



'Ensamble'
Hajjah Masnah
Painting by Bte Haji Lusin
Brunei

*'The one who plants doesn't
necessarily pick the fruit'*
Painting by Hin Phalla
Cambodia

'Barren'
Painting by Don
Djerassi
L. Dalmacio
Philippines

Defining Arts and Promoting Cultural Exchanges in Southeast Asia

Zoe Matthews shares some of her thoughts on supporting the promotion of arts.



'The Bathroom'
Photo by Ismail Hashim
Malaysia

For some, art may be considered a trivial and dispensable matter, or it may well be considered as vital or valuable to the universal human condition. It may even be considered dangerous, so much so that some would argue the need for it to be regulated or even censored. Art can be perceived as existing for its own sake, as an expression of spontaneous individual creativity, or the dominant cultural or psychological imperatives of society, whatever the time or place.

In present day society, the art world can fundamentally be perceived as functioning in a leisure context, since the concepts of freedom and enjoyment that one would normally associate with leisure, are both commonly used synonymously with the creation and the appreciation of art. But what is the extent to which we can have this freedom? In an ever-increasing globalised and commercialised world, the question of whether the arts can survive in the 'money race' concerns even the remotest parts of Southeast Asia.

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*'Golden Bracelets'
Photo by Leo Nardi
Indonesia*

To start, what is art? The word art has, in the past, generally been used to refer to any kind of skill, such as archery for example, but over time it has developed a more common specialised meaning. Since the 16th Century, there had been imagined to exist seven muses¹ and a practitioner inspired by these muses was referred to as an artist. By the 19th century, these muses were replaced by a group of skills that include painting, drawing, engraving and sculpture, and eventually music composition and creative writing, such as poetry (Williams, 1976).

A problem which becomes more obvious as one is drawn deeper into bringing together a group of activities that can be classed as 'art' is a realisation that it is actually an almost impossible task to place



*'SARS'
Painting by Long Tuan Tran
Vietnam*

an all-encompassing definition of what art actually is. A common approach to attempting this is providing a distinction between what are known as “fine arts” and “popular” or “folk arts”. The following is Zolberg’s (1990) interpretation of the distinctions in art forms today:

Types of Art

Fine Art	Popular Art
Symphonic music, chamber music	Popular music, folk music
Opera	Musical comedy
Serious contemporary music	Jazz
Art works in museums or galleries	Works sold at art fairs or stores
Ballet	<i>Cemetery gravestones</i>
Modern dance	Show dances
Serious drama	Folk or ethnic dance
Experimental theatre	Melodrama or light comedies
TV – educational channel	TV – light programming
Art and classic films	Popular films for entertainment
Serious novels/non-fiction	Mass market novels/non-fiction
Specialised periodicals	Mass circulation periodicals
Poetry/literary criticism	Advertising blurbs
Art comic strip books	Mass circulation comic books

Source: V. Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, pg. 144

Scholars and intellectuals differ amongst themselves in the ways they view society and social processes. However, as Zolberg states in her book “Constructing a Sociology of the Arts”, the way in which an

¹ The Muses, in Greek or Roman myth, were nine goddesses who protected and encouraged poetry, music, dancing, history and other branches of art and literature (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 1989).

individual defines art is dependent on the extent of a preference towards the humanistic principles, such as art history or aesthetics. The humanist school of thought revolves around aesthetic quality or ethical or moral correctness, i.e. they are interested in what constitutes “great” art. This is known, according to Zolberg, as the “internalist” perspective whereby elements such as the techniques and media used, or content of imagery, are analysed.

Panofsky (1955) defined a work of art as a ‘man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically’. In his definition, he describes the actual process by which reality is brought to the study of humanities. Art historians studying sculpture are not merely concerned with how the sculpture exists materially but how meaningful its existence is, and they are able to nurture this concern by reproducing and ‘realising’ the emotions manifested in a work of art. Hence, if one can use this concept of art as a meaningful process by which there is reproduction and realisation of one’s emotions in identifying with a work of art, is there a specific context in which this reproduction and appreciation can occur?

