Renaissance or Regurgitation?
Arts Policy in Singapore 1957-2003

Dr. Ruth Bereson
Teachers College, Columbia University
with contributions from Wee Liang Tong

Keywords Singapore, arts policy, cultural policy, arts management, arts administration, south-east Asia

Abstract Over the past decade it would seem that the arts have become significant to the Singaporean state. This paper investigates the language which has been developed by government agencies and employed by government ministers concerning the arts and culture since 1957. It argues that the underlying intentions of the state towards the arts are to be found in documentation which existed well before the formation of supposedly new ‘arts policies’ and most significantly within the written record of ministries not traditionally associated with the arts. The paper questions the claims that there is a renaissance of real artistic innovation in Singapore and considers the motives which may lie behind the creation of the newly-phrased arts and cultured infrastructure.

Biography Dr. Ruth Bereson, Assistant Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University has worked extensively in the field of arts policy and management in Australia, Singapore, England, France and the United States. Her major interest is the relationship between governmental policies and their effects on the arts in different countries and at different times. Her most recent publications are: The Operatic State: Cultural Policy and the Opera House, Routledge 2002 and Artistic Integrity and Social Responsibility: You Can’t Please Everyone!, Ethos Press 2001.

In the new millennium, a cultural renaissance of historic importance will accompany the dramatic economic transformation of East Asia. By being of continuing service to the region and the world, Singapore hopes to do for the arts what it has done for banking, finance, manufacturing and commerce, and help create new ideas, opportunities and wealth.

Brigadier-General (NS) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts.
(STPB 1996a)

Since its creation in 1957, Singapore has focussed on the education and enrichment of its people. In many ways modern Singapore is an economic miracle, achieving a level of financial stability which was formerly unthinkable. How then has Singapore’s tried-and-tested system of active self-determination affected its arts and culture?

From the outset the formulation of a cultural or an arts policy was of prime importance to the nascent state of Singapore. In the 1959 State of Singapore Annual Report, the Government clearly set out the objectives for the Ministry of Culture. They were almost exclusively concerned with nation building and the objectives were very clearly cultural, not artistic:
According to the 1963 State of Singapore Annual Report, 'The South-East Asia Cultural Festival …was a landmark in the cultural history of the state' supporting 'the Government's social and economic objectives'.

The independent Republic of Singapore was created in 1965 amidst tension amongst the various racial groups as well as between the Straits. The language of cultural cohesion became aligned with the creation of national identity and within a decade this became a significant government objective. As the increasingly affluent nation moved away from the formerly immediate and pressing concerns of racial conflicts, the emphasis of the government shifted from the management of cordial relations between the races, to that of forging a unique Singaporean identity.

Within the space of almost two decades at the opening of the Third Singapore Arts Festival in 1981, the Minister for Finance, Mr. Hon Sui Sen, made a case for the integration of arts policy within the young Singaporean nation. He posited the notion that once a society has succeeded economically it could then be allowed to indulge in artistic expression, stating that 'an arts festival takes shape finally when a society is mature and ready for one.' In this speech he also recognised that what he termed ‘supporting services’ such as ‘media, cultural facilities, transportation’ would enhance the artistic register. Into that mix he also poured patronage, which at that stage was seen to be a completely private responsibility whether that be from ‘a well-endowed company or institution, or from wealthy individuals’:

A Michelangelo could not have given his best without the beneficence of a Pope Sixtus with a Sistine Chapel to be decorated. Neither could other artists of the Renaissance have done their work without the patronage of princes whose vanity must be flattered or wealth displayed.

(Hon 1981: 1-3)

Furthermore he embellished upon the concept of ‘renaissance’ (significantly introducing terminology which was to be fully developed another two entire decades later), by stating that ‘they were assisting at a birth or a renaissance from the marriage of rich cultures making up Singapore’s multi-faceted society.’ This speech was not made by an ‘arts’ or a ‘cultural’ minister, but rather by the Finance Minister. Thus significant political statements concerning the arts and their relationship with the Singaporean state were to be made by politicians whose remit it was to concern themselves with other fields of governmental policy. It is precisely these Ministries and the Committees they set up which define the cultural environment. Working Committees on all sectors of government policy such as development, heritage, tourism, finance, taxation, education, information technology, land use, amongst others have critically defined the environment and to an extent determined the language and register of artistic endeavour. It could be concluded that the Finance Minister’s speech sets the tone for arts development being equated with ‘arts policy’ and in a sense tells us what the important aspects of the arts were to Singapore in the early 1980s.

