

Essay 01

Premises for Critical Studies of Modern Art in Southeast Asia

T.K. Sabapathy

T.K. Sabapathy is an art historian and art critic. He has published extensively on art and artists in Southeast Asia. His writing has inaugurated important art historical trajectories for appraising the modern and the contemporary in Southeast Asia. His monographic studies of artists—especially on those in Singapore and Malaysia—and essays in exhibition catalogues have established significant benchmarks in developing the critical literature on art and artists in the region. He is currently Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, where he teaches the history of art.

This essay was presented at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Exhibition and Art Symposium held in Kuala Lumpur in 1982. The occasion offered the author the opportunity to respond to the “curatorial strategies” and “critical purposes” of the exhibition, “Landscapes in Contemporary Art Forms.” He believes that exhibitions can provide “acuity in critical discussion.” From this perspective, he sets out to reflect on the way modern art in Southeast Asia is studied. He begins by stating that “chronologies, inventories, styles and influences” have to be situated in a state of tension with the “intelligence crystallized in the work of art.” In other words, the said methods have to be processed and seen in the context that is proposed by the event, the instantiation and the condition of art, which he describes as both a “subtle activity” and, quoting Arnold Hauser, a “nodal point of several causal lines.” In assessing such a complex moment of sensible life, he critiques the assumption that modern art in Southeast Asia conforms to the premises of the Western avant-garde that anchor the value of modernism in the “self-consciousness towards the history of art.” This self-consciousness persistently requires challenge and subversion. Sabapathy contends that this is not the sole basis of modernism. In light of this idea, he advances two propositions that underlie the production of art in the region: the relationship between existence and expression and the relationship between environment and expression. These propositions can only be elaborated upon and rendered productive by “comprehensive interdisciplinary approaches.”

[PF]

Source: *Architecture Journal* 1983
(Singapore: School of Architecture,
National University of Singapore): 1–6.

ARCHITECTURE
JOURNAL 1983
school of architecture
national university of
singapore

Exhibitions publicize productions and solicit for patronage. These are operatives functioning at a primary level. At a secondary and other related levels, they prospect for stakes on uncharted terrain, persuade support for such stakes and propose new methods for prospecting. Perhaps an improper scenario, but one which allows for a convenient entry into our situation. For the purpose of this occasion is to induce fresh approaches to expositions for art activity in Southeast Asia, to inject direction and focus in presentation, and acuity in critical discussion. The expectation has been that ASEAN exhibitions are institutional endeavors seeking to provide overviews of varied and shared conceptions shaping modern art practices in the countries of the region. In these regards, the current exhibition, titled "Landscape in Contemporary Art Forms," generates satisfaction and provocation.

Satisfaction stems from witnessing a shift from habitual one-dimensional presentations framed by amorphous readings of history to those which set out to explore, in detail, a single idea or conception: an emphasis which can highlight and discriminate enduring assumptions related to art activity in the region. The present approach is geared towards a clear, purposeful and structured realization of the aims underlying the ASEAN exhibition. The shift reflects the adoption of new curatorial strategies, as well as fresh critical purposes. Some brief remarks concerning preceding exhibitions will be useful in setting a scene for my discussion.

In the past, mobile exhibitions have offered desultory histories of art in capsule form, based on selective, condensed schemes of chronology. They have aimed at compacting a varied range of pictorial accomplishments in the respective ASEAN countries. Invariably, the packaging unrolls as a parade of the top ten.

In these respects, earlier presentations point to attitudes wrapped around essentialist assumptions. That is to say, the productions have been selected for display because they embody a singular essence in which aesthetic and historical values coincide. A work of art is claimed to be significant in relation to its revealed, aesthetic qualities as well as its marking a moment of generative consequence, around which perceptions and contexts regarding importance and influences can be suggested.

There is nothing new or surprising in these claims; indeed, they constitute the core that sustains critical impulses. The received traditions of the history, criticism and appreciation of art are rooted in such assumptions. In this connection, earlier mobile exhibitions have, potentially, useful functions; they are nuclei for plausible, generalized accounts of modern art practices in Southeast Asia.

