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The arts and culture strategic review report: Harnessing the arts for community-building

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Introduction

The Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) was initiated in 2010 to chart the next phase of cultural development in Singapore. The final report, which was released in 2012, appears to propose a paradigm shift in focus for arts and cultural policy making in Singapore: from the desire to manage the arts and cultural sectors into profitable creative industries to the utilisation of the arts and culture as expedient tools for social cohesion and community building in Singapore.[1] This shift has resulted in government programmes placing (renewed) importance and emphasis on "community arts" as a cultural activity.

This chapter critically examines the early years of this shift towards a socio-cultural focus and its ensuing promotion of "community arts." Through an analysis of the rationales, formulation and implementation of the ACSR, this chapter will demonstrate how the ACSR is not an illogical discontinuity from previous cultural policies. Rather, the ACSR is a reaffirmation of the government's deep-rooted desire to harness the arts and culture as ideological tools to socialise the migrant society into a cohesive community. This chapter will also show that the ACSR's invocation of "community" is a strategic response to the current socio-economic and political realities in Singapore. Finally, this chapter will also highlight some key challenges that the government faces in pursuing a community arts agenda in Singapore.[2]

Policy Genesis: Economic Impulses

The ACSR was first initiated as a vital and timely progression of Singapore's economic development. Like the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) and the Creative Industries Development Strategy (CIDS), the ACSR was initiated after a major review of the Singapore economy.[3] In 2008, Singapore experienced its worst economic downturn since its independence in 1965. To ensure continued growth and development of the Singapore economy, the Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) was formed in 2009, and subsequently released its official report in February 2010.

Titled "High-skilled people, innovative economy, distinctive global city," the ESC Report (2010) claimed that the next phase of Singapore's economic growth must be fostered through productivity, skills and innovation. This claim was based on the need to overcome the challenge of a slower-growing workforce. A key stimulant behind Singapore's economic growth has been the expansion of its resident and foreign workforce. However, with low birth rates and increasing life expectancy, Singapore faces the prospect of a shrinking and ageing citizen population and workforce. High immigration rates over the last decade have also caused discomfort among citizens, with the government responding by tightening immigration policy and attempting to lessen Singapore's dependence on foreign workers. Consequently, the ESC Report was more inward- looking, with many of its recommendations targeted at upgrading the skills and productivity of Singaporeans and Singapore companies. Importantly, one key recommendation of the ESC Report was to provide support for "the growing creative and arts clusters, which will add to the character of the city, and nurture new talents" (2010, p. ii).

One month after the release of the ESC Report, Lui Tuck Yew, then acting Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, declared that a strategic review would be conducted in the development of the arts

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[1] This chapter follows George Yudice's argument that in today's increasingly globalised world, culture is increasingly utilised as an expedient resource to be invested in, contested, and used for varied sociopolitical and economic ends. For more, see Yudice, 2003.

[2] This chapter is based on data collected from 2010 to mid-2014.

[3] Please see Chapters 5 and 14 in this volume for more detailed analyses of the ACCA Report and the CIDS policy.

and culture. He explained that this strategic review would "take the broad recommendations outlined in the ESC Report, crystallise concrete strategies and propose major initiatives to realise the vision" (Lui, 2010). Lui's speech clearly highlights the ACSR as a cultural policy that was initiated in response to Singapore's economic restructuring needs. In the same speech, Lui also highlighted the ACSR as a review that would be undertaken in partnership with the private and people sectors. The next section will examine this inclusion of public consultation into the policy formulation process.

Policy Formulation: The Public Consultation Process

The ACSR was positioned as a review driven by the public: "The ACSR's intent was to provide the public with a greater stake in shaping our cultural development, engender a greater sense of public ownership of Singapore's arts and culture, and ensure its long-term sustainability" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 13).

Unlike earlier cultural policies like the CIDS, the ACSR was driven by a Steering Committee led by Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman of Shell and the School of the Arts (SOTA), and comprised individuals from both the public and the private sectors.

When the details of the committee were released, many arts practitioners pointed out that there were no artists on the committee (Chia, 2010).[4] Indeed, out of the 20 members in the Steering Committee, seven were senior civil servants from government bodies, and the rest were high-ranking senior or executive management individuals. This configuration led arts practitioners to doubt the ability of the committee to conduct a proper review. According to Alvin Tan, Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage, "there are many CEOs… they all have stakes and maybe they won't produce any radical solutions or recommendations" (Chia, 2010).

The policy formulation process also included "extensive and comprehensive public consultations" on the preliminary recommendations of the Steering Committee (Lui, 2011). From May to November 2011, the public was consulted through diverse platforms: (i) focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders; (ii) a month-long online public consultation panel that was open to the general public; (iii) a quantitative survey with 500 respondents; and (iv) five public forums that were attended by more than 180 participants (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 107–110).

However, the process of public consultation was conducted within fixed parameters. The public was only invited to give their feedback on the preliminary recommendations of the ACSR Steering Committee. The public was not able to offer suggestions on what they wanted and could only respond to the preliminary recommendations. According to the ACSR Report, when "there were differing views," "debate has helped the ACSR to sharpen its recommendations" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2002, p. 14). One could infer that any differing views or disagreements were not supported or taken on board.

