

Case Study 4: Example of community-based work to provide exposure to a community and how the arts can build community involvement.

SASARAN ARTS ASSOCIATION AND THE TOWN OF SASARAN: building community engagement through an international arts festival

The case study is compiled from interviews conducted with Ng Bee and Tan Khang Sang, founder and core member of Sasaran Arts Association, respectively, and supplemented with additional details from Sasaran's publications and from a visit to the town in March 2014. All pictures are taken from Sasaran's Facebook pages and reproduced with permission, unless stated otherwise.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Sasaran Arts Association (SAA) runs the Sasaran International Arts Festival, a triennial event featuring international artists that takes place in the small fishing town of Sasaran, Selangor. Now in its third installment, the festival is run entirely by members of the community and stands out as a locally conceived and administered, independent festival without outside professional or state-sponsored partnership, or corporate backing. It is made possible through the efforts of the local community, spearheaded by artist and founder, Ng Bee, and a team of dedicated key members of the community.

BACKGROUND: Sasaran and the origins of the festival

The fishing village of Sasaran

The town of Sasaran is located in the Kuala Selangor district in the north of the state of Selangor, in the subdistrict of Jeram, and approximately an hour's drive northwest from Kuala Lumpur. The town was founded as a fishing village in the early 1900s at the river mouth of Sungai Buloh (Bamboo River), a river which gave the village its first, original name. The name of Sasaran came about after Malaysia's independence in 1957, when the local police force set up a shooting range on a nearby hill. The word 'sasaran' in the Malay language means 'target', and this word became associated with the town, leading to its eventual adoption by the locals as their new village name.



Fishing boats of Sasaran. Picture by Victor Chin

The village grew into a small town during the country's Emergency Period (1948-1960) following an influx of people drawn by the village's autonomy and lack of restrictions at a time when other communities were becoming designated "new village" settlements¹ and subject to new rules and controls. Sasaran has a multiethnic population, with its early Chinese residents traditionally working as fishermen, the Malays as farmers east of the river, and Indians working the plantations in the outskirts. Today, Sasaran resembles most small towns in Malaysia, with both brick houses as well as older, wooden structures, shophouses and modern facilities. The community is still ethnically mixed and mostly working class.

The community of the Sasaran Arts Association is an ethnic Chinese community with a population of about 3,000, but the town population also includes 5 small Malay villages (*kampung*) within its boundaries.

¹ New Villages were set up by the colonial British government in Malaysia to segregate and monitor communities during the period of communist unrest in the country.

Ng Bee, bringing art home

Ng Bee, is the founder and Chairman of Sasaran Arts Association (SAA), and is an artist who was born and raised in Sasaran. After his secondary schooling he studied Fine Art in Singapore and Paris, returning to Sasaran after, and has always chosen to reside in the town of his birth. He has been making a living as a painter for over 30 years, and started participating in and organising arts exchanges with neighbouring countries like Vietnam and Indonesia in the mid 2000s. The small events that Ng Bee ran took place initially in Kuala Lumpur, where his artwork was exhibited at galleries in the city. Following a visit to an art event in Jogjakarta that was “very low budget but very well organised” in 2007, Ng Bee, together with two old friends (one, Tan Khang Sang, plays a significant role in the association and acts as a frequent spokesperson alongside Ng Bee. Tan was interviewed together with Ng Bee for the compilation of this case study.) from the community who were to become his main collaborators in the running of the festival, were inspired to attempt an art event in their own hometown.

Sasaran International Workshop

The first event they organised was called the “Sasaran International Workshop”. At this time, their original thinking behind the project was not with the community in mind, but was instead oriented towards the invited international artists. Their intention was to provide the artists with what they considered a more culturally enriching experience in a traditional, small town, as opposed to a cosmopolitan city (Kuala Lumpur). The community involvement initially arose more from the need for local support as venue providers and for additional manpower. They started with a loose committee of friends, with no specific appointed roles. Funds were derived from a variety of sources, and cheques were made out to a local NGO that permitted the use of their name and registered address for official purposes.

In the beginning, according to Ng Bee and Tan Khang Sang, most of the community were not interested in art and paid them little attention. However, they were known and trusted by the community, and the community members that did become involved in the first year did so based on this trust.

The Sasaran International Arts Workshop was held from 12-23 December 2008 and featured 35 artists from 9 countries and included Malaysian artists. The core of the workshop was a studio residence programme for the artists, with an exhibition at the end. A local school, S.R.J.K (C) Chung Wah (est. 1936), was enlisted as the venue for the studios, while various local community members provided rooms for the artists to stay in. In addition to providing ample and suitable space to act as studios, the school is seen as central to the community, and education is highly valued. This basic formula of school-studio and homestay has become a fixture of the Sasaran festival. Partly out of practicality and partly because it worked conceptually, materials for the artists were all sourced locally (sculptures made out of recycled materials, paint donated).



