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Constructing habitus: promoting an international arts trend at the Singapore Arts Festival

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Title: Constructing Habitus: Promoting an International Arts Trend at the Singapore Arts Festival

Abstract: The Singapore Arts Festival (SAF) is Singapore's largest government supported international arts festival. SAF presents the best in international and local arts, in an attempt, to develop what it perceives to be a lack of cultural knowledge of the Singaporean arts-going public. The key focus of the festival is to present the best in international and local arts in an attempt to educate what SAF perceives to be a lack of cultural knowledge in the Singapore arts-going public. Using Pierre Bourdieu's key concept of 'habitus' together with an analysis of the programming of the festival, this paper will highlight how the festival seeks to create a specific cultural taste in Singaporean art-goers through privileging and promoting works that are internationally marketable to European countries. The paper will conclude that this programming style occurs at the expense of Singaporean artists and hinders the development of the city's state cultural and artistic development.

Introduction

With the launch of *The Renaissance City Report* (RCR) in 2000, the Singapore Government announced its intention to transform Singapore into a "global city for the arts" (MITA, p. 62). Building upon previous cultural policy documents, *RCR* explicitly stated that the long-term goal of these policy initiatives would be for Singapore to become a recognisable Capital of Culture alongside other cities such as New York and London with 10 years (see MITA). Since then, the Singapore urban landscape has seen the addition of *Esplanade: Theatres by the Bay*, a performing arts venue; the *School of Arts: Singapore*, an arts training facility as well as the renovation and refurbishment of buildings to house the *National Museum of Singapore* and the *National Art Gallery, Singapore*. There has also been a corresponding growth in large-scale events taking place within Singapore such as the *Singapore Biennale*, the *Singapore Grand Prix* as well as the hosting of the inaugural *Youth Olympic Games*. It seems that the Government had hoped that the combination of both infrastructure and high-profile events would allow Singapore to develop the necessary social and cultural conditions needed, in order to be considered a global city for the arts.

The myriad impacts of government cultural policies on Singapore's arts and cultural sector have been documented in various studies and tend to run along three strands. The first examines the economic and social role culture plays in Singapore: research done by academics such as Lily Kong and Terence Lee have highlighted the link between government economic and social agendas within cultural policy in Singapore and the impact they have had on the local arts and cultural scene (see Kong 2000; Lee 2004). The second strand is historical and continues to provide a retrospective look at the way arts and culture has changed in Singapore. Publications such as *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre, 1987-1997: Essays commissioned by The Necessary Stage* (1997); *Theatre Life!: A History of English-Language Theatre in Singapore Through the Straits Times (1985-2000)* (2001) and *Selves: the State of the Arts in Singapore* (2002). Written by artists, critics and government bodies respectively, this strand facilitates an understanding of how the arts scene in Singapore has developed in the past twenty years. Finally, as a city-state with a strong interventionist government, the third strand of cultural policy in Singapore examines the increasing tensions between the role of the citizenry and the Singapore Government. Research here done by sociologist Chua Beng Huat offers useful references in understanding the development of democracy and civil society in Singapore and researchers have sought to examine the connections between the development of a culturally vibrant Singapore with freedom of expression (see Chua 1995; Kwok and Low 2002; Ooi 2010). These three strands of research offer a holistic view of the state of the arts and cultural sector in Singapore and highlight the various contradictions that have occurred since 2000. What this article seeks to do is bring together these three strands of research by highlighting how Singaporean artists and audiences are engaging with government driven social and economic agendas via the historical examination of a local arts festival.

Despite concerns from researchers and local art practitioners and commentators on the viability of Singapore's quest to become a Capital of Cultural, ~~It is contestable today whether Singapore can be considered a Capital of Culture. This does not mean that~~ the Singapore Government has not ~~abandoned its~~ ~~this~~ attempts to re-invent

Singapore. Rather, the release of the *Renaissance City Plan III* (RCPIII)¹ in 2008 reiterates this continued commitment to transforming Singapore into a global city for the arts. This raises the following question: why, despite almost 10 years of continual investment in the arts and cultural sector, has Singapore not managed to achieve its original vision set out in 2000? Through the examination of the Singapore Arts Festival (SAF), a government supported performing arts festival; this article argues that a desire to privilege and promote a specific style of art that was perceived to be part of a trend in international cultural discourse offers a way of understanding why Singapore is still not considered a capital of culture.