In fact, the ACSR Report claimed that the preliminary recommendations were "well-received" by the public. Yet, this claim was not supported with evidence, as findings from the public consultations were never released. Only short paragraphs describing each consultation phase and succinct summaries of the recommendations that resonated well with the public were included in a five-page annex (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 107–110). Quotes from the public consultation process were merely scattered throughout the report to reflect support from the "voices from the ground" and pitch the ACSR as a community effort.

Despite the "extensive" public consultations, the visions, targets and strategic directions of the final report were identical to those identified at the start. When the ACSR was first initiated in March 2010, the government claimed that the overall goal of the ACSR was to increase access and participation in the arts (Lui, 2010). This goal was repeated by Lee, Chairman of the ACSR Steering Committee. According to Lee, the aim of the committee was to "make arts and culture an integral part of life for Singaporeans" by encouraging them to attend and participate in arts and cultural activities (Chia, 2010). The final ACSR Report, which was released almost 2 years after conceptualisation, reiterated this preconceived goal as the official targeted outcome of the ACSR.

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[4] Please see Chapter 11 in this volume for a discussion on the Censorship Review Committees (CRCs), where Tan notes a similar practice. According to him, the CRCs comprised numerous members who had little knowledge and experience of the local censorship regime when appointed.

The public consultation process appeared to be a futile effort in terms of improving the policy by reflecting a broader range of views.[5] However, the inclusion of a public consultation process had more symbolic value and must be understood in the particular context of sociocultural, economic and political conditions then. The public consultation process was conducted soon after the May 2011 General Election, where the ruling party — the People's Action Party — suffered its greatest loss of votes since independence. One reason cited for the vote swing was the changing electorate. Singaporeans were becoming more educated and vocal, and had expressed the desire for the government to take into account the concerns and interests of citizens, especially during policy formulation. Hence, in his 2011 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged the need for the government to undertake greater engagement and consultation with citizens. He called for Singaporeans to play a bigger role in shaping our communities and the nation (Lee, 2011).

The inclusion of public consultation in the policy formulation process of the ACSR is thus reflective of the current shift towards a more consultative government. More importantly, it must be understood as a symbolic and pragmatic move of the government to manage the growing discontent of the local populace. The following section will further demonstrate how the ACSR is a timely policy response to the changing socio-economic and political conditions in Singapore.

Policy Rationale: The "Shift" Towards a Socio-cultural Focus

The final version of the ACSR Report was released on 31 January 2012. It positioned the ACSR as a policy that shifted the focus for the next phase of Singapore's cultural development to its "people and society" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15). According to the report, this is because the time had come for the arts and culture to play a key role in strengthening the "software" aspect of national identity, belonging and unity:

A nation cannot inspire and endear its people through infrastructural sophistication and material wealth alone. What binds a nation to its people are the softer things in life: family, friends, places, communities, memories. In the years ahead, social challenges… will increasingly take centre stage. Arts and culture can play a key role defining Singaporeanness in a globalised world [and] promoting social cohesion across population segments. (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 9–10)

This desire to harness the arts and culture for socio-cultural benefits is encapsulated in its vision, which is to transform Singapore into "a nation of cultured and gracious people, at home with our heritage, proud of our Singaporean identity" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15).

To achieve this vision, the ACSR aimed to meet two targets. The first was to double the percentage of Singaporeans who attend at least one arts and culture event every year from 40% to 80%, and the second was to increase the percentage of Singaporeans participating in arts and culture activities from 20% to 50% (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15). Increasing access and participation in the arts and culture are seen to have transformative effects on society. These effects include enriching the lives of Singaporeans, strengthening Singaporean ties and promoting social cohesion (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, pp. 8–11).

The ACSR is what Kong defines as a "cultural social policy," that is, a policy that emphasises the social and cultural benefits of the arts and culture rather than the economic benefits *per se* (Kong, 2012, p. 290). Although the ACSR was initiated as an economic restructuring strategy, the economic language and rationales were significantly more muted in the ACSR Report. This downplaying of the economic benefits of arts and culture is especially stark when compared to the CIDS policy.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that the ACSR was a "discrete and discontinuous act" that may radically alter the trajectory that an early intervention may have put in place (Chua, 1995, p. 69).[6] This "softer" tone of the ACSR

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[5] There is a general belief that the process of policy formulation is improved when it is able to involve as many people as possible. According to Matarasso and Landry (1999, p. 21), "the creation of policy through a real partnership between a cultural ministry, its constituency and the wider public offers major advantages." One benefit is that the policy will reflect a broader range of views.

[6] According to Chua (1995), the post-colonial governance of Singapore is based on the ideology of pragmatism, which allows the PAP government to respond to situations "at hand rather than in ideological commitment" (p. 1). This means that, as long as continuous economic growth can be ensured, some of the governmental techniques and activities of the PAP government may be "discrete and discontinuous acts," and "a particular intervention in a particular region of social life may radically alter the trajectory that an early intervention may have put in place" (p. 69).