Chung Wah school, location of the studios and main site for of the workshop/festival. Photo author's.

When the idea for the international art programme was first conceived, Ng Bee did not imagine it would turn into a recurring event, but, after its successful first run, received encouragement from various sources for it to be held again. At the end of this first event, the organisers found themselves with a small profit of about RM 10,000, as well as over 60 artworks left behind by the artists. With this in hand as a starting point of funds for the next event, together with support from their original organising committee, and with encouragement from as far afield as Taiwan in the form of a visiting academic who made them more aware of the benefit the festival brought in terms of community-building, the decision to make the festival a regular event was mooted.

It was during this process that the community involvement came into focus. Ng Bee's fellow collaborators, none of whom were artists, saw quickly how local people could have a greater role, and Ng Bee himself recognised that while the participating artists gained fulfilment through the "filling of the canvas", the onlookers (community members) were merely passive observers. He saw an opportunity to nurture arts appreciation amongst the locals, and to expose them to people and culture from outside their small town, and indeed, the country.

Sasaran Arts Association

Once the decision was made to hold the festival on a regular basis and to increase the emphasis on community participation, Ng Bee and his close collaborators saw the need to become more organised and they set up the Sasaran Arts Association as a registered association in February 2009. The pro-tem committee of the first year became the steering committee of the new association, and many of them are still members today. Ng Bee is the only member with an arts background. In addition to Tan, another key member of the team is Lau Kim Tai, a welder by profession and an active member of the community, playing the role of fixer for events such as funerals and other important events in traditional community life. Other key members include the chairman of the local school's Parents-Teachers Association (PIBG), and the director of the school board. All of these key members play vital roles as advocates and enablers within their respective spheres of influence.

SASARAN INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL: a festival run by the community

The Sasaran International Arts Festival was planned as a triennial event, with the SAA recognizing that time was needed to plan and raise funds for an event of the scale that involved several international artists, and also taking into account that all the members contributed their time and energies as volunteers.

The exhibition at the end of the 2008 Workshop was held at a venue in KL city centre. For 2011's festival the exhibition was to be held locally – the festival and all its components would take place entirely in Sasaran. The programme took place over 12 days and included the artists-in-residence studio programme, exhibitions, performance art, a short film competition, digital art, outdoor art, art camp for children and a parade and 'cultural night'. Interactions with and support from members of the community were woven into all aspects of the programming.



Ng Bee (seated, 2nd from left) with the international artists of 2011's festival



Costumed children and artists in the final day's parade

Ellen Schon, a participating artist from America, had this to say about her experience:

"Our studios were open to the public, so crowds often gathered around to watch our artistic process. I focused on ceramics, sharing the studio with four lovely Singaporean ceramic artists. Lau Kim Tai, a local machine shop owner, asked what was needed for equipment. He then created an electric potter's wheel from scratch, using materials at hand from his shop...The children in the village and their parents seemed very interested in watching me spin clay into

shapes....After almost two weeks of art-making, the festival drew to a close. Costumed international artists, organisers, volunteers, and children paraded through the village of Sasaran in a final demonstration of pageantry. Cavalcades of cheering residents on motor scooters accompanied us....The openness and cooperation we experienced with each other personally and professionally during this art festival (not available in many other contexts), is testament to Ng Bee's inspiring vision of art and global cultural exchange."

[quoted from http://berkshirefinearts.com/02-20-2012_we-art-together-a-malaysian-arts-festival.htm]

The festival does not seek nor receive official funding from state or federal government sources, though it does receive municipal help in the form of permits and loan of tents. Nonetheless, the SAA cultivates the blessings of the various state and local representatives and MPs for the officious parts of its formal events – launch and/or closing ceremonies. This is evident in the numerous letters of congratulations and support in the 2011 commemorative booklet they published, and ensures that the festival secures all permissions necessary for its activities.

Community members as arts organisers and creative partners



Community members as "artist assistants" helping erect an outdoor installation.

In the fulfillment of their responsibilities, members of the committee take time to learn more about art and art events. Ng Bee being the sole member with an arts background had over the years exposed his close friends and earliest collaborators to the world of Fine Art through his work as an artist and art activities, both locally and in the region. This exposure was now more purposefully cultivated to others in their team. It must be highlighted that this team, the SAA and its wider team of volunteers, included fishermen, shopkeepers, and other local tradesmen – none of whom fit the stereotypical view of what a fine arts practitioner or enthusiast might be. The exposure they have gained through the festival, however, has resulted in a confidence and familiarity with art that is in evidence in members like Lau².

