



ANCER Lab 04

Bangkok

3-4 March 2023



INTRODUCTION

ANCER Lab is a platform for critical conversations on the development and management of arts and culture in Southeast Asia and one of the core programmes of ANCER (Asia-Pacific Network of Cultural Education and Research). The fourth ANCER Lab took place in Bangkok, Thailand, from 3-4 March 2023. Designed to provide a snapshot of arts activity and infrastructure in Bangkok both private and public and engage in conversation with local practitioners and arts workers, the two-day visit included visits and meetings with select key individuals and agencies and a public half day event, the ANCER Lab Conversations, on the theme of the relationships between funders and arts practitioners.

In Southeast Asia, much cultural work is supported by individual patronage, and corporate sponsorship as well as international funding agencies. National-level government support, with the exception of Singapore, tends to be inconsistent and in different stages of development, and in the case of some countries, virtually non-existent. Thailand, along with its neighbours such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, has some fairly well-established hard infrastructure for arts and culture, along with dedicated government agencies and institutions tasked with supporting and developing the cultural and creative sectors. There is also an abundance of artistic talent and creative energy in Thailand. Bangkok is a bustling metropolis known for its tourism, shopping and food, and, to a somewhat lesser extent arguably, its arts. As a major city in the region, however, with a large, aspirational and growing middle class, globally connected elites, and significant foreign investment, there are opportunities for private corporate support and more substantial development of the arts and creative sectors. The government has acknowledged the importance of the cultural and creative industries through the establishment of agencies such as the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), but there seem to be disconnections between arts workers and policy, which also emerged in the ANCER Lab Conversation.

Sustaining an arts organisation or cultural initiative, funding artistic work, making sure people are paid a decent wage, are all preoccupations for arts and culture workers. Previous ANCER Labs have looked at questions of policy and patronage, the role of networks and ways to cultivate greater agency amongst artist communities. The focus of the ANCER Lab Bangkok Conversations aimed to reflect on the relationships with funders, patrons and donors – to avoid the old yet persistent refrain of there never being enough money, and instead foster more critical reflection on how to steer relationships in order to sustain artistic work, and to better understand the power dynamics inherent in these.

Participants of the ANCER Lab include MA Art & Cultural Leadership students from LASALLE College of the Arts and invited ANCER network members to be active participants in the Conversation: Linda Hoemar Abidin, Co-founder, Koalisi Seni, Indonesia; Sokhorn Yon, Programme Director, Cambodia Living Arts, Cambodia; and Mio Yachita, Research Fellow, Osaka Metropolitan University, Associate Fellow, National Ainu Museum, Japan. Thai presenters in the Conversation were Sasapin Siriwanij, Artistic Director, BIPAM (Bangkok International Performing Arts Market), and Suranya Poonyaphitak, Independent Producer, Coordinator & Administrator at BICT Fest (Bangkok International Children's Theatre Festival). The ANCER Lab Conversations was co-moderated by Audrey Wong of LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, and Siree Riewpaiboon of BIPAM who also provided skillful English-Thai interpretation.

MEETINGS AND VISITS

Over a day and a half, we visited the government agencies TCDC, the Thailand Creative & Design Center/Creative Economy Agency, and the Bangkok Art Culture Centre (BACC); as well as the independently run Documentary Club; a contemporary art gallery, Warin Lab Contemporary; and met with a gathering of independent theatre practitioners in the People of Ari (PoA) White Box, located above a trendy café, Yellow Lane, in the fashionable and leafy Ari neighbourhood. The visits revealed different forms of arts infrastructure, mostly privately developed. Also the venue for the ANCER Lab Conversations, Yellow Lane is a small and versatile venue catering to the Bangkok independent arts and creative communities. The 52-seat screening room and bar of the Documentary Club is located in the Woof Pack, a five-story building near Lumpini Park managed by a creative agency, housing a mixed-used creative community of office, retail and F&B spaces, as well as an art gallery and event spaces for hire. Warin Lab Contemporary was founded in 2021 by Sukontip Nakasem, a successful art entrepreneur and gallerist, and is an art space with an explicit mission to focus on issues of sustainability. Worth mentioning is its location in Charoenkrung, an historic neighbourhood, now developing into the latest cultural hub of the city, and housed in the former residence of Dr. Boonsong Lekagul (1907-1992), a legendary Thai wildlife conservationist credited as the founder of the conservation movement in Thailand. Bangkok, is, of course, a sprawling city with much more to offer, but the three different locations provide a glimpse into the variety and vibrancy of the city's art scenes, also demonstrating the relationship between creative entrepreneurship and art.

