

types to advance their ideas of the modern. The ideological bent of this type of exhibition mirrored the political and cultural polarization caused by the Cold War that divided the world into the capitalist-democratic and the communist blocs. The ideologically-based exhibition as a new exhibitionary mode quickly became an important vehicle adopted by avant-garde artists who saw themselves as part of the broader avant-garde movement internationally. Their avant-gardism allied with notions of freedom, creativity, individualism, and a detachment from politics, striving for "art for art's sake" exemplified by American Abstract Expressionism.<sup>11</sup>

Early modes of exhibitions in Southeast Asia in the 1950s was dominated by Salon exhibitions modeled after the French Salon de Paris that was initially organized by an art academy, the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1725, and later by a fine art society, the Société des Artistes Français from 1881 onwards. John Clark's study of Salon-type exhibitions in Calcutta and Tokyo forms the basis in which comparative studies can be done in the history of exhibitions understood within the rubric of networked artworlds that involved the art market, exhibitions, and discourse that determined how art was received, legitimized and understood in Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> Other Salon-type national art exhibitions include the "National Exhibition of Art" organized primarily for art students from the Silpakorn University and Pochang to showcase their talents, and the 1959–1964 annual "Spring Painting Awards" organized by the Department of Culture in Saigon.<sup>13</sup>

The shift from Salon-type exhibitions to the new ideologically-based exhibitions that promoted specific styles and ideologies began in the 1950s and '60s across Southeast Asia. Solo exhibitions that propel "avant-garde" styles like Cubism and abstraction were mounted by individual artists like Ta Ty who is described by the late art historian, Boitran Huynh-Beattie, as being committed to "Cubism for a brief period of time before venturing into abstract art."<sup>14</sup> In the Philippines, the "First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in the Philippines" in 1953 featured non-representational works that included cubistic-semi-abstract and symbolist paintings. This exhibition marked the emergence of exhibitions based on propagating styles conceived as "non-objective"<sup>15</sup> that went against the dominance of the Amorsolo School featuring realist and idealized landscape and figure-types that embody the imagined Philippines. The ideologically-based exhibition as a new

exhibitionary mode produced exhibitionary discourses that were different from the Salon exhibition that previously dominated exhibitions in Southeast Asia. Salon exhibitions rarely produced any critical exhibitionary discourse beyond the official and salutary foreword. In contrast, ideologically-based exhibitions produced a new form of exhibitionary discourse that is rhetorical and polemical. These characteristics of the ideologically-based exhibitions often coalesce as art manifestos that form a critical part of exhibitionary discourse which in turn "becomes a document of alterity where a stance is shared and partisanship elicited."<sup>16</sup>

The critical exhibition emerged in the 1970s. As a new mode of exhibition, it transformed exhibitions into a vehicle of dissent to directly engage with the public sphere which had united through shared causes by rebelling against social injustices, struggles against American neo-imperialism, and resistance against oppression. Critical exhibitions deploy exhibitionary discourses as a vehicle to critically engage and shape new public spheres as a force for activism through collectivism. This new exhibitionary mode called for a socially engaged form of conceptualism to produce knowledge from multiple frames of reference and theories from the marginalized: class, traditional art forms, and local knowledge could be framed as an active agent in the process of decolonization and deimperialization in Southeast Asia, a process that was also occurring concurrently in other art forms such as literature, as shown in Chen Kuan-hsing's book, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of both the ideologically-based and critical exhibitions as new exhibitionary types did not occur in an art historical vacuum in Southeast Asia. The ideologically-based exhibition marked a shift away from the Salon exhibition as the dominant exhibitionary type in the 1950s. The 1970s witnessed the birth of the critical exhibition that challenged the ideologically-based exhibitions by contesting the notions of the "new" and the "real."

The Search for the New: What is the Modern?

The MAS burst onto the Singapore art world, anointing itself as the harbinger of the "new." But what aesthetic ideal was the MAS championing as the "new"? The foreword in the 1969 MAS exhibition explains: "the main concerns of modern artists are the beauty of form, harmony of rhythm and creativity."<sup>18</sup> Form was defined as "living lines, breathing strokes, unique structures, or moving colors."

<sup>11</sup> See Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (2nd ed.), Francis Frascina, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 147–154; Serge Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-garde in America," *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (2nd ed.), pp. 197–210.

<sup>12</sup> John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Fine Arts Press, 1998), pp. 175–190.

<sup>13</sup> Boitran Huynh-Beattie, "Saigonese Art during the War: Modernity versus Ideology," *Cultures at War: The Cold War and the Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem eds. (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010), p. 96.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Flores, "The Demands of Abstraction: Exhibiting the Non-Objective in Manila in 1953," unpublished conference paper presented at the ST PAUL St Gallery 2013 Curatorial Symposium: From a History of Exhibitions Towards a Future of Exhibition Making, The ST PAUL St Gallery, August 7–9, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Flores, "First Person Plural: Manifestos in the Seventies in Southeast Asia," *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Hans Belting et al. eds. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Chen Kuan-hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Author unknown, "Foreword," *Modern Art Society*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Modern Art Society, 1969), unpaginated.

“Beauty could be attained by the arrangement and composition of the elements of form (space, rhythm, harmony, line and colors).”<sup>109</sup> With its proclaimed universality, “modern art is therefore an effective and essential means to promote better understanding amongst the various countries of the world.”<sup>110</sup> The MAS’s exhibitions broke away from the Salon exhibitions organized by art societies and art academies. It introduced the exhibitionary strategy of the manifesto that propagated “new” modern styles—abstraction and Abstract Expressionism—that connected with the avant-garde modern art movement worldwide. Unlike the Salon exhibitions which only sought to promote artworks to establish the artists’ statuses, the ideologically-based exhibitions advanced specific styles and ideas rather than a particular medium such as watercolor, and Chinese ink paintings.

The MAS was not alone in its vision of a global avant-garde modernist movement of which they are part of. The Hoi Hoa Si Tre Saigon (SSYA; Society of Saigonese Young Artists) formed in the 1960s was identified by Boitran as artists who “ventured into styles more Symbolist and Expressionist than narrative. One distinctive trait they all shared was a commitment to being apolitical, which meant that typical Cold War politics, pitting the North against South, or Russia against the United States were excluded from their art.”<sup>111</sup> Their manifesto declared their position as modern artists to “follow modern art movements closest to the tendencies that reside in the hearts of our Vietnamese audience... Bring a positive atmosphere to criticism, and exclude hypocritical diplomacy.”<sup>112</sup> Their manifesto aligned themselves with modern art that was apolitical and their works explored styles associated with the avant-garde movements in Euro-America. Like the MAS, Sang Tao conceived of the “new” as having the following urges: a break with academic styles which were promoted by the art academies, the desire to connect with the global avant-garde modern art movements based on formalism, and to “make it all happen in an unprecedented record time” in order to convey a sense of urgency in catching up with the rest of the world.<sup>113</sup>

In the Philippines, the call of the avant-garde came in the 1953 “First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in the Philippines (FENOAP)” dedicated with the words “to the avant-garde artists of this country who have endured untold sacrifices and cruel criticisms that Art in Tagala might move forward to greater horizons” printed in the exhibition’s booklet.<sup>114</sup> A booklet on the exhibition, which included an

essay by Aurelio Alvero (he wrote by the pseudonym, Magtanggul Asa), was published in 1954, where, by tracing the history of Tagalan art to the European modernist avant-garde, the idea of Non-Objective art was cast as the culmination of the leftward trend:

Impressionism painted what existed in the eye. Expressionism, however, painted what was in the mind’s eye. This painting of things that existed in the mind’s eye, irrespective of the actual physical, or visual nature of the objects, was to reach its culmination in non-objectivism.<sup>115</sup>

