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Contextualized Practices in Arts Education

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Chapter 2
Exegetical Commentary

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Gene's article has provided a succinct overview of the development of Singapore's arts policy since its independence, and notes the complexity of cultural politics in the island-state, such as the Singapore artists' resistance and creative responses to the state's "deterritorialization" of cultural diversity and the ways that Singapore arts and theatre groups have managed to "strategically" create works that address politically-sensitive topics. One particular narrative of Singapore's arts development, indeed, has been to tell the story(ies) of Singapore artists' relationships of negotiation with, and resistance to, the state, which are ultimately about carving out space not merely for creative expression of ideas, but for social dialogue. This narrative has also been about how, despite the Singapore government's deliberate, articulated policy to build a global city for the arts, the economic imperative remains dominant. There remains the lingering suspicion among artists and some of the public, that the ultimate aim of arts and culture is for attracting investment, foreign talent, and tourism.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Singapore's arts and cultural sector is vibrant today, and much of it has to be attributed to the investments made by the state – mainly infrastructural developments such as the Esplanade and the refurbishment of the National Museum. These investments in turn have stimulated increased activity by the arts community. In 2010, Singaporeans had 85 arts activities per day to choose from, according to the MICA Minister Lui Tuck Yew, speaking in Parliament during the Budget debates of 2011. In that year, the total number of arts activities was 31,886, while the number of arts groups has increased substantially between 2003 and 2011, from 302 in 2003 to 856 in 2011 (MICA 2012).

There is thus, plenty of activity in the arts sector today, but the question to ask now is, "to what end"? What is the direction that this increased volume of activity is taking us? What kind of arts hub will the Singapore of the future be and will it add to the aspiration of Singapore to be the "best home" for Singaporeans and new

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migrants? What is clear is that Singapore's arts policy over the years has given rise to tensions and contradictions as noted by Gene. Gaps have emerged which are perhaps insufficiently articulated and debated in the public sphere, and perhaps it is time for policy-makers and the arts community and the public, to take a serious look at some of these contradictions, imbalances and gaps in the arts and cultural sector.

The increased volume of activity I have mentioned has also been a result of the economist way in which the Singapore government regards the arts, which in fact runs in tandem with an interest in exclusivist events. One strategy which government agencies have adopted is to attempt to stimulate a market for art in Singapore by addressing both demand and supply at the same time through supporting high-profile international events such as the art fair Art Stage (run by the people behind Art Basel) and the opening of Gillman Barracks, a cluster of galleries, an initiative spearheaded not by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts but by the Economic Development Board which comes under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The supply, however, is that of artworks from out of Singapore; while these events do stimulate a degree of public and buyers' interest, there is still a lingering sense among the local arts community that they remain on the margins of such activity. Gene cites Terence Chong's contention that the Singapore state's drive towards creating a global city for the arts has prioritized certain types of art forms and arts groups while marginalizing others; the economist and global slant of policy have also marginalized individual artists, as Ooi (2011) has also argued.

Perhaps because of the economic imperative, it also appears as if the state continues to look for quantitative measures of success for its arts policy, at a time when perhaps more qualitative measures and particularly, impact measures of the arts on the public and the arts community are needed. The Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) report referenced in Gene's article speaks of specific numeric targets to be attained for Singapore through the strategies it outlines. The ACSR states the objectives of increasing Singaporeans' arts attendance rates so that 80 % of Singaporeans would attend an arts event per year by 2025, and for 50 % of Singaporeans, or half the local population, to participate or be actively involved in arts and culture by 2025 (ACSR 2012).

The ACSR's vision is that Singapore will be a society where arts and culture are part of everyone's everyday life; through the articulation of the numeric targets, it appears that numbers will be used as a measure of whether we attain this ultimate objective. There is some doubt (noted also by Gene) about whether the strategies outlined in the report will reap the desired results – apart from the censorship question, artists are also concerned that the new emphasis on 'arts in the community' in recent policy declarations would result in sacrificing the more 'purely' artistic expressions and sideline their practice. This included the recent announcement that the arts portfolio will come under a new Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth starting on 1 November 2012 (Woo 2012).

