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Challenges of the independent cultural economy in Singapore: A masterclass with Juliana Lim and Kenny Leck

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Abstract

Surviving as a cultural or artistic worker in the city has never been easy. Creative workers find themselves celebrated as engines of economic growth, economic recovery and urban revitalisation even as the conditions for our continued survival becomes more precarious. How can you make a living today in such a situation? That is, how to hold together the demands of paying the rent and bills while managing all the tasks necessary to support one's practice? How to manage the tensions between creating spaces for creativity and imagination while working through the constraints posed by economic conditions? In a more traditional workplace, it is generally easy to distinguish between those who planned and managed the labour process and those who were involved in its executions: between the managers and the managed. For creative workers, these distinctions become increasingly hard to make. Today, the passionate and self-motivated labour of the artisan increasingly becomes the model for a self-disciplining, self-managed labour force that works harder, longer, and often for less pay precisely because of its attachment to some degree of personal fulfilment in forms of engaging work. In September 2019, the first University of Essex and Kaplan Singapore Masterclass was held, featuring presentations by long-time cultural policy worker Juliana Lim and BooksActually owner and co-founder Kenny Leck, which explored these issues and more. The master class investigated how cultural workers in the modern metropolis manage these competing tensions and demands. This is an edited transcript of that seminar.

Stevphen Shukaitis (SS): Can you tell me about how your career developed and experiences you've had with the arts and creative economy?

Juliana Lim (JL): I'm Juliana and I'm 69 years old. I worked for 40 years, from 1973 to 2013, during which I was a public servant. I began my career as a senior civil servant, making policies for aviation, metrology, telecommunications. As young officers you're sent around to different ministries to experience the different sectors. But after about seven years in the Ministries of Education, Communications, National Development, I ended up with the People's Association in 1979 where I managed the cultural troupe. The PA cultural troupe was started in the mid-sixties as a post-independence strategy promote social cohesion and to enhance the quality of life for Singaporeans, especially the heartlanders. These artists were the earliest full-time professional artists in Singapore.

There were eight sections – a military band, bagpipers, a contemporary dance group, a Chinese orchestra. Then, there were part-time groups – Indian drama, Malay dance, Chinese drama and a children's choir. My job was to stage events around the year in the heartlands – road shows, Christmas rhapsody, Chingay Parade, the lantern festival. That's when I began to 'play' stage director, costume designer! I was very 'interfering' once I got bitten by the bug. I was posted next to the Ministry of Culture, I then dug my heels into arts management and chose to stay in the arts sector for the next sixteen years. I declined postings to other more important ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance. I think my career suffered from foregoing all the high-profile postings. I chose to stay in the arts.



Figure 1: Juliana Lim.

I really believed in what I was doing and eventually ended up as the General Manager of the Singapore Arts Centre Company which was founded in 1992, to develop the Esplanade Theatres. I spent a total of 12 years developing it, from 1986, with the first user brief, appointing the first theatre consultant, the first cabinet paper, until the ground breaking in 1997. Thereafter, I crossed into Singapore Pools, one of two funders for the Esplanade project. There I was lucky to land in the community funding portfolio. I did all the nice things. My colleagues earned the money through gaming while I managed the distribution of the profits to sports, charity, community, and the arts. A lot of my career was spent making grants for artists, for sports, and for charities. That was a sum total of my experiences. From those experiences I honed my knowledge of how, when you're giving money, what thoughts go through your mind. How do you negotiate with your applicant to create a win-win situation? I retired in 2013 when my first granddaughter was born, so I could travel more freely to see her. I have volunteered in the arts from the time I joined Singapore Pools in 1997 and continue to do so. I became President of the Richard Wagner Association (Singapore) from 2014-18 and in October 2016, we produced *The Flying Dutchman*. It is Wagner's opera, a beautiful opera and it was fully staged. I also volunteered elsewhere, here and there. That's the sum total of my career and what I'm currently doing.

