

Regionally Speaking: The Significance Of Cultural Inflection

Author

Bereson, Ruth, Bryne, Caitlin

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Regionally Speaking: The Significance Of Cultural Inflection

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By Professor Ruth Bereson and Dr Caitlin Byrne

In 2017, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will reach its half century. In recognition of this, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) called for a traditional cultural mapping project of the region. Our interest in responding was to reveal and analyse the many factors which influence artistic and cultural practice in the Region and their intersection with state practice.

The research began in what would appear an unlikely country and region, 'Malta', at a gathering hosted by International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA) and Arts Council Malta (ACM) which was holding its 7th World Summit on Arts and Culture. We started here to understand how this network of agencies, whose role it is to assist artistic and cultural development, might inform the research. It also presented us with an opportunity to be in a place which has experienced a parallel history to that of the ASEAN region. Malta and its geographical position, mid-point in the Mediterranean sea between two continents and with links to greater Asia has within it a confluence of arts, cultures, religious practices and trading routes, surrounded by the geopolitics of today. It is positioned literally and metaphorically at what might be called a point of journeys and 'migration'. The opportunity to hear and engage with a polyphony of perspectives with representatives from Africa, Asia, North and South America, the Pacific, Europe and Australasia would, we thought serve to structure our own inquiry and research questions.

There isn't room in this piece for a formal critique of the Summit, however many IFACCA members are engaged in **mapping**, which resembles plotting census-like data on **websites**, **publications**, and **cultural observatories**. The sum of this information tends to reflect essential qualities of cultural practices within regions. These mapping exercises place significant emphasis on institutions and infrastructure which at times are significantly different to actual practices. Our inquiry is somewhat different in intention. It draws upon the existing landscape and works across a number of fields of inquiry which impact on traditional and contemporary arts in the region, such as Arts Management, Cultural Policy, and Diplomacy.

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In this project the very nature of the ASEAN 'bloc' is scrutinised. It is a region characterised by remarkable diversity (political, social and economic) and ASEAN's purpose and membership has gone through a number of changes since its inception. We were left with the question: *how can one go beyond plotting points on a map, or describing institutional architecture, or fabrics of networks, to reveal the complexity of the region and the roles which arts and cultural practices play within it?*

During our ongoing discussions with ASEF it became clear that despite requesting a Mapping exercise, what was clearly hoped for was something broader and more 'alive': an informed engagement and representation of the cultural sector's role in ASEAN. ASEF was looking for an interactive model which would engage and inform diverse interlocutors from all forms of artistic and cultural practice building upon the breadth of resources in the field. It laid emphasis on 'people to people' connections and capacity-building in the sector, shying away from managerial terms such as 'leadership' but wishing to engage in inquiry about effective artistic and cultural management and policy making practices. What a daunting task!

It became evident that this could no longer be understood as a mapping project. We needed to rethink our approach and in conjunction with ASEF, completely reworked the project and designed a regionally based longitudinal investigation. In order to fully represent the diversity of the bloc we identified and engaged regional rapporteurs who could contribute to and inform the project from within each of the ASEAN countries. The project regional researchers' role was to engage with and reveal traditional and contemporary artistic and cultural practice. Their challenge is to reveal these given the diversity of and ever-changing dialogue within the region. During the Malta meeting the researchers determined that broad themes would be developed which could generate common starting points and create space for cultural inflection (both within nations and externally). This project therefore has changed substantially in nature. It is no longer that of a traditional mapping exercise (where regional cartography changes all too frequently) but a plotting of a journey with shelters along the path.

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We have therefore undertaken an ambitious but hopefully rich framework, as the regional researchers became owners of the thematic journey, embodiments of their practice and narrators of their own stories, at a confluence of cultural and political discourse. (It's now happening in real time). As with any aspirational project, where one releases oneself from the centre of the process, the outcomes are uncertain, but the aim is to move from a static flat tool to a dynamic instrument through which subjective voice presents a layered picture, over time and in and out of a region which can provide some insight into cultural practice at the regional level. It is hoped that it will inform both ASEAN's cultural perspective (both possibilities and limitations) as well as policy at a local level. As a capacity building exercise, it aims

to equip the ASEAN regional researchers with expertise and courage to develop their nuanced layers of description and analysis, and gain political voice and agency by presenting their findings at significant occasions such as the Asia ASEM councils, international conferences concerning culture and diplomacy and Arts Festivals.

The project title 'Regionally Speaking' is deliberately evocative rather than didactically expressive. It emphasises the need for granularity and inflections of artistic and cultural meaning. It is also the manifestation of a new ethos of representation of practice, advocacy and capacity building. Last but not least it is simply a representation of individuals and their societies. Arts and creative practice take the stage as a subject for interrogative space rather than as an object to bolster other agendas.

Professor Ruth Bereson is Dean (Academic) Arts, Education and Law Group at Griffith University and has worked in the fields of arts management, cultural policy, cultural diplomacy and cultural leadership internationally. She was Founding Director of the Arts Management Program at SUNY Buffalo, and Associate Director, TCColumbia University Arts Administration Program and designed the Cultural Leaders' Lab, an international program for experienced Arts Managers and Practitioners, for the National Arts Council of Singapore. Ruth has contributed to the field through a wide range of books, edited volumes and articles on arts management, cultural policy and diplomacy.

Dr Caitlin Byrne is a research adjunct with the Griffith Asia Institute and Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Bond University where she teaches courses in Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution and Negotiation. Caitlin's research focuses on soft power, public and cultural diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific and her research is published in journals such as *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* and *Sport and Society*. In May 2016 she led the Griffith Asia Institute Roundtable on Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific: Emerging Models and Trends. Prior to joining academia, Caitlin held positions at Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Queensland Government's Office for Women and Department of Communities. She is currently completing the Asialink Leaders' Program (Brisbane)