

EuroSEAS Roundtable Proposal

Title: Arts and Civic Participation in South East Asia

Convenor: Dr Amanda Rogers, Department of Geography, Swansea University, UK.

Explanation of Format: The roundtable will bring together 6 academics and practitioners from South East Asia/with a South East Asian focus to share their experiences of working on projects linking the arts with civil society. This will be followed by a moderated discussion between the panellists, with time to expand this to include questions from the audience. I am requesting that one or two passes for an online presence for artists from South East Asia be made available to this session for free, given the financial constraints many are currently facing. I have also requested a roundtable format for this as one of the major issues facing artists in South East Asia is a lack of connectivity and awareness about what is happening in other contexts, which decreases their resilience and safety.

Urgency of Topic

This roundtable explores the complex, often divergent, relationships between the arts and civil society in South East Asia. It considers both the role of citizens in using the arts to creatively respond to, and intervene in, the domain of civil society, but also the complex challenges faced by artists regionally when attempting to make work that engages with contemporary social and political issues. Artists, art works and art forms are key components of cultural life that promote well-being, collectivity and connectivity, raise awareness, and develop new imaginations. Yet the complexity of civil society also draws our attention to a more varied and shifting patchwork of positions that artistic practice can occupy, and to the many collective experiences and identities that can be served. Indeed, despite the democratic ideals underpinning narratives of participation in civil society that aim to promote empowerment and equality, participation is highly ambivalent and can reinforce the status quo (Bishop 2012). Research has also explored the many types of participation in operation when citizens become engaged in artistic projects, and their shifting, contested relationship to power and community (Eriksson et al 2018). As such, whether or not participation in the arts can create communities (both real and imagined) as a mechanism for enacting socio-political change remains an open question.

These dynamics are especially timely in South East Asia as UN Special Rapporteurs, regional journalists and academics note the increasing [shrinkage of civic space](#) in many [countries](#) (e.g. Guan 2004; Khoo 2017; Lay and Eng 2020; Nixon 2020). This situation has intensified in the Covid-19 pandemic, with new laws that promote censorship, arrest and detention being rapidly introduced in the name of protecting national security. The 2021 Artists at Risk Connection report *Arresting Art: Repression, censorship and artistic freedom* highlights these dynamics and how they work to increase the barriers to artistic expression and livelihood, particularly by restricting access to safe spaces, reducing mobility, and excluding the arts and cultural sectors from state support mechanisms. Rather than promoting a diverse sphere of civil society, there has been a rapid acceleration in the development of a 'culture of conformity' that reflects a 'shrinking imagination' and a 'climate of fear' – one enacted as much by local communities and traditional institutions as by governments (Yeluri

et al 2021). Such discussions are core to broader human rights agendas given that the ability to 'freely participate in cultural life' is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948, article 27) and cultural and creative diversity is often held up as a mechanism for promoting greater equality (UNESCO, 2001, article 5 of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity).

This roundtable will explore these dynamics and debates to offer a space in which new connections can be made and experiences shared from across the region.