

international art world appeared divided between artworks from “developed” and democratic states, and those that were not.³⁷ This created a quarantine effect not unlike the predicament described by art historian Hans Belting in 1991 of similar exclusions of Eastern European artists in Western European exhibitions.

Especially prominent from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s for his role in bringing contemporary art from Asia and particularly China to Western audiences through loosely configured exhibitions designed to encourage viewers to consider the relationships between artworks as opposed to their differences, Hou Hanru put matters more witheringly by insinuating that the interest in what was sometimes called “unofficial” Chinese art coincided with renewed Western interest in China after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.³⁸ He implied that it was only after such an exemplary demonstration of a will to democracy and against authoritarianism that Western institutions could finally accept certain forms of contemporary Chinese art.

Consider the remarkable popularity of Xu Bing’s *Square Word Calligraphy* in Europe and the United States. Begun in 1992, it featured an invented system of writing whereby words appear to resemble Chinese characters but in fact are English whose forms have been reassembled and rescaled. *Square Word Calligraphy* addressed the importance of distinguishing what something looked like versus its capacity to say something other than that inferred from a literal view of forms. Those literate in Chinese cannot read the script without also knowing English. Likewise, those familiar with English are given the opportunity to rethink what they consider so familiar as to forget about the role form plays in enabling that familiarity.

Of his invented Chinese script Xu commented that, “Chinese audiences lose part of the meaning and Western audiences lose another part, but each side gets the part that the other doesn’t.”³⁹ Yet the actual experience of seeing and interacting with the work suggests that differences are best understood by first recognizing the configuration of forms as the basis on which communication is made possible or not. Was it a deferred response to what many critics saw as a profoundly troubling insistence on the part of Western curators and institutions for authenticity? If contemporary Asian art was partly meant to be a socio-political intervention, one of its main concerns was to construct a platform on which to consider cultural difference without reiterating modernist distinctions pitting the authentic against the derivative.

Serving free rice and curry to a general audience, “Cities on the Move” participant Rikrit Tiravanija sought to reject what to him may have been an undue obligation to discuss the links between race and art. Tiravanija came to the United States to study in the early 1990s, when debates about the direction of Asian American art were at their height and when the seeming receptivity to non-Western contemporary art was also circumscribed by audience expectations; remarked Tiravanija, “as much as everything is more open, it is also closed.”⁴⁰ Instead he focused on building the relationships among their viewers, unrelated in no other way save for their occupying the same space. Left unanswered, however, is whether the aspirations for inclusiveness also limit the scope of production by compelling artists to make work for the world at large rather than for a particular audience — something that comes across even with the works purported to respond specifically to local concerns.

Since the mid-2000s, discussion has taken a decidedly entropic turn as numerous institutions and organizations have radically expanded the kinds of work included under the contemporary Asian art rubric. On the face of it, redrawing the parameters of contemporary Asian art suggests an intention to facilitate a beneficial kind of globalism where the international art world functions more like a democracy than an oligarchy. Yet its expansion verges on the point where the idea ceases to have any real meaning. If much of what I’ve just said feels suspiciously like a eulogy, it may be because contemporary Asian art

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Supangkat, “Multiculturalism/Multimodernism,” p. 80.

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38

Hou Hanru, “Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions: A New Internationalism,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), p.80.

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Ibid., p.93.

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40

Cited by Alice Yang, “Letting Go: The Work of Rikrit Tiravanija,” in *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, ed. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), p.8. Originally written in 1996.

41

I have discussed this issue elsewhere in "What Scale Affords Us: Sizing the World Up Through Scale," *Art Margins* 3, no. 2 (June 2014), pp. 3-30.

42

Daniel R. Montello, "Scale in Geography," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 2001), pp. 13501-13503.

43

A good example is "Asia: Redefining the City," a conference organized by writer and filmmaker David d'Heilly, architect Rem Koolhaas, and editor Ota Kayoko as a "direct" predecessor to "Cities on the Move." It focused on six cities or urban areas (Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Zhu Jiang Delta) and took place in Tokyo in 1996. <http://www.tnprobe.com/eng/act/sym01.html> (Accessed June, 2015).

44

For examples of such collaborations in Myanmar and India see Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

45

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

has outlived its discursive usefulness. It sounds anachronistic, for example, to describe some of the most internationally celebrated Asian artists like Murakami Takashi, Cai Guo-Qiang or Rikrit Tiravanija as "contemporary Asian artists."

By Which Measure? The Variable Scales of Asian Art

But the widespread recognition of a tiny handful of Asian artists does not make the scale question go away. We still parse the world using words like "local," "global," "nation," and "region" even when we find them limiting and problematic. Neither does the matter of scale disappear by expanding what we regard as "Asian." In fact, all this expansionism reads as an alibi for avoiding a question foregrounded by the disparities between those artists able to transcend or move across certain scales and those who do not.⁴¹ To specify what the "scale question" means, I turn to three definitions of scale in geography. The first concerns *cartographic* scale, which "refers to the depicted size of a feature on a map relative to its actual size in the world."⁴² In this context, such cartographic scale refers to the physical size of a place relative to its actual influence on the international art world. The second is *analysis* scale, or "size of the unit at which some problem is analyzed." In post-World War II Asia, the most important unit of art world organization was the nation; only from the mid-1990s did the city emerge as a significant unit via the establishment of biennials and other large-scale arts events by specific cities.⁴³ The third is *phenomenon* scale, or the "size at which human or physical earth structures or processes exist, regardless of how they are studied or represented." This may be the most difficult scale question to answer. Indeed, the recent vogue in academic and museum circles for notions of the "contemporary" is a symptom of having to deal with rapidly conflating scales of operation without actually having to face its specificities.

In the 1990s, the scale question meant scale disjunction, or a lack of correspondence between analysis scales. A great deal of discussion tended to revolve around the crude dichotomy pitting the so-called "local" against the "global." Expatriate artists, or artists of Asian nationality living outside their home countries, felt this keenly. They struggled for their works to be seen outside the frameworks of nationality, ethnicity, or race while also agreeing to exhibit them in shows organized around such tropes. Many consequently rejected being known as an "Asian" artist, a refusal that now reads as a quintessentially '90s attitude.

