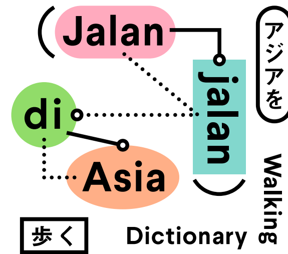


The 1990s as formation of art platform Interview with Shioda Junichi

Hattori Hiroyuki, Shioda Junichi

In the pre-internet days of the 1990s, it was no easy matter to know what was happening in the Asian art world. Over the course of tracing the Japan Foundation's Asian Art Archive and following the process by which art hubs in Southeast Asia were formed, I came across an essay written by Shioda Junichi, called "Glimpses into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be." I became interested in how Shioda interpreted the practices of artists in Asia in the 1990s in terms of acts of communication through gift-giving. At almost the same time as the idea of relational art was emerging in Europe and the United States, Shioda had focused on activities in Asia that emphasized process and communication. In this interview, he spoke about practices in Asia from the 1990s to the early 2000s.

Zoom Interview

Guest: Shioda Junichi (Visiting Professor, Tama Art University)
Interviewer: Hattori Hiroyuki
Date of interview: October 19, 2020

* Translated from Japanese to English by William Andrews.

Hattori Hiroyuki: Thank you for speaking to me today.
I would like to ask you mainly about your work in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, in the 1990s. During that period, you engaged in a wide range of practices, from research to organizing exhibitions, including writing an essay called

"Glimpses into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be" for the catalogue of the exhibition "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future," which was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in 1997.

I think that stance of finding hope in approaches based on giving gifts, as outlined in your essay, is still important today. Prior to this, for the 1995 exhibition "Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand," you had conducted research in Thailand and met many artists. Could you tell me in what kinds of practices of young Asian artists you found this attitude of gift-giving, as opposed to equivalent exchange, and what led you to take an interest in it?

Shioda Junichi: Entering the 1990s, there was a kind of trend for Asian art, with the Fukuoka Art Museum, before the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum opened, and then the Japan Foundation Asia Center, which at the time was called the Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, holding exhibitions of Southeast Asian art, and I observed this with much interest. In terms of my own work, "Asian Modernism" was actually the first time I came into contact with Asia. With a focus on modernism in the three countries of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, it would introduce the art of each country in the sense of taking a historical overview. As such, a curator was assigned to each country and the Japan Foundation asked me to handle the Thai section. That was in around autumn 1994. At the time, I had been working since 1993 for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, which was planned for March 1995. Prior to that, I was at the Setagaya Art Museum. So they approached me and, since I already had an interest in Asia, I wanted to take the job, and did so, though the way things were structured was there were also curators and critics specializing in modern and contemporary art for each country, and the exhibition was put together through a process of discussion with them.

I went to Thailand in May 1995 to conduct research, but because there was a contemporary art exhibition and symposium to accompany a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Jakarta, I first went to Indonesia to see that exhibition and then went on to Thailand. This being the Non-Aligned Movement, I could see what things were like not only Asian art but also for art in the so-called Third World, before going on to Thailand.

“Asian Modernism” was intended as an exhibition that reflects on modernity, so one of the themes would be to explore how modernization in Thailand had been achieved. When comparing Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, though Indonesia and the Philippines had been colonies of Western powers, Thai was never colonized. The king promoted modernization, even in the field of art, inviting the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci, who later naturalized and took the name Silpa Bhirasri, to establish Western-style art education in the country.

In a sense, this is the same as the modernization that art underwent in Japan, whereby foreigners came into the country and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was opened, and what happened in Thailand followed a parallel course historically. In terms of modern artworks, Silpakorn University, which was founded by Bhirasri, has a collection, and this formed the core of what we showed at the exhibition.

On the other hand, I was able actually to meet contemporary artists and develop my research while listening to what they had to say and having them show me their work.

