

# What Will Work in Culture Look Like Tomorrow?

## A Special Cultural Connections Panel Discussion

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Chief Librarian, Chief Innovation Officer, National Library Board (NLB)

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*Leading minds in Singapore's arts and cultural scene sit down for a lively and broad-ranging forum on the future of work, and ponder the direction that the sector should be heading in an increasingly fragmented world and a complex society at home.*

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**Cheryl Chung (CC):** Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for making time today. I'm Cheryl. I specialise in strategic foresight, and have done work in futures thinking, scenario planning for different sectors, mostly with government. My job today as a moderator is to gently nudge, push back, explore different perspectives, and keep people talking. I'd like to keep the discussion organic and conversational, if we can. First, let's start with introductions?

**Suene Megan Tan (SMT):** I'm Suene. I oversee museum planning and audience engagement, and I've been with the museum sector for more than 20 years, both with the Singapore Art Museum and also with the National Gallery Singapore. I started with the Gallery before it opened to the public in 2015. I think the museums have seen dramatic shifts in recent years. So we're excited to see where the future lies. I look forward to exchanging views.

**Kok Heng Leun (KHL):** I'm Heng Leun. I'm a theatre practitioner. I used to run a theatre company called Drama Box. I've since stepped down but am still with the company as a full-time art-maker.

**Yeo Whee Jim (YWJ):** I'm Whee Jim. I was with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) from 2012 to 2017. Until recently, I ran my own consultancy firm which offered corporate, learning and workshop facilitation.

**Gene Tan (GT):** My name is Gene, I'm the Chief Librarian and Chief Innovation Officer at the National Library Board. I don't know how many past lives I've had, but I led "The Future of Us" exhibition as part of SG50 in 2015 and the "Singapore Bicentennial Experience" in 2019.

**CC:** Given that we are talking about the future of jobs in the arts and culture sector, I would like to ask you to articulate your dreams and hopes for the sector, especially in the context of jobs. Take us through what that vision looks like.

**SMT:** This is something that we've been contemplating within the museum: what role do we play? How can we best serve society? From my perspective, I believe that cultural workers should also be leaders of change. That's the vision I hold. We know that the needs of society are constantly evolving, and we see transformations unfolding alongside broader challenges in the social, cultural, political landscape. We're aware that global challenges are multifaceted, from climate change, and disruptions caused by emerging technologies, to the complexities of ageing populations, and so on. We also know that failure to address these challenges could exacerbate tensions and create deeper divisions.

In considering what the important mindsets are for a cultural worker in the future, I've landed on three qualities. Firstly, we need to be reflexive. Reflexivity is really the ability to critically examine and understand the role of cultural institutions within the broader socio-cultural landscape, especially when museums and cultural institutions are part of the larger ecosystem.

Secondly, the willingness to adapt to changing social needs—recognising the needs of society, and



**Figure 1.** Panel discussion with Suenne Megan Tan (left), moderator Cheryl Chung (second from left), Gene Tan (centre), Kok Heng Leun (second from right), Yeo Whee Jim (right) at the National Gallery Singapore.

being open to reimagining ways in which cultural institutions can contribute to positive social value.

Thirdly, adopting a collaborative mindset. Cultural workers will need to possess strong collaborative skills because their ability to solve problems increasingly no longer rests on just specialists or experts within the specialised field. To solve more complex problems, we need to work across disciplines. We also need to work across sectors.

On partnering, we already see partnerships happening between museums and the healthcare sector, museums and the education sector, as well as with the technology sector. I think that probably will bring future value to both the respective field and society.

**YWJ:** I love what Suenne mentioned. It's something that I used to grapple with when I was with the ministry. Is culture part of the larger conversation? Are we even relevant?

I think that cultural workers have to embrace AI and technological advancements rather than say they belong to another sector. So what Suenne said resonates. Despite the narrow definition of culture which we practise in Singapore, arts and heritage, to me, is clearly part of a larger social policy.

Social policy and economic policy are inextricably linked and have a bearing on national security policy. Our own sovereignty, our existence as a nation, and whether there is a stable condition for things to happen. It scares me to think that if culture is not part of the conversation about the future, either with the future of Singapore or the future of the world, we run the risk of being irrelevant.

It always struck me when I had to go and negotiate budgets with the Finance Ministry that we needed to recognise culture as being part of a larger ecosystem. It doesn't exist on its own. Sure, cultural excellence important, but it doesn't stop there. It is very much part of a larger ecosystem, locally and internationally.