Report is in line with the ESC Report's goal to transform Singapore into "an endearing home that offers Asia's best quality of life and with which citizens and global talents forge strong emotional ties" (Economic Strategies Committee, 2010, p. 67). Accordingly, when the ACSR was first announced in 2010, it was positioned as a review based on the ESC's call for significant investments to be made to "better our cultural landscape, especially in the software aspects" (Lui, 2010). The ACSR's focus on strengthening software is hence a premeditated strategy to restructure the economy through indirect means.

Singapore is not alone in its heightened focus on harnessing the arts and culture for their socio-cultural benefits. Since the late 2000s, governments across the world have identified the importance of utilising the arts and culture to enhance the well-being of their societies, especially in terms of strengthening social cohesion, identity and belonging. For instance, in the United Kingdom, there has been a push towards increasing access and participation in arts and cultural activities because it is believed that "arts and culture strengthen communities, bring people together and remove social barriers" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2013). Similarly, the U.S. government has been producing research studies to show that arts participation is a factor in strengthening communities.[7] Hence, like CIDS, the ACSR is a cultural policy that is influenced by global trends in policymaking.

However, the shift towards a socio-cultural focus is not an illogical or blind pursuit of global trends. Although most of the existing academic literature on cultural policy in Singapore has demonstrated how the arts and culture in Singapore have been pragmatically used by the state to enhance Singapore's economic development — especially during the 1980s and 1990s — this is not the first time that a cultural policy in Singapore has included socio-cultural goals. In fact, since Singapore first attained self-governance in 1959, the arts and culture have been regarded as expedient tools for socialising the migrant society into a cohesive and civilised community.

The 1959 State of Singapore Annual Report, which was released 1 year into self-governance, clearly set out the social objectives for the arts and culture. The objectives included "the creation of a sense of national identity" and "the elimination of communal divisions and attitudes" (Bereson, 2003, p. 3). Early ministerial speeches also highlighted the importance of harnessing the arts and culture for their social values. For example, in 1966, 1 year after independence, then Minister of State for Culture Lee Khoon Choy argued that "the days of Art for Art's sake are over. Artists should play an integral part in our effort to build a multiracial, multilingual and multireligious society where every citizen has a place under the sun" (Chong, 2010, p. 132).

As Kong (2000, p. 412) notes, during the 1960s and 1970s, artistic and cultural activities were used by the state for nation-building purposes and to counteract the negative influences associated with the "yellow culture" of the "decadent West."[8] During the 1970s, the Ministry of Culture organised regular "Art for Everyone" and "Music for Everyone" programmes. "Art for Everyone" was a series of monthly exhibitions that toured the community centres around Singapore. These exhibitions were targeted at "ordinary people who must learn to appreciate the beautiful as part of the process of gracious living" (Chan, 1971). The exhibitions showcased "neither well-known names nor artistic masterpieces — simply ordinary men and women from all walks of life who feel the urge for self-expressing… the themes are very ordinary ones — just those themes that are close to the lives of the people" (Chan, 1971). As explained by Ong Soo Chuan, then Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these exhibitions were organised for the "prime purpose of popularising art." This was because art was believed to "contribute positively to inter-racial understanding, harmony and hence national unity" (Ong, 1973). The "Music for Everyone" programme had similar intentions. Since then, the government has continued to organise similar programmes. For instance, before the ACSR, there was the NAC-ExxonMobil Concert in the Park series. This series was launched in 1996 with the aim of bringing the arts to the people and exposing them to various art forms through a series of concerts held at public parks all over the island.

The role of cultural policy as a formal instrument to utilise the arts to cultivate a cohesive community was most clearly stated in the ACCA Report: "the government's cultural policy is to promote widespread interest and excellence in the pursuit of the arts in our multicultural society, and to encourage cross-cultural understanding and appreciation" (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, p. 3).[9] The ACCA Report emphasised the social values of the arts and culture by arguing that the arts and culture "can provide for greater social integration and strengthen the spirit of our nation" (Ministry of Culture, 1989, p. 12).

Importantly, the ACCA Report also outlined recommendations for community outreach and engagement. One key recommendation was to make cultural and arts programmes more accessible to Singaporeans through

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[7] For instance, the National Endowment for the Arts (see http://arts.gov) has been producing studies on "age and arts participation," "arts and ageing," "art-goers and their communities: patterns of civic and social engagement" and "arts and achievement in at-risk youths."

[8] See Chapter 2 in this volume for a discussion on the cultural politics of yellow culture.

[9] See Chapter 5 in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the ACCA Report.

community clubs (formerly known as "community centres") and other community organisations, such as social clubs and clan associations (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989, p. 32). Terms like "access," "participation" and "community," which were frequently used in the ACSR Report, were already key words used in the ACCA Report. However, although the ACCA Report was a seminal cultural policy that paved the way for significant top-down investment in the arts and culture in Singapore, the community outreach and engagement strategies have yet to be implemented. Rather, the substantive outcomes of the ACCA Report were in capacity building and infrastructural development.[10] These outcomes were deemed as necessary building blocks for the development of the arts and culture as growth industries.

