

# Thinking Through Arts Education in Our Time

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## **I. Fellow Teachers, Fellow Students**

I am indeed privileged to greet you in this way: *Fellow teachers, Fellow students!*

Fellow teachers, in choosing our vocation, we have inevitably become permanent students — and our students have constantly made us better teachers and learners.

And it is especially in a university, a college, an institution of higher learning, that we aspire to fulfil the highest ideals of a special learning community — all of us learning from *all* sources, from each other, from our students, from our peers across disciplines, institutions, and regions of the world, from those who have come before us, and with an abiding concern for those who will come after us.

I also wish to acknowledge fellow educators in our midst — our administrative and support colleagues and our partners, too, from the arts community, academia, civil society, government, and industry. For, without *you* as our co-educators, we cannot carry out our educational mission.

This means that we bring out the best in ourselves and in each other when we are guided by — when we live out — an ethos of collegiality and mutual respect, and when we extend this ethos beyond our university, reaching out to the public, the wider population, the world.

And this is precisely the thrust of my speech: Just as no artistic or intellectual endeavour can germinate and flourish in a social vacuum, cut off from life, no university can grow and thrive in a self-enclosed domain, cut off from society and the world, from its living roots.

This applies to each of us as persons and professionals — none of us can achieve anything substantial or sustainable alone, contrary to the celebration of the solitary genius or the myth of the Great Leader. There are indeed mysteries to human creativity. Yes, individuality and solitude may be preconditions for originality, but community and solidarity transform creative labour and channel it towards public purpose.

“**No artistic endeavour can flourish in a social vacuum, and no university can thrive in a self-enclosed domain, cut off from society.**”

## II. Life, Livelihood, Vocation

This is even more so today as we grapple with the challenges of the contemporary world, whose key features are described by the acronym VUCA: *volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous*.

Behind these words are lived experiences of ordinary women and men facing extraordinary personal circumstances that are shaped by larger social forces, which they feel are beyond their control and yet courageously confront each day.

We have witnessed this most dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, which exposed and worsened existing inequalities. During the most devastating phases of the pandemic, we also saw many governments, even of so-called developed nations, faltering, flailing, and failing in their basic duties to their peoples.

How do we map the contours of our time, how do we chart the paths ahead? We face multiple crises simultaneously: pandemics, climate change, technological disruption, social inequality, and political polarisation. And we need to understand their cumulative impact on the way we live, work, and learn.

As educators, we ask: what does it mean to be educated? What does it mean to be an educated person? With our students in mind, economic development and social equity are among our chief concerns, including practical issues such as job skills, occupational preparedness, professional growth, and career progression.

Over a lifetime, however, our graduates also seek, shape, and sustain a *vocation* — finding personal meaning and social purpose in their creative work.<sup>2</sup>

“Our graduates seek, shape, and sustain a vocation — finding personal meaning and social purpose in their creative work.”

This is why I think the word “vocational” as in “vocational training” or “vocational skills” has a profound original meaning that is not captured today. We now tend to narrowly confine it to learning a trade or being qualified for gainful employment in an occupation, getting a job, entering a profession, and building a career.

Jobs and employability are crucial issues that no one should discount — especially those who have not experienced what it means to be unable to make a living. But let us remember that we do not educate our students to just enable them to get their first jobs, which will be the first of many jobs. Upon graduation, they would have many decades of adulthood ahead of them. The decades ahead will be filled with unexpected challenges and unforeseen circumstances.

Meaningful jobs and successful careers in the cultural sector fuel and propel the creative economy, but lifelong vocations build and strengthen a vibrant society, resilient and responsive in the face of crises and complexities.

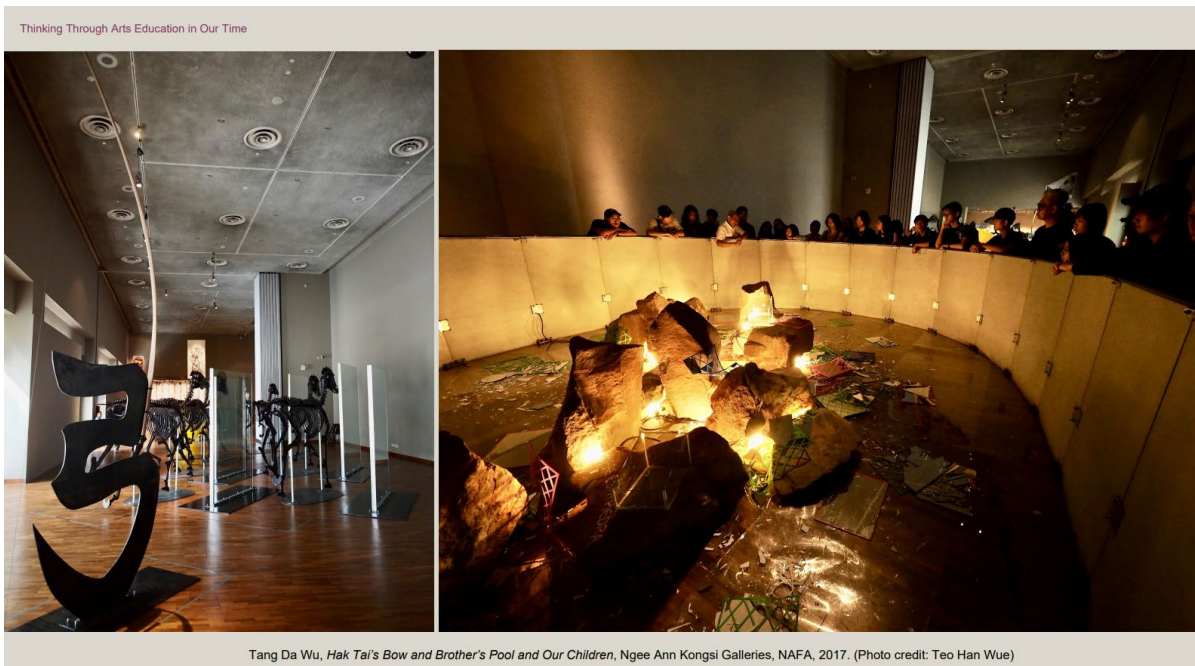
Let us, together, think through education — and arts education — in our time.

