

## **ANCER Lab 03 | Manila**

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“How are you, the Asian arts world?” This question seems an apt opening to the ANCER Lab 03, Manila, an event that would normally have seen us gathering in person but took place online instead due to the still raging Covid-19 pandemic. The world has changed significantly this past year and a half and arts communities worldwide have been deeply affected. The ANCER Lab 03 took place on 6-7 October 2021, and was jointly organised by LASALLE College of the Arts Singapore and the Arts and Culture Cluster, De La Salle- College of Saint Benilde Manila. Together with the focus on Manila, we also took a closer look at how the arts and cultural sectors in other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Japan and Cambodia, were coping amidst the pandemic. It was an opportunity to understand what is happening in each society, how local cultural workers operate, how artists negotiate changes in cultural and artistic policy, and how they understand their world. ANCER Founder, Dr. Venka Purushothaman, calls this “the voices of contemporary Asia”.

### **THE ROLE OF THE ARTS MANAGER**

Day 1 of the ANCER Lab was a series of discussions between invited members of the ANCER network, speakers from the public event of Day 2 of the programme, faculty of the organizing institutions, and MA Arts & Cultural Leadership students of LASALLE College of the Arts. Focusing on the field of arts management education by both formal and informal education organisations, we learned that the dilemmas faced and the responses made by the arts sector, and the attempt to reconcile theory with practice, are very similar throughout Asia. How do we apply the theory of arts management to practical use? There is an awareness that the future role of arts managers needs to be redefined, and we also need to rethink sustainability in the ecosystem. All the thoughts and conversations can be summed up in one word - reality! How can the arts survive in reality, especially during the difficult times of the pandemic, when people in society are focused on the mere survival of humanity?

Theodora Agni from Shifting Realities, based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, was particularly concerned about the working conditions that the arts manager faces, and the constant multi-tasking that they are expected to perform. This would lead to long working hours, and with poor remuneration, there is a danger of emotional burnout. Hence, with a clearer defining of boundaries and roles, we may be able to create better systems of support for arts managers today.

## OPPORTUNITIES AMIDST COVID-19

The afternoon session featured an overview of the visual arts and the performing arts scenes in the Philippines by visual artist, curator, and educator Karen Flores and transdisciplinary performance maker, artist, and teacher, Eric dela Cruz, who shared their respective sectors' experiences of dealing with the effects of the pandemic. Despite the dark moments, delays, cancellations and even closures caused by COVID-19, they described how there was space and time to develop new ideas for a diverse and sustainable future. Arts groups explored collaborations between each other, and looked for alternative ways of audience participation. Artists and art groups had more time to reflect on survival issues, and to make connections with fellow artists. They have been forced to create and innovate in order to survive, and there have been opportunities to embark on new entrepreneurial pursuits.