I say potentially, because their implications continue to lie dormant. The contents have not received sufficient exposure. The interpretation of these exhibitions in terms of issues and aspirations collectively shaping modern art practices have yet to

be suggested. Had these been cultivated, two of the three aims framing ASEAN exhibitions—namely, the promotion of a regional consciousness, and the provision of a basis for the comparative study of trends and developments—would have been articulated and tested, and have gained possible currency. For consciousness has to be made concrete and palpable to have impact. Comparative bases for study have to be structured and continually submitted for discussion and revision to be vital and purposeful. Creative performance and critical enterprise would only have gained from such eventualities.

It is with an optimistic view of such possible gains that I direct my remarks to the present occasion. I began with the claim that the current exhibition generates satisfaction as well as provocation. The cause for satisfaction has been remarked upon, briefly. We who are participating in the symposium are the provocateurs. Our licenses have been issued and the arena marked out. The guidelines to the symposium state aims that are comprehensive and, admittedly, ambitious. And they should be! If worked upon with enthusiasm and vigor, they can lead to provoking inputs and germinating results. In summary, they call for the provision of contexts that can suggest and generate sufficiently invigorating insights into an aspect of pictorial expression selected for this occasion—landscape. Such provisions will entail more than narratives fleshing out skeletal chronologies, tiresome inventories of names, dates and productions, and the facile reading of styles and influences. They will require more than a parade of aesthetic idiosyncrasies.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not intolerant of idiosyncrasies. The mystique enveloping creativity as such embraces this notion, and the recognition of such entities jolts discussion into creative dimensions. The bureaucracy of critical systems, however, seeks to tame and domesticate such precocious existences.

Chronologies, inventories, styles and influences are primary apparatus for critical perceptions. Entire disciplines and supporting ideologies concerning the conservation, display, publicity and cultural persuasion of art objects are anchored in them. They will, undoubtedly, feature in varying degrees of prominence in the papers scheduled for delivery at this platform. They have their uses in raw conditions, but they need not be offered for consumption in a perpetually uncooked state. All of these elements have to be internalized, pressed into serviceable form, and then employed with discretion, with proper stress and harmony in order to tease out the intelligence crystallized in the work of art.

The provision of contexts I referred to a little earlier is an endeavor to set up approach roads. The focal point at which all such approach roads must converge is the *image* the artist projects, its content, its form and style of expression—criteria which make up the conventions guiding the history and criticism of art. They are based on

the understanding that there is a discernible link between expression and existence; in other words, there is a discernible relationship between the style of the aesthetic object and the style of the creator's existence. The elaboration of contexts at the surface level pursues these aims.

Elaboration at a deeper level involves factors of greater, interlocking complexities. For in as much as there is a link between existence and expression, there is a link between environment and expression. The aesthetic object is pressed into shape by the values, ideologies and exigencies of a given place and time. One cannot remind oneself too often that the creative process is an infinitely subtle activity; that the work of art is a compound of the most unexpected elements; that it is, in the words of one writer (Arnold Hauser), the "nodal point of several causal lines: psychological, sociological and stylistic."⁰¹ For a complete apprehension of its significance, therefore, all three factors have to be simultaneously considered in a logical exegesis.

There is something unnerving about all of this. On the one hand, these are familiar conditions which have percolated to levels of commonsense application. No doubt, aspects related to them will surface in the country reports. On the other hand, declared with strident formality, they appear daunting and fraught with uncontrollable difficulties. To activate these considerations entails comprehensive, fully worked-out methodologies requiring inputs from various disciplines. They are available for adoption and transformation, to suit particular situations. The urgency for such approaches and levels of consideration cannot be overstated. For if art activity as such is to stake claims in areas which forge identities, shape values, and crystallize processes by which choices are made, then its study must embrace factors as those mentioned by Hauser as formative criteria. Their adoption is compelling, particularly in the discussion of modern art activity in Southeast Asia.

It is axiomatic that the emergence of modern art implies the existence of parent traditions. Accordingly, one of the identifying characteristics of this kind of activity is its self-consciousness towards the history of art, of all art—a self-consciousness realized by strategies that challenge and subvert the structures and ideals of existing practices, thereby provoking fresh values and directions. The conception of the avant-garde, its inexorable advance, is dramatized in these terms. Critical accounts of modern art are anchored in these assumptions.