- **A debt of gratitude**

At this inaugural Symposium, we offer a gesture of appreciation to our arts educators, exemplified by some of our senior teachers gathered here today, and our first duty has been to remember the founders of our two constituent colleges, Mr Lim Hak Tai 林学大 (*Lín Xué Dà*) and Brother Joseph McNally.

For, it is important for us to acknowledge that our university has not emerged out of nowhere: many artists and teachers, many artist-teachers and practitioner-educators have over generations made this moment possible.

There's so much to say — and much remains to be written — about Mr Lim and Brother Joseph, two exceptional individuals who led remarkable lives and whose creativity, foresight and determination were buttressed by a deep sense of vocation. Mr Lim's vocation can be traced to the ideals of the May Fourth Movement (五四运动 *wǔ sì yùn dòng*) of 1919. And Brother Joseph found his religious calling in his teenage years and his wider vocation later naturally extended to the combined spheres of education and art.



I hope that it may suffice here to draw on Tang Da Wu's 2017 exhibition at NAFA entitled *Hak Tai's Bow, Brother's Pool and Our Children: Tang Da Wu* — which attests to Da Wu's deep regard for the founders and their legacies.

Da Wu is himself an artist-teacher who has been teaching for more than two decades at the National Institute of Education. Da Wu could not be here today, but we want to register our appreciation for his role as an arts educator and, more concretely, his three exhibitions and rounds of seminars on art and arts education in 2017, 2019, and 2022.<sup>3</sup>

At the risk of simplifying what is a complex and multi-layered exhibition, let me just highlight the suggestiveness of Da Wu's titles for his two installation works.

In *Hak Tai's Bow* the six horses are a reference to Mr Lim Hak Tai's six principles, enunciated in 1955, outlining aspirations for the art of the Malayan era, whose spirit I will indirectly revisit today. Hak Tai's personal name 学大 (*xué dà*) connotes wide or great learning, and the huge bow 大弓 (*dà gōng*) is a play on the Chinese term for an archery bow 弓 (*gōng*), which has the same pronunciation as the word for "merit" or "contribution" 功 (*gōng*). The wide curvature of the bow resonates with Hak Tai's name 学大 (*xué dà*), and this also suggests that his merit or contribution is great 大功 (*dà gōng*) and something we can learn from.

*Brother's Pool*, and I hope this is not too literal, refers to the pool of artistic talents that are gathered in the art college that Brother Joseph founded, with the craggy rocks and broken glass perhaps alluding to the obstacles and challenges that artists confront, as well as the constant need for critical self-reflection. And there are many stories of how Brother Joseph had to face many obstacles and challenges, especially in securing financial and official support for his dream of building an art school.

- **Artists and their lives**

Certainly, we cannot speak of *the arts* without speaking of *artists and their lives*. We turn now to just a few illustrative examples out of many that can be drawn from the entire range of the arts in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Let me first share this image and these words:



Rohani Ismail was the first female Malay graduate of NAFA and Georgette Chen 张荔英 (*Zhāng Lì Yīng*) was one of her teachers. This is a fascinating case study of the bonds forged between teacher and student, who become close friends. Reading their many

letters — written in Bahasa Melayu, a language that Georgette Chen learnt and used diligently — we can't help but feel the sense of mutual affection and care between them. In one letter, Rohani Ismail signs off: "*Yang tidak lupa*" ("the one who does not forget"). This was a friendship based on the fondest of shared memories.

And here, let us not forget the lessons that we can draw from their experiences. I will just make three other observations.

First, Rohani Ismail identifies herself as an artist, who experiences the feeling of "fullness" (*merasa kenyang* or feeling satiated with food) and one might say, *fulfilment* in artmaking.<sup>4</sup> Artmaking draws on, and develops, a full range of the human senses, and this fullness is an emotional, bodily, and social experience.