Consequently, due to the lack of "soft," or non-physical, outcomes from the ACCA Report, the Renaissance City Plan (RCP) repeated this top-down desire to govern the arts and culture for sociocultural benefits.[11] The RCP recognised the importance of developing the "software" aspects of the arts and cultural sectors as a key means to transform Singapore into a "distinctive global city for the arts." This focus on software was most prominent in the third RCP, which aimed to transform Singapore into "a best home to an inclusive and cohesive population, appreciative and knowledgeable about its diversity, and proud of its national identity" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008, p. 17). To do so, the third RCP advocated the need to encourage "more people to cultivate an interest in culture and the arts" and generate "widespread participation" in cultural activities (pp. 25–26).

The ACSR is evidently a rearticulation of the government's deeprooted desire to harness arts and culture for its sociocultural benefits. While the language used in the ACSR Report is consistent with previous cultural policies, what is distinct about the ACSR is its amplification of this importance — the above objective is brought to the forefront as the primary policy objective in order to tackle the challenges of a more heterogeneous society, as well as to address the economic stress on social cohesion. The need to overcome these challenges has had a significant impact on policymaking and has resulted in a whole-of-government shift towards a social focus. This shift is most evident from the restructuring of ministries and their portfolios in November 2012. As explained by Prime Minister Lee, the restructuring of ministries is a response to Singapore's "new phase of development, where social and community issues are increasingly important" (Neo, 2012). The ACSR is undoubtedly part of this shift.

Among other measures, the restructuring resulted in the moving of the arts portfolio from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts to a new ministry, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). MCCY was given a mission to create a "gracious society" and cultivate "a strong sense of belonging to Singapore." This was similar to the mission of the ACSR, which was to transform Singapore into "a nation of cultured and gracious people, at home with our heritage, proud of our Singaporean identity" (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 15).

Apart from the arts, MCCY also handles the sports, heritage, community and youth portfolios. Grouping the arts portfolio with portfolios that handle community development and services indicates a desired alignment. In particular, the grouping of the arts portfolio with the People's Association (PA), a statutory board aimed at promoting racial harmony and social cohesion, is eminently significant. As the next section will elaborate, the PA has played an important role in implementing the recommendations of the ACSR.

Policy Implementation: Bringing Arts and Culture to Everyone, Everywhere, Everyday

To achieve its vision, the ACSR Report stated two key strategic directions: (i) to "bring arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day"; and (ii) to "build capabilities to achieve excellence" (p. 19). In order to translate these strategic directions into reality, three masterplans, with a total funding of S$274 million, were launched in 2012. Two of the masterplans are meant to implement the strategic direction of "bringing the arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, everyday." These are the Community Engagement Masterplan (CEM), which has been allocated funding of S$210 million, and the Arts and Culture Education Masterplan, which has been allocated funding of S$40 million. Meanwhile, the third masterplan — the Capability Development Roadmap — has been allocated S$24 million to operationalise the second strategic direction, which is to build "capabilities to achieve excellence." Apart from these masterplans, a branding tagline — "Living Arts, Loving Culture" (LALC) — was also launched

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[10] In terms of capacity building, the ACCA Report led to the establishment of two dedicated statutory boards to spearhead the development of the arts in Singapore: the National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991 and the National Heritage Board in 1993. For more, see Chapters 5 and 9 in this volume for more detailed analyses of the ACCA Report and the NAC. Meanwhile, in terms of infrastructural development, the Esplanade was a direct outcome of the report. See Chapter 15 in this volume for an analysis of the Esplanade.

[11] See Chapter 13 in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the Renaissance City Plan.

in August 2012. The tagline was meant to serve as an exhortation to the public to embrace the arts and culture as part of their everyday lives.

Both the tagline and the allocation of funding reveal a prioritisation of increasing access and participation over developing the capabilities of the arts and cultural sectors. This chapter hence focuses on the CEM, as it was the master plan allocated the bulk of the funding. According to MCCY, this funding of S$210 million will go into three priority areas: (i) 45% will be spent providing more community touchpoints for the arts and culture; (ii) 30% will be used to promote learning and appreciation; and (iii) 25% will be used to seed new interest groups, community networks and ground-up initiatives.

The CEM itself is not a new initiative. Its predecessor was the "Arts for All" community engagement plan, an RCP III initiative launched in October 2008. The "Arts for All" plan (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2008) had two key components: ArtReach, which aimed to increase access to quality arts experiences for the community at large; and ArtLink, which aimed to bring the arts to specific population segments that have been constrained by age, physical disability, income or other circumstances. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that the National Arts Council (NAC) signed with the PA in 2006 also laid the foundations for the CEM. This MOU called for the joint development of District Arts Festivals and the development of community arts talent. These paved the way for many of the programmes and initiatives organised under the CEM.