I was particularly interested in Chang Se Tang and Vasan Sitthiket. The Italian Feroci built up the core of modern art in Thailand to a certain extent in an attempt to establish a Western-style academicism, so to speak, but in Chang Se Tang and Vasan Sitthiket, I sensed a vector that deviated from that academicism, one that was trying to move away from the very framework of academicism, and thus decided to exhibit many examples of their work.

To provide a bit more information about the artists, Chang Se Tang came from a family of Chinese migrants. He would paint abstract expressionist-style paintings that evoked Chinese abstract calligraphic ink art, but then later did expressionist landscape painting. Unrestrained by the chronological development of modern art in the West, he freely and arbitrarily engaged with a wide range of art.

Chang Se Tang also did concrete poetry and made interesting conceptual drawings. He had died about five or six years before I went to Thailand, so we couldn’t meet, but when I went to see his family, I saw his photo on the Buddhist altar, on the walls around which were many self-portraits. There were realistic ones and expressionistic ones. It was a really wide range of styles across several

dozen works. That was very interesting. At the Tokyo exhibition, we showed several of his pieces, including the portraits.

A photo and self portrait of Chang Se Tang, 1995

Younger and in around his late thirties when we met, Vasan was an energetic artist who made quite rough works in a neo-expressionist style. Alongside his paintings, he also made installations and video works recording performances, and the intense social criticism and messages in his work left a strong impression.

Vasan Sitthiket, 1995

Both Chang Se Tang and Vasan had never until then been showcased in Japan, and we structured the exhibition in such a way as to really promote these two artists. The exhibition “Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s,” held in 2018 at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, also featured the two artists, which really brought back memories.

From my side, this “Asian Modernism” exhibition felt like my first lesson about Asian art, but what I especially gained a strong sense of was that while we label Southeast Asia as a region, each country has its own distinctly culture and history of modernization, out of which the current art has emerged. That was a major factor in stirring up my interest in Southeast Asian art.

The exhibition was held in October 1995 in Tokyo and then toured to Manila, Bangkok, and Jakarta. After it finished, I wondered if we could hold a full exhibition of contemporary art from Asia or Southeast Asia at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, and this led to “Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future” in 1997.

I felt very much like I wanted to do the next exhibition while my enthusiasm levels were still high. It is difficult to independently put together a big exhibition with a focus on Asia, so it was realized through a partnership between the Japan Foundation and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. We made the exhibition to quite a tight schedule, undertaking research in the region in February and May of 1996, and then holding it in early spring of 1997.

In 1996, the 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art was taking place in Brisbane, so I first went there in February to see that, and then went on to Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. In May, I took another trip to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Naturally, the major cities of Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Manila formed the main part of my survey, though I was also able to meet artists living in quite remote districts. It was a good experience being able to visit those places, come into contact with those ways of life, and view the landscape while seeing the art there.

What I realized was that artists in Asia are aware of the community. The work itself is attempting somehow to solve various problems related to a community—the situations that force difficulties on the residents. As such, there were many people making art exploring the question of what we can do with art. In this sense, it left a somewhat different impression than contemporary art in the West.

Among the artists that I met, I was incredibly impressed by Nunelucio Alvarado, who was working at a studio in the middle of sugar cane fields on the island of Negros in the Philippines, and Dadang Christanto, who was making work at a suburb of Yogyakarta that encompassed a kind of political protest.

While the individual occupies the center of modern and contemporary art in the West, the activities of a group like Sanggawa in the Philippines rather created a single artwork collectively. I was interested in approaches that emphasized a commonality that transcended the individual, and there were many such artists in the exhibition.

For this conversation, I went back and reread the catalogue, and I mainly discuss this idea of giving gifts in reference to Navin Rawanchaikul's Pha Khao Mar Project. In this project, the titular cloth, a traditional type of fabric for everyday use, is given to every visitor. At the time, I was pretty unsure how to interpret this.

In comparison with other artists' work, I originally felt that Navin's was very different. Looking back now, I don't think it was all that different, but back then I had wondered how I should interpret it.

At the time, relational art had already appeared in various exhibitions, and by chance in 1995, I was able to see a work by the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh in which he cooked and served green curry.