**KHL:** In the first place, when we say “cultural sector”, we seem to view it as being separate from the other sectors. But, culture itself, broadly defined, examines a way of working, a way of living, and includes values. This means, from a larger perspective, that culture would embrace even economics.

We have to acknowledge, which I don't think we have, that our economic sector is populated by people who create the culture that happens within us. So, the sector must see themselves as cultural producers, and the cultural sector should not just include the culture-makers, the people who create all those artefacts, artworks, exhibitions, or heritage, but also include the people who are part of the economic sector, because, currently, they are often the ones who determine the way we live and work. So, in the world of culture, artists as well as economists, makers of iPhones, AI programmers, and so on, are all collectively producers of culture. And if they're part of the sector, do they actually have the skills to be reflexive?

The second role is that of the people I call the cultural documenters. These are the people who put the data and archives together. The third role is that of the cultural critics; these are the people who look at the things that are happening, and give meaning to them.

I mean, let's look at the movie, *Oppenheimer*. In the end, the main protagonist was really reflecting on the choice he made. That was a moral choice, one which posed an ethical question. Sometimes, I wonder how many people in our economic sector think about the ethical choices they make. In fact, rather than think about culture in terms of creative innovation, as a way to imagine our future, a thinking that is reflective of the industrial revolution, should we move to see culture as a way of thinking and living?

We should be working with economists to critique the kind of work that happens here. I think about Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. It is relevant to us even though it was written in the 70s. My question is: how come cultural workers are never being asked to be part of the conversation? In fact, speaking as an artist, I feel we are always being put at the back end.

**YWJ:** “Non-essential”?

**KHL:** Non-essential. We're never part of that conversation. It's always an afterthought.

**YWJ:** I like what Heng Leun said. When I was working in Ministry HQ, the way I framed it many times was: how can you use culture to fulfil your KPIs (key performance indicators)? How can culture be useful in enhancing education, economics, diplomacy and so on? Underlying that is an assumption that, of course, there must be cultural excellence. Because if you don't have cultural excellence, how do you offer your art? I know we hate to say we are instrumentalising the arts, but I think what seems like a common theme pointed out by Suenne, Heng Leun and, perhaps to a lesser extent, me, is that culture needs to be part of that conversation.

Culture, since time immemorial, has always needed patronage. Royalty, rich people, philanthropists, companies, and, I suppose in Singapore's context, government too. I think the cultural workers in the sector need to know that they have to be part of the conversation. Otherwise you'll be left behind, become irrelevant.

**CC:** **What I'm hearing from this conversation is that a lot of the framing of culture and jobs in the sector invites reflection about the skills**

**that cultural workers possess, skills which can contribute to the creation and sense-making of a future. I think there is a kind of beautiful, creative, generative energy there that, to me, feels untapped. I'm curious to unpack that. During COVID, I moderated a similar kind of panel, and one significant theme was how arts and culture contribute to creating the future. You know, in the current conversation, AI is going to descend upon us. Will everything become AI art? How can culture and artistic expression explore identity or teach us to be more human in the AI world? That's another way of framing the question. I'm curious about your perspectives.**

**GT:** I'm not a tech person at all. I'm an English grad and did Humanities subjects at A levels, but I like to think I bring a different perspective as a non-tech person.

**CC: So, what do you bring from your English literature background to a transformation, innovation role that's typically very technology defined?**

**GT:** In the library world, such a role is usually run by a tech person or someone with design thinking skills. But, we are transforming the library experience with storytelling, heritage and generative AI. We're launching nine different generators to look at almost every aspect of the library business in order to change the nature of that service to our customers. It has been quite frightening navigating so many difficult challenges because there's so much that's unknown. But we're taking a careful, curated approach to generative AI.

**SMT:** I'll build on what Whee Jim said earlier, about the perception of a dichotomy between "art for art's sake" and "art as instrument". Traditionally, museums have been viewed primarily as repositories of art

and heritage objects. However, this has changed. Today, there is a global recognition that museums also play a social role, opening up resources and spaces to provide areas for reflection, inspiration and well-being.

As recent as 2022, the global understanding and definition of museums went through a transformation. ICOM (the International Community of Museums) implemented a new museum definition after many rounds of debates. This was perhaps the most significant update in the last 15 years. This new definition introduced four key terms: inclusivity, accessibility, sustainability and ethics.