By 1984, Mr. S. Dhanabalan, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Culture, also incorporated the term ‘renaissance’ into his vocabulary. He explained why it was of such importance to Singapore, stating that: ‘In the Renaissance world and for much of Western history, the artist was often considered a craftsman. The artist did not consider it demeaning to be working to meet the demands of his patron within the bounds set by his patron’ (Dhanabalan 1984: 32). And herein lies the crux of Singaporean politicians’ argument: art is a good thing and can serve the state’s...
interests, as long as it respects the state’s boundaries. Like the model devised by that consummate politician of the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli, the artist’s role is to promote social and economic interests and therefore should receive patronage in order to achieve such ends. The notion of patronage in the Italian Renaissance would be reconfigured in the Renaissance City Report (RCR) tabled almost two decades later.

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*The creation of a sense of national identity. The elimination of communal divisions and attitudes. The propagation of democratic values, conducive to the ultimate creation of a more just society. The creation of a wide acceptance of the National Language. The propagation of an awareness of the ultimate objectives of complete independence through merger and the ideals of a democratic socialist way of life.*

(State of Singapore Annual Report 1959)

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By 1987, Wong Kan Seng, 2nd Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Community Development, integrated many arts policy areas into his speeches. He presented views on the need for the arts and artists to participate actively in the task of nation building and therefore the creation of a national identity:

Society, therefore, needs artists to translate the feelings, the aspirations, the beliefs and the values into art forms, into dances, dramas, music, paintings, literature etc. so that these experiences can be accumulated and portrayed effectively and transmitted continuously for the benefit of the present and future generations. The subsequent generations of people will then be able to understand their roots better, and know what binds them together as a people and as a nation. (Wong 1987: 39)

In this speech ‘the arts’ are used synonymously with ‘culture’. These sentiments, which mirror those of the Finance Minister of 1981, are now linked clearly to a need to develop a cultural heritage for future generations. Wong then continued to employ notions of ‘cultural vibrancy’ which now became a concern of government in which artists as well as other sectors of society should participate:

The government has set out to achieve a culturally vibrant society before the end of this century. As you all know, the creation of this culturally vibrant society cannot be the job of government alone. It must be the joint responsibility of the Government, the artists, the art associations, the community and the business organisations. (Wong 1987: 41)

The government’s role is ‘to create a conducive environment’ in order to achieve vibrancy and creativity so that ‘people, in their new found affluence, will be able to find time to learn and appreciate the arts’ (Wong 1987: 41). This is consistent with the Ministry for Community Development’s duty statement in 1987, in which he was said to be ‘responsible for promoting and nurturing a robust, culturally vibrant, cohesive and caring society through the provision of recreational and cultural services’ (Singapore Annual Report 1986: SAR). Thus, towards the end of the 1980s we can see that the Singaporean definition of arts and culture and their relationship to society were set in the language of social cohesion and economic development. It was only a matter of time therefore before the government formed a committee to look at the arts.

In 1988, the government’s first initiative to recognise what it termed the ‘arts’ and to support them was mooted. In 1989 it tabled a Report of the Advisory Council on
Culture and the Arts, which was later to become a White Paper with recommendations for areas of implementation. The salient points were: to set up a National Arts Council (NAC), the establishment of an Arts Museum, the building of The Esplanade Theatres on the Bay and to relocate arts groups closer together. Arts and cultural policy thus tacitly became part of the policies which government considered to be important to a developing nation.