Alvero expands on the notion of Non-Objective art advanced by this exhibition, stating that the trend from the objective relied on the “faithfulness of the object being reproduced” to the sense of the non-objective or the subjective, “more popularly known as modern art.”<sup>116</sup> He continues, “in this new trend, the artist did away from the external object. He went into the internal, which to him was more valuable. He fragmentalized his subject and finally reassembled the fragments into a composition that completely eliminated recognizable representation.”<sup>117</sup>

Modern art led by the avant-garde who saw affiliations with their compatriots in Euro-America as a global, internationalist, and universal movement that propelled avant-garde styles based on formalism, and non-objective art that depoliticized art was not alone in defining the notion of the “avant-garde.” Other competing notions of the avant-garde and even detractors from the tradition of the Euro-American notion of the avant-garde vied to claim the status of the “new” and the “modern” in Southeast Asia through exhibitions. These exhibitions which I call “critical exhibitions” adopted a critical approach to the “modern” and the “new” by opening their scope to include alternative ways of thinking and making art that departed from Western-centric approaches and practices. These alternative notions of the avant-garde sought new trajectories away from the avant-garde movement in Euro-America. The critical exhibition as a new mode of exhibition contributed to the decolonization process in Southeast Asia in the domains of culture, knowledge production, and a politicized mentality or psyche that shifted towards the region, local contexts, and social conditions which functioned as the basis in which new perspectives, practices, and thinking could be produced.

Two critical exhibitions that adopted this approach in Southeast Asia come to the fore:

<sup>109</sup>

Author unknown, “Foreword,” *Modern Art Society*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Modern Art Society, 1971), unpaginated.

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<sup>110</sup>

Author unknown, “Foreword,” *Modern Art Society*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Modern Art Society, 1965), unpaginated.

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<sup>111</sup>

Boitran, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

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<sup>112</sup>

Manifesto of the Society of Saigonese Young Artists, November 10, 1973.

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<sup>113</sup>

Boitran, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

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<sup>114</sup>

Magtanggul Asa, *First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in Tagala*, exh. cat. (Manila: House of Asa, 1954), p. iii.

This exhibition featured 28 paintings by artists including Fernando Zobel, Hernando R. Ocampo, Nena Saguil, L. Locsin, Fidel de Castro, Jose Joya, Conrado V. Pedroche, Lee Aguinaldo, Carl Steele, Vic Otezaya, and Manuel Rodriguez among others.

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<sup>115</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 5.

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<sup>116</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 2.

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<sup>117</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 5.

"Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa (TMR)" and the "Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement)":

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It seems necessary from the inset to state that we are MODERN artists and as such, we are not involved in traditional Asian art forms. We are however borrowing from Asian philosophies in order to come up with an attitude which we hope will help enrich the international modern art movement which needs to be considered in global terms... WE ARE HOWEVER ATTEMPTING TO WORK OUTSIDE THE WESTERN-CENTRIC ATTITUDE TOWARDS FORM. WE ARE TRYING TO SOW THE SEEDS FOR A THINKING PROCESS WHICH MIGHT SOMEDAY LIBERATE MALAYSIAN ARTISTS FROM, THEIR DEPENDENCE OF WESTERN INFLUENCES [emphasis as in the original].<sup>18</sup>

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Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa's manifesto in the TMR exhibition catalogue claims the status of the modern in block letters as a rhetorical device, similar to the claim and exhibitionary strategy deployed by the MAS exhibition catalogues from 1964 and '65, using block letter text as part of the graphic design of the catalogue to lend weight and importance to their words. Although TMR adopted the exhibitionary strategies of the manifesto from the avant-garde ideologically-based exhibitions, both Piyadasa and Esa were critical of the "Western-centric influence" of the avant-garde on modern art and Malaysian artists who were circumscribed by form that derived from subjectivity and perceptual senses.

The TMR's rejection of that which was perceived as "avant-garde" artists of the New Scene, who were motivated by style, departed from ideologically-based exhibitions of the avant-garde in their concept of the "new." Instead, TMR thrust the idea of conceptual and intellectual considerations as the basis from which the "new" could be prospected. "THAT ART IS BECOMING A VERY DIALECTICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ACTIVITY TODAY IS INDICATIVE OF A NEW STATE OF AFFAIRS WHICH SUPPOSEDLY 'MODERN' ASIAN ARTISTS ARE YET TO BECOME AWARE OF!" [emphasis as in the original].<sup>19</sup> The conceptual, rather than the form, is the wellspring from which the "new" and the "modern" emerged. "WHEREAS THE WESTERN ARTIST APPROACHES ART IN TERMS OF 'SPATIO-TEMPORAL/SENSORIAL' CONSIDERATIONS, WE ARE APPROACHING ART FROM A

'MENTAL/MEDITATIVE/MYSTICAL' STANDPOINT."<sup>20</sup> TMR has effectively rejected perceptualism based on the human senses and formalistically transmuted abstracted forms that MAS, FENOAP, and the SSYA exhibitions saw as a Euro-American obsession which is antithetical to Asian sensibilities.

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The conceptual as "new" began to emerge in the exhibitionary discourse of critical exhibitions in the 1970s. The 1974 MAS exhibition catalogue featured an extracted essay from Cheo Chai-hiang's article in a Chinese newspaper.<sup>21</sup> This foreword introduced the idea of how "contemporary art has in fact reached a point when artists are prepared to adopt anything as a medium to work with. What is important is not the execution of an artwork but the idea behind it... Similarly, the 'non-art' attitude in art itself has become a new notion, a new concept of contemporary art."<sup>22</sup> Art as an expanded field into art concepts rather than technique, proposed by Cheo in the 1974 MAS exhibition catalogue, marked an openness of MAS's ideologically-based exhibitions to the conceptual. Critical exhibitions advancing the conceptual as the "new" did not start or end in Singapore as flares of the conceptual occurred throughout Southeast Asia in the 1970s.

The Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB) in Indonesia came into being when artists from Bandung, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta met to further the ideas of the Black December movement. The GSRB was born in 1975, led by student-artists propelled by a surge in student activism to challenge the authority of the conservative art academy with the manifesto, *Lima jurus gerbrakan Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (The Five Lines of Attack). This manifesto called for the expansion of art into new forms beyond fine art, to include the "diverse aesthetic values of traditional and ethnic art forms," liberating art from "elitist attitudes" and rejecting the universality of art.<sup>23</sup>

The GSRB's attack on "elitist attitudes" targeted the avant-gardist narrow conception of art as "fine art" that excluded other definitions of art, aesthetic values, and philosophies embedded in traditional art forms such as those the TMR drew from Taoist and Zen philosophies. Like TMR, the GSRB represented a counter to the Western-centric avant-garde and sought to break rigid artistic categories and hierarchies that excluded "new art forms" which do not fall into the categories of fine art taught at art academies such as *Academie Seni Rupa Indonesia* (ASRI; Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts) in Yogyakarta. Both TMR and GSRB

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Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, "Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa," reprinted in *Narratives in Malaysian Art—Volume 2: Reactions—New Critical Strategies*, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong, and T.K. Sabapathy, eds. (Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art, 2013), p. 31–54.

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*Ibid.*, p. 39.

20

*Ibid.*, p. 50.

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Cheo Chai-hiang, "Foreword," *Modern Art Society*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Modern Art Society, 1974), unpaginated.

22

*Ibid.*

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For an English translation of the Five Lines of Attack, refer to Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art Since 1966* (Adelaide: Flinders University of South Australia, 1991), pp. 25–26.

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Manifesto of The Artists' Front of Thailand, 1975

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Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 164.

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Ibid., p. 165.

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Flores, "First Person Plural: Manifestos in the Seventies in Southeast Asia," *op. cit.*, pp. 224–71.

privileged concept over technique by elevating intellectual engagement, or a critical attitude and approach to rethink art making, its practices, and exhibitions that display art. The ideologically-based exhibitions, which were previously dominated by the avant-garde, were challenged by critical exhibitions that were based on conceptualism rather than a narrow formalism that were based on the avant-garde movement in Euro-America.

