

HEART WORK

Arts groups blur the lines of art and community with fresh projects in unexpected venues



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On a Wednesday morning in August, Singapore artists Woong Soak Teng and Genevieve Ang are sweaty behind the counter in a Punggol mini-mart, Snickers bars in front of them, roll-on deodorant and canisters of hair dye ranged behind.

To their left, a cat figurine with the national flag planted through its paws beckons.

This is a strange habitat for artistic work: no painting or sculpting, just everyday transactions of cash in exchange for coriander or curry leaves.

Woong and Ang are at the beginning of a six-month immersion in Punggol as part of arts organisation OH! Open House's three-year residency in the neighbourhood.

Best known for its art walks, OH! since June 2025 has ventured into the alien territory of community arts, which has birthed activities that even artistic director Alan Oei admits can be a bit "strange".

A lot of these activities look suspiciously like social work: Volunteers knock on doors to collect 500 stories about Punggol, and "gatherings" have been organised in people's homes to get them to talk to their neighbours.

Others are more recognisably "art" – like Woong and Ang's final presentation of an art experience in 2027 – but the majority fall somewhere in between. For instance, getting 99 people to pledge 10,000 volunteer hours to social causes, in exchange for works of art by renowned Thai artist Mit Jai Inn.

Oei says: "In the past, we have always been very touch-and-go. We collected stories, used them and then we left. To be honest, I've never felt that OH! Open House's role is to be a community partner."

The Punggol project, HAN@Punggol, initiated and partly funded by the National Heritage Board (NHB), is the most colourful of a new wave of social arts projects that have sprung up or established more permanent bases in 2026.

They challenge elitist notions of the arts as belonging in galleries and theatres, or as the domain of the rich.

Surprisingly, these projects are not primarily fronted by the National Arts Council (NAC) or People's Association. Artists are willingly opening up their practices, drawn to social impact and unpredictability.

To these imperatives, OH! Open House project lead Kristen Oliveira adds empowerment.

It was her idea to recruit children aged nine to 13 in Punggol to lead three community projects with a budget of \$3,000 each, putting them through a development boot camp.

She says: "When people think about public art, they think of an alien, random sculpture in the neighbourhood.

"Another version is 'Let's all paint the mural together'. But does anything change?

"For me, it was more about how we can get people involved in art as a way of shaping the neighbourhood. As Singaporeans, we don't often get a chance to have a say, or it's very performative. My hope is that these (projects) give people more ownership."



FROM LENGKOK BAHRU TO CASSIA CRESCENT

OH!'s residency is a relatively new effort. But 2026 is becoming a banner year for what can be loosely termed "social arts".

Tak Takut Kids Club, for example, opened a new branch in Lengkok Bahru in January, adding to its Boon Lay space. Founded by arts producer Lin Shiyun in 2019, its philosophy is simple: Create a safe space for children and they will come and express themselves, sometimes through art.

Lin, whose philosophy was honed in the 1990s, when theatre could still be performed unticketed in Singapore's streets, says: "If you are a visual artist, then your medium is sculpture, sound if you are a sound artist. For social art, this medium is human relationships."

The initial idea was to replicate the approach used in Boon Lay, but the group realised it had to make adjustments to accommodate the higher concentration of seniors in Lengkok Bahru. Lin says there is likely to be more inter-generational work.

If one is hard-pressed to discern the "art" in the equation, it is because Lin is not beholden to pressures on artistic output and believes in organic creation.

An upcoming comic, titled Shards Of Life, to be published in October, is about a real-life journey of an anonymous child who struggled in her school's counselling system, with its gaps and its occasional counter-effects.

The book was possible only after Lin worked over years with the anonymous child, Bean, to gain her trust.

Lin says: "Artists are always seen as making noise, right? This is har-



Above: Artists Woong Soak Teng (left) and Genevieve Ang at Hosh Global mini-mart in Punggol. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Left: The fashion workshop Styled Together was held by Drama Box in Cassia Crescent in 2025. PHOTO: DRAMA BOX

der to argue against. The social work grounds our artistic practice. Because of it, we are in a good position to influence policymakers."

Over at Cassia Crescent in Geylang, Drama Box has been co-creating with residents since 2022. The theatre group is now fundraising for a permanent, open art studio in a void deck, in a signal of long-term commitment.

The Ground Unit is meant as a gathering point for residents to come together to make work they are interested in.

This community club model is very different from Drama Box's earlier staging of performances in the void deck, or projects like Boleh Bank, where residents exchanged services they could provide, like nannying advice or haircuts, in the spirit of gotong royong (mutual help).

Drama Box co-artistic director Koh Hui Ling says the company has transitioned from "output-dri-

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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ARTS PRODUCER LIN SHIYUN

ven work to relational work".

"We observed that beyond the initial excitement and adrenaline of creating impactful work in that period, it takes much more time and stakeholder engagements to see real change," she says.

"Partners and funders have asked us when the project would end, and I always reply, 'When the project is no longer relevant to the residents, we will leave'."

Not bothered by the dilemma of whether Drama Box's efforts qualify as arts or community work, this willingness to play facilitator is proof of a greater confidence in the theatre group's role as artists.

"This is a question we often hear from locals we encounter, and less so from our foreign counterparts who are more used to having the arts assimilated into their everyday lives and culture," Koh says.

"We are artists first and foremost, and strive to create works with high aesthetic aspirations."

FUNDING ISSUES

These groups' more nebulous approach to artistic practice has befuddled administrators and other sticklers for categories.

Many arts groups rely partially on funding from the authorities, and when art begins to look like community work, it presents problems for civil servants in different departments who have their own key performance indicators.

NAC has rejected grant applications from the Tak Takut Kids Club. Though the club was taken under the wing of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) for a while, it is now entirely at the mercy of private donors.