In the 21st March cover letter to the First Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Goh Chock Tong from the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in 1989, the Advisory Committee, chaired by Mr. Ong Teng Cheong, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the need for facilities was stressed as a key reason for maintaining investors, foreign talent and tourism in order to:

...give a nation its unique character and provide the much needed social bond to hold its people together. They add to the vitality of a city, and enhance the quality of life. Good facilities and activities help to attract world class performances and exhibitions, thus creating a more congenial environment for investors and professionals to stay and tourists to visit Singapore. (Advisory Council on Cultural and the Arts 1989)

The speedy creation of a bureaucratic infrastructure in the early 1990s is a sign of the government’s decision to support the arts and culture in the ways that governments know best. The year 1990 witnessed the creation of the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) and by 1991 the NAC, an arm’s length body for managing and promoting the arts in Singapore, was set up. Significantly the emergence of these bureaucratic structures post-dated that of many arts companies. Between the years 1985 and 1991, a number of grassroots companies and arts venues emerged and are still in existence today and receive a substantial part of the NAC’s funding. They are: TheatreWorks (1985), The Theatre Practice, formerly the Practice Theatre Ensemble (1986), The Necessary Stage (1987) and Singapore Dance Theatre (1988). The Substation, an alternative Arts Centre, was founded in 1990.

MITA was designed to take over the portfolio of the arts and culture from the Ministry of Community Development. Its initial mission was to be:

...responsible for strengthening commitment to Singapore through our shared values, heritage and the arts, promoting appreciation of Singapore and its policies at home and abroad, making Singapore an international centre for information services and the arts and promoting a well-read, well-informed and gracious society. (SAR 91)

For the first time, the term the ‘arts’ was mentioned not only in a policy statement, but also included in the official designation of a Ministry itself. This clearly tells us that ‘the arts’ have now come under a ministry that concerns itself with their development.

The Singaporean nation which now officially contained artists, arts companies, Ministries and an Arts Council was to be clearly delineated through the strong views of the Acting Minister of Information and the Arts who was also a Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs). Brigadier-General George Yeo stated clearly that the major function of the arts was to serve what he termed a ‘Darwinian imperative’, i.e. the social strength of the ‘Singaporean species’; or, to put it in other words, a commodification of the arts which were supported if they clearly demonstrated a competitive edge in the market:

We come back to the Darwinian imperative. If the arts develop in a direction which strengthens the whole society, it will flourish. If instead the arts weaken society, then it must in the end eviscerate itself. ...What we want in the end is to make participation in the arts a way of life in Singapore, in a way which helps us remain competitive in a very
Indeed in the following year at the Official Opening of the Mountbatten Campus of the LaSalle College of Arts, November 29, 1992, Yeo claimed that ‘an East Asian renaissance’ now existed. Such a claim combined the interests of the Minister’s two offices, that of Foreign Affairs and the Arts as the arts were to be perceived as a cultural spearhead of trade-related activities to spur on the nation’s platform of growth and development. The claims Yeo made brought Singaporean arts discourse very much into the arena of international policy and, as 19th century colonial powers, the implications of such a policy were to ‘spill over’ into the region under its economic domination:

What we are witnessing is an economic and cultural renaissance of a scale never before experienced in human history. Like the renaissance in Europe a few centuries ago, this East Asian renaissance will change the way man looks at himself, at human society and at the arts. The rise in the level of cultural life in Singapore is part of an oceanic tidal flow that will wash onto every shore in the Pacific. (Yeo 1992: 31)

Yeo was very clear about this view of the function of the arts and took care to explain to his audience how these areas knitted together with the developmental task at hand, prefiguring an entrepreneurial competitiveness in the realms of arts and culture.

While there are many beautiful arts centres in the West, our objective is not to build just another one to replicate those in Europe and North America. Our objective is to build a centre on the Pacific Rim which will prefigure and help usher in the new age of East Asian enduring quality. … With economic growth, we can expect many new arts centres to spring up all along the Rim starting with Japan, then the NIEs, then the rest of ASEAN, then China and Vietnam. Some will be competing against us. We want to be one of the first in a future series, not one of the last in a past series. (Yeo 1992: 31)

He continued with a brief and clear statement of government arts and cultural policies, leaving the listener in no doubt about government strategies: ‘all our policies in the arts should have this perspective clearly in view. We hope to be an important centre of the arts in East Asia. By being an early mover, we will enjoy certain pre-emptive advantages’ (Yeo 1992: 31).