By utilising the concept of ‘Habitus’ as described and developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this article will examine how the SAF attempted to create a specific cultural taste in both Singaporean artists and arts-goers in the belief that a city that was seen to produce and enjoy art that was part of this international trend would be a city that could be considered a global city for the arts. With a strong influence in many aspects of the lives of Singaporeans, the Singapore Government has, in the past and currently, sought to systematically direct certain forms of collective behaviour in Singapore through its myriad public and cultural campaigns implemented by its various administrative bodies. SAF, as the longest running arts festival in Singapore with the biggest budget available is the only performing arts festival organised by the National Arts Council² (NAC) and I would argue that SAF provides a way to understand how cultural strategies initiated by the Government are implemented onto the Singapore citizenry to inculcate a specific cultural taste it has identified a global city of the arts should possess. The first part of the article will be concerned with the concept of ‘habitus’ and how it can be extended and applied to Singapore society. I will then show how this habitus is inculcated onto the Singaporean artists and arts-goers via the programming of SAF under the leadership of its former festival director, Goh Ching Lee. In doing so, it would also be possible to see how local artists and audiences are able to ‘improvise’ within this state-

¹ In 2003, the Singapore Government released *The Renaissance City Report II*, which examined how the areas of media and design could contribute to Singapore’s attempt to become a global city for the arts.

² The National Arts Council of Singapore is the main funding body for the arts and cultural sector in Singapore. It receives money from its parent ministry, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts and distributes it via various funding schemes to the five art forms under its remit: Dance, Literary Arts, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts.

directed habitus allowing for the creation of a nascent ‘habitus’ based on the issues surrounding the formation of a Singaporean national and cultural identity. These ‘improvisations’ I would argue pre-empt the new cultural strategies initiated in the release of the *RCPIII* and serve to highlight how there needs to be a re-thinking of the role of the state within the arts and cultural sector in Singapore.

The Creation of Habitus for a City

Habitus was first described by Bourdieu in his book, *Outline of a Theory in Practice* (1977). Drawing on his experiences as an ethnologist in Kabylia, Bourdieu described habitus as a product of “a particular type of environment”, which he elaborates as the “material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition” (Bourdieu, p. 72). He formally defines habitus as a system

(of)...durable, transposable, *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu, p. 72; emphasis original).

Bourdieu’s description of the conditions that produce Habitus, as well as his formulation of Habitus, contains key concepts that bear further discussion in relation to this article. However, before I begin, it has to be acknowledged that Bourdieu had no concise definition and later revisions of this term has led to habitus being described as “notoriously difficult to pin down”, or as a concept that is familiar to many scholars and yet “far from well understood” (Calhoun, p. 292; Swartz, p. 96). In *Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu* (2004), Brubaker argued that the best way to understand habitus was not through a fixed definition, but as a means to “communicate a certain theoretical stance or posture” in order to “designate ...a certain way of looking at the world” (p. 26). By thinking of

habitus as a theory, it allows for the appropriation of Bourdieu's concept in a "practical, sociologically productive manner" (Brubaker, p. 26). Trying to determine or create a fixed definition of what habitus is or is not, so as to apply it unchangingly to different conditions only returns to the tendencies of structuralism Bourdieu was trying to avoid in the development of this concept. As Calhoun points out, rather than attempting to summarise this theory of habitus through an "abstract theoretical treatise", Bourdieu instead sought to apply his theory on a "variety of analytic problems" which allowed him to extend his "theoretical resources further" (2007, p. 282). Habitus, as a theory, therefore maintains the capacity for reflexivity – it provides key concepts that allow for their application onto different socio-cultural complexes at distinct times in history, and allows for a new way of understanding and expanding both the theory of habitus as well as the society under examination.

By utilising Bourdieu's concept of habitus, I acknowledge that his key observations are social and culture specific, and yet the concept is also reflexive to the degree that it can be extended and applied empirically to a very different and non-Western society and cultural complex. I will therefore identify what is useful in the concept in a context of its application to Singapore society.

Specific descriptions of 'habitus' in current literature focus on three key aspects. The first is that habitus is manifest as a form of 'behaviour', which is the means by which an individual moves through a "maze of constraints and opportunities" (Swartz, p. 99). This behaviour is learned, and amounts to a set of "dispositions", which Bourdieu describes are the result of "particular social conditions"; these conditions produce "practical rather than discursive, prereflective rather than conscious, embodied as well as cognitive, durable though adaptive, reproductive though generative and inventive" behaviour (Swartz, p. 101). In other words, habitus is ingrained, and does not identify affected or simply adopted social or cultural behaviours.

