



Photo: Zinkie Aw

ARTSWOK: BUILDING BRIDGES AND ENABLING COLLABORATIONS

What does “community arts” mean, and what would ArtsWok like to see in the local community arts scene in the near future? A strong advocate for the arts and an intermediary between stakeholders and artists, ArtsWok answers these questions and more, giving us a glimpse into the complex field of community arts.

How did ArtsWok start developing programmes for the community arts scene and why?

We were each at a point in our careers where we were looking for the right people to work with to address some of the pressing challenges we saw affecting our communities. The question we asked was “How do we cultivate thriving communities?” The insight we had was that a fundamental issue that needed to be addressed was the poverty of relationships we saw around us. We believe that human flourishing can only happen in the context of healthy connections with self, others, institutions and the environment.

Having worked in the arts and community development sectors, we witnessed how the arts have the power to connect communities by creating dialogue, inviting social participation and building bridges across difference. We also saw that our combined experience gave us a unique vantage point as well as access to valuable networks for building a strong ecosystem to support the work of arts-based community development.

So we took the plunge and started as freelancers in the first year, mainly interviewing key stakeholders and trying to understand the needs of the various players in this field.

We discovered that while there were pockets of activity in the scene, there were not many cross-sector collaborations taking place that would be important for meaningful and sustainable change to happen. It was evident that there was a role for intermediaries to play in bridging these partnerships.

How would you describe the role that you play in Singapore’s community arts scene?

We see our role as one of bridge-building, enabling collaborations and innovations to occur, and working towards a healthy, thriving arts-based community development ecosystem.

We work with multidisciplinary teams to design and implement community-based arts projects, facilitate learning and exchanges through a community of practice, build capacity of practitioners through an action learning-incubator programme as well as conduct research and advocacy in the field of arts-based community development.

“When working with communities, it is important to revisit our own values, assumptions and ways of being.”

This is a relatively young field in Singapore. There is a lot of work to be done in terms of capturing the range of work, articulating it in meaningful ways, sharing and exchanging significant practice, exploring ethical issues, evolving evaluation tools and learning from the outcomes. It would also be beneficial to dialogue with arts-based community development practitioners in the region and internationally, being a part of, contributing and gaining from an even larger ecosystem of resources, leading to the further development of the local and international field.

Essentially, a significant part of our role is in advocating for the arts, and artists as civic leaders, as social change agents, and the impact of the arts at all levels in society. There is a whole continuum of artistic practice and audience engagement, and we are interested in upping the engagement levels of communities and the range of stakeholders (people, public, private). The arts are integral to living and being human, and not just one aspect of it. We want to bring this to the consciousness of more people and hopefully create a deeper understanding and integration into our lives.

If ArtsWok had to define community arts, what would it be?

As a field, we still lack the language to talk about this new aesthetic. It is a constant process of refinement. A simple definition would be artists working with communities to create artworks of all forms – visual art, drama, literary, film etc. But on a deeper level, what is worked on is the canvas of human relationships within the community and the medium of the arts brings to life in full colour their collective expression of identity, concerns and aspirations.



Photo: ArtsWok Collaborative

Why is the community important in the work that you do?

As Singaporeans, we have a stake in this place. All of us, as members of this community, have a part to play in making our own culture, in creating a shared narrative that brings us together and gives us our power. It is therefore necessary to create space for meaningful and creative civic participation, so that we can constantly adapt to new external realities while keeping the integrity of our values and identities.

People are the backbone of any society, and as ours grows more and more complex and diverse, and as we develop as a nation existing in an international arena with smaller and smaller boundaries, we need strong and resilient communities able to engage across difference - not just tolerating it but to co-create meaningfully. Communities need to be more involved in shaping space, conditions for living and thriving, working together, and with public and private sectors to find solutions and have needs met. We need to encourage each other to exercise more leadership in our communities. We need to address social ills and injustices we witness. We need energised communities that are creative and imaginative in creating places and spaces (social, psychological, aesthetic and so on) worth being alive for.

The arts provides that transformative space, offering the platform for people to tap into their creativity and draw actively upon their imagination, to understand the new and changing, to approach challenges, create solutions, relate to one another and emerge new possibilities.

Based on ArtsWok's past experiences, what do you think are the roles of the artist, community and audience in a community arts project?

Arlene Goldbard, a writer and advocate of cultural development said it well when she described how community artists are like farmers – they prepare the soil, plant the seeds and add nutrients, then let the sun, air and rain work their miracle. In other words, artists create the conditions for people's creativity to flourish, each according to his or her own nature.