If one examines the language used in the mission statements and policy papers by other statutory boards, that one might imagine addressed their direct policy areas, it is also clear that certain terminology was being developed and integrated into governmental language which would later be clearly echoed in the language of arts policy. By 1992, arts discourse became an integral part of the language of many government policy-making sectors. The National Computer Board (NCB) in its report, A Vision of An Intelligent Island, claimed that cultural industries were part of information technology and therefore a subset of the knowledge based economy. Part of what it called the arts and culture included the following activities: ‘going out to a show’, ‘reading a book’, ‘watching a video’, ‘extension of our media and cultural institutions’, and ‘recording of national archives’. Such activities were obviously predicated on the consumption and utilisation of artistic product and the language of consumerism infused the depths of artistic practice. Thus it was not a quantum leap for the report to state that: ‘anticipating the inevitable international linkage, we might some day bring into our homes the Louvre, the Smithsonian Institution, the museums of Beijing and the Library of Congress’ (NCB 1992: 34); or to determine that its role was to facilitate the modes of access to such activities and to enhance tourism and media development.

The Economic Development Board’s (EDB) blueprint for developing Singapore’s
competitive edge in the 21st century, *Industry 21*, also employs familiar terms:

*The vision of Industry 21 is for Singapore to be a vibrant and robust global hub of knowledge-driven industries. The knowledge-based economy will rely more on technology, innovation and capabilities to create wealth and raise the standard of living. For our knowledge-based economy to flourish, we will need a culture which encourages creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as an appetite for change and risk-taking.* (EDB 2000)

Thus another government department was aligned with cultural issues.

It is significant that the terminology, once established in Ministerial statements of the 1980s, has now been infused with the stated policies of many aspects of the nation. These policies can effectively redefine the way the arts and culture function and effectively shift their meaning. The belief in economic growth was shattered with the crash of 1995. Therefore, the whole mental map of the Asian Pacific region with its ‘tigers’ and its ‘newly industrialised economies’ was seriously challenged. The consequences of this ‘Asian Economic Crisis’ were not without ramifications on government policies and attitudes towards the arts and culture. When government intervenes to assist non-cultural sectors in the economy these have immediate consequences for the arts.

In 1996, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s New Year Message enunciated the values of government and was reprinted in the frontispiece of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board’s (STPB) booklet, *Destination Singapore: The Arts Experience* (1996a): ‘Let us now complement our economic achievements with our social, cultural and spiritual development. Then, by the 21st century, Singapore will be a truly successful, mature country with a developed economy and a gracious society.’ At the opening of the Singapore Art Museum in the same year, Goh stated that ‘this is the classic role of a city-state and one which we are well-posted to perform.’ He concluded his speech by explaining this rationale, stating: ‘you have a great challenge to enhance Singapore as a confluence of ideas and give Singaporeans the panache of a refined, educated people’ (*Straits Times* 1996). This was re-enforced in the statement from, Tan Chin Nam, Chief Executive of the STPB:

*As the arts increasingly become a part of Singaporean lifestyle, so too will they grow into an integral feature of the Singapore Experience. The vibrancy of this cosmopolitan city is painted by the arts in a palette of brilliant colours. By their magic, the arts enrapture visitors from all over the world in countless ways. By their endless variety, they tantalise visitors to come to Singapore again and again.

Singapore now offers a rich cultural diversity, a unique heritage, world class productions, international arts and film festivals, art auctions and exhibitions of repute, and a wide selection of art and antiques. The time has come for us to invite the world to join in our cultural feast.*

(STPB 1996a: 7)

These claims clearly reflect the greater Singaporean interests. Certainly, Singapore has a rich cultural diversity, yet a heritage is a great claim to make given its relatively recent history. The world class productions are those of a few international producers who left their mark during a couple of seasons. These claims are reinforced in the report by ‘captains of industry’ who list the great variety of commercial luxury goods available in Singapore.