Government Support for Arts and Culture

The Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC)

The Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC) was created by Cabinet resolution on September 2, 2003, and was officially established on June 18, 2004, placed under the supervision of the Office of Knowledge Management and Development (Public Organisation), which is in turn part of the Office of the Prime Minister. Since 2017 TCDC has been located in the Grand Postal Building, a historic building in the Bang Rak District of Bangkok and in 2018 were “reestablished” by royal decree as the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), Thailand's new official government agency tasked with creative industries development. Their official mission as stated on their website is to “promote the Creative Economy as the driving force to a balanced and sustainable economy” and they do this through several thrusts, including data collection and knowledge dissemination, incubation and research, supporting the development of creative districts, and the management of public-facing centres such as TCDC's library and resource centre. The agency also acts as “the focal point for inter-ministerial collaboration and public-private partnerships in support of the CCI sector” and has been a driving force behind the formation of “industry associations, federations, regional cooperation clusters and local cooperation clusters”¹.

In our meeting with representatives from the CEA, they stressed the organisation's role as being not a funding agency, but to support developmental needs of the sector such as drawing up databases and indicators for creative industries and creative cities – highly necessary work for strategic planning and which has been highlighted as a need in Thailand in the 2019 UNESCO report, *Backstage* (Janamohanam, et al., 120). They also identified a lack of trained

¹ Data source: Thailand Country Brief in *Backstage: Managing Creativity and the Arts in South-East Asia*, by Janamohanam et al. UNESCO, p. 117

arts managers and shared courses they have supported in cooperation with international agencies UNESCO and the British Council. They have also produced mapping reports of the creative industries. In presenting their projects for creative city and creative district development they recognise the importance of local communities and stress an element of care to mitigate the effects of gentrification. The plans and activities described and the optimism of the officers is inspiring but it is worth mentioning that the (re)establishment and drive of these agency actors are susceptible to political changes, and the success of their initiatives and policy implementation will inevitably be influenced by the stability of the Thai government which has undergone some turbulent times in recent years.

Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC)

Described as an “art center for the people”, the campaign advocating for the founding of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre took over a decade with active grassroots participation through the Thai Artists’ Network and the agreement of the Bangkok governor and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, but with delays resulting from changes in political appointments. Since its eventual opening in July 2008, the centre has been beset by challenges, with among other things, criticisms of its “lack of vision”, “architectural compromise” and un-articulated long-term vision².

Between 2018 and 2019, the centre found itself making headlines, first with a controversial announcement by the BMA to turn the building into a co-working space, presumably due to a perceived need to be run more profitably, with then governor Aswin Kwanmuang quoted as saying “Each year the city supports the BACC with 40 million baht. If we could manage this money ourselves, we could develop the center in appropriate ways”³. Public outcry led to the scrapping of this plan, but then in October 2019 the BMA abruptly dismissed the BACC director, a respected art critic and academic, Pawit Mahasarinand, leading to further reactions by the artist community of Bangkok, covered by both local and regional media⁴.

In 2022, the BACC appointed a new director, Adulaya (Kim) Hoontrakul, who has acknowledged the challenges the organisation faces in terms of funding and income generation, and the question of the identity of the BACC and its role to the public.

BACC is managed by the BACC Foundation, and reports directly to the BMA. It is “a multifunction arts centre” with educating audiences on art appreciation a primary part of its mission. In our meeting, the director Kim described the organisation’s focus on audience building, training for arts professionals and the provision of space for arts groups and artists, all important areas for sustaining the development of contemporary art. Although it is a major venue for the Bangkok Biennale⁵, the emphasis is less on curating and presenting their own programmes, but more on their role for the larger ecosystem, and ensuring that they work “in the interest” of the BMA and in alignment with the BACC board who plays a role in setting themes or the direction of the organisation. Their flagship projects include an incubation

² See Lola Lenzi, “BACC opens to contemporary art” in *Mutual Art*, Dec 26, 2008.