Kenny Leck (KL): I'm Kenny. I'm slightly younger. I went from founding and running a bookstore, and from there it was a natural progression to go into publishing. It's always been part of my upbringing. And parts of it also – I guess I can't use the word desperation – but things fell into place where I could start. The only real official cert that I have is actually O' Level cert because I dropped out from the poly. Technically in terms of what our education system is or the society is, a person of this educational attainment shouldn't be running a bookstore and be running a publishing arm. But for me, it was a natural progression. By luck things fell into place. My folks encouraged me to read. They were okay with me buying books. They brought me to libraries. Everything came as one. And before National Service, I started working at a bookstore and after National Service, I ended up working at another bookstore. And so that fell into place. At some point in time you realise 'hey, why let a retail chain make the money when you could probably make the money yourself?' I stumbled into it. Literally the next day, two and a half years later, I started BooksActually. And less than six or seven months down the road, we actually had a bookstore. And we are still stumbling our way through fourteen years later.

The publishing was also born out of stumbling through. We didn't expect to want to do publishing. We realised that there were a lot of manuscripts out there. There were quite a number of writers that have been writing but their manuscripts has no place to go to. And we knew them as friends through the bookstore. We would stock up the books that were either self-published or by another publisher. At a point in time, we realised that 'hey, why not we try our hand at it?' Now there's no turning back, fortunately.



Figure 2: Kenny Leck

SS: There's something quite interesting about that stumbling through. You can see that as well, for instance, when you look at the rise of independent record labels in the UK during the 80s. These were labels that basically came out of nowhere, but then ended up putting out music by bands who became super influential, bands that became huge. But the interesting thing about these indie labels is they were run by people who didn't have training in management, didn't have training or a background in the existing recording industry structure, but they had crazy dreams and said 'I want to do this.' And then they did it and it worked, probably through a lot of sweat, tears and frustration. Maybe aiming for more than you're qualified for but aspire to is not such a bad strategy after all. That sounds like stumbling as well, but stumbling that led to great success.

Thinking about those kinds of shifts in arts and culture, how would you say the setting for arts and culture in Singapore has evolved over the years? Juliana made reference to producing events for heartlanders which is a very specific term or category in Singapore that I'm not totally clear on, but which seems to be quite important. Can you describe how things have changed over the past fifteen to twenty years?

JL: Actually it hasn't changed.

KL: Art is for everyone.

JL: Basically, there's the idea of arts for art's sake. What does that mean? You watch it simply because you love it. When I watch opera, I get goose bumps. But truth be told, there are many agendas for art promotion. When Singapore was a new nation, in 1965 – even 1958, when we became independent from the British – arts was a means to promote social cohesion. You would stage Malay dance, Indian dance, and Chinese dance, to create mutual understanding, to create social cohesion. And you have arts events to make people's lives better because you were living in a kampong, or in a very small flat. Basically, if you go to see a show, it makes your life more enjoyable.

The purpose of the People's Association, as I experienced it, was to go out there and entertain the public. And today it's the same thing. There's no change. More money is poured into arts plus. Arts plus refers to arts for the community which doesn't always equate to the pursuit of arts for excellence, although it should. A lot of money is poured into arts in Community Clubs (CCs), art in the parks, because it's about making life more enjoyable for people. It hasn't changed. It justifies government funding for the arts but it is double-edged because then arts that are more difficult to access, don't get much money because they say it's only for the elite. It's not so simple or straightforward.

SS: What's been your experience, Kenny? The general impression of your work is that you've been one of those people who have been responsible for putting Singaporean literature more in public view than it was previously.

KL: For us it's literary arts. But the bookstore and it's this lifespan, it has always been a confluence of the fairest discipline of arts. Earlier before the session started, we were talking about The Observatory, which is a local band. They actually performed at the bookstore for us, an acoustic session. Running a bookstore, we are at the crossroads where we've gotten the meet the musicians. There's a visual arts artist called Speak Cryptic. He's a close friend of ours from way back. He did the wall mural art for us outside the bookstore. When we got the chance to connect up with artists from different disciplines, it gave us, the people who are running the bookstore, small little peeps at what they are practicing and what are probably their needs, their wants, and their difficulties. Subconsciously, it impacts the way we put together our programmes, the things that we publish, even up to how certain decisions are made. That's helped a lot. We know that different artists appeal to different demographics. If you're talking about The Observatory's music, you are going to appeal to a narrow segment of people. But if you're talking about, say, a wall mural painting like Speak Cryptic, it appeals to anybody and everybody because it's very accessible. And I think, to me, that's what art is. It's for everybody, if possible. No matter how esoteric or narrow-scope, that's what arts I think is about. It's about discovery. You might not know that you like it at first, but who knows, after coming into contact two or three times?