Under the CEM, two broad types of programmes have been developed. The first aims to increase access to, and participation in, the arts. Since 2011, under the umbrella branding of "PAssionArts," the PA has organised arts and cultural activities to enable residents to "build and grow meaningful relationships, make friends and build a sense of home where they live" (People's Association, 2014). The PAssionArts programmes are organised at the grassroots level, giving citizens easier access to the arts and allowing them to participate in a diverse range of activities. One regular programme is the Community Art Gallery, which invites residents and community artists to co-create and display their art works at community places, such as public housing (Housing Development Board) void decks and coffee shops. Another programme is the annual PAssionArts Festival, which is described as "an interactive national community arts festival for residents to take part, where artists co-create and build stories with community and where neighbours become friends" (People's Association, 2014). Other popular activities include singing competitions, line-dancing fiestas and ukulele lessons.

Similarly, the NAC's "Arts for All" initiative aims to bring arts programmes to "where people live, work and play." There are currently four regular programmes: (i) the "Silver Arts" programme, which organises arts activities for senior citizens; (ii) the "Arts in your Neighbourhood" programme, which is a quarterly series of interactive arts programmes that take place in public libraries in the heartlands; (iii) the "Arts@Work" programme, which brings the arts to the workplace; and (iv) the ArtReach programme, which endeavours to reach out to the underprivileged and underserved communities through arts activities.

Another noteworthy initiative is the development of Community Arts and Culture Nodes. Piloted in 2012 and organised by the National Library Board, these are centres of activity that aim to provide access to the arts through regular performances, workshops and community arts projects in neighbourhoods. The plan is to develop 25 nodes by 2025. There are currently five: Jurong Regional Library, Tampines Regional Library, Siglap South Community Club, Kallang Community Club and Woodlands

Regional Library. The node at Jurong is youth-centric. Called "JRL Live!" it has held activities such as a puppet-making workshop for parents and their children, live performances by local bands, and a workshop to create *kampong* games. Meanwhile, the "artSEEN" node at Tampines has been organising visual arts programmes, such as pinhole photography and watercolour painting, for adults and seniors.

Apart from the PA, the NAC and the NLB, the National Heritage Board (NHB) has also been involved in increasing access to, and participation in, the arts. One of their key initiatives is the development of a network of community museums. The first community museum was opened at Taman Jurong Community Club in January 2013. Called "Our Museum @ Taman Jurong," this museum is "not just about displaying artworks," but it is also meant to function as "a space for people to interact, develop their own interests in the arts, and co-create artworks in the community" (Shanmuguratnam, 2013). Hence, activities such as screen-printing workshops, *ketupat*-making workshops, and storytelling sessions for children are regularly conducted. The second community museum is being planned for the new Tampines Town Hub and is slated to open in 2016. It is worth noting that both Jurong and Tampines are major residential areas.

The second type of programming under the CEM is capability development. This is helmed largely by the NAC and is less visible to the public. The aim is to develop the capabilities of both the arts community and community organisations to produce better community-based arts activities and projects. One initiative is a

networking session held four times a year that aims to better connect everyone who is interested in starting projects that use the arts to achieve social outcomes. This includes artists, social service practitioners, welfare organisations, healthcare workers and volunteers. The NAC also provides funding support to advocate and seed projects with social impact. It started the Community Participation Grant in 2008 to encourage such projects.[12] The NAC is also developing resources such as toolkits to help interested parties in starting and leading their own socially focused projects.

All of the aforementioned initiatives, along with the many other ACSR initiatives not mentioned here, share similar characteristics and aspirations. One similarity is their endeavour to make arts and culture more accessible for Singaporeans by bringing the arts out of perceived exclusionary spaces such as museums. Thus, many activities are conducted in public spaces within residential estates. Furthermore, many of the aforementioned activities are "amateur, popular, street and hobbyist" ones, such as karaoke singing competitions, line dancing, ukulele performances and the creation of flowers out of plastic bags (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 28). In fact, these programmes seem to be premised on an opposition to "high" or "elite" arts. As stated in the ACSR Report (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012), there is a need to change prevailing perceptions that "arts and culture is expensive, inaccessible, and/ or restricted to high art" and therefore not for everyone (p. 17). Another similarity is the preference for "participatory arts." Many of the activities involve engaging Singaporeans as doers and learners. The ACSR's aim to increase participation seems to have resulted in the support of art activities that privilege process over product — the final product is regarded as less important than relationships and social skills cultivated through participation.

Together, these similarities reveal how the ACSR privileges what is defined by the state as "community arts" over other art practices and forms. Community arts are seen as arts and cultural activities that emphasise public access and participation. They thus privilege process over product, emphasise the participatory nature of the process, and usually take place in public spaces and where the desired outcomes are social benefits such as relationship building, social bonding and connectedness. The next section will problematise this current invocation of "community arts." In doing so, this section will also highlight some opportunities and challenges that the government might face in its efforts to implement the ACSR through its promotion of community arts.