Likewise, the "outsourcing" model of curation so widely prevalent in the mid-to-late 1990s has led to a troubling conflation of scales, where the chosen native informant is automatically regarded as a legitimate and comprehensive *representative* of an entire artistic ecology without necessarily being made to account for his or her choices. Witness, for example, how certain curators are repeatedly tapped by institutions outside their home countries to organize shows of a particular region. What accordingly happens is that certain artists tend to be selected again and again to represent the whole of a given territory, leading to reduced diversity. Few processes in the art world are less democratic (or more authoritarian) than artist selection patterns for exhibitions intended to survey art of a particular nation or region.

The pressure of having to simultaneously deal with multiple scales of operation was especially intense for the spate of non-governmental exhibition spaces throughout East and Southeast Asia that emerged in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. During the peak of the crisis from 1997 to 1999, governments across Asia desperately tried to balance their books by slashing their support of the arts, a move that all but compelled non-governmental organizations to take over many of the functions otherwise performed by national museums. Intense pressure was brought to bear on these organizations which found themselves having to cater not only to both local and international audiences, but also to effectively serve as a national institution. Who, or what, was the audience? More importantly, was it sustainable for institutions to address certain analysis scales even when it was physically or

financially impossible to do so? In other words, what of the phenomenon scale of non-governmental institutions?

On many levels, the late 1990s was when a new epoch began, one marked by a renewed interest in artistic collaboration. Such collaboration directly responded to the breakdown of social hierarchies on which the ideas of nation, city, or state once depended.⁴⁴ The affirmative nihilism so championed by Hou and Obrist in "Cities on the Move" and their later collaborations may have fully given way to the kind of "connectionist" capitalism sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (among others) have pointed out as the core of the new market.⁴⁵ Over time, Tiravanija, for example, has performed in increasingly more upscale surroundings. What we are left with are people scattered around the world, wondering about the community to which art branded as "contemporary Asian art" is directed.

Yet we ignore the scale question at our peril. Doing so will only compromise the efficacy of organizations; it is as important to know one's limits as it is to recognize areas for growth. Moreover, paying close attention to the scale question is needed in order to reexamine the racist and imperialist assumptions underpinning the use of many scale terms. The challenge remains as to whether it is possible to embrace indiscretions and deviances from a system of overlapping scales to which we assign the name "world" as a matter of convenience.

Discussion | Session 2

Moderator
Doryun Chong

The Burden of Representing
Contemporary Asian Art

Doryun Chong

Thank you, Dinh and Joan, for the really stimulating presentations that are different in their own ways. There were so many questions and topics that came up in my mind, and I don't know how many of them we can deal with in the next twenty minutes, but let me give a word to the audience. You are going to be included in the discussion when all of us come up on stage later, so if you have any burning questions, please hold it until later.

Maybe I will start with a more specific question directed to Joan. You used the word "scale" several times in your presentation, but I clearly don't think that you are just talking about the *physical* scale; I think you are using it in at least a couple of different notions. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

Joan Kee

One of the things that was very significant about the first panel was you have these "alternative" organizations and all of them are very small in scale, not just in terms of size but also the kinds of communities to which their activities were directed. But at the same time, there is also a kind of this palpable burden or a certain expectation to represent *all* of, say, contemporary Thai art, or *all* of contemporary Indonesian art. That's a *real* burden that in some ways, I think, contributed to making or putting the idea of the "alternative" under such pressure that it's now become sort of a compromised idea. Just as it was discussed earlier, "What does 'alternative' really mean anymore?"

So when I am thinking about "scale," it's about a lot of artists, institutions, or organizations in Asia having to endure a real burden, again, of the kind of clichéd global-local dichotomy. But I think these pressures of having to

deal with so many different audiences at once, for instance, is one real issue that hasn't been sufficiently addressed especially at the national level; there is not enough dialogue between small organizations and larger, public organizations. That is one way to think about scale, which concerns the relationship between different kinds of entities.

Size, or absolute proportions, is another issue as well. We had those giant, sprawling exhibitions such as "Cities on the Move" and what not, and now we have moved towards very focused solo exhibitions of particular artists. But the unresolved issue here, is, "what happens to the 'middle'?" Is there a middle ground in which to think about both individual artists but also artists as a group? Because what is happening now is that, if you don't have that middle ground, you just have individual artists who, unintentionally or not, take up the burden of being a star; you kind of become the canonical point. I mean, you cannot really write a history of contemporary art in Vietnam without talking about Dinh. It's just unavoidable. But at the same time, what happens to, say, artists who kind of fall between the cracks; those who may not have been given the honor of having a solo show and who may have gotten lost in these big, large shows that were so popular in the 1990s?

Doryun Chong

I think we should try to pick up first about scale when the presenters from the first panel come up in the next session. I was actually struck by this notion of the burden of representing the bigger picture, because it is something that I would have also expected from these presenters. But it seems to be more absent—Gridthiya's scandalizing admission that she wasn't even thinking about the audience back when she started.[laughter]

So I think it is really an interesting to ask, "What is the burden that you put upon

yourself, and what are the external expectations?" Just as Flaudette May discussed, you have curators from abroad "parachuting" in and basically asking, "Tell us everything that has happened in your country or in your region." So I do think that there is this dichotomy between the internal or self-imposed pressure and the external pressure or expectation, which, again, I think would be more interesting with the first panel's presenters here. So we can pick that up later.

On another note, there is an interesting resonance between both presentations talking about a moment of origin, if you would like, which is some time in the 1990s. Dinh, I was really struck by what you said that when you first returned to Vietnam, in 1994, that there was no contemporary art. So I think you definitely played a very instrumental role in creating contemporary art or at least a context for it. Joan, I think you are also suggesting that the rubric of contemporary Asian art was created through specific exhibition-making practices, perhaps surprisingly or maybe obviously, around the same time.