JL: Growing on you.

KL: Yes. Take your first impression of western opera. One thing is that it's very high brow, but who knows? It's still an art form and technically, it's an art form that could be enjoyed by anybody and everybody. And it doesn't matter what background you are from in that sense. Whether, let's say, someone who is from a lower income background, would they have the chance to enjoy it? And if, let's say, arts funding is bringing that particular production to the heartlands.



Figure 3: BooksActually.

JL: That's a good point. I was just thinking, it's double-edged. The tendency for people to think is that arts for the general public can be of a lower quality than arts in the theatre. I'm against that. I think we should give everybody quality. The trick for artists is how to make what is esoteric accessible. Wagner operas have never been produced in Singapore. There have been orchestral concerts, but never an opera. If you mention Wagner, people think of his fascist connections. Our challenge was to make *The Flying Dutchman* accessible. This opera runs two and a half hours straight. There's no interval! Our way was to introduce puppetry. The overture is about ten minutes long. Traditionally, the curtains are closed during the overture. In our version, the curtains were open and through *wayang kulit*, Indonesian shadow puppetry, we were able to enact the back story of the Dutchman, that he made a pact with the devil that until he sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, he would not die. The whole stormy scene was all enacted through puppetry[1]. The audience, even first time opera goers, remarked that the overture whizzed by, that they didn't feel its length. The challenge is to give the larger community high-quality art, as high as in the theatre but make it accessible. That to me is the trick.

As to whether opera is elitist, I was in Korea in 2015 to watch *The Flying Dutchman*. We went around to see who else did what and how they did it. The day after, the hotel hailed a taxi to fetch us to the airport. The driver asked me "Madam, were you here for business?" I said "No, I was here for opera." The driver asked "Did you see Faust last night?" "No," I replied, "I came to see Wagner." Then, he said proudly, "My wife sings Violeta in La Traviata." It wasn't the kind of conversation you'd expect to have with a taxi driver. And all through the journey to the airport, he kept switching radio channels. "Here you are, Madam, Wagner. Here you are, Beethoven." This was a Korean taxi driver! Who says opera is for the elite? It's for everyone. It's just getting over the hump. The producer has to do his part or her part to make it accessible. That's what we're here for. Not to make it secretive and mysterious and esoteric so we feel that we're special. It's to make it accessible because everyone deserves to enjoy it. That to me is the thing.

SS: Isn't there a difference between making something accessible and thinking that every piece has to speak to everyone?

JL: The attempt has to be made by the arts manager to create the production, to give the audience a choice. Turn the stone over and see whether you like it. If you don't, it's alright. It doesn't matter, there's always something else. But give them a chance to turn the stone over, to check it out. Otherwise you don't deserve the arts funding. Arts funding is for making artistic choices available to the public, not for your own private enjoyment. That to me, for me, is the mission. I feel strongly about this.

SS: In some ways you and Kenny occupy slightly different positions in the ecology of arts production, whether you're directly making or publishing versus creating infrastructure that supports the arts. Would that be a fair characterisation?

JL: Yes. I think Kenny is the artist whom, if I was still in Arts Ministry, I would make it my job to enable him to succeed.

KL: The bookstore has been around for fourteen years. We started publishing around the midpoint, around our seventh year. But at the beginning, after a year and a half, I had met a publisher. He is dormant now in his publishing, but he was a very good publisher and a very good editor. These days, within the literary arts scene, I always say that there's three main publishers: ourselves, Epigram Books, and Ethos. If you're to put these three editors – our brains – together, we can't beat him. In that sense, he was that good as a publisher in terms of supporting Singaporean authors. It might be that their voice was still very raw but he could edit their works to make them better. What I learned most from him back then was nothing to do with assessments or business, but purely those things that matter in literary arts, fiction, poetry, prose, novels, and so forth. Most of the publishers do tend to rely on the arts funding, the grants system.