The development of modern art in Southeast Asia does not necessarily conform to criteria based on such assumptions. Its development is linked with processes related to the attainment of political independence, self-determination in structuring new states, securing a semblance of harmony between the old and the new, and safeguarding of cultural identity. These processes exert enormous pressures, explicitly and implicitly, on the purpose and meaning

of modern art activity.

Conceptions regarding identity, individuality, art as the expression of private as well as public values are conditioned by them. Consequently, the sensibilities with which traditions are viewed, the choices that have to be made between contending ideological or philosophical positions and competing stylistic models are contingent not only on the realization of formal transgressions but also on the production of images that symbolize shared aspirations and meanings. Notions of individuality, of innovation and expressiveness, whilst earnestly sought for, defended and cherished, are actualized not exclusively in personalized journeys but hedged with the need to image a collective spirit.

Let me illustrate some of these assertions; the examples are taken from the great debate that raged throughout Indonesia regarding the future of art and culture. Glimpses into it provide vivid testimony of its passionate conduct and the scale of the issues.

Writing in the late 1930s, Sudjojono makes an impassioned plea to his fellow artists to depict "reality," "truth" and "life now," and not to seek "beauty in antiquity—Majapahit or Mataram, ... because art is work based on our daily life transmuted by the artist himself who is immersed in it."⁰² For Sudjojono, the past is truly dead; the artist should not be encumbered by it. Other voices counselled differently, for it was necessary not only to look forward but to look back.

In addition to conflicting views concerning the past, positions were clearly drawn regarding the choices that had to be made between indigenous traditions and modernity—the latter understood as Westernization, and translated in terms of individualism and materialism. In these respects, Sanusi Pane, the poet and playwright, offers the following diagnosis:

— European culture flourishes on materialism, intellectualism and individualism ... Individualism breeds boundless competition in the economic sphere. In art, the goal is *art pour l'art*.

and conclusion:

— In the East ... , materialism, intellectualism and individualism are not needed so much. Man is not forced to combat nature in trying to master it. He feels in unity with the world around him.

In a riveting simile, Pane likens the West to Faust and the East to Arjuna "meditating on Mt. Indrakila."

Takdir Alisjahbana, in his attempts to demystify the tired clichés about East and West, supported by a recognition for the need for modernization, began by espousing a holistic view. "The Western technology and science that they want," he admonished, "cannot be separated from Western philosophy, art and customs—in short, from the Western way and

01

Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 13.

—

02

Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1967). This and all quotations regarding the debate are from this publication.

view of life." In a swift, cleaving stroke he dispels Pane's mystic vision of the East.

It is not likely that airplanes, well equipped hospitals, efficient banks and rationalized agriculture would spring from spirits as Gandhi's or Tagore's.

Alisjahbana gradually assumes a conciliatory and accommodating stance, and calls for a reinterpretation of traditional heritage in ways that can be relevant to the modern age. About art he says,

If traditional arts and crafts can be taught in the schools alongside the scientific knowledge and the values and mental categories developed by modern culture, there is every reason to hope that the two cultural elements will produce in the talented and gifted student a synthesis of the artistic trends of our times flavored with something peculiarly Indonesian.

This is a paean to the humanistic vision in which craft and industry, tradition and modernity, the universal and the particular attain a grand synthesis through the disinterested intervention of the genius incarnate.

The proclamations and positional statements culled from the debate in Indonesia are not peculiar to that country. They allude to abiding preoccupations in the countries of Asia, particularly in this century when the pace towards the creation of new states accelerated. At first glance the statements I have quoted may well appear, in turns, simplistic and naïve, dogmatic, ambiguous and mystifying, and yet, they clue us into conceptions which are of pointed significance today, such as: attitudes toward traditions, understanding of the idea of the modern, anxieties concerning the role and status of the artist, the purpose of art activity, and the relationship between the audience and the work of art. It is not, however, my intention for this occasion to engage in a detailed reading of these statements. I present them in order to indicate the scope of the issues, the flavor of the discussion, and the potential inherent in them to enrich the interpretation of art. Needless to say, they are available for purposeful, critical readings. Material such as this need to be sought, secured and publicized; their application and codification need to be continually tested in order to expand the contexts for the discussion of art.