The challenge spearheaded by TMR and GSRB, as well as individual artists like Cheo, widened the scope of art by offering exhibitionary sites of resistance against the Western-centric avant-garde exhibitions that propagated the Euro-American avant-garde with their imagination of a shared global, and universal, avant-garde. Instead, alternative ideas based on Asian philosophies and aesthetic values from traditional art forms—which multiplied frames of references to self-reflexively include theories, philosophies, and practices from Asia, Southeast Asia, and local cultural resources—provided alternative well-springs from which the “new” in Southeast Asia could emerge. It was, however, in the contested idea of the “real” advanced by the critical exhibition, propelling the process of decolonization, that offered an even more compelling challenge to the Western avant-garde-driven ideologically-based exhibitions.

#### The Real Challenge: The National, Social, and Colonial

The “real” quickly became the battle cry for artists who organized critical exhibitions. They proclaimed the “real” as their conceptual weapon to engage in social, institutional, and political critique to give real effect to social changes that avant-garde artists appeared to be detached from. It was from the feelings of discontent—swelling from social, political, and economic injustices suffered by the common person, the working class, and the disenfranchised—that critical exhibitions were organized by the Artists' Front of Thailand (TART), Kaisahan, and GSRB. These artist collectives adopted a critical approach in exposing the “real” conditions in their countries for social and political change.

TART was established in 1974 and they too published a manifesto in 1975 outlining their aim to oppose art produced for capitalist and imperialist consumption. They adopted strategies of institutional critique against the institutional structures of the state:

We, who are not satisfied with what the

“big people” have done and we, who are conscious of the priceless Thai culture art's conservation, innovation, and development for the “little people”, then organize ourselves into *The Artists' Front of Thailand*. Our mission is to conserve, innovate, and develop Thai culture art and make it serve all Thai people in the correct ways it should.<sup>24</sup>

TART's first exhibition took place on October 1974. Like the GSRB, TART was driven by broader student activism against military dictatorship of Thanon Kittakachorn, the Prime Minister of Thailand supported by General Praphat. TART adopted the new exhibitionary strategy of breaking out of the usual gallery spaces, inhibited by avant-garde exhibitions at the Rajadamnern Avenue, to commemorate the anniversary of the Thai military's fall from government in October 1973.<sup>25</sup> In 1976, TART organized a critical exhibition of paintings and billboards as a protest against the American military bases in Thailand due to the Vietnam War. This resulted in an eventual military crackdown and the arrest and killing of protestors.<sup>26</sup> By intervening into public spaces, TART resisted being subsumed by capitalism and used the terrain of art as a counter-hegemonic force. The anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist aims of TART that directly engaged with the public through critical exhibitions in public spaces redefined the role of the artist as an activist to produce art for the people to incite social change.

Like TART, the Kaisahan sought to manifest the realities of the Philippine condition against American neo-imperialism and capitalism. For the Kaisahan, “this means, first of all, that we must break away from the Western-oriented culture that tends to maintain the Filipino people's dependence on foreign goods, foreign tastes and foreign ways that are incompatible with their genuine national interests.”<sup>27</sup> Like TART and GSRB, the Kaisahan was also part of the broader radicalization of student movements in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. The insistence on departing from being Western-oriented and slavishly imitating the West merged into one voice in TART, with its aims to preserve Thai culture, and TMR that called for Asian mystical ways of thinking about and making art. TMR clearly insisted that:

WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO SUGGEST  
QUITE SIMPLY IS THAT THE SCIENTIFIC  
AND EMPIRICAL VIEWPOINT OF  
REALITY IS NOT THE ONLY VALID ONE

THERE IS. THE MYSTIC'S VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE IS ALSO VALID FOR THE MANY PARALLELISM THAT ARE BECOMING APPARENT TODAY.<sup>28</sup>

The real for the TMR was one of multiple mental realities that departed from the hegemonic rational and empirical view that forms the basis of perceptualism derived from our human senses alone. The GSRB's manifesto whereby the "universality of art was rejected, implying that Indonesian art cannot be studied from imported foreign books" effectively undermines knowledge dominated by the West for local understanding and interpretations to emerge as the dominant form of knowledge. Collectively, TMR, TART, GSRB, and the Kaisahan adopted critical approaches to question the institutional, economic, political, and mental structures that are based on Western systems of knowledge through the exhibitionary discourses propelled by critical exhibitions. These critical exhibitions collectively sought to decolonize the minds of emerging public spheres within the context of Southeast Asia during a period of decolonization that increasingly rebelled against American neo-imperialism as seen in the Vietnam War, and the American bombing of Laos and Cambodia. More importantly, these critical exhibitions that challenged avant-gardist claims to internationalism advanced the critical tradition of leftist thought as an alternative framework to address the historical question of colonialism in the process of decolonization.

Critical exhibitions that adopted a critical approach based on social and political engagement with the "real" were on firmer ground in articulating their vision of the "national" by expanding their frames of reference to the marginalized working classes and traditional cultural forms rooted in the actual, social, and cultural experiences of the people who live in the specific region. The Kaisahan firmly entrenched their aims to commit themselves in "the search for a national identity in Philippine Art."<sup>29</sup> Like the Kaisahan, TART was clear in that art was to serve the common people and that any national art form had to emerge from traditional Thai cultural forms. Both the Kaisahan and TART shared a common ideological connection with Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, stating that art must serve the people and the revolutionary cause, leading them towards a "national" that required art to incite social and political revolutionary change. The desire to politicize these ideologically-based exhibitions

as an act of political resistance and engagement differed from the avant-garde exhibitions that propagated formalism.

### Conclusion

This paper has mapped an exhibitionary history of Southeast Asia with multiple entry points by illustrating that competing notions of the avant-garde was primarily contested in the "new" and the "real;" the former by those who aligned themselves with the avant-garde movements in the West, and the latter by those who forged a new path for the "avant-garde" that multiplied frames of references by expanding what art could be, and also being socially engaged in the self-reflexive process of decolonization in the region. This paper has shown that the notion of the "avant-garde" itself was contested by ideologically-based and critical exhibitions as new exhibitionary modes. Critical exhibitions organized by TART, the Kaisahan, Gangaw Village Art Group (GVAG), and TMR expanded the scope of what art could be in which the Euro-American notion became just one of the multiple frames of references from which artists in Southeast Asia could draw from and power the process of decolonization in the region. The exhibitionary discourses of critical exhibitions made visible the significance of local contexts as crucial determinants in the role of art and artists as vehicles for dissent or exemplariness of universal formalist ideals. At stake was the scope of what art could be as a vehicle of decolonization for the purpose of rediscovering diverse forms of modernities by including alternative forms of knowledge production located in real and concrete local practices and experiences. The emergence of critical exhibitions across Southeast Asia becomes a mediating site for confronting and making visible the existence of alternatives that can be harnessed for the process of decolonization in the socio-political order circumscribed by the Cold War. The political theorist, Chantal Mouffe describes, "critical dimension consists in making what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of existing hegemony."<sup>30</sup>

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Nur Hanim Khairudin, Beverly Yong, and T.K. Sabapathy, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup>

Flores, "Social Realism: the Turns of a Term in the Philippines," *Afterall Journal*, Issue 34 (Autumn/Winter, 2013).  
► <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.34/social-realism-the-turns-of-a-term-in-the-philippines> (Accessed January, 2015)

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Chantal Mouffe, *Agnostics: Thinking the World Politically* (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 91.