Second, the friendship between Rohani Ismail and Georgette Chen is an example of intersecting biographies and histories, two artists — one established and one aspiring — from contrasting backgrounds meeting in Singapore, our corner of Southeast Asia, and in an art school created by Chinese émigré artists.

Thinking Through Arts Education in Our Time

"Sometimes when I think that I am the product of four world events, all wars – two Chinese revolutions, the one of Dr Sun and Mao Tse-tung and first and second World Wars in all of which I have been inexorably involved, the wonder is that my profession should have been one of goodwill and peace!"

Text: Georgette Chen to Dorothy Lee (Letter), 17 May 1967  
Georgette Chen Archive, National Gallery of Singapore

Image: Georgette Chen *At Home in the World*,  
Exhibition, 27 Nov 2020 – 26 Sep 2021 National Gallery of Singapore



Georgette Chen said that she was the product of two Chinese revolutions, 1911 and 1949, and the first and second World Wars, and she spent a significant part of her formative years in Europe before making her home in Singapore, which led her to learn to speak and write Malay.

Third, there's a material difference between them. Georgette Chen, who was close to three decades older than Rohani, was an established artist by the time she taught at NAFA. In 1963 when she painted Rohani Ismail's portrait, Rohani was barely 20 years old. Malay artists saw the need to support each other; they came together to form a community in a more organised way. Rohani was a co-founder of the *Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya* (APAD) or the Association of Artists of Various Resources, whose motto was "*Secita Mencipta*" or "Together, we create".

Indeed, artists everywhere have always drawn on unevenly available resources, which include learning opportunities and mentorship, as well as funding and sponsorship.



In 1975, both women artists exhibited at an International Women's Year show. When interviewed, Georgette Chen said that she "breathes, eats and sleeps art", but Rohani Ismail expressed frustration and disappointment that she could not make a living from painting, and art has become "strictly a hobby"; in addition, marriage for women meant leaving their talents behind and turning their attention "to the home".<sup>5</sup>

The personal circumstances and social conditions that artists, especially aspiring artists, labour under are not something that we can take for granted. Behind the question of livelihood, deep down there is a process of personal search and struggle, which teachers can help guide. And there was, as in Rohan Ismail's case, a gender dimension to the process.

- **Merantau**

In speaking of this process of personal search and struggle, the concept and practice of *merantau* comes to mind. This has been highlighted by T.K. Sabapathy in his study of Latiff Mohidin's artmaking, in part explaining its fertile imagination and its rootedness in Southeast Asian landscapes:

## Merantau

“... To wander or sojourn is a significant fulfilment in Latiff's cultural milieu. Such an activity is designated by the term *merantau* which literally means to go forth by leaving the homestead. In the Minangkabau tradition (which is Latiff's), it is a male preserve, enabling setting aside or freeing from impending household obligations and setting out into the beyond, unencumbered in all ways.”

Text: T.K. Sabapathy, Latif Mohidin,  
*Journey to Wetlands and Beyond*

Image: Latiff Mohidin. *Pagoda II*. 1964.  
Oil on canvas, 99.4 x 99.2 cm.  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Indeed, Latiff Mohidin's *merantau* was exceptional in terms of the opportunities for artistic development that he sought and that were available to him. It might well be rare for aspiring artists to be relatively “unencumbered” in many ways. Because so much depends on the struggle between the inner self and external social conditions.

Here, I pause to share a lesson I learned from my friends from the Centre for Singapore Tamil Culture. Tamil is one of the oldest living languages in the world. And around 2000 years ago Classical Tamil literature, especially *Caṅkam* poetry — the word *Caṅkam* referring to the academies of the time — was very well developed.

The poems continue to be read and performed today, and even in translation, they can touch us deeply — especially the genre called *akam* (அகம்), love poems, which speak to the *inner* life, as contrasted with *puṛam* (புறம்) poems, which are about the *exterior* world, for example, about war, heroism, and kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

This distinction appears to be a universal distinction, which is also reflected in the Islamic concepts of *batin* (باطن inner / inward / hidden) and *zakhir* (ظاهر external / manifest / physical / bodily), which is commonly part of the Hari Raya Adilfitri greetings — “*Maaf zakhir dan batin*” — among our Muslims friends when they seek forgiveness for inner thoughts and outward actions that might have been inconsiderate.

And the lesson here is that artists are no different from others in having to cultivate their inner lives and grapple with external circumstances over the course of a lifetime. Arts education, too, must give attention to this interplay between the inner life and social conditions.



### III. University, the Arts, Singapore

On this occasion as the University of the Arts Singapore brings together arts educators and our partners in arts education, allow me to share a few reflections on three themes encapsulated in the name of our new institution: “University”, “the Arts”, and “Singapore”.

- **The Idea of a university<sup>7</sup>**

Narrowly defined, a university is a degree-granting institution. We know that the degree is prized as evidence of achievement at the apex of the educational ladder, and the university is a prime vehicle for social mobility.