The parameters for plausible contexts have been suggested in terms of two propositions: on the one hand a relationship between existence and expression, and on the other hand a relationship between environment and expression. The link connecting the two is the notion of expression, in other words, the work of art. It is vital that the focus on this notion is safeguarded. Critical methodologies, of whatever persuasion, however lofty and subtle in structure, are useful as long as

they advance and enrich the apprehension of the work of art.

Critical accounts of modern art in Southeast Asia are rooted in the first proposition, which I have translated as interpretation at the surface level. The controlling idea is style. Used with varying degrees of proficiency and discretion, the idea is elaborated by adducing a number of descriptive formulations. The more important amongst these are delineating schemes of chronology, identifying picture categories and discerning influences. Yet others include determining shifts in aesthetic positions, claiming and defending significance for specific productions, and analyzing individual works in order to ascertain attitudes toward medium, material, processes and techniques of production. Art activity as a phenomenon which is available for discussion as well as for discursive formulations is based on these features. They make up the grammar of critical structures.

It is of vital importance that histories and criticisms at this level continue to be practiced and publicized. Admittedly, current practices are heavily indebted to received traditions, conceptions and values institutionalized in the USA and in Europe, and there is disquiet regarding such dependence. In this connection, it might well be worthwhile to remember that critical activity, as much as creative performance, is subject to processes of acculturation. (It is an issue that can be formalized as a theme for a separate symposium—one that is eminently compatible with the declared aims underlining ASEAN exhibitions.) Acquired traditions, conceptions and values pertaining to critical enterprises require revision and domestication; they need to be controlled and inclined toward positions that suggest and clarify contexts for modern art activity in Southeast Asia.

Procedures such as these are plausible with the adoption of the second proposition: namely, the link between expression and environment. In addition to the grammar of style, a comprehensive critical account of a work of art needs inputs from sociological and psychological causes. Admittedly this is a formidable demand in terms of the precision of information needed, and the comprehensive interdisciplinary approaches required. Nevertheless, a conscientiousness towards such causes can bring out the sense of the authentic in modern art activity in Southeast Asia, a sensibility that can be directed towards eradicating cynical and apologetic attitudes regarding such activity. We all share in the tumult of the complex and interlocking processes that used to and that continue to affect perceptions as to what society has been, is and should be. Inputs from sociology and psychology can suggest that modern art as practiced in the countries of this region reflects and participates in these processes; it has a rightful claim as a particular expression of these processes.

The choice of a single art idea or conception is ideally suited for the exploration of the kinds of contexts I have outlined. Landscape, as such, proposes particular challenges to the artist regarding time,

place and style. It crystallizes content in ways that are not so starkly available with other art ideas. For these reasons, it is eminently suitable for discussion of and approaches to the issues I have mentioned. The respective country reports will, I dare say, be principally based on interpretation at the surface level; in other words, fleshing out the link between expression and existence. This is useful. It is hoped that observations regarding interpretation at the deeper level, i.e., the link between expression and environment, will receive adequate attention in the ensuing discussion.

In conclusion, I offer you a provocative principle

enunciated by the late Ananda Coomaraswamy. In an oration delivered at Boston College in 1936, Coomaraswamy declared, unequivocally:

—
It is only when we understand the *raison d'être* of iconography that we can be said to have gone back to first principles. ⁰³
—

Iconography, properly understood and given a comprehensive range, will allow for surprising and yet clarifying understanding and interpretation of the causal links connecting existence, expression and the environment.

03

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 41.

Modern Art in Southeast Asia

John Clark

John Clark is Professor Emeritus in Art History at the University of Sydney. He is the author of five books and editor or co-editor of another five. In 2011, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art of the 1980s and 1990s* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010) won the Best Art Book Prize of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand. The recently completed draft of a two-volume study, *The Asian Modern, 1850s–1990s*, includes detailed comparative studies of five generations of modern Asian artists between the 1850s and the 1990s. His *Contemporary Asian Art at Biennials* is scheduled for publication by National University of Singapore Press in mid-2017.