<https://www.mutualart.com/Article/BACC-opens-to-Contemporary-art/2115FB5A54A0A59C>

³ Asaree Thairakulpanic, “The city actually wants to turn BCC into a coworking space”, May 12, 2018.

<https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/bangkok/2018/05/12/the-city-actually-wants-to-turn-bacc-into-a-coworking-space/>

⁴ See “BACC: Whose art centre is it anyway?” by Siriwat Pokrajien, *Arts Equator*. 23 October 2019.

<https://artsequator.com/bacc-pawit/>

⁵ The Bangkok Art Biennale is managed by the Bangkok Art Biennale Foundation and organised with the support of Thai Beverage Public Company Limited (ThaiBev), the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB). BACC has been listed as one of six venues for the 2024-2025 BAB.

programme, now in its seventh year, which provides funding and mentorship for young artists and culminates in a showcase; a “Masters series” programme, the title bestowed on national artists by the Ministry of Culture; and they are also in the process of reviving their music programmes. They also work in partnership with various collaborators. BACC, thus, is acting as a hub for arts and artists, through their in-house programming and their collaborative showcases, along with housing small creative entrepreneurs in their retail spaces and attempting to develop critical thinking amongst the public through art.

Kim acknowledges the activism of the generation of artists who lobbied for the creation of the BACC –and this activism and energy of the community and acknowledgement of their “pioneers” was apparent in our meetings and interactions with the independent theatre practitioners, underscoring the importance and vitality of grassroots arts advocates and artists. However, this can also result in the impression of artists occasionally being out for themselves or for survival, “people trying to water their own plants”. A significant point raised was the lack of a governing body that unites all the arts and creative sectors, and the lack of a policy that clearly states support and sets strategic directions for the development of the arts beyond Thai classical art.

Crucial to the successful and continued operation of the BACC will be to balance the government authorities’ expectations of the BACC to provide a free public service yet still be economically viable, while also fulfilling the needs of the arts communities.



Top left: Meeting at TCDC, Creative Economy Agency
Bottom left: Warin Lab Contemporary.



Right: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre

ANCER Lab Conversations

วงสนทนา (Wong Sontana)

BANGKOK

Saturday 4 March 2023, 2:00-6:00 pm

Venue: PoA White Box at Yellow Lane, Ari Soi 1
2, 92 Phahon Yothin 5, Samsen Nai, Phaya Thai, Bangkok 10400

SCHEDULE

1:45 – 2:00 pm	Registration
2:00 – 2:15 pm	<u>Welcome & Introduction</u> Introduction to the Lab by Audrey Wong , Programme Leader, MA Arts & Cultural Leadership, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
2:15 – 3:45 pm	<u>Roundtable Conversation about Funders</u> <u>Regional speakers:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linda Hoemar Abidin, Co-founder, Koalisi Seni, Indonesia • Sokhorn Yon, Programme Director, Cambodia Living Arts, Cambodia • Mio Yachita, Research Fellow, Osaka Metropolitan University, Associate Fellow, National Ainu Museum, Japan <u>Thai speakers</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sasapin Siriwanij, Artistic Director, BIPAM • Suranya Poonyaphitak, Independent Producer, Coordinator & Administator at BICT Fest (Bangkok International Children's Theatre Festival)
3:45– 4:15 pm	Coffee break
4:15 – 5:45 pm	<u>Roundtable discussion</u> Moderated by Audrey Wong and Siree Riewpaiboon
5:45 – 6:00 pm	Closing remarks