There is also the famous work by Félix González-Torres in which he put candy in a museum for visitors to take home with them. I had seen and heard about these works, and while I was pondering how to connect with that and understand it within the contexts of the exhibition, the cultural anthropology concept of gift exchange came into my head. I had just then been reading books by Nakazawa Shinichi, Malinowski, and Marcel Mauss, and had learned that there had been this culture of giving gifts among the Native American tribes of the Northwest Coast of North America and the peoples of the South Pacific, a different kind of exchange system that doesn't depend on a monetary economy.

As an extension of this, I thought of a work that would give visitors a gift of Navin's *pha khao mar*. I decided to put this work at the start of the exhibition. Visitors would enter that room first. There were mats and people would sit down to watch a video on a big screen about how the *pha khao mar* is used locally. Watching this, visitors would come into contact with a part of Thai culture. After this, visitors could wear the cloth anyhow they wished as they went around the rest of the exhibition. And of course, they were also free to take it home with them. Moreover, Navin asked that they let us know how they were using the cloth in their own homes. At the time, the internet had only just got started, so the responses came by letter, but we received information and photographs about how people were using the cloth, from as a shawl to as a cloth to hold a baby in. Gift exchange, as described by Marcel Mauss, is where some sort of wealth accumulates and is then given to another tribe. The receiver of this hospitality will always give back somehow. And from this there comes a cycle of wealth going back and forth, of what we might call reciprocity. It is, Mauss says, an economic system of gift-giving. Nakazawa Shinichi then interprets this by bringing in the poet Miyazawa Kenji, and suggesting that the act of writing a poem is also part of gift-giving, and so I then based my essay on the idea that perhaps this can be applied also to works of visual art.

Navin Production Co., Ltd., *Pha Khao Mar on Tour,* 1997
Photo: Ueno Norihiro Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

I attempted a reading of Navin's work through this concept of giving gifts. In the catalogue essay, that's where I ended, though I thought that this concept doesn't stop just there but can also be applied to many artists in Southeast Asia, such as Nunelucio Alvarado, Dadang Christanto, Moelyono, and others whose work is deeply rooted in communities.

There is the artist Montien Boonma, a major figure in contemporary art not only in Thailand but in Southeast Asia in general. He also took part in the exhibition, where we featured his work that hung medicinal herbal beads from the ceiling of a large roof. Assembled entirely in the venue, preparing the work was an ordeal that involved not only the curator responsible but the whole team. Exhibited in that way, the beads were like drops of falling rain. It was a work that seemed wrapped in scent. I felt that this could be interpreted as gift-giving too. That work's title, *House of Hope,* also seemed very symbolic.

Montien Boonma, *House of Hope,* 1996-1997
Photo: Ueno Norihiro　Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

The idea incorporated into the title and subtitle of my catalogue essay, "Glimpses into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be," was to capture and present how artistic approaches are gradually changing. I still can't see the art that "should be," but I had the feeling that it would probably be something new. For this reason, I chose to use that phrase "what art should be."

Indonesia's Moelyono was living in a place called Tulungagung in East Java. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to visit during my trip but his work was included in the exhibition. His work was also featured in "AtopicSite," an exhibition held in Tokyo in 1996 and we could meet in Tokyo. While working in an agricultural village, he undertakes activities deeply connected to regional communities. He made a work closely involved with farmers where the construction of a dam was going to submerge an entire village. Not simply making works of art, he also teaches painting and various things to local children. As someone who thinks his role is to guide a community in a better direction, he reminded me of Miyazawa Kenji. As I wrote in the catalogue essay, I wanted to link up Moelyono somehow with Miyazawa's approaches in how the latter designed fertilizer and taught art, singing, and music to students at an agricultural school, and was originally a very ardent Buddhist. In Moelyono, Dadang, and Montien, I could sense a commonality with the certain kind of morality or ethics that was Miyazawa's stance that the happiness of the whole must come before the happiness of the individual.