So I am wondering if you can talk about this issue a little more because I think you are talking about a *specific* notion of contemporary art. What I mean by this is that, for instance, if you can define contemporary art as "art that is being made today," then, I assume, clearly there *was* contemporary art in Vietnam back when you returned.

Also you are bringing in certain experiences, definitions, and notions having returned at that time from the United States as an American-educated artist. So I think we kind of need to parse that issue out a little more. In Joan's case, we could ask, "What does it mean when these exhibitions created this rubric, 'contemporary Asian art'?" which I think you problematized. But if it *was* created in the first place, then what was the utility of it back then, if at all?

Dinh Q. Lê

You are definitely right about the art scenes in the 1990s. Actually, it was very vibrant. In certain areas, particularly in Saigon and Hanoi, what was so interesting was that when the country had opened up its doors, collectors from Hong Kong and Singapore came flooding in because there were so many artists of the older generations who made very beautiful paintings, derived from modernist and some social realist traditions. They were very beautiful because these artists were very well-trained. So there *was* an influx in the arts. But the younger artists who were interested in new forms were completely excluded from it.

So I think there was the moment where, again, the break between generations came into play. I mean, the younger artists *could* have made a lot of money, actually, by just pandering to these collectors. Many of the senior artists actually *did*; they were producing so many paintings because it was the first time where they were able to make money. Moreover, dollars at that time was just *a lot* of money.

I think the younger artists refused to do that; they wanted something else. So that was part of the system then, but I am sure the next generation now will refuse our model as well. So I think in every generation, there are those that get excluded.

For me, it was just coming in at the right time, because the younger artists were interested in the knowledge that I had acquired. With that and some connections, it just helped to raise those interests toward a larger audience.

Now, our model, or what we define as "art," is definitely taking over Vietnam and the senior artists and the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association, who used to control all of this, has slowly become obsolete.

Doryun Chong

I am going to just follow-up and maybe dig a

little deeper. This may be a question that is a little provocative, but if these older-generation artists were making contemporary art at that moment, their lineage is a modernist one, which, I assume, was several generations after the one from the French education of modernism. Then, when you and your community of artists in the mid-1990s onwards brought in a *new* notion of contemporary from outside, was that replacing the existing model? Or was there something fundamentally different from that model of origin, reception, and naturalization?

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Dinh Q. Lê

In a way there was not much difference. You are talking about the French introduction of modern art to Vietnam and, prior to that, I don't think we really had "art." We had crafts and craftsmen. But that, again, is importing Western concepts. Now, I think younger artists, or artists in general, in Vietnam are slowly starting to look at Vietnamese tradition and trying to somehow connect it to their current practices. But I think at that point, there was not much difference.

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Joan Kee

That brings us back to the original point you made about translation. The idea of "contemporary Asian art" as a stand-alone idea was first coined in Japan in 1968 by the art critic Hariu Ichirō. He criticized the show "Contemporary Korean Painting" [at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo] describing it as totally derivative, how they are all just copying their European or American counterparts, and he asks in *Asahi Journal*, "Why is there no *gendai ajia bijutsu* [contemporary Asian art]?" One thing that is very telling was initially when this idea of "contemporary Asian art" emerged, Hariu's main goal was to explore whether it was possible to think about contemporary art beyond simple dualities pitting Japan (or more broadly, "Asia") against the

West. But what happened towards the late 1970s and early '80s when the Fukuoka Art Museum held large Asian art shows, despite it being specifically created, in part, to include as many countries as possible, there were still certain art works that were particularly considered champions, such as artworks that had a "primitive" or "natural" quality that looked "non-Western," so to speak. But at the same time, you had someone like Hariu who formed an organization called *Nihon ajia afurika raten-amerika bijutsuka kaigi* (JAALA: Japanese, Asian, African, Latin-American Artist Association), which intended to purposely include works that would have been considered "traditional" and would have been excluded from "contemporary."

So Doryun, I think your question is really getting to the heart of the assumptions on which "contemporary Asian art" itself is grounded. So what happened since the early 1980s is that the Fukuoka Art Museum was accumulating *all kinds* of artworks; they are one of the few museums, to my knowledge, that doesn't have North Korean works, but they have socialist realist paintings and many other works in their collection. That started to really change after the mid-'80s when you had these big, blockbuster shows of Japanese art.

Dinh, you briefly discussed earlier about how the '80s was a "lost decade" when it comes to the history of contemporary Asian art. But, for instance, Gutai *was* a big deal in France and Italy during the '80s. And so what happened was that certain avant-garde—I hate to say the word "expression," but there it is—forms of expression became the dominant paradigms in which artists thought, "Okay, this is sort of the track that we are going to take."

There is a little bit of push back which, I think, was triggered by Apinan Poshyananda's show, "Traditions/Tensions," because of the *kinds* of works he chose, trying to, again, incorporate what the audiences would consider



Doryun Chong

“pre-modern” or “traditional”—whatever those words might mean—as the face of a contemporary Asian art, and displaying them for North American audiences. I think there was a little bit of a push back in terms of what he saw as these sorts of shows that championed a very *particular* way of thinking about art; one that would link back to, quite frankly, a very Euro-American modernist trajectory.

So what we have now are different media that get overlooked—ink painting, for instance. Ink painting almost never gets talked about unless the subject is something considered “modern” or when it takes digital form. Or in Vietnam, lacquer painting. Lacquer painting has been practiced for many, many years—decades really. I would say a large percentage of artists worked in lacquer painting. That gets excluded.

So in thinking about contemporary Asian art, is our task actually about trying to recuperate these sorts of forms? That’s a question I have for you, Doryun, as Chief Curator of M+. What do you think the task is in terms of collecting?

Dinh Q. Lê

If I can follow-up before Doryun. The younger generations in Vietnam now are recuperating lacquer painting, as well as silk paintings and all that. They are doing really interesting, new things with them. So now those forms of works are coming back as well.