My lesson with that publisher was that if I decide to start publishing, he said to not take arts funding. For him there were two factors behind that. One obviously was the term itself, censorship. When you take funding, it's not just a government thing. If you want to take funding from anybody, there's always strings attached, limits to what you can do. That's what funding is about. It's about giving that money and then making sure that money is used for the benefit of as many people as possible. My takeaway from this publisher, and this was the biggest takeaway, is that arts funding is a crutch. And what I've seen in the last fourteen years, to a certain extent, it has become a crutch. On first view, it's a crutch that's provided by the government, but when you go deeper, the crutch is actually very much embraced by the artist themselves, by the publishers.

[1] For a video of this, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acsnDmPVGic

I've seen works that got rejected by another publisher because the grant was rejected, and suddenly that author has nowhere to go. And the reason why the grant wasn't given wasn't due to content. It was because the publisher had taken a certain amount of grant over that one year. There's always a certain amount capped. And suddenly the author is caught in limbo and of course there's not enough publishers in Singapore. And if we say 'no' and the other publisher says 'no', then there goes that book. As we went on, we realised that we'd be on better footing by not taking any grants. And that's what I think we've done since day one when it comes to publishing, where we try our best to do what we can in that sense.

It's very difficult because it consistently puts you in that survival mode. Technically I'm an artist but I'm also super pragmatic. The numbers come first. I have to make sure the numbers don't just balance. They cannot put us in a riff. And every single thing that I do, the numbers come first. For lack of better word, it's a key performance indicator (KPI). I've got to make sure that that exists in the best optimum way as possible, every single day. And if I don't do that as the base, I can't be an artist. The majority of Singapore artists have to understand that. If you decide that you can't wear that business hat, then have someone wear it for you.

JL: I should respond to this, as I was a grant-maker. I agree with him entirely. As a grant maker, whether I was in the government service or in a private organisation, I'm afraid that there are strings attached, but we tried to negotiate win-win partnerships. There was a time in the past when censorship decisions did not rest with Government arts managers. There was a censorship board that was separate from the arts ministry. And we as arts administrators tried to be the ombudsman. Whenever the censors censored the artist, we tried to find a way out for the artist. Today it is different. Today the arts council also assumes the role of censor. But I think that for me as a grant maker, I'm not censoring, I'm making...

KL: The parameters?

JL: It's how we go about making interests overlap. That means all parties – funder, producer, and audience – win. I'll give an example in Singapore Pools. We used ideas from the management guru Michael Porter. He talks about shared values. It's where you do a deal and both sides win. Nespresso and Vodafone were held up as examples of this model. Vodafone is a cell phone company. Vodafone created a very simple phone to enable the farmers in Africa to monitor the weather conditions, because you need to know the weather conditions for your crops to thrive. They sold simple phones and then farmers received the knowledge they needed. Now that's win-win, right? There's no censorship. It's two parties coming together to do something which both of them actually benefit from.

I was in Singapore Pools. That was my job. I had this wonderful job of just creating schemes where I could match up interest of the company as sponsor, the applicant, and the people whom they existed to serve. We even went to the extent of doing deals for them with other parties. We used our strengths to bargain on their behalf with other parties. That's what I mean. But of course, they have to carry the sponsor's logo. There was the condition though we dispensed with this in certain circumstances. We had to justify giving you the money. But we don't take away from you. We enhance what you have. And the partnership enhances the company's image. That's what's I think we should look at doing.

And it's all about finding creative solutions. I'm often approached to help fundraising. I'm a volunteer. I don't make a single cent from anything I do. But the calls I get from artists, whether it's orchestra, opera singers, theatres, or bands. The main issue is about how to raise funds. It's all about branding. What is your brand? What do you represent? Go find an advertiser that fits you so you can represent them. You become their face because your personalities overlap. That's a win-win. The product needs to advertise. It needs a face for that advertisement. You become its face. Go find companies and products that overlap with your personality, your audience, and your interests. That's how I would do it. As for censorship, I'm afraid, when it comes to religious harmony, I think there's a case for it. It's a question of how far to go. I would wish grant makers to think along these lines! of looking for and enriching both sides, not just one side.