One such context in which art is believed to be an intrinsic part is culture. According to E.B. Tylor, “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society” (Waters, 1989). Generally, the word “culture” seems to be used to indicate, although not explicitly, a formation of a body of values, making it almost equivalent to the word society, in that it is a particular way of life, i.e. ‘Khmer culture’, ‘Malaysian culture’, etc..

In the pre-18th Century environment, the concept of culture was generally linked to agriculture, i.e. as a process where a farmer tends to the natural growth of his crops in cultivating his land (Williams, 1976). By the 19th Century, the word ‘culture’ distinguished human and material characteristics and was held to have contrasting ideas to a mechanical society. Culture involved indulging in knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, creativity, intellectual activity and receptiveness to new ideas, and thus, in such ways culture was inherently linked to the concept of art.

Contrastingly, culture has been separated from the idea of a mechanical society – one based purely on work and capitalism – repressing any creative input whatsoever (Waters, 1989). An unfortunate



'Cigarette Vendor'
Photo by Claro Cortes IV
Philippines

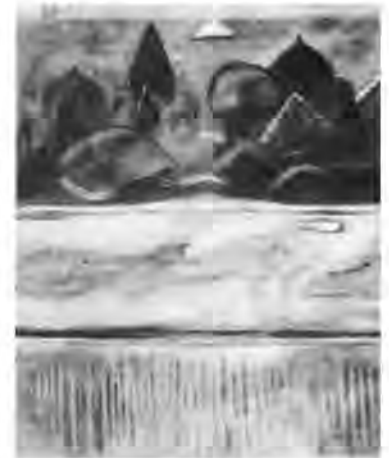
result of this is that culture and the arts became separate from the 'real' business of life, i.e. work. Nevertheless, if an artist can be perceived as a skilled worker, making works of art as a commodity or service for income, can he/she not then be noted as engaging in the 'real' business of life?

According to Waters (1989), "... if culture is accepted to mean the whole way of life of a particular people, then the arts have an important place within that way of life ..." The link between art and culture is safe in its generality. In fact, if one looks in retrospect at the histories of most world cultures, one tends to judge their worth by the remnants of artistic works of the culture. For example, "The Ramayana", a fundamental model to spiritual consciousness in Buddhist and Hindu societies, is depicted in numerous temples across Southeast Asia, such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Referring to the work of Dumazedier ("Towards a Society of Leisure", 1967), Waters argues that art not only gives pleasure to its audience or creator but also provides relaxation and uplifts their spirit through the benefit of the symbolic characteristic of art. It is a medium through which the creators can express what cannot be put into words, i.e. art can visually represent fears, hopes and joys, provide excitement, novelty, imagination and a sense of mystery. Artists, then, as sensitive members of their society, imagine, dream, think, feel, and communicate in the context of their world (Russell, 1996). The audience, on the other hand, receive that sense of empathy, although their hopes, fears, etc. are, in effect, being expressed by another, they are still sharing and identifying with the experience of that person. Waters referred to a saying in Bali: "We have no artists, everyone is an artist."

Inevitably, meanings and values of works of art have to depend, at some point, on taste. Bourdieu (1979) wrote that "taste is an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate', and it functions as a tool of social orientation – an individual's taste guides them to a specific social clique". In fact, sociologically, consumer tastes set the conditions for how cultural goods, such as

"... the sheer appreciation of the beauty of the world, and higher values, conveys a sense of being alive in a way that speaking can't. It is spiritually rewarding – we have grown to love the intellect and the understanding that art reflects..."
(from BBC television documentary *Art and Science: the Two Cultures*, directed by Mark Harrison, 1999)



'The Journey'
Painting by Sharifah
Fatimah Zubir
Malaysia

works of art, are produced. At the same time, consumer tastes tend to dictate the different ways works of art are acquired. Bourdieu argues that artistic tastes actually reinforce social divisions within society and widen the social gap between the higher socio-economic groupings and the lower, a divide which is already a phenomenon prevalent in Southeast Asian societies. This consequently results in two distinct perceptions of culture: popular culture, perceived to be for the masses and the art-inexperienced, and high culture, generally perceived to be appreciable only by the elite and the social upper classes.