# Magpie Modernity in Thai Art

Prapon Kumjim

Head of the Art Center, Center of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University

The title, “Magpie Modernity in Thai Art,” is intended to reference a sense of eclecticism by means of hoarding a range of domestic and international cultural influences which, at initial glance, may seem indiscriminate, but, given the complex historical background, the amalgamation of diverse influences may suggest an alternative narrative to how we may improve our current understanding of contemporary Thai cultural sensibilities. This paper aims to introduce several of my personal observations that intersect aspects of cultural rebellion in Thailand between the 1960s and ’80s. It is by no means an attempt to summarize a historical overview of Thai art during that era. The term “rebellion” itself can be somewhat problematic as to the general consensus of what exactly is considered as resistance to one’s government or ruler or defiance of any authority, control, or tradition. In order to avoid making awful summaries on what has already been mentioned in many articles and books about modern art in Thailand, I have chosen to limit my discussion to be based around only seven artists. My seven artists have been divided into three genres. Chalood Nimsamer (1929–), Thawan Duchanee (1939–2014), and Chavalit Soemprungsuk (1939–) will represent the first genre which I will call “Post-Bhirasri,” in reference to the era after Professor Silpa Bhirasri. The second genre will discuss Chang Se Tang, also known as Chang Tang (1934–90) and Pratuang Emjaroen (1935–) which I will call “Institutional Outsiders.” The third genre will discuss early works during the mid-1980s by Apinan Poshyananda (1956–) and Kamol Phaosavasdi (1958–) which I will call “Postmodernists.”

My rationale for separating the three

genres is based on notions of cultural rebellion and not necessarily about any particular timelines. Chalood, Thawan, and Chavalit are still very much alive and active today, so I believe that the socio-political turbulence in Thailand since the 1960s have verified their professional careers as senior artists. Cultural rebellion in this context can also be seen as defiance against notions of retirement or artistic expiration. The genre of “Institutional Outsiders” refers to influential artists from outside dominant institutions. Thirdly the genre of “Postmodernists” refers to the global phenomena that challenges the acceptance of modernism.

## Introduction to Thailand

The Thai kingdom was established in the mid-14th century. Known as Siam until 1939, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been taken over by a European power. The Siamese Revolution in 1932 was a bloodless transition (also known as *coup d’état*) and was led by several key members of the military who had changed the Kingdom toward a constitutional monarchy.

Even though Thailand was never colonized by any Western countries, we cannot overlook the symbolism that colonialization had for Thailand as the colonialization of Southeast Asia reverberated through the entire region. Southeast Asian regional concerns impacted Thailand especially during the 1940s as the country moved towards political, cultural, and technological modernization. Since the late 19th century, several generations of privileged Thai nationals have been educated overseas and have returned to

Thailand or have migrated to Europe, North America, and, more recently, Australia. This history explains a long tradition of elitist Thai-Western international networks that have existed for several generations. I am particularly interested in the shaping of contemporary Thai identity and the semi-colonial status that uniquely positioned Thailand within Southeast Asia.

The British expatriate art critic, Steven Pettifor who moved to Bangkok in 1992, referred to the Kingdom of Thailand as a fiercely proud and independent nation. In *Flavours: Thai Contemporary Art*,<sup>11</sup> Pettifor discussed how Thailand managed to retain self-rule in a turbulent region which witnessed the might of European colonialism in the neighboring Southeast Asian region.

In the 19th Century, Siam waged a delicate game of diplomacy, holding several Western states at bay, while Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines were divided up by European overlords.<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand contemporary Thai culture from a historical context, I turn to Asian cultural theorist Peter A. Jackson who has explained in "The Thai Regime of Images"<sup>13</sup> that in the 19th century, under the threat of colonization, Siamese elites began a process of "civilizing" the appearance of the state and its population. This was done by systematic propaganda and enforced by the military and police. This entailed reshaping public displays of Thai civilization for foreign consumption through dress, public behaviour and manners, but interestingly did not reshape the inner lives or traditional values of the people. Jackson and Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul both agree that the 19th century regional colonial encounter with the West facilitated the emergence of a "regime of images"<sup>14</sup> initiated by the Thai monarchy to convey to potential colonizers Siam's high level of cultural achievement and its capacity for self-rule. As a result of this, Thai-ness as a form of hegemony emerged in tandem with projects of modernization and nationalism, both of which followed the overthrow of Absolute Monarchy — where the king had absolute power to freely rule the Kingdom until 1932, when the coup d'état military-takeover had peacefully ended the 150-year reign by the Royal House of Chakri (since 1782).

Cultural rebellion can be seen in the Thai 2004 musical-drama film *The Overture* (or *Hom rong*) directed by Ittisootorn Vichailak. It presents a fictionalized account based on the life story of a Thai palace classical musician, between late 19th century through to

the 1940s. The film was the winner of several awards in Thailand.

Military dictatorships had dominated Thai politics since the overthrow of Absolute Monarchy in 1932 through to 1973. Interestingly, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who staged another coup in 1957, thereafter served as Thailand's Prime Minister and had reintroduced the public role of the monarchy to be at the heart of the nation. King Bhumibol was seen attending public ceremonies, toured overseas as well as the provinces and patronized development projects. Under Sarit's dictatorship, the ancient practice of crawling in front of royalty during audiences, banned by King Chulalongkorn, was revived in certain situations. King Bhumibol's birthdate (December 5) in 1960 was declared the National Day, replacing the previous National Day, the anniversary of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 (June 24).

The Australian political scientist Michael Kelly Connors has observed that Thai military dictatorships from Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram's rule from 1938–1957 through to Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn's ending of his dictatorship in 1973 had a significant impact on representations of Thai identity.<sup>15</sup> Some traditional Thai folk music and some traditional dress were prohibited during dictatorship rule. The need for Thailand to be seen as "modernized" in the Western sense became a threat to national security. In the early 1970s, the Thai government feared regional communism in Vietnam and Cambodia and right-wing anti-communist propaganda became heavily enforced as the national Thai identity of that period. The ideology from this era of nationalist propaganda promoted anti-communism. The suppression of individuality remains arguably visible in contemporary teachings of art in Thai schools.

Nidhi Eoseewong, an influential Thai historian, recently wrote on the subject of "Understanding the Cultural Constitution": "in old Thai culture, power is unified and indivisible. Even the power of a god and the power of a king are one and the same because the king is an incarnation of god. The concept of a division of powers—legislative, executive, and judicial—and balance among them is a Western idea."<sup>16</sup> This notion of old Thai culture remains an integral part of contemporary Thai culture and to comprehend Thai modernity would be to tactfully navigate between the invisible lines that separate the old and new culture.

Confrontational works by the Australian educated Thongchai Winichakul who published "Toppling Democracy" in *The Journal of*

<sup>11</sup> Steven Pettifor, *Flavours: Thai Contemporary Art* (Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Peter A. Jackson, "The Thai Regime of Images," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19 No. 2 (October 2004), pp. 181–218.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Kelly Connors, "Thailand: The Facts and Frictions of Ruling," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), pp. 365–384.

<sup>16</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, "Understanding the Cultural Constitution," *Bangkok Post* (August 13, 2014).  
► <http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/426370/understanding-the-cultural-constitution> (Accessed January, 2015)

<sup>17</sup>

Thongchai Winichakul, "Toppling Democracy," *The Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 38 Issue 1, 2008 (published online: November 23, 2007), pp. 11–37.

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<sup>18</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>20</sup> Ambika Ahuja, "Leader inflames Thailand with remarks," *New York Times*, December 4, 2008.

► [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/world/asia/24iht-thai.1.10331686.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/world/asia/24iht-thai.1.10331686.html?_r=0)

(Accessed January, 2015)

*Contemporary Asia*,<sup>17</sup> and the British educated Thai cultural critic Sulak Sivaraksa have been highly influential to international discourse about Thai cultural politics. Thongchai's book *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*<sup>18</sup> argued a case for reassessing the history of 19th century Siam against the previous cultural misinterpretation of the country by neighboring French and British colonizers. Thongchai claimed that the Siamese were not just passive bystanders who provided a buffer state between the British and the French. In addition, Thongchai has convincingly argued against historical theories that the Siamese were as much a player of Southeast Asian colonialization as the Western colonialists.

