

EYE ON SINGAPORE

The arts as new global ambassador



The tiny "lion boy", by Singapore artist Tan Wei Keong, is part of an urban installation of 986 plastic miniatures featured at the Singapore Festival in Toulouse, France. The festival and the travelling Singapore: Inside Out campaign are just two veins of Singapore's global cultural outreach. PHOTO: FOUNDIN

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Singapore's cultural charm offensive has deep pockets and reach, but is it winning hearts?

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In March and April, residents and tourists in Toulouse, France, might have spotted on their walk through town a tiny, red-and-white "lion boy" sitting on a kerb, created by Singapore artist Tan Wei Keong as part of a sprawling urban installation of 986 plastic miniatures.

Half the world away in Beijing, eager visitors coloured in a quirky black-and-white mural painted by another Singapore artist, Farizwan Fajari, whose monochromatic replica of his bedroom is now a riot of explosive colour.

This year, tiny Singapore has embarked on an unprecedented cultural charm offensive to paint towns red and white.

The ongoing Singapore Festival in France and the travelling Singapore: Inside Out campaign are just two veins of Singapore's global cultural outreach, an attempt to promote its cutting-edge artists - and through them, a dynamic Singapore brand - the world over.

Art's human touch

Singapore has also returned to Italy's prestigious Venice Biennale, one of the most important international platforms for contemporary art, and will send a contingent of artists to the City of London Festival next month. Earlier this year in March, more than 100 delegates from Singapore and Mexico gathered for Spotlight Singapore Mexico City to celebrate 40 years of friendship, and economic and cultural ties.

These cultural diplomacy events have gained currency because they do not simply export the Singapore brand; they are also an affirmation of ties between countries, a cultural give-and-take that can develop a more intimate and layered understanding that economic talks and free trade pacts sometimes cannot. They offer a human way for countries to see eye to eye.

One of the recognised ways of demonstrating that a country is a place of vitality and growth is by developing its "creative culture". Among the academics who have studied this are Dr Sacha Kagan and Ms Julia Hahn of Germany's Leuphana University, who noted in a 2011 paper that "the presence and concentration of artists... is linked to the city's economic development in that these groups foster creativity, which is seen as the new economic value".

Countries the world over have long turned to arts and culture as effective ambassadors. South Korea's Hallyu Wave, propelled by the twin thrusts of K-drama and K-pop, has proved to be enormously successful for the country. In 2012, South Korea's culture ministry estimated the Korean wave's economic asset value at US\$83.2 billion (S\$111 billion); it has also wildly boosted exports and tourism.

Other countries have established institutions dedicated to cultural diplomacy.

The British Council, which specialises in cultural outreach and education, was set up in 1934 as the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries. It was inspired by a recognition of the importance of "cultural propaganda" in promoting British interests. Similarly, Alliance Francaise was founded in 1949 to promote the French language and culture worldwide.

Singapore's own turn outward can be seen as a move to strengthen the city-state's position on the global stage, to prove that it can wield cultural heft despite being small in size. It is likely that it will take many more years for Singapore to nurture this first growth spurt. As late as 2007, some eight years after Time magazine's cover article "Singapore lightens up", former Member of Parliament Chan Soo Sen lamented in the House that "the Singaporean brand name is known to be good, but it is very rarely known to be 'cool'".

With Singapore's global cultural ambitions now emerging after many years of careful planning, the cool factor might have only just found its way to the surface.

What has been positive about these long-term cultural goals is the fact that they are not, as Culture Minister Lawrence Wong put it, "ad-hoc events". The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth set up a \$20 million Cultural Diplomacy Fund last year, and Mr Wong said it would continue "to build meaningful, strategic and sustained cultural partnerships with other nations".

Other cities have also been welcoming of Singapore's artists, some offering venue sponsorship and others sending

artists to Singapore, demonstrating that the relationship is not one-way.

But despite the recognition and praise that its artists have been receiving abroad, Singapore still shoulders that stern, "no chewing gum, please!" image of a gleaming but sterile metropolis. There is a flip side to this cultural expansion that is worth noting if Singapore wants to make these relationships meaningful ones - and to make sure that the "coolness" sticks.

