

## An Interview with Mr. Tan Boon Hui

*Executive Director of Arts House Limited*



Tan Boon Hui

Image Credit: Tan Boon Hui

<b>Culture Academy</b>	Would you introduce yourself and Arts House Limited for our readers?
Tan Boon Hui	My name is Tan Boon Hui and I am Executive Director of the <a href="#">Arts House Limited</a> or AHL in short. AHL is a non-profit CLG set up by NAC to manage a portfolio of artists workspaces (housing) such as Goodman Arts Centre and Aliwal Arts Centre as well as arts presentation venues such as The Arts House, Victoria Theatre & Concert Hall. AHL is also the organiser of two pinnacle arts festivals, namely the Singapore International Festival of Arts and Singapore Writers Festival. Most recently, AHL was commissioned by NAC to produce the Cultural Medallion showcase at The Art House, which is slated to open in November 2021.
<b>Culture Academy</b>	Having witnessed the culture wars in the US, how do you see the arts and culture in Singapore going beyond professional “silos” to embrace collaboration and bring people (both artists and audiences) of different persuasions and convictions together?
Tan Boon Hui	I think the culture wars in the United States have just restarted following the dislocations in the wake of the Pandemic. There is intense debate going on about how the arts can go beyond business as usual to embrace the new calls for real

	<p>diversity and inclusion. There is now a growing belief that the arts will never go back to ‘business as usual’ or the pre-COVID days. In my personal opinion, I feel that the new calls for a collaborative approach that goes beyond solely relying on only one organisation or platform to grow a sector is something worth really looking into. We are talking about a big tent approach to the arts where the pinnacle event needs to be both supported by the sector overall but also be willing to umbrella and find opportunities and resourcing for other allied events to grow under its ‘big tent’. In Singapore, the tremendous growth of the Singapore Art Week and its importance to the visual arts sector is one such success story. Although it had its initial core around an art fair, it has grown to allow many smaller players and satellite presentations which now give it a critical mass and attractiveness to both national and regional visitors.</p>
<b>Culture Academy</b>	<p>You mentioned that for home-grown artists to become truly international, there must be local support. Is this because it is important for artists to embody an authentic local flavour? Could you elaborate on this relationship between local support and internationalisation?</p>
Tan Boon Hui	<p>All art comes from a specific place and time and does not exist in a vacuum. All international visitors or audiences of art seek to understand where artworks come from and they will want to know what the community from which the art comes from has to say about it. No one really wants art that is not seen as authentic, that means being true to its time and place. This notion of authenticity is really important in how art is appreciated and valued. The opposite of this is ‘tourist art’. Why would anyone in New York, London, Paris, Berlin or Shanghai want any art from Singapore that no Singaporean knows about or wants to see, acquire and enjoy. That’s why I have said over the years that international art begins at home. There is also the idea that internationalisation increasingly involves seeding international collaboration between local and international artists, this is more than an import and export model of art presentations.</p>
<b>Culture Academy</b>	<p>In a recent interview with The Straits Times (11 September 2021), you mentioned that COVID-19 has “killed” the “export model of productions”, yet it presents “a window of opportunity, simply because the entire international art system is limited”. Could you elaborate on this window of opportunity and how artists and arts organisations could best capitalise on it?</p>
Tan Boon Hui	<p>I think the recent developments will encourage a rethink of how international arts productions or presentations can be done. Instead of shipping huge amounts of artworks, artists and associated goods and services halfway around the globe, it will encourage producers to think of how art could be produced at each location of a ‘tour’ for instance, using local talent, while still participating in the ‘global’ artistic creation of the originating artist/s. Instead of shipping a fixed set of artworks to each venue, perhaps we could be thinking of how the artistic concept could be re-made at each specific location. Each artist could be giving a set of instructions on producing the artworks that could be given to each venue. It would give a new impetus to the desire for art to respond to the context of each community that it is being presented.</p>

Culture Academy	In your goal to transform Arts House Limited into a “creative powerhouse” and a “leading arts centre” in the region, and in light of the expansion of programming and venues under its fold, it seems that there is an attempt to consolidate the roles currently played by different arts centres and venues. Would this diminish the value that other arts centres/venues offer, and would there be space for other independent arts centres (both existing and new) to grow?
Tan Boon Hui	I think we need to move beyond silos of who wins and loses to start really asking the question of how do we enlarge the pie? How do we make the arts scene bigger with more audiences and supporters? We need to stop thinking of competition and think more about how we can collaborate and partner more people such that we grow the number of ticket buyers etc. After all, do we think Broadway or the East End has too many theatres, do we think London has too many museums and art galleries? In fact, we want more, because these art scenes have reached the stage where they are growing the scene, contributing to their city’s GDP in a big way, creating and taking risks on the most creative arts presentations. Our arts scene is tiny compared to some other cities, but it can grow a lot more, so we need to have more players and more collaborations.