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The Arts as a Social Cause



Felicia Low graduated from Goldsmiths College, London, with a degree in Fine Art in 1999. She is a visual artist, visual arts educator and a community arts advocate. She has held several independent and commissioned public performances and installations in Singapore over the last 11 years. She is also a founding member of Community Cultural Development (Singapore) and a Ph.D candidate in Cultural Studies in Asia at the National University of Singapore.

The arts may be quietly making waves, says **Felicia Low**, but much more can be done to support the movement and effect real change.

There is little doubt that we are living in “The Golden Age of Singaporean Cultural Production.”¹ Statistics from the National Arts Council’s annual report 2011 reflect an exponential increase in arts activity from 15,911 in 2003 to a whopping 33,884 in 2010.

These figures, representing over a hundred percent increase over just

seven years, are the harvest of strategic cultural policies taken in the 1980s. It was then that the arts took on a distinct economic value as well as producing non-economic benefits for the community including improved quality of life and social cohesion.²

Value of the Arts

It’s been through persistent arts

advocacy that organisations now recognise the key role the arts can play in forging cultural identity while deepening community development and engaging those who have hitherto either been excluded or have had limited access to mainstream resources.³

What comes to the fore is a belief in the crucial role the arts play in effecting social change.

Historically though, this role has not been free of controversy. While Plato was wary of the arts and its adverse influence on the young, Aristotle spoke of its cathartic effect and its potential to nurture communal well-being.

In more modern times, the arts have been valued as a means of achieving humanistic and moralistic ends. It has also been used, more sinisterly, as a political instrument by Fascist states.⁴ What is clear throughout is the arts can influence society in a way that impacts the social-political mores of its time. Either social cohesion or upheaval can result. Its potential is therefore often a matter of great (and state) importance.

Little wonder then that there is such ambivalence when it comes to public funding for the arts. Wary of anti-government agendas,⁵ funding has often been kept tight and contained, its content censored for a public cause.⁶ Equally, taxpayers, wary of the elitism of the costly “high” arts, may not see any relevance of the arts in their everyday lives. In their view, public funding should instead go to more pressing areas such as education, community development and urgent income-generating programmes, such as the sciences or business.

This funding preference has meant that, despite a proliferation of arts advocacy and recognition of its potential social benefits, the arts in Singapore have continued to be defined by aesthetics and its “feel-good” benefits.

How then can the arts be made more relevant to the social dynamic, such that it becomes, in itself, a social cause?

The Transformative Value of the Arts

In recent years, there has been a strong and renewed call for the arts to be made an integral part of the community. This is one of two facets of the vision for the arts highlighted in the Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review submitted in February 2012 by The Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee to the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts. In order to achieve this, changing the “prevailing perceptions among the general public” that “the arts and culture is expensive, inaccessible and/or restricted to the ‘high arts’ and therefore not for them”⁷ is a top priority.

The subsequent flurry of activity and investments bodes well, but genuine discourse and a means of evaluating these initiatives continue to be elusive, resulting in a superficial understanding within Singaporean communities of the value of the arts.

The experience in other countries may help articulate in a local Singaporean context the “transformative” value of the arts.

Artswork, a UK-based national youth arts development agency, recently conducted a year-long campaign to collate evidence of how youth arts are able to transform young people’s lives. Titled “Youth Arts Transforms Lives-FACT,” this publication carries many helpful qualitatively analysed case studies of various UK-based youth arts initiatives.

The Fallout Project in Lancaster, for example, provides disadvantaged youth with opportunities to engage in the arts and interact with experienced practitioners. Despite poor literacy, participant youths reported confidence in approaching peers from other districts, articulating their thoughts, and in creating their own performances. A percentage of the youth, deemed “offenders” or “at-risk” of offending, began taking responsibility for their actions and became more socially able to engage with others in the larger community as a result of these performances. The report notes the project’s wider social impact as barriers of communication were broken, leading to the “direct result” of “reduced anti-social behaviour.”⁸ Other case studies highlighted how the youth arts contributed to educational and career development, health and wellbeing and the economy.