Today, we still welcome cohorts of first-generation university entrants. But what of their parents and relatives who never attended university? We often come across people in our daily lives who, when asked about their education, say with a tinge of regret that they never had the chance to study at higher levels for reasons that have to do with the lack of opportunities or having to support their families from a young age.

And often enough, you would hear this phrase: “But I did go to the University of Life” (or in Chinese, 社会大学 [*shè huì dà xué*]), which may be translated as the university of society or social experience).

We must know it is a great privilege to be members of a university as students and staff, and this must carry with it a sense of responsibility on our part — to think and see beyond ourselves.

“**It is a great privilege to be members of a university, and this must carry with it a sense of responsibility on our part — to think and see beyond ourselves.**”

On this note, I now take a step back to reflect on the idea of a university.

It is not accidental that the term “university” carries with it two associated ideas: “universe” and “universality”. This suggests to me, first, that a university as an institution of learning embraces learning about all aspects of the *universe* and, second, that a university’s mission is predicated on an ideal of the *universality* of humankind.

On the first point, one must be in awe of the vastness of the universe, which has been described by Nobel Prize physicist Frank Wilczek as follows: “Earth is one among several planets of our Sun; our Sun is among billions of stars in our Milky Way Galaxy; our Galaxy is one of billions in the visible Universe”.<sup>8</sup> And it is an expanding universe, which recently the James Webb Space Telescope has enabled us to appreciate its beauty as never before.



Webb Uncovers Young Stars' Outbursts in Carina Nebula

Image Credit : <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/webb-uncovers-young-stars-outbursts-in-carina-nebula>

At the beginning of his book, *A Beautiful Question* (2015), Wilczek poses these questions: “Does the world embody beautiful ideas? Is the world a work of art?” And at the end of the book, after offering copious evidence from the world of science and mathematics, he offers his answer, which is a resounding “Yes”. But he goes on to say that the physical world is both “beautiful and *not* beautiful”, spelling out this apparent contradiction as follows:

The physical world embodies beauty.

The physical world is home to squalor, suffering, and strife.

In neither aspect should we forget the other.

This leads us to the second point about the universality of humankind as an ideal: if the physical world is home to squalor, suffering, and strife, and if as we know, the impact of these conditions is unevenly distributed within and across populations, what is there to be said about the sense of a shared humanity among all peoples? And even more so today with extreme social inequality and political polarisation, and the plurality of contending and seemingly incommensurable worldviews and values.

Yet, in this fractured world, a university is one — perhaps *the* one — institution that, in its pursuit of understanding all aspects of the universe, holds on to the possibility of a shared humanity on an increasingly fragile Earth, a mere speck in the universe. This is still an *ideal worth striving for*.

“**In a fractured world, a university is perhaps the one institution that holds on to the possibility of a shared humanity.**”

And if this is the case, where do the arts and arts education figure within the context of a university?

- **The arts and arts education**

There is now a vast literature on the very definition of art or the arts. As one Thai artist, Tang Chang, suggested in 1971, the question “what is art?” is intrinsically related to the question of what it means to be human. As he put it: “When we separate the materials, techniques and narratives out, something should be left behind”. For him what is left behind is “the essence of being human”, which he equates with “human intelligence” and which we might broaden to encompass human sentience.<sup>9</sup>

All human senses, all the qualities of human sentience, are creatively drawn upon in the practice of artmaking, and arts education develops these qualities as capabilities that can be expressed across many art forms and arts disciplines. Yet, Tang Chang insists: “Do not tell me that the craftsman is an artist or that his work is a work of art. Do not tell me that the technique, the colour, the narrative and other invented things are art”.

But this view seems to negate the idea that these tangible “things” are the products of human intelligence or sentience. Put simply, there appears to be two intertwined dimensions of the arts.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the arts is part of material life and the making of objects, including everyday utilitarian objects that are invested with symbolic meanings not only by the makers, but also by their users, especially in the process of “making special” in communal life.<sup>11</sup>

“**Art is also a medium of human self-reflection; making art, as Tang Da Wu suggests, involves “making questions”.**

On the other hand, art is also a medium of human self-reflection; making art, as Tang Da Wu suggests, involves “making questions”. This latter view has sometimes led to the distinction between craft and art, although it can be argued that the two cannot be clinically separated as if the processes of making, involving materials and techniques, and thinking, involving ideas and concepts, are disconnected processes.<sup>12</sup>

One way to understand the critique of craft by some artists is that they are responding to a situation in which traditional craftsmanship has reached a stage where experimentation and innovation have been stifled, especially when it has been sponsored by the establishment, and is out of sync with contemporary social conditions that engender new and pressing questions.