Moelyono, *Jeritan Keprihatinan (Screams of Grave Sorrow)*, 1997
Photo: Ueno Norihiro Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

Hattori: Thank you for that.

Especially in the work of Navin, the possibilities of gift-style communication were found in the activities of many Southeast Asian artists in the 1990s, though I think there were also works and activities rooted in similar values during this time outside Southeast Asia. Later, when you were the commissioner for the Japan Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale, you presented the Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project with Miyajima Tatsuo. Two years later, in 2001, the exhibition "The Gift of Hope" was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in a way that eliminated the framework of Southeast Asia. Could we say that it was an exhibition that thematically discovered that hope that was also there in the title of Montien's work—the hope that exists in gift-giving? These two exhibitions seem connected with what you had found in Southeast Asia until 1997, or were achieved through your experiences in the region. Could you please tell me about that?

Shioda: After "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future," I had various opportunities to observe the art scene in Europe and North America, and there was an incredible amount of participatory art or work that turned relationships with others into art. What I was thinking while preparing for the 1999 Venice Biennale was that it was an exhibition held at the point when the 20th century was ending and the 21th century was beginning, and so what was the 20th century? And how will art change in the 21th century? What approaches should it take? In that sense, we gave it the title of "Dove va l'arte?" (Whither the arts?), and I talked with Miyajima Tatsuo and of course we wanted to have one of this LED works but not only that, I felt that the Kaki Tree Project that he had started also offered hints at a new direction for art. I came up with an exhibition structure that combined both of these. The Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project takes saplings from a persimmon tree that survived the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and distributes them for planting around the world.

As such, the upper floor exhibition space of the Japan Pavilion was used for Miyajima's artwork and then among the pilotis under the exhibition gallery, we erected walls and made a space where we showcased the Kaki Tree Project. In the middle there were saplings from the persimmon tree and we introduced the project's activities until then. We also made a space to display messages written by visitors. Since this project is about planting saplings from a persimmon tree that survived Nagasaki, it is also intended to convey an anti-nuclear arms message, and we set up a section for recruiting locations for future saplings. We received a vast number of applications from people who wanted to plant trees. For those planting efforts and as part of the biennale, we planted trees in two locations: on the island of Burano in Venice and in the town of Casciago, in the north of Lombardy. The tree planting ceremony took place in March of the following year, after the biennale exhibition had finished, but I was able to attend as the commissioner.

Thinking about this in terms of gift exchange, the project is giving a gift to the community in the form of planting the sapling from the persimmon tree. The community receives that gift. And the receiver conducts a ceremony in return for the gift, and a festive situation is created. This was held, including those processes, as an important event for the project, and as part of the Japan Pavilion's exhibition at the biennale. Planting trees appealed very much to members of the community, but I tried to rethink the meaning of planting trees, drawing on *The Golden Bough* by the cultural anthropologist Frazer. Though

clearly influenced by Joseph Beuys's oak-planting project, this act of planting a tree seemed to possess something that appeals to us in the contemporary era—planting a tree, giving it water, giving it fertilizer, letting it grow, and watching over it—something underlying a mindset that humans have had since time immemorial.

Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project, Installation View of Japanese Pavilion, The 48th Venice Biennale, 1999
© Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project

After experiencing the processes related to the biennale and seeing various kinds of artworks, I wondered if it might not be possible to hold an exhibition as an extension of this concept of giving gifts. From December 2000 to April 2001, the century-straddling exhibition "The Gift of Hope" was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.

In terms of gifts, there are thematically suitable artists in various places. Though positioning gift-giving prominently, it seemed to need something more, and eventually I arrived at this theme of hope. In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War came to an end, and all kinds of things seemed to be heading in positive directions, but then in 1999, just as the Venice Biennale was taking place, the Kosovo conflict erupted in the chaos following the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the case of Japan, the collapse of the bubble economy had plunged the country

into very difficult circumstances, and it was a time when people were uncertain what the new century would bring. Within these contexts, I wanted to emphasize hope and this is why I chose the concept of giving a "gift of hope."