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

Linda Hoemar Abidin, Co-founder, Koalisi Seni, Indonesia

Linda opened the session by describing her personal journey as a dance student funded by the New York-based Asian Cultural Council (founded in 1963 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd), who became fascinated by the administrative side of the arts, leading her to obtain an MA in Arts Administration from Columbia University, New York. She explained how her personal experience with her sponsors instilled in her an early understanding of the need to cultivate and maintain relationships with funders, emphasising the need to invest time and energy to get to know them – the “art of hanging out with funders”. She highlighted the fact that funders are also networked and speak to each other, demonstrating the need to be aware of funders’ relationships outside of ones’ own organisational relationship, as well as of the constant potential for new opportunities. However, she also acknowledges challenges they face of

navigating relationships with funding bodies due to personnel changes, and shifting interests of funders who are currently more interested in issues such as climate change and less in the arts.

The organisation she represents, Koalisi Seni (“Arts Coalition”), was founded in 2010 as an umbrella organisation to represent the needs to the arts communities of Indonesia to “talk to government”. Starting as a group of individuals from a diverse range of arts and culture fiends, coming together in West Java, Koalisi Seni now consists of 200+ members from 21 provinces across the country. Advocacy is at the heart of their work and their vision is a healthier arts ecosystem in Indonesia through supportive public policies⁶. Two major successes of the Koalisi are the advocacy for a culture bill which became the Law for the Advancement of Culture in 2017, and the successful lobbying for the establishment of an endowment for culture. They continue to push for culture to be seen as an investment, not a cost, and have several strands of advocacy being carried out by their well-organised and dedicated members.



ANCER Lab Conversations. Left: Linda Hoemar Abdullah. Right: Sokhorn Yon

Sokhorn Yon, Programme Director, Cambodia Living Arts, Cambodia

Cambodia Living Arts (CLA) was founded 25 years ago as a grassroots initiative, supported initially by friends who trusted and believed in the founder’s vision. Approximately 80% of their work is focused on grant-making – they administer five types of grants with a major focus on capacity building. In the absence of state agencies for arts and culture development, CLA plays the role of an intermediary agency to provide opportunities for artists and to develop the arts and culture sector of Cambodia. The majority of funds (90%) came initially from American donors, but as the organisation grew, they also started to diversify their income.

By 2019, their income distribution was more or less 1/3 individual donors, 1/3 grants and 1/3 earned income through the activities of the cultural enterprise arm of CLA. However, the cultural enterprise had to close as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in the current situation where the funding distribution is more 70% grants and 30% from individuals.

Sokhorn’s presentation focused on three questions: how to turn individual donors into loyal supporters; how to know who you are in a relationship, especially with high-profile one(s); and what to do if confusion/conflict arises in the relationship. First, she emphasises staying close to the organisation’s mission and core values, maintaining constant engagement with their donors. Recognising that international grants and foundations typically have more requirements and may often be more restrictive, she highlights a need to adapt their own ways

⁶ See the Koalisi Seni website for more information: <https://koalisiseni.or.id/en/>

of thinking and working and to learn new languages. CLA also recognises a need to manage their internal expectations, while making sure always to maintain their core values as an arts and culture organisation. They do this by having trust in their own processes while building into their work time for regular and constant reflection. Confusion or conflict is managed by always being open to conversation and maintaining a genuine desire for resolution and to seek alignment with the funder. There is also a strong recognition that the signing of an agreement “is just the start” of the relationship and that there will be an entire process to follow. At the core of the CLA approach is the belief in the organisation’s purpose and mission.

Mio Yachita, Research Fellow, Osaka Metropolitan University and Associate Fellow, National Ainu Museum, Japan

Currently working at the National Ainu Museum, Japan, Mio presented a perspective informed by her experience as the Head of Culture for the Japan Foundation, based in Malaysia from 2012-2016. Her presentation was organised along the lines of “3+1 fundamental tips” towards a good relationship with your funder:

- 1) Understand what the funder wants: “the grant is not charity for you.” It is crucial to be clear about what funders *really* want – what are the initial / hidden / ultimate goal(s)?
 - 2) Always know what *you* want first. Resist force-fitting your work to a funder’s needs. It is important to find a balance between what you need, your mission, core values and the funder’s expectations, and know your bottom line so you know how to adapt the programme to fit the grant’s objective without compromising your integrity.
 - 3) Are you in the right pool? In other words, is the grant the best fit for you and your organization / your work? If the grant is not the right fit, look for alternatives. Cast the net wider, while knowing your strengths.
- +1 (Bonus tip): what if you don’t feel like you fit anywhere?
If nothing is working, perhaps you are trying to do something new or risky or unfamiliar, which is an opportunity for new innovation.