Here, we turn to the reflections of another Thai artist, Montien Boonma, in a poignant letter to his wife, Noom, in 1987:<sup>13</sup>

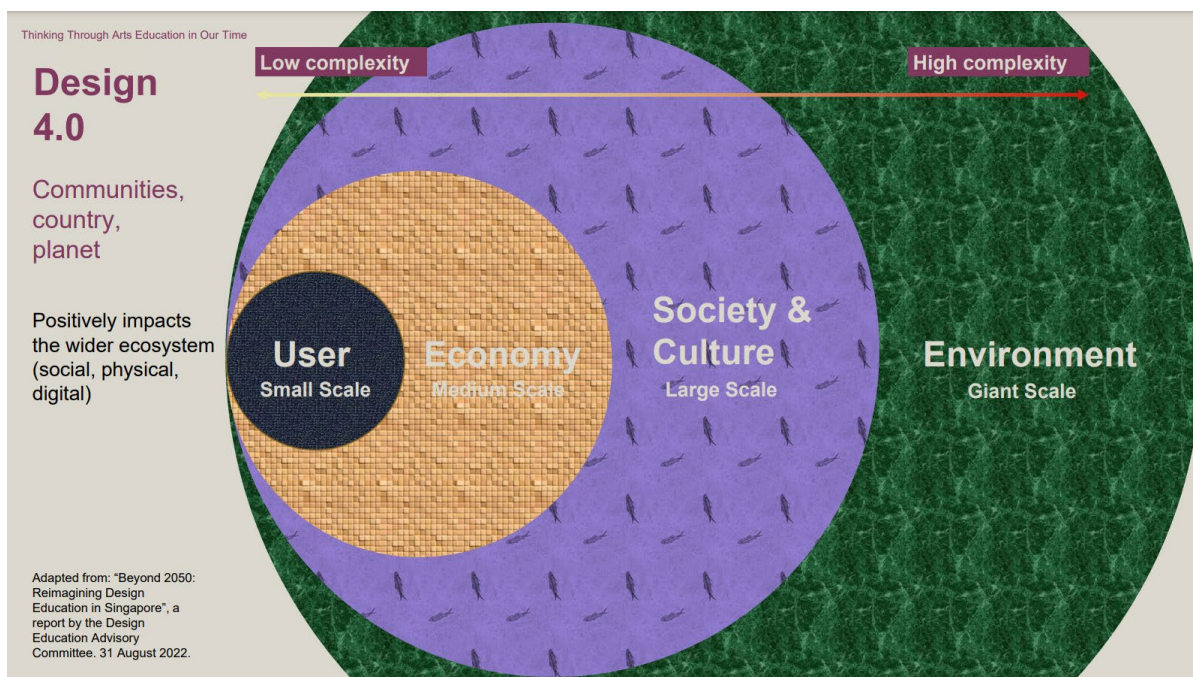
We should have artists who embody the values of the age. So we need to ask ourselves what our age contains and what are its characteristics... the national character, the Thai culture and tradition, and the culture of contemporary world society — both are necessary in the creation of works that represent the age.

In Montien Booma, we see an artist struggling with discerning the new demands on artistic work and yet labouring under the shadow of established ideas and practices.

Noom, I think when I get back to Chiang Mai, I'll no longer use wood sculptures at all. Why? Because we artists are the cause of deforestation. We don't have enough Thai teak left to be sculpting away at it. We should change our old way of thinking, or if we want to use wood, we should select a different kind that takes less time to grow. The government is promoting reforestation, but the artists take the trees and chisel at them. Noom, I'm telling you, *a piece of art on a mountain with no trees has less value than a single beansprout.* [emphasis added]

This is a powerful expression of a self-critical environmental consciousness on the part of an artist posing reflective questions about the "values of the age", the challenges of contemporary society, and the *value* of art under new circumstances.

If we take Montien Boonma's line of questioning seriously, what are its pedagogical implications for arts education today? As an example, I refer to some recent thinking about design education in the face of complex contemporary challenges, as articulated in the 2022 report by Singapore's Design Education Advisory Committee.



To use Montien Boonma's reference to wood sculptures as an instance of artists having to think about materials and concepts: we cannot remain at the small-scale level of users ("creating positive change for people"). We have to consider the increasing complexity posed by the medium-scale level of the economy ("creating value for businesses"), the large-scale level of society and culture ("positively transforming societies"), and the giant-scale level of the environment ("positively impacting the wider ecosystem").

Correspondingly, our pedagogy has to move beyond the disciplinary (“specialised design discipline”) to multidisciplinary (“including different design disciplines”), interdisciplinary (“including non-design disciplines”), and transdisciplinary (“including non-academic knowledge”) approaches in dealing with the various scales of complexity in our time.

Let me briefly turn to the question of technology, and in particular, generative Artificial Intelligence, which has far-reaching implications for us. There have been significant and rapid developments in generative AI based on large language models, culminating in new AI tools made available in recent months. With a few “prompts”, such tools can scrape voluminous amounts of digital data to generate texts, images, music, and videos in a matter of seconds. The prompts are further tweaked to generate content that satisfies and even exceeds the expectations of users.

This raises several important questions for the arts, artmaking, and arts education.

First, if AI can produce competent and arguably “creative” texts, images, music, and videos within a fraction of the time usually taken, is there still a demand for creative labour or the work of creative professionals?

Second, when the process of creation is reduced to tweaking prompts to generate desired outputs, are these products of artistic creation? Are we exercising human creativity in its fuller senses? In achieving expediency, do we lose something in the process? What is gained and what is lost?