In 1965, Thailand became an ally of the United States. The Thai-U.S. relationship was strengthened during the Vietnam War which began in 1965 and finished in 1975 when the Americans retreated from Vietnam. The threat of expanding communism within the Southeast Asian region was seen not only as an immediate threat to the borders of Thailand, but also a threat to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> By that time, fanatically anti-communist propaganda had already taken root within popular Thai culture. Not long after the end of the Vietnam War, Thailand witnessed the massacre of October 6, 1976. This was a violent crackdown by the state on leftist students and protestors that occurred in the grounds of Thammasat University (Bangkok) and on Sanam Luang (a name which literally translates as "Royal Ceremonial Grounds") in the historical heart of Bangkok. The newspaper *International Herald Tribune* (February 24, 2008) published the official record of the massacre issued by the Thai government which stated that 46 people were killed and hundreds more were wounded. Conflicting reports by several human rights groups and eyewitnesses suggested the death toll to have been in the hundreds.<sup>20</sup>

#### Art Education

Pohchang Academy of Arts, established in 1913, was the first art training establishment in Siam but in terms of modern art in Thailand, it is without doubt that Professor Silpa Bhirasri's legacy dominates the art scene in Thailand; born Corrado Feroci (1892–1962), he was an Italian sculptor who worked mainly in Thailand.<sup>21</sup> He is widely considered the father of modern art in Thailand. Feroci was initially invited to Thailand to teach Western sculpture at the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Palace Affairs in 1923. Twenty years

later in 1943, he founded what later became Silpakorn University (the leading art university). Feroci became a Thai national in 1944 and changed his name to Silpa Bhirasri. He was the designer and sculptor for many of Bangkok's best known landmarks, including the Democracy Monument, Victory Monument, and the statue of King Rama I. His birthdate, September 15, is observed each year in Thailand as Silpa Bhirasri Day which is celebrated across most art universities in Thailand.

The unearthly and almost supernatural legacy of Professor Silpa Bhirasri is something that may appear on par with the status of demigods or guru in the Hindu sense as we can see his shrine and images worshipped as amulets that are worn by many artists and art students. One of Professor Silpa's oldest surviving student is Chalood Nimsamer who followed his professor's footsteps to teach at Silpakorn University as well as becoming influential for the avant-garde art movements of that period. During the 1960s, many of Professor Silpa's graduate artists went on to further their studies abroad; Italy was usually the destination but many attended art schools in the United States and Europe. On their return, these artists all contributed to the development of art in the following decade. Chalood was awarded several national prizes in painting, printmaking and sculpture, and won scholarships to further his studies in Italy and the United States. Even though his techniques were considered of modernist tradition, his subject matter remained deeply local which was very much a part of Professor Silpa's teaching.<sup>22</sup>

Thai art scene during the 1960s was highlighted by another significant event as His Majesty King Bhumibol was known to have painted regularly between 1959 through to 1967. His oil on canvas works ranged from realistic portraits through to abstract expressive brushstrokes. "Most importantly, he permitted the National Exhibition Committee to exhibit his works regularly during this period. His textural marks and vibrant colors can be compared with the sound of jazz music that the King played regularly with bands and musicians in court. Jazz, painting, sculpture and photography became favorite mediums for the King's artistic creation. In 1963, the King gave an audience to Oskar Kokoschka, the Austrian painter, during his visit to Europe," as mentioned by Rama IX Art Museum Foundation.

Unlike modern art movements in the Western world, Thai art exhibition and criticism did not gain much public attention during the 1960s.



fig. 111

Silpa Bhirasri 120th Anniversary, CMU Art Center, September 15–30, 2014



### Post-Bhirasri

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Both Thawan Duchanee <sup>fig. 03</sup> and Chavalit Soemprungsuk were awarded prestigious scholarships by the Dutch government to study at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. Interestingly, their artistic ideology could not have been more different as visual practitioners. Thawan's interest in dramatic mythical themes and Chavalit's quest for abstract simplicity are both groundbreaking in their ideas. In a personal conversation with Chavalit during 2011, he recalls his memory of Thawan at the Rijksakademie and mentioned that their professors were not convinced by Thawan's mythical tales. "The tales only work in Thailand" according to Chavalit. Thawan Duchanee has been a wealthy celebrity, household name long before he was awarded the grand title of National Artist in 2001. The mythical tales behind his artworks in conjunction with flamboyant showmanship has sparked a wave of patriotism through his neo-traditional Thai art.

Chavalit's career path took a different turn as he chose to remain in Amsterdam as a Dutch-sponsored artist. He has been returning

to Thailand regularly to exhibit his artworks. I was amazed to learn that many of Professor Silpa's photographs during his later years were taken by him during his student years at Silpakorn University. Surprisingly according to Chavalit, photography was not considered as an art form which was worthy of credit during that time.

### Institutional Outsiders

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Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Tang were both self-taught artists who vividly responded to dark events and social turmoil of the late 1960s onward. Even though Chang had very little formal education, his series of black-and-white abstract paintings were inspired directly by Chinese calligraphy and philosophy, reiterating notions that abstract and non-representational art should not only be a phenomena in Western art.

Chang Tang's painting titled *14 October 1973*, a self-portrait with his eyes plucked and cut-off hands, together with Pratuang Emjaroen's *Dharma Adharma* and *Days of Disaster* (1973–74) illustrates social polarization

fig. 02  
Chalood Nimsamer  
*Rural Sculpture*, 1982,  
dimensions variable, rural objects



and uncertainty as Thailand faced political turbulence. Pratuang, as founder of an artist collective called Dharma Group, had painted an image of the decapitated Buddha, peppered with bullet holes which eludes widespread apocalypse. As a matter of spiritual principle, both artists deliberately pursued a financially modest career, relative to what they could have sold.

Furthermore, the 1970s was a period of overwhelming heavy-handed treatment by the state and frightful uncertainty for many artists and liberal thinkers who were suspected of harboring communist ideology. Many artists were targeted and kept under state surveillance, as explained in conversation with artist and social activist Vasan Sitthiket.

#### Postmodernists

Moving abruptly to the 1980s, I turn to the next generation of artists who represent a shift beyond the previously established artistic disciplines. Apinan Poshyananda and Kamol Phaosavasdi were both overseas graduate instructors at the relatively new Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University, which is Thailand's very first university. In terms of local art scene acknowledgement and accreditation by organizations such as the National Exhibition of Art in Bangkok, Apinan had already received medals in painting and another in printmaking whilst Kamol had received medals in sculpture and other awards in painting before they began their move onto experimental practices.

In 1985 Kamol collaborated in Apinan's video performance work, *How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock*, [fig. 04](#) which was exhibited at the distinguished Bhirasri Institute of Modern

Art, Bangkok. The assemblage of objects, prints, performance, and video sparked puzzlement and controversy amongst viewers as video installation was a new technology at that time. Apinan's absurd depiction of the gaps in communication between Western art and Bangkok audiences remains a valid theme that still reoccurs today amongst young artists.

Later on that year, Kamol went on to do an installation and performance work *Song for the Dead Art Exhibition* [fig. 05](#) at the same venue. Outside the gallery, an additional component of his exhibition was a real-life social intervention during an inaugural faculty speech at Chulalongkorn University to welcome new students. Kamol installed a battery of ringing alarm clocks and read his anti-aesthetic manifesto in the presence of a puzzled crowd during a formal speech by the dean. This was met with several abusive comments. Nevertheless, the event had been witnessed and contributed to the avant-garde history of Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art. Kamol's deliberate interrogation and intervention within the very notions of Thai academic and artistic institutions mark a beginning of post-modern art practice in Thailand.

#### Conclusion

Modern art in Thailand has shifted considerably since its glorified master plan to socially engineer heroic national iconography since the 1940s. Modern Thai art as an academic field of knowledge may not be the most immediate or realistic form of representation for cultural rebellion in Thailand between the 1960s and '80s. The cultural strengths and bonds in Thailand exist in several complicated layers as well as regions, for instance at the

[fig. 03](#)  
Thawan Duchanee during his postgraduate study in the Netherlands, 1964–68.