This revision signified an acknowledgement that museums must evolve to meet the changing needs of society, and effectively serve our communities. However, this journey has not been straightforward. There are diverse perspectives on what arts and culture should be, whom they should benefit, and the roles museums should play. Yet, I believe that if we aspire to be part of this broader dialogue, there needs to be greater alignment in mindsets. This entails embracing a more collaborative and inclusive approach to understanding our potential impact.

**KHL:** I've also been thinking about Whee Jim's points on cultural excellence. What is cultural excellence? I think we need to examine what art and culture are. For me, an artwork, a performance or a material artefact is excellent if it shifts the way you feel and think about things. A work that does this facilitates critical thinking, and has excellence. The most interesting art has always been art with that kind of critical excellence.

Excellence, for me, is defined by that kind of critical thinking. Art can be useful if it shares that skill of critical thinking with every sector.



A play, for example, may tell the story of an individual. But, what it also does is create a complex web of relationships, politics and power so that we may understand the world in a particular way. It is the same with a complex painting or installation. A work can embody so many different elements. Beyond being beautiful, it can challenge the way I look at my environment, at my relationships with friends, at society. And I think that has always been what artists have been doing. In fact, some of the most interesting artists have always been at the forefront as futurists. They tell stories about what can happen if humans continue on a particular track and warn us.

**CC: Thanks, Heng Leun, for sharing what cultural excellence might be. I love the phrase “an artist is a futurist”! Now may be a good point to think about the trends we observe, what we see in the cultural sector, what innovation looks like beyond AI, including business model type innovations.**

**GT:** I'll share from the library perspective and I'm sorry if it sounds a bit parochial! I've been to libraries around the world. China and the Nordic countries are the two most progressive systems in the global field. The Nordic libraries are very focused on building community, which is great even though they may not embrace as much emerging technology in transforming themselves. Then, there are the Chinese libraries which invest in technology, especially in transforming their operations, but still focus on printed books. Have they or any of us transcended the current age of libraries?

There are four ages to the library. The first is the Acquisition Age: this is when you accumulate as much as possible. Think of the library at Alexandria and monks running early European libraries. The second age is the Access Age: it means people get access to content. For example, how Carnegie

started all the great libraries in America. The third age, where almost everyone is at now, is the Maker Age. I help users create something at the library, for example, with 3D printing in a 3D lab. The fourth age is one I think we need to approach very carefully. It is the age of the Generative Library, where it is not just technology with users taking stuff, but an age of working with a range of people to create new knowledge and experiences with generative AI. The goal for me is that librarians play this role so that the libraries evolve. Every action of every visitor incrementally changes the nature of the library.

**CC: It's a much more emergent kind of organisation.**

**GT:** Yes, dynamic and organic. So that's something we're experimenting with. I think I'm letting the cat out of the bag now, but we're going to experiment with something towards the end of the year, where all our generators come together to create that kind of library. I hope to work with artists and writers on this journey, to figure out how we can write this together, create an engine, and generate more things. But as partners, not suppliers. Large language models now take all this content to generate new things. I don't believe that should be the way. In fact, I believe the anonymity of large language models might kill the cultural sector. How do I put a name to what's created, acknowledge the creative process, even if it's enabled by our apps? I'm keen to figure out how to do that.

**CC: Suenne, this brings us back to the conversation we had earlier about the changing definition of museums. This must resonate with you.**

**SMT:** Yes, it does. Gene's generative library brings to mind the concept of the participatory museum. By participatory, I mean having artists also function as educators. In fact, there are artists whose

practices involve participatory ways of working and engagement with different communities in society. So I believe this could be a promising approach to innovation, involving creative individuals who conceive of new methods of working. Another aspect I'd like to revisit is the concept of innovation itself. I prefer to view innovation as rooted in human creativity rather than solely in technology.

I've come across reports of growing interest in the humanities as technology progresses. For instance, more technology CEOs are hiring graduates with backgrounds in liberal arts and humanities. They recognise that technical skills alone have limitations and are seeking individuals with a broader literacy. What truly fosters innovation is the capacity to infuse creativity into the process, to pose questions, and to examine solutions from diverse perspectives.

**CC: Any other responses? I'm intrigued by this idea of the generative library, the participatory museum.**

**KHL:** I would like to elaborate a bit more about critical thinking. Often, when we refer to it, we're just thinking about what's better, what's good, what's right, what's wrong. There are other aspects though; it's also about trying to understand how things operate within a complex world. Actually, the next step to critical thinking is generative thinking, which is connected to this discussion. Through critical thinking and a dialectical interrogation of the idea, you generate possibilities. I think a lot of the time that's how art-making happens.