By 1996, the relationship between the arts and tourism was clearly defined, and set out in *Tourism 21 – Vision of a Tourism Capital*:

*While cultural and religious festivals continue to intrigue visitors, other events such as the performing arts and visual arts in Singapore have seen buoyant growth in recent years. For example, Cameron Mackintosh*
International and the Really Useful Group, both Sydney-based subsidiaries of British entertainment multi-national corporations, have expanded into the Singapore market and now offer tourists an alternative form of entertainment: the staging of musicals such as Cats and Les Miserables in Singapore in 1994 and Phantom of the Opera in 1995, for example was very successful and attracted many regional tourists – especially the Indonesians. (SATB 1996b: 13)

In comparison to the 1960s, where emphasis was placed on ostensibly cultural activities, such as the Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat and the South-East Asia Cultural Festival, government policy makers now appear to be more concerned with importing international acts and supporting international producers. Ironically, only a few years after this enthusiastic statement the producers of these shows closed their Singaporean offices. The arts, under the banner of tourism had become focused on economic and marketing objectives.

In March 2000, MITA published the most comprehensive policy statement on the arts and culture to date (although a Green Paper on ‘cultural capital’ is currently being worked on): the Renaissance City Report, which contained few surprises as it sought to align cultural vibrancy and cohesion with the country’s main goal of being a ‘hub city’. As such, the Report was not so much a ‘watershed’ as a bureaucratic document which set out achievable and concrete aims. What is interesting is the emphasis which it places on the promotion of its vision of what ‘the Renaissance Singaporean’ should be like:

>[A]n individual with an open, analytical and creative mind that is capable of acquiring, sharing, applying and creating new knowledge. He is able to bring a distinctive value-added advantage to each activity he engages in.

(MITA 2000: Ch 5.6)

In the light of the concerns of the Prime Minister and other ministers, the NCB, EDB and STPB, one might ask the question: what is the function of a Ministry of the Arts when other Ministries and Statutory Boards effectively determine its remit? This question has partly been resolved to the satisfaction of government by the emphasis on the rhetoric of economic denominators in arts discourse such as ‘multiplier effects’, ‘construction of infrastructure’, ‘allocation of development funding’ and providing benchmarks in terms of goals of achievement, i.e. audience numbers, etc. with other cities which Singapore wishes to emulate. If the state were mainly committed to such artistic objectives and believed that injection of money was directly related to enhanced artistic output, then its pledge of the additional $55 million dollars over 5 years for development of the arts, over and above existing running costs and investments, would seem inadequate. It is significant that in comparison to this the STPB will receive $300 million over the same period. Of course it is hard to quantify artistic output in cash terms but one can understand a government’s policy directives within such comparative figures. Clearly the STPB’s arts policies are likely to have a greater economic weight than those of MITA.

It is interesting therefore to observe the arena of arts practice in order to investigate the rhetorical claims of policy. One example of dissonance between rhetoric and reality in 2000 was the refusal to grant a license to Talaq, which was a play focussing upon the plight of women in one of Singapore’s racial minorities which treated the subject of marital rape. This work had been performed a number of years previously in the Tamil language but was not given a licence to be performed in the English language. The objection lay in the fact that the issues were culturally sensitive. As the Public Entertainment and Licensing Unit (PELU) of the Singapore Police Force refused the license, the NAC which owns and runs most performance spaces in Singapore withdrew the use of its theatre. The director who tried to rehearse the play on NAC property found herself briefly detained for trespassing on the theatre under instructions from the Council. Therefore policies of racial tolerance have found conflict with an artistic manifestation. It was not the ‘art’ which was being regulated,
the issue at hand was in fact that social policy was potentially threatened by artistic action and the powers which regulate the arts intervened to ensure that the social policy was preserved.

On 26th June 2002, an announcement was made that the authority to licence films, publications, plays, exhibitions, pop/rock concerts and other forms of arts entertainment would be transferred from PELU to MITA from 1st July 2002. PELU would remain responsible for cabarets, nightclubs, bars, karaoke lounges and ‘other establishments that provide public entertainment’. Artists have been quoted in the press generally supporting this move and ‘expressing the hope that the process will be more transparent and provide time and space for negotiation and mediation instead of blanket last-minute refusals or laying down of conditions’ (Straits Times Interactive 26 June 2002).