[fig. 04](#)  
Apinan Poshyananda  
*How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock*, 1985, video sculpture



grassroots within the largest and most populous region known as Isan in Thailand's Northeastern region. The people are influenced by *Mor lam* which is a traditional Lao form of song in Laos, and Isan encapsulates the notion of traditional and avant-garde culture that have combined ancient oral histories and contemporary concerns for centuries. *Mor lam* musical broadcasts and public performances was utilized as a stage for cultural rebellion and even pro-government propaganda between the 1960s and '80s.

Our present-day global standards have catapulted contemporary art to be at the forefront of cultural translation and discussion to the point that local Thai artists are no longer at the mercy of local art scene influences and authorities as they can connect directly with international patrons. We are now living in a time where local political protests need to have banners in the English language, simply to access the mighty global voice of cable news networks. Since the 1980s, artist Apinan became Professor Dr. Apinan Poshyananda after a prolific career as an academic and international contemporary art curator. He is now the minister, holding the highest position at Thailand's Minister of Culture, and, in many respects, Thai contemporary art community is feeling optimistic about the immediate future of art in Thailand.



Fig. 1.6  
Kamol Phaosavasdi  
*Song for the Dead Art Exhibition*,  
Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art,  
Bangkok, 1985

# Malaysia: A Cultural Rebellion

Simon Soon

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Art History and Film Studies, University of Sydney

Let me begin by first rehearsing the standard narrative of Malaysian art, and from it we are able to then consider the broader implications of this narrative in relation to the theme of “cultural rebellion.” Malaysian art from the 1960s to ‘80s was bookended by two key historical events—the formation of Malaysia in 1963 and the inauguration of the first ASEAN Symposium of Aesthetics in Kuala Lumpur in 1989.

Our story begins with the clash between proponents of abstraction and realism in the 1960s. This culminated in a walk out staged by the Angkatan Pelukis Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Painters Front) during the 1968 Salon Malaysia exhibition who felt that they were prejudiced in the competition.<sup>11</sup> The Angkatan were artists primarily though not exclusively promoters of realism, and felt that this was the most relevant approach to advance an “art for society.” It was also at the same time establishing itself as a welfare organization for painters who came from humbler Malay origins, outside the purview of the English school system or the Chinese cultural associations, playing the role of offering free art classes and putting together shows in their self-organized exhibition spaces since 1956. They were in many ways a precursor to the artist’s run/community initiative today.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the artistic milieu that largely won the 1968 Salon competition, though not exclusively committed to abstraction, was primarily English-speaking, trained in Europe and America, and appealed to the universalist aspirations of modern art—both modernism and pop. This circle also actively promoted the transformation of a regional craft technique such as batik into a modern painterly medium.

Therefore, the disagreement was centered primarily on the best means to convey the birth of a new nation. As an artist conferred of that period, “we are still trying to build a unified nation and culture from a plural society. A Malaysian art can’t be achieved until the Malaysian society has an image.”<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, there was a desire to figure the Malaysian subject through representational means; while on the other hand, there was an attempt to encapsulate the mood and the expressive aspiration of being associated with a new country and to stake its place in the world.

Therefore, even as the latter tendency won over the 1968 Salon, by 1969 such a gestural and emotive turn was upstaged very briefly by a calculated analytic turn towards geometric abstraction in exhibitions such as “The New Scene.” But this would not last long, for the 1970s really opened with the racial riot of May 13, 1969 in Kuala Lumpur. Perhaps one of the least discussed responses was a sculpture built by Lee Kian Seng for Expo ’70 in Osaka. Titled *Unity*, it was an exhortation for solidarity in the towering three figures that are seen in embrace, yet, at the same time, drenched in streams of red paint; a chilling reminder of the tragic bloodbath that occurred a year ago.

If artists felt that a Malaysian image was non-existent, then perhaps one of the consequences of the race riot was a conscious effort to construct one, through the formulation of a National Cultural Policy at the National Cultural Congress of 1971. Not only are indigenous cultures and Islamic values prioritized, the participating majority at the congress also voted to champion “art for society”

<sup>11</sup>

T. K. Sabapathy, “Merdeka Makes Art, or Does It?,” *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, exh. cat., T.K. Sabapathy, ed. (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>12</sup>

Zainol Abidin Ahmad Sharif, *Meeting Modernity: Forty Years of the APS Malaysian Artists Movement 1956–1996* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>

Dolores Wharton, *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia. A Biographical Survey* (Petaling Jaya: Asia Society and Union Cultural Organisation, 1971).  
This was an unattributed statement.

rather than the modernist “art for art’s sake.” More significantly, under the suggestion of University of Malaya’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Ungku Aziz, a majority of congress participants, who were made up of academics and civil servants, voted for increasing the role that the government should play in limiting the freedom of expression so that another clash amongst races would not repeat itself.<sup>54</sup> This resulted in a walk-out amongst dissenting group of artists. It was also an indication of how much individual freedom a young country like Malaysia was willing to give up in exchange for security.

Artists responded to the policies later on, not by taking sides in these two pole positions, but by pushing their practice towards a different direction. The outcome was a number of experimental collaborative undertakings that were either multi-disciplinary or conceptual in method. Some of the key events of this period include: |1... a conversation-driven workshop/exhibition “Manifestasi Dua Seni (Manifestation of Two Arts)” — where visual artists were invited to respond to works of local poets, |2... the establishment of Anak Alam, an art collective founded by Latiff Mohidin, which moved away from the realism of the Angkatan towards multi-disciplinary approaches in art making — they would stage photography exhibitions to impromptu street happenings to talks on poetry at their artist’s run space,<sup>55</sup> [fig. 01](#) |3... the formulation of a conceptual manifesto by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa. The exhibition featured found objects that argued for an alternative cognitive approach to the practice of art based on Eastern spirituality in their joint exhibition of found objects, “Towards a Mystical Reality.”<sup>56</sup> Lastly, |4... there was a noticeable increase in government support for contemporary art. This included the establishment of a university-level art school in Penang, the appointment of the first full-time director at the National Art Gallery, as well as the creation of the Young Contemporaries Award since 1974. But it also extended to the publishing under the National Language Institute magazines such as *Dewan Sastra* and later *Dewan Budaya* where a number of important aesthetic debates took place.

This also led to a number of sustained attempts, in the late 1970s, in the writing of Malaysian art history, most notably in three exhibitions—a study of Malay art and craft tradition “Rupa dan Jiwa” curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal and the “First Nanyang Painters’ Retrospective” curated by Redza Piyadasa in 1979, followed by Ismail Zain’s exploration of how traditional forms and ideas

04

Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang Kunang: Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), p.117.