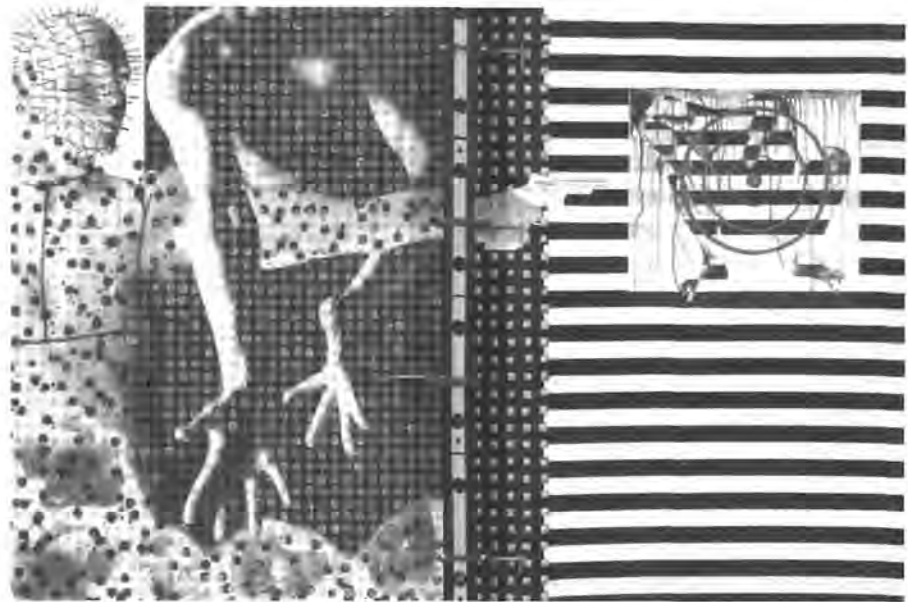
However, it can be argued that it is not an essential requirement of any “gallery-goer”, for example, to have specialised knowledge of artistic products, and surely the nature of art is such that anybody who enters a gallery or museum will still be able to judge and appreciate art works at their own discretion, however art-experienced they are. This is the unfortunate implication of a sociological investigation into art’s effect on social status – we tend to ignore the leisure element in which arts participation is primarily for. Therefore, much time is wasted on arguing about how appreciation of art has the effect of classifying the ‘appreciator’ into a social class, i.e. one who enjoys art is of the higher class and highly educated, a mistake of course. Art is basically a leisure past time, and it can be a pleasurable and even healthy experience for all those wishing to dabble in it – both ‘appreciator’ and ‘doer’.



'Flute Players'
Painting by Mulyadi W
Indonesia

So, given that the arts and culture involve indulging in knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, creativity, intellectualism and receptiveness to new ideas, the meaning of these terms in human development and self-awareness is far-reaching, whatever social grouping the individual is in. It is important not to lose sight of this fact in the argument over what social conditions are necessary for a person to enjoy art. It is also

'Unbalance'
Mixed Media by
Zakaria Bin Omar
Brunei



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true that although the forms and content of art have undergone a constant change over time, art has always been a medium, passed from one generation to another, which emphasises the importance of a sense of history and what it means to be human, as well as a reinforcement of one's cultural identity. Therefore, to continue with this sense of passing art on for more generations to come as a leisure medium, through which meaningful human essence can be found, it needs to be supported and sustained so that it is capable of changing with the trends of the leisure industry and our society, while still retaining that essential human quality at the same time.

Cultural Exchanges

In addition to the passing of art and the perpetual reinforcement of cultural values through the generations, it could be perceived that as the world gets smaller, provision for "cultural exchange" becomes vital. Although traditional art forms in the Southeast Asian region have shown evidence of liberal cross-community exchanges and appropriation, cultural exchange is a recent invention. It is an invention designed to develop an arena for challenging collaborations that face the questions of difference between cultures, as well as to explore the tensions between global and local identities and perhaps foster cross-cultural understanding or awareness. However, bringing artists from different countries together can be costly and, thus, formal structures of exchange between the more economically disadvantaged Asian countries are limited. On top of the lack of funds available to local arts organisations

in Southeast Asia, the intellectual, political and social environment in the area is such that there is a great deal to be desired in terms of access to arts practice, when compared to the situation in the Western world.