KL: We see the grants internally for ourselves in our own experience. It could become a crutch in that sense because once the grant has been lowered or it has been dispersed to more people, then of course you might not get funding for your particular work. Then you get skipped over and then you'll feel the pinch. You'll feel that you can't practice your art. Going back to the Singapore arts scene: we are the most well-funded in terms of grants. In the grant system, we have the largest amount of money that's given to an artist. You'll be hard pressed to find better in cities like London or Paris, at least speaking about literary arts.



Figure 4: BooksActually's cat.

We have this thing called the Arts Creation Fund. It's intended for already established artists, those with an established track record. You put in this grant proposal to say that you need to work on a work for at least twelve months. And you know you'll work full time as an artist painting, or composing music, and so forth. If you do that, take a year off, then what about your daily expenditure and your monthly expenditure? You let the government know what is your monthly estimated expenditure, whether you're paying a mortgage or your livelihood expenses. You have your receipts to back you up. They will issue out a stipend to you. You get a grant for a full year and then you can do what you do as an artist.

I'll give you an example on when this didn't work so well. It was with a novelist. He's one of the nicest people I've met. He has been awarded the creation grant twice. If this was bitching online, you would say that he has lived off taxpayers for twenty-four months. But at the third round, when he tried to apply for it again, he got denied. And he was quite bitter about it. He went online to talk about it. It reached to the point where someone from National Arts Council (NAC) needed to have a sit down and talk with him and explain to him why he didn't get it.

I talked to him and said 'do not be so entitled. I support you as a writer. As an artist I think you are a very nice person. You might be unhappy.' The way he posted it publicly was that 'now that I've been denied this grant, I can't produce this novel as an artist, so we are now poorer for it.' I told him to not act in such an entitled way because what about the other novelists in all the other part of the world? Those that do not get a grant, they still produce a book. And that could be a very isolated incident, but it points towards a broader difficulty. The grant system works, to a certain extent. In theory it works, but I think, it's the people who are using it that are not using it in a way that is conducive for arts at the moment.

Let's say, as an organisation, I take a major grant. A major grant lasts you from three to five years. And if I take it after my sixth and seventh year, by right I should be weaned off it. I should have been profitable. I should be sustainable. I should be able to exit from a major grant and then do things on my own, whether annual fundraising through a gala dinner or other means. But more often than not in the literary arts, it doesn't exist at all. Nobody has exited it yet. At the moment, when the funding gets lowered, gets turned off, then you hear that noise when that happens. I think it has to go both ways. I mean, yes, there are moments when of course, even though we don't take grants for publishing, we also work very closely with the National Arts Council.

I sit on a committee for Buy Sing Lit that has been running for three years. And we do have that communication almost on a weekly basis on what is going on in literary arts. And more often than not, you realise that person on the opposite side is just doing his or her job. They are just doing their job and you are doing your job. And I think for me, it's how can both sides again meet at a certain point and figure it out, find a solution together.

JL: Did you know that when Singapore first began to industrialise they had a thing called pioneer status. The companies from abroad investing money here to start a factory would get a thing called pioneer status for five to ten years where they get tax breaks and low cost land. When I was developing artist assistance programs in the 1980s I tried to develop them to be multi-demensional in my approach. That means we give them space, both for performance abd rehearsals, the annual grant for a sense of financial security, plus help with the administration. Pioneer status, after about five to ten years, would be withdrawn because the expectation is the company would then have taken off, made some profits and built a surplus. Now I wonder whether that model was fully applicable to the arts. or whether we had not used it properly? I don't know.

I thought at the time that it could happen. I always tell art companies to develop different business centres. You've got the production arm which would always lose money. You've got the education arm and that can be a cash cow. All the schools have funds for theatre in education programmes. For a while when it began, I heard that we were short of suppliers. And there are many quacks out there, people who are just event managers out there delivering arts programmes. I keep telling my artist friends, why don't you tap that market? Money is flowing, there's a demand and not enough supply. Why won't you make that your cash cow? Engage qualified staff to run the outreach programme in the schools and that revenue will then pay for your productions.