Mio followed this with four examples of organisations demonstrating innovation:

- i) Paradise AIR, artist residency in a former love hotel, with a creative tenant paying rent (income) and government grants to support the residency programme.
- ii) Arts Initiative Tokyo, a small curator-led organization that runs exclusive art classes targeted at a higher wealth market, and also art consultation services.
- iii) KL Shakespeare players (Malaysia), using forum theatre for corporate training – a new market and source of income.
- iv) PHARE social circus and social enterprise, whose public performances generate income that supports an art school (Cambodia).

Mio also raised a point about strength in solidarity, citing Japan’s new association for arts workers fighting for insurance and other needs, which developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. This point echoes the work of Indonesia’s Koalisi Seni and Cambodia’s CICADA (the Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development & Advocacy) which was formed in 2022 and of which CLA is a founding member. A clear trend across the three country examples, despite obvious differences in cultural practices, economy and political leadership, is the need for artists and arts workers to share models, unite, and work together for the advancement of the sector.



Mio Yachita

Suranya Poonyaphitak, Independent Producer, Coordinator & Administrator at BICT Fest (Bangkok International Children's Theatre Festival)

The Bangkok International Children's Theatre Festival is a biannual festival that does creative workshops and other activities in between, deriving income from ticket sales and sales of merchandise. Suranya focused her presentation on the BICT during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the festival was forced to move online and run without the selling of tickets. Half their funding came from international sources, with a small amount of corporate funds, and in-kind sponsorship from the Thai government. The festival is very reliant on international funds – embassies, cultural funds—and international artists typically obtain their own funding to come to Thailand.

BACC is a venue supporter of the festival but other government agencies are perceived as challenging to work with or lacking in the level of support and understanding provided. Suranya made some careful but critical statements about the relationship of the BICT with government agencies. The OCAC, Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, under the Ministry of Culture, was described as “should be the one who supports us a lot”, however, this is apparently not the case and the relationship is perceived as challenging. The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TECP) now has a fund for arts and culture and they have been working with BICT, but their main goal is to bring foreigners into Thailand, and the international festival does not bring in as many people as commercial conventions and large expos. She also cites recent policy changes at TCEP that makes it harder for arts workers to meet their goals. CEA – the Creative Economy Agency— is a provider of space and this is also a relationship she hopes to see become more meaningful.

Corporate funders are the hardest to tackle in her opinion, citing that successful obtaining of funds is always 100% through personal relationship – e.g., “my friend owns the company”— and without this social capital, would be impossible.

Sasapin Siriwanij, Artistic Director, BIPAM (Bangkok International Performing Arts Market)

In addition to running BIPAM (founded in 2016 and currently presented biannually), Sasapin is also an actor and member of the theatre company, B-Floor theatre. Her presentation was a reflection on relationships that balanced the ideal with the pragmatic. Starting by emphasizing that relationships are between *people*, she acknowledged that while always wanting to find a “win-win situation”, a “sacrificial relationship is not practical”. One needs to mutually define what the win is for both parties, and take the time to do so; to not be shy in asking if unable to identify the other’s needs rather than guessing or trying to figure it out on your own. She also advocated strongly for establishing a relationship of transparency and to be honest in one’s dealings with potential funders and partners: “We know there are things we need from each other, no need to pretend we don’t”. Vital in a partnership mindset is to have the conviction of what you have to offer – to never beg!— and be secure in the knowledge that both parties are looking for the way to mutually fulfill each other’s mission. Although the result is not always balanced, the basic understanding must be there that both sides are gaining/benefiting.

