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### Global ambitions: Positioning Singapore as a contemporary arts hub

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## **Global Ambitions: Positioning Singapore as a Contemporary**

### **Arts Hub**

*Su Fern HOE*

*We should see the arts not as luxury or mere consumption but as investment in people and the environment. We need a strong development of the arts to help make Singapore one of the major hub cities of the world... We also need the arts to help us produce goods and services which are competitive in the world market. We need an artistic culture.* (Yeo, 1991, p. 54)

### **Introduction**

There has been a palpable growth of the visual arts landscape in Singapore, especially since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Key infrastructural developments such as the formation of the National Arts Council (NAC) and National Heritage Board (NHB) have facilitated the establishment of museums such as the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore Art Museum and the National Gallery Singapore.<sup>2</sup> This sprouting of hardware occurred in tandem with a flourishing of activity within the local visual arts community. During the late 1980s, new practices and modes of expression emerged from returning artists who had lived and worked abroad, as well as from local artists who enjoyed increased access and greater exposure to different materials and other forms of art-making (Tan, 2003, p. 470). One seminal development was The Artists' Village (TAV), initiated by Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu in 1988. TAV was an artists' colony that provided studio spaces and a rural communal environment for the exchange of ideas, collaboration and mentorship. Consequently, the horizons of artists expanded as many began to experiment with new forms of art such as installation, performance art, video, photography and conceptual practices. This dynamic expansion, along with an aggressive arts and culture development policy backed by significant state funding, enabled the rooting and growth of contemporary art — as a popular art form and business — in Singapore.

This chapter has two objectives. The first is to critically interrogate the state's efforts in utilising the visual arts as a means to position Singapore as an international arts hub and marketplace. As Kwok Kian Woon and Low Kee-Hong have noted, "Singapore's cultural policy has everything to do with staying on top as a focal node in the late-capitalist world system of the new millennium" (Kwok and Low, 2002, p. 154). This chapter offers an overview of the programmes and initiatives introduced by the state from the 1990s to the present in order to encourage the entry of international art galleries and major commercial platforms, and to position Singapore as a key player in the international art market. The second objective is to explore some of the tensions, if not contradictions, in this pursuit of global city status. With examples such as Gillman Barracks, Art Stage, Singapore Biennale, the local art market and cultural diplomacy, this chapter demonstrates how the visual arts, in particular, have been integral to the nation's imagination as a global arts city.

### **ACCA Report and the Renaissance City Plans: Identifying the Economic Potential of the Arts**

The government's interest in utilising the visual arts as a means to achieve its ambitions to become a global city began in the late 1980s. This was a period that forged a stronger link between arts and economic imperatives.

The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) highlighted the economic potential of the arts. ACCA was established in February 1988 to map out a plan to make Singapore a "culturally vibrant society by the turn of the century" (ACCA Report, 1989).<sup>3</sup> ACCA was supported by four committees, one of which was

<sup>1</sup> For a historical survey of Singapore art, see Kwok, 1996, Nadarajan et al., 2007, Tan, 2009, and Wee, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 12 in this volume for a more in-depth discussion of the development of museum spaces.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the ACCA Report.

the Committee on Visual Arts. Formed in April 1988, the Committee on Visual Arts was tasked to identify factors and propose measures that would create a conducive environment for sustained growth in visual arts (ACCA, 1989, p. 48). The Committee was chaired by Yeo Seng Teck, CEO of the then Trade Development Board (TDB).<sup>4</sup> The choice of Yeo as chairperson was telling. Although the Committee included members from the arts community, including art critic T. K. Sabapathy and Brother Joseph McNally (founder of LASALLE), they were not invited to head the Committee. Instead, Yeo was a senior civil servant from a statutory board whose mission was to develop Singapore into a premier global trading hub and pioneer entry into new markets. The Committee Report identified the visual arts as having “important contributions to industry and the economy and offer potential for business development” (Committee on Visual Arts, 1988, pp. 14–15).

Yeo’s appointment as chairperson must also be understood within the larger context of the economic environment of that time. Four years before, after experiencing one of the country’s worst economic recessions, the government established the 1985 Economic Review Committee (ERC), which was tasked to identify new directions of Singapore’s future growth. One key ERC recommendation was the exploration of various service sectors as new potential growth industries. In particular, it singled out the economic potential of the “cultural and entertainment sector”, which included film production, the performing arts, museums and art galleries. This set the scene for ACCA which, as Audrey Wong pointed out in this volume, was “a logical offshoot” of the ERC report.

According to the Committee Report, as Singapore “does not have the critical mass to sustain a viable art market”, it is “imperative that it should establish itself in the international grid in the same way as Singapore has successfully established itself as an international manufacturing, banking and financial centre” (1988, p. 42). The Report also recommended the development of Singapore into an “international art market to serve the region”, as other than Hong Kong, there was no other country in this region which organised international art fairs (p. 43). It explained that “such an art market can be a confluence for artists, designers, art dealers, art collectors, auctioneers, art experts and valuers and other members of the international arts community to meet and transact business” (p. 43). This desire to position Singapore as an international arts hub was driven by economic spin-offs and benefits. The Report listed these spin-offs as rationales for its recommendation for Singapore to plug itself into the international art market. The listed spin-offs included the enabling of Singaporeans and people from the region to enjoy “a regular flow of outstanding world art without the government having to invest in them” and the enhancement of “Singapore’s tourist, convention and hotel industry” (p. 45).

This economic potential of the arts was also recognised across government. In January 1991, the Economic Development Board (EDB) set up its Creative Business Programme Unit to develop the arts as an emerging industry. EDB’s involvement enabled the visual arts industry to grow quickly. Sotheby’s Singapore opened in 1985, and Christies Swire Singapore was registered in 1991. By 1992, there were about 200 fine arts galleries and dealers, and around 400 producing artists in Singapore. In 1992, Singapore’s first major international art and antiques fair — *Tresor d’Art* — was organised by Bradbury International, UK. This 5-day fair recorded sales of S\$60 million to local and regional collectors. The promising sales led other international auction houses such as Glerum and Sotheby’s to organise more auctions.

The 1992 launch of the Global City for the Arts project, jointly helmed by the EDB and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), gave a clearer policy direction to ACCA’s recommendation to position Singapore as an international arts hub. This broad cultural policy initiative was prompted by the economic impetus to raise the country’s international profile as an important nodal city in the global network of cities. The international profile was important because the city-state sought to fashion itself as a financial centre and creative hub in order to diversify its national economy. The policy also identified the arts as an untapped area for economic opportunities. As such, the Global City for the Arts project was a whole-of-government approach that impacted the arts and culture landscape, especially the visual arts sector.

There were two immediate needs. First, mega cultural productions were deemed necessary to compete with the likes of other cultural cities like London and New York. In actual terms, this meant attracting blockbuster showcases of historical artefacts from renowned museums such as the Vatican Museum, as well as international auction houses like Sotheby’s to plug the city-state into the international cultural circuit. Second, the project sought to make the city-state an attractive destination for global talent to live and work while simultaneously retaining

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<sup>4</sup> Named and reorganised into International Enterprise (IE) Singapore in 2002.

local talent. Greater cultural vibrancy and wider arts and entertainment options were deemed necessary as the city-state faced increased competition for global talent and capital.

In 2000, the local arts landscape received another boost in the form of the three-part Renaissance City Report, which set the blueprint for cultural policy over the decade.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, this Report continued to champion this vision to transform Singapore into a global city for the arts. In particular, Renaissance City Plan II (RCP II) called for arts and culture development to be more “deeply and pervasively” integrated into the economic landscape of Singapore. Apart from NAC and NHB, RCP II also identified STB and EDB as key players in the holistic development of Singapore into a global city for the arts. RCP II pointed out that the development of Singapore as a global city for the arts should not be based on an “arts for arts’ sake” mindset (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005a, p. 14). Rather, the arts should be a resource utilised to ensure Singapore’s social and economic development.