In socially-engaged arts practice, the participatory work is not just about a person taking part and sharing his or her story, but an engagement in the pedagogical process which helps the participants generate other possibilities for their lives. I'm not keen to talk about whether art becomes instrumentalised or not. What I'm saying is that

art has this pedagogical aspect where people learn something, sometimes in a structured way, and sometimes in an intuitive way. For instance, when you read a novel and become affected by the story or a sentence, which you hold onto for life and find useful in decision-making.

What kind of space do we create to allow that? For me, art-making requires three things: space, time, and what happens after. The space could be the library or the museum. The time could be the amount of time you need to engage with the people with whom you're working. What happens after is the artistic and creative process that can be critical, generative, or imaginative.

But we don't think enough about spaces, or design them in a way that allows people to feel that they can participate. Sometimes in Singapore, our institutions are very rigid about the way we can behave in a space. As for time, I'm afraid we now work in a kind of "industrialised" timeframe; we have work hours and rest hours. Our rest hours are strictly for entertainment, while work hours are about making a living. But if we want to be more, make meaning of our life, it cannot be just this or that, right? So where do we find the extra time when we make sense of who we are, how we work, how we relax, what makes me me, or what makes me part of this community? These are the two things that, as cultural workers, we need to constantly challenge. The kind of space that we make, the kind of time that we create for our audience.

I like to say that artists are time stealers. We steal time from the audience. We use that time to make you go through a meaningful, deep, enriching experience, so much so that you think: damn it, I just gave you 20 minutes of my time, spending it on your art, but the experience went deep and its impact will last. I sometimes think the economic sector needs to

think this way too. They are responsible for a lot of the time that we spend, the way we are consuming.

**CC: They're also time stealers.**

**GT:** So you buy more shoes! That's their objective as well.

**KHL:** Yes, but I was just sharing that they're also culture-makers, because society is now organised around consumption and production. The economic sector is responsible; they cannot take themselves away and say, look, we're not in charge. We have to bring them into the conversation and say, you're in charge as well. You also create culture. And what kind of culture do you want to create? This sounds idealistic, but I think it is necessary as we move forward as humankind.

**SMT:** That's interesting. It prompts me to think how perceptions are shaped and what role education plays in shaping our cultural experiences throughout life. Interestingly, compared to adults, children often exhibit greater comfort in engaging with abstract artwork. They explore endless possibilities free from preconceptions. I wonder: does our progression through the education system and into adulthood result in a detachment from the art experience, ultimately influencing our perception?

As we progress into the fourth industrial revolution, liberal arts education and humanities training remain differentiators. They help us understand and generate value within an evolving landscape, so there is a pressing need to reevaluate the role of art education within this broader ecosystem. Collaboration between museums, schools, and the wider education sector becomes imperative. Hopefully, such partnerships can foster a more holistic and innovative educational approach,

incorporating the arts to equip future generations with the skills needed to navigate and thrive in an ever-changing world.

**GT:** Do you think art education needs to be recognised? Or does recognition stay within art education? I always wonder about that. Is it so careful that it ends up defining its own boundaries?

**SMT:** I think there is a lack of time in the curriculum. There are a lot of competing agendas.

**GT:** To sort of undo your point, apologies for this, is there an economic objective? And the economic objective of the arts may not be... this is very reductive... to sell more art. It could be to sell more shoes. I'm just saying, what if it is for employment, but not as cultural workers? When I talk to all the tech giants and say I'm bringing in art and the cultural perspective, even if I'm not an artist, I wonder if we are creating products that may not be in the market yet. Could this be a way to think about arts and culture? Do we create our own boundaries for art, and limit its application?

**CC: Yes, I think that's also part of the conversation. However, the way it seems to be framed in the cultural sector... its application seems much broader.**

**YWJ:** This discussion reminds me how Singaporean we are... [laughter]... talking about what value art education brings to the table, about resource utilisation and optimisation of outcomes. I feel that, sometimes, less is more. At least in the Singapore context. Does everyone need to be involved in art? I remember when we set up SOTA. I really like its mission of nurturing creative citizens. We were clear it was not about producing artists. You can be a chemist, a civil servant, or a surgeon



with an appreciation for aesthetics. This is really important, isn't it? That arts and culture is infused in whatever we do. This gave me hope: as long as we are human, there will always be a space for the cultural professional.

