Education and Becoming an Artist
Experiences from Singapore
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Education and Becoming an Artist: Experiences from Singapore

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When Charles Landry introduced the idea of the creative city two decades ago, he was advocating a place for people to think, act and live with imagination, so they can seek out opportunities and manage urban challenges (Landry 2008). A culture of creativity underpins the creative city. The concept of the creative city has moved on, with the emphasis on the promotion of creative industries such as the culture and the arts, advertising, architecture and movies (Florida 2003; Hospers 2003; Howkins 2001). A creative city is also a magnet for the creative class (Florida 2003). Creativity goes beyond solving urban problems. A creative individual is seen to celebrate innovation and design and accept, even embrace quirkiness and diversity. Today, cities from Seattle to Shanghai, Århus to Adelaide, are boasting their creativity credentials, which include vibrant cultural scenes, efficient urban design, dedicated creative business clusters, art festivals, museums and art schools. These manifestations are evidence of artistic industry, but it is questionable if they constitute a true culture of creativity. It is also debatable if these manifestations demonstrate reverence for creativity in wider society, beyond the cognoscenti.

This chapter takes Singapore as a case study and looks behind the claim that Singapore is developing its arts and culture sector and art professionals are being nurtured in the education system. It will examine Singapore's creative economy policies, as well as public attitudes towards art, as conditioned through the education system, for the purpose of understanding the position and career path of the homegrown fine artist.

In contrast to the official celebration of Singapore as an emerging cultural city, many fine artists I met lamented on the challenges they face in their jobs and careers[i]. Beyond the difficulties in selling their works, gaining recognition in society and getting state support for their art activities, they faced a more fundamental challenge, namely, a general indifference towards their art—or the value of their art—by the public. As will be explained, the education system plays a large part in the shaping of these attitudes. Within this context, this study seeks to unearth the values and mores inculcated into my respondents and into society via the Singaporean education system, with regards to the arts.

Setting the scene: Cultural policy and society

Singapore, a former British colony, is less than 50 years old as an independent state. It has little to no cultural tradition that is unique. It being a settler colony, what "indigenous" art forms it can

claim are transplants from regional cultures that reflect the diversity of its migrant population. In Singapore, the population is divided into three ethnic groups: Chinese (77%), Malay (14%), and Indian (8%). There is a miscellaneous category of 'Others' (1%). This is the CMIO model (Benjamin 1976; Ooi 2005, 53; Siddique 1990). The ancestries of the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities are broadly defined as from China, Malaysia/Indonesia and the Indian sub-continent respectively. Officially, the diversity in Singaporean society is always defined along these ethnic lines, rather than along social class or political lines.

The promotion of the arts in Singapore started in earnest after the release of the 1989 *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts 1989). Based on this report, among other things, the National Arts Council (NAC) was formed in 1991, more support was given to art groups, and schools started offering art programs. To further develop the 1989 recommendations, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB, formerly Singapore Tourist Promotion Board or STPB) and Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA, formerly Ministry of Information and the Arts or MITA), took the initiative to make Singapore into a "Global City for the Arts" in 1995 (MITA and STPB 1995).

Over the years, cultural infrastructure and institutions mushroomed in the city-state. To demonstrate that Singapore is culturally vibrant, in the mid-1990s, the Singapore Art Museum and Asian Civilizations Museum opened and the National Museum of Singapore was extended. New cultural festivals, including the Singapore Biennale, Singapore Arts Festival, Singapore Writers Festival and Singapore Film Festival, were established over the years. Art and cultural activities have not only become more abundant but have also become more accessible.

Following the footsteps of internationally-recognized cultural cities like London and New York, the plan was for Singapore to develop its art trading sector, get world famous artists to perform and attract established art companies to its shores. The aim then, and still is, to make Singapore the art and cultural capital of Southeast Asia (Ooi 2008). A natural assumption from these indications would have been that there are many career opportunities in the arts. But many Singaporeans, including artists, think otherwise. These developments may be visible and measurable indications that the cultural economy is actively promoted in Singapore, but it is largely art-as-commerce, with one eye on the bottom line (Lee 2006). The cultivation of local art talents and productions is

encouraged but many artists and art lovers do not feel that the cultural scene is bubbling with a culture of creativity and innovation.