Collectively, the recommendations from these three major reports reaffirmed the state’s instrumentalist approach to the arts, where the arts is viewed as a means to enhance Singapore’s liveability and quality of life. This then raises the question: has Singapore managed to achieve this vision?

### **The Growth of Exhibition Platforms for the Visual Arts**

In addition to museum spaces, there has been significant growth in new exhibition spaces and platforms for artists to showcase their work. An example would be the expanded Earl Lu Gallery at LASALLE in 1996, which was incorporated into the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore in 2004. The NAC, through programmes and initiatives such as the Arts Housing Scheme (AHS), which was started in 1985 to provide affordable spaces for the arts, has enabled the germination of seminal sites that have provided conducive environments for artists — especially less established and emerging artists — to experiment and hone their practices. One beneficiary of the AHS is the Substation, an independent space started by Kuo Pao Kun, for multidisciplinary art-making in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, The Substation functioned as an incubator of new artists and artistic work, and a site for experimentation and discourse. Over the years, The Substation has developed programmes such as the Artist-in-Residence Programme and the Open Call Programme that have provided many art practitioners and groups with financial support, space and time to research and develop their practices.<sup>7</sup> These programmes offer artists the chance for exploration and experimentation, and are an embodiment of a statement made by Kuo in 1993, that “a worthy failure is more important than a mediocre success” (Kuo, 1993).

More importantly, The Substation has provided comparatively affordable venue rental for artists to use and experiment. The value and significance of having an open space that offers affordable venue rental, and programmes that support experimentation from new and emerging practitioners, may be seen from the multiple negative reactions at the initial decisions taken by Alan Oei, The Substation’s fifth and most recent Artistic Director, to ease out the institution’s venue rental and remove most of the long-standing programmes like “First Take”.<sup>8</sup> As stated by Shaiful Risan, head of DIY punk collective Prohibited Projects and a regular music event organiser:

*A ton of art projects have been hosted at The Substation Theatre and Gallery as well as events and gigs across all sounds and forms. Its strength is in its strategic location and its openness to discourse, whether or not you would like to vent an artistic frustration or you just needed another hour to run your show. It has brought people together, and it has been doing so for 26 years. It must remain open for as long as there is breath running through the social fabric of Singapore’s alternative community. My point thus far is simple. The noisy people are part of society. They too need a playground. (Risan, 2016)*

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 13 in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the three Renaissance City Plans.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion on The Substation, please refer to Chapter 10 in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Notable artists that have benefited from the residency programme include Zai Kuning, Tang Mun Kit, Heman Chong, Grace Tan and Loo Zihan. Meanwhile, the Open Call Programme has supported experimental arts projects from then emerging artists such as Vertical Submarine, Debbie Ding and Ulrich Lau.

<sup>8</sup> In October 2015, Alan Oei was appointed as The Substation’s fifth Artistic Director (Lee, 2015 and Martin, 2015c). The fourth Artistic Director, Noor Effendy Ibrahim stepped down in January 2015 after a 5-year stint. In response to the negative feedback, Oei has decided to reinstate venue rental for 8 months a year (Fang, 2016).

Apart from The Substation, another site that benefited from the AHS was Sculpture Square (SSQ), a non-profit space dedicated to the exhibition and promotion of three-dimensional art. In 1995, local sculptor Sun Yu-Li saw the need for exhibition venues and facilities for three-dimensional art and found the abandoned 19th-century church building at Middle Road most suitable for this. In 1996, under the AHS, SSQ was allocated two buildings — the abandoned church building and the former budget hotel located next to the church building. NAC subsidised part of the costs of refurbishing the venue and the rest was covered by donations from private donors and organisations. Generous donations were made possible because of the involvement of Edmund Cheng from Wing Tai Holdings, a leading property and lifestyle company in Singapore. Cheng shared Sun's passion in promoting the art form, and the former volunteered the use of Wing Tai's extensive network of contacts to raise funds for the project. Cheng's involvement highlights the importance of corporate support for the arts.

In 1999, SSQ opened at Middle Road, with sculptural art as the main focus. Besides organising exhibitions, community outreach programmes to promote public awareness and involvement with sculptural art were also a key part of their annual schedule of activities. In March 2014, SSQ turned down NAC's offer to extend their tenancy and exited the premises. According to SSQ Chairperson Richard Helfer, SSQ vacated the premises because they wanted the flexibility to work with different venues and organisations so as to better connect with a broader artist and audience base (Martin, 2014). In 2015, Objectifs — a local visual arts centre dedicated to promoting photography and filmmaking — took over the building (Ting, 2015).

Another significant site is the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). Conceived during the 1990s, STPI is an institution focusing on contemporary art in print and paper. In April 2002, STPI formally opened its premises near the Singapore River, under the guidance of Kenneth Tyler, a renowned master printmaker who founded the original print workshop in Mount Kisco, New York in the United States. Tyler's connection with Singapore was formed through Brother Joseph McNally who had initially wanted Tyler Graphics to be part of LASALLE. Eventually, STPI was developed under the guidance of Liu Thai Ker, an architect planner, who was NAC's chairman at that point in time (1996–2005), and who would later serve as the founding chairman of STPI (2000–2009). Liu's conviction enabled STPI to obtain substantial government funding.

Unfortunately, Tyler left STPI shortly after the official opening, even though he oversaw the setting up of the facility. Hence, in its earlier years, STPI received flak for its affiliation with a Western brand and a founder who abandoned ship. It was also criticised for the tremendous amount of money poured into it, and its focus on a less popular medium (Martin, 2013b). In particular, STPI is known for housing S\$16.2 million worth of specialised print- and paper-making equipment.

Under Emi Eu's directorship from 2009, STPI has adopted a global outlook. Today, STPI is known for its creative workshop space and residency programme, which enable artists from all over the world to experiment with alternative methods and materials.<sup>9</sup> STPI has also been participating in international art fairs where it has done relatively well in selling STPI made-in-Singapore art works. In 2013, STPI became the first Singapore gallery to participate in the prestigious Art Basel. At Art Basel Hong Kong 2015, STPI sold 18 works produced by non-Singaporean artists (Yusof, 2015).<sup>10</sup> The ability of STPI to attract such international and commercial success highlights STPI as a significant platform that has contributed much to the proliferation of expression and approaches to contemporary art-making. More importantly, the establishment of institutions like STPI have enabled Singapore to “attract major international talent, organisations and acts to create, premiere, perform and exhibit in Singapore” (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008, p. 10). A more recent site is DECK, which is an independent art space launched in 2014 with a focus on developing and nurturing photography and photo artists in Singapore. DECK is a purpose-built modular space created from 20 modified shipping containers, and which activated a piece of disused land near LASALLE. Its facilities include two galleries, an artist studio for residency programmes and a resource library. The team also founded the biennial Singapore International Photography Festival (SIPF).

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<sup>9</sup> This has included Ashley Bickerton (United States), Trenton Doyle Hancock (United States), Do Ho Suh (South Korea), R. E. Hartanto (Indonesia), Genevieve Chua (Singapore) and Suzann Victor (Singapore). In 2006, the *New York Times* featured the work that Ashley Bickerton made at STPI in 2005 on its cover.

<sup>10</sup> Eight were by Korean sculptor and installation artist Do Ho Suh, and 10 were by English conceptual artist Ryan Gander.

## Gillman Barracks: A Business Park for the Arts

Gillman Barracks (GB) is a recently opened visual arts space. In February 2010, the Report of the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) recommended that Gillman Village, located off Alexandra Road, be turned into “an arts and creative cluster”, “a prominent destination to anchor and grow the arts and creative businesses” (Economic Strategies Committee, 2010, p. 97). It was decided that GB would be jointly developed by EDB, NAC and JTC Corporation.<sup>11</sup> The role of EDB would be to market and promote GB as a home for arts businesses, while NAC would promote local art literacy through GB and nurture the development of Singaporean artists by supporting their participation in GB programmes. JTC was appointed as GB’s master tenant and infrastructure developer.

