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## Navigating disruption in the Southeast Asian arts and cultural sectors: the ANCER Conference, 17 to 19 September 2020 (online)

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### Abstract

This paper reviews The ANCER Conference 2020: Disruption as Opportunity organised by Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore. The conference focussed on how the arts and cultural sectors in Southeast Asia have been navigating the challenges caused by Covid-19. By showcasing a wide range of ongoing art projects in different parts of Southeast and East Asia, the event offered a fresh perspective on the meanings of (making) local-regional-global nexuses which have been both challenged and given new impetus by the current crisis. The Southeast Asian perspectives highlighted in the conference also provided new opportunities to scrutinise the crisis not just in geographical but also in temporal terms, questioning the relationship between the past, present and future state of the arts. The presentations provided inspiring cases to examine the political relevance of artists and the potential and limitations of the emergence of cultural policy entrepreneurs in different Southeast Asian societies.

### KEYWORDS

Cultural policy; Southeast Asia; creative industries

The Asia Pacific Network for Cultural Education and Research (ANCER) is an initiative founded by LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore with the aim of bringing practitioners and academics together to contribute to the development of cultural policy and arts/cultural management in the region. *The ANCER Conference 2020: Disruption as Opportunity*, focused on how the arts and cultural sectors in Southeast Asia have been navigating the challenges caused by Covid-19. With the help of a virtual platform, the organiser was able to reach out to a more diverse and international audience and to foreground the Southeast Asian perspectives which have long been overlooked, if not marginalised (see e.g. Gu et al., 2020; Kawashima & Lee, 2018; Lim & Lee, 2019; for an overview of the existing scholarship). By incorporating an online exhibition curated by local artists into the conference and enabling the virtual lounge function between sessions to provide an egalitarian setting for friendly conversations and networking, the organiser turned the conference into a co-produced creative space.

Comprising one keynote session, one round table and three panels, the ANCER conference programme engaged participants in discussions on the impact of Covid-19 on cultural management, cultural work, cultural policy and the relationship between

technology, environment and arts/culture in Southeast Asia. The conference opened with a speech by Venka Purushothaman, Provost at LASALLE College of the Arts. Purushothaman proposed to analyse the impact of Covid-19 in terms of mobility, technology and power relations and suggested that the crisis has provided an opportunity for us to reimagine the possibilities of humanity and culture. In the keynote address, Amitesh Grover, inter-disciplinary artist and Assistant Professor at the National School of Drama (India), explored the role of artists in advancing these possibilities through three of his artistic projects undertaken in India – Occupation, Mourning and Velocity. Specifically, he discussed the role of artists in social transformation and community building and how the processes have been influenced by government intervention. In the Q&A session, Grover restated the importance of developing new ways of collectivising to cope with turmoil.

In the roundtable session, cultural managers from different Southeast Asian countries introduced their projects and organisations to discuss the relationship between cultural organisations and other stakeholders. Lyn Lee, art manager at Siong Leng Musical Association (Singapore), discussed her project to preserve and promote Nanyin – a traditional music form – in association with the Singapore National Arts Council. Arman Arief Rachman, financial manager and founder of Serrum (Indonesia), shared his experiences of establishing an artist community originating from the State University of Jakarta. Phuong Hoang Nguyen, a general manager of TPD (Centre for Assistance and Development of Movie Talents in Vietnam), detailed the educational programmes and developing young filmmaker community via a partnership with Vietnam Cinema Association. Andrei Nikolai Pamintuan, creative director of Pineapple Lab and Fringe Manila Festival (Philippines), discussed his experience of creating space for contemporary Filipino artists and events. Sasapin Siriwanij, artistic director of the Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (Thailand), presented a project creating international partnerships with Southeast Asian countries. In addition to the rich case studies from diverse regions, the roundtable discussion brought forward fundamental questions related to cultural management including tensions with national governments, the significance of building trustworthy partnerships, and the varieties of ecosystems of public and private sector actors in each country. This roundtable spotlighted the practices of arts/cultural associations – and the contexts shaping them – which continue to develop in response to Covid-19.