In trying to discuss the practice and place referenced by the terms “modern art” and “Southeast Asia,” the author insists on the impossibility of neatly characterizing both. John Clark draws attention to the social condition of Southeast Asia in terms of a “severe historical disjunction.” The region is a highly differentiated formation, and therefore resists facile attempts to describe it as a singular geography of art. He asks: “What could possibly link, or what structural parallels could possibly be valid for, such disparate histories?” This disparity is not only a condition of the region; it constitutes the character of modern art itself. The region and the modern, therefore, are not to be viewed as preconceived norms; these categories are themselves problems to be probed in intellectual and artistic work. According to him, the disparity is partly overcome by a common element: “the simultaneous absence of articulated indigenous academic painting discourses and the presence of the representational power of European mid- and late 19th-century salon realism.” This involves a complex process. For instance, he imagines oil painting to be a source of status and prestige for the “colonial or self-colonizing aristocrats and their successors—colonial and postcolonial educated members of the literate middle classes.” This seems to suggest a situation of acceptance. But, on the other hand, he underscores the tricky nature of the transfer of knowledge of the discourse of painting as a transformation of its form “outside Euramerica” and a vehicle for a postcolonial sign system marking identity within modern nation-states. The appropriation of the Western form, therefore, was extremely complicated: a means to express critique of the Western origin but no longer in formalist terms within the modernist continuum, on the one hand, and a turn of the postcolonial creative intelligence to issues that trouble the world, many of which could be traced to colonial history, on the other.

[PF]

Source: Originally published as “Modern Art in South-East Asia,” in *Art and AsiaPacific* Sample Issue (1993): 35–38.

South-East Asian Focus

Hong Kong • Japan • China
New Zealand • Australia

Modern art in Southeast Asia exists in a context of severe historical disjunction between the different linguistic and cultural situations inherited from colonialism or neocolonialism. Let us take art schools as one direct indicator. Some countries had a colonial art academy. In Vietnam this was followed by a variety of overseas "attachments"—the North with the former Soviet Union and China, the South with the USA and France, until reunification in 1975. Russian and Chinese replaced French as the language of art discourse for North Vietnamese, and English for some South Vietnamese. Other countries, like Thailand, experienced a kind of self-colonialism. The Thai court and nobility imported Italian art and artists wholesale in the 1890s and 1910s, and in the 1930s the military government's art school took Italy as a model through the work of Corrado Feroci. Malaysia was without its own art schools until the late 1960s; Indonesia only had them from the early 1950s; yet the Philippines had the earliest art schools in the region, dating from the early 19th century. What could possibly link, or what structural parallels could possibly be valid for, such disparate histories? Probably the single most important linking element is the simultaneous absence of articulated indigenous academic painting discourses and the presence of the representational power of European mid- and late 19th-century salon realism. In Southeast Asia, realist European oil painting was not connected with the strong pictorial discourses of China and Japan, each of which had developed parallel art-theoretical or poetic criticism. Furthermore, where there was a highly developed, stylistically syncretic representational mode, as in Thai Buddhist temple murals, stylistic innovation was not questioned as long as the narrative integrity of the morality tale depicted was maintained.

An equally striking structural analogy is found in the interest of mid- and late 19th-century aristocrats in the mastery of European art forms, whether by study at home, as with Prince Naris in Thailand, or through study in Holland, as with Raden Saleh from Java. The long historical lead times for the development of modern art in Europe to some extent finds a minor social equivalent in the learning of oil painting by these colonial or self-colonizing aristocrats and their successors—colonial and postcolonial educated members of the literate middle classes. To some extent, this prehistory positions oil painting among the postindependence, court, or upper-middle-class elites as the formal expression of a received or acquired status. A signal example of this is the Indonesian artist Basuki Abdullah, who was "court" painter to Soekarno in Indonesia in the 1960s, to the King of Thailand and to the Marcoses in the Philippines during the 1970s.