You've got to have some kind of a business development plan. That this part is where I'll lose money. With production you'll always lose money. There's no two ways about it. And then there's the other arm, the theatre, in the education arm, which is a cash cow. Because the schools need programmes. You need to develop simple syllabus to talk about composers! Artists and arts groups have to find that balance. That's how I think you can survive. You run classes, you teach this and that. You need to have a revenue stream to support your productions.

SS: There's a funny story about the composer Philip Glass. When he was just starting out he had a side gig of installing dishwashers. One day he's installing a dishwasher in someone's house who ends up being the *New York Times* art critic. And while he's working, the art critic recognises and asks him what's he doing there, to which is response is 'I'm installing your dishwasher, please leave me alone so I can finish doing that.'



Figure 5: Group photo from the Essex-Kaplan masterclass.

JL: Well that's how to survive. Some artists are married to wealthy spouses. Their spouses are their cash cows but even then there's a limit to what they do. Other artists keep jobs with steady incomes. And now I have to confess. All my career, I've been preaching that to be professional, you must practise full-time. Now, I say don't go full-time. Do a job that earns you a steady income to protect the integrity of the arts you believe in. Because if you're a full-time artist and you've got to turn out lots of paintings to make your living, you will become a factory. I've seen it happen. You may be the best of artists. Some very well-known ones, they found that something was saleable and started to reproduce. It's just different colour, one boat less, one flower more. They undermined their reputation. So, protect your art by doing another job that earns you a steady income. You don't have to be rich but preserve your integrity as an artist. That's what I tell all my artist friends now. Don't go full-time.

SS: You were taking about the importance of artists understanding the aspects of business, which is important because if you don't, then you're going to end up being disciplined by not understanding it. Perhaps the flipside of the question is for people who are studying accounting, business, and management: what would you say to someone who is coming from that side of the world about how to approach questions in art management and funding in careers? What would you say to people who aren't in the arts but have a removed relationship to them?

KL: It's good to have accounting knowledge. When I was in poly, I was an accounting and taxation student. I was there for two years. That knowledge is useful. These days when everything is outsourced, the accountant does it. Then they'll come back to you with a report. And I remember, the first few years, the accountant was surprised that I understood the numbers. And I studied taxation, which allows you to know how to reduce your tax bill at the end of the day. Everything comes together. Whatever you're studying now and whatever you decide to do later, whether to work in a bank or eventually in an arts organisation, everything downscales at some point in time that the things that you learn, that knowledge doesn't go to waste.

JL: People in finance are very important because you help artists to be prudent, to get value for money. Basically, you help the artist to manage their limited resources. But all I ask is that you learn to love the arts. Then when you assist them, you have more empathy for them. Because sometimes, benefits are intangible. Beauty is intangible. If you try to be too hardnosed about it, you might actually destroy a lot of things.

KL: Artists have temperaments. When I deal with authors, some will say 'are you sure this manuscript, if you publish it, it can sell?' I tell them 'your job is to write, my job is to help you sell.' My job is to brand you and then brand the book and then help it sell. If it doesn't sell then there's a lot of other factors at play. Maybe your manuscript is just really that bad, but we just happened to publish it. Or that particular time, that novel, that short story is just not well received. There are different factors. But your job should be to write it and my job should be selling it. You shouldn't be worried about whether it sells or not. You should be more worried if it sells really well. Am I going to be big enough to help you make it into a best seller?

JL: Let me offer one more suggestion. I may become very unpopular with the institutions teaching arts management as these days I tell arts management students to find jobs in other sectors. I tell them to not fret if they can't find good jobs in the arts sector. Why? I'll tell you why. Armed with my arts management background, when I joined Singapore Pools, I could influence who they engaged to design their publicity collaterals. I could influence who they engaged to perform at their annual Dinner and Dances. They usually engaged pop artists. I brought in opera singers. I was in a position to try to re-shape the taste and aesthetics and I did it to the best of my ability. To be truthful, some of my colleagues were resistant, said 'you arty-farty person, you don't understand the taste of our customers.' I didn't really but I tried and succeeded to some extent. So if you are arts management trained and you join a corporate organisations, or whatever, you can import your network of artists and influence who they engage to do the collaterals and whole host of other things. You become an arts evangelist. You're going out into the non-art sectors to influence their taste. And you'll create jobs for artists. If I need gifts for overseas visitors, I go buy Kenny's books or I go to the museum and buy something designed by an artist. You may face some nonbelievers but you've just got to persist!