A second aspect of habitus consists of specific actions, which are instinctive but directed to achieve a specific goal (sometimes entailing a modification of their behaviour). This modification is often linked to the idea of "improvisation" (Bourdieu, p. 44; Calhoun, p. 282; Swartz, p. 100). This improvisation is often

described as a “feel for a game”, a “practical sense”, which causes agents to behave in specific situations that are “not always calculated” or “simply a question of obedience to rules” (Johnson, p. 5). How and in what ways an agent improvises behaviour is linked to the third aspect of habitus, which identifies how habitus is created over a lifetime.

The last aspect of ‘habitus’ is that it is the creation of a specific set of dispositions that takes place over time. Bourdieu (1977) writes that dispositions are “a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future” (p. 82). Habitus is a life long learning experience whereby agents within a habitus learn to change and adapt their behaviour to maintain the interests of their specific social group. It can be summarised then that habitus are the actions of individuals who have learnt through a “long process of inculcation” to behave in a certain way that has become “second nature” whereby there is no longer a “conscious choice or rational calculation” (Johnson, p. 5; Swartz, p. 100).

How then can habitus³ be applied to a city and is it possible to see how an artistic habitus is being constructed in Singapore? I would contend that it is possible to apply habitus to a city in the following ways:

- A certain type of behaviour is inculcated in the citizenry by the government through schemes (different funding plans, large-scale cultural events), incentives (cultural awards) and deterrents (funding guidelines, performance licenses)
- Through these schemes and deterrents, an instinctive behaviour (such as responses and reactions) is created within the citizenry. It is possible, at the

³ As a point of clarification, I will be primarily concerned with Artistic Habitus in this article. The artistic habitus is manifest in behaviours inculcated largely through culturally-oriented social conditions (such as an educated family life) as well as explicit institutionalised cultural social formations, such as art histories, criticism and scholarship, art schools and art galleries or museums. The ‘dispositions’ inculcated by an artistic habitus can be describe in terms of “artistic competence”, which is often the result of “a long process of inculcation which begins in the family” that is commensurate with their “level of economic, academic, and cultural capital” and “reinforced by the educational system” (Bourdieu, p. 23). A key difference in the formation of artistic habitus from other forms of habitus is that, as part of this inculcation, agents have had “prolonged exposure to the arts” and gain an understanding of a work of art by being in “possession of the code into which it has been encoded” (Bourdieu, p. 23).

same time, within this government-sanctioned behaviour for improvisation to occur.⁴

- Government schemes are constructed and implemented over a period of time so as to inculcate a specific type of behaviour based on the establishment of values and priorities through a continual political effort and administrative promotion.

Through increasing the number of libraries in Singapore, as well as launching new arts events and the like, it is possible then to extend habitus to not only an individual but also to a city. Furthermore, the ways in which arts and culture is supported through various funding schemes as well as the promotion of events such as the Singapore Biennale, an adoption of a certain behaviour and even ‘aesthetic’ values can be identified. The recent construction of the *School of Arts: Singapore* indicates an understanding that the dispositions provided by habitus must be institutionalised in order to endure and develop. This fact is also reiterated through the understanding in *RCR* that Singapore required up to ten years to reach the point where it could be considered as culturally successful as New York et al, that is after the strategic deployment of long-term cultural infrastructure, not merely the organising of large-scale but short-term events.

I would contend that it is possible to see the kind of artistic habitus the Singapore government would like to foster in Singapore through the support and promotion it gives to specific large-scale arts events in Singapore, in particular, via SAF.

Habitus for a City

The Singapore Arts Festival was first established in 1977. Originally known as the Singapore Festival of the Arts, it merged with the biennial Festival of Asian performing Arts in 1999 into its current state. In the year 2000, Goh Ching Lee was

⁴ An example of such a scheme can be seen in the *Speak Good English Campaign*. This campaign was launched in response to the popularity of a fictional television character who spoke ‘Singlish’ a truncation of the word Singaporean English. Singlish is a form of Pidgin English which utilises words from a mix of local dialects, Malay, Tamil and nonsensical words. It is spoken by most if not all Singaporeans. The broadcasting company being a government-linked firm eventually broadcasted an episode where the character was seen attending English lessons (See Nirmala 2000; Han 2001)! This is by no means the only campaign that sought to create certain behaviours in Singapore. Other schemes and deterrents include the *Courtesy Campaign* to the *Clean and Green Campaign*.