"That's how our society is organised. The arts side of the house sees us as more social service work. The social service side doesn't think of us as social work because a lot of the time, social workers do case work," Lin says.

There are other demographic considerations. Lin says: "We cannot get funding from MCCY (Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth) because we work with children too, who belong to MSF. So we are quite chaotic. The way we organise is people-centric, which does not always match the way society is conceived by those in power."

Theatremaker Kok Heng Leun, who has been working with Pulau Ubin residents since 2022, had to seek multiple sources of funding, including from a new AGENCY Fund by arts group T:>Works. He is using the money to support a dance film with Ubin residents.

Koh says he is always careful during the pitching process not to "instrumentalise the art".

CONTINUED ON C2

Arts groups taking their work into unusual spaces

TAK TAKUT KIDS CLUB

In January, Tak Takut Kids Club, which wants to create a safe space for low-income children to hang out and maybe create art, cut the ribbon on its second facility in Lengkok Bahru.

Its first space is in Boon Lay Drive, near rental estates with a good number of transnational families. Founded by arts producer Lin Shiyun in 2019 with her own “pocket money”, it was initially an open-ended art project that became a local fixture.

“Tak takut” is Malay for no fear, and Lin hopes that through the carving out of space, children who have experienced family violence and misunderstanding will regain confidence.

Activities range from getai performances to working with children to create healthy snacks that steer clear of processed foods. “It’s about discovering what this place means to the kids,” Lin says of her methodology.



Children at Tak Takut Kids Club's Lengkok Bahru branch. PHOTO: TAK TAKUT KIDS CLUB



OH! Open House holds gatherings in Punggol residents' homes to get them to meet. PHOTO: OH! OPEN HOUSE

OH! OPEN HOUSE

OH! Open House is in Punggol for three years and has come up with some of the most dynamic programmes to get residents in on the act.

Residents have been asked to share their stories. And at specific blocks, OH! has organised 10 “gatherings” to get people to meet their neighbours, with invitations handed out the old-school way, via fliers.

In the past year, the group has supported five culture projects pitched by Punggol residents with \$3,000 each, including a diorama exhibition capturing memories of Punggol's erstwhile pig farms. Another three projects will get \$8,000 each in the next open call.

Six artists, including two from abroad, are participating in a six-month “residency” to create Punggol-specific projects, culminating in art experiences for Punggol residents in March 2027.

Artist Woong Soak Teng, for example, is exploring the neighbourhood's identity as Singapore's “baby town”, in line with her personal dilemma in her 30s of whether to have children. Fellow artist Genevieve Ang asks what gives Punggol its identity.



Drama Box's Boleh Bank saw Cassia Crescent residents exchange services like haircuts. PHOTO: TEY YONG HOW

DRAMA BOX

Drama Box's involvement in Cassia Crescent began in 2022, but in this field, it is a bona fide veteran.

Its turn to community spaces began in the early 2000s when it started staging well-attended theatre shows in outdoor spaces with heavy footfall. From 2014 to 2016, it experimented with community co-creation in Dakota Crescent.

The Ground Unit at Cassia Crescent has, by Drama Box's own estimation, evolved into something more, no longer about artistic output but relationship-building.

It is now fund-raising for a permanent, open art studio in a void deck. The relationships it has built with the residents have given it the confidence that they will come to collaborate on projects they themselves are interested in.

In the past four years, Drama Box has staged theatre shows, workshops, block parties, town hall sessions and “community mapping exercises” with more than 1,000 residents of Cassia Crescent. These participants now ask for Drama Box practitioners by name and wonder what the next project is.



Gateway Arts' The Parting Glass takes place at live music bar The Blackbird. PHOTO: GATEWAY ARTS

GATEWAY ARTS

Founded in 2016, Gateway Arts began with a focus on children and youth but increasingly came to scope its plays around themes of mental health.

Its productions frequently involve talkback or discussion sessions that allow troubled young people – and sometimes their families – to approach issues with critical distance and the support of trained counsellors.

In May, its Scaredy Kat Presents, which discussed panic attacks and anxiety, was seen by 1,800 school students, who comprise some 60 per cent of Gateway Arts' audience. It also works with charities like Singapore Children's Society and Touch Community Services to invite those from underprivileged communities.

Gateway Arts is a commissioned artist of Healing Arts Singapore, Asia's first national-level arts and health initiative, launched in 2025. The consortium makes explicit the link between art and the tackling of practical health issues, and is co-founded by the National University of Singapore's Centre for Music and Health and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.



ART:DIS

ART:DIS, which began as Very Special Arts Singapore in 1993 before its 2021 rebrand, is a non-profit organisation that has worked to increase access to the arts for people with disabilities.

It has three centres – in Bedok, Changi and Bukit Merah – where it holds community programmes. Over three decades, it has also cultivated a pipeline of excellent artists who are now recognised by the mainstream, with aspirations to tackle topics that go beyond their disability.

It is a standard port of call for most high-profile arts platforms, from Singapore Art Week to the Singapore International Festival of Arts. Singer-songwriter Sky Shen, who trained with ART:DIS in its theatre programme and whose first EP ART:DIS helped launch, was a key act at the National Day Parade 2026.

Come end-September, ART:DIS is also organising a solo exhibition for UOL x ART:DIS Art Prize winner Christian Tan Wen Siang, which executive director Angela Tan promises is “going to be the most avant-garde exhibition ever done in Singapore for disabled artists”.

The organisation is working with the National Arts Council on Singapore's first national grant for artists with disabilities, including mentorship support and residency space.

Monstress, written by blind artist Claire Teo (above, right), is part of the Esplanade's 2026 The Studios season. PHOTO: POH YU KHING