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ART MUSEUM EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

Abstract. This study examines the practice of art education in one art museum (the Singapore Art Museum) through an analysis of its policy and curriculum, and the relationships between these and the public dimension of art museum education. The exhibition and public educational programmes serves as a basis for the discussion of three main issues in relation to museum educational policy in Singapore: (i) the creation of an awareness of national heritage among museum visitors, (ii) the notion of equity and inclusive museum education, and (iii) the concept of learning for life. The 'reality factors' that enable and inhibit the implementation of the art museum educational policy are presented and their implications for other contexts are considered: the tension between governmental aims of nation-building and post-modern concepts of art and art experience; policies of inclusion and the effects of self-exclusion for those without cultural capital; and the pressure to relate art education to economic development.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the developed world, structural trends and changes in society have exerted a profound influence on the role of museums and galleries for the 21st century. Among the principal trends are the emergence and implications of post-industrial society, developments in technology, changing government attitudes, and the concept of education for life (Middleton 1998, 27-34). On an international level, the context of art museum and gallery practices are readily related to an aesthetics revolution, which over the last decade, has brought about a complex artistic transformation, renewing people's history and bringing artistic and creative interests into people's lives (Dalin and Rust 1996, 55-56).

No exception to these general trends, the Singapore National Heritage Board (NHB) has made considerable efforts to explore and present local culture and heritage through a network of three national museums. In the case of the art museum this has resulted in a search for new perspectives and possibilities of integrating the educational role of the museum into its core identity. This is spelled out in the mission statement of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM):

To preserve and present the art histories and contemporary art practices of Singapore and the Southeast Asia region so as to facilitate visual arts education, exchange, research and development. (NHB 2000).

This chapter centres on an analysis of the existing art museum educational policy in Singapore as a case study of international trends. The chapter shows that 'reality factors' - the tensions between governmental policies and the aesthetic and educational mission of art museums - have to be taken into account in this case, and suggests that such factors are also likely to be found in other contexts too. Three interrelated areas are examined:

- 1) The context of the Singapore Art Museum's mission and educational policy.
- 2) The role and function of education within the museum's overall aims and strategies.
- 3) Implications of art museum educational practices in Singapore: the 'reality factors' that enable and inhibit the implementation of the policy.

In general, art museums do not just collect art but also contribute to the production of cultural knowledge and influence the ways in which we imagine our community and ourselves. Hence, it is necessary to first evaluate SAM's role in the local cultural context. Second, an analysis of the art educational practices in the SAM will throw light on its purposes in relation to the overall mission of the Museum. Finally, the factors that enable and inhibit the implementation of the art museum educational policy will be addressed to place SAM's aims and strategies in a broader context of educational policy in Singapore before we consider the more general implications for art museum education in other contexts.

THE CONTEXT OF SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM'S MISSION AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Infrastructure For The Arts

The role of SAM is closely related to the national cultural developments of Singapore, where an infrastructure for the arts has been set in place for the new millennium. This includes the establishment of arts institutions such as NHB; National Arts Council; an arts centre – the Esplanade, to be completed by 2002; the development of an arts market, and the upgrading of art colleges. The establishment of SAM in 1996, being reincarnated from the former National Art Gallery, marks an important development in the arts infrastructure of the nation.

The Singapore Committee on National Arts Education in 1996 affirmed the significance of arts education to the nation's development. In *The Next Wave of Creative Energy: report of the Committee on National Arts Education* (1996, 20-22), the provision for arts education in the context of Singapore's economic, social and cultural development was recommended. A three-pronged approach was proposed as an effective way of implementing national arts education at the levels of the school system, the community at large, and tertiary arts institutions. Museums and libraries will provide a core resource for the intellectual capital of the nation, and can further their potential by seeking partnerships with industry and formal education establishments to form a network of centres of learning for life.

Against this backdrop of a response to the changing needs of the cultural development of the nation, SAM has become part of a network of art centres and community centres to provide arts education for schools and the general adult population. It can therefore play an important role in helping to raise the standards of artistic knowledge and produce a critical mass of creative citizens.

The Arts and Knowledge-based Economy

From the mid-1990s, phrases such as “a global city for the arts” and “cultural renaissance” have entered into the official discourse of government leaders in their pronouncement of policies. *Singapore: Global City for the Arts*, a glossy brochure jointly produced by the Tourist Promotion Board and the Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1995, makes a very clear declaration of the government’s intention of forging close links between the arts and the economy (TPB 1995, 5).

In the new millennium, a cultural renaissance of historic importance will accompany the dramatic economic transformation of East Asia. By being of continuing service to the region and the world, Singapore hopes to do for the arts what it has done for banking, finance, manufacturing and commerce, and help create new ideas, opportunities and wealth.

It is not surprising that the government’s justification for turning the nation into a regional hub for the arts often carries economic overtones. As a young nation, the Singaporean education system has been developed over the past four decades to fulfil the dual needs of nation-building and of sustaining economic development (Ashton and Sung 1997). The Government’s current policy towards the development of arts and culture is consistent with this. The state’s view of the culture industry as a new and desirable area for economic growth was evident when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong – on the occasion of announcing the vision for Singapore to be a “Renaissance City” – stated that “artistic creativity is an important element of a knowledge-based economy” (*The Straits Times*, Sept. 26, 1999).

A more recent state initiative in the arts further testifies the state’s pragmatic and rational approach to cultural development. In March 2000, the government announced that SGD50 million would be devoted to the development of art activities in the next five years, which doubled the previous funding to the arts. Armed with a checklist of six strategies, including developing flagship arts companies and an arts economy, the intention is to turn Singapore into “a world-class city with a vibrant cultural scene”. The two aims of the “Renaissance city” report were reiterated by the Minister for Information and the Arts: (i) to make Singapore a global city of the arts, and (ii) to strengthen the sense of national identity by nurturing an appreciation of local arts and culture (*The Straits Times*, 10 March 2000).

Arts in Nation-building

The government’s interest in the culture business (or arts industry) is seen as a way to promote economic growth and a way to preserve traditional values admired by the government (Tamney 1996, 154-7). The national museums are therefore accorded the role of engendering a sense of nationhood through the understanding of the history and heritage of Singapore. In the case of the Art Museum, the educational programmes have been designed to promote an understanding of the nation’s visual arts history as well as nurture an appreciation of the arts of Southeast Asia and the world.

From the perspective of the government leaders, the arts and cultural policy are clearly linked to wealth creation and employment potential. In these terms, creativity

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