appointed festival director, a position she held till 2009. Goh has been credited with transforming SAF into a “premiere international arts festival” that has attracted well-known acts from around the world (Chew 2005). For the scope of this article, I will be focusing on SAF during Goh’s tenure. The reasons for doing so are firstly, because the impact of Goh’s mission has made her synonymous with the event and secondly, that this period coincides closely with the release of the *RCR* in 2000 and the *RCPIII* in 2008. The direction of SAF is determined by a Steering Committee and the strong presence of the NAC is present in the composition of the committee. Comprised of 10 members this committee is usually led by the current NAC chief. The committee has been described as “consultative and multi-layered” where the committee acts as a “sounding board” for “recommended performances” (Chew 2005). As the flagship festival of NAC, SAF occupies a dominant position within the calendar of cultural events in Singapore and the works that it programmes since 2000 have shown a distinctive similarity in the style of works that it supports so as to, I would argue, boost the international standing of SAF. Referencing *RCR*, she states “The Renaissance City Report spoke about the importance of developing Singaporean arts internationally- the Arts Festival has a crucial role to play, as an event that can create that kind of international image” (*Business Times* 2000). For Goh, SAF can be a vital tool in helping establish Singapore as a Cultural Capital.

How is it possible that Government cultural programming in this regard can be habitus-forming for both Singaporean artists and audience members nationally? The answer to this question lies in the position SAF occupies in the local arts and cultural sector as well as the way arts and culture is managed in Singapore. As a Government supported flagship festival, SAF is more than just an arts festival, but rather a national festival that enjoys the largest budget and support from government bodies and, for the moment, possesses the most visibility in the Singapore Cultural Calendar ([see Petersen 2009](#)). In addition, with the support of government agencies, works by Singaporean groups that have performed at SAF have gone on to perform in other arts festivals in the world through the exposure to festival curators present at SAF. For many artists, being a part of SAF offers contacts and opportunities that would be almost impossible for them to initiate on their own. The cachet in performing at SAF is not lost on Singaporean artists. Ivan Heng, artistic director of W!ld Rice, who launched the Singapore Theatre Festival, has stated that an “ideal for us would be that

SAF sees a world premiere of Singapore writing at the Theatre Festival, picks it up, and develops it further for SAF the following year” (Nayar 2006a). What this means for Singaporean artists is that if they wish to be able to be a part of SAF, they need to create and present works which reflect what SAF feels to be the dominant artistic habitus. As for Singapore audiences, there is an acknowledgement from the Steering Committee responsible for programming that Singapore audiences do not possess the appropriate knowledge about the arts and thus SAF has to provide them with the opportunity to develop a taste for what they have identified to be the current global artistic styles.

Professor Bernard Tan, Chairman of the Steering Committee in 2000, states very clearly that one of the key aims of the festival was finding the right balance between “what the audience wants versus what we think the audience should see” (Nayar 2000). Another aim of the promotion of arts is reiterated when he continues “You need to give the audience what they expect to see or hear, but bear in mind that this is a fairly young nation in terms of appreciation of Western art, and we have to bring to the attention of the audience things which perhaps they haven’t heard of but will strike a chord” (Ee 2000). Tan’s comments also hint at the fact that the current artistic habitus of Singaporean audiences is not adequate if Singapore wants to be a global city for the arts. Furthermore, by stating that that SAF should aim to become “a must-see event for everyone, including visitors to the region” previous National Arts Council Chairman, Liu Thai Ker, is hinting that the works presented in the festival should not only cater to local Singaporeans but also to international audiences (Lye 2000a). This statement brings up the notion that Singaporean audiences should enjoy the same works that overseas audiences enjoy. This view is worrying as it hints at the creation of an appreciation of the arts is not based on what Singaporean citizens enjoy, but rather an inculcation of an understanding of art based on the preferences of an international audience especially when we take into account the way in which Goh champions SAF as a festival to raise Singapore’s international profile as a global city for the arts. From the quotes above, it is also possible to see how SAF is being used to create and inculcate a specific type of artistic habitus in Singaporeans through exposing them to what Goh and the Steering Committee think is the ‘right’ type of work.

So what is the artistic habitus that ~~Singaporeans~~Singaporeans audiences should adopt and what schemes and incentives that SAF provide to create this specific habitus?

Habitus and the Singapore Arts Festival

The key to this question would lie in the direction programming of SAF has undergone since Goh took over in 2000. Goh realised that the three quarters of the audience that attended arts events were 40 years old and younger (*Straits Times* 2000). For her this meant that there was a “potential for audience growth...more so than any city in the region” (Lye 2000b). She commented that due to the relative youth of the audience, SAF was in the position to have “challenging programming” as the audience would be “receptive to new and cutting edge work” (Lye 2000b). For her, this meant, that SAF would now have a “Singaporean/ Asian identity” (*Business Times* 2000). This draws upon a perception of Singapore’s strength as a meeting point of Asian cultures or as the *RCR* describes a “Gateway to Asia” (MITA, p. 35). By exploiting Singapore’s geographic position, SAF would highlight performing arts groups in Asia in order to bring them to an international spotlight and thus also bring Singapore to this same spotlight through its support and association with new Asian artists that the Steering Committee has identified is producing work that fits within the international arts scene. A clear correlation between SAF and *RCR* can also be seen when Singaporean artists are exhorted in *RCR* to not confine themselves to “parochial” themes that would only be relevant to Singaporeans but to a wider Asian and hence, international audience as well (MITA, p. 40).