The common denominator that runs through all these case studies is that the arts create a platform for creative participation and engagement to all its participant communities who forge a sense of cohesion and purpose in their own daily lives. Individuals and communities who may otherwise be unheard and silent create a presence for themselves by articulating their concerns and issues through a process of collective critique and introspection. In so doing, they shape their respective social and cultural spaces.

The process of collective critique has been occurring closer to home.⁹ The Theatre For Seniors programme organised by The Necessary Stage gives senior participants (aged 54 – 75) a means of social engagement that extends beyond the mere act of participation.^{10,11} Through the programme, the seniors publicly enacted and articulated deeply personal issues such as loneliness, abandonment and companionship. Unexpectedly, inter-racial and inter-generational gaps were bridged as participants of different races found themselves discussing cultural differences when collaborating on their pieces. Many of those interviewed also noted greater communication with their children and grandchildren, who showed great interest in their elders’ performances.

Interestingly, another by-product of the programme has been an enhancement of “cultural sustainability,”¹² a term that refers to the ability to create cultural products that are rich in “local cultural content” and contain “embedded indigenous idioms,” to create “a local sense of identity and, indeed, nationhood.” And so, it was through a collective critique and performance of their personal experiences that the senior

participants were able to comment on national issues of housing, employment, medical costs and palliative care.

In turn, participants carry their skills and stories to other vulnerable communities in old age homes and hospitals. The myth of the passive, despairing aged is thus transformed into a new reality of active, engaged seniors who are invested in furthering the development of their larger community.

If it's not already clear, the arts are not all fun and play. Its transformative value spans a spectrum of personal development that includes community development and social change.¹³ The Bridge Café Project by Japanese choreographer Kim Itoh, for example, was a community dance project that engaged middle-aged men and underprivileged youth to perform in the everyday setting of a café. The Taman Jurong Community Centre Dragon Dance Troupe collaborated with French company Theatre du Centaure to send an Asian dragon and centaurs cavorting on the streets of Chinatown. The 2012 Arts Festival staff teamed up with various social organisations to engage women on issues of ageing and sexuality. The participants then created a performance, facilitated by drama company Mammalian Diving Reflex. Local theatre practitioners Drama Box and the Singapore Drama Educators Association also collaborated with the international artists behind "Ciudades Paralelas," or "Parallel Cities," to create the Singaporean stories for "Hotel", "Factory" and "Roof".



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The Measure of Meaning

Successful investment in community arts requires an understanding of how it can add meaning and value. The danger is that "feel good" indicators become superficial measures of benefit from the investment. The community arts then run the risk of devaluing its own potential, which results in a drop in future investment. Locating the meaning and impact of the arts in communities is difficult, but if done correctly, it assures sustainability as investors begin to really believe in the potential of the arts and its social impact. This brings us to the agendas of the "right potential."

In the 1970s, drama director Kuo Pau Kun created a set of plays that were a "collective creation" of youth members in a theatre group. These plays drew on the youths' narratives and improvisation and depicted their struggles in recently independent Singapore.¹⁴ The plays were banned by the licensing authority and, not long after, Kuo was detained. The collective critique had evidently taken on a "wrong potential." The plays were regarded as potentially anti-government and a threat to social harmony.

The incident shows that if the "right potential" for community arts is one that brings about social cohesion and community bonding, then the main point of contention is not just how "right" is defined, but who defines it.

More to the point, to achieve social cohesion, one must address the respective struggles of fractious groups and attempt to articulate a common cause. Artistic practices that engage with communities and their issues in this way will harvest the fruits of active citizenry, not communism.

On a broader level, the meaning bestowed on the community arts can either limit or expand its potential value to society. If defined as leisurely community bonding, a group of disadvantaged youth can have a great time in a foreign arts activity. Expanded to social engagement, the same youth can, through their art, talk about issues of poverty they face, contribute to solutions or highlight an area of need not addressed by existing policies. The value of confident, active and involved youth is immeasurable to a young nation.