One thought that I had as I was coming here was that actually the future is already here. My daughter and I share a Spotify account, so when she listens to Taylor Swift, I get recommended artistes like Maroon 5 and Christina Aguilera whom apparently other Swift fans enjoy as well. I think cultural professionals need to understand how the algorithm works. Let's say I was in Gene's shoes and in charge of libraries. I go into a NLB app. Do I know how the algorithm works? If I read a certain book, it pushes certain books to me afterwards, right? But in the context of Singapore, I don't think we should work like that. If you read a Chinese novel, should you be reading more and more Chinese novels? If you like Indian classical dance and are ethnically Indian, does that mean you should be served only Indian cultural offerings? Surely this is not what we stand for here in Singapore. What about intercultural dialogue and multiculturalism? When you oversee that kind of monster, it's very difficult, very complex. You would need to deeply understand the technological advancements and how they shape consumption behaviour. How do we navigate that kind of space?

**KHL:** I'm reminded of two things. One is American educator and psychologist, Jerome Bruner, who talks about cognitive learning pedagogy. In one of his later works, he talks about education as a kind of cultural learning, and how students' minds can reach their full potential through an understanding of what culture means. His definition of culture is probably closer to what I was talking about. It is a broader vision which folds everything into the idea of culture, rather than culture as the lowest priority. I'm sure

all Singaporeans need to understand culture. We need to understand the complexities of how humans operate, work, make decisions and come together, how laws are made, how laws affect each of us, how social policies affect the way we relate to one another.

The second is something I read yesterday which asked: can we make AI more ethical and more moral than a human being? And I ask that question because now we create the algorithm according to how humans behave. But, what if AI could be taught to think in another way, rather than in the way humans typically think? We just think about what we need at this moment, without much foresight. Can AI be created in a way that allows us to think differently? Like what Whee Jim gave as an example. So if you like Taylor Swift, would you even consider listening to, I don't know...

**YWJ:** Teresa Teng?

**GT:** Metallica!

**KHL:** Maybe the algorithm should recommend country music when you listen to Taylor Swift because she has roots there and changed her genre. This way, you broaden your palate. If the algorithm allows us to understand culture, its evolution, its history, how people relate to each other, then it works.

The other thing I was thinking about is relational aesthetics, something I'm keen on, something I realise we have been missing. Honestly, we are all consumed by AI technology, and I find myself everyday struggling to deal with it, learn it, and try to use it. But how much time do we actually spend with another person, having this kind of communication? And, of course, I think this part of our conversation is still an Anthropocene mode of thinking. Can we

think beyond the Anthropocene? Some philosophers have called for a symbioscene, where humans and nature, all living, sentient beings and the non-living can co-exist.

I realise a lot of art-makers nowadays work largely on ideas, but may not be so good with materials. We seem to have lost our aptitude with materials. I've seen older visual artists, who know how to differentiate between different materials and understand which is better with which to express a thought or feeling. When we lose that ability, we get locked into the sort of world depicted in that Pixar movie...

**CC: WALL-E!**

**KHL:** Yes *WALL-E*. In it, after having been in a space shuttle for so long, the humans have evolved to have very short arms. That's how we'll end up. We're just not that tactile anymore. So, how would our library, our museums become a different kind of space with materials we can touch and work with?

**SMT:** I recently visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. They have a multi-disciplinary education centre located beside the main museum, where the focus is very much on learning to look by doing. It's an exploratory process guided by individual curiosity. They go back to the basics of understanding how art is made, and what artists use to make art.

And the belief is that when you understand the process of creation, you also begin to appreciate art more deeply. For example, learning how different colour pigments were traditionally made rather than assuming that everything comes from a paint tube enhances our understanding of the intricate processes behind artistic creation. In this regard,

foundational practices like drawing, painting, sculpting and the studio practice remain important.

**CC: One of the themes I am hearing from all of you is this idea of going back to the first principles. Part of the creative process generates from that, I think. If we live in a world that's derivative, there's a lot of value that cultural practice brings to the creation of the future. Without it, it's very difficult to expand into the future's possibilities. So we need to do something new, right?**

**GT:** The current algorithms are mostly about growth analytics, getting people to buy more shoes, therefore narrowing that group. When you like one genre or product, the algorithm keeps offering a similar genre or product. National projects are a lot more complex. So, something that I want to bring to the table is to have a different sort of algorithm, and we're in the midst of building what we call the "T-shape algorithm". This algorithm runs counter to confirmation bias, equity, and demographic goals. Besides helping users go deeper, every time a user searches for something or consumes something, this algorithm will also nudge you a little to the left and to the right. I think it's possible to apply that to culture too.