More recently, MICA have pushed the 1995 initiatives further in successive plans that envisage Singapore as a "Renaissance City" (MITA, 2000; MICA, 2008). The authorities saw the arts and culture as necessary to: "enrich us as persons"; "enhance our quality of life"; "help us in nation-building" and "contribute to the tourist and entertainment sectors" (MITA, 2000). The latest plan further elaborated their ambition in three ways: (1) to produce distinctive art and cultural contents; (2) to produce a dynamic art and culture ecosystem and (3) cultivate an engaged community as part of the nation building process.

The language of creativity is rife in these ambitions, but art and culture can only flourish if there is a receptive audience. Many artists I interviewed described the public as being unsympathetic towards art and artists. In order to understand this lack of enthusiasm, one must consider the way society has been disposed towards the arts through their exposure to it in the education system.

Art, artists and the Singapore education system

Broadly, art education in Singapore takes place at two levels. One, art is offered as a hobby-like subject at the earliest stages of the general education system. There is no scholastic examination at this stage, and if there is, the obtained grade is not factored into how pupils progress to the next level. Two, art training is a dedicated program through which selected children can further cultivate their artistic talents. For pre-tertiary art education, talented children can audition and join the School of the Arts (SOTA); older students can choose to receive tertiary art education at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) or the LASALLE College of the Arts (LASALLE).

When interviewed, my artist respondents described their career journeys as challenging and pointed out that many of their school peers have given up on the professional artist ambition. In fact, the local education system does not encourage children to become artists. Let me elaborate.

Art in general education

From a structural functionalist perspective, an education system serves many functions in society (Haralambos and Holborn 2004: 692-4). They include the transmission of values, the allocation of

social roles in society and dividing labour. A meritocratic education system allows society to identify an appropriate job for a person. Many education systems around the world identify talented and gifted children to nurture and realize their potentials (Colangelo and Davis 2002).

Singapore has an elaborate education system that streams pupils. The segregation broadly mirrors C.P. Snow's ideas of polarization between "the two cultures"—"the sciences" and "the humanities"—in modern society (Snow 1960). From the age of 10, pupils are grouped according to academic ability to facilitate more efficient learning. At the age of 14, the more academically successful pupils are selected for the "science stream", where they will concentrate on science subjects such as physics, chemistry, biology and more advance mathematics; these are the subjects that they will be evaluated in for their GCE "O" levels. Those pupils with poorer grades are streamed into the "arts stream", i.e. "the humanities", where they will take subjects such as basic mathematics, literature, history, geography and art. In order to progress to higher education at university-level, pupils must, after clearing their GCE "O" levels, obtain appropriate GCE "A" level qualifications in junior colleges (equivalent to grades 11 to 12 in the American education system). Junior college students are also streamed into the science and arts streams; science students from secondary schools can crossover to become arts students in junior colleges but not vice versa. The former have also more options when they enter university, in terms of choosing subjects and disciplines. The system therefore inherently maintains the view that "the sciences" are more desirable, and because the best of the talent pool is channelled into it, science students come to be perceived as more able than arts students.

In this rather complex system of segregating pupils, art as a subject is provided. However, pupils seldom learn anything more than simple drawing and craftwork in primary and secondary school. The subject does not contribute to the promotion of a pupil to the next level. Art appreciation, by way of introduction to classic or well-known works, is rarely a component of art lessons. Without such experiences, students are limited in their opportunities to develop an aesthetic faculty. Art therefore faces the challenge of being taken seriously.

The Singapore Ministry of Education (MoE) nevertheless boasted that its education system is ranked best in the Global Competitiveness 2007/8 Report, "in terms of the ability to meet the needs of a competitive economy" (MoE 2009). That the education system has overwhelmingly favoured

schooling in "the sciences" may be attributable to a calculation that "harder" technical skills were required for the industrialized economy of the 60s and 70s. With the emergence of the knowledge economy and the ascendance of the creative class this emphasis is being moderated.

