

Home Truly:

The Role of the Arts in Making a Country Home

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One of my most abiding memories in my leisure travels is visiting the small islands in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan. This is a clutch of islands in a rural part of Japan in between the city of Okayama and the large island of Shikoku. Previously an under-the-radar destination among art aficionados, these isles have in recent years become popular with general tourists looking for a unique experience focused on art and culture, coupled with the assurance of quality Japanese hospitality and cuisine.

What struck me on my brief visit to that region was how art has been integrated into these islands and how this process has been instrumental in revitalising local communities. These were islands which faced a raft of problems – depopulation, the loss of a farming economy and even environmental degradation. Today, there are small museums, public art installations and art trails found everywhere – particularly on the islands of Naoshima, Teshima and Shodoshima – and old buildings and industrial sites have been repurposed to house fascinating and visually arresting artworks.

Anyone who has visited the islands would have interacted with elderly island residents acting as docents in arts spaces, or serving in cafes and bed-and-breakfast establishments. When one reflects on the local history of these islands, it is nothing short of amazing how art has activated all typologies of spaces and brought back life to the region, generating economic activity and bringing a sense of purpose and optimism to the local communities. Given the charge that the contemporary art is an elite enterprise which alienates the average man on the street, there is something refreshing in hearing an elderly local – possibly a farmer in an earlier part of his life – explain how one could interact with an artwork.



The art installation *In the Stillness* transformed a classroom in Shodoshima into a “garden” with a huge cloud-like sculpture.

Image courtesy of Shingo Kanagawa

From one island to another: a Singaporean artist in Shodoshima

The islands also play host to a well-regarded contemporary arts festival, the Setouchi Triennale, which sees temporary site-specific artworks installed across the islandscape. First organised in 2010 and running for about eight months each time, the Triennale was last held in 2016.

With the support of the National Arts Council (NAC), Singapore’s independent arts centre The Substation and artist Grace Tan (b. 1979) took part in the 2013 edition of this visual arts festival. Tan’s work, titled *In the Stillness*, transformed a classroom in a defunct school on Shodoshima with a huge cloud-like sculpture made of two million polypropylene loop pins. (These are the plastic bits you see in a department store which attach price tags to apparel.)

Tan, who spent about three weeks in Japan, spoke of how the work was constructed with the help of volunteers from Fukuda town, involving residents ranging from kindergarten and high school students to nursing home residents. They would spend time creating the sculpture bit by bit in the community centre or at other local sites, drinking tea and sharing local snacks. Tan spoke of the warm ties that resulted from time spent together and how the completed work attracted Triennale visitors, who also got to enjoy the food specially prepared in the makeshift café within the defunct school. (Parallel to the art-making were workshops which taught local residents how to cook Southeast Asian dishes such as chicken rice and prawn noodles.)

It is heartening that a Singaporean artist like Tan can create work which resonates on so many levels, in both critical reception and social outcomes. It is a reminder of the power of good art. I suspect though, that in all likelihood, such broadly transformative arts projects are more the exceptions than the norm, across the globe.



School children viewing the installation.
Image courtesy of Fukuda Residents' Association



Close-up of the sculpture made out of two million polypropylene loop pins.
Image courtesy of Artist



Volunteers from a local nursing home helping to construct the sculpture.
Image courtesy of Fukuda Residents' Association

The arts in Singapore: a diverse heritage and audience

As the agency that champions the arts, NAC has to acknowledge that art in Singapore is created with different artistic intentions for diverse audiences.

Singapore is a modern cosmopolitan country with a multi-ethnic, multi-religious heritage. This means we have artistic traditions that go back centuries as well as an open attitude towards external ideas. For sure, these circumstances create for a complex art-making and reception in a relatively young nation.

Borrowing the lingo from the marketing world, one could say that potential consumer base for the arts in Singapore can be divided into discrete describable segments. Each segment has different attitudes and expectations of the arts, responds to different stimuli and thus, needs to be addressed differently, if NAC wants Singaporeans to embrace the arts.

Our most recent population survey in 2015¹ revealed that while eight in ten Singaporeans attended an arts event, in reality, only four in ten expressed an interest in the arts. It could mean, I remarked to colleagues in a moment of levity, that half the people who encountered the arts in 2015 – perhaps a free performance or exhibition in a public space – were dragged there reluctantly by family members, or had experienced the arts “accidentally” on a weekend errand run.

The statistics underline the fact that the appreciation of the arts is in its nascent state in Singapore. But when taken together with the upward trend of important indicators, it gives us in NAC some comfort. Things can only get better in the longer term. This is especially so when we consider today’s opportunities for arts exposure in our public schools. There is also increasing recognition that young people should chase their dreams and that there are many possible pathways to become a contributing member of society.

Art for all audiences and ages

For today’s artists, there is little doubt that the base of interested audiences and arts appreciators (the four in ten Singaporeans) is indeed a varied one. For every serious collector of conceptual art who visits international art fairs and enjoys in-depth discourse about art, there is someone who derives an uncomplicated aesthetic pleasure from a beautiful watercolour painting. For every audience member who is willing to shell top dollar for a hard-hitting stage drama on a difficult topic, there is someone who is happy to hear beautifully harmonised pop songs, reprised from his youth. For every reader of serious poetry and follower of the vibrant literary scene, there is a parent hunting for accessible children’s stories for his mobile-device addicted child.

With this demographic diversity, which we at NAC are trying to understand better, as well as the variety of art forms in Singapore practised here, NAC’s support of the arts need to be multi-dimensional. We will need to cater to audiences who are encountering the arts for the first time, as much as we need to champion artists who are presenting art which well-informed arts lovers expect of a global cultural city.