In BIPAM’s experience, many times they do not receive monetary support, but instead receive endorsement, in-kind sponsorships, and “connections”. Sasapin recognizes that sometimes despite shared objectives and mutual desires, there simply may not be the funds to make it happen the way you want. However, the goodwill developed through the process and mutual understanding gained is seen as a relationship that continues and that can grow and build.

On working with the government, Sasapin stresses that there also needs to be a mutual point and of the mindset that “their win is our win”, explaining that a win for the arts leads to advancements in the wellbeing of the nation. Yet, this is not always recognized by the government authorities or funders. Time is also highlighted as an issue, with government agencies often not willing to give the time and space needed for real and deeper conversations with artists and arts managers. In such instances, Sasapin proposes three strategies of working with partners/funders:

- I. Adapt to their existing mission (most passive)
- II. Propose alternative ways to achieve their mission (a middle ground)
- III. Ask them to be more responsible for what their scope of work should include (more aggressive in asking for accountability). For example, art is not always about the nation and the king and artworks that are not about that should also be supported; if the funder cannot recognise this they need to be helped to understand this.

As an illustration of their efforts to deepen and expand engagement with would-be funders, she cites an example of their Performing Arts Lab programme where 12 arts and culture related government agencies were invited to dissect their missions and answer questions with the arts organisation and artists.



Left: Suranya Poonyaphitak



Right: Sasapin Siriwani

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DISCUSSION

Practitioner-led ecosystem

A clear scenario that has been made evident by all the presentations is that the **arts and culture ecosystem is being defined by the practitioners**. In Bangkok and throughout all of Southeast Asia, funding for arts and culture is uncertain and artists have to be **advocates** and drive the cultural agenda. This is exemplified in the experiences of Indonesia and Cambodia as illustrated by the work of Koalisi Seni and CLA respectively, but with a difference compared to Bangkok that in Indonesia and Cambodia these are formalised organisations – in the case of Koalisi Seni, a grassroots coalition that became formally registered as an association, and both CLA and CICADA are registered nonprofit organisations.

In Bangkok, the Bangkok Theatre Network started with theatre companies coming together with the purpose of making the festival happen; but it was run by artists with no full-time administrators. An anecdote was shared that it ran well for a while until a production by B-Floor theatre ran afoul with the military⁷. The network, however, refused to take up the cause as their objective was the festival and not for general artists' welfare or advocacy for improvements in the sector. This supports an argument for stronger and more **formalised coalitions or associations if structural and systemic change is desired**. It also makes a case for having more people to take up vital **administrative** roles.

CICADA in Cambodia is a useful and very recent example of strategic thinking in organising and building coalition. Initiated by CLA, they obtained a UNESCO grant to pay the salary of an administrator for one year and used that year to gather the key players across sectors, work on future funding and strategies for advocacy, cultural policy training, protections. They formed a steering committee and obtained legal registration, and are now collecting membership from industry practitioners. The process was not without challenges. One, as shared by Sokhorn, was that the term "creative industries" does not translate well in Khmer (the word for "industry" is associated with factories and manufacturing), taking them a year of negotiations with the government authorities as a result, but persistence, negotiation, and long-term vision are key factors to making progress.

Technology and change

Recent changes as a result of the pandemic and innovations in technology were discussed, and various individuals/groups have found and are finding ways to adapt and forge new ground, however, there was also an emphasis that arts and culture are ultimately about **people**, and human relationships, and funders need to understand that investing in the people is necessary to achieve the vision and broader goals. This point is particularly relevant to questions about funders' anticipated reluctance to fund future face-to-face gatherings now that the benefits of digital platforms such as zoom have been both proven and normalised. A point raised by Mio is that funders need to rethink what it is they truly want to achieve and the mechanics of how to do this given new changes in the arts landscape.

The new frontiers of arts management and arts creation and consumption through technology are recognised as a fact that can bring **benefit to and beyond the sector**, though challenges of access and IRL benefit are also acknowledged. A shift in government or funders' priorities towards tech is acknowledged as being a boon for artists working with/in digital technology; while Covid-19 and technology may open up more/new opportunities to cultivate individual donors as corporate priorities and agendas shift. Linda also added a positive note about how zoom and remote meeting platforms have been great for Indonesia for how it has enabled and expanded their reach and more efficient in a country that is a vast archipelago of islands and for whom geography has always added a challenge to collective organising.