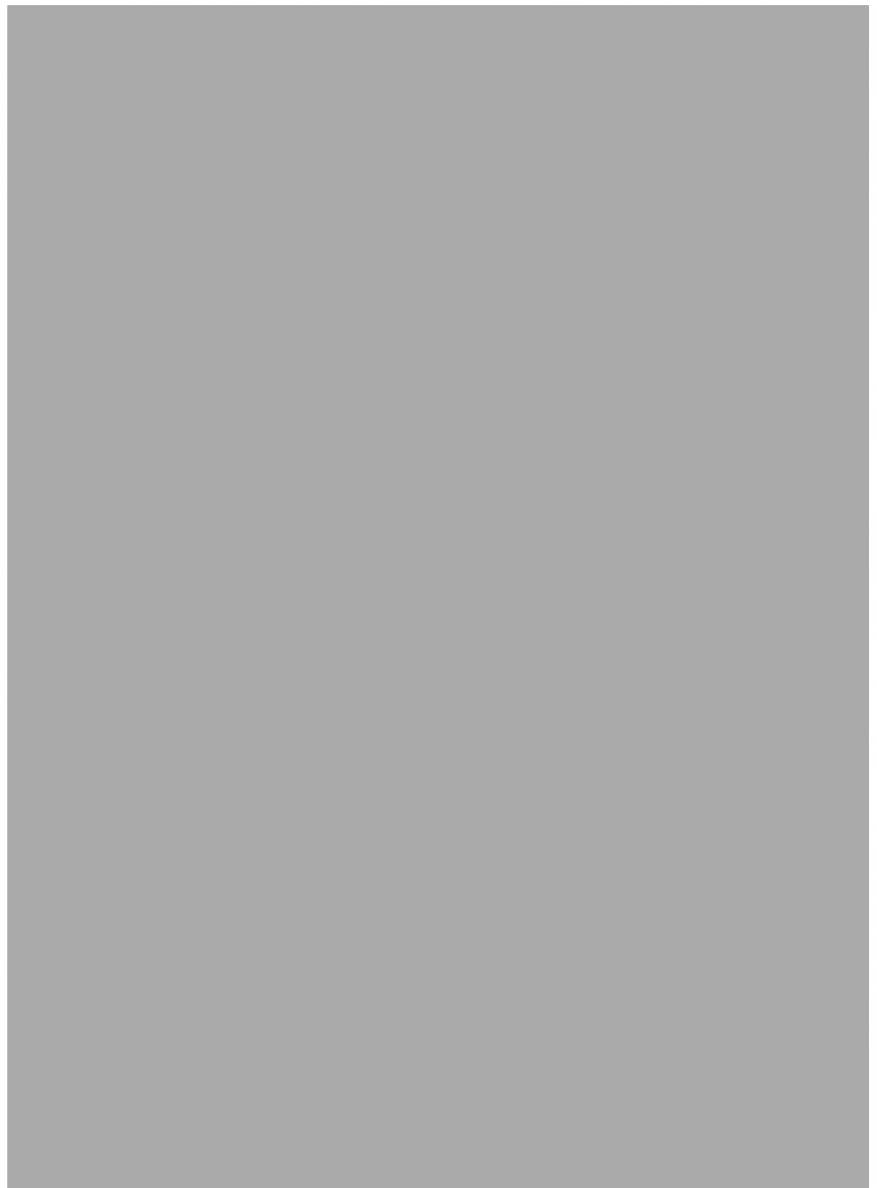
05

For more information about Anak Alam, see Nur Hanim Khairuddin, “Anak Alam: Behind the Scenes,” *Narratives in Malaysian Art — Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies*, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong, and T.K. Sabapathy, eds. (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), pp. 24–30.

06

Simon Soon, “An Empty Canvas on which Many Shadows have Fallen,” *Narratives in Malaysian Art — Volume 2: Reactions – New Critical Strategies*, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong, and T.K. Sabapathy eds. (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), pp. 55–69.

fig. 01  
Anak Alam member Yusof Osman  
performance of 1974



influence contemporary art in the 1980, “Seni dan Imajan.” <sup>107</sup>

By the 1980s, three distinct paths could be identified: | 1... a new investment in Islamic discourse as a springboard for contemporary art practices, | 2... a parallel engagement with broader regional aesthetics also emerged, | 3... a continuation of postmodernist inquiry into cultural identity as a direct result to some of the aesthetic calls made through “Towards a Mystical Reality.”<sup>108</sup> Then perhaps quite early on, the emergence of a digital art practice in the computer-generated artworks of Ismail Zain. <sup>108</sup> <sup>fig. 03</sup> The 1980s also marked to bolder attempts at staging international events such as the two-edition Kuala Lumpur International Arts Festivals and the relocation of the National Art Gallery to a larger space, the former Hotel Majestic, in 1984.

In many ways, this has fossilized into a grand narrative and framework for the past two decades for Malaysian art historians as we continue to flesh out details through retrospective and other closer studies on a particular artist or movement.

But, what do we make of such narrative? This paper after all makes a strange proposal. It proposes to examine the concept of Malaysia as a “cultural rebellion.” As such it assumes a number of things. Firstly, that the nation and its artistic production were intimately connected, driven by perhaps an impulse that have variously and contentiously been argued as *kunstwollen*. Secondly, that art is an agential cultural space in the shaping of

a national imaginary and discourse. Lastly, the very concept of “nation” as a cultural rebellion meant that the nation coming into being represented a breach.

The formation of Malaysia was the coming together of four territories, all previously under varying levels of British control—Sabah, Sarawak, the Federation of Malaya, and Singapore. Singapore, of course, would leave Malaysia in a short two years’ time. The compact of Malaysia was significant, not least because it caused the sundering of the MAPHILINDO confederation. Filipino claims to Sabah, and Indonesia’s accusation of British neo-colonialism meant that Malaysia’s formation was in and of itself a cause of neighboring unease against two nations that had already been independent since 1946.

As such I want to suggest that given the above circumstances, Malaysia could serve as a unique lens through which we may understand the fraught concept of cultural rebellion. Because of how clumsy the articulation of a historical destiny appears in this national compact—after all the ties that bind Borneo to the Malay Peninsula was primarily colonial since these were under varying levels of British control—Malaysian art and the shaping of a Malaysian image really had to begin anew, to begin now. But the question has always been, “how does one arrive at this beginning?”

This beginning was closely shaped by the Malayan-ization ethos of the preceding decade and it pays to consider them. Two significant episodes were to have repercussions on the overview of Malaysian art I am about to make. In 1957, the year that Malaya gained her independence from the British, Patrick Ng Kah Onn won the First Prize at the First Southeast Asian Art Conference and Competition held in Manila for his painting *Batek Malaya*.<sup>109</sup> Because the work went into a Philippine collection, a copy was produced the following year. This copy was intentionally produced for the acquisition by the National Art Gallery, which was founded in 1958 in Kuala Lumpur, realized by the Malayan Art Council established in 1952. The National Art Gallery would be one of the first few public institutions in Asia dedicated to modern art, considering that for example the Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura was founded merely seven years before in 1951, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo was established the following year. <sup>fig. 04</sup> In these two episodes that I have highlighted, a regional art conference and competition as well as the establishment of a public art institution for modern art were significant features that will continue to shape

<sup>107</sup>

Redza Piyadasa, “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,” *Modernity in Asian Art*, John Clark, ed. (New South Wales: University of Sydney East Asian Studies No. 7 and Wild Peony, 1993), pp. 169–181.

<sup>108</sup>

Redza Piyadasa ed., *Ismail Zain Retrospective Exhibition 1964–1991*, exh. cat. (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995).

<sup>109</sup>

Ooi Kok Chuen, “Strokes of Wry Humour,” *The Star Online*, April 26, 1998.   
• <http://www.viweb.freehosting.net/PatrickNg.htm> (Accessed July, 2014)

<sup>fig. 02</sup>

Redza Piyadasa, *Bentuk Malaysia Tulen*, 1980, bromide image, acrylic on canvas, 106 x 70 cm, private collection, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>fig. 03</sup>

Ismail Zain, *Al Rumi*, 1987, computer-produced print, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian art.

In the first instance, some of the aspirations towards self identity as a region through an art competition mirrors the aspiration of Malaysia's founding as a federation—firstly through the federation of Malaya, then subsequently that of Malaysia, where previously smaller states came together to form a larger political unit. More than historical ties, it was a marriage of modern convenience that embodied a contradiction, as former President of the Art Association of the Philippines, Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, noted, "the first was that all men are brothers and art transcends all barriers because it is universal. The second—and this may not be as diametrically opposite as it may seem—was a belief in national identity."<sup>10</sup>

This resulted in the formation of a later regional unit that has continued to exist today—ASEAN, which color and shape the way we think about Southeast Asia as a geographical, political, and cultural unit. Malaysia shared, in many ways, similar features on a national scale—one of them being the anxiety felt against perceived Communist threat.

The second feature was the role the state played in the support of cultural and artistic productions. So much so, it would be hard pressed to find anything outside the long arms of the state. As such, when we ask, "is it ever possible to view cultural rebellion through the lens of a nation?" do we also need to ask, "in what way did the nation inflect upon artistic productions through cultural policies as well as infrastructures?" More importantly, "if state support was such a determining feature, what was cultural rebellion? *Where* was the place of cultural rebellion?"