Singapore lite?

Singapore has long nursed aspirations to be a cultural player on a global scale. In 1992, the Government rolled out its vision of a Global City for the Arts, appearing to soften its censorial stance with the setting up the National Arts Council to advocate for the arts and convening the Censorship Review Committee to relook arts regulation.

Several years later in 1999, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said: "People laugh at us for promoting fun so seriously. But having fun is important. If Singapore is a dull, boring place, not only will talent not want to come here, but even Singaporeans will begin to feel restless."

Authorities in many countries, not only in Singapore, often want to make use of the arts in nation-building to foster cohesion and an understanding of certain values and principles that embody a country's perceived identity. Because the arts often hold up a mirror to society and reflect narratives and stories that resonate with citizens, it is an ideal way to reach the community.

Artists, however, are often reluctant to be co-opted into this sort of national storytelling.

They create art not for instrumental purposes, but for its intrinsic value and its ability to both challenge and elevate the human condition, even if these ideas may run counter to what the authorities have in mind. In Singapore, artists have continued to tussle with censorship and regulation. Certain topics, such as those dealing with sexuality, religion, race and politics, are still viewed with suspicion by decision-making bodies.

The reason artists are largely more enthusiastic about cultural diplomacy is that it provides a broad platform on which to showcase their work, as well as the opportunity to connect with like-minded artists and new audiences from around the world.

Often though, these events put together a palette of work that conveys what official bodies feel is the best of Singapore.

Touring France next week is the Siong Leng Musical Association's Soul Journey, a musical showcase of nanyin, an ancient Chinese musical form, merged with vocals and percussion from other musical genres. This could be the poster child for Singapore's cultural diversity.

Then there is 1000 Singapores, an architectural showcase at the 2010 Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition, which presents Singapore as an effective model for a compact and sustainable city.

In Beijing, award-winning chef Janice Wong created an edible art installation that will also travel to London and New York City - what better way to emphasise Singapore's cuisine?

But the concern among artists is whether the selection of artwork that goes abroad presents an authentic version of Singapore and not a whitewashed one that does not do justice to the way the country is developing. There is some domestic suspicion that the state is keen mainly to promote to the world a "Singapore lite" version of the arts.

Multimedia artist Loo Zihan, who was in France for a three-month arts residency earlier this year, spoke about the dilemma that artists like him face in accepting state funding because "no matter how avant-garde or controversial the work, we are being co-opted into the system and this necessarily means that the work we are producing aligns with the interest of the state and what it would like to represent".

During the opening of the Singapore Festival in France in March, it seemed that the French public had already cottoned on to a catchphrase for Singapore art: a unique blend of "tradition and modernity". Whether curator, theatre director, arts-goer, or artist, they bandied about the phrase so often that it began to feel tired, even lazy. Was this the only label they could give to the work Singapore was so proud to show to the world?

The works left out

Much of the Singaporean work sent abroad does occupy a safe space that tends to avoid or cleverly disguise the "out-of-bounds" markers of politics, sexuality, race and religion. This is not to say that the work is poor; it is uniformly good, often outstanding. So it is not the work already in the line-up that is problematic; it is the work left out.

For instance, there will be a meaty retrospective of 50 Singapore films at Paris' prestigious La Cinematheque francaise in June and July. They are excellent productions, tracking the arc of Singaporean film-making from P. Ramlee's Penarek Becha (The Trishaw Man; 1956) to Anthony Chen's Ilo Ilo (2013).

But international film audiences will keep pointing to all the films that have been censored in Singapore as proof of an authoritarian identity.

There is no doubt that these international platforms are crucial and have enormous benefits for our artists. But if only a very specific, government-approved brand of the arts is sent out into the world, it will immediately be recognised as shallow, and even viewed with scepticism as more of a way to soften Singapore's authoritarian image than to support its artists.

In order to shape a global impression of a Singapore that is dynamic, exciting and adaptable, both the inner and outer images of the country must come into alignment.

Singapore cannot export artists it deems worthy of the international spotlight while quietly putting the lid on artists at home who do not fit the safer slogan of "tradition and modernity".

Its strategy cannot be to simply conquer cities - it must win hearts.

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