Professor Bernard Tan, then Chairman of the Steering Committee, announced that SAF would be a festival that would be different from the other major festivals in the world as it expresses the Asian region. He announced in 2000 that SAF would be a festival that would “showcase...emerging Asian talents...in Singapore before they go out into the world” (*Business Times* 2000). Due to this change in the focus of the festival, the festival’s programming underwent a radical change in the type of works that were selected. A quick examination of the shows in the 2000 edition of SAF would show that half the performances in the main programme were either brand new or had been touring internationally for less than 2 years. Drawing upon a key cultural initiative highlighted by *RCR* on the importance of establishing Singapore as an “international arts centre”, Goh has sought to raise the SAF’s international profile

through its programming by continually emphasising on the SAF's need to tap into global art trends (p. 56). A quick examination of her curation can be seen in how she justifies the works that she picks for the festivals. In 2001, she states that the works she picked are "All...part of a global trend" (Tan 2001). Other key phrases she would use in successive years would include SAF being a "gateway between East and West"; containing works of a "multi-disciplinary nature", works that are created through "international collaboration", with an "Asian and contemporary focus" which are often "multi-genre" in nature (Tan 2002; Ong 2003; Cheah 2004; Chew 2005; Nayar 2006b). Under Goh, SAF has programmed an increasingly number of works that have "aggressively cross the categories of theatre, dance, and music" (Peterson, p 119). Goh's vision for the festival has resulted in many arts commentators stating that SAF has widely acknowledged the "multi-disciplinary nature of the global arts scene" through the programming of works that are best described as "cutting-edge...challenging...contemporary...(and) cross-cultural" (Chia 2007; Nayar 2008). In short, SAF, drawing upon *RCR* and with the financial support from the Government, has identified the key artistic style that Goh feels Singapore should adopt if it seeks to become a recognisable Capital of Culture. There is a recognition that if SAF wants to compete with the other festivals in the world, it should recognise and understand the various expressions of this abovementioned 'trend' in cultural discourse around the world, and become part of it.

By identifying and promoting certain key types of work in SAF, such as new work or work from the Asian region, Goh was encouraging a specific type of behaviour in the audience through the works to which they were exposed. Furthermore, by commissioning works by artists such as Robert Wilson and Philip Glass in her first year of the festival, a clear style of what kind of work audiences should learn to appreciate is visibly highlighted. In order to increase the artistic knowledge in the Singaporean audiences, and to prepare them for the new type of works that were being showcased at the festival, new 'incentives' were introduced into SAF. These incentives included a series of pre-festival talks that were "designed specially, for the first time" to "inform and educated potential audiences" about the shows in SAF before the festival began (Chan 2001). Forums and post-show discussions were also organised in order to expand the cultural capital of the festival-going audience. Goh would remark that a strong turn-out for these events was encouraging as it was a sign

that Singapore audiences were “seeking greater knowledge in the arts” (Tan 2002). These programmes show how an artistic habitus of Singaporeans was being cultivated in a certain direction by the programmes and activities in SAF. What should follow the creation of a certain artistic habitus should be the development of an instinctive behaviour in the citizenry whereby audiences would be comfortable in this new habitus and enjoy the works that come within this artistic habitus.

Different schemes, incentives and deterrents were also used by SAF to encourage a certain type of behaviour in artists and arts groups in Singapore via the work they produced and perform for SAF. The first way in which a specific habitus is created can be seen in the very basic premise on how SAF is programmed. According to Goh, works for SAF are selected based on a formula of three concentric circles whereby works from Singaporean groups and artists form the smallest circle, followed by works by Asian, and then International, groups. This form of programming was first mentioned in 2002 and reiterated in 2006 (Tan 2002; Nayar 2006c). One of the ways in which SAF includes Singapore work into the festival is through pairing local arts groups with international groups.