The association appropriated a shophouse space owned by a member for use as a meeting space, that has since also become Ng Bee's studio as well as a communal, clubhouse-like space that community members drift in and out of with ease and familiarity. For the 2011 festival, roles of the team members became more defined, each leading on areas such as media, programme and logistics (accommodation/travel). Each committee member then worked with smaller project teams with volunteers made up of members of the community – about 100 in total.

Activities are held with children, recruited through word-of-mouth. According to Ng Bee and Tan, prior to the festival, children in the town had little positive outlets for their free time, spending much of this in neighbourhood cybercafés. Initially, many were reluctant participants signed up by their parents, but by mid-way through the workshops, the children began to really engage and many clamoured to stay on after the workshops, reveling in the environment of creativity and positive energy generated by the artists in residence and their elders. The children's programme featured workshops and a public parade, similar in form and concept to the Community Art Carnivals run by Soon Choon Mee in Cheras and Serdang (ref. Case study 3) and who was invited by Sasaran to help in the organisation of these.

The artists were placed in over 20 homes of various community members. The school canteen operators cooked their meals, and the artists transformed the canteen into their communal space for eating,

² As observed by the author during a visit to Sasaran in February 2014.

drinking, playing music and hanging out. The school also became an exhibition venue, with two other locations in the town –abandoned lots-- becoming outdoor exhibition spaces, all within walking distance of each other.

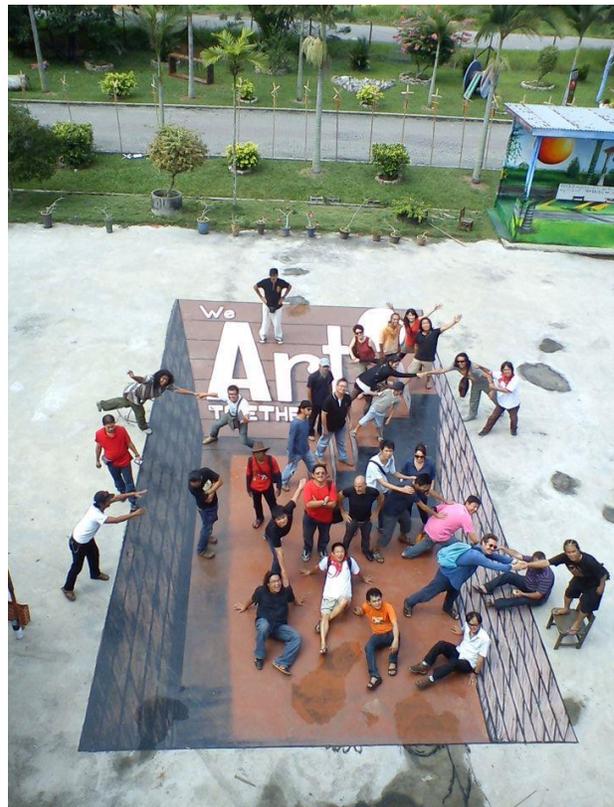
From fisherman to artist and art producer

An important aspect of the festival is that the community members become involved in the creation of artworks. Each invited artist is provided with a group of ‘assistants’ who help them in the production and building, if necessary, of their respective pieces. In addition to this, the villagers also produce an art piece made entirely by themselves that sits alongside other artworks in the outdoor sculpture park.

This process is seen as vital to the members of Sasaran Arts Association, and is an important part in establishing a sense of belonging, ownership, pride in and appreciation for the art festival. It is not without its complications, with Ng Bee sometimes having to mediate conflict between artists encountering difficulty communicating with the villagers (language barriers as well as differences in opinion and artist temperament). However, these are small obstacles that they overcome and are never seen as barriers to the effective running of the festival, and the artistic outputs. More often than not, a sense of camaraderie is established and the teams of community volunteers frequently bond with the artists in the evenings over food and drink.



The villager's artwork in 2011, a sculpture of a giant fish made out of recycled bottles and wire, held aloft by driftwood –an homage to their heritage as a fishing village. Photo author's.



Playful 3D art in the grounds of the Chung Wah school with small sculptures in the background, all contributed by the artists-in-residence.

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The community involvement in the art process appears to be more male-dominated than female, but the women in the community are also involved in more traditional, domestic ways – food preparation, running the homestays, as well as overseeing their children’s participation in the art camps and related activities.