Member of Parliament, Ong Kian Min, pointed out (Parliament Hansard 9 March 2010):

> PE, art and music, being non-core and non-academic subjects, tend to get sidelined by other subjects, like mathematics and science. In schools, the temptation to use art, music and PE periods for other subjects, especially around examination time, is strong.
>
> If we are serious about providing our children with quality PE, music and art education, we should have teachers who have in-depth knowledge and are specially trained to teach in these areas. Precious time is wasted and interest lost if children do not receive instructions from specialists in these areas who can give a better insight into their area of specialty and are more likely to infect and inspire the children with their enthusiasm.

At the middle stages of education, when art is offered as a graded, scholastic subject (at the GCE "O" and "A" levels), it is considered a "soft option". Art as a subject is generally seen as academically less taxing and easier. Curiously, even at this level, there is a tendency for art to be studied in isolation, without investigation or exploration into the progeny of art. Art education, as provided, is thus fragmentary and ill-conceived. For instance, WWH trains art teachers at the National Institute of Education. He observed that art teachers are not interested in art history and theory. He also observed that these teachers do not encourage their pupils to select art history and theory electives. Two secondary school art teachers, KLP and PS, reasoned to me that pupils who take art as a subject would not be interested in another academic subject.

Generations of Singaporeans have gone through this education system that systematically marginalizes the importance of art as a subject. With the perception that art is an easy subject and that it is often chosen only by academically weaker pupils, the system does not encourage pupils to become artists. As a result, while there are many children who are good in academic subjects and are also artistically talented, they face the pressure of going into the science stream and not nurture their artistic skills.

This tendency is not lost on the government. Over the years, attempts are made to encourage artistically talented children to cultivate their skills. So for instance, an option for artistically

talented pupils is to do the "art elective program" in secondary school and pre-university, regardless of whether they are in the arts or science stream. The "art elective program" is a more rigorous and in-depth training in the arts but these pupils still face the persistent view that other academic subjects are more important. These pupils receive diminished social support as many of their peers and teachers perceive art dimly. Hoh Chung Shih, Head of Aesthetics in Raffles Institution, a top school in Singapore, observed that most of his pupils would not pursue an art career because these pupils also excel in other fields, even if they have strong passion and remarkable artistic talent. He also reasoned that "many parents do not know the scope of careers possible in the arts. And Singapore being a young nation still lacks convincingly 'successful' role models."

Schools dedicated to the arts

So in 2002, SOTA was set up. It is Singapore's only arts school at the pre-tertiary level and it is under the purview of MICA, not MoE. Pupils with special talents in art have the opportunity to study there. Unlike normal schools, SOTA give due attention to art education, together with other academic subjects. Acting Minister for MICA, Lui Tuck Yew, explained the uniqueness of SOTA in the Singaporean education system (Singapore Parliament Hansard, 12 March 2010):

> SOTA's unique proposition lies in the pedagogy which makes meaningful connections between the arts and academic subjects to provide an enriched learning and teaching experience for those who are talented in the arts. The distinctive curriculum and learning environment have attracted highly-qualified teachers with teaching and industry experience, and prominent artists, into SOTA's arts faculty as well as full-time practitioners who teach on a part-time or adjunct basis.

Interest in SOTA seems strong. In 2009, for instance, about 1000 children auditioned for 200 places. The school offers a six-year programme, leading up to the International Baccalaureate (IB). A good IB qualification will allow school leavers to enter university or other tertiary-level education. In terms of curriculum development, faculty and student exchanges, SOTA partners with a number of established international arts institutions, including the Chicago Academy of Art and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Middle School in China. It is prestigious to study at SOTA because the pupils are recognized to have special artistic talents; they are specially selected and not

streamed there by default. They must also prove to be good in other school subjects before they can enter SOTA. This is a significant development for the arts in the Singaporean education system.

There are two tertiary-level art schools in Singapore: LASALLE and NAFA. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts or better known as NAFA was founded in 1938. It offers programs in fine art, music, dance, interior design, fashion design, video production, 3D design, advertising, animation and interactive media, amongst others. LASALLE College of the Arts, popularly known as LASALLE, was set up in 1984, with the aim of providing contemporary art education in fine art, design, media and performing arts.