Funders are human too!

Expanding on the discussion on funder relationships, Sokhorn shared another anecdote from Cambodia of Covid-19 breaking out right when their festival was going to happen, and having to pick up the phone to call the funder and discuss the situation; an urgent response to an

⁷ Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a Prime Minister as head of government. From May 2014 until July 2019, Thailand was ruled by a military junta, and the country has seen 13 military coups to date. In August 2023 Thailand elected its newest Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin, a businessman, and the country's first prime minister in nearly a decade without a military background.

urgent situation. The outcome was that the funders were open to accommodate changes, a demonstration of a shared understanding with mutual goals. A humorous point, however, was that the funder themselves had just contracted Covid. Not only did this mean they would have an obvious and direct empathy for the situation, it also served as a reminder that funders are human too.

Policy, politics, and arts management

The political situation in Thailand was discussed as a major factor (impediment) for the advancement of the arts. Even having a supportive political leader, as is currently happening with the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, it is not always positive, as agendas can dominate. Art is recognised as being about difference and diversity, and ideological differences between cultural authorities and the ground can be an obstacle in achieving the support needed.

Using Japanese small towns and community festivals as an example, Mio raised a point of how this is exactly where “arts management needs to be close to cultural policy”, where the small towns usually have a local law or statute for the festival that buffers it against changing administrations. Her point, together with Linda’s sharing, makes a compelling case for advocacy work to focus on legal frameworks as has been done by the Koalisi Seni in Indonesia. Advocacy also takes different shapes, from direct lobbying and conversations, to research papers, and, in a Japanese example, symposiums as a large and visible platform to engage policy makers, administrators, funders and artists on a change agenda.



Participants in the ANCER Lab Conversation discussion

Purpose, mission, “brand”

Following a question about “brand equity” and whether branding could attract more financial support, the discussion revealed that many artists and arts workers do not have a clear sense of their respective brands, nor do they have a firm understanding in business terms of what this means. Too often ideas of “brand” rarely move beyond having an identity in the form of a logo and marketing collaterals or a marketing strategy. While most of the arts organisations and festivals represented in the room have or are not thinking about “branding” in a business sense, in fact, many have been engaging in some reflection on what they stand for (artistic values), and how they/ their organisations are perceived by their publics (and funders). Some are also asking philosophical questions of themselves, and one participant shared the benefit of conducting a branding exercise that revealed skillsets that were lacking in the organisation, and also reinforced their sense of mission and purpose. Another example was shared of an arts collective with a 40-year history, that refuses to discuss their work in business terms but in fact, has great brand recognition in their city. While it was questioned whether it is necessary for artists and arts workers to use business frameworks and the language of marketing, there is an argument to do so as it is the language of corporate or corporatised funders.

An additional point was made about brand “authenticity” in relation to partnerships – one needs to be convincing when pursuing relationships with a corporate brand; a need to be honest about what you are and what you are not, and seek genuine alignment. This reinforces an earlier point about being true, in nonprofit terms, to the organisation’s mission and core values.

Regardless whether thought about in terms of brand equity, social capital, or reputational power, there is a need to communicate value, and present it in terms that people understand and recognise. The power of narratives is an important factor that cannot be overlooked.

Additional points on relationships

Trust needs to be earned and cultivated – invite your funders to as many events as possible. Linda shared that while they may often be “too busy” some will attend and will appreciate being included in what seems like an exclusive, special thing. Sometimes personnel changes can have a negative impact on existing relationships with funders; ensure your house is in order and data always in place so when things go awry you can reestablish trust more easily and quickly.

Trust goes both ways – referring to Sasapin’s presentation about “win-win” and most “aggressive” strategy for working with funders, arts workers need to remember that the trust needs to go both ways, and that funders also need to show themselves trustworthy and reliable. Rather than being framed as the most “aggressive” strategy, an ideal relationship would be one where truth and frankness is seen as the norm and not a form of aggression. This is echoed in another participant’s point to not underestimate what we as artists bring to the table.