The relationship between the artist and the community can take different forms depending on the level of engagement as well as authorship of artistic content.

The artist may create art for the community, where community members are the intended audience of the work (e.g. puppetry performance for children in an orphanage). One key benefit of this model is the increased access to the arts for those who would not otherwise get exposure to it.

Artists may also create art with the community, where the process of artmaking is more collaborative, with members of the community contributing creative input to the work (eg. artist-in-residence at a hospital working with patients). With this greater participation, the community moves from being an audience to a co-creator.

Finally arts by the community (e.g. seniors form a theatre company to perform original plays) honours the stories of community members who, through their direct participation, take responsibility for the development of their own culture.

Name your favourite community arts project overseas and share with us why?

We recently heard about Pillsbury House + Theatre in Minneapolis, a centre for creativity and community. It addresses social and economic problems through affordable and accessible services that integrate community-based arts and social services. What is inspiring is that the work, and vision for the place is arts-led, collaborating in a multi-disciplinary field involving non-arts disciplines and practices as well. We're interested to find out more about their work and methodologies first-hand and are hoping to organise a study trip there with other artists soon.

It would be good to explore how a model like that would work in Singapore, where community-based arts extends beyond a project or programme into something much more sustainable, long-term and has a greater impact on community development. It would be wonderful to emerge arts-based practice that intersects with non-arts fields such as social work, and community development and health and that is relevant and effective in meeting needs. What great advocacy work for the arts and arts practitioners if we can demonstrate the power and potential of the arts in taking the lead in enabling communities and society to thrive.

What are some of the common challenges ArtsWok faces or hears about when working with the community in the arts?

For ArtsWok Collaborative, one of our more common challenges is in enabling stakeholders to understand what we do as intermediaries. The field itself in Singapore was not too visible until recently. As such, stakeholders have to grapple with understanding what the field of community arts is about, the continuum of work the field encompasses, and also what we do as bridge-builders in the field. This means that the value of what we do is not easily or quickly understood, and we often have to expend time and resources at our own expense in enabling them to understand, to be convinced of our role and its value.

I think for artists doing community-based work, it can be somewhat similar, where stakeholders may not understand the role and value of the artist, and may view them as programming gap-fillers, or helping to keep communities occupied and working together etc. without necessarily understanding arts processes, the skills that go into arts-based facilitation and so on. This then translates into situations where sometimes artists



Photo: ArtsWok Collaborative

are asked if they can volunteer their expertise, or the resources made available to them are limited, with insufficient time provided for process etc. A lot more awareness and advocacy is needed for our field, and how to meaningfully collaborate with other fields.

When a community arts project is executed well, what are some of the benefits that the artist, community, and audience can experience?

The arts can bring together groups of people with divergent viewpoints in an encounter that brings forward personal stories and the human dimensions of issues, reflecting multiple perspectives and even giving permission for emotions. Seeing and hearing one another in new ways creates empathy where diversity is not feared, but instead celebrated, identities and cultures are not threatened but instead enriched. It brings a sense of openness, of hope and possibility.

If ArtsWok could recommend only one essential skill for artists to have when working in the community arts field, what would it be and why?

The one essential skill would be self reflexivity. When we enter into a community, we are entering into a different culture with its particular dynamics. Challenges, even ethical ones, will inevitably arise. When working with communities, it is important to revisit our own values, assumptions and ways of being. This awareness helps us to keep in view the intentions behind our actions and ultimately the purpose behind the work.

If the work becomes too much about the artist, her or his vision and what she or he wants to do with the community, and not necessarily what the community wants, the community then serves the art and not the other way around. An artist who is self-reflexive and is a good facilitator will be able to create and produce the best processes that will result in the best social and aesthetic outcomes possible.

What would ArtsWok like to see in the local community arts scene in the next two to three years?

We want to see stakeholders from all fields taking more of an interest in the arts, and seeking out collaborations with artists especially when it comes to tackling societal needs and issues. We would like to see more artists being confident and articulate in communicating the value of their work in the community arts field, to stakeholders in non-arts fields. This requires the building and development of vocabularies that are meaningful and impactful.

Our dream is to run a Centre where the arts and culture are key in building and developing communities, where individuals and communities are learning, dialoguing and collaborating, contributing back to their own communities as well as other groups of people; We imagine it to be a place of connection, where creativity and imagination heals, energises and transforms the way we relate to one another, and how we co-create our future.