The answer is contingent on what we hope to look for. One answer is that perhaps nation is itself a form of cultural rebellion. It rebelled against two earlier destinies. The first was the call issued forth from the Philippines in search for a unity of the Malay races as embodied in Wenceslao Vinzon's "Malaysia Irrendenta" and Eduardo L. Martelino's *Someday Malaysia*, based on Jose Rizal's earlier desire for a unity of the Malay races.<sup>11</sup> The other was a rebuff to Sukarno's manifest destiny, *Indonesia Raya*, or Greater Indonesia, which perhaps also drew on Tan Malaka's notion of an ASLIA—which was an irredentist claim to a vast swath of land that stretched from North Indonesia (the Philippines) to the Southern continent of Australia.<sup>12</sup> In this way, because Malaysia rejected seemingly older and more expansive imagined historical ties, after all no great monuments of its past is in its orbit, its state-sponsored modern art was an



Fig. 14  
National Art Gallery (1958–1984), 109,  
Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

attempt to construct the new in order to stage its difference. One could recall the words of French historian and theorist of nationalism, Ernest Renan, that "a nation is a daily plebiscite"<sup>13</sup>—in the manner that the desire of a people to live together through the formation of this strange place called Malaysia would also require a new art to help produce its imaginary horizons.

Herein lies the contradiction in the thinking of the totality of Malaysian art as an act of cultural rebellion. If the state was so closely involved in the production of contemporary art, could there have been a space outside of this all-embracing narrative? Writing a critical review on the "Towards a Mystical Reality" exhibition, for example, Salleh Ben Joned mockingly noted, "it wasn't supposed to be an exhibition; it was supposed to be an 'experience,' a 'direct confrontation with (mystical reality).' But it still had to be legitimized by the presence of a representative of officialdom; and he, of course, had to give one of those usual speeches."<sup>14</sup>

To seek out other narratives, one approach is to identify artistic avenues outside of state-sponsored institutions. As suggested above, this presents a problem, for even many of the early artists' collectives, such as Angkatan Pelukis Se-Malaysia and Anak Alam, received some form of patronage and support. In this sense, we might recognize how the avant-garde was in many ways imbricated with the cultural visions connected to the state. Perhaps a much more productive way of thinking about cultural rebellion, then, is to underline what is noticeably absent within the dominant narrative.

Let me consider three artists and their practices from different periods to suggest a productive approach in this direction based on my previous researches. By this I am not saying that these are artists who have not since been recognized for their significant output by

<sup>10</sup> Purita Kalaw-Ledesma and Amadis Ma. Guerrero, *The Struggle for Philippine Art* (Quezon City: Vera-Reyes, 1974), pp. 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> Wenceslao Vinzon's speech was awarded the Quezon Gold Medal in Oratory in 1932. Printed in Andres R. Camasura, ed., *Philippine Encyclopaedia of Eloquence* (Manila: The Philippine Encyclopedia Company, 1936), pp. 409–414; Eduardo L. Martelino, *Someday Malaysia* (New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1959).

<sup>12</sup> Tan Malaka, "XI. Federated Republic of Indonesia," *Massa Actie* (1926) reprinted in Tan Malaka, *Aksi Massa* (Jakarta: Teplok Press, 2000). By the time *Thesis* (1946) was published, the concept of ASLIA suggested the inclusion of a new federation stretching from Southeast Asia to Australia, based on the hypothesis that the world would achieve relative peace and stability if there existed a number of giant nation states that were able to keep each other in check.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" (What is a Nation?) originally delivered as a lecture in Sorbonne in 1882. Reprinted in Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" *Becoming National: A Reader*, Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 41–55  
► <http://www.nationalismproject.org/what/renan.htm> (Accessed July, 2014)

<sup>14</sup> Salleh Ben Joned, "Kencing dan Kesenian (Peeing and Art)," *Dewan Sastra*, July 15 (1975), p. 58.

15

At the stage of preparation, this essay was being edited for publication in a special issue on queer theory and visual cultures in Southeast Asia in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, Issue 38 (planned to be published in February or March, 2015).

16

Simon Soon, "Along Other Historical Sightlines: Landscapes as Conditions of Being," unpublished conference paper presented at the Tilting the World: Histories of Modern and Contemporary Asian Art: A Symposium in Honour of John Clark, University of Sydney, November 29–30, 2013.

17

Amir Muhammad, "Mat Som," *Writing by Amir*, September 17, 2008.

► <http://amirmu.blogspot.com.au/2008/09/city-of-mud.html> (Accessed January, 2015)

18

Wong Hoy Cheong, "Contradictions and Fallacies in Search of a Voice: Contemporary Art in Post-Colonial Culture," *First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics*, Delia Paul and Sarifah Fatimah Zubir, eds. (Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1989), pp. 117–125.

fig. 05

Lat (Mohd. Nor Khalid), *Mat Som* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing 2004). Original edition 1989.



the national cultural institutions. What I want to highlight are three issues here: |1... the possibility of an occluded history that could challenge our understanding of the development of a specific medium, |2... the development of long time-based projects that are able to explore untold stories of the postcolonial city, |3... artistic medium whose circulation did not necessarily rely on the museum as its defining institution.

If we look at the 1960s, perhaps one of the most overlooked outputs belongs to Patrick Ng Kah Onn's batik paintings of male nudes. I have examined elsewhere that what was registered in Patrick Ng's exploration of the batik was a critique of a national discourse that attempted to position the batik medium as Malaysia's contribution to modern art. It also queers the very representational schema of well-developed native women by turning its scopophilic pleasure towards the male body. In doing so, it also signals a compact built around homosocial intimacy and desire that was occluded from the dominant narrative of Malayan and Malaysian art of the 1950s and '60s.<sup>15</sup>

The second of this is Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingham's photographic collage—*Statement III*. I have also suggested elsewhere the radically unsettling manner in which her time-based documentation of squatter population was able to draw out some ethical

coherence issues related to progress and the growth of a postcolonial city.<sup>16</sup> In her sociological reportage of a squatter community, once in 1975 and then again in '79, her methodical and factual statements direct conceptual preoccupation with aesthetics towards political inquiry to bring to our attention sections of the population left behind in Malaysia's economic growth. As such, through a documentary approach to art making, she also deconstructs both universalist and utopian claims of progress in modernization.

The last of this could be found in perhaps an undervalued comic book by Lat—*Mat Som*.<sup>17</sup> Lat, a Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize winner, is perhaps more famous for his two other graphic novels—*Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*. But what endears me about *Mat Som* is its brilliant study of Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s—encapsulated in the story of a young journalist who has arrived from the countryside, to strike out in the capital of Malaysia. Reviewing *Mat Som*, writer Amir Muhammad notes, "in him [Mat Som, the protagonist], the values of the village and the city struggle to reconcile."<sup>18</sup> One striking example is the scene where we encounter a rain-drenched Mat Som in a moment of despair. He seeks solace by reciting painter/poet Latiff Mohidin's signature poem of 1976, *Songsang*—which can be loosely translated into English as "a misfit." Mat Som's character is one who doesn't really belong; he represents those who are different, struggling to find his voice as a writer and his place within a city where change is the only constant.

In sketching out these examples, I am also reminded here of Anak Alam painter Zulkifli Dahlan's *Kedai-Kedai* (Shops)<sup>19</sup> where naked humans roamed through the familiar city streets with carnival-esque abandon. The absurd quality of this painting, which depicts naked men roaming nonchalantly along the streets of Kuala Lumpur, brings into sharp relief some of the qualities that are embodied in all three works. What binds the works that I have brought up here is a direction of sympathy, an artistic practice that was turned towards the others, to recognize their time and place within the complex fabric of time that we call "contemporaneity."

If they represented isolated instances, to grapple with the conditions of modernity in fits and starts more so to negotiate questions of values within urbanscape, by the end of the 1980s a conscious effort was being attempted to imagine this as a series of linked solutions to formulate an artistic direction for contemporary art in the 1990s. This took place at the