But there are also broken genealogies which serve as historical parallels between different countries in the region. One thinks of the break between the Spanish orientation of Philippine art before "independence" in 1896 and its orientation towards the

USA thereafter; the loss of a socialist art in Indonesia after the counter-communist coup in 1965, and the sideways dislocation or fragmented development of a socially critical art in Thailand after the right-wing military coup in 1976. Significantly, only the relatively free situation in postindependence Indonesia and post-1945 Philippines produced an historicizing art linked to representation of popular struggles. Of course the greatest and longest-lasting disruptions were those implied by the end of colonialism, or externally imposed neocolonialism (as opposed to that internally generated) after World War II. These political changes implied the end of a different order which has only recently become apparent. The cultural domination of Euramerica brought prestige to both its academy and anti-academy art, but as the mimicking of academy art for the colonial elites could now be exposed by an openly nationalist discourse, its power could also be seen clearly as more than inverse Orientalism on the part of those elites. European academy art now became the art of a local establishment, but this nationalist transfer also concealed a different contradiction. For if modernism's founding myth had legitimated its self-origination through the invention of new forms in the face of academy atavism, so with the transfer of new political legitimacy among the ex-colonies could academy realism be challenged outside Euramerica. The transfer of the confrontation was from an historical situation in turn-of-the-century Europe to a topological location in the contemporary world outside that of Euramerica, where modernism's various styles had already become part of an academy repertoire. Access to the originating myths under local conditions actually implied the end of the notion of origination in modernism itself, and at the same time exposed the ethnocentric notions which still underpin talking from the periphery on the center's terms. Part of the task which artists in Southeast Asia have adopted is to create meaningful icons for the new national identity, or for efforts made in its development and defense. Whether these icons had a royal or crypto-fascist construction, as in 1920s and 1930s Thailand, or whether they involved the siting of massive public monuments to national unity and effort in a context of multilingual and cultural diversity, as in Jakarta, it was quickly found that formulaic rejections of the colonial were no guide to the positive formation of postcolonial symbols. All that littered the public sight lines of many Southeast Asian cities by the 1980s were monuments to megalomania or corporatist appropriation of public symbols in the name of national or religious pride: the multistory "Malay" roof on a party headquarters; the international hotel lobbies full of commissioned local "genre" painting in Bangkok and Jakarta.

The end of formal dominance in politics by Euramerica, and in art of the origination implicit in modernism, meant that the new elites could treat Euramerica as an immense cultural warehouse from which they now had the sovereignty of consumer

choice. Local elites, as in 1950s Philippines, could decide they wanted certain types of modernism to curtain-call their entry onto the stage of international expression. Or other elite members could denounce the ignorance of what was genuinely local, vernacular and of the people, criticizing the cultural choice of their peers as ethnic or nationalist treason. This position carried with it the danger of a domestic "Orientalizing" of the folk, and the confusion of types of aesthetic preference with the social structures which privilege one type of art against another. The political and nationalist coloring given to many art debates tended to obscure more directly artistic contradictions. If there was a gap between the national and the tribal, "the tribal" or the "ethnic" were not unproblematic notions, nor were they necessarily clear in attributing valued aspects of common symbolic values to art forms. All the Southeast Asian countries have seen as much forced assimilation of tribal or local difference into the presumed national synthesis as they have seen artists arising from a local base with a local expression that found wider popularity.

Also buried, often by an inclination to leave artists alone so long as they engaged in individual expression or unproblematic decorativism, was the wider exploration of a kind of formal consciousness having cultural or religious roots, which implicitly excluded other members of the new nation. The tradition of Islamic calligraphy and the Islamic prohibition against using icons were the basis for some interesting attempts to develop a culturally specific non-figurative art in Indonesia in the 1970s, and later in Malaysia in the 1980s—which have yet to see full development. The progenitors were sidetracked into producing appropriate decorations for the elite. Such purchase-worthy elements as Koranic quotations, gold highlighting, or, in Thailand, royal references, seemed to paradoxically foreclose their full plastic and expressive qualities by obvious referential decorativeness. Despite the efforts of some Thai artists at a *wat* overseas in London, the very rich possibilities for the social critique of contemporary authority figures found in the moralism of 19th-century *wat* murals do not seem to have entered modern artistic expression in Thailand.

The end of the Cold War and of a world dominated by two superpowers should bring Laos, Vietnam and eventually Cambodia back into an artistic relationship with their neighbors. Increased institutional provision for art teaching, including more art schools and more opportunities for high school art study, should increase the size of the art-interested publics in all of the Southeast Asian countries. With greater security for the art establishments now producing modernist art, the tendency seen in Bangkok and Yogyakarta for certain art schools to dominate state art exhibitions should produce a much stronger art anti-establishment with a wider range of small exhibition venues.