SS: What you're saying is if you put yourself out of your comfort zone, you might end up somewhere more interesting, somewhere more productive? You wouldn't have thought to go there to begin with, but in the end you can do more.

JL: Yes. Actually, you are more useful. I realise that the colleges justify their Arts Management courses by talking about demand in the arts sector, but we need arts managers, too, in the non-arts sectors. But I really think more jobs for artists will be created, if the arts managers permeate non-arts organisations. And you people on the finance side, please don't ask why it costs so much more. Because they are artists, they are not run-of-the-mill designers.

When I meet young arts managers, I tell them they don't have to work in the arts. Go work in corporate organisations where you can actually shape the taste of the man in the street. You know how many CEOs can be so high-powered but have poor taste? If you go and see what art they hang on the wall, many have under-developed taste. In Singapore Pools, I faced my colleagues who called me arty-farty and they got upset with me for trying to influence marketing collaterals. You will face some nonbelievers, but you've just got to persist because otherwise you can't do anything useful.

SS: You can stumble into things, or stumble through thing, that you wouldn't have anticipated. What Juliana is saying reminds me of the ideas of the Artist Placement Group, who worked in the UK mainly during the 1960s and 1970s. One of their key ideas was that 'context is half the work.' In other words, the space where they developed their craft was just as important as what they did. They developed this approach by finding ways to place artists working



Figure 6: Stevphen Shukaitis and Benediktas Spinoza.

in corporations and government departments. Their practice became to use their artistic skills and influence and change those environments. But trying to bring those skills and abilities to other spaces, whether corporate or government, has its own challenges, especially if it goes against their existing patterns and practices of working.

KL: That creates a challenge for someone applying to work in those places with an 'unorthodox' set of skills. I don't think immediately when they look at your resume they would just strike you off. It's actually the entire current environment of this not willing to see further. You can have an applicant who comes from fashion management background and is going to apply for PR, but the people who are doing the assessment now, maybe they don't see the fact that there might be potential for you to see other solutions in doing PR. Unfortunately, it is the nature of the working environment that we are not geared towards moving out of our comfort zone.

Now I've been running BooksActually for fourteen years. During that time I've had many conversations with friends and acquaintances. At the bookstore we will always encounter people who have thought of running a bookstore, but just never got around doing it. I've a circle of friends and acquaintances who decide that they want to run their own business. Either they're too jaded by corporate life, or they just want to take a leap. And the first thing I ask them, 'will you choose to run a bookstore or run a cafe or something that you really want?' There are instances where someone just wants to make the leap, but has no idea what they want to do. And then they tell you, 'I always thought of running a bookstore but I'm going to open a cafe or a cake shop instead.' And I ask why. They say because the bookstore is a stunted industry and bookstores are closing down. And I tell them 'maybe you want to look at the numbers from the Ministry of Trade Industry.' How many F&B businesses open in a year? Around 300-odd and another 200-odd close in a year. And the bookstore, I've run for 14 years and we've been in the black since our fourth year onwards.

It's that willingness to really step out of your comfort zone. That if you want to be an entrepreneur, nobody is going to stop you to be the next Amazon. Nothing is going to stop you, unless it is yourself. Unfortunately, there are a lot of environmental factors at work and we're not able to look past a lot of things. We might be teaching. If you're talking about twenty years ago, when I wanted to study visual communication for graphic design, there were only so few courses available and so few schools that were offering it. And now it's vastly different. But would a bank ever think of hiring a very good graphic designer, even an award-winning graphic designer, to help do their branding? Nothing to do with design but literary communications. I think maybe I would because that person comes in with a different skill sets, different perspectives and it's that different perspective that results in different possibilities. And I think that you folks who are here, are going to be the ones that are going to offer these possibilities for someone younger, five, ten years down the road.

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