Third, as arts educators, how we can teach our students to use new tools without replacing the need to grapple with difficult questions, exercise critical judgement, and make thoughtful choices concerning artistic merits and social impacts? How can we leverage the creative possibilities of technology and still cultivate artistic integrity?

Indeed, there is a part of me that wants to tell our students: “No shortcuts! Resist the path of least resistance, take the long and winding road, sometimes confronting wrong turns and dead ends, and sometimes being thrown into uncharted and difficult terrain, which engenders new insights, and sometimes experiencing serendipitous encounters with strangers who become friends”.

**“No shortcuts! Resist the path of least resistance, take the long and winding road, which engenders new insights and serendipitous encounters.”**

The question of artmaking in the age of artificial intelligence deserves our detailed attention in the years ahead, just as nearly a century ago social thinkers have had to consider the work of art in the age of technological reproducibility with the advent of photography and film.<sup>14</sup> But this time, the issues raised include larger philosophical and ethical questions about human sentience, in addition to the impact on artmaking and pedagogy.

- **Singapore in Southeast Asia and the World**

For the present purpose, my reflections here come from two inspiring sources, although I will not be able to do justice to their fuller implications. I am inspired, first, by Professor Wang Gungwu's recent Institute of Policy Studies series of lectures on "Living with Civilisations".<sup>15</sup> And second, by the recent publication of *The Modern in Southeast Asia: A Reader*, edited by T.K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores, a very significant compendium of translated writings by artists and intellectuals commenting on the socio-cultural transformations in the region since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This work, running into 1300 pages took some eight years to come to fruition under the auspices of the National Gallery of Singapore and in partnership with NTU's Centre for Contemporary Art.<sup>16</sup>

Prof Wang sees civilisations as stemming from, I quote, "efforts by visionaries, prophets and teachers to explain the universe and find the meaning of life on earth. From a set of first principles, ideational and moral systems were constructed to uplift the life of everyone beyond local cultures and identities". In this sense civilisations are "borderless" and indeed, Southeast Asia, at the crossroads of East and South Asia, has been a confluence of four major civilisations: the Indic, Sinic, Islamic, and modern European civilisations.

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Singapore can be said to have been heavily influenced by modern European civilization as part of its history as a colonial port city, but Singaporeans too must learn to live with the civilizational legacies that have been inherited by its people of various backgrounds. This is especially urgent in light of global and regional geopolitics.

In some ways complementing Prof Wang's work, the edited volume shows the struggles that Southeast Asian nations have experienced in their paths to the modern world, involving traumatic historical developments, to which artists have responded in different ways, as seen in the example of Montien Boonma that I referred to earlier.

It might be said that Singapore, for reasons related to its colonial past and its path towards independence, has projected itself hurriedly into the modern world. And in pursuing its strategies of globalisation with the entire world as its hinterland, it has also tended to "leapfrog" the region. But the two works that I have mentioned indeed point to the need to engage with our neighbouring countries in deeper ways. This may offer new and creative ways of culturally and intellectually connecting with the region and, through the region, with the world.

But this also means that Singaporeans themselves must have a deeper understanding of our complex multicultural history, indelibly intertwined with Southeast Asian and global history.

Here, I want to draw some insights from one of our cultural organisations, the Centre for Singapore Tamil Culture. I would like to highlight some parts of its mission statement for our consideration:

Though Tamils have traversed this region hundreds of years ago, their continuous recorded history life on this island is available only since Stamford Raffles acquired it as a trading post for the East India Company in 1819. Their culture and identity have survived over the past 200 years.... However, in recent times, a question has risen: Despite their distinct identity in name, are Tamil-Singaporeans truly a community with a distinct identity in practice? Many of us are distanced and dislocated from our own culture, if not totally deracinated.

*We cannot be ourselves, as we do not know ourselves. And to not know ourselves, is to not know others. As a people, we will become dark, silent ships passing each other in the night. This must not come to pass.*<sup>17</sup>  
[emphasis added]

Indeed, the experience of cultural loss and cultural change among Tamil-Singaporeans is not limited to any one ethnic group. This could be said to be part of the Singapore condition given its history of becoming a modern society from its earliest days as a port city and its rapid state-led modernisation since its independence. Hence, there have always been anxieties about the lack of deep literacy in Asian languages and civilisations beneath the ubiquitous use of the English language, which has served as the language of modernisation and globalisation.

In the same vein, Singapore has often been positioning itself as a hub for trade, finance, education, and the arts. However, this ambition must be matched by intellectual depth, artistic vitality, and strong cultural and intellectual capabilities in interacting and exchanging with diverse peoples within and beyond our shores. The metaphor of a hub suggests spokes that reach outwards in many directions, but to do so effectively, the centre itself must not be a vacuum, an empty shell; it must be a crucible of creativity.

“The metaphor of a hub suggests spokes that reach outwards, but to do so, the centre itself must not be a vacuum, an empty shell; it must be a crucible of creativity.”