Some of these in Bangkok and Jakarta have

already become a kind of art-fashion boutique for newly prosperous professionals. But the end of the modernist myth of formalist origination concomitant with the end of Euramerican political domination means this anti-establishment no longer has to position itself against the establishment through formalist innovation. It is also increasingly sophisticated about earlier Euramerican assimilation of avant-garde styles and concepts by the local art establishment, of which its own art-school teachers are visible examples. In the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia this art anti-establishment has begun to link its activities to social issues such as environmental despoliation, prostitution and AIDS, both through its subject matter and through the materials it adopts. This may mean a return of art to propaganda for faith and the creation of a new orthodoxy. The cultural diversity of the region, and the indigenous nature of the art world processes which this will represent, should ensure this creative process remains a fairly open one.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Works

Clark, J., ed. *Modernity in Asian Art*. Sydney: Wild Peony Press, 1993.

Indonesia

Agus Dermawan, T.R. *Basoeki Abdullah RA*. Jakarta: Penerbit PT Gramedia, 1985.

Edleson, M. J., et al. *Neka Museum: Guide to the Painting Collection*. Ubud: Museum Neka, 1986.

Fischer, J., ed. *Modern Indonesian Art*. Jakarta and New York: Panitia Pameran KIAS (1990–91) and Festival of Indonesia, 1990.

Forge, A. *Balinese Traditional Painting*. Sydney: Australian Museum, 1978.

Holt, C. *Art in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.

Holt, C. *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972.

Lee, Man Fong, ed. *Lukisan2 dan Patung2 koleksi Presiden Sukarno dari Republik Indonesia* [Paintings and statues from the collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia], 5 vols. Jakarta: Panitia Penerbit Lukisan-lukisan dan Patung-patung Koleksi Presiden Sukarno, 1964.

Liem Tjoe Ing, comp. *Lukisan2 Koleksi Adam Malik* [Paintings from the collection of Adam Malik]. Jakarta: PT Intermedia, 1979.

Kartomi, M. J., ed. *Five Essays on the Indonesian Arts*. Melbourne: Monash University, 1981.

Rosidi A., et al. *Affandi 70 Tahun* [Affandi, 70 years old]. Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian, 1978.

Spanjaard, H. "Free Art: Academic Painters in Indonesia." In *Kunst uit een andere wereld* [Art from another world]. Edited by Faber, P., et al. Rotterdam: Museum voor Volkenkunde, 1988.

Supangkat, J. "Indonesia's New Art Movement." *Praxis M*, no. 24 (September 1989).

Wright, A. *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters*. Singapore: Oxford University Press 1993.

Malaysia

"The Arts in Malaysia." Special supplement, *Arts & the Islamic World* 5, no.1 (Spring–Summer 1988).

Piyadasa, R. *Pengolahan lanskap tempatan dalam Seni Modern Malaysia, 1930–1981* [The treatment of the local landscape in modern Malaysian art, 1930–1981]. Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1981.

Sabapathy, T.K. and Piyadasa, R. *Modern Artists of Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bagasa dan Pustaka, 1983.

Philippines

Castaneda, D. *Art in the Philippines*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Diliman, 1964.

Coseteng, A. M. L., ed. *Philippine Modern Art and Its Critics*. Manila: UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines, 1972.

De Alaya, F.Z. *Philippine Religious Imagery*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila, 1983.

Duldulao, M.D. *A Century of Realism in Philippine Art*. Manila: Fine Arts Corp., 1982.

Duldulao, M.D. *Contemporary Philippine Art*. Quezon City: Vera-Reyes, 1972.

Kalaw-Ledesma, P. *The Struggle for Philippine Art*. Manila: Purita Kalawa-Ledesma, 1974.

Kalaw-Ledesma, P. and Guerrero, A.M. *Elades: National Artist*. Manila: Filipinas Foundation, 1979.

Navarro, V.T. and Zafaralla, P. *Carlos V. Francisco: The Man and Genius of Philippine Art*. Manila: Ayala Museum, 1985.

Roces, A. R. *Amorsolo*. Manila: Filipinas Foundation, 1975.