At the time of this heated debate many groups in Singapore were performing works dealing with areas which had hitherto been deemed taboo, for example, explicit issues of sexuality. The Necessary Stage presented a provocative work entitled Asian Boys, the Singaporean Repertory Theatre presented the musical Rent, the Toy Factory presented Shopping and F***ing and a local entrepreneur presented a Filipino version of The Vagina Monologues. Significantly these productions, which treated the areas which had previously concerned government and disturbed ‘Asian values’ most, received permits for performance although some alterations were required of certain scripts.

As recently as September 2003 this is still a vexed issue as the Censorship Review Committee has recommended that existing censorship laws be maintained much to the disappointment of arts groups over 250 of whom signed an Arts Community Proposal On Censorship Review which ‘…basically called for an end to the licensing of arts events - in other words, any regulation of the arts by an executive body over and above existing laws governing public order and racial harmony.’ This is perhaps a most telling indication that different definitions of ‘the arts’ and ‘culture’ exist and operate in Singapore, both at the level of policy and at the level of actual practice (Oon 2003).

In a forum entitled You Can’t Please Everyone: Artistic Integrity and Social Responsibility, held at The National University of Singapore (NUS) amidst the polemic surrounding Talaq in October 2000, the then Minister of State for Information and the Arts, David Lim, stressed the importance of maintaining social harmony. Mr. Sasitharan, Co-Director of the Practice Performing Arts School, argued forcefully that an artist must also remain true to another set of values which were to a degree ‘supra-social’:

> I think that artists everywhere will tell you that personal integrity and artistic integrity is tied up with the work that they are doing…Sometimes the highest social responsibility entails that the artist as a true person, as a citizen, as a member of a community speaking for that community, as a member of that community representing the shape of that community, decides to be irresponsible for the sake of truth. And I think that that is an option which may be difficult for a government, or a politician or anyone in power to accept but that is an option the artist must face if he is to work truly in art. (Bereson (Ed) 2001)

What is being debated here is that the artist’s struggle to remain an artist as well as a citizen can at times be conflictual. This is of interest to us because it highlights the dilemma between government pronouncements which affect the arts and the arena of artistic expression and practice.

Perhaps the situation is best described in the RCR itself. MITA perceives its role as helping the arts to serve the greater economic imperatives, or shifting workings to a ‘knowledge based economy’. Effectively, ‘creativity’ is the ‘buzz-word’, alongside the
notions of benchmarking, mapping etc., familiar to all analysts of cultural policy. But here, there can be no argument about the importance of creativity and the arts when properly harnessed to aid ‘our economy and society’:

Apart from the direct economic benefits that accrue to arts and cultural activities, creative and artistic endeavours will also play a decisive role in the future economy. To ensure sustained growth in the long run, Singapore must forge an environment that is conducive to innovations, new discoveries the creation of new knowledge. Knowledge workers will gravitate towards and thrive in places that are vibrant and stimulating. Building up a cultural and creative buzz will thus help to attract both local and foreign talents to contribute to the dynamism and growth of our economy and society. (MITA 2000: 5)

The ‘players’ of that society are spelt out and one wonders if art itself has not also been as rigorously determined:

In order for this to happen, the state, the arts community, the private sector and individual Singaporeans will have their own roles and responsibilities to fulfil. The state and the private sector must provide support and space for the development of the arts. The arts community must strengthen its sense of professionalism and accountability. The private sector and individual citizens must engage in a fruitful and symbiotic partnership with the arts community. (MITA 2000: 5)

This ‘manifesto’ certainly defines what the new art must look like but also describes an environment in which it is unlikely that great art will emerge. Opposition is likely to be non-existent as the recognised arts companies are to receive ‘an additional $5 million per annum over the next 5 years’. The author witnessed soon after this, one mainstream company in receipt of this extra money sporting more laptop computers than there were desks, in their brand new offices which they had moved to in the Prime Minister’s electorate. That company has, since its move, provided what is generally agreed to be work which is of lesser quality than its antecedents, but significantly more ‘product’. Yet all this is justified in the concluding remarks of the RCR:

The Renaissance Singapore vision and recommendations will help us establish a strong position as a premier cultural city in Asia. These initiatives in culture and the arts will demonstrate the Government’s resolve in pursuing policies that will secure a bright, vibrant and creative future for Singaporeans in the 21st century. (MITA 2000: 59)