The artists' fear and concerns that pure art will be marginalized as more resources are pumped into arts activities for the community, perhaps is an effect of the media dedicating more attention to the 'community' aspect of the ACSR report rather than another main thread of the report which is about building

capability and excellence for the arts scene. However, this response from the arts community is indicative of the unbalanced relationship between the arts workers and artists 'on the ground' and the policy-makers and the National Arts Council/ Ministry – often the relationship is contentious or oppositional, and flashpoints over controversies such as censorship and funding cuts given airtime in the media. The arts community often challenges the policy-makers, most recently in a letter published in the press expressing their disagreement with the Arts Council's decision not to participate in the Venice Biennale (Chong et al. 2012). As hinted at in Gene's article though, the cultural politics of Singapore is more complex than that of artists opposing the state's attempts to control the field of culture. Artists have become advocates to the public and the government for the arts, and are organizing themselves to engage with issues affecting not just them, but the future of Singapore as they perceive it – an example would be how the arts community organized itself to choose their nominees as Nominated Members of Parliament in 2009 and 2011, and going a further step by asking for endorsement of their candidates from the Arts Council. The relationship between the arts community and the Arts Council (and other state agencies) therefore, is not a simple opposi-tional relationship but is one where both sides are engaging each other in dialogue as much as they challenge the other.

Among the gaps that have emerged in the wake of Singapore's arts development, is the question of space for art, or the contradiction between 'hardware' and 'software' discussed by Gene. While the government has provided hardware, this remains unevenly distributed not just in terms of location but in terms of their function, and arts groups and facilities are not always adequately resourced. For instance, there is a lack of actual 'creation spaces' that incubate artists and new work through a rigorous process of exploration and critique, with most theatre spaces for instance, primarily being venues for final 'shows' and outcomes, rather than devoting space, time and money to nursing an idea or concept from birth to final showing. Most grants, apart from the Arts Creation Fund from the National Arts Council, support only a fraction of the final production costs of an exhibition or performance, and not the development process which might take months if not years. Apart from the Arts Council, few additional funding sources are available, and most of these sources are private foundations whose grant quantums for arts projects have remained at the same level for over a decade. All these have led to physical and psychological constraints on artistic creation – and psychological constraints certainly go beyond the fear of being censored. These naturally, have implications in our desire for 'excellence' in the arts – without adequate space and resources to work, it is impossible for artists to produce top quality, well-researched work.

Another gap, which the National Arts Council is starting to address, and which is mentioned in the ACSR report, is capability-building for the arts sector: enhancing the capacities of not only artists but also arts managers, administrators, technical personnel, production personnel and educators. New measures introduced in this area now include a Specialist Diploma in Arts Education offered by the National Institute of Education International (NIEI), and new arts management training

courses developed as collaborations between the Workforce Development Agency and local arts organizations that lead to a Workforce Skills Qualification certification. Here again, though, I feel there is need to sound a cautionary note: rolling out skills training programmes are not enough, we need more than technical, administrative and pedagogical skills to build capability and also to bridge that gap between what Gene calls "the extensive efforts of the government to promote the arts and the low level of appreciation and awareness in the communities". Why is this so? Because bringing the arts to the "people" requires dedication, an understanding of how people learn about and appreciate the arts, and the techniques and strategies involved in such outreach work, as well as imagination.

This has implications for how we carry out arts education in Singapore – and imagination is key. Ultimately, the role of the arts educator is not to simply equip our students with the techniques and skills required to be an artist, dancer, actor, director, designer or arts manager, but perhaps more importantly, to enable their capacity to harness their artistic instincts and passion to the creation of new work that expresses our identity(ies) and in the process, to stimulate a search for solutions to address gaps and problems in our arts development and to seize opportunities for better social dialogue among various communities and interest groups in Singapore (including the government) – in short, to be the creative solution-seekers that a more complex, globalized and socially and culturally diverse Singapore needs.

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