Doryun Chong

Well, first of all, I’m not recuperating anything, and definitely not “contemporary Asian art.” But the question of modern and contemporary ink art, *vis-à-vis* what we *normally* think of as modern or contemporary art, is a really interesting question. I prefer not to talk about myself but since you, Joan, put me on the spot, I will.

One of the most stimulating and jarring

things I encountered when I first landed in Hong Kong was how important ink art is there. It is because of its historical condition; Hong Kong was the “gateway”—to use the word of the day—and the main exit point for all of those fleeing China because of the wars and revolutions. This was especially true for those who were trained in literati ink painting amidst a condition and environment that was highly anti-intellectual. These literati ink painters often settled there. There was something called New Chinese Painting Movement in the late 1960s or the early ’70s which played a very important role. While in many places, including Japan, the state ran a policy of educating the first generation of artists in Western media and genres, there was no such thing in Hong Kong due to the British colonial policy. There was no established tradition of modernist painting or sculpture, so ink art became a really important tradition.

What that entails, for me, is a question of what does a collection that aspires to include a lot of modern and contemporary works as we understand it, as we are talking about it today, look like when you give equal weight to the tradition of modern ink painting? I *do* think that these are two parallel traditions. That is to say, it’s easy to say that they often crossed paths, but, in actuality, they didn’t. The same thing can, of course, be said with the topic of socialist realism which is a modern *and* contemporary movement. So when you put all of these together, the story definitely becomes very, very messy and complex. But very few institutions have these issues in one location and try to narrate them together. So that’s the aspiration M+ has as an institution.

Now that you put the curator on the spot, I want to come to my next question: the role of the curator. Again, it’s not coming from my self-interest here, but Joan, since you commented on Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hou Hanru, and Apinan Poshyananda, I was also beginning

to think about this when you were discussing the “Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art” (1993) and “Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art” (1994) exhibitions. These exhibitions have very different kinds of curators, I think. They is not usually quoted. Jane Farver was the curator for “Across the Pacific,” wasn’t she?

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Joan Kee

Actually “Across the Pacific” is really an interesting exhibition. It was one of the very few exhibitions to include both Asian and Asian American artists, which actually started with the artists Bahc Mo (known later as Bahc Yiso) and Yong Soon Min, telling the Queens Museum [formerly, Queens Museum of Art], “You have a lot of Korean people living in Queens. We want a show.” Then, Jane Farver, who was also the curator for “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s” (1999) said, “You know what, that is a good idea. Let’s do it.”

—
Doryun Chong

That really is an interesting question. Jane Farver, who very suddenly and tragically passed away just a few weeks ago in Venice, was working on the US Pavilion for the 56th Venice Biennale. Those of us who have had the pleasure of meeting her, remember her as an incredibly kind, generous, and supportive curator. When curators who were not white Americans were coming up in the 1980s, ‘90s, and 2000s, she acted as a mentor for so many of them.

That kind of curator of an institution like Queens Museum—a museum outside of Manhattan—to organize this show is quite different from “Cities on the Move” (1997–2000), or even “Traditions / Tensions” (1996–1997), although some parts took place in Queens Museum. So I think it is also important to keep note of the many different kinds of curators:

those who are often cited as globetrotting curators; those who are really committed to their local context in doing their work; and others who unintentionally became curators, like Dinh during the first three years of Sàn Art.

So maybe I would turn that into a question to you, Dinh. Having been embedded in the Southeast Asian context or, more specifically, the Vietnam context for almost the last twenty years, what is your perception of the evolution of the role of curator in Vietnam or maybe in the wider Southeast Asian region?

Manifold Forms of the “Curator”

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Dinh Q. Lê

I think in Vietnam, the idea of “curator” is still not very well understood. I think Zoe Butt, who is the current curator and director of Sàn Art, was asked by a magazine interviewer, “What is a curator?” Zoe answered, “You are like a stylist, so you make the work look better in the exhibition.” [laughter] So the idea itself is still not very clear in places like Vietnam.

I think many of us became curators out of necessity. I still don’t see myself as a curator even though I was running the place for three years. I think it was just necessary and so we just had to take on the role. And what I found interesting, recently, is the phenomenon of artists claiming this [curating] as *part of* their practice. I think in Asia, we had to do what was necessary and so it became part of our lives: making artworks, organizing things with and for our friends, and coming together, et cetera.

But now I see more and more artists, not only in the Southeast Asian regions, but also artists in America and Europe, discussing it as part of their practice, too. So this idea of “curator” is still changing, but for *me* it was a necessity. I took up the role because I had to, and it just became a part of my life.



Dinh Q. Lê



Joan Kee

Doryun Chong

Joan, do you have any thoughts about the different definitions and roles of curators who were wittingly and unwittingly involved in contemporary Asian art?

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Joan Kee

I think it was different, for instance, with Dinh. You are talking about Asia versus Europe or North America, where you already have these infrastructures and you have someone like Hans Ulrich Obrist, who had already set forth this paradigm of “anyone-can-be-a-curator.” But in reality, that wasn’t really quite true. One of the things that is a paradox, especially with any sort of non-Western contemporary art exhibition, is that there is a real kind of elitism that is involved; you have people who get to curate these shows over and over again. Hou Hanru is *everywhere*, at least when you think of the 1990s. It’s Hou Hanru, Obrist, and a couple of other people. But then the question is, “What about some of the other shows that didn’t have this kind of, how shall I put it, ‘celebritization’ of the organizers?”

The “Under Construction: New Dimensions of Asian Art” exhibition (2002) would be an example of a show which was very, very important in Asia, primarily because it came after the IMF crisis which, in many parts of Asia, gave rise to an “alternative system” because the national governments drastically cut their spending on the arts. So how is it that the artists are going to be able to show their works? They are going to have to take things on and organize shows themselves. But those who organize these shows are kind of under the radar in a way.

So, one issue, here—especially with histories of contemporary art in Asia that tend to get circulated—is you care more about the curator than the actual artist. That also goes back to the question of “scale.” Whose scale do we privilege the most? Do we privilege the

person who gets on a plane and has a gazillion frequent flyer miles, or do we think about the artist who is working for a very specific context?