**YWJ:** Precisely. As cultural leaders, we need a deeper appreciation and understanding of the technology. It's not something that can be outsourced. The intercultural dialogue, for instance, connecting across different communities... If you're Chinese speaking, it doesn't mean you should be happy just being in the Chinese speaking community... that's not what we subscribe to. I'm sure you do a lot of outreach...

**KHL:** I really enjoy working with the Malay community.

**YWJ:** Which is what we're talking about, right? We don't subscribe to the world's algorithm. How do cultural professionals in our system rise to that level? Unpack what we've internalised, and then do what we do. T-shape algorithm, right? Nudge, nudge, nudge. It requires a deeper understanding, not just cut-and-paste, outsourcing the algorithm. It's not simplistic, but very deep. There is a lot of work to be done.

**KHL:** I do see the library as a cultural institution, where you're riding the beast of this technology. Conversely, what jobs can cultural workers do now? Maybe all companies in the private sector should employ a cultural worker. All these industries need some kind of HR (human resource) role and perhaps cultural work can lead from there. After all, HR is about the way the company is run, what the company means, the kind of people they are. and the kind of work they generate. And I think culture is formed through HR, which should be seen as a cultural crucible that allows things to happen.

**YWJ:** There's more drama in HR than there is in the performing arts. [laughter]

**CC:** **I hope that line makes it into the journal! I feel like we've moved naturally towards the last segment of questions which basically touch on the idea of the weight of history. What are some of these legacies, in both the positive and negative sense, that inhibit the future we're trying to create? For instance, we've talked about the tendency to compartmentalise.**

**KHL:** I return to Alvin Toffler. While we always say "change is a constant", we're not taught how to adapt and deal with change. Our response is to either accept or reject change, and acceptance can sometimes be passive. So, we just take change and don't think about how we may adapt it such that it

becomes useful and meaningful. I don't think we have that skill. So how do we adapt? How do we take change and make it meaningful for us? And if we need to resist change, we can resist the parts we don't like or don't find meaningful or useful. That requires a number of skills. Firstly, you must be able to discern, and that means thinking critically. Secondly, if you want to adapt, you will need to make adjustment and change; you need to be able to play at the imaginative level.

**GT:** I'm curious, how do you teach a person change management? Does it work?

**KHL:** The work I do is highly interactive, and I have come to realise that when we allow participants to improvise within a structure, they become more creative. There are no stakes in the rehearsal; we all try different things and we don't get judged. It's very liberating. Being able to tell your own story is also very liberating.

I've worked in school for many years, and I've realised that one of the things our students can't do well is tell their own stories. They find it very hard to tell stories, not even "once upon a time" tales. They meander, and can't seem to structure their experience.

It's not about wanting them to be artists, but the process of making art means one very simple thing—sense-making. Do I use red or blue to draw an image of myself? And I think if only you can tell your own story, articulate your values and your system, then you're able to discern and be critical, and you're able to say, I think this crossed my boundary, right?

**CC:** **Am I right to say that what I'm hearing from you is that the cultural sector offers processes and spaces to rehearse the future?**

**KHL:** I think another function of culture which we have not thought about is how culture heals, repairs, and cares. This will be needed in the future. We need this kind of healing process. For example, reading poetry can be healing. Sometimes, when reading about the Palestine-Israeli conflict leaves me frustrated, reading a nice poem helps me to feel that there's hope. Art and culture heal and repair us, even if just a bit. And I think cultural workers do that work.

One of the things about culture is understanding that there are fallacies in the way humans think and act. Culture embraces these fallacies. Most of the time, we put the human at the forefront. We try to get the best of everything, but we forget to acknowledge the fallacies of humans.

I always tell my actors: every day, there will be at least one problem. We learn to accept that imperfection. If we don't accept imperfection in ourselves, we don't grow; if we are too tough on ourselves, we end up living a fraught existence.

**GT:** I also think the idea of culture has an inherent uncertainty. There's always questioning. Cultural understanding is not merely about making something pretty, it's much more than making something aesthetically pleasing so that you'll buy more shoes.