We are all active citizens – it is possible to have agency when it comes to seeking funding and partnerships; there is a need to look at the bigger picture about what can be achieved as individuals, and in partnership with others.

Persistence and readiness – there is a need to be ready to respond at any time to funders’ requests or problems, and change can take years. Although it can be physically exhausting and demoralising when results are not achieved, the example of Koalisi Seni shows persistence and coalition is key. As Linda explained, “one of us” would respond when needed – there are several of their members— this is not the work of one person or a few. The coalition works strategically, with long-term vision and deliberate goals. Related to this point is the need to always be on the funders’ or government officers’ radar, therefore maintaining contact and visibility may reap rewards somewhere down the line.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout Southeast Asia artists are well networked, and arts and culture workers, some of whom may have international experience/expertise and/or qualifications, are often more knowledgeable than the government officers tasked with sector development. Sometimes this happens as a result of on-the-job learning as a result of the presence of foreign funds/international aid for arts and cultural work, and support from and collaborations with cultural diplomatic organisations such as the Japan Foundation and British Council. These artists and arts workers meet at regional and international festivals and meetings; they maintain relationships through social media and often develop true and long-lasting friendships; they provide support and capacity development for their communities; and they are often socially engaged and frequently involved in advocacy work.

The sector, thus, seems to lag behind the artists and arts workers. Government officers are often described as lacking knowledge and empathy. Corporate giving is not formalised and tends to be driven by individual relationships. Infrastructure is still very much developing in many countries. The ANCER Lab Conversations have brought together individuals from some of the leading groups in their respective cities and it is evident that within the individuals gathered here, there was vast experience and a fairly sophisticated understanding of mutuality and accountability, as well as a pragmatic approach to the administrative requirements in dealing with funders. While some artists are still learning these skills – “admin is the enemy of the artist” as stated by one participant— there were clear commonalities and shared perspectives on the need to learn the language of funders, the recognition of relationship building, and an awareness of core values and sense of purpose.

What the arts communities desire is neither unusual nor unreasonable. What seems to be a major obstacle, however, is time and space to develop understanding and relationships between artists and funders that are mutually beneficial and less transactional. Arts management is ultimately about relationships, and the best global practices of donor cultivation places profound emphasis on this. Time is often spoken about as a scarce resource, however, and one that requires energy for all concerned. It is worth mentioning, however, that most arts workers and artists seem to be committed to this in the long term—for many, the arts are a vocation, driven by intrinsic need and desires— whereas with funders or government agencies, it is all too often a job with changing officers and political winds, and

insufficient capacity invested in the personnel tasked with administering grants or for sector development.

In conclusion, three final learning points emerged from the ANCER Lab Conversation:

1. A more holistic view is needed and an ecosystems way of thinking amongst all stakeholders.
2. Coalition building is vital and necessary, it builds capacity and may attract additional resources for the sector.
3. Arts Managers also need support, and meetings through programmes such as the ANCER Lab cuts across borders, enables peer learning, and, hopefully can ultimately lead to greater empowerment.

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RESOURCES

Thailand

Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC): <https://en.bacc.or.th>
Bangkok International Children's Festival: <https://www.bictfest.com>
BIPAM: <https://www.bipam.org>
Creative Economy Agency: <https://www.cea.or.th/en/home>
CEA's Creative Economy Database: <https://data.cea.or.th>
Documentary Club: <https://documentaryclubthailand.com>
Warin Lab Contemporary: <https://warinlab.com>

Indonesia

Koalisi Seni: <https://koalisiseni.or.id>
Kelola Foundation: <http://kelola.or.id/>

Cambodia

Cambodia Living Arts: <https://www.cambodianlivingarts.org/en/>
CICADA: <https://www.cicadakh.org/en/>

Japan

Japan Foundation: <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/>
Upoppoy National Ainu Museum: <https://ainu-upopoy.jp/en/>

Singapore:

LASALLE College of the Arts: <https://www.lasalle.edu.sg>
ANCER: <https://www.ancernetwork.org>