In the first panel, artists and cultural workers reflected on the relationships between culture and politics by discussing both the socio-political-economic conditions that pose challenges for their cultural associations and their strategies to address them. Clara Cheung shared her experiences as both an artist and a District Councillor in Hong Kong and emphasised that artists had already faced a lot of hardships and restrictions even before the pandemic. Katrina Santiago (Philippines) focused on the precarity and disparity of artists by pointing out the lack of action from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and the absence of effective initiatives from artists' associations in the country. Thanupon "Golf" Yindee from Makhampom Theatre Group (Thailand) provided an overview of the political landscape of Thailand and detailed how his project has attempted to create a platform for artists and activists. Kathy Rowland, managing editor of *Arts Equator* (Singapore), explained the damage to the cultural sector caused by the pandemic and emphasised the necessity of comprehensive support from the Singaporean government. She argued that the government has not been tolerant of

critiques from artists, who have been categorised as “non-essential” workers. The panel discussion referred to the potential of artwork evolving in the current context and its role in transforming society. The conversation offered both optimistic and pessimistic views about the current landscape and forthcoming political-economic challenges. All participants emphasised the need for substantive supports from governments to activate and protect the cultural sector while respecting its autonomy.

The second panel featured academics specialising in cultural policy in East Asia, who shared their latest findings and proposals for public support. Nobuko Kawashima (Japan) presented a recent cultural policy trend in Japan by spotlighting the boom of inbound tourism. She pointed out how inbound tourism has become a growing sector in cultural and creative industry policy, and how relevant policy has been sustained despite the pandemic. Jerry C Y Liu (Taiwan) explained the features of cultural policy in Taiwan and how the government quickly and effectively responded to the Covid-19 crisis through a bottom-up approach based on deeply rooted beliefs about cultural democracy. Justin O’Connor (Australia) gave an overview of global cultural policy trends and critically examined their economic-oriented policy logic and how the rhetoric of the creative economy has been vulnerable in responding to the crisis. The speakers also examined the specific challenges exposed by the pandemic in their own regions and called for artists’ active involvement in cultural policymaking.

In the third panel, speakers articulated their analysis of the “new normal” growing from the pandemic and offered their suggestions to adapt to new media landscapes and conditions. Oonagh Murphy (UK) commented that cultural organisations should not just adapt to digital technologies, but also bring critical perspectives to them in pursuit of a more equitable society. Jac sm Kee (Malaysia), a feminist activist working in digital technology, argued that the digital has become the common experience, so our conception of space is radically changing. Thus, she underlined, we need to maintain critical perspectives on restrictions related to the digital space. Marco Kusumawijaya (Centre for Urban Studies, Indonesia) reflected on how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed his work and plans. He reconceptualised the pandemic as an opportunity to advocate for new public policy to deal with environmental problems as a common root of both the pandemic and climate change. The panel discussion covered arguments about the role of cultural sectors to reflect and reconsider current settings with critical perspectives on technology.

By showcasing a wide range of ongoing cultural and arts projects in different parts of Southeast and East Asia, the event offered a fresh perspective on the meanings of (making) local-regional-global nexuses which have been both challenged and given new impetus by the current crisis. The panellists demonstrated that the arts and cultural sectors in Southeast Asia share common challenges and agendas – such as the precarity of cultural work, political activism and the autonomy of the arts, new potentialities of arts/culture, artists’ multiple roles in society and hardship related to the pandemic. On the other hand, the debate highlighted the underlying political-economic contexts that shape the current state of the arts/culture in the region and how cultural projects have attempted to tackle and in turn have been influenced by these dynamics. In short, they reminded us that the “common” challenges and agendas have in effect unfolded and been dealt with in specifically local ways. They can only be made sense of when being embedded in local contexts. This means that, instead of searching for a single

prescription, we should try to develop a global toolkit derived from and catering to local experiences.

The Southeast Asian perspectives highlighted in the conference also provided new opportunities to scrutinise the crisis not just in geographical but also in temporal terms, questioning the relationship between the past, present and future state of the arts. The presentations provided inspiring cases to examine the political relevance of artists and the arts and the potential and limitations of the emergence and development of cultural policy entrepreneurs in different Southeast Asian societies.

### Notes on contributors

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