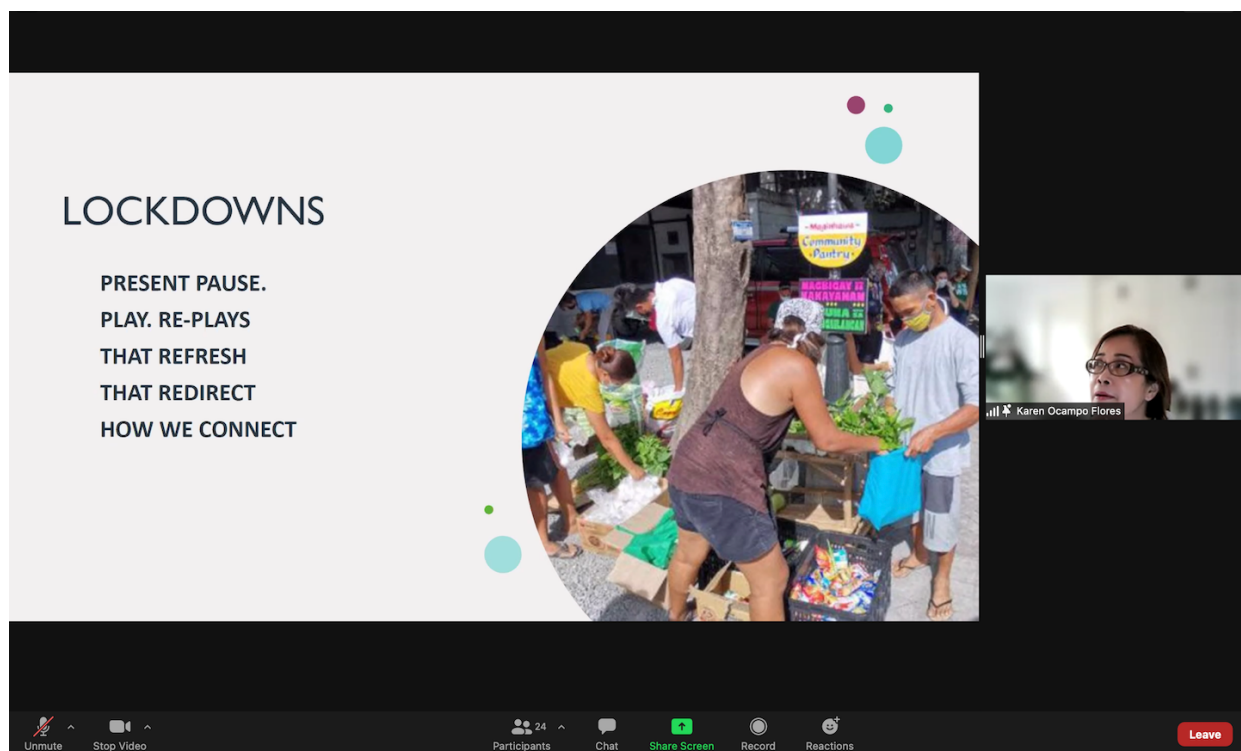


Image: Karen Flores presenting an overview of the visual arts sector in the Philippines.

In particular, the move to digitalise performances and exhibitions presented a host of opportunities. Digital platforms provide accessibility and there are lower barriers to entry, possibly reducing the need for a venue space and requiring less manpower. An example is the online exhibition “To Differ Digitally 2: Love and Dissent in the Time of Pandemic”, which was meant to showcase a protest for change. Also, more theatre groups in the Philippines are using online platforms such as *Broadway On Demand* and *Kumu*, to stream and monetise their performances.

## DIGITAL LIMITATIONS

However, the move to digitalisation has also presented a number of problems. Firstly, there are limitations due to the level of digital accessibility amongst the population. For instance, within the Philippines, there was a move towards providing storytelling and outreach activities via digital means, but that presented the necessity to coordinate with Local Government Units (LGU) to ensure that there would be adequate internet connection and devices for the audiences to enjoy the digital performances.

Also, even though digital platforms provide more accessibility, online offerings can be very similar as they are shown through the same platforms. For museums and galleries, for example, in-person exhibitions may be able to use environmental, design and technical strategies to differentiate one exhibition from the other. Online, however, there could be more competition because different companies could produce similar concepts. Unless companies find other means to differentiate their products, there may be audience fatigue due to the similarity of offerings.

The emergence of these innovative forms also raises new issues. Without the ability to “see” our audience members, how do we communicate with them? How do we identify them, engage with them, and better understand their needs? These are important issues that we may need to address, as we continue to pursue digitally innovative ways of presenting our work.

## ARE THE ARTS ESSENTIAL?

Meanwhile, similar to what occurred in Singapore with the media highlighting the arts as “non-essential”, the arts workers in the Philippines realised the low priority of the arts in the eyes of the government, as this was made vividly evident during the pandemic. Government support for arts freelancers in the Philippines has been and is low, leading the arts community to rally together and fundraise for the more needy members of the sector. There was a move to identify arts freelancers, in an attempt to raise more awareness to the plight of the industry. In addition, a Creative Industries Development Bill has been passed in the House of Representatives in the Philippines, proposing the creation of a Philippines Creative Industry Development Council to improve the creative sector.

## CONCLUSION

Day 1 of the ANCER Lab 03 gave us much food for thought. There are many similarities in the way the arts world has reacted to the pandemic - transitioning to digital means, finding space for

introspection, questioning the role of arts in society, and organising as an arts community. However, the arts and cultural sector has not yet survived the pandemic. A large number of arts workers have changed their career plans and moved out of the sector, which has led to a talent drain. It is still unclear whether they will return once the situation gets better. Unfortunately, the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts is still uncertainty.

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