But again, the problem there is that it begs the cliché of global-versus-local. Do we want to really go back to those discussions? Probably not.

—
Dinh Q. Lê

I have been really interested in all the important exhibitions that have been mentioned today. I’ve heard about many of them, but *how* important are they really? I’m actually quite fascinated because while they’re important in the West, not many of us in Asia have been aware of these exhibitions.

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Joan Kee

Except for “Cities on the Move.” Gridthiya was very instrumental in that one. So, except for that one.

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Dinh Q. Lê

True. But that idea of “importance” and *how* important it is in a region is interesting. I must say, in Asia, we hardly know anything about them. “How important is it to *us*?” is questionable.

—
Joan Kee

Or maybe it depends on the countries that were included in the exhibition. So, for instance, “Traditions/Tensions” *does* get talked about in the countries that included their artists. So that, again, also brings up the question of inclusion/exclusion.

—
Doryun Chong

Maybe this is a good point to bring back panelists from the first session to join us.

Discussion | Sessions 1 and 2

Moderators

Doryun Chong

Kamiya Yukie

Doryun Chong

Kamiya-san and I just had the idea of asking you if you have questions for one another. We don't want to go overtime and we should definitely give the audience the chance to ask questions, but if there is anything that panelists from each session want to say or respond to, this is the moment to do so.

What is "Contemporary Art" in Asia and Who Defines It?

Gridthiya Gaweewong

I'd like to ask Joan a question. I am now reading her article in *Third Text*, and I think it's very important that you provide an introduction about Southeast Asian contemporary art. The title of the article is, "Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: The Right Kind of Trouble," (*Third Text* 25, no. 4, 2011) and there is one interesting point that you mention that I would like for you to share with us, which is the question, "What is contemporary art, and how can we write about contemporary art in Southeast Asia as a history?" Could you speak a little about that?

Joan Kee

I think that's a really tough question, just because, for one, there aren't that many History of Art departments [in universities in Southeast Asia], for example. There used to be one at the National University of Singapore but that was eliminated. The other difficulty is what you and a lot of the panelists brought up over and over again: funding. There is a reason why, say, events in Japan, Singapore, Australia, and the United States tend to dominate the discussion. I think, Dinh, you bring that point up implicitly in your last comment about why does everyone talk about "Cities on the Move" or "Traditions/Tensions," when it is not really talked about in Vietnam. It is, again, this idea or assumption that somehow what is being said in countries with money, tends to set the stakes

for the histories of contemporary art elsewhere.

So one issue here is, if one were to think about, say, a *different* kind of contemporary art history in Southeast Asia, what would that actually look like? Is that even possible? So, in writing that introduction in *Third Text*, the main question is, "is it really *feasible* to write about this kind of history?" It is almost like a dog chasing a car; it is just something you will never quite grasp, in a way.

But I think that is also why we emphasize exhibitions, and I apologize if I came across as being sort of exhibition-centric. For me, what are really more interesting are the artists and the works. But it is just the way that discussions tend to get written; they tend to follow these big events. So I think that a real problem is, "How do you get away from a history of contemporary art that doesn't just privilege the biennial circuit, or the well-known curators coming from outside and organizing these shows?"

So, again, going back to Doryun's question earlier, when "Cities on the Move" went to Bangkok, it really was the organizers of *all* the spaces where the show took place who were the key; *they* were the actual organizers. But none of that ever gets talked about. That's another reason why, say, historicization is becoming even more urgent now than before.

Gridthiya Gaweewong

I think lately we, as curators and researchers, have started to talk about the history of exhibitions as part of the historicization of contemporary art, because, I mean, one thing that we are trying is to justify why we select this work and not another, why we choose to write about this exhibition, but not on another, et cetera.

One thing that I would like to follow-up on Dinh's comment is that we have been thinking about the impact or effecting factors of "Cities

on the Move" and "Traditions/Tensions." For "Cities on the Move," in particular, it was the first time that at least a hundred artists from Asia were circulated, not only in America, but also in Europe and back to Asia. If you compare the number of artists in the "Traditions/Tensions" show, it was only twenty-something, and it was really within the circle of the "regional" framework such as the Asian Society and others alike. And I think in terms of "Cities on the Move," when it toured back to Thailand, it was the first time that everyone in Thailand worked together. The local art scenes are, of course, very fragmented; it is very territorial.

There were two important facts: firstly, it was the first time that curators from outside Asia organized a show; and secondly, the whole exhibition was endorsed by the French Embassy, so they were the ones who facilitated it. I think it was very important for us to realize that, and in the end, to work together. To me, this was very important, in terms of the local impact. But that had to be triggered by external factors.

Kamiya Yukie

If I may give a comment. Every time we talk about "modern" or "contemporary," how to define them always becomes a big issue. But I think that "contemporary" is not a *style* or a *form*; it has more to do with periodization. Sometimes it is used to describe or refer to a certain style or form, which can get confusing. But Asian art is also often introduced as an area of study, as we see in "Cities on the Move." I don't think those approaches have been able to show enough respect to individual expressions; rather, the mentality has been that anyone can be included as long as they are living and working in the particular region. So rather than specific artistic contexts, Asia has often been introduced just as a regional or a geographical mass.

The "Global Conceptualism" exhibition was organized around the same time in the late 1990s where it introduced a "style" of conceptual art, how ubiquitous instances occurred globally in different areas. So there are two different

approaches in the '90s: one is the "regional" specificity; and the other is the "global" presentation for one specific style. So those two strands existed. I don't mean to suggest that either one is good or bad. It is more to do with the variety of ways in introducing "Asia." While there are these different approaches, I think contemporary Asian art still tends to be introduced within the regional rhetoric.

So the question is, "How can we move away from or extend this idea?" I think that could be one of the challenges of exhibition-making.

