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26 June 2020: Inaugural artists of the Artist-in-Residence programme interact with ecology to create engaging artworks

By Jermayne Ong



Andrew S. Yang and Christa Donner, the inaugural artists for the Artist-in-Residence programme at Yale-NUS College. Video still provided by Joshua Vargas.

In January 2020, Yale-NUS College launched the [Artist-in-Residence \(AIR\) programme](#), welcoming its inaugural artist team Andrew Yang and Christa Donner from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to the College for a semester.

While at the College, Yang and Donner engaged in a variety of works spanning the visual arts, sciences, ecology and history, and investigating the human and non-human body as a site for conflict and adaptation.



Works in progress by Yang and Donner respectively in the College art studio. Images provided by Tom White.

As the first of its kind in a liberal arts and sciences college in Asia, the Yale-NUS Artist-in-Residence programme aligns with the College's aim of supporting meaningful community engagement with artists to cultivate a vibrant arts community. Supported by the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation through the Tan Chin Tuan Chinese Culture & Civilisation Programme at Yale-NUS College, the programme also engages with contemporary issues and Chinese culture through art-making while seeking to catalyse activities that promote art as a practice to nurture a vibrant and diverse arts community in Singapore.

"Singapore is a remarkable place from which to experience a diversity of cultural perspectives layered together," the artists said, adding that they were fortunate to learn about Chinese culture as an integral part of Singapore's national identity and existing in its own hybrid form here. "It gives us a new view on the scope of Chinese culture, history and aesthetics. With our experiences in other parts of East Asia, and as part of a Taiwanese-American family, our understanding of Chinese culture and its global influence has been broadened greatly by our time in Singapore, while also learning about Malay, Indian and other communities that have built this place."

Ms Chew Gek Khim, Deputy Chairman of the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation and recently appointed member of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Board of Trustees added, "There is much to learn from past cultures and civilisations. This new Artist-in-Residence programme continues the Yale-NUS vision of forging interdisciplinary and international ties."

During their time at the College, Yang and Donner jointly taught *Culturing Nature: Ecological Art in the Garden*, a studio art course inviting students to explore gardens throughout the city as a starting point for creative research. Although gardens on the College campus were a focal point of their studies, students also visited gardens off-campus. With guidance from the artists, they experimented with drawing, photography and multimedia projects to observe, represent and imagine the ways humans relate to the natural world in an age of environmental urgency. This culminated in an installation of their work in the College Library titled [Library Leaves](#), as well as a series of interviews with home gardeners and urban farmers in Singapore, both of which are now part of an online showcase of artworks produced by students across the College's art practice modules.



Students from Culturing Nature installing their works for critique in preparation for Library Leaves. Image provided by Tom White.

"Overall, our experience teaching here was wonderful," the artists shared. "The Yale-NUS students we worked with were incredibly thoughtful, bright and creative. *Culturing Nature* was a brand-new class for us to teach, and a chance to adapt our teaching to a different structure... [It] will certainly continue to influence our approaches to teaching when we return to our home institution." Yang and Donner added that their residency at the College was an unforgettable one for them.

Choy Jia Yu (Class of 2022), who enrolled in *Culturing Nature*, said that the class sparked her deep interest in using art as a medium for exploration and education about the environment. "There are many ways one can make use of this intersection to create art that informs and creates conversations about the environment, and I definitely have greater insight into how art can be used as a way to create connection with the natural world," she explained.



Choy Jia Yu (Class of 2022) on a field trip to the community Sky Garden@Jurong Central as part of a Culturing Nature class. Image provided by Ashbel Chioh.

Apart from engaging Yale-NUS students, the artists were also able to connect with the larger Singapore community via various platforms. As visiting speakers at LASALLE College of the Arts, visiting critics at the NUS Department of Architecture and visitors on Post-Museum's online programming, they were able to engage with local and regional artists and gardeners as part of their creative research.

AIR programme coordinator Mr Tom White added, "Andrew and Christa have set a high bar during their residency. They have actively and enthusiastically participated in many activities to bring their work out of the classroom and into the community, and have shown us a path forward to build our AIR programme."



Panel discussion after the Artist-in-Residence public lecture held on 10 February 2020. From left to right: Dean of Faculty, Professor Jeannette Ickovics; AIR programme director and Assistant Professor of Humanities (Visual Art) James Jack; artists Christa Donner and Andrew Yang. Image provided by Ashbel Chioh.

AIR programme director and Assistant Professor of Humanities (Visual Art) James Jack said, "The distinguished artists selected for this programme will each react, engage and respond to the environs in Southeast Asia by reflecting upon historical and current

circumstances from their own artistic perspectives to make new works that critically engage with the Chinese world today.”

“Yale-NUS is a cultural meeting place that must continue to strive to draw more artists, more scientists, more humanists, more great thinkers to campus to address the most complex problems of the region and the world. The Artist-in-Residence Programme provides a foundation from which to build this vision,” added Dean of Faculty, Professor Jeannette Ickovics, who first conceptualised the programme.

Watch the video on the AIR Programme here:

<https://youtu.be/17PukNUgaMg>

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CONTACT US

+65 6601 1000 (Main Line)

+65 6601 2416 (Admissions-related queries)

admissions@yale-nus.edu.sg

publicaffairs@yale-nus.edu.sg

LOCATION

16 College Avenue West

#01-220 Singapore 138527

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