

Foreword

It has been close to two years since COVID-19 hit the world and disrupted lives and livelihoods with millions of lives lost. Although the arts and culture sectors throughout the world were badly impacted, our 2020 edition of *Cultural Connections* reflected how the artistic community banded together to uplift spirits and also how they have been resilient and innovative in pivoting to respond to challenges.

Now as 2021 draws to a close, our arts and culture scene continues to be significantly impacted by constraints on live performances, audiences, and visitor numbers. But on the positive side, there are now novel and immersive arts experiences that bring together the physical and digital worlds to delight audiences in new ways.

In Singapore, work opportunities also shrank for self-employed persons (SEPs) in the sector. More than 80% of the freelancers faced project cancellations and postponements. With almost 50% of the sector's workforce being SEPs, this disruption has caused many to diversify and transfer their skills to other sectors. Moreover, with the inability to conduct live performances and the need to play to a smaller audience due to safe distancing measures, revenues for art companies and cultural institutions have also been greatly reduced.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has spoken about the "Crisis of a Generation", and this has indeed been the situation facing our arts sector. With the support of the Singapore Government's Arts and Culture Relief Package of S\$75 million, many in the arts community have tapped on project grants to upskill themselves with digital know-how as they continue to create new works of art and embark on new initiatives that will make a longer-term impact on their careers and livelihoods. Many others have also used this down time to further their research into their art forms and better equip themselves with new and deeper knowledge of their craft to create more cutting-edge work that has been well received by their stakeholders.

These efforts are testament to the arts and culture community's resilience and adaptability in the face of crisis, and how it is beneficial to a society's well-being. We have a "never-say-die" attitude that willingly embraces change, brings solace, and bonds people together in difficult and good times.

This is why we have dedicated this 2021 edition to the theme of Culture and Crisis—to acknowledge how culture has over the centuries, been used to bring societies together, create a sense of strong national identity, and create meaning in people's lives. On the other hand, culture has also been used during times of crisis to break a nation's confidence and question its sense of identity, for example during wartime.

Throughout these two challenging years, one thing is clear: in surveys conducted locally and internationally, culture is a strong tool that when effectively wielded, will present considerable benefits to a society during good and bad times, in the form of intangible benefits to a society's economy, well-being and sense of identity.

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Editor-in-Chief's Note

Destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin. This is most clearly seen during crises, when disruption to life as we know it and devastation of established norms also bring forth deeper meditation on the essence of humanity, artistic creation, and invigoration of creative practices.

As we draw close to the end of 2021, two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we feel it is time to take a step back and delve into the broader question of crises and their impact on the arts and culture sector. This edition of *Cultural Connections* presents the perspectives and experiences of arts and cultural luminaries and thought leaders on the topic and gives us pause for reflection.

We have a number of essays reflecting on the nature of crises, the stresses they cause, and the role of arts and culture in helping societies weather such turmoil. The contributions by Professor Tan Tai Yong of Yale-NUS College and Singaporean medical practitioner Dr Wong Tien Hua both discuss the pivotal role of arts and culture in ensuring social and mental resilience and how it is essential in the making of a healthy community, while Suenne Tan, National Gallery Singapore, shows us how museums can actively support mental well-being in communities. Dr Susie Lingham, Singapore, highlights the role of artistic and cultural creations and projects in mitigating the impact of crises and providing spaces for reflection, healing, and de-escalation of conflict.

The question of how the arts and culture are shaped by crises is explored in a few essays. Kwa Chong Guan, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, looks at how portrayal of war in cultural products has evolved over time in Southeast Asia and proposes another angle to the phrase "Culture of War". Phan Ming Yen, The RICE Company Ltd, proposes that the arts can be a tool for survival in crises, as the case of Syonan Symphony Orchestra established during wartime Singapore reveals. Finally, this edition's centerspread by Dr Eugene Tan, National Gallery Singapore, is a curated presentation of artworks from Singapore's National Collection, featuring how artists have engaged with and addressed crises of their times.

Another aspect of confronting crises is how arts and cultural institutions respond and adapt while continuing to serve their communities. The experience of Australian museums in adapting to disasters such as fires and floods, and in preserving cultural identities in the face of such challenges, is documented in the essay by Professor Robyn Sloggett, University of Melbourne. Chung May Khuen, National Museum of Singapore, shares the museum's lessons in pivoting to digital platforms in the wake of COVID-19.

Technology, with its benefits and ills, also features heavily in this volume's contributions. Peter Tullin, co-founder of REMIX Summits, gives us an overview of exciting developments in this respect, from institutional partnerships with content creators to innovative digital strategies adopted by forward-thinking museums and libraries. Jervais Choo, National Heritage Board, Singapore, discusses the challenges and opportunities of the digital realm for the sector and highlights forays into the digital by local organisations, while Zulkifli Zulhaqem, Centre for Strategic Futures, deliberates on the questions posed by technology to the creative process, specifically, if it is to remain an exclusively human endeavour.

Finally, we have three essays reflecting on crises and opportunities. Ravi Menon, Monetary Authority of Singapore, presents an overarching view of global crises confronting mankind, and posits that Singapore has a role to play in mitigating them. Professor Mitsuru Haga, Tohoku University, gives us an overview of humanity's trajectory and his thoughts on the ultimate crisis—that of the extinction of humans—and how we may collectively prevent it. For our closing essay, futurist Sir Geoff Mulgan shares his thoughts on the impact and opportunities afforded by three current crises—climate change, new technologies, and social inequality and recognition—and their impact on artists and their roles.

We hope this collection of essays provokes the same sense of reflection, purpose, and even hope, as it did with the editorial team. May 2022 be a year of hope and testament to the strength and endurance of the human spirit.

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