In the context of its fine art education, NAFA with its historical links to the Chinese segment of the population, is known to emphasize traditional art techniques and skill training. LASALLE is associated with contemporary art approaches, and takes a more open approach to art making. Both art schools offer diploma programs and are recognized as polytechnic-level educational institutions by MoE. Their cooperation with foreign universities like the UK Open University for LASALLE and University of Huddersfield, Purchase College (State University of New York), Loughborough University, University of Wales and Singapore Institution of Management University for NAFA, has allowed them to offer degree courses. By studying just one more year after attaining the diploma, students can obtain a degree. For instance, at LASALLE, after passing their GCE "O" levels, candidates apply to take a one-year preparatory foundation course before they pursue a two-year Diploma program, and will be awarded a degree if they continue into the third year. This is a four-year fast track to obtaining a degree, as compared to obtaining one's GCE "A" levels (two years) before studying in the local state-supported universities like the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University (three years). While the academic entry requirements are relatively low for NAFA and LASALLE, each potential student has to build and present a portfolio during their application for entry.

There is an apparent tendency for students who do well in the first year foundation course to enter the more commercially-oriented programs, such as animation, graphic design and fashion. Singapore has pursued a pragmatic and neo-liberal economic model in the last five decades (Chan 2005; Chua 1995; King 2006; Low and Johnston 2001). This message is prevalent at all levels of society, including in the education system. It would seem that however puristic the artistic instinct, socialization by this line of thinking predisposes students to position themselves towards the more gainful, if not lucrative, careers.

My interviews with artists who graduated from these institutions also revealed an inherent prejudice against pursuing the fine arts even in the art schools; the fine arts curriculum is a "residual" program for students who do not qualify for the others. I offered this observation to respondents teaching these students; they agreed and often shook their heads when they think of the prejudices. My respondents who were good students and committed themselves to the fine arts in NAFA and LASALLE have to continuously respond to these preconceptions. For those who end up in the fine arts program, a fine art diploma or degree from NAFA or LASALLE provides a formal recognition of the person as a trained artist.

Cultural capital outside of schools

Challenging the view that a meritocratic school system offers equal opportunities to all, Bourdieu argued that socialization outside of school has an impact on pupils' achievements in school. French children acquire "cultural capital" at home. Children who have been introduced and participated in "high culture" such as classical music, art and literature, will do better in the French education system because the education they receive also promotes and celebrates high culture (Bourdieu 1973). Studies from around the world (see Buchmann 2002; De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp 2000; Kaufman and Gabler 2004;Yamamoto and Brinton 2010) have similarly shown that pupils advance faster in the school education system when endowed with different types of cultural capital, including embodied ones (e.g. dispositions of the mind and body) and objectified ones (e.g. books, dictionaries, art objects) (Bourdieu 1983: 243). As a result, the school system engages in social and cultural reproduction. Following Bourdieu's arguments, while certain interests and values are reproduced through the education system, some interests and values are also marginalized and even disparaged.

Parents respond to the demands of the education system by attempting to increase the cultural capital of their children by sending them for extramural tuition. In Singapore particularly, extramural tuition in mathematics, science and languages is common. Being knowledgeable and artistically cultivated is nice but excelling in the more academic subjects takes precedence. This may be seen as another consequential effect of the neo-liberal economic model; to have an edge in an increasingly competitive world has become a major impetus for individuals to hone from an early age the "hard skills" necessary for the more lucrative careers offered by "the sciences". In

contrast to Bourdieu's observation in France, high culture may be appreciated by the middle class but it may not readily translate into cultural capital in Singapore's education system. Instead the Singaporean education system socially and culturally reproduces groups of people who value "the sciences" over "the humanities".

Moreover, the message that the arts and culture are important in one's personal development is not translated into Singapore's education system; the promotion of creativity and the regulation of the arts is under the purview of MICA while education in the arts falls under the MoE. The two do not necessarily work in concert. There are contradictory policies and messages that dampen the aspirations of children who want to become artists.

The Position of the Fine Artist

Social Engineering

Fine artists trained by institutions assimilate to various degrees the ethos celebrated or preserved by those institutions, in either the form or the spirit of the learned discipline. It has been pointed out by some that an educational system can be a socializing agent with the social engineering intention of generating social cohesion through the promotion of value consensus, for example, patriotism (Erickson 2005; Neo and Chen 2007; Shpakovskaya 2009). Art, as taught, can be co-opted for such purposes. In fact, and as described earlier, one of the functions of art and culture, as explicitly elaborated by MITA in their plan to make Singapore a "Renaissance City", was to "help us in nation-building" (MITA 2000).