**CC:** I also like the point made earlier, about the role for culture in healing and care.

**SMT:** We already see this convergence of art and well-being in museums like the Gallery, which we refer to as creative health. While museums may not be the centres of gravity in the healthcare space, they can play a part in enabling a sense of wellbeing. I think an openness to cross-sector collaborations is key.

Let me share a programme where we were delighted to witness the transformation in participants. While there is an increasing number of people affected by dementia as Singapore's population ages, we recognise we are not experts in this field, so we partnered with Dementia Singapore to establish a programme called "Art With You". This initiative was not solely for individuals living with dementia, but also for their caregivers. Caregivers' days revolve around practical matters like daily care and routines. However, when they spent time together at the Gallery on a few artworks, engaged in discussions, participating in art-making, it enriched their conversation. This investment in time pays off, deepening the bond between two people. Research also indicates an enhancement in the well-being of participants. Such programmes underscore the potential of art and culture to address social issues in our community.

**KHL:** A lot of cultural artefacts are, in a way, a documentation of human grief and loss. It's a process of seeing what we have, as well as a process of grieving. After doing 10 years of *Both Sides, Now* (Editor's note: this is a socially-engaged arts project in the community, presented by Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative), the greatest thing I've learned is that we are not taught how to deal with loss. We're never taught how to grieve.

Heritage is part of that process of helping us heal from grief and loss. And sometimes it helps with repair and healing. Art-making does that. Preserving culture means more than just making an artefact. It's the belief systems, emotions and experiences of a generation of people that we are looking at. To some extent, we lose them almost every day. The cultural way of thinking is to appreciate all these things that are happening and constantly changing, and how we deal with them as human beings.

**SMT:** I agree. We all possess the capacity to bring our lived experiences to art. We can engage with the art without feeling pressured to find the "correct" interpretation. Research indicates that people typically spend only 20 seconds observing a painting. This is insufficient time for meaningful engagement.

In response, we deliberately invited students in one programme to spend a good hour on a single piece of artwork. We encouraged them to share their insights in a group setting. This approach prioritises introspection over formal technical knowledge, helping individuals delve deeper into their own thoughts and feelings. It prompts reflection: are we sometimes too preoccupied to truly contemplate?

So, with a programme like "Slow Art", we endeavour to slow down, to be present, to be mindful of oneself. That's where we observe people starting to open up, and to engage. Despite often doubting our capabilities, we discovered that we do possess the capacity to connect with artworks on a meaningful level. That's one of the valuable insights gleaned from the programme.

**YWJ:** I like what you're saying.

**SMT:** Yes, and in the process of sharing, you discover a common humanity. Everybody may come to a programme experiencing different issues and challenges, but when you come together and share connections, art can serve as a catalyst for exploring different possibilities.

**YWJ:** I hear you, Suenne. Returning at a personal level to the last point about art that heals, after my wife passed on, I was very privileged to have, as part of SIFA (Singapore International Festival of the Arts), a programme called *Open Homes* which transformed private homes into performing spaces for intimate audiences. I shared how my entire neighbourhood

rallied together to help my wife and me, and called my story "Vertical Kampung". Now, as I undergo my own critical illness, whether I'm writing poetry or sending letters to my daughter about future milestones like marriage, having kids, even her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday which I may not live to see, I've found it therapeutic. This is my very personal response to hearing Heng Leun and Suenne.

**KHL:** Maybe, in a way, culture does slow time down. [To Gene] I think you would love people to take more time in the library, right? Being there with the book, going through every word. I think we have become the antithesis to that: everything happening out there is constantly fast, too quick. That need for instant gratification is scary. The T-algorithm, for me, opens up the palettes and allows one to wander. The idea of wanderlust is so important.

**CC:** **Without that exploration, the future is very difficult to create, right? So, I think that's a good thing.**

**SMT:** We were discussing the importance of stories being told. The question we've begun to ask ourselves in the museum is: whose stories are being told? As societies become more diverse and interconnected, it is increasingly important for museums and cultural institutions to actively engage with diverse perspectives, histories, and voices, and to become more reflective of the communities we serve.

In fact, decolonisation offers museums a framework for addressing historical injustices and building a more equitable future, as it prompts us to consider: how might we decolonise and dismantle the various narrative hierarchies we have inherited? In practice, museums can use this framework to critically examine their collections, addressing biases by actively seeking out underrepresented voices and perspectives, tackling systemic barriers to access



and participation, and sharing authority over cultural heritage.