In 2011, the existing tenants of Gillman Village — then a “lifestyle enclave” — were asked to vacate the premises. In the same year, EDB called for expressions of interest for the setting up of art galleries in GB. About S\$10 million was spent renovating the former military site. In September 2012, GB officially opened with 13 galleries from 10 countries. The involvement of EDB reveals GB as Singapore’s version of a business park for the arts. As Yeoh Keat Chuan, Managing Director of EDB, stated during the official opening, “Singapore is now an even more attractive art marketplace with GB” (GB, 2012).

Besides the business-driven galleries, a key institution in GB is the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), which officially opened in October 2013. NTU CCA is a non-profit exhibition and research venue run by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and was developed with grant support from EDB. The Centre comprises three platforms: exhibitions, residencies and research.

Under its founding director Ute Meta Bauer, NTU CCA has since produced high-quality, non-commercial exhibitions featuring globally-renowned artists such as Joan Jonas (New York), Tomás Saraceno (Argentina) and Yang Fudong (Beijing). It has also featured work by local artists. For instance, in 2015, it presented Simryn Gill’s first major solo exhibition in Southeast Asia, and in 2016, it presented Charles Lim’s *Sea State*, which debuted at Venice Biennale 2015. Since its launch, NTU CCA has also produced multidisciplinary, multidimensional programs featuring activities and events by a wide range of people including environmentalists, filmmakers, urban planners and academics. It also runs an International Artist Residency programme that helps artists, curators and researchers, both local and from abroad, to conduct artistic research, pursue ideas and foster dialogues through the provision of time and space.<sup>12</sup> The artists-in-residence are not under pressure to produce tangible outcomes. Meanwhile, the centre’s commitment to research is formalised through their connection to NTU. Under NTU’s School of Art, Design and Media (ADM)’s Master of Art (Research) and Doctor of Philosophy programmes, NTU CCA offers a stream in Spaces of the Curatorial. The Centre’s Visiting Research Fellows also contribute to the programmes.

Unfortunately, despite the marketing of GB as “Asia’s up-and-coming destination for contemporary art”, and being envisaged as “an enclave of visual artists networking with curators, collectors and art lovers from Asia and other parts of the world”, GB was largely quiet with low visitorship for the first 2 years. Concerns were also raised over the lack of proper signage for easy navigation, the absence of sufficient eateries, and the overrepresentation of international galleries.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, from 2014, there have been attempts to boost visitorship and increase GB’s attractiveness as a bustling creative cluster. In 2016, NAC and EDB jointly set up the Gillman Barracks Programme Office headed by Low Eng Teong, director of NAC’s Sector Development for Visual Arts. The mission of the Office is to

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<sup>11</sup> In late 2015, NAC took over EDB’s responsibilities and became the lead government agency managing GB.

<sup>12</sup> From July 2014 to July 2015, the programme has hosted 25 artists and 11 curators and writers-in-residence. The inaugural batch of artists included local artists such as Koh Nguang How, Charles Lim, Lee Wen, as well as Mona Vatamanu from Romania, Tiffany Chung from Vietnam and Simryn Gill from Malaysia.

<sup>13</sup> In a forum letter to *The Straits Times*, Robin Greatbatch, a former tenant of the Gillman Village, pointed out that the initial lack of creative energy and heavy footfall were due to the inability of the policymakers to understand that a creative cluster requires supporting businesses and activities: “I am sorry to say that the Gillman of today is dead. It may be full of rare artistic works, but it lacks the ambience and character to attract visitors.... With other tenants, we had fought to stay at this beautiful spot. The place had grown organically into a bohemian enclave with a Balinese garden, furniture shops, cafes, bars and restaurants. We approached the EDB and JTC Corporation but they were focused on the visual arts and did not see the need for other supporting activities and businesses” (Greatbatch, 2015).<sup>14</sup> This is a concept not unique to GB. Night festivals with pop-up stalls and events have become increasingly popular in Singapore.

strengthen the placemaking efforts of GB, and help GB integrate with the broader art scene of Singapore. Apart from infrastructural improvements, GB has also tried to “programme” bursts of activity through pop-up events. One regular event is “Art After Dark”, an outdoor night festival where the galleries and CCA studios are opened to the public for free, and special activities such as artist talks, live music, outdoor film screenings, and food pop-up stalls are organised. In the first half of 2015, GB held three “Art After Dark” events.<sup>14</sup> Although there were visitors, most of them seemed more interested in the pop-up food, beverage and retail stalls.<sup>15</sup> Also, although media reports stated that there were almost 6,000 visitors to the first event in January, the numbers appeared to have dwindled with each event (Shetty, 2015).<sup>16</sup>

In April 2015, five galleries, more than a third of the galleries there, declined to renew their leases (Shetty, 2015). In 2016, two more art spaces — Platform Projects and Galerie Michale Janssen pulled out of GB.

In fact, one of the five galleries, Tomio Koyama from Japan, had attempted to pull out midway through its 3-year lease, but could not. The gallerists cited “low human traffic, poor sales and a ‘slow start’” as reasons for their exit (Shetty, 2015). High operational costs are a key factor. According to *The Straits Times*, it takes S\$20,000 a month or more to keep a gallery going. Furthermore, galleries have come to realise that the number of local collectors is significantly smaller than what they had hoped for, and that EDB’s attempts to attract international collectors have yet to succeed (Shetty, 2015).

Asian art is the specialty of most of the exiting galleries. In comparison, three galleries that have renewed their leases, namely, the Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Arndt Gallery and Fost Gallery, which have an international focus. Sundaram in particular represents prominent heavyweights from America such as Annie Leibovitz and Frank Stella. This has led regional art consultant Valentine Willie to claim that the problem lies in a commercial bias: Southeast Asian art is comparatively cheaper than their Western counterparts, which is problematic in Singapore where overheads are high. To Willie, “the high costs of Singapore are exacerbated by the lower prices of regional art relative to Chinese or Western art” (Shetty, 2015).

Admittedly, these are all teething challenges as it takes time to develop an art ecosystem able to support artistic practices while also maintaining financial sustainability. It is worth noting that although many galleries have pulled out of GB, newer galleries and art spaces have moved in (Yusof, 2015a and Yusof, 2015b). These include Sullivan + Strumpf from Australia, and Chan + Hori Contemporary, as well as Playeum Children’s Centre for Creativity and Art Outreach, an art education organisation. New eateries and cafes such as Creamier have also opened, providing spaces for social interaction. Yet, GB’s earlier struggles to live up to its policy vision and its exiting galleries underscore the challenges faced by the state in trying to manufacture Singapore into a global city for the arts through institutionalised spaces. The challenge of injecting life to GB is thus a “uniquely Singapore problem because elsewhere, gallery clusters are not engineered from top down but emerge organically through supply and demand” (Oon, 2014). For instance, the 798 art district in Beijing was created by artists and galleries choosing to move into a rundown 1950s-era factory complex in the eastern end of the city.

GB also illuminates the difficulties faced by artist-initiated spaces. SSQ is not the only non-profit arts organisation that has exited its premises. Other notable examples include Plastique Kinetic Worms and Post-Museum.<sup>17</sup> Like SSQ, many art organisations and groups are currently nomadic but actively involved in artistic

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<sup>14</sup> This is a concept not unique to GB. Night festivals with pop-up stalls and events have become increasingly popular in Singapore.

<sup>15</sup> This is based on personal observation at the events.

<sup>16</sup> This is also based on personal observation at the events.