At the intersection of civilizations and contrasting paths of becoming and being modern, we can contribute to deepening a sense of shared humanity with many peoples, with the arts playing a pivotal role in transcending the superficial, shallow cosmopolitanism of the globalized world.

## IV. Our Collective Mission

The University of the Arts Singapore is committed to collaborating with our arts educators across tertiary institutions as well as those teaching at pre-university levels.



In addition, we are located at the heart of an arts and educational precinct in the city. Think of the tremendous intellectual capital and creative talent concentrated within a few kilometres. We have yet to fulfil the potential of this precious ecosystem. We will be seeking partnerships within the city and beyond, reaching out to the rest of Singapore, the region, and the world.





Since the establishment of UAS, we are gratified that national institutions in the cultural sector have come forth to offer support and explore collaboration. For example, the National Library Board has announced plans to centralise and consolidate its arts collections and programming in the downtown arts and educational precinct. This certainly presents a golden opportunity for UAS to work closely with NLB and many partners in jointly reaching out to students, practitioners, researchers, and members of the public who love the arts.

We also find great affinity with the National Gallery of Singapore's new initiatives in designing and delivering online courses on art, drawing from its Southeast Asian collections, networks, and expertise. In addition, the Gallery's major scholarly project in gathering and translating art writings of the region engenders many possibilities for collaboration in the areas of teaching, research, and public education — which the UAS is very keen to explore.

In the area of talent development, National Arts Council and UAS will be launching the NAC-UAS Arts Scholarship soon, in time for our first undergraduate intake in August 2024. This is in addition to NAC's initiatives in the areas such as research and public education. We would like to express our thanks for this clear demonstration of support for our educational mission.

And we know from experience that partnerships with national agencies and industries must be complemented by the ground-up initiatives of communities, with individuals and groups seeking and creating new opportunities for collaboration. In this regard, we hope to develop a network of arts educators, practitioners, and researchers from diverse backgrounds, coming together as in this Symposium to define core priorities in arts education and evolve a new agenda in arts practice, pedagogy, and research.

## **V. In Lieu of a Conclusion**

And now, as I conclude, you would have sensed that throughout my sharing, I have touched on a series of apparently *competing* demands, but I have attempted to show that they are *complementary* concerns that we have to grapple with in arts education. If they appear to pull in different directions, we must hold them together in creative tension.

I shall summarise them here:

### **1. Livelihood and vocation**

- Making a living and possessing employable skills to weather the major changes in professions, industries, and markets.
- Finding and sustaining personal meaning and social purpose in creative work over a lifetime.

## **2. Inner lives and external circumstances**

- Cultivating our inner selves, developing insight and maturity.
- Overcoming social and practical constraints, and enabling professional growth.

## **3. Beauty in the world and squalor, suffering, and strife**

- Appreciating the beauty embodied in the universe, in nature and in human life.
- Confronting the ethical, social, and environmental challenges of our time.

## **4. Craft and conceptual thinking**

- Acquiring disciplinary knowledge and specialised skills, and constantly experimenting with new materials and techniques.
- Deepening conceptual thinking, sense of history, and critical judgement, and bridging the arts, humanities, and the social and natural sciences.

## **5. Exercising human creativity and leveraging technology**

- Exercising and expressing human creativity through deep reading, feeling, seeing, listening, performing
- Exploring and leveraging the creative possibilities of new technologies, and valuing intellectual and artistic integrity.

## **6. Intimate self-knowledge and deep understanding of Southeast Asia and the world**

- Knowing ourselves intimately as diverse communities rooted in civilisations and as a nation located in modern Southeast Asia.
- Understanding deeply our neighbouring societies — their artistic and social struggles — and reaching out to the world with humility and self-respect.

## **7. Strengthening our institutions and fostering partnerships**

- Strengthening our institutional foundations, resources, and networks, and a sense of identity and belonging.
- Collaborating fruitfully with each other in arts practice, pedagogy, and research across disciplines, schools, sectors, industries, and countries.

The work of transforming arts education is a *collective* mission, with each of us playing a special role within and across our institutions, in partnership with each other and our stakeholders and supporters — and all of us as value creators committed to the public purpose of the arts and arts education.<sup>18</sup>

Collectively, we will pursue these priorities with purpose and patience, with resourcefulness and initiative, with care and attention — bearing in mind the people who make our work possible, especially those who do not enjoy the privileges of our profession and whose lives we can enrich through our vocation.

Fellow teachers and all our co-educators, we are living in the face of technological acceleration, where speed and efficiency are prized, and we must also contend with the complex plurality of values in contemporary society.

This requires us to develop and exercise good judgment and discernment in making difficult choices. This, after all, is a hallmark of art making and arts education involving deep preparation, including rehearsals, studio practice and experimentation, going through a process that has integrity, rather than delivering a product in the most expedient way.

“As arts educators, and with our peers everywhere, we must take time, make time, and give time to discuss, debate, and deliberate.”

As arts educators, and with our peers everywhere, we must *take time, make time, and give time* to discuss, debate, and deliberate — to respond to the demands of our time, and to demonstrate the value of the arts in our time.