Dinh Q. Lê

Recently, the Asia Art Archive did something that I thought was really interesting. They expanded their research into independent art spaces. Some of them might be defunct by now, but they try to archive their programs from the very beginning to the end, and analyze how important that organization was to a particular area, country, or even region. That itself is a different way of looking at art programs. It is not only about these big, traveling exhibitions, but more about giving attention to the local, smaller organizations and how big an impact they were. We just don't *know* about them. So this is a new way of looking at the history of the region, I think.

Doryun Chong

Maybe a slightly different way of asking this question would be to go back to one of my earlier questions. I *do* think that "contemporary Asian art" was a very problematic rubric, a default term that was used mostly by Western institutions and exhibition-makers, and which also often times has obscured the actual works and artists. I think what Joan said is right, and now that the research and study of the histories of exhibitions is so in vogue, that ends up in kind of perpetuating the centrality of the curators, their concepts, venues, and other contextual factors. But at the same time, I would imagine, and in some cases I *do* know, that it did bring a lot of artists in the region

across national borders. It brought together those who may not have met before then. I think it *formed* relations. I have heard such stories from artists in many different instances.

So, I will turn that into a question, especially for the panelists from the first session. When you have been included in such exhibitions or when you had interface with other colleagues from different regions through projects and initiatives by Western curators, institutions, or funding bodies, what was your experience like? Did it have any impact on what you were doing at your own site or not?

—
Flaudette May Datuin

I agree with you. What is “contemporary Asian art”? What is Asia? Baguio and Bacolod, for instance, already are two different contexts which are very complex. What is “contemporary” is a moving target. For example, in the Philippines, the modern and contemporary are seen in colonial, art historical, stylistic, and cultural terms and it is impossible to define and characterize the “modern,” “traditional,” and “contemporary” in definitive ways. Aside from these disciplinal issues, we are also under political and economic pressure from inside and from outside. The Philippines, and consequently, the University of the Philippines which is a State University, is now gearing up for ASEAN integration, which has consequence to our curriculums in the next two years. One of these changes is the recent addition of two more years into the Philippine high school curriculum (K12 curriculum), which has become a challenge for us educators. I am leading a group of writers who are writing a textbook for a core subject in the proposed K12 curriculum on contemporary art in the Philippine regions. The challenge is how to avoid homogenizing such a complex context, but at the same time, taking care also to ground the students on some common key concepts and basic vocabularies, given that our general student try has little—if at all—knowledge of contemporary art, a result of a faulty education system that

pays little attention and importance to art and art education.

When the parachuting curators—not *all* of them, by the way—come, we, the local gatekeepers, are also consulted. In the academy, for example, the kneejerk response is, “we are going to be co-opted.” But at the same time, another section of the faculty would say, “But it’s the artists’ turn to be visible.” So there is this tension between being visible and being under the radar. For some, the latter, to be under the radar, is better because it is a very productive space to be in. For example, one of my projects, “Women Imaging Women” was funded by the Japan Foundation. It featured around sixteen artists from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. It came out of my research in those countries in two phases: an exhibit-conference of women artists from the Philippines in 1997; and an exhibit-conference of women artists in Southeast Asia in 1998. It resulted from the research in the countries the previous years, which became my lifework. But it is not included here and they are not part of the canon because such small scale events with modest objectives are really under the radar. But as I said, it’s sometimes nice to be under the radar because a lot of productive inquiries can be made there beyond the pale of blockbuster exhibitions.

Of course, if we *do* get consulted, we can be civil and collegial about it. [laughter] But personally, I really prefer not to talk to curators who are going to be in our country for just three days. Go home. You come here, already with your assets, and all you need is affirmation. It’s really very nice to be consulted for three days.

—
Ade Darmawan

Well, this is interesting. I’d like to follow what Flaudette May was saying, but firstly I think we should maybe see it from a different angle. I think the attempts in representations of Asia have always been institution- and State-driven and, therefore, always problematic. I mean, we have been here for only half-a-day, and I’ve lost count of how many

times the questions, "What is contemporary art" and "What is Southeast Asia?" came up.

These are really interesting questions, but there will never be a single definitive answer. It is very unstable; you can't really say with confidence, "*this* is contemporary art, *this* is Asian art." I think it really is a trap of the institution, a trap of categorization, and a trap of identity politics.

So to respond to your question, I think my experience as an artist, a member of a collective, and a curator became really different after the 1980s and '90s. This is actually interesting, because in the '80s and '90s, I think so many, or too many projects were always described as "representing so-and-so" or related to defining political identities.

We can see also how Asian countries or Southeast Asia have been presented in Europe. I mean, it is hardly ever shown in a contemporary art museum. For example, works from Asia toured to the Haus der Kulturen der Welt [House of the Cultures of the World] in Berlin, Germany, but it never traveled to a contemporary art museum there. So we have to consider that as well: how *they* view Asia or Southeast Asia. I mean, we were *on* that stage in the '80s, in the '90s a bit less, and I think it's less and less now. But the interesting thing is that, I think, there were a lot of networks and interfaces on which many met, just as Flaudette May and Joan said, "under the radar."

We should see how the performance art scene developed for example. They're like bees. They have their own frequencies and networks; they don't have to be trapped by State identity politics. It really is amazing. They just connect with each other from all over the place, they organize tours together without really representing any flags—any national flags, not to mention—and is still growing. Video and new media is also like that. It's really the different media and practices that are producing different strategies and approaches that can be more economical, cheaper, movable, flexible, and also temporary.

Things really are different, and the medium has played a role in this change.

We started the OK. Video Festival, for example, in 2003, and have organized it for six or seven times up to now. We are surprised by the number of submissions, and how it has attracted many known artists. They were really eager to send their works to a festival in Indonesia.

Something has changed. We used to try to be part of the bigger scene, but now there are a lot of events, initiatives, or "points" that attracts the global scene. That, I think, is what has changed in the last ten or fifteen years; it has really changed how country representations are made. There is less and less of that kind of tendency.