<sup>17</sup> Plastique Kinetic Worms (PKW) was a significant alternative artist-run space formed by Vincent Leow and Yvonne Lee. PKW was a contemporary art collective that provided a much-needed space for Singapore artists to showcase their works without the pressure of having to cover exhibition costs with the sale of their works. PKW became the first visual arts group to receive a major grant from NAC. In 1998, PKW managed to secure the ground floor of a shophouse in Pagoda Street as an arts space. In late 2001, PKW moved to 61 Kerbau Road, a space allocated by NAC through the AHS. Apart from regular exhibitions at their art gallery, PKW also organised an annual Worms Festival, which was a multidisciplinary arts festival that attracted many overseas artists and performers. The Festival also included programmes targeted specifically at young artists like Francis Ng. In March 2008, due to a variety of factors including high operational costs, PKW decided to vacate their premises at Kerbau Road. PKW is no longer active. Another is Post-Museum, an independent cultural and social space initiated by Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei. From September 2007 to August 2011, Post-Museum was located in two shophouses in Rowell Street at Little India. The premises played host to a variety of events and activities including exhibitions, workshops and talks, and also functioned as a rental venue. Although Post-Museum has been mostly nomadic since mid-August 2011, they have

projects. One nomadic curatorial group is Latent Spaces, which was started by Young Artist Award winners Chun Kai Qun and Chun Kai Feng. Latent Spaces “adopted” Haw Par Villa for about 2 years. Apart from exhibitions and activities that responded to the spatial environment, the Chun brothers also included experimental art and socially conscious projects.

Not only is the recent trend for nomadic curatorial groups a circumstance of the high overheads in land-scarce Singapore; it is also possibly a reflection of the changing environment of contemporary art-making in Singapore. The impact of the Internet as an increasingly popular and accessible medium of information and communication must be taken into account. The Internet has enabled a growth in online art galleries, with information on pop-ups and travelling exhibitions now more readily available to interested parties. Also, it may now be more viable, flexible and innovative to create art and organise collective events without the fixed structures and confines of a physical space. This is evident in the recent emergence of organic pop-up arts events at vacant and derelict sites. In September 2014, artists took over the Eminent Plaza with art works and music acts, which was built in the 1980s and slated for demolition in October 2014. In February 2015, another similar “Destruction and Rebirth” event took place at a 54-year old former rice mill that was demolished in May 2015.<sup>18</sup>

As much of the land and existing arts infrastructure is state-owned, the lack of space — literally and figuratively — remains a key challenge. In its earlier years, the TAV was unable in securing a permanent space. When the TAV still had its studios at Lorong Gambas in Ulu Sembawang, it was able to initiate numerous exhibitions and activities that attracted large numbers of participants. The group was massively destabilised after the loss of their space to urban development in 1990. Although the group tried to survive through collaborations with institutional agencies; by the mid-1990s, many of the members eventually struck out on their own, with increasing participation in international art shows.<sup>19</sup> The fate of the TAV is an example of the importance of space to artists and art.

Meanwhile, art practitioners and groups who use existing arts infrastructure — whether as an AHS tenant or to exhibit — are subject to the terms and conditions stipulated by the state, which may include censorship on content deemed undesirable.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, there is a dearth of unregulated, non-output oriented spaces that encourage experimental and off-filter work without the pressure to attain commercial success. Two current independent arts spaces are Grey Projects by artist and curator Jason Wee, and The Independent Archive and Resource Centre by artist Lee Wen. As Wee (2014) has pointed out, although there has been a boom in museum real estate in Singapore, what is growing far more slowly are “the artist spaces and non-profit initiatives that welcome and occasion encounters between artists, without the demands of production”.

## Staging Art Events for the Global Art Marketplace

Tremendous efforts have also been made to organise art events that would plug Singapore into the global art network, and enable our artists and festivals to “stand proudly on the world stage” (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, p. 55). This utilisation of art events as a means to turn Singapore into a global marketplace started when EDB first identified the arts as an emerging industry. In 1986, the National Day Art Exhibition was developed into the Singapore Art Fair. Initiated in 1969, the primary aim of the Exhibition was to utilise art to instil a sense of national identity. When it was developed into the Singapore Art Fair, the event incorporated a sales component and also included art-related businesses. In 1993, there was strong state desire to transform the Singapore Art Fair

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continued to be actively involved in artistic and activism projects. Notable projects include the Singapore Really Really Free Market, and *Awaken the Dragon*, which is a community art project that raised awareness and knowledge about the last two remaining Dragon Kilns in Singapore.

<sup>18</sup> Both the “Eminent Take Over” and “Destruction and Rebirth” event at The Mill are also responses to the constantly changing spatial environment in Singapore.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that in 1992, TAV rehabilitated Hong Bee Warehouse, which was previously abandoned and derelict, for exhibition space. In June 1992, it held an exhibition called *The Space*, which was a fringe event of the Singapore Arts Festival. Despite attempts to secure the space permanently, the Urban Redevelopment Authority repossessed the space at the end of 1992. For more on TAV, see Singapore Art Museum, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> In particular, artists who occupy arts housing spaces have to abide with NAC’s terms and conditions. For instance, in return for subsidised rentals, the occupants are required to submit activity reports on a regular basis, indicating their output and participation in events. In 2011, a new Framework for Art Spaces (FAS) was introduced. Artists who occupy spaces under the new FAS — namely, Goodman and Aliwal — have additional obligations such as the need to participate in place-making initiatives that aim to inject a sense of vibrancy and community into the nearby neighbourhood.



from a local to regional market focus. The expanded fair was held as a curated section within the *Tresor d'Art*, which was the first international fine arts and antiques fair in Singapore and was organised by Bradbury International.

In 1995, NAC and SAM organised the Singapore Art Series, which was similar to the earlier National Day Art Exhibition. In 1999, after two runs, the Singapore Art Series was renamed Nokia Singapore Art (NSA) to reflect the sponsorship from Nokia Singapore. The NSA's significance was manifested in the shift from a single exhibition venue to multiple exhibition sites. The NSA also included activities such as workshops and talks. Greater emphasis was also placed on contemporary art. These changes were a result of the efforts by NAC and SAM to introduce newer and more innovative ways to present Singapore art and artists locally and abroad. According to RCP II, these changes were necessary "to facilitate the showcasing of our artists abroad and Singapore's eventual entry into the international circle of renowned art events" (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005a, p. 18).

The last run of Singapore Art was in 2005 — the year RCP II was released. RCP II further argued for the importance of staging art events to ensure Singapore's presence on the international art stage. In particular, it recommended that the Singapore Art Series be transformed into the Singapore Biennale (SB) "to enhance Singapore's international profile" (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005a, p. 18). It also stated that the SB should aim to be on par with other Biennales, and become "the most important national visual arts event showcasing top local and international artists" (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005a, p. 18).

As Wee has pointed out, Singapore is a "definite latecomer" to the biennale game (Wee, 2006, p. 215). Although Biennales have existed since the late 19th century, the 1990s saw a proliferation of biennales especially in emerging economies, from Cuba, Senegal, Shanghai and Busan.<sup>21</sup> According to Lee Weng Choy, who was Artistic Director of The Substation and also part of the selection panel for the first artistic director of the SB, "Asian cities are battling it out for foreign investment and tourism revenue, and trying to be the gateway to Asia. That makes it crucial to project an image as a nice place to live, and art shows can help.... Besides there are so many biennales around the world now that if you don't have one, you feel left out. It almost comes down to that" (Yee, 2006).

What provided the impetus was Singapore's hosting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) meetings in 2006. The meetings were highly anticipated as a means for the state to reap significant economic and tourism earnings. As many as 16,000 delegates were expected to attend the meetings, which would generate at least S\$95 million for the local economy (Chow, 2006). In terms of business spending related to SB2006, such as freight-forwarding, retail and tourism, then NAC Chief Executive Lee Suan Hiang estimated it to be at least S\$3 million (Chow, 2006). In his National Day Rally speech on 20 August 2006 — 3 weeks before the opening of SB 2006 — Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described the IMF and WB meetings as the "best ambassadors for Singapore.... worth far more than any EDB or Tourism Board advertising campaign".

A series of events were planned to accompany the IMF and WB meetings. SB2006 was positioned as the anchor cultural event that would "highlight Singapore as a dynamic, well-connected and entrepreneurial economy with tremendous opportunities in financial, business, technology and creative industries sectors", and "put the spotlight on Singapore as a cosmopolitan society where arts and culture thrive" (Tan, 2007, p. 95). Once again, like many of state initiatives for the arts, an economic impetus underscored the decision to stage the inaugural SB.

