

IFACCA GETS DOWN TO BASICS

The ambitiously named Second World Summit on Arts and Culture that took place in Singapore between 23 and 26 November produced the sort of refreshing clash of experience and opinion rarely found at one-nation events. Hosted jointly by the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies and the National Arts Council, Singapore, the theme of the summit was 'trends in government support for artistic creativity' and representatives of more than 45 countries came to share their policies and practices in support of the arts. While perhaps too much time was spent listening to speakers (too many of whom over-ran, forcing others to race through their notes) and when it came to debate the layout of the room in the opulent Conrad Centennial Hotel suited only the boldest of interrogators, the summit provided policy makers and funders with a valuable opportunity to question themselves and each other.

Ho Kwon Ping is the kind of keynote speaker conference organisers dream about. Speaking to an audience that encompassed the world's richest and poorest, largest and smallest nations, and without appearing to cause even a ripple of offence, he challenged the 'subtle biases and hidden values' that inform governments' arts policies, supplanting 'popular taste'. 'I marvel,' he said, 'at how alienated public funding has become from the community it purports to engage with...and I am worried that arts councils in developing countries might develop the same kind of tendency towards alienation in trying to appear knowledgeable and in perpetuating an elitist and avant garde approach. This will only nurture artistic imitators rather than originators.' Ho is, among other things, Chair of the Banyan Tree Group, which commissions only local artists to make the work that decorates its hotels and resorts. He acknowledged the inevitable 'tension between intellectual and democratic impulses' but argued that the only way to achieve diversity in an increasingly homogenised world is to 'nurture artforms that arise from within artists' own heritage'.

Bronac Ferran, from Arts Council England, set the standard for questions when she asked Ho about the impact on the community of the high monetary value placed on the works sold at his resorts. The following day, Philippino curator and critic Marion Pastor Roces delivered a blistering speech on the relationship between art, culture and development. The response ranged from awe at the number of her academic references to irritation at the apparent gulf between academics and practitioners. Roces rejected the notion that any country is 'developing' especially in relation to creativity but, intriguingly, acknowledged that a book she had written about the Philippino textile tradition had resulted in most of the country's textile heritage being carried off by collectors from overseas.

The Jamaican Director of Culture, Sydney Bartley, won over the conference with a speech that ended with a rendition of Bob Marley's Redemption Song. 'Jamaica is recolonising England,' he announced with considerable relish. The Jamaican government does not fund arts organisations directly but supports those that facilitate the development of arts organisations. He invited delegates to consider the role of the arts in cultural policy and not to use the words interchangeably. For Bartley, cultural policy should be about much more than grants to artists, 'it is about enabling people to be'.

South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Namibia and Swaziland made strong contributions, particularly from the floor. Doreen Nteta, chief executive of the National Arts Council of South Africa asked what advice other countries could give her about how to support the country's national symphony orchestra, the legacy of the Western classical tradition, Keith Kelly, Director of Public Affairs at the Canada Council for the Arts lent towards the microphone and said softly, and to a prolonged round of applause: 'Doreen, we share your pain.'

The value of this event was in bringing together a large number of people with very similar job titles but with very different jobs to do. A full report of the conference will be available soon on the Summit website <http://www.artsummit.org> or at <http://www.ifacca.org>.

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