Policy Challenges: The Nebulous Concept of "Community" in Community Arts

The ACSR has presented Singaporeans with more opportunities for creative expression by increasing access to, and participation in, the arts. With the emphasis on process and participation, there has also been a democratisation of the production of art. The ACSR defines art as being everywhere and everything:

> *Far from being elitist and inaccessible, arts and culture is in fact already everywhere: in the designs of our clothes and accessories, the graphics in magazines and billboards, the films in cinemas and on television, the music in bars and cafes.* (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2012, p. 17)

In particular, there have been efforts to bring the arts to the social sector and the underprivileged. The NAC's ArtReach initiative aims to encourage artists and social service practitioners to collaborate on projects that use the arts to achieve social outcomes such as increasing engagement among isolated elders and building resilience in at-risk youths and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[13] The NAC has also funded projects such as "Both Sides Now" (http://www.bothsidesnow.sg), a multidisciplinary immersive arts experience that invites audiences to engage and reflect on the topic of death and related end-of-life matters. Organised by Drama Box, a local theatre company, this project took place in the residential estates of Toa Payoh and Nee Soon South. The main target audience was the elderly. Importantly, this creation of an immersive arts experience enabled conversations between the elderly, people from nursing and hospice care, and partners from the Agency for Integrated Care. Community arts was used as a platform to enable disparate individuals and organisations with common interests to connect with one another, and to enable the community to discuss and reflect upon a difficult topic like death.

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[12] This grant has since been subsumed into a catch-all grant called the Presentation and Participation Grant.

[13] For instance, in 2012, the NAC commissioned a community arts project where visual artist Justin Lee worked with 13 seniors from King George's Avenue Seniors Activity Centre. Before this project, many of the seniors did not know how to write with a pen, let alone draw with it. Lee taught them how to draw with simple lines and make stencils. The seniors were then invited to use their stencils to work on a larger canvas together. The creative hub of the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) is also currently located in Goodman Arts Centre, along with the NAC and other artists and arts organisations. The NAC's approval of SAMH's application to occupy this arts housing space is an affirmation of the desired alignment between the arts and welfare organisations. This strategic location has also enabled the SAMH to use art, music and dance as platforms to promote mental wellness.

However, the ACSR continues the government's instrumental approach towards the arts and culture. The focus of cultural policy making in Singapore has tended to be on quantifiable "impacts" and "outcomes." As both Kong (2000) and Chong (2010) have demonstrated, the ruling party in Singapore has long regarded the arts and culture as important ideological tools to propagate and perpetuate its agendas and interests. In this case, community arts is mobilised as a means to resolve national issues such as social cohesion and unity. In fact, this instrumental approach is intrinsic to the definition of community arts itself. Bennett (2000) usefully defines community arts as follows:

> *[It] involves the use of artistic resources as a means of building strong, self-reliant communities that are capable of managing themselves and producing a strong, but not exclusive, sense of identity and belonging for their members while contributing to the resolution of social problems at the community level.* (p. 26)[14]

This instrumentalist approach is most evident in the programmes organised by the PA. According to Nah Juay Hng, group director of the engagement cluster for arts and culture at the PA, arts is meant to be used to "bring residents together for friendships and bonding, and for them to forge collective memories" (Tan, 2014). This utilisation of arts as a means to an end can also be observed from the types of questions asked in the feedback survey about the PAssionArts Festival. Participants had to answer questions about whether "the presence of arts and culture activities made their neighbourhood a more enjoyable place to live in," whether "attending and participating in arts and culture helped draw the community closer," and whether "the presence of arts and culture gave a greater sense of belonging to their neighbourhood" (People's Association, 2014). The main concern of the survey appears to be the ability of the arts to serve as a platform to engage the community, instead of the quality of the products and the skills of the artists involved.

The ACSR's privileging of arts that serve as a platform for social cohesion and harmony may also be problematic for artists, especially those seeking government funding. The needs and priorities of the government may not necessarily match those of the artists. In order to obtain government funding and support, the artist may be placed in a compromising position. Their artistic vision, their ability to take risks artistically, and their desire to be innovative and creative may be constrained. As Chong (2010) points out, cultural policies in Singapore "are not sympathetic to art for art's sake but subordinate to the ideologies, values and interests of the ruling elite" (p. 132).

The ACSR's current promotion of community arts may hence lead to the legitimisation of selected arts and cultural forms and projects. This may exacerbate the difference between the type of arts supported by the government and the type of arts Singaporean artists would like to pursue. This exacerbation is a critical consideration, especially since the government has demonstrated a low tolerance for art works and productions that may not affirm their ideologies and interests. This is evident from the initial "Not Allowed for All Ratings" (NAR) classification given to Ken Kwek's 2012 film *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues*. This classification was given because of a public complaint about supposedly racist remarks (designed to serve as satire) about Indians in the film.[15] More recently, another local filmmaker, Tan Pin Pin, received an NAR classification for her documentary feature on political exiles, *To Singapore, with Love*. This classification prohibits the film from being publicly screened in Singapore. According to Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister of Information and Communications, Tan's film is a "one-sided portrayal" that "contains untruths and deception" about the history of Singapore (Xue, 2014). Additionally, in December 2014, the Dim Sum Dollies, an established musical cabaret group, received their first ever classification of any sort, for their show *The History of Singapore Part 2: The Growing Up Years*. The show received an "Advisory 16: some mature content" classification as the government believed its "satirical sociopolitical references" would be more suited for a mature audience (Ting, 2014). The sociopolitical references included a segment on Operation Spectrum in 1987, which led to the detention of activists accused of Marxist activities, and jibes at a leader paving the way for his son to take over his throne.[16] This classification was unexpected as the group is renowned for their tongue-in-cheek sociopolitical commentaries.