To ensure that SB2006 ran smoothly, a generous budget and years of planning were dedicated to its organisation (Tang, 2007). In 2004, SENI Singapore 2004 was held as a prequel to SB2006, which would be a larger international contemporary art biennale.<sup>22</sup> The total budget for SB2006 came close to S\$8 million, with S\$800,000 going towards promotional marketing (Tan, 2007, p. 95). SB2006 was held over 10 weeks from 4 September to 10 November 2006. It featured 95 artists and artist collectives from 38 countries, particularly from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa, and received over 800,000 visitors.

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<sup>21</sup> In fact, the 1990s has come to be regarded as the "Biennale Decade", a qualifier which refers to the precipitous growth of the Biennale and its dethroning of the hierarchically dominant institutional roles of museums and galleries (see Belting *et al.*, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Seni is a word in the Malay Language for "art".

Because its rationale was linked to the IMF and WB meetings, the SB was criticised as a “self-aestheticising device” used by the state to soften its image and boost its place in the league of global cities (Wee, 2006, p. 219). While this may be true, the SB provided local artists with a major platform to showcase their works. Five editions have been held since 2006 and all continue to invite arts practitioners and collectives to present contemporary arts according to the globally relevant themes.

A key significant difference is that SAM took over the role from NAC as the key organiser for the fourth and fifth editions. This shift was meant to anchor the institutional role the state envisions SAM would play in the contemporary art world of the region.

### **Growing the Art Market**

Singapore has also tried to capitalise on the growing global marketplace for art and collectibles.<sup>23</sup> RCP I recommended that Singapore should stage international art events for its positive externalities.<sup>24</sup> An important measure for creating a favourable arts market environment was the formation of Singapore FreePort. Officially opened on 18 May 2010, FreePort is currently the largest secure storage facility in the world dedicated to art collectibles, and the first such facility in Asia. FreePort also allows non-resident collectors to store works without having to pay taxes or file customs forms. FreePort is hence meant to provide integral logistics capabilities that would ideally improve Singapore’s competitiveness as an arts destination, and enable the top-down vision of developing a thriving art and collectibles market in Singapore. According to then NAC Chief Executive Lee Suan Hiang, the establishment FreePort was a “milestone development” that will enable Singapore to attract “high net worth art collectors” and “key players in the art business” (Shetty, 2009). Today, one of its major tenants is international auction house Christie’s, which has set up Christie’s Fine Art Storage Services to service its high net-worth clients throughout Asia.

In November 2010, Singapore hosted the first Affordable Art Fair (AFF) in Asia. AFF was first launched in London in 1999 by Will Ramsay and is now held in 11 countries including London, New York, Amsterdam and Milan. The first AFF in Singapore featured galleries from 17 countries, and was attended by 9,500 visitors. Aimed at debunking the myth that art is only meant for the wealthy, AFF featured works priced from S\$100 to S\$15,000; with 76% of art pieces priced under S\$7,500. In 2014, the Singapore fair was made into a biannual event as the organisers were encouraged by the steady growth in the past 5 years. However, in 2017, it was announced that AFF would revert to a single Autumn edition from 2018, due to falling sales and thereby illustrating the constant instability of the art market in Singapore.

In January 2011, the inaugural Art Stage Singapore was held at Marina Bay Sands. It is founded by veteran art fair director, Lorenzo Rudolf, best known from turning the once-obscure Art Basel into the world’s top art-lifestyle fair for artists, collectors and celebrities. Interestingly, Rudolf initially rejected a proposal to launch Art Basel in Singapore in 1992 because he felt that the art scene in Singapore then was too small. Almost two decades later, he staged a Singapore edition that focused on Southeast Asian art. Art Stage Singapore was established with backing from EDB and STB, which enabled it to offer tax-free trade to all non-Singaporean galleries in line with the RCP’s recommendations for Singapore to attract international art events through a pro-business strategy.

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<sup>23</sup> It is unsurprising that Singapore wants to position itself as a commercial arts hub through the organisation of blockbuster art fairs. Art has become a globally profitable industry.

<sup>24</sup> Over the last 25 years, the global art market has seen a massive growth in size and sales. For instance, the sales of the global art market have tripled since 1990. In 2014, the global art market reached a total of over US\$53.7 billion. In 2014, sales made at art fairs accounted for a reported 40% of all dealer sales, the second largest sales channel after in-gallery transactions. In terms of global art sales, Asian Art is increasingly popular, especially those from Greater China, which comprises Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The art market also has ancillary economic impacts. Today, art fairs have evolved from being trade shows to premier global events that showcase a broad variety of artforms and artworks, and involve competitions, performances and parties. These art fairs also create substantial revenue for external support services. According to Kow Ree Na, director of EDB’s lifestyle programme office, Art Stage “draws a critical mass of international visitors that is crucial to the success of the week” (Huang, 2015). Her statement highlights how tourism is a key outcome of hosting Art Stage in Singapore, rather than the impact on the local art market and artists.

In addition to the main fair, special platforms are provided to showcase emerging talent and particular markets. These include the Southeast Asia Platform, the Indonesian Pavilion that was introduced in 2013 and the Singapore Platform, which is an exclusive platform commissioned by NAC for local artists to produce new works.<sup>25</sup>

So far, Art Stage Singapore has been relatively successful. It is patronised by key international and regional collectors, and participated by an increasing number of galleries especially from the region. The inaugural edition attracted 121 galleries and 32,000 fee-paying visitors. The fifth edition in 2015 featured 152 galleries and a record-high attendance of 51,000 visitors.

The success of Art Stage prompted NAC to launch Singapore Art Week in 2013. Timed to coincide with Art Stage, Singapore Art Week is meant to celebrate the visual arts in Singapore with activities such as public art walks and free bus tours to the galleries and museums. The 2015 edition took place over 9 days and featured more than 100 events including the aforementioned Art After Dark event at GB. As the anchor event of the week, Art Stage itself is more than a fair; it also presents special feature installations, special talks and discussions on art trends and insights. With STB and EDB as partners, Singapore Art Week is also a cultural tourism strategy aimed at attracting international visitors and impressing onto them a positive image of Singapore as a culturally vibrant global city.

However, although Art Stage 2015 saw a record-high attendance, the April edition of AFF 2015 saw a dip in sales and visitor footfall. Some have read this dip as a signal that the art market here may be oversaturated with art fairs. For example, in 2014, apart from Art Stage and Affordable Art Fair, Singapore also hosted the Milan Image Art and Design Fair and the Singapore Art Fair. In 2016, a new mid-priced art fair — Singapore Contemporary — made its debut during Singapore Art Week 2016.

Despite this proliferation of art fairs, sales in Singapore remain low compared to other countries. In 2011, Art Singapore — the longest-running contemporary art fair in Singapore since 2000 — went on an indefinite hiatus. Its director, Chen Shen Po, explained that she wanted to “re-assess the market situation” (Ang, 2011). In the same year, Helina Chan, who owns galleries in Hong Kong and Singapore, shared that sales in Singapore “remain a tiny fraction of Hong Kong’s”. For her, “the commercial scene does not represent that of a mature arts city. The challenge will be to transact all these exhibitions and fairs to dollars and cents” (Ang, 2011). In 2015, some of the galleries leaving GB cited the same reason. Hence, a bigger question is whether the growth of Singapore’s art market will be sustainable.

Additionally, beyond the glitz, international exposure and economic impact, the growth of the art market in Singapore does not automatically translate into positive growth for the local visual arts ecology. This is mainly because the art market continues to be a highly polarised market. Artworks are mostly acquired by wealthy clientele and only a small number of artists, buyers and sellers account for a large share of the value. This means that not all artists will benefit from the presence of global art fairs in Singapore. In addition, although these art fairs offer local artists a global platform to showcase their works, many artists do not have representation from the galleries. Many of the smaller local galleries themselves cannot pay the high fees associated with taking part in art fairs. There is hence a gulf separating much of the local art production from the marketplace.