In 2000, NAC arranged ten collaborations between international groups with local artists in music, theatre and dance. In 2002, Goh would justify this practice by stating that Singapore is viewed as a city that is “the gateway between East and West” (once again reinforcing *RCR*’s cultural initiative) and thus SAF was about bringing “people and ideas together, to collaborate and create new art” (Tan 2002). The press would remark that the result of these collaborations were “the temporary answer to finding a distinctive Singaporean aesthetic” (Oon 2004). This method of supporting artistic development in artists and arts groups is interesting when we think of the aesthetic that is being developed in relation to the encouraging of a certain type of artistic habitus. Just as Singaporean audiences should learn to adopt an artistic habitus that would also be similar to an international audience as pointed out in the previous section, it can be argued here that local artists, through collaborating with foreign groups, are also being inculcated in a certain artistic habitus. With NAC arranging these collaborations, the type and style of work that is being selected will also play a large part in inculcating a certain artistic habitus. It seems that the development of an artistic habitus for Singapore artists is closely linked to the artistic habitus of

international groups. Goh points out that it was through “international collaboration” that “will continue to provide a platform for local groups to show new works” (Cheah 2004). It is clear that the artistic habitus that she would like to create is one that is not emerging from a developing Singaporean cultural identity but from a habitus that is what she deems to be international. She states in 2007 that the role of SAF has changed throughout the years. It first had to create a demand for the arts scene and develop “professional theatre work through commissions” (Nayar 2007). This was followed by the ‘internationalising’ of Singapore’s art through international “co-commissions, collaborations” as well as “encouraging bold works by Singaporean artists that have greater currency internationally” (Nayar 2007). It is clear that the artistic habitus that is being encouraged in the local arts community in Singapore is one that is formulated in a programmatic way, with its content extrapolated from international cultural discourse and configured within a series of non-cultural (social and economic) Government policy frameworks.

It can be argued that the creation of an artistic habitus through working with foreign groups might not be widely accepted by local artists in Singapore. The idea of an artistic habitus created through working with foreign groups is not widely accepted by local artists in Singapore, who have since Since 2001, local artists have called upon SAF to offer and help local arts groups gain a wider representation within SAF (See Cheah 2008; Nayar 2006c; Nayar 2006d). Artists have also called for a greater transparency in SAF’s selection process (See Oon 2001). It can be seen here that SAF has implemented specific strategies in order to inculcate a specific habitus in both Singaporeans and the artistic community in Singapore. Goh and her team behind the programming of SAF are convinced that through the different schemes both these groups will gain the correct knowledge, which they have identified as the dominant habitus that will allow Singapore to become a global city for the arts. However, it is clear with the release of *RCPIII* that Singapore is still not considered a global city for the arts. What also has to be noted is that despite the efforts to educate and develop both these groups in Singapore, it was clear by 2008 that the artistic habitus of audiences and the arts community in Singapore did not turn out as the Steering Committee had hoped.

The ways in which both these two groups have responded to the initiatives of SAF, I would contend, offer interesting results when we firstly analyse them against the idea of improvisation and secondly, if we examine their ‘improvisations’ against the newest cultural initiatives from *RCPIII*.

Improvising within the Habitus

Through supporting a specific type of work SAF hopes that Singaporeans, artists and arts groups would respond favourably to the artistic habitus that it wanted to encourage in them. SAF hoped that both audiences and the artistic community would be comfortable in this new habitus and embrace the works SAF presented, however, ticket sales and audience attendance reached a nadir⁵ in 2008 and I would contend that this was because they were capable of ‘improvisation’ within this government supported and sanctioned artistic habitus. Habitus, it has been suggested is made up of “two essential components” that of “structure” and “propensity” (Swartz, p. 103). What Goh has done with the programming with SAF is to create a structure hoping that this would help create an inclination from both artists and audiences in Singapore to respond to this structure thus creating the content of the specific habitus that SAF would like to inculcate in them. If “power and legitimation is at the heart of the functioning and structure of habitus”, then artists and audiences who are trying to become dominant members of the field (i.e. the arts and cultural sector in Singapore) would be inclined to struggle against the dominant habitus in the field, which is being supported by the dominant producer in the field (Swartz, p.106). After all, if habitus was a behaviour that could be inculcated over a period of time, it should stand to reason that attendance figures and the response from the public, artists and arts groups for SAF should increase annually. Why then, after almost eight years of this strategy, did this ‘disposition’ not materialised?