Roces, M.P. *Exchange Manila-Berlin*. Berlin: RAAB Galerie, 1988.

Smith, W.S., ed. *The Art of the Philippines, 1521–1957*. Manila: Associated Publishers, 1958.

Torres, E. *100 Years of Philippine Painting*. Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1984.

Singapore

Chai Yik Chin. *Singapore Artists*. Singapore: Singapore Cultural Foundation, 1982.

Singapore Artists Directory. Singapore: Prime Prints Pte. Ltd., 1987.

Sheares, C., ed. *Georgette Chen*. Singapore: National Museum and Art Gallery, 1985.

Thailand

Hoskin, J., *Ten Contemporary Thai Artists*. Bangkok: Graphis, 1984.

Jamuni, Pairoj. *Modern Thai Painting*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1989.

Krairiksh, Piriya. *Thai Reflections of American Experiences*. Bangkok: Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, 1986.

Krairiksh, Piriya, and Thongchua, P. *Art in Thailand since 1932*. Bangkok: Thamasat University, Thai Khadi Research Institute, 1982.

Michaelson, H. *Die Entwicklung und die Konsequenzen der westlichen Einflüsse auf die Zeitgenössische thailändische Malerie*. Dissertation, Ruhr Universität-Bochum, 1987.

Michaelson, H. "Thailand in the 1980s." *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 41 (June 1991).

Phillips, H.P. *The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand*. Berkeley: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1992. Distributed by University of Washington Press.

Poshyananda, Apinan. *Modern Art in Thailand*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Smithies, M. "The Bangkok Art Scene in the Early 1960s: A Personal Souvenir." *The Journal of the Siam Society* 66 (July 1978).

Vietnam

Mohring, H. *Vietnamesische Malerei*. Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1963.

Nghe Thuat Tao Hinh Vietnam, Hanoi, Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa, 1975.

Peintures Vietnamiennes contemporaines. Hanoi: Nha In Quoc Gia Viet-Nam in Va Phat Hanoi, 1956. Distributed by So Xuat Nhap Khau Sach Bao.

Trai Van Can, Huu Ngoc, Vu Huyen, Mai Van Nam. *Contemporary Vietnamese Painters*. Hanoi: Red River Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1987.

Trung Dai Hoc My Thuat Hanoi 1925–1990. Hanoi, 1990.

Essay 03

**Realism as an Attitude:
Asian Art in the 1990s****Ushiroshōji Masahiro**

Ushiroshōji Masahiro is Professor in the Faculty of Humanities, Kyushu University. He graduated from the School of Letters at Kyushu University and joined the Fukuoka Art Museum as a curator in 1978. From 1999 he was Chief Curator of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, before assuming his current position in 2002. He has curated numerous exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from Asia, including "The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements" (1997), the first two Fukuoka Asian Art Triennales (1999, 2002), and "50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings: 1925–75" (2005). He is the author of numerous books and articles in the field.

Included in the catalogue for the 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka, held in 1994 at the Fukuoka Art Museum, the essay addresses the theme of the exhibition's English subtitle, "Realism as an Attitude." (The Japanese subtitle, *Jidai o mitsumeru me*, which translates loosely to "Eye on the Times," was chosen for its appeal to a general audience.) Here, Ushiroshōji Masahiro argues that in Asian art from the 1980s onward there has been a visible increase in works based on a critical social awareness as well as those observing ordinary, familiar incidents. He describes this stance of actively engaging with one's lived reality as reflecting a "realistic" attitude. Differing from "realism as a style," which attempts to represent an object as realistically as possible, "realism as an attitude" implies the honesty of confronting the object of reality itself. Having learned the techniques and ideology of Western modern art, Asian modern artists sought to achieve a unique, non-Western mode of expression, but the search for such uniqueness turned more often to national identity than to the individuality of the artist, leading to an overemphasis on "Asian-ness." In contrast to this, Ushiroshōji says that since the 1980s there has been an increase in works expressing the individual critical awareness of the artist in Asian contemporary art. Instead of painting and sculpture, there has been a rise in installation and performance works, and works using ordinary, close-to-hand materials have also come to prominence. He concludes the essay by describing the current situation—which has seen the emergence of new modes of expression