### **Harnessing the Arts for Cultural Diplomacy**

Since the new millennium, there has been a concerted drive towards the use of the visual arts for cultural diplomacy (see Ang et al., 2015). The state has long recognised the power of the visual arts to develop sociocultural ties with other countries, shape international perceptions of Singapore, and to maintain Singapore’s global presence. As Carol Tan, a former Director of the National Marketing Department at the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA), states, cultural diplomacy has become “a tool in the national marketing

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<sup>25</sup> For the inaugural edition in 2011, the Singapore Platform featured a group exhibition — *Remaking Art in the Everyday* — which was curated by Eugene Tan and featured eight Singaporean artists: Heman Chong, Ho Tzu Nyen, Jane Lee, Donna Ong, Tan Guo Liang, Ming Wong, Ian Woo and Robert Zhao.

strategy for Singapore,” where soft power is used to help Singapore “win friends” (Tan, 2015, p. 68). Early efforts included the hosting of the ASEAN Sculptural Symposium in 1981.<sup>26</sup>

One key platform for cultural diplomacy and the projection of the Singapore brand is the Venice Biennale (VB), one of the world’s oldest and most prestigious events on the international contemporary arts calendar. During Singapore’s inaugural participation in the VB in 2001, then Minister for MTA Lee Yock Suan explained that Singapore’s participation in the Biennale was seminal because the VB “provide[d] many opportunities to forge new links and generate collaborative endeavours amongst international art institutions, art communities and enthusiasts”.

The importance of VB as a key platform for global visibility has also been recognised by the artists. This is evident in the negative reactions to NAC’s decision not to participate in the 55th VB in 2013 and to reassess Singapore’s long-term participation in the event.<sup>27</sup> The announcement in 2012 resulted in over 200 members of the arts community to sign and send an open letter to Yaacob Ibrahim, then Minister of MICA. The letter requested for MICA to reconsider its decision, as the VB was an indispensable platform for Singapore’s art and artists to gain international visibility: “while we recognise that Singapore’s participation in Venice need not be the determination of artistic worth for Singaporean artists, the fact remains that it is one of the most important and invaluable channels through which Singaporean artists can connect with the international art world on our own terms” (Chong, 2012).

In 2014, NAC released a statement stating that Singapore would be participating in the 56th VB. At the 56th VB, it was announced that Singapore has secured a 20-year lease for its national pavilion. According to Sam Tan, current Minister of State of MCCY, “the long-term lease of the Singapore Pavilion at the Biennale further underscores our commitment to our artists, who will fly the Singapore flag on the global stage” (Tan, 2015). Tan’s statement affirms the state’s desire to harness the showcasing of artists overseas for cultural diplomacy.

Apart from VB, there have also been several state-initiated programmes. A key state-initiated platform was Singapore Season, a cultural diplomacy effort to showcase Singapore as a culturally vibrant destination in key cities. This is an interagency collaboration between NAC, MICA, EDB, STB and International Enterprise Singapore (IE). According to Lee Suan Hiang, then CEO of NAC:

*Singapore’s investments in the last decade to develop our artists, audience and arts facilities have borne fruit. Our artists are winning awards and making a mark on the world stage. The Singapore Season, one of many platforms created by the Council to showcase Singapore artists to the international audiences, presents another face of Singapore — a global city driven by imagination, creativity and innovation.* (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2005b)

Lee’s statement highlights how artists are viewed as a means to help Singapore wield soft power on the international stage by presenting Singapore as an attractive city with a vibrant arts and cultural milieu.

The inaugural Singapore Season was held in London and featured about 250 Singapore artists at notable performance venues over 6 weeks. Singapore Season 2007 was held in Beijing and Shanghai. Originally meant as a biennial event, it was postponed in 2009 due to the global economic crisis. In 2015, a similar event, called “Singapore: Inside Out” was created as a travelling showcase celebrating Singapore’s contemporary creative talents across disciplines. Led by STB as part of the SG50 celebrations for Singapore’s golden jubilee, this showcase travelled to Beijing, London, and New York City before returning to Singapore.

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<sup>26</sup> Several of the members donated the sculptures to Singapore after, and the collection of artworks can now be viewed at the ASEAN Sculptural Garden at Fort Canning Park. Apart from the ASEAN Sculptural Symposium, the former National Museum Art Gallery also regularly hosted exhibitions from various countries such as the “18 Young Belgian Artists’ exhibition in 1978 (Low, 2011, p. 120). The establishment of NMS, ACM and SAM during the 1990s have also enabled a proliferation of exchanges and partnerships with museums and embassies of other countries. For example, NMS collaborated with the Musee du Louvre in France to hold an exhibition entitled *Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre* at NMS from December 2007 to March 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Please see Chapter 21 on the Arts and Culture Strategic Review in this volume, for another discussion on the withdrawal from the 55th VB.

A major move was the signing of an agreement to enhance cultural cooperation between Singapore and France on 20 January 2009 (see Cai, 2013). The agreement's objective was to facilitate the showcasing of art works, artefacts and exhibitions from renowned French museums and artists in Singapore, and vice versa. This agreement enabled exchanges such as *Singapour Festivarts* (October 2010 to January 2011), which presented a line-up of arts and cultural performances in Paris, including the *Baba Bling: The Peranakan Chinese in Singapore* exhibition at the Musee du Quai Branly (MQB), and the three-month long *Singapour en France — le festival* in 2015.

Another major move was in 2014, when MCCY decided to dedicate S\$20 million over 5 years to the building of “meaningful, strategic and sustained cultural partnerships with other nations” (Wong, 2015). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also contributed \$5 million to this initiative (Chan, 2015). According to current NAC Chairman Chan Heng Chee, this monetary commitment signals a concerted recognition of the importance of promoting Singapore's cultural and creative assets internationally (Chan, 2015).

Although the state's desire to utilise the arts as a means for soft power and cultural diplomacy has enabled more platforms and funding for artists to showcase their works to an international audience, it is worth noting the type of art and artists selected by the state as national representations. In particular, VB has tended to showcase more established artists who have already had opportunities to showcase their work at prestigious international expositions. Many of these artists such as Ming Wong, Ho Tzu Nyen and Charles Lim had also obtained international recognition before the state decided to utilise them as tools of national self-promotion at VB.<sup>28</sup> Also, according to Venka Purushothaman, “the strategy of presentation has been to veer away from traditional and multicultural expressions of art to more cutting-edge and contemporary expressions that showcase Singaporean artists being on a par with the international art scene” (Purushothaman, 2007, p. 73). This has meant that artists who produce contemporary artworks have more opportunities than other artists who specialise in more traditional mediums such as painting. Consequently, the use of the visual arts for cultural diplomacy may have broadened horizons only for a selected few, and may have uncritically reinforced a homogenised and sanitised image of Singapore.

### **Challenges: Beyond Scale and Spectacular Display**

Thus far, this chapter has shown how the state's ambition to position Singapore as a global city for the arts have resulted in a proliferation of spaces and platforms for the visual arts to grow and flourish in Singapore. This growth has not been even. There has been an inclination towards organising contemporary art events and showcasing young contemporary artists. As observed by Lee Weng Choy (Lee, 2007, p. 347), contemporary art has become “normalised” in Singapore. For some, this may have come at the expense of the older generation artists. For instance, Cultural Medallion recipient Goh Beng Kwan has claimed that the older artists feel neglected as “many big shows are focused on the younger generation” (Martin, 2015b).

Despite the overall growth in the visual arts landscape, artists in Singapore continue to face challenges, especially issues related to censorship and control over artistic expression.<sup>28</sup> Not all art forms and content are tolerated by the state. In particular, there was a 10-year blanket cessation on government funding for performance art, indicating the state's discomfort and disapproval of this art form. This was sparked by sensationalised media coverage of two performance art pieces that took place during The Artists' General Assembly at the end of 1993.<sup>29</sup> This eventually

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, Charles Lim, who was chosen to represent Singapore at the 2015 VB, had already won a Special Mention for his short film *All the Lines Flow Out* at the Venice Film Festival in 2011. His moving images have also been screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Tribeca Film Festival and the Edinburgh Film Festival.