In line with such social engineering messages, fine arts students in Singapore tend to be directed towards traditional, international and "indigenous" Asian art forms, such as drawing, oil painting, pottery, Chinese ink brush painting and Malay batik. Art forms and their combinations that fit into the official multi-cultural CMIO model, described above, constitute the bulk of this work. It would be observed that the natural and essential emphasis of these traditional art forms is on the picturesque, and that adherence to tradition means that their employed themes are mostly historical and trite, not contemporary or polemical. The championed form itself may therefore be seen to act as a buffer, limiting the artist's ability to articulate in these forms the more critical or emotional voices of society. Art in these forms seldom rises above pageantry, but, as a purely aesthetic work,

may be displayed and viewed by all without controversy. The educational process therefore directs budding artists toward making works that are considered "safe" and acceptable in society. This may explain why the fine arts receive less attention, as the more ambitious artists and audiences alike gravitate towards newer media, such as video and cinematography, which are more naturally open to innovation, the expression of individual voices and "edginess".

In other words, many Singaporean artists, as trained, tacitly or inadvertently perpetuate the social engineering messages of the state. As a collective, many artists in Singapore forge an identity tied through the set values they have internalized through various social engineering mechanisms, including the education system. While the CMIO social engineering message is ingrained in art training in Singapore, the emergence of current social and political criticisms in works is discouraged and even trampled upon. This does not mean that artists are not interested in engaging with and criticizing the authorities, they are however wary of such attempts because they have not been emboldened in art school. Revealed to me by teachers and graduates in NAFA and LASALLE, critical social and political commentaries exist in student works but these works are not publicized and would be received cautiously by most art teachers and classmates. Critical social and political statements in art can result in reprimands from the authorities (Ooi 2010).

Social Stratification

Closely related to the previous point, the education system also communicates tacit messages and inculcates values that stratify society. Bowles and Gintis (Bowles and Gintis 1976) argued that inherent in any educational system, there is a hidden curriculum. For instance, the idea of a meritocratic education system is a myth to justify the continuation of an unequal society. Based on their study in the USA, the education system there produces a subservient workforce, generates an acceptance of hierarchy, teaches pupils to be motivated by external rewards and fragments knowledge through individually insulated school subjects. Scholars have argued against Bowles and Gintis, stating that the formal curriculum is also important and that school children also acquire skills to be critical (e.g. Reynolds 1984). But Bowles and Gintis highlighted the importance of identifying what is not formally taught but insidiously ingrained into children.

The Singaporean education system advocates a neo-liberal economic view of society and establishes the importance of being economically independent, and of the need to constantly better oneself. Wealth generation and advancement in society are major and common preoccupations.

Many artists find that they need public support for their projects and consequently, artists may feel that they are dependants in society.

These real-world challenges are daunting to the artist who has not yet established himself or herself. From the perspective of gallery managers, they find Singaporean art works not very saleable even though these artists may hold qualifications from local art schools. Works from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and China are popular with customers. They give several reasons on this phenomenon. One is that Singaporean artists are too expensive for the quality they produce. To some gallery managers, local artists are less loyal and therefore they are reluctant to invest their efforts in local artists. According to a few gallery managers, there are too few good Singaporean artists to generate the excitement for Singaporean art in the market. A damning observation against local art schools is that most graduates from the schools are technically inferior to their foreign counterparts; three gallery owners whispered this view to me. Local artists, on the other hand, lamented that galleries are unprofessional and not supportive of them; the galleries do not consistently champion their works and do not develop their careers, instead the galleries are obsessed only with profit, not art. These conflicts arise partly because the art schools do not educate their students on career management. Essentially, as a former teacher of LASALLE, HW, stated, students were given little idea about what it takes to become a professional artist:

> If you are a professional artist, how should you behave? How do you position your career? All these are very important. [The government's approach] is just like I give you time, space and school to develop your skills and that's it.

New art school graduates felt unprepared for their career. Many ended up being art teachers, with little time to make art themselves. Many of their classmates became real estate agents and insurance agents as these jobs have lower entry barriers.