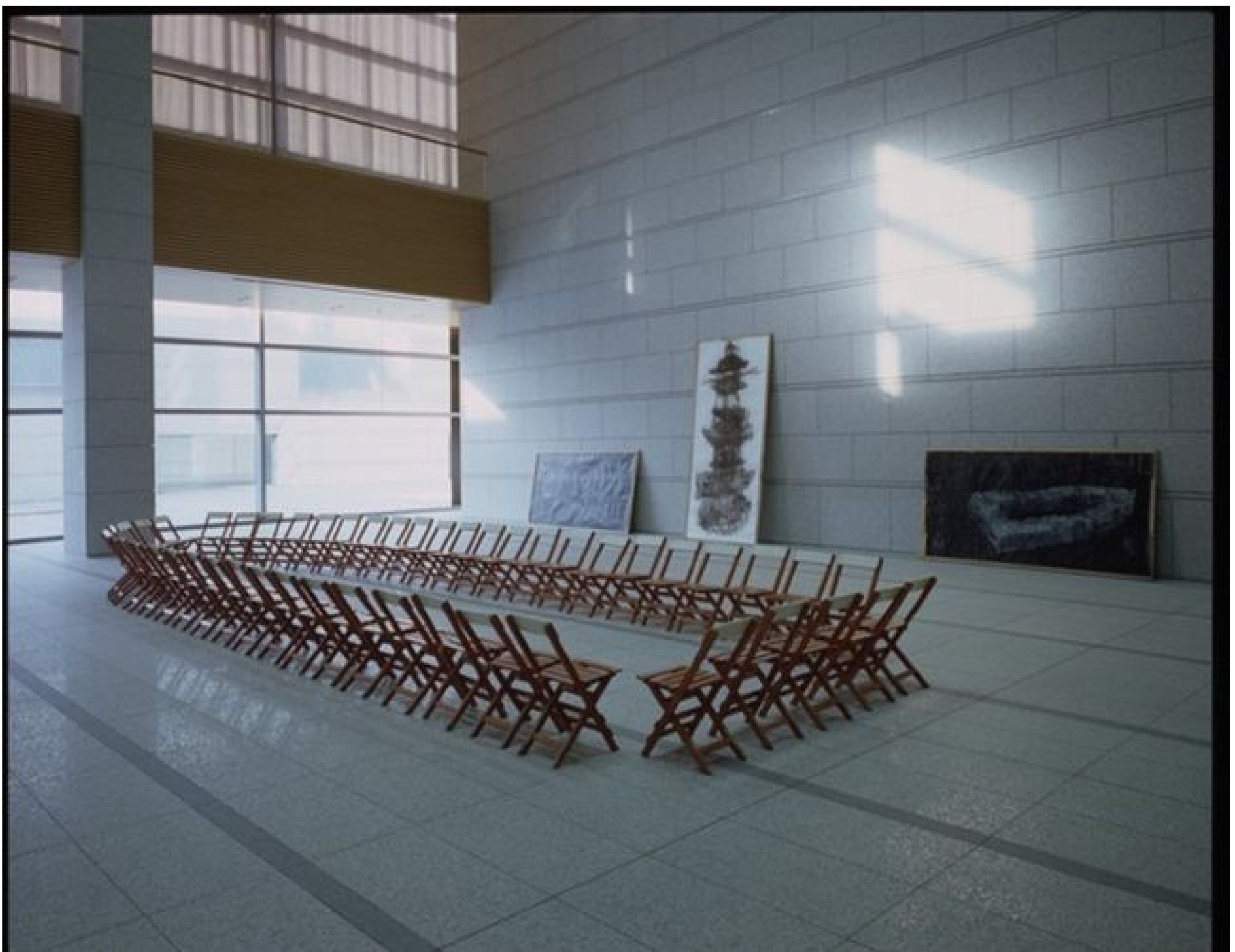
That said, artworks that took the concrete form of gift-giving like Navin's *pha khao mar* were few and far between. There was a project by the Thai artist Surasi Kusolwong in which he brought Thai items into the venue, built a kind of tower, and then visitors could use a stick to hook one of the things hanging there and take it home with them, but that was about the only act that involved actually moving things or what we could call the act of giving gifts.