<sup>29</sup> The Artists' General Assembly was a week-long festival jointly organised by the TAV and 5th Passage at the Parkway Parade Shopping Centre. During the wee hours of 1 January 1994, local artist Josef Ng performed a piece called *Brother Cane*, which was done in protest against the media's sensationalism and demonisation of the arrest of 12 men for allegedly committing homosexual solicitations in 1992. His performance included him snipping his pubic hair while turned away from the audience. Another young artist Shannon Tham, burnt, swallowed and then regurgitated pages from *The New Paper* (TNP). On 3 January 1994, the front page of TNP carried a picture of Ng's bare back, with his briefs slightly lowered, and the headline “Pub(l)ic Protest”. Subsequently, NAC released a statement on 4 January 1994 that condemned the acts as “vulgar” and “completely distasteful”. It also claimed that the acts were not art, and in fact “debase[d] art and lower[ed] the public's esteem for art and artists”. On 21 January 1994, MICA and the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a joint statement making clear the government's disapproval of the two performance art pieces. It stated that the government “is concerned that new art forms such as ‘performance art’ and ‘forum theatre’ which have no script and encourage spontaneous audience participation pose dangers to public order, security and decency, and much greater difficulty to the licensing authority. The performances may

resulted in NAC suspending all funding of performance art.<sup>30</sup> Organisers of scriptless public performances were also required to provide a synopsis and a high security cash deposit to the Public Entertainment

Licensing Unit (PELU) before any performance could occur. These restrictions were only eased at the end of 2003.<sup>31</sup> Although there was no official ban, NAC's no-funding rule has been taken as a signal of the state's disapproval, which in turn has made other organisations less willing to support performance artworks.

Although this 10-year no-funding proscription did not lead to the complete annihilation of performance art in Singapore, it did make it more difficult for artists to practice performance art. In 1994, eight members of the TAV had to pull out of the Adelaide Festival in Australia because of insufficient funding partly caused by NAC's suspension (Koh, 1994). After NAC's decision, many artists also went abroad, either to study or to emigrate permanently.<sup>32</sup> However, several artists such as Tang Da Wu continued to find ways round the restrictions, and several critically acclaimed performance art pieces were produced during this period, including Amanda Heng's *Let's Chat* (1996) and *Let's Walk* (1999).

Apart from this 10-year restriction, which illustrates the state's discomfort with non-conformist art, not all artistic content was accepted. Three recent examples are SAM's removal of Zunzi Wong's work *Lee Garden* from its premises in October 1998, the cancellation of Indian artist T. Venkanna's performance piece at the inaugural Art Stage 2011, and the removal of some items from Simon Fujiwara's *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* that was exhibited at SB2011.<sup>33</sup> These three cases highlight how artistic expression remains subject to local policies guarding sensitive topics such as race and religion. Artists, both local and foreign, also have to bear in mind that art works that deal with taboo subjects, particularly ones that are politically or sexually explicit, may not be exhibited.

More importantly, the above examples illustrate how the state's desire to internationalise the arts and market Singapore as a vibrant global city for the arts is still narrowly boxed within out-of-bounds (OB) markers.

At Art Stage 2011, Indian artist T. Venkanna, who was represented by Gallery Maskara, did a performance piece in the nude. He sat in front of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas*. As part of the work, visitors could pay \$250 to be seated next to him, hold his hand, and get a photograph taken, which would be a *tableau vivant* version of the painting. Despite being behind a black curtain, and an advisory about content and age restriction being displayed at the booth, the performance had to be cancelled due to a media outcry. Venkanna was also questioned by the police. The gallery's owner, Abhay Maskara, said that the gallery was asked to stop the performance, but was not told specifically who filed the request.

A few months later, Simon Fujiwara's work *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* — an examination of violent oppression and censorship of homosexual literature under General Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain in the 1970s — was removed from SB 2011. The installation featured nationalist symbols such as bulls' heads, portraits of the leader, fake legs made of suspended ham, suggestively arranged objects, and homosexual pornographic

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be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion". This statement indicated the government's worry that the art form might be used politically to disrupt social stability. This joint statement also stated that all applications for public entertainment license for any performance or exhibition by 5th Passage or any other group involving Ng and Tham would be rejected. Ng was charged for committing an "obscene act in public" and was eventually fined \$1,000. Iris Tan, a founder member of 5th Passage and organiser of the event, was also prosecuted for providing public entertainment without a license, as both performances continued past the approved time. Due to the negative publicity generated, 5th Passage was eventually evicted from its premises.

<sup>30</sup> State funding for forum theatre was also suspended.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that this came after Singapore signed a free-trade agreement with the United States on 6 May 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Ng himself migrated overseas and never practiced art again. Artists such as Lee Wen, Zai Kuning, Vincent Leow and Jason Lim resorted to performing overseas.

<sup>33</sup> In October 1998, SAM removed Zunzi Wong's work — *Lee's Garden* — from its premises. This was a piece that featured a large cartoon caricature of then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong wielding pest-control gear, with then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew patting him on the back. This work was part of the ARX5 exhibition, at the SAM. When the Hong Kong artist was told that his work was "insensitive to the cultural context of the exhibit's venue," he responded by modifying it. The title of the work was changed from *Lee's Garden* to *Eel's Garden*, and the heads of the two political figures were also removed. Nonetheless, the work was taken down 15 minutes before the exhibition opened (Sa'at, 2001). The museum staff tore down the work and disposed of it without consultation or consent from the artist.

magazines. These magazines were visible to visitors, but not within reach, as they were placed on an elevated shelf where they could only be seen reflected in a mirror. The curatorial team and SAM staff also placed advisories and labels to inform visitors that no part of the installation was to be touched.

During the opening week of SB, SAM made the call to keep the installation open, but removed all the magazines. Both the artist and the curatorial team, then led by artist Matthew Ngui, were only informed after this decision was made and executed. As Fujiwara felt that the removal of the items meant that his work would fail to convey the necessary meaning, he requested for the exhibit to be closed. Although various options for reinstating the installation were later discussed, no agreement could be reached and the exhibit stayed permanently closed. Interestingly, there were other works in the museum that featured sexually explicit content and nudity (all bearing the necessary advisory notices).

As with Zunzi's work, Fujiwara's work was censored without any consultation with, or prior notification to, the artist. SAM later admitted that it should have closed the entire work instead, and sincerely apologised for the distress caused to the artist (Martin, 2013a). Nonetheless, the lack of communication with the artist before the final removal of the artwork was noteworthy. As Fujiwara pointed out, "whilst I understand the legal prohibition of exhibiting pornographic materials in Singapore was the main cause of this removal, I believe it was both unprofessional and unethical to alter the work without my prior consent" (Martin, 2013a).

This is despite RCP I's allusion to the need for a more open and hands-off approach to censorship of the arts:

*while our government has been rightly concerned about undesirable influences permeating our country, it also recognises that cultural vibrancy cannot be achieved without some risk-taking and openness to new art forms and ideas. In the arts, the habitual 'nipping in the bud' could possibly leave us with many fruitless trees.* (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, p. 47)

As Low writes, "the autonomy to practice is still circumscribed within the citizenry duties of each individual to uphold the nation's values" (2011, p. 125). Low's observation is best illustrated by the response of an NAC spokesperson when asked if Ng were to have performed in 2008 instead of in 1994:

*As a public arts agency, NAC is obliged to prioritise financial support away from projects which erode the core moral values of society, including the promotion of permissive lifestyles and depictions of obscenity or graphic sexual content. NAC would have to consider funding the event based on these criteria.* (Narayanan, 2008)

This need for all artists to be cognizant of, and confined to, local politics may be a hindrance for some foreign artists, and is a possible reason why Singapore is still trying to fulfil its global art hub aspirations.