Singapore's education system impliedly communicates the message that doing art and being an artist belongs to the lower echelons of society. Having to seek public support despite the policy to promote the arts, careers in making art are not well regarded in Singaporean society. Many artists in Singapore, while developing their careers, have to overcome the prejudices against them and struggle to show that they also contribute economically and usefully to society.

Cultural Compass

Art history and art theory are scantily covered in the local art education. Students are said to be uninterested. For instance, YMU, a professional artist and graduate from NAFA and LASALLE, observed that most of her classmates were not interested in art history, the single academic course she attended in these art schools. She did well in the course and self-admitted that she is academically oriented; she holds a Bachelor degree in business administration before she took the step to becoming a professional artist by joining NAFA and then LASALLE. She is also a free-lance writer. YMU finds the art history course important to her career because it provides the foundation for her to situate her works in different art movements.

Art students who limit their exposure to art theory and history are somewhat limiting themselves, as they do not acquire a broad enough knowledge of art to learn to embed societal contexts and historical roots into their art practice. In other words, the artist is trained in a narrow and fragmented manner. While many of my artist respondents have taken it upon themselves to practice art in a theoretically, historically and socially engaged manner, they also complained about the fragmented approach to art making in school. They also lamented that their education had not prepared them for becoming a professional practicing artist. They were not guided on developing a successful career in art.

That said, with the emergence of new media and new technologies, ideas and inspirations coming from everywhere, questions have been raised not only on what is art, but how useful is an art school education (see Madoff 2009). In other words, inspirations for art making and for becoming an artist do not come singularly from art school. Art schools and their curricula not only fragment the training needed for an artist career, they generate a false sense of having been trained and being qualified to be a professional artist.

Art does not necessarily reflect reality but it communicates the emotional voices of the people in many societies (Kavolis 1964). By being the emotional voices of the masses, artists engage with society and become salient and relevant mouthpieces for sections of the population. By speaking up critically, artists allow the release of aggressive and hostile impulses in an acceptable manner, so that other social structures in society are not affected (Albrecht 1968 3:389). Except for a few theater groups in Singapore, most artists in Singapore are not ready to step into the role of becoming the emotional voice of the society. They do not engage in a manner that makes them relevant and central in society. Many artists in theater and film who make critical social and political statements have gotten themselves into trouble (Ooi 2008; Tan 2007).

In sum

The existence alone of art schools and art programs cannot be used, such as they are, as indicators of how serious a city takes culture and creativity. As this chapter shows, such indicators must be evaluated more critically.

Art training and art school education carry explicit and hidden curricula that do not necessarily match. In Singapore, one explicit message is that art training helps develop the "soft skills" of pupils; they will make for a more intellectually-rounded and gracious populace in the future (Singapore Parliament Hansard, 9 March 2010). The many initiatives to promote the arts and culture also show that the cultural economy is important and artists are central in the emerging scheme of things. But the streaming processes in the Singaporean education system perpetuate a low status for artists in Singapore, and, by association, a low regard for art in general. The education system socially reproduced a system that better respects the sciences and professions that require good academic performance in school. Going to art school is not considered prestigious. Many Singaporeans still think that most persons who have taken up an art education are lousy in school and their choice of an art education is forced upon them. Thus children are given a negative impression of becoming a professional artist. The system continues to rank the career of an artist lowly. With the limited recognition from society, many professional artists inevitably feel deflated at times. If art in school and art schools do not train artists, what do they do? The system continues to perpetuate the CMIO social engineering messages of Singapore, and many practicing artists inadvertently continue the message. Artists are not encouraged to take risks for fear of overstepping the boundaries of public morality set by the authorities. The current situation does not inspire persons to become artists with the aspiration of mobilizing people emotionally and speaking up for the masses. The art education discourages that. Even for those who are successful and can make a living from their art making, they question how useful was their art education.

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[i] Data was collected since April 2007 through various means, including documents, media reports, observations and in-depth interviews with 70 stakeholders in the Singapore art world, including artists, gallery managers, curators, art teachers, collectors and policy makers. Where permission was granted, actual names are used. Respondents who chose to remain anonymous are referred to by random strings of letters.