The link between such claims and the actual creation and sustaining of art and culture seem tenuous. Indeed, what has happened is that there is much infrastructure advertising the existence of the arts and culture and yet it would not appear that the actual amount of good art has increased in proportion to the increased grants, the increase in infrastructure and the increase in ministerial activity. Certainly, Singapore’s best known playwright, the late Kuo Pao Kun, was sceptical of governmental discourse and its building program. In an interview with Sanjay Krishnan, he said:

Official policies can hamper creativity. Creative energies have been held back for too long because it’s the big government that controls the entire national life. If the government learns to devolve control, to let go, many more things will happen without that much money being spent. Officials seem to believe that unless you spend big money, you cannot develop – this isn’t true. People will expand creative spaces for themselves if officials simply learn how to relax their control. Right now there exists a non-creative or an anti-creative policy. (Krishnan 1998: 138)
Thus, to counter government assertions, there remain sceptics amongst some of the best known artists – ironically, those honoured by government as bearers of their cultural medallions, another emblem of governmental infrastructure.

The author observed an example of the kind of art produced through designated policy in 2001 when one of the major companies, TheatreWorks, produced a season of plays entitled *30 Plays in 30 Days*. This ‘professional’ flagship company more than adequately fulfilled the NAC’s criteria of producing local work for the public. Indeed the festival was to present the past ten years of local plays (with the noticeable exception of many plays produced by other major companies) over the period of a month. This was part of a mainstream flagship company’s festival and yet not only were virtually all performances farmed out to amateur groups but rehearsal time was minimal and payment derisory. The performances were often oversold, on occasion the halls were not opened on time and it was rather difficult to actually purchase tickets. Such displays by a major theatre company lead one to pose the question about the quality of art being produced even though the right boxes to satisfy the cultural bureaucrats may have been ticked, and the government given income well and truly banked.

Moreover, in a manner similar to methods used by New York’s autocratic Schubert family at the height of their power, the artistic directors of at least two professional theatre companies will not permit certain newspapers or individual journalists to review their shows. It would seem that unfavourable reviews are no more acceptable to the ‘artistic directors’ than to the ‘cultural bureaucrats’ and that their methods do not differ. What would appear to matter is success, preferably international success and obstacles to failure are, if possible, removed. Of course, not all art groups use such tactics but the proliferation of theatre companies and those calling themselves artists over the decade since the creation of the NAC is considerable. What has also increased is a dialogue concerning the arts. More often than not such a dialogue is tempered by the constraints of a small community who know each other and the critics well or by the nature of the journals. There is a dialogue on the arts e-group which nonetheless does boast a membership of approximately 400 and on which information is exchanged and ideas developed. A few theatre companies, the Substation and other arts groups do hold fora on certain topics as did NUS in 2000 yet the notion of debate is still fledgling, rather timid and affiliation-driven.

One recent ‘arts project’ serves as lens through which one can observe the physical outcomes of the investment in infrastructure on the part of Singapore: The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay complex which opened in October 2002 through which we can ask the questions: to what extent does it act as an agent which brings about the results confidently assumed in official statements about the importance of arts and culture in Singapore; and to what degree does it support the vision of artistic and cultural ‘renaissance’?

The notion of the need for a cultural centre was first mooted in 1976 by Ong Teng Cheong Minister for Culture and later President of the Republic. Feasibility studies were prepared in the 1980s and the project was given the go ahead in 1990. In 1992 the Singapore Arts Centre Company was formed to manage the centre and in 1994 the final plans were unveiled. Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Tony Tan at the ‘ground-breaking’ ceremony held on 12th August 1996, described the Theatre which was estimated to cost S$513.3 million and be completed in 2001, as marking ‘... a new milestone for our nation, a new phase of national development with an emphasis on culture and gracious living’ (*Straits Times* 12 Aug 1996). In 1997 Rear-Admiral Teo Chee Hean, Education Minister and 2nd Minister of Defence unveiled its logo stating that: ‘It will spark the growth and development of Singapore’s performing arts by offering the best performing spaces which will constantly encourage excellence’ (*Straits Times* 20 Nov 1997). The Esplanade ended up costing S$595 million and houses a 2,000 seat theatre, an 1,800 seat concert hall, some smaller performance spaces, extensive food and beverage outlets catering to all budgets and a shopping mall. Originally it was to house an adaptable theatre, and some mid-sized
performance venues and a Chinese stage over the water. As costs escalated, only the larger theatres remained on the drawing board.