On behalf of my UAS colleagues, allow me to end my keynote by borrowing the words of our APAD colleagues:

*Secita Mencipta*

Together, we create

*Terima kasih, மிக்க நன்றி, 谢谢, Thank you!*<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In editing this manuscript, I have taken the opportunity to clarify and amplify some parts of the original address, including restoring a few lines that were earlier omitted in the interest of brevity. I have also included scholarly references and selected visuals from the presentation. I welcome comments, criticisms and suggestions for further inquiry.

<sup>2</sup> On the idea of vocation, one major source for my thinking is Max Weber (2020), *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, New York: NYRB. The two lectures, "Scholarship as a Vocation" (1917) and "Politics as a Vocation" (1919), were delivered at the University of Munich. This version is edited and introduced by Paul Reutter and Chad Wellmon, and the translation from German is by Damion Searls.

<sup>3</sup> See the essays and transcripts of seminar discussions in *On This Stone, We Will Build An Art School*, (2020), Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

<sup>4</sup> In the keynote, I mentioned Rohani Ismail identifying herself and her teacher as "fellow artists". I thank my colleague Nora Samosir for pointing out to me that Rohani Ismail used the term *kami* ("artists *saperti kami*," translated as "we artists"), which in Bahasa Melayu does not include the addressee (unlike the term *kita*). Thus, technically speaking, she did not include Georgette Chen as part of "we artists". Perhaps, as Suriani Suratman tells me, this was because she was referring to a delimited group of artists within her own circle. At the same time, she might have been showing deference towards her teacher, an older and more experienced artist. However, given their friendship, I would like to think that both women as fellow artists knew what it meant to share the experience of "*merasa kenyang*".

<sup>5</sup> Mei-Lin Chew, "Women artists show their colours", *The Straits Times*, June 24, 1975, page 10. See also the article by Nurdiana Rahmat on Malay female artists, "Terms and Conditions: Re-examining Singapore Art History Through the Art Making Experiences of Early Malay Women Artists", *Currents Journal, Archipelagic Encounters* (2021), <https://currentsjournal.net/terms-and-conditions>

<sup>6</sup> See A. K. Ramanujan, (2014), *The Interior Landscape: Classical Tamil Love Poems*, New York: New York Review Books.

<sup>7</sup> "The Idea of a University" is the title of John Henry Newman's reflection on higher learning, first published in 1852. His thesis has been criticised as irrelevant in today's context; see, however, Alasdair MacIntyre (2009), "The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman and Us", *British Journal of Education Studies*, 57 (4): 347-362.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Wilczek, (2015), *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design*, New York: Penguin Books; the quotations from this book are found on pp. 326 and 328.

<sup>9</sup> Tang Chang, ([1971] 2023), "Questions, Humans, Art", In T. K. Sabapathy & Patrick Flores eds., *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Vol. 2, pp. 841-842.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ellen Dissanayake, (1995), *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, University of Washington Press and Alva Noe, (2015), *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, New York: Hill and Wang.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Soetsu Yanagi, (2018), *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, UK: Penguin Random House.

<sup>12</sup> See Edward S. Cooke Jr., (2022), *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

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<sup>13</sup> Montien Boonma, ([1987] 2023), "Letter to Noom", In T. K. Sabapathy & Patrick Flores eds., *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Vol. 2, pp. 932-933.

<sup>14</sup> See Walter Benjamin, (2008), *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>15</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> IPS-Nathan Lecture Series by Professor Wang Gungwu titled "Living with Civilisations: Reflections on Southeast Asia's Local and National Cultures" will be published in due time. In the meantime, the video recordings of the four lectures are available at: <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/research/s-r-nathan-fellowship-for-the-study-of-singapore/12th-s-r-nathan-fellow-wang-gungwu>.

<sup>16</sup> T. K. Sabapathy & Patrick Flores eds., (2023), *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Vol. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Centre for Singapore Tamil Culture, (2021), <https://www.eng.singaporetamil.org/about>.

<sup>18</sup> On the idea of a mission-oriented approach, see Mariana Mazzucato, (2021), *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*, UK: Penguin Random House.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to many artists, arts educators and researchers, and friends who have shaped and sharpened my thinking and showered me with support and encouragement. They know how much I have enjoyed learning from them over the years, and I hope to find ways to properly acknowledge each of them. A very perceptive friend wrote: "I could hear you speaking to Kuo Pao Kun, and I could feel him listening, and you didn't need to mention him for that to happen. But I wonder if you should have anyway?" Indeed, Pao Kun's presence has sustained me through the decades and this keynote continues our conversation, but I thought that I would not be able to contain myself during the delivery just recalling him and what he meant, and still means, to many of us.

For now, I would like to thank my UAS colleagues who have supported me in one way or another, including Ng Yi Ming who assisted me with research and, together with Keith Tan, prepared the slides for the keynote, as well as Chionh Weiyi for formatting this manuscript. I am grateful to all Symposium panellists and participants for their attention, and I look forward to continuing our dialogue.