Just another example. When ruangrupa was invited for the 31st São Paulo Biennale, we had a big debate because most of the artists did not want to be mentioned where they were from. We were able to negotiate with the organizer and finally it was settled. Obviously, the organizing foundation has a certain obligation to indicate the nationality because, again, funding is involved. So, again, I'd like to reiterate that performance and video art as a new media can, to a degree, be cut off, liberated, and detached from the big source of funding, I think, allowing the media to be free.

The Art Market Dynamics in Asia

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Doryun Chong

Thank you, Ade. I think we should open the discussion to the floor, now. Would anyone in the audience like to ask questions for any of us or them?

—
Questioner 1

I am an art collector so I would like to ask a question about the [art] market. There are galleries in Asia, and they have the same system; there are art fairs and these art fairs are spreading throughout Asia. In conjunction with that, the markets are becoming global. Money is becoming more powerful. For better or for worse, I think countries may be becoming less individual, in other words, more

similar. I would like to ask for your thoughts, if any, about this phenomenon where the art markets are actually diminishing individual differences between the different countries.

—
Kamiya Yukie

Ade or Dinh, maybe you could respond as artists?

—
Dinh Q. Lê

At Sàn Art, we have actually discussed about participating in these art fairs as a way to sustain ourselves, as a way to survive, because sources of funding have become less and less. Europe is where large sources of funding have been cut drastically. So we have been discussing about this.

I understand where you are coming from; I think there are many complaints about art fairs. Everything just looks very shiny. It doesn't matter where the artworks come from. So yes, I agree, there is a problem, and we *do* worry about it. But at the same time, I think the context of each artist is very different, nevertheless.

Vietnam is completely different from the United States and our concerns are very different from their concerns. And I think there are artist who keep to themselves, remember who they are, and not just cater toward the market.

I think a lot of artists *do* cater to the market, but I think many artists are still situated in places like Vietnam. In Vietnam, in particular, there are many artists who can still make very beautiful paintings, sell them, and make a comfortable living. But they refuse to do so, because, as I said before, they want to do something else. They experiment with video, performance, and other new media because somehow what is "sellable" is not appealing to them. It just doesn't reflect who they are, so they refuse to do it even though that means they might live in poverty or get a second job. So I think artists are very interesting in that way. Money, wealth, and the market are not our priority, and so we just keep doing what we do.

—
Joan Kee

I think, perhaps, part of your concern deals with the fact that when you are in an art fair, it just looks like one booth after another. It is the worst possible condition in which to see art and I can see why differences and specificities might seem to disappear. But in terms of who is actually *buying* the work, there *is* a real difference. Chinese collectors don't buy Korean art. It's the same with Indonesian collectors, for instance; they don't buy art from India, for example. There still is this real nationalistic tendency.

The other issue, too, is when it comes to galleries in the market—for instance, Indonesia— auction houses have enormous power, possibly much more so than other parts of the world. Or in Singapore, with the Gillman Barracks, Ahmad [Mashadi] might disagree with me, where there is a real kind of crumbling at the foundations. You have the Singaporean government saying, "Okay, we are going to create this oasis of galleries." But nobody is going there, nobody is buying anything. The real market is taking place among a very selected handful of collectors, and they are buying these particular kinds of works.

So even though all the artworks might seem alike—that you have a lot of artists going to the same art schools, reading the same magazines, showing up at the same biennials—there is a difference not only in terms of what the work *looks* like, but also who is actually *buying* the work.

—
Gridthiya Gawewong

In Thailand's case, I am actually very happy that the art market is not as powerful as the other countries in Southeast Asia, so artists have more freedom in their practices. But on the other hand, a few of them *are* represented by international galleries; something I found to be very interesting. Some of them are represented by a gallery in New York, Italy, or Singapore, but for countries without good infrastructure, governmental support, or strong culture of collectors, I think it's important for artists to earn their living, and, for that, maybe

art fairs are a necessary condition.

But I agree with Joan. Our collectors in the region are very, very nationalistic. It is very rare for Thai collectors to fly to Basel and buy Indonesian artists' works. Now, I am trying to educate and advise them that they should look beyond national borders, especially because now there is the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). You really have to extend beyond the borders, otherwise nationalism would stop it all.

Doryun Chong

Let me pitch in. Chinese collectors were only buying Chinese artworks until last year, but this year it's a totally different story. Of course, I am not specialist in the market, but by being so close to what is now the most important art fair in contemporary art, Art Basel Hong Kong, I have had the chance to talk to all of these dealers and collectors, and you really hear all these stories. The learning curve of Chinese collectors is like this [holding hand up in steep angle], and last year they were like this [holding hand horizontally]. This year their knowledge base is completely different, and I think that this doesn't just apply to Chinese collectors. Things will really change very quickly. And yes, I think Joan's point about having to think about *who* is buying and *what* is being bought is important.

As a buyer myself—not as a collector, but because I buy for the institution using public money—I end up spending quite a lot of time at different art fairs, and I'd like to add that you *do* actually see quite a lot of differences between art fairs. Art Stage in Singapore looks totally different from Art Dubai, and totally different from Art Basel in Hong Kong. So I think it's a *bit* of a stereotype to say that this proliferation and increasing power of art fairs are flattening or homogenizing the differences. That in itself is a cliché that has been around for several decades now, and I think, overall, what we are saying here is that, there *is* no such thing. Whether it's a re-entrenchment, redefinition, re-localization, or whatever you call it, I think the contexts are quite different *even* at art

fairs. Despite all the same-looking booths, you actually end up seeing many, many diverse kinds of practices, even though they *may* look similar on the surface. I mean, you may see something that looks familiar because you know the history of conceptual art that is based primarily in Europe and America. But then, when you start talking to a dealer whom you never seen or met before, and learn that the work is by an artist considered to be the father of conceptual art in Armenia—I am not making that up, that is a real example—the story completely changes.

So I *do* think that the languages or vocabularies of contemporary art, globally, are limited. What I mean by that, is that it's also so easy to just settle with this fallback saying, "we are all different, have different contexts, speak different languages." I do think that there is a shared language of contemporary art—I shouldn't say singular shared languages of contemporary art in existence, but there are limited numbers of languages—especially in this age of the internet, easier travel, and large-scale exhibitions that bring artists together. I think they all get informed and learn from each other, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are homogenized and are taken away of all their differences and independence. I think it is just more about being able to speak to each other while retaining your specificities.

