

DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP:

Judging the Open Section at the Singapore Art Show

By Venka Purushothaman

On 28 July 2005, the organisers of the Singapore Art Show posted on the arts community e-group an invitation to artists to submit entries for the Open Section of the Singapore Art Show. What seemed like an innocuous posting, received a strong inquisition by celebrated arts activist, Lee Weng Choy. He sought to find out about the judging criteria and the panel who will be judging the works. There was dead silence in the e-group. No response from organisers, no comments from artists and no further pursuance from Lee. His age-old enquiry as to “who judges”, who sets the structures of determination which will endorse and promulgate a particular aesthetic dimension anointed as a ‘New Work’ is poignant and drew critical reflection during the deliberation of the submissions for the Open Section.

What might seem like a non-descript accounting of an event, a moment of fracture in the didactic cusp of the e-group known for its dramatic charges and challenges to ideological apparatuses, for me serves to articulate one of the key dilemmas in visual arts management today: that of judging and deciding on the value of art.

The Open Section, according to the call for entries, serves as a platform to exhibit “distinctive, high quality artworks” staged within a curatorial broad stroke of “New Works by Singapore Artists” as stated by the National Arts Council’s press release.

Problematic use of words or mere rhetoric? What does distinctive mean? A rupture from tradition? What is high quality? Semblance of supreme materials

used? What is New? Its ideational spectre located in temporal dislocation or spatial untimeliness? Who are *Singapore Artists*? Citizens of a global economy or tradition bound nomads? Who are *Singapore Artists*? A colony of ideologues?

The Open Section was just that: open, democratic. Unframed by unilateralism and untouched by the formality of regulatory principles, the open section sought to receive new and exciting works created within the last two years of an artist's development. There is an air of informality and irrationality about this call: informality that portends to propose a wide range of interpretative possibilities both in the artist's response to the open call and the irrational constellation of works that were submitted as there were no guide to thematic trajectories. The informality became lived experience as by the close of day for entries on 15 August 2005, only 8 entries were submitted. As the arts administrator, revelled in the world of panic and "Plan Bs" an extension was granted rightly as artists warmed up and unstressed by the formality of regulation submitted 261 works by 22 August 2005.

A panel of art enthusiasts, art critics, art historians and artists was put together to evaluate and ascertain the value of art. There is a sense of power, a sense of dictatorship. Whose call, whose taste, whose judgement? How does one identify a new and innovative work from a mixed bag of 261 submissions ranging from landscape paintings to social realist expressions to still life to sculptures to mixed media to video and sound art? How does one balance conceptualisms with representational expressions and mere aesthetically pleasing designs? How does one start a process of evaluation, assessment and critical discourse? The dictator sets in. Blind refereeing the works, the panel placed as paramount critical consideration for originality, mastery of medium, conceptual rigour (expression of idea, concept, emotion, movement, etc), composition and overall presentation. Each work was considered on its own, not against others.

The most meaningful and fulfilling debates centred on questions of originality, gender representation in art and challenge of locating traditional expressions (e.g. calligraphy) within the fold of the contemporary. At points, discussion centred on 'guess who is the artist' as some works began to reveal the signposting of old ideas in new shapes. This made the judging educational to the panellists.

The panel finally selected 37 works. These were selected for the very democratic ideals they espoused and the panel choose not to organise (curate) the works according to themes but rather preferred all the works respond to the exhibition space at the subterranean passages of the Singapore Management University and each member of the panel was invited to select a work that speaks to them and hence, anointed as a "Judge's Choice." As the University's cold and stark passages are colourised and transformed by these artworks, one wonders as to the weight of "Management" on art. The German critic Theodor Adorno, in his assessment of culture and its administration said that "no matter what form it takes, culture [art] is measured by norms not inherent to it and which have nothing to do with the quality of the object, but rather with some abstract standards imposed from without." The works, selected by the panel based on submissions of images, will take on different meanings, relevance and negotiations as they are displayed in these passages of public mobility. Their usefulness and uselessness will only be realised when the viewer stops to see, engage and be drawn into the work. In this instance, the spectator is the dictator and the moment s/he is drawn into the work, the work reigns supreme.

The author was the Chair of the Open Section Judging Panel.