In 2012, the National Arts Council has focused more attention on collating case studies that highlight the social benefits of the arts. Ground-up initiatives in community cultural development programmes¹⁵ since 2010 have sought to define arts practices with marginalised communities.

Local attempts at boosting community cultural development have located four possible levels of engagement between artists and the communities they work with:

- On the first level, the public is a mass participant within an arts process.

- On the second, volunteers are co-opted into the creative process of the work.
- The third level looks at co-developmental approaches in crafting a creative process relevant to the participant community.
- The fourth level of engagement occurs when the participant community organises its own activities and advocates for its own needs, with the artist as advisor or facilitator.

Each level of engagement brings about its own set of benefits. Each story needs to be documented, its benefits evaluated and framed within a social, cultural and political context for its value to unfold. The meaning of the arts in society would then become apparent, requiring little cajoling from the top to buy into the need for arts and culture.



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- 1 Ng Yi Sheng, *The Age of Festivals in Singapore Shifting Boundaries—Social Change in the Early 21st Century* (Asian Urban Lab, 2011).
- 2 Lily Kong, "Cultural policy in Singapore: Negotiating economic and social-cultural agendas," *Geoforum* 31: 409-424 (2000).
- 3 The list of instrumental benefits resulting from participation in arts and culture is an extensive one. Please refer to Francois Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Comedia, 1997) and Lily Kong, *Community Cultural Engagement and The Value of the Arts and Culture in Singapore* (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, Singapore, 2008).
- 4 Eleonora Belfiore & Oliver Bennett, *The Social Impact of The Arts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 5 Since 1991, the National Arts Council has set up a myriad of programmes including the Arts Education Programme which has nurtured generations of young Singaporeans in arts appreciation, enticing many to pursue further interests and careers in the arts.
- 6 "Singapore theatre community responds to decision by National Arts Council to cut funding for W!d Rice," a blogpost on 12 May 2010, <http://jacob69.wordpress.com/2010/05/13/singapore-theatre-community-responds-to-decision-by-national-arts-council-to-cut-funding-for-wld-rice/>.
- 7 *The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, 2012).
- 8 *Youth Arts Transforms Lives- FACT! Artwork National Campaign 2011* (Artwork UK, 2011).
- 9 *Report of the Committee On Aging Issues* (Committee on Ageing Issues, 2006) <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/Publications/ReportoftheCommitteeonAgeingIssuesP2006.aspx>. In Singapore, concern over the rapidly ageing population has resulted in national initiatives to promote active living among the elderly.
- 10 Felicia Low, "Activating a space for social engagement and cultural sustainability—The experience of community theatre for seniors in Singapore," Paper presentation at Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society Conference 2011, Dhaka.
- 11 Social participation involves less formal engagements with friends and family, while social engagement involves a desire "for social change and to be heard to affect community choices." See Levasseur M, Richard L, Gauvin L, & Raymond E, "Inventory and analysis of definitions of social participation found in the aging literature: Proposed taxonomy of social activities," *Social Science and Medicine* (2010) 71, 2141-2149.
- 12 Lily Kong, "Making sustainable creative/cultural space in Shanghai and Singapore" *The Geographical Review*, 91(1), 1-22 (2009).
- 13 A recent front-page article in the Straits Times highlighted how the 2012 Arts Festival focused specifically on communities. According to Arts Festival General Manager Low Kee Hong, the Arts Festival team had intentionally put in place a range of community arts initiatives that cut across this spectrum of values.
- 14 Quah Sy Ren, "Representing Idealism and Activism: Kuo Pao Kun's Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s" *Moving Worlds: A journal of transcultural writings* (U of Leeds, UK, 2010).
- 15 Community Cultural Development Singapore 2010, www.communityarts.sg.