NGS, which is symbolically housed within two of Singapore's national historic monuments – the former City Hall and the Supreme Court.

In her Keynote, Ms Chong stressed that it is imperative for institutions to accept that disruption is the new normal. Inevitably, there are new boundaries and expectations to be negotiated, but the net impact is positive, bringing greater connectivity and avenues for audience engagement. Echoing her sentiments, Ms Pégard put forth a compelling argument for institutions to find a balance between staying true to their core mission of preserving and communicating heritage, and with working around the traditional rules to remain relevant to the times.

Panelists also addressed the banes and boons of big data, and noted that although the data offers a wealth of insights, it is easy for institutions to become overwhelmed with the amount of information available. In fact, institutions often struggle to collect and make sense of it. In this situation, Ms Gaille Teo, Associate Quantitative Analyst, Quantitative Strategy at the Government Technology Agency (Govtech), recommended targeting efforts to answer the following: What is the question you want the data to answer? What kind of information do you have on hand? What other information would you need?

Mr Kia Siang Hock, Deputy Director, Architecture and Innovation, National Library Board (NLB), advised institutions to start small and adopt an incremental approach. He offered an outline of the step-by-step process that NLB took, from the intention to link its diverse resources, to successfully using data sets to recommend good reads and improve user experiences.

Mrs Catherine Collin, Head of Public Relations at the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, postulated that the big data is valuable because it goes beyond safeguarding art to also offer new ways of appreciating the pieces on display. Her story is one of collaboration, and she carefully detailed working with multiple organisations to collect and share data – testament to how an institution need not own all the data for it to have a significant impact.

Cultural innovation has also changed the way institutions develop their audiences. Traditionally, the success of a museum programme has been measured by quantity: the number of visitors, exhibitions, events and tickets sold. Today, however, it is also measured by the quality of interaction visitors have with the exhibitions, and the meaningfulness of each person's encounter.

Mr Olivier Boasson from the Department of Visitors' Experience, Musée du quai Branly and Ms Agathe Grandval, Director, Studies, Réunion des Musées Nationaux– Grand Palais, shared their experiences in improving audience engagement with innovation, and concluded that it is insufficient to implement technology just for the sake of using it.

This is first and foremost because institutions like a national museum operate under unique conditions. Mr Boasson noted that a low admission fee and low revisit frequency make it unlikely that visitors will register with any customer relationship management (CRM) programme just for a financial incentive. As such, he advocated for a small-scale, incremental approach instead that allows for the development of a personal relationship instead.

He shared quai Branly's process of building both its own CRM programme and audience, segment by segment. He provided the rationale for adopting a multi-generational approach, shared the importance of sufficient family programming, and demonstrated how these led to unique measures like the museum reaching out to adults through their children.

Ms Grandval reiterated these sentiments with the reminder that it is not the digital experience, but the theme and quality of the exhibitions that matter. Having explored various types of innovation, the Grand Palais had found success in some areas – using 3D imagery and Augmented Reality (AR) to reconstruct archaeological sites near the Middle East, and through their massive open online courses (MOOCs) – but not in others. Each experience has shaped how the museum can expand its reach and satisfy visitors.

A few speakers also stressed how innovation must cross the threshold from entertainment to education. For this to happen, innovation must be guided by business processes, said Mr Shawn Wong, Assistant Director, Digital Engagement at the National Heritage Board (NHB). To delve deeper,



he described the stage-by-stage evolution of NHB's knowledge management system and the various platforms the organisation had experimented with in the process of developing Singapore's heritage portal, roots.sg.

General Director of the Centre des monuments nationaux (CMN) – also known as National Monument Agency – Mrs Benedicte Lefeuvre offered multiple examples of how the Centre uses AR, Virtual Reality (VR) and superimposed reality to shorten waiting times. She also shared about the development of robot-led tours to reach underserved communities with limited mobility. Ms Michèle Antoine, Director of Exhibitions at Universcience, also made a strong case for how innovation must also be practical and functional, adding to the discussion with examples of how the science centre's development of a GameLab and Fablab have helped to de-mystify technical skills and promote the scientific approach.

Finally, the seminar addressed the relevance of festivals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Attendance at festivals has grown tremendously over the years; this is indicative of a growing public appetite for free entertainment and a larger platform for artists, but also increasing the likelihood of festival fatigue.

This idea of the need to reinvent festivals was generally considered unnecessary, as the panelists felt that each festival had its own uniqueness. In fact, Mr Dominique Bluzet, Director of Les Théâtres and the popular Easter Festival in France, praised Singapore for the plurality of the festivals held in the country.

Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, Dr June Yap also argued for how festivals will remain relevant as they provide a new and fresh way to experience art and culture. With reference to the Singapore Biennale, she contributes an insightful account of why biennales embody aspects of festivals, rituals and carnivals, provoking thought about how novelty, revelation or change is reason alone for festivity.

This leads to the question of sustainability. Innovation has lowered the cost of hardware and opened more channels to engage audiences. Yet, festival organisers struggle to balance their accounts while keeping their event accessible. There are options like mixing ticketed and free events, but the majority of the panelists spoke of the importance of partnerships – between organisers and sponsors; and artists and independent companies, to bring exhibitions and festivals to life.

Opinions varied about the indicators of a successful festival, but the common theme was that it should engage the people. Perhaps as how Ms Angelita Teo, Director, National Museum Singapore described the Night Festival: It should seed growth of local artistic talent, revitalise the city centre, and contribute to the overall local creative ecosystem.

The speakers at the seminar concluded that going forward, a culture of innovation is necessary. In fact, it has already permeated various facets of cultural and heritage institutions. To remain relevant and add value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, institutions must be bold enough to venture into new terrain, be nimble enough to adapt and fine-tune their programmes, and be open to exploring new opportunities for collaboration.