These examples highlight how there are still top-down limits placed on the context and horizons of artistic expression and creative experimentation in Singapore. Therefore, any assessment of the ACSR needs to consider the types of art forms and artists that are included and promoted, and the cultural values attached to them. Official discourses of arts funding and patronage define and delimit what community arts can conceivably be, and any potentialities and opportunities it may therefore offer.

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[14] Many other existing studies on community arts take the form of "arts impact studies." These studies tend to document the field's instrumental outcomes and evaluate the success, or otherwise, of the programs.

[15] After an appeal, the NAR classification was lifted. However, Kwek had to edit the two partial lines of dialogue which included racial insults. The film was later shown with an R21 rating for a 1-week period in Singapore.

[16] The current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, is the son of Lee Kuan Yew, who was the first Prime Minister of Singapore.

Also, despite the active role of the government and the proliferation of programmes, there is a lack of common understanding of the contours and characteristics of community arts in Singapore. This is mainly because the term "community" in "community arts" is a nebulous and unstable ideological concept (see Hawkins, 1993 and Shaw, 2008). As Mayo (1994) states, "it is not just that the term has been used ambiguously; it has been contested, fought over, and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices" (p. 48). According to Rose (1999), community emerged as a "valorised alternative, antidote, or even cure to the ills" that society had not been able to address (p. 175). This is because the term "community" is traditionally associated with the hope and desire of reviving the closer, warmer and more harmonious types of bonds vaguely attributed to past ages. As it is an ideal, community becomes a contested term because there is tension between what it is, and what it should be and do.

The nebulous and malleable nature of community arts can be observed in the absence of an over-arching definition or framework of community arts guiding the implementation of the ACSR. This is evident from how each government agency has formulated their own approach, framework and set of key performance indicators (KPIs). As the previous section has shown, the implementation of the ACSR is dispersed across numerous government agencies, programmes and ground-up communities. The nebulous nature of community arts has allowed each stakeholder to mobilise community arts to achieve its own broader objectives and mission. For instance, the PA has incorporated community arts as one of its many grassroots activities that aim to promote racial harmony and social cohesion in Singapore.

In addition, these government agencies may not necessarily cohere to the same definition of community arts. In particular, the PA and the NAC operate on different frameworks. Although the PAssionArts initiatives appear to define community as grassroots activities and through constituency demarcations, the NAC takes a more heterogeneous definition of community. Apart from "Both Sides, Now", the NAC has funded different types of ground-up community arts projects, including "Awaken the Dragon," "My Queenstown Festival," "Post-Museum" and the Migrant Workers Poetry Competition.

The different approaches undertaken by the government agencies highlight the complex and multilayered lifeworld of policy implementation in Singapore. Each stakeholder invokes its own interests under the banner of community arts. For consistency, community arts should be appropriately defined, and must also take into account the multiple sites and stakeholders that are involved. More importantly, the different approaches highlight how it was the very ambiguity and malleability of the concept of community arts that made the field conceivable for governance, and to be taken up in a range of different political agendas. Inopportunely, the different approaches have merely contributed to the lack of understanding of the function and value of community arts in Singapore.

The lack of clarity has perhaps contributed to the initial scepticism expressed by many arts practitioners over the government's decision to pursue a community arts agenda. Their scepticism is most evident in their reactions to the NAC's decision to withdraw participation from the 55th Venice Biennale. In August 2012, the NAC announced that, as part of its "ongoing review of all platforms," it had decided not to stage a Singapore Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.[17] The Venice Biennale is highly regarded as one of the world's most prestigious international showcases for contemporary visual art. Since 2001, Singapore has presented the work of 14 artists and seven curators at the biennale through its national pavilion.

Numerous arts practitioners questioned the top-down decision to withdraw participation and related it to the ACSR's community arts agenda. An open letter that was initiated by artist-curator Heman Chong received 300 signatures and much social media discourse. Much of the criticism related the decision to the ACSR's current focus on community arts. Some felt that the decision to withdraw participation from the Biennale was an indication that government resources were being diverted away from support for local artists and towards the PAssionArts initiatives. As art collector Colin Lim said, "I applaud the council's many initiatives to take the visual arts to the heartlands… but this should not be done at the expense of depriving our artists of greater glory and international recognition" (Shetty, 2012b).

Many arts practitioners also voiced their concerns over the current focus on community arts. Artist-curator Alan Oei said the following about the decision to withdraw:

> [It] tells us that the government has a certain way of looking at the arts and that the focus is to give up any notions of artistic independence or excellence. Art becomes nothing more than a tool to meet some arbitrary metric or to foster clichéd ideas of community and national identity. (Shetty, 2012a)

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[17] It should be noted that the NAC reviewed its decision to withdraw and decided to continue its participation in the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. The NAC also sent a delegation of nine artists, curators and administrators to the 55th Venice Biennale.