Although censorship has existed in every society at every age, space for experimentation is critical for art-making. In his essay "Do not proscribe political art" that was written during the Josef Ng controversy, then journalist T. Sasitharan made the case for the need for artistic freedom:

*Art is born of inspiration, not prescription. So each time the parameters of the permissible are redrawn to diminish artistic space, more artists — often the more committed and imaginative ones — will be forced either to give up entirely or turn their sights on safe but dead and fossilised forms imported en bloc from elsewhere or the past.* (Sasitharan, 1994)

Yet, the persistent ambiguity of the OB markers continues to be a challenge. The shifting boundaries and politics mean arts practitioners and organisations, especially those who wish to obtain state funding, will simply have to continue the endless dance around questionable OB markers and practise self-censorship or risk state intervention, which range from funding cuts to outright censorship. Until these OB markers are withdrawn or demarcated clearly, artistic merit will be easily undermined by terms such as "socially subversive", "objectionable content" and "undermining state authority".

The shifting boundaries are best illustrated by two cases in 2012. During the 2012 edition of the M1 Fringe Festival, artist Loo Zihan successfully staged a one-night performance of *Cane*, which included a reenactment of *Brother Cane* based on an eyewitness account by artist and writer Ray Langenbach. Yet, in the same year,

Samantha Lo (SKLo) was arrested for her street art in public places.<sup>34</sup> Dubbed the “Sticker Lady”, SKLo prompted a public discourse on whether her work counts as vandalism or street art. Although many in the arts community viewed her arrest to be a harsh punishment against ingenuous and creative artistic expression, there were also many others who petitioned for the vandalism charge against SKLo to be considered under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act (Ho & Wong, 2012). Ironically, after SKLo was eventually sentenced to 240 hours of community service, she has been commissioned by numerous state agencies including STB to produce artworks.

The 2012 cases illustrate the indistinct boundaries that artists must manoeuvre. They also illuminate how this statement by then political journalist Cherian George from 1999 still appears to hold true today: “for every carrot dangled to encourage a more lively and creative arts and media scene, there was also a stick waved every now and then to deter anyone from getting carried away by this sense of freedom” (George, 1999).

Audrey Yue’s concept of “illiberal pragmatism” is a useful framework to help us make sense of the current condition for contemporary art making in Singapore. Yue uses this concept to explicate how queerness has been utilised as a “technology” by the state; that is, as a means to advance economic goals. Its approach to queerness is completely instrumental, divorced from issues of human dignity and civil rights (Yue, 2007). As she states, the queer culture of Singapore “has been constituted, not as a result of the recognition of rights and liberation, but through the disjunctive acceleration caused by economic and cultural reforms” (2007, p. 158).

In a similar way, the arts and artists have become pragmatic “technologies”, that is, expedient resources to realise Singapore’s ambitions to become an attractive global city (Yudice, 2003). Hence, the arts policies and initiatives aimed at transforming Singapore into a global city for the arts, may actually be divorced from actual issues affecting art-making in Singapore and might not necessarily contribute to the quality and substance of art production in Singapore.

For instance, in 2002, funding for the arts and information increased 24% to S\$529 million (Tan, 2003). However, the lion’s share went to infrastructural development such as libraries and museums. Meanwhile, funding for NAC — the main funding body of independent artists and arts groups — shrank 10% to S\$36.5 million (Tan, 2003). This prioritisation of hardware over software is not new for the arts in Singapore. As Lily Kong cautions, economic imperatives tend to emphasise “growth and property development and expression in prestige projects and place marketing”, and might simply create a city in which “economic spectacle replaces cultural substance and aesthetics replaces ethics” (Kong, 2000, p. 423). There is hence a danger that the arts may be used to support an urban cosmetics policy that creates a mere veneer of a global city for the arts.

The superficial development of the arts can also be observed from the relative lack of clear measures that respect and protect artistic creation in Singapore.<sup>35</sup> This lack indicates how the current focus on grand buildings, marketing, publicity and escalating the number of arts activities for vibrancy, may have overshadowed the importance of “quality” and “substance” of state initiatives. It also calls into question: to what extent does the current state spending on the arts go into nurturing and improving the artistic merit of arts practitioners and

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<sup>34</sup> Her “offensive” street art included the pasting of monochrome printed stickers with slogans like “Press to Stop Time” on pedestrian crossing call buttons around the city, and the spraying of the words “My Grandfather Road” on Maxwell Road and Robinson Road.

<sup>35</sup> This is best illustrated by a recent case where Cultural Medallion winner Lee Wen claimed that he was not informed or given due credit for the idea behind a horseshoe-shaped pingpong table installed at the Sports Hub for the 28th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games Carnival, which resembled his interactive art installation “Ping-Pong Go Round”. The SEA Games Organising committee (Singsoc) said that there was no intention to infringe on any rights, and that the installation had been produced by a vendor who was unaware of the similarity. However, Lee’s Ping-Pong Go Round has toured widely round the world since 1998. Lee has also clarified that a proposal to exhibit this artwork in front of the Sports Hub was submitted to the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Sports Hub last year, and that the minister’s office confirmed receipt of this proposal. Incidentally, at the time of the incident, Lee’s Ping-Pong Go Round was also showcased as part of the Prudential Singapore Eye Exhibition at the Art Science Museum. It was selected to be part of the touring exhibition of the Singapore en France Festival, which as mentioned earlier, is a key initiative of MCCY’s cultural diplomacy programme. The arts community submitted a letter with 229 signatories to the media, which expressed their concerns about the lack of clear measures that will ensure that “artists will be given legitimate recognition and reward for the time and effort they spend on proposing and creating artworks, with the assurance that their ideas and creations are protected from plagiarism and imitation” (Martin, 2015a). After negotiations between all concerned parties, Sport Singapore (SportSG) agreed to make a “goodwill payment” to Lee. However, the term “goodwill payment” does not acknowledge any wrongdoing, or indicate whether any IP rights were infringed upon.



organisations? Conversely, how much of it is a means to instrumentalise the arts as display, entertainment and spectacle?

## Conclusion

This chapter has mapped out the key efforts undertaken by the state to position Singapore as a global city for the arts. Initiatives such as NAC's AHS have provided subsidised spaces for artists to produce and experiment, while the emergence of alternative arts spaces like The Substation alongside with business-oriented sites like Gillman Barracks. State efforts have also enabled increased funding and platforms for artists to exhibit their works to an international audience. Importantly, alongside state efforts, corporate support has also been integral to the development of sites such as Sculpture Square.

However, while it is undeniable that the state has played a formative role by providing key building blocks for the growth of the visual arts landscape in Singapore, visual art practice in Singapore is still marked by an uncomfortable and precarious relationship with the state. As astutely observed by Sabapathy:

*the notion of alterity is governed by cultural, social and political circumstances particular to Singapore.... Activism as such is constrained and circumscribed... by norms and stringent rules which are clearly delineated and unflinchingly applied.... Not surprisingly, the pursuit of alterity in whichever sphere and in whatever form is neither strident nor shrill, but circumspect, neither is it ostensibly adversarial.* (Sabapathy, 1993, p. 86)

In 1972, S Rajaratnam, former Deputy Prime Minister gave a speech about the need to cultivate Singapore into a global city. During the 1990s, this vision of the global city was expanded to encompass a flourishing arts and cultural scene. As then-Minister for Culture George Yeo claimed, "we cannot work the magic without the arts" (Yeo, 1993, p. 65). Today, Singapore continues to pursue its global ambitions, with numerous arts policies (re)emphasising the need to transform Singapore into a global city for the arts. Rajaratnam himself warned, "laying the economic infrastructure of a global city may turn out to be the easiest of the many tasks involved in creating such a city" (Rajaratnam, 1972). For him, a true global city would demand "a measure of courage, imagination and intelligence" from the citizens.

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, these measures are still currently constrained by OB markers and the prioritisation of the economic over all else. Hence the question remains: Will Singapore ever truly become a global city for the arts if "arts for arts sake" is not tolerated and arts is conceived as an expedient resource for economic and political purposes such as cultural diplomacy?

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