When we take into account the way SAF is programmed to reach out to both an international audience and a local audience which the Steering Committee have already acknowledged do not possess the same habitus, it is possible to understand

⁵ Attendance figure for the 2008 edition of the festival were the lowest since the 1980 edition of the Singapore Arts Festival. Then-Chief Executive of the National Arts Council Lee Suan Hiang, would state that low tickets sales could be attributed to a recession in Singapore, however, news articles also highlighted that the final released figures also included complimentary tickets. As a further point of comparison, tickets sold for the 2008 edition were even lower than tickets sold for the 2003 edition, which took place during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic and a recession.

why local audiences are not responding to SAF. This issue is further complicated when there is an acknowledgment from the Steering committee that Singaporean audiences have differing levels of cultural knowledge. SAF places a priority on works that are perceived to have a good chance of being both critically and commercially successful internationally through their subject matter or in their performance style. This is the first audience that it attempts to please- an overseas audience who does not share the same artistic habitus of Singaporeans. The second audience it hopes to attract are local Singaporeans. The constant reiterations that SAF is a festival with 'something for everyone' points to the fact that it has to cater to a population of "people with different levels and appreciation of the arts" (Chia 2008). The diversity of the audience in Singapore can be seen when Goh states that programming SAF requires having to "juggle the demands of artists, connoisseurs, children and, last but not least, the Singaporean in the street" (Choy 2005). What is also interesting are the range of audiences that Goh and her committee have in mind when she points out that SAF is not only for a crowd that enjoys theatre or concerts, which they define as a "small group", but also a festival for "ordinary folk" as well, which is why the festival contains activities in its outreach programme consisting of performances in "parks, malls and town centres all over Singapore" (*Straits Times* 2001). It is important to note that there is an official awareness of two quite separate 'groups', or segments. The impact of this division is reflected in the programming of SAF, which consists of a Main Programme whereby the works in the programme contain the high-profile international acts, the collaborations and commissions from local arts groups, as well as a parallel programme consisting of a series of outreach and fringe shows which are free and take place outdoors.

SAF's attempt to reach out to more Singaporean audiences in this manner, however, raises more questions. The first: how do the shows in the Outreach programme actually encourage or entice a Singapore who does not usually attend an arts event to buy a ticket for a show in the main programme? The second: if the aim of the outreach events is to bring arts to people who normally do not attend arts events- judging by the types of performance in this programme- what kind of habitus is being inculcated in this non-arts-aware person? The knowledge and behaviour required to watch and enjoy these programmes are completely different from the knowledge and behaviour that are expected in a performance in the core programme. What has

happened with these two programmes with the diverse programming is creating two types of audiences with two different ideas of what art is and by extension a different habitus. The end result of this type of programming seems to create two completely different festivals and in the long run, two types of habitus as well. It also leaves the programming open to criticism, especially with regards to the core programme. The attempt to placate the 'ordinary folk' by including more mainstream works in the main programme leads to criticism that the event is not cutting edge enough and risks losing its 'edgy' credentials and even putting off foreign journalists and buyers who are used to such works. On the other hand, by including works that are considered avant-garde and contemporary, the programme allows itself to be criticised again for not being inclusive enough to new audiences who would be put off by such esoteric works.

The increasing number of arts festivals that take place in Singapore besides SAF is also a growing indication that there is an audience that is interested in attending arts events, and that private companies, artists and arts groups in Singapore have created festivals that are more attractive to Singaporean audiences than SAF through their content. Two key examples would be the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival (M1 FF) organised by The Necessary Stage and the Singapore Theatre Festival created by W!ld Rice (sic). What both these festivals have in common with each other that differ from SAF is the focus on work that is relevant to a Singaporean audience. Alvin Tan, artistic director of M1 FF states that the festival's programming direction is based on presenting work that is "socially relevant" and has the potential to "make a difference in people's lives or make people think differently" (Cheong and Hong 2008). STF hopes to "nurture and develop a festival that would engage, relate to and resonate with the audience" through the presentation of new works written by Singaporean or Malaysian playwrights whom Singapore shares a close cultural background and language with (Tan 2006). M1 FF is interesting because the style of works that it presents are not dissimilar to the habitus that SAF hopes to inculcate in Singaporeans, with the key difference that the content is specifically targeted at local audiences and not an international audience. Their website states that the works it hopes to present are "the best of contemporary, cutting-edge and socially-engaged works to the Singapore audience" (website: 2011). Both M1 FF and STF are festivals that grew

out from local theatre practitioners who had identified what they felt were key areas within the Singapore cultural scene that required development.