Biennales in Asia

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Questioner 2

Joan-san mentioned that the Triennale-India was one of the influencing factors, and Gridthiyasan also spoke about "P_A_U_S_E," the Gwangju Biennale in 2002, as being influential. Furthermore, I heard that Ade-san is also planning a biennale in Indonesia which is scheduled to open in November this year. In Japan, too, there are international exhibitions held every year, with the numbers increasing in the last five or six years. I am curious what the people of Asia think about these international exhibitions. Especially,

Ade-san, how do you plan to carry out the exhibition and what are your thoughts on these large-scale, international exhibitions that are mushrooming all across the globe?

Ade Darmawan

I can't speak for the globe, but I think there is a specific reason for every context. In Indonesia or maybe Jakarta, for instance, I think there should be a bigger platform to talk about certain issues or discourse, and, I think, the biennale can function as that platform. In Jakarta or Indonesia, we don't have the tradition of museums. We just don't have that.

In this kind of condition, I think it's really important also for the biennale to try to find strategies. For the Jakarta Biennale 2009, when I was the artistic director, for example, we combined the indoor "exhibition" experiences with the outdoor experiences of the city, having really diverse projects and public art spreading into the streets. That's the only way that we could reach out as much as possible. Of course, when I say "public art," I am aware that the experiences of audiences who *have* the tradition of museums and those who *don't* are quite very different. So I think in that sense, also, I think we can say that we are sort of creating new approaches and experiences as well as something that can't be simply reduced to become the "official" arts. This is particularly so because most of our audience, maybe seventy or eighty percent of them, has never been to galleries to see art. It is not their custom to do so.

So in that sense, what we are trying to explore or achieve is *totally* different compared to, maybe, other biennales in the world. When I participate in biennales as an artist or a collective, of course, it has always been really exciting, but, at the same time, it has also very challenging. When we are invited to participate in one of those large-scale exhibitions, we always don't know what to expect. We know what we do within our own context, but to go and do something in another place, in another context, is not an easy task

because it is not just about transporting art objects. Working on another site is always more complicated. So it's always been a creative process for us as well. It has also always been a crucial point for us.

Kamiya Yukie

Thank you very much. I think the discussion could continue further, but I think we would like to close for today. We will have the third and final panels tomorrow, so we hope we will see many of you again.

Thank you, again.

THE 1990s
The Making of Art with
Contemporaries

Day 2

Session 3

Artistic Engagements of Public Institutions: The Visualization and Discourse of “Asia”

The Southeast Asian art scenes of the 1990s have in no small part been affected by the artistic exchanges conducted by Singaporean, Australian, and Japanese public museums and government bodies. Through practices that connect the differences in historical processes, shared awareness, and visions in the arts, these institutions not only instigated the transformation of art scenes from individual units to a joined web or field called “Asia”—from the national to the regional—but also opened the path toward its entire discourse. Entering the 2000s, the rise of international art exhibitions and the art market, followed by the further developments in museums stimulated the expansion of audiences and consumers of the arts, ultimately shifting the expected roles of the “public.”

The attention directed at these initiatives by Australia and Japan, as well the local artistic engagements in Singapore, were elaborated and evaluated in this session.

Contexts and Predicaments: Ahmad Mashadi Singapore 1996–2006

Head, National University of Singapore Museum

Preamble

Kaplan: What do you think about the idea of choosing a city and a decade as a way of framing thoughts about the relationship between modernism and urbanity. ⁰¹

From its attempts to establish a regional art market to institutions, Singapore's current position of privilege is remarkable, seen as an inevitable expression of its economic status and the continuing project of the global city. ⁰² This year it will inaugurate a new National Gallery, an institution that will displace the Singapore Art Museum as a premier curatorial agent for Southeast Asian modern art. Although arguably formative in its shape and direction, the Singapore Biennale very much remains in place as a major event regionally. Singapore is among few Asian countries to maintain a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It also continues to present Southeast Asia to the Western public, the latest being "Secret Archipelago" at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, organized by the National Heritage Board. All in all, Singapore struggles to condition itself to the tropes of nation and culture that defines production and reception of art in the region, attempting ways in which conceptions of region can be afforded as signs that are simultaneously appropriative and productive. Opened in March this year (2015), "Secret Archipelago" is promoted as an exhibition that exposes a region with "firm roots in ancient tradition... plunged into an ultra-contemporary world."

The opening quote comes from an interview question raised by Janet Kaplan to curators participating in "Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis" (Tate Modern, 2009). In responding to Rasheed Araeen's criticism that the third world cities of Lagos and Bombay were presented from a "sociological point of view, while the rest are being presented from an art-historical point of view." Olu Oguibe remarked that the turn was a necessary one given the curatorial focus on cities, their geo-economic conditions, density, and stratifications, and the need to suggest that "art is relational." Its value is to be harnessed by way of locating it within the matrix of production and consumption, in particular, the tropes that define the modes of art making, the spaces it occupies in social and political contexts, and ways that the broader discourses of nations and communities are regarded, in this case, in African and the Indian Sub-Continent. Consider this against "Secret Archipelago" exhibition's urging for its Paris visitors to "leave behind your Western vision and interpretation of art." Here, illumination is defined by a temporary suspension held values and regard, not as ways to complicate expectations and receptions.

Among world biennales, the associated struggles against or for hegemony, symptomized by the decentralization of art, away from the previously centres of Europe, according to Oliver Marchart, "also needs to be understood as a ... struggle for consensus and consent: for a specific legitimate yet imagined cartography of our world. This symbolic struggle is simultaneously carried out in local, national and transnational contexts." ⁰³ Further, Marchart argues that "biennials can also be called 'hegemonic machines,' which link the local to the global within the field of symbolic struggles for legitimation." ⁰⁴ Singapore