While the committee members of Sasaran Arts Association have their designated roles, the preparation and running of the festival is not managed as an exclusive thing. “Sasaran (the festival) belongs to everybody”, Ng Bee states, and people are able to join in activities and help out whenever they want. Members of the community contribute manpower and skills in logistical preparations and as art ‘assistants’ and handlers; they source materials, sometimes from their own homes and trades; some assist in fundraising or make contributions themselves; local businesses might pay for advertising space in the festival publications; the school board provides the school as venue and the canteen and cleaning staff are given employment during an otherwise down period (school holidays); residents open their homes for homestays, and acquire new skills and broaden their experiences through the daily interactions with the foreign artists. During the 10-12 days of the festival, many more hands are required for additional logistical support, coordination, reception, and such.

Impact on the community from engagement with the arts

Ng Bee and Tan attest to the positive influence of the arts involvement on the lives of the younger members of the community, describing how their meeting ‘clubhouse’ and the larger festival provides a positive and safe space for young people to interact in. They specifically recount how certain teenage youths in the community who were involved in drug abuse and other social troubles, have been able to overcome their addictions with the help of the positive influences and support provided through the community activities of the festival. These young men are now regular helpers to SAA activities year-round, not just once in three years during the actual festival duration.

Public art has also transformed the landscape of the town. A visitor to Sasaran on any given day is able to see the outdoor sculptures in what otherwise looks like a somewhat blighted and unremarkable neighbourhood, while the school venue at the heart of the festival is decorated with several murals and sculptures, legacy of the artists-in-residence it plays host to.

The SAA members have also become actively involved in various community events, such as the annual mooncake festival, contributing to an increasingly cohesive sense of community through place-making activities that bring together art and culture and the townsfolk.



Crowds at the Mooncake festival, held in one of the two outdoor sculpture parks created as a result of the Sasaran International Arts Festival.



The second sculpture park as it stands in early 2014, with artworks still on display from 2011. Photo author’s.

Media attention (mainly Chinese language press) and the 8,000-9,000³ visitors that came through Sasaran during the 2011 festival has introduced a new sense of pride to the small town. According to Ng Bee, many of the townsfolk speak of the festival as “theirs”. The Association has also been approached

³ The figure is an estimation from Ng Bee and Tan.

by former residents who had left Sasaran for economic reasons, but have since returned to offer their help to the festival. Prior to the festival, and ever since it's slow decline as a fishing village, Sasaran has had no strong identity to speak of. Now, however, Ng Bee and Tan say the town has a new profile; "Sasaran = Art".

They are convinced of the positive benefits the festival brings to the community and that gives their town an exceptional identity. Where once it was known to very few outside Jeram, it now has a profile well beyond its borders. They are proud of the name Sasaran and the festival has been instrumental in instilling this pride in the community.

Sasaran Festival 2014 and beyond

As Sasaran moves forward in its third installment – Sasaran International Art Festival 2014 takes place 27 November to 8 December 2014 — the ambitions of its organisers are growing. They intend to attract more media interest, particularly with the English and Bahasa press; and introduce better communications to help with the visitor experience. With the previous festivals, they installed bunting and banners around the town and up to 10 miles along the main roads leading to Sasaran, but once in the festival area, there was little to orientate the visitor – something they intend to improve on this year. Focus during the first two events was more inward, towards the artists and the community members, and an outside public as spectators was never quite a factor until now, as the festival grows.



In line with its growth and greater visitor consideration, the SAA also hope to offer souvenirs and explore income possibilities from the visitors. Ng Bee and Tan are very aware of the economic potential of a well-run festival, recognising the small boosts in income that has already happened for local shopkeepers, restaurant proprietors, and the residents who run homestays (Sasaran is a small town with no café or restaurant chain or shopping mall; a dining or coffeeshop experience is completely local in the old-fashioned sense). However, they also recognise that harnessing the economic potential of a festival is a long-term plan and would be a secondary outcome of their activities.

CONCLUSION

Many aspects of how the festival is run is rooted in the local culture of the community, from a traditional village loan mechanism by which Ng Bee and Tan first raised money for the 2008 Workshop; to the traditional values of family ties and respect for education and central role of the school amongst the community. Although the sole artist in the group, Ng Bee prioritises the engagement of the community over the output of the artworks.

The SAA – certainly its founding members — are clearly invested in the festival and Sasaran in the long term. What remains to be seen, though, is how the SAA will adapt to change as the festival develops, and whether their increasing awareness of potential directions and benefits of the festival may change their objectives and how the festival runs.

Sasaran is an interesting model for engagement as a community festival in Malaysia because it is one of very few festivals (that we are aware of through this documentation project) that can demonstrate such extensive involvement of ordinary members of the community. That they do so with minimal official support – no state grants, no big-name corporate sponsors – is also testimony to the degree of local support they receive in terms of funding and labour and is an assurance of their autonomy. The idea of Sasaran becoming a full blown "Art Village" is still a way away, but the commitment of the community to the festival at present appears certain.