There are two important issues to acknowledge with regards to both these festivals. Firstly, both theatre companies have picked up the 'rules of the games' in commissioning and promoting the arts in Singapore according to the regulations imposed by the Government through its various schemes. They are not only working within the structures of the Government: through their commitment to improve artist and audience development, their actions are improvisations of a behaviour that is inculcated in artists by the Government- namely to be financially sufficient and to be able to quantify their achievements. Hence the pursuit of private sponsorship and the release of their financial and audience figures to the press. Their improvisation has not only reaped benefits locally but also in the case of M1 FF help to create a festival that is slowly being recognised around the region as well. The commitment of both these theatre groups to nurturing new audiences and new artists shows an acknowledgement that these festivals need time to show tangible results. By making the focus of these festivals on Singaporean citizens and artists, both TNS and Wild Rice are adopting a strategy of difference rather than of reproducing the dominant artistic habitus SAF is trying to impose on audiences and artists in Singapore. It would be hard to predict what the long term results of this strategy would be, but in the years since the inception of both these festivals, both theatre groups have proven not only that there is an audience out there who are willing to learn more about new art trends, but that there is also an audience out there who are interested in productions based on local content- two issues that SAF have been unable to resolve. Secondly, both theatre companies are committed to developing a 'habitus' drawn from a Singaporean national and cultural identity demonstrate a better understanding of the type of support the local arts and cultural sector require in order to either create or appreciate work that might allow the city to become recognised as a global city for the arts.

It would be interesting here to point out that the aims of these festivals and the work that these festivals have been producing 'pre-empt' the latest cultural initiatives in *RCPIII*. The release of *RCPIII* signifies a marked shift from wanting to turn Singapore into a 'gateway' to Asia and instead now champions the production of

local content, a view that seems to be supporting the work done by The Necessary Stage and Wild Rice. *RCPIII* goes on to state that it is a country's "unique content" that allows it to shape its "national identity and distinctiveness" thus allowing it to project a "city's identity internationally" as well as act as "repositories of the city's heritage and collective experience" (MICA, p.18). Finally, the report highlights that a nation's "body of creative work" can only help in defining its "values and ambitions" to the rest of the world and "instil a greater sense of pride in the nation's identity amongst the citizenry (MICA, p. 18). There is now recognition of the growing importance of Singaporean content. Contrast this idea to the way in which works are selected for SAF during Goh's tenure and it can be seen that there has been a change in the way works that can be considered 'Singaporean' are valued and thus perhaps a shift in what type or form of artistic habitus the Singapore Government has now identified as suitable for Singaporeans artists and audiences to adopt. What is problematic now is how these new policy directives will be implemented.

Conclusion

Singapore cannot become a global city for the arts by 'adopting' an artistic habitus drawn from what is perceived to be dominant cultural trends. Rather, being a Capital of Culture requires a city to develop its own habitus so as to contribute to the global cultural discourse. Habitus cannot be swiftly acquired like a swift training course. The direction of the Singapore Arts Festival under the new leadership of Low Kee Hong, hired to fill Goh's place has reorganised the festival structure and direction. There is still a desire to present the SAF as a festival to access the best in new Asian work, however, there also seems to be a commitment to present new Singaporean work (see Chia 2010, Tan 2011). However, critical opinions seem to indicate that the festival still faces the same issues as the festivals under Goh's tenure and it remains to see how the festival will continue in the next few years (see Chia 2011, Cheah, 2011)

Singapore's audience is unique because about 90 per cent of attendees are aged 20 and below, according to a survey conducted on behalf for SAF (Rasul 2007). With the right support the habitus of these people can be developed in such a way as to allow them to participate fully in the arts in the future, helping the Singapore arts

scene to grow artistically both locally and internationally. However, this would require a shift in the way in which cultural policy is being implemented in Singapore.

What is needed here is the recognition from the Singapore Government that while state support is vital for the growth of a thriving arts and cultural sector, what is equally important as well is allowing the creation of art that is changing constantly in relation to artistic discourse (as it responds to both a changing culture and also the changing social make-up of its audiences), rather than art that is supported and created in response to non-artistic conditions (to become a recognisable Capital of Culture). This would require a shift from the Government's current role in the arts scene in Singapore, moving from creating and maintaining what it actually thinks or wants the arts scene to be, to taking on the role as a facilitator assisting artists, arts companies and even private individuals and companies with their ideas instead. Would the NAC be prepared to help artists and private individuals develop their own schemes and plans, which they may or may not agree with, based on past examples that these people might be better attuned to the needs of the arts and cultural sector? This would require the Government to support schemes and ideas from artists and audiences themselves rather than the current state-directed cultural policy.

By acknowledging that local artist and audiences have valid views on the way the arts and cultural sector should be supported, it would then be possible to help Singapore achieve its goal of becoming a global city for the arts because the work created, presented and consumed would be work that showcases ideas, interests and views of being Singaporean, thus helping Singapore forge a unique identity, that sets itself apart from other cities in the region. Until then, it remains to be seen how the new direction SAF has undertaken, alongside the new cultural strategies from *RCPIII*, will impact upon the arts and cultural landscape in Singapore in the future.

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