Ho Tzu Nyen, a visual artist and filmmaker who represented Singapore at the 54th Venice Biennale, expressed concern about the ACSR's desire to increase access and participation in the arts:

> *The NAC is sending an extremely negative signal about the function of art in Singapore, where there has been a reorientation of art to be community-building exercises. In the history of art, you will notice that the really important art works were not blockbusters. So this emphasis on using art as a tool for getting high visitor numbers, or to have works that can be understood widely by the public, is quite worrying.* ("Artists raise questions about S'pore's exit from Venice Biennale", 2012)

Several arts practitioners also questioned the government's definition and use of the term "community." To them, the decision on the Biennale was "abrupt and unilateral" and very much contrary to the "spirit of consensus and engagement" that the ACSR supposedly upheld and represented. As Ho opined, "if art is really a community-building exercise, then I would have expected that the first people they discuss this with are the artists and art practitioners" ("Artists raise questions about S'pore's exit from Venice Biennale", 2012). This comment raises the issue of who is included and excluded in the ACSR's definition of community.

Together, these reactions highlight an uneasy tension and discontinuity between top-down aspirations and management and the actual on-the-ground reception and understanding of the ACSR. The reactions also expose the limits of community as a political agenda. According to Young (1986), community is an idealistic but understandable dream. To her, community conceives of the "social subject as a relation of unity composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality" (p. 7). This "impossible ideal of shared subjectivity" tends to "deflect attention from more concrete analysis of the conditions of their [referring to social relations of domination and exploitation] elimination" (p. 12). This desire to use community arts to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity might be a denial of difference, and a refusal to acknowledge and address the misunderstandings, conflicts and incomplete resolutions within society.

The uneasy tension between government policy and on-the-ground conditions is also apparent from the latest findings from the 2013 NAC Population Survey on the Arts.[18] The survey found that more Singaporeans are recognising the value of the arts in their everyday lives. Seventy-six percent of respondents said that the arts gave them a better understanding of people from different cultures and backgrounds, compared to 68% in 2011. Fifty-six percent felt that the arts gave them a greater sense of belonging to the country, compared to 49% in 2011.

Despite these promising findings on public perception of the value of the arts and culture, the survey also revealed an overall decline in both attendance and participation in the arts (National Arts Council, 2014). In 2013, attendance at arts events fell to 40% of the population attending at least one arts event a year, a drop from 48% in 2011. Participation in the arts also declined from 19% in 2011 to 11% in 2013. According to the NAC (2014), the decline in attendance levels was due to "fewer options" being made available to Singaporeans. However, although there were fewer ticketed arts events in 2013, the number of non-ticketed or free events increased from 4,311 to 4,944. The majority of CEM programmes, especially the PAssionArts initiatives, would belong to this category of nonticketed events. This decline in attendance levels hence suggests a lack of keen public interest in the CEM events. Significantly, the survey demonstrates how the ACSR has yet to meet its targets of increasing attendance and participation in the arts. The lack of direct correlation between public perception and actual attendance and participation also highlights how the ACSR's causal link between community arts and their supposed sociocultural outcomes may have been overclaimed and oversimplified.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the government has consistently envisioned the arts and culture as expedient tools to cultivate social values in Singapore and help Singaporeans draw closer as a community. Although there may have been shifts in the prioritisation, the government has never deviated from its desire to mobilise the arts and culture to achieve social outcomes. From the "Art for Everyone" exhibitions in the 1970s to the NAC-ExxonMobil Concert in the Park series in the 1990s, state-led development of the arts has largely been justified in terms of the envisioning of the arts as resources to civilise and socialise the migrant society into a cohesive and cultivated community. The ACSR is a continuation of this top-down imagining of the arts and culture, and their efficacy to Singapore.

This chapter has also demonstrated how this sociocultural focus has been amplified in the ACSR. This amplification is a timely and pragmatic response to the social, economic and political challenges Singapore has

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[18] The 2013 survey interviewed 2,015 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents between December 2013 and March 2014.

been facing since the 2011 General Election. These challenges include a more heterogeneous society, an ageing population, rising inequality and slower economic growth (see Low & Vadaketh, 2011). These challenges have created stresses on social cohesion and citizens' sense of belonging. Consequently, there has been a whole-of-government shift towards a focus on social policy and a need to reach out to the wider community. The ACSR and its invocation of "community" are hence symptomatic of the current policy climate.

The formulation and implementation of the ACSR exemplifies key shifts in Singapore, offering a window onto broader transformations in society and governance. Not only are the techniques used to implement the ACSR dependent on the unique institutional context in which the governance occurs; they also reflect and raise issues about the broader sociocultural and political conditions of Singapore.

Finally, this chapter has also explored how the heightened focus on the need for the ACSR to produce sociocultural "outcomes" and "impacts" has resulted in the mobilisation of community arts as a means to strengthen the social fabric of Singapore. Regrettably, as this chapter has argued, the ACSR's focus on community arts faces more challenges than opportunities. The funding for the ACSR's three master plans ended in 2016, and it would be interesting to see how the focus on community arts continues and if the causal link between community arts and their supposed sociocultural outcomes have been oversimplified and overclaimed.

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