Surasi Kusolwong, *Free-For-All (Tokyo),* 2000
Photo: 5x7 Studio Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

There was also a somewhat absurdist project by SHIMABUKU (Shimabuku Michihiro) in which an octopus was given the gift of a sightseeing tour of Tokyo.

More broadly, we can define a kind of spirit that captures the concept of giving gifts. I selected works that encapsulated, for instance some sort of hopeful

expectation of the future, the expectation of wanting the new era to turn in a good direction. For example, the work of Kcho in the exhibition was an incredibly simple one in which fifty-five chairs were arranged in the shape of a boat. Boats have a very special significance for the Cuban artist Kcho. Though separated by a few hundred kilometers of sea water, Florida and Cuba have existed since the Cuban Revolution in a state of isolation from one another and under totally different systems of, respectively, capitalism and communism. Florida is home to many Cuban exiles who entrusted their lives to boats when they fled. A boat connects things by crossing the sea; it is a testament to hope. By arranging chairs in the shape of a boat, I think Kcho conceived his work as a way to create an opportunity for perfect strangers to sit down and conversations to start.



Kcho, *I know what I am thinking what I am drawing.* 1999
Photo: 5x7 Studio　Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

In the end, twelve artists exhibited a wide range of works. Lee Mingwei, for instance, conceived the highly primitive tool that is a letter as a tool for connecting hope. At a booth in the exhibition space, visitors were asked to write a message to someone close to them, and if they wanted it to be sent to the

person, they could include the name and address. The museum then posted the letter on their behalf. If they didn't want it posted, they could leave the letter in the booth for other visitors to read. It was, in this way, a project made by hand.

Yanobe Kenji had previously made an artwork in which he conducted a careful on-site survey at Chernobyl while wearing protective clothing he called an "atom suit." For the exhibition, he created hundreds of miniature versions of himself in the suit and set up a Geiger counter that detected the radiation in the air.

The overall structure of the exhibition was intended in this way to convey a sense of overcoming desperate circumstances and taking hope.

Yanobe Kenji, *Atom Suits Project (Antenna of the Earth)*, 2000
Photo: 5x7 Studio Courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

Hattori: If anything, Yanobe's work almost paradoxically presents a longing for hope. On the other hand, there were artists like SHIMABUKU, who demonstrated a more critical attitude toward gift-giving that seems one-sided, or even like

misplaced kindness, meaning gift-giving and its hope were explored from various directions.

Shioda: Yes, SHIMABUKU was—how shall I put it?—a bit of a handful! [*Laughs*]

From the organizers' perspective, the notion of "gift of hope" was, in a way, optimistic. But he interpreted it in his own style. He even proposed one idea where he would charter a plane and fly over Tokyo, drawing a picture in the sky. In Tokyo, it would be very difficult to get permission to do this. Since that was not very realistic, his next idea was to give a gift of a Tokyo sightseeing tour to an octopus.

It was a gift, but also a nuisance. It was thus very ironic and full of humor. We really did transport an octopus from Akashi, take it to Tsukiji Market in Tokyo, and bring it face to face with a Tokyo octopus. An artistic practice that seemed to dislocate the concept of a gift of hope by this kind of rereading of it actually, I think, broadened the scope of the exhibition. Though we rhapsodized about hope in 2001, the reality was that about six months later came 9/11, and ten years later, in 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake.

In the end, it was perhaps mere optimism but the very fact that it was belied by reality is the reality of life and, in that sense, I am glad we could accomplish this kind of exhibition in that period of time between 2000 and 2001.

Hattori: From what you shared, it is clear that your experiences and practices in Southeast Asia in the 1990s are connected to the subsequent endeavors throughout the first half of the 2000s. Thank you for talking to us today.

Related Keywords

Art in Southeast Asia 1997 : Glimpses into the Future