**CC: As we draw today's discussion to a close, may we have a couple of lines from each speaker to wrap up your thoughts about the future of work in the cultural sector?**

**GT:** I'm very excited. Sorry, I keep talking about ages. We're in an age of expansion. There are so many ways that we can go, and I am very excited for every sector in this age of expansion, an age of blurred lines.

**KHL:** In this conversation, I hear a lot of institutions trying to reimagine their positions. Because I work from the ground, I think that's really positive. But I'd like to end on a question: if culture needs to be everywhere, then can those in leadership roles see that it is important that, as soon as they can, they should change the way they talk? Instead of talking about efficiencies and efficacies, maybe they need to think and use different ways of engaging in policies?

**YWJ:** I'll go next. Because culture is fundamentally about what is human, there will always be a place for culture to exist in the future, unless we go the way of the Dodo bird. Secondly, as humans, we love communities, and culture will always play a role in bridging communities—communities not only in the sense of brown people versus non-brown people, but communities with different interests, different genres, people who are different from, and yet, similar to us. So, I think there will always be a role for culture.

**SMT:** I'll conclude with the points I began with. I feel very optimistic hearing this conversation. I still feel that, at the end of the day, it's important that we remain reflexive, understand the role that we play in

the larger ecosystem, and are willing to collaborate to bring about positive change. It's by adopting a collaborative mindset that we can create a stronger ecosystem which brings value to the communities we serve and to society at large.

**CC: Thank you everyone for a rich discussion which covered much ground and took interesting detours. There's much food for thought for us and, hopefully, the readers. □**

This panel discussion took place on March 18, 2024. The editorial team would like to express its gratitude to the National Gallery Singapore which hosted the discussion. The above transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

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## About the Panellists



Cheryl Chung is the Founder and CEO of Tent Futures, a strategic foresight research, advisory, and training practice focused on building long-term public good. A seasoned public sector futurist, Chung has over two decades of experience working with senior decision makers in Singapore and the region to identify trends, understand policy implications, create alternative scenarios and develop strategies to prepare for the future. She is an experienced and sought-after practitioner, educator, coach and speaker across the public, private, people and academic sectors.



Gene Tan is the Chief Librarian of the National Library Board (NLB), responsible for the professional development of all NLB librarians. As the Chief Innovation Officer, he spearheads the development of LAB25 (Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025), a new transformative vision for the National Library, National Archives, and the public libraries in Singapore. Previously, he was the Executive Director of the Singapore Bicentennial Office at the Prime Minister's Office, and helmed the Singapore Bicentennial which commemorated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Raffles' arrival in Singapore in 1819. He was also the Creative Director of the SG50 capstone event, "The Future of Us" exhibition that captured the hopes and dreams of Singaporeans. Tan also developed the Singapore Memory Project and served as the former President of the Library Association of Singapore.



Kok Heng Leun is a theatre director, playwright, dramaturg and educator. He is known for engaging the community on various issues through the arts, championing civic discourse across different segments of society. Having begun his work in the theatre more than 30 years ago, some notable directorial works include *Drift*, *Trick or Threat*, *Manifesto* and *Underclass*. His explorations with multi-disciplinary, community-engaged arts have produced site-specific works like *ubin*, a three-installation theatre experience, *Project Mending Sky* (2008, 2009 and 2012), a series on environmental issues, *Both Sides, Now* (2013, 2014 and 2017-2019), a community-immersion project that seeks to normalise end-of-life conversations, and *It Won't Be Too Long*, which examines the dynamics of space in Singapore.



Suenne Megan Tan is Senior Director of Museum Planning and Audience Engagement at National Gallery Singapore. She spearheads the Gallery's strategic planning, and drives organisational synergies and transformation, in support of the Gallery's vision of inspiring a thoughtful, creative, and inclusive society. With a keen interest in museums as dynamic sites for content creation and well-being in cities, she advocates an inclusive approach to programming and engagement, prioritising accessibility, and fostering art appreciation across all life stages. With over 25 years of experience in the arts, heritage and culture sector, Tan actively contributes to the broader arts ecosystem through her involvement in various committees.



Yeo Whee Jim has been formally facilitating workshops, programmes and conversations for more than a decade. He was a public officer for more than two decades, of which more than a decade was in senior management positions at various public sector agencies. Issues that he has worked on include sectoral development, strategic planning, corporate governance, stakeholder engagement, cultural philanthropy, and capacity building. Living with incurable Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) since 2023, Yeo published his first collection of poetry called *Itinerary* this year and continues to write and speak on his life journey.

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