For us to deepen the level of arts appreciation, there is the need for the arts to be relevant or accessible for first-timers, with the aim of helping them build a foundation of understanding and importantly, a love for the arts. This must be the only sustainable way to broaden the base of Singaporean audiences, readers and arts collectors in the long term.

Fortunately, there are many artists in Singapore like Grace who can develop work which can be accessed at different levels and who are interested to reach out to the community in the process of artistic creation. There are also many seasoned programmers, curators, and producers who know how to build bridges between the artwork and the audience, who know how to mediate that tricky space between artistic intention and critical reception. We can do more in this area, for sure.

Pushing boundaries and awkward questions

While we have said Singapore's art scene is still relatively young, there is no denying that the last decade has seen a dynamic growth in the range and quality of cultural offerings. There is a plethora of quality art which reflects our diverse communities, recognises our local contexts and poses thoughtful questions. We have, for instance, enjoyed theatre that uses humour to talk about integration of new immigrants, experienced installation art that expresses the hope of prisoners waiting for their day of release, and read poetry that mourns the loss of local landmarks and captures a forgotten way of life. This vibrant scene has not gone unnoticed internationally with both international tourists and expatriates appreciating the sea change.

At the same time, there is a need to remember that art is not about the lowest common denominator. We cannot assess the merit of the arts based on the numbers of audiences, or exhibition attendees, or books sales. If we did, we will not support poetry, vernacular theatre, experimental performance art,

or contemporary dance. Niche, we should not be shy to declare, is not a bad word in itself.

Of course, some Singaporeans will like their art immediate, not taxing or overly cerebral. They just want a good evening out after a demanding work day, or a stress-free excursion during the weekend with the children in tow. We have to respect that art serves that role too, and NAC must strongly support such endeavours.

In the same breath, it also needs to be said that we must also continue to support artworks that challenge boundaries or pose awkward questions. We should not be afraid. If the play on stage pokes fun of us as Singaporeans, may we have the grace to laugh it off, recognise our foibles and think about the merit of the critique. If the music sounds strange at the first listening, or the novel seems too difficult in the first few pages, may we have the patience to persist a little longer and give the artist that consideration. If we do not like the work in the end, may we have the generosity not to generalise about all home grown artworks.

Such works do reflect the polyphony of artistic voices in Singapore, even if at an individual level, we may not take a shine to some of these works. More often than not, they are unique to our island and collectively express perspectives on life here, ultimately adding to and enriching our growing national canon.

Singapore, I am sure readers will agree, will be poorer if we did not support such art forms.

Art in making a country home

My personal wish for the next few years is to see more arts in the heartlands (the public housing estates which most Singaporeans call home) and for artists to keep creating works which have universal appeal but are yet locally anchored and to showcase more works that welcome multiple responses. Critically, I hope to see more Singaporeans who understand that art, in all its forms and voices, is relevant to their lives, their sense of self and their well-being. When that happens, there would be greater recognition of the role of the artist in society, including a ready willingness to support the arts as patrons, collectors, ticket-buyers and volunteers.

With the present uncertainty in global geopolitics and gloomy talk of protracted slow growth, there should also be a recognition, however unquantifiable it may seem, that an appreciation of and participation in the arts too have a part to play in the future economy of this island. The creative mind does not belong only to the artist. An engaged arts lover will have the intellectual curiosity and nimbleness of a creative disposition: an individual who can imagine broader horizons and may be better able to respond to challenges created by the disruptions” that we see in the market today.

In this age of global connectivity and unprecedented movement of peoples, some have responded to the accompanying anxieties by looking inward or raising barriers. Singapore, as a port city and trading hub that has prospered by being open to ideas and people, cannot afford to do that. While we must be chary of over-instrumentalising and simplistic reductionism, the truth is that the artworks that are being created

in Singapore are uniquely placed to speak to our citizens and residents. They can capture, channel and reimagine the lives of residents in a way that an imported Broadway musical or a work by an international writer cannot.

The understanding and connections forged by such art can indeed be a bulwark against the vicissitudes of uncertain times or the anxieties of a borderless cyber world.

What art can do is to root the Singaporean youth who is still finding his or her voice and provide a link, through imagination, to their forbears and a physical landscape that has been lost. It can also create a sense of empathy for the people we encounter in our midst – from the unhappy domestic worker to the newly retrenched office manager or the child from a new immigrant family.

At the end of the day, what makes a country home? The answer must lie beyond physical trappings, gleaming buildings and state-of-the-art infrastructure. The bedrock of that home must be in its social fabric – its people, the relationships they have with each other and the experiences they build in the common spaces they share. The arts and culture form a vital part of this fabric and there is so much potential yet unlocked.

On the one hand, Singaporeans can remember the lump in the throat when an entire stadium sings in unison to Cultural Medallion recipient Dick Lee’s song *Home*.² But what else is out there? What artworks can articulate what we know, remember and treasure about our world; capture the struggles and milestones of a young nation; and ultimately, help us see ourselves and the world beyond? What new visions of the future can inspire us? If we want a glimpse of the answers, we should all support our artists as they imagine those possibilities and together celebrate the works they create. □

Notes:

1. Population Survey on the Arts 2015 by the National Arts Council. Singapore, 2016.
2. Composed by Dick Lee (b. 1956) and first performed by singer Kit Chan (b. 1972) during the 1998 National Day Parade (NDP), *Home* has become one of the most well-loved NDP songs. The title of this essay also draws from a line in the song which goes: “This is home truly, where I know I must be.”