Nevertheless, several funding programmes have been established to rectify the situation, such as Arts Network Asia (ANA), the Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectual. ANA, set up in September 1999, provides grants ranging between US\$1,000 to US\$10,000 each for projects meant to bring about a collaboration between artists in Southeast Asia. One such project was the collaborative work of the Malaysian Shakti Dances in Indonesia and Thailand. Beyond the funds, ANA provides successful applicants access to generations of practitioners across Asia, and has the potential to promote the idea of cultural exchange in the arts.

Meanwhile, the ASEAN committee on Culture and Information represents another body concerned with enhancing awareness toward promoting regional identity and solidarity by way of cultural immersion programmes. These include the ASEAN Photo Competition and Exhibition, implemented with the aim of attaining a heightened sense of awareness and understanding among the participants as well as the viewing public; the ASEAN Youth Camp held in Laos; and the People-to-People Exchange Programme held in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. In addition, the ASEAN Declaration of Concord (October 2003) mandated that ASEAN "shall nurture talent and promote interaction among ASEAN scholars, writers, artists and media practitioners to help preserve and promote ASEAN's diverse cultural heritage ..."

Even more encouraging has been the input from foreign mission programmes, primarily of countries such as the US, Japan, Germany, Australia and France. A classic example is the Ford Foundation, which supports collaboration among the non-profit, government and business sectors to build common understanding, enhance excellence in the arts and other areas, and enable people to improve their lives. However, although an appropriately equitable power-balance is generally maintained, it should be continually monitored to prevent criticism over cultural imperialism. Nonetheless, the combination of initiatives taken by the ASEAN and other funding bodies, both local and foreign, has so far been the main thrust in the promotion of the arts in Southeast Asia.



*'Animal Transportation'
Hans Liando Indarto
Indonesia*



*Drawing by
Pattanapong Varanyanon
Thailand*

Participation in the Visual Arts

Looking elsewhere for the type of opportunities created by agencies to support the arts, the effort of the Arts Council of England (ACE) provides an interesting example.

A fundamental objective of ACE has been to position visual art in a key role in regeneration of socially-deprived areas across England. Toward this end, the ACE involved the National Lottery in the arts funding process.

The Government introduced the National Lottery in 1994, with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) responsible for the introduction of the legislation which established the Lottery, and the distribution mechanisms. Camelot Group, who operated the Lottery, allocated 28% of the overall proceeds to causes such as the arts, heritage, sports, and charities. The money was distributed to ACE by the DCMS, and by June 1999, ACE had allocated more than £1 billion to 8,400 projects throughout England. The grants were allocated to three main arts projects in the visual arts field, Capital projects, Public Art project, and The Arts for Everyone (A4E) Programme.

The impact of lottery capital awards has been dramatic, transforming the visual arts landscape with new spaces, better public access and facilities. It was found that lottery funding transformed the arts infrastructure, and created sponsorship projects contributing to an increase in arts venues. Those arts venues that were in need of restoration have been turned into state-of-the-art places.

The A4E scheme, in particular, has widened the range of school and community projects, as well as exhibitions and events specializing in crafts and the applied arts. It has garnered greater participation in the visual arts. In fact, the A4E Express Scheme allocated grants to 917 visual arts project, contributing to a value totaling £3.6 million. It also created short-term employment for individual professional groups and developed new forms of artistic practice, such as new media.

For example, Imag@nation, a new media agency in Bristol, received an A4E grant to support a three-year digital media project which aimed to bring together artists and young people with arts and media companies to explore the creative potential of new technology. An A4E award was also granted to the Walsall Museum and Art Gallery

for its 'Me and You' project which introduced very young visitors and their carers to newly-commissioned contemporary art.

Unfortunately, lottery funds can only be an example of the contribution toward increasing participation in the arts. Lottery money could not be a substitute for public funds, and the Government of England has a clear policy against this.

Funding from lottery provided one-off opportunities and capital improvements, but the long-term support of public funding for infrastructure and vigorous arts and cultural exchange remains an issue to focus on if efforts to promote access to and excellence in the arts of Southeast Asia are to succeed.

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