The Esplanade’s second director who led it to its opening had considerable experience in running international hotels. Indeed, in October 2000 he proudly spoke of the significant number of beds which could be drawn upon for use by tourists and performers in the theatre’s immediate vicinity. At a press conference held on 23rd May 2002, he had realised many of his ambitions in this arena stating that the Esplanade aims ‘to set new standards in the industry by not only harnessing technology to work for us, but also to be known for aspiring to the highest standards of services and hospitality’ (EC 2002: 3). An alliance with the Oriental Hotel would:

…offer five-star hospitality services to our artists, partners and audiences. These services will extend from accommodation, to catering, front and back of house services as well as the hospitality spaces. For example, artists can enjoy five-star hotel standards of services and amenities in the artists’ dressing rooms and green room while patrons are able to host anything from simple cocktail functions to elaborate outdoor parties at our venues. (EC 2002: 5)

So the new Theatre complex in the director’s words is a ‘customer oriented culture’ (EC 2002: 4). Indeed with the emphasis so firmly on the consumer, why should it be called a theatre complex at all? Its management sees art as a consumer service, not a challenge to the way people live, so why is it any more ‘cultural’ than the hotels and stores which are the heart of Singapore? Indeed on entering the theatre the clearest signs indicate directions to the shopping mall and eating areas rather than the box office or theatre entrance. In many ways it seems to be remarkably similar to Singapore’s International Airport which offers facilities for conferencing and hospitality and incidentally hosts cultural events for transiting passengers. This project is the flagship of the many recent building projects in Singapore. Other such projects have been the re-housing of the MITA and the NAC as well as several galleries, into a brightly painted former police station in the heart of the ‘Arts Precinct’, the maintenance of the Substation and the development of new theatrical spaces and museums.

Without a trace of irony the NAC will be host to the modestly titled Second World Summit on the Arts and Culture, part of the newly created International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA) in November 2003. The Federation describes itself as ‘the first global network of national arts funding bodies’ (IFACCA 2003) and was inaugurated in Ottawa, Canada in November 2000. Furthermore it has been announced in The Straits Times that a proposed confederation of Asia-Pacific Arts Festivals might meet … (in Singapore) for the first time next June (Straits Times Interactive 28 June 2002) also under the auspices of the NAC. Certainly, the bureaucratic face of the Singaporean arts and cultural scene is realising its international objectives and yet at the same time the artistic and cultural life within the country, are perhaps playing a metaphoric second fiddle to the international boardroom of cultural bureaucrats.

It is often taken as a given that arts and cultural ‘policies’ directly affect the arts and culture, and that these two areas in turn directly respond to such policies. What has been suggested is that such a direct and simple two-way-relationship is far from the truth. All aspects of government policy, be they economic, language, education, transport, taxation, tourism, land-use or defence determine a country’s culture and the development of its country’s arts environment. Of equal importance is the fact that a country’s art and culture are determined by its history and by its interaction with other states and civilisations. In Singapore there is certainly evidence, as we have seen, of more economic activity, of more provision and wordier policy-making; but there seems to be little evidence of more sophisticated critical discourse.

This paper set out to explore whether language describing arts and culture of contemporary Singapore by politicians and cultural bureaucrats effectively matched
the reality. It worked from the premise that statements about a culture do not in themselves make a culture although they may seek to advertise, package and promote a desired version of it. It has observed the accretion of public statements made by politicians concerning the arts and culture and puts paid to the belief that recent decisions in the realm of arts policy and infrastructure development are new and responsive measures to a changing environment. It concludes that the language with which we are now familiar has been carefully honed by politicians from many portfolios over the past few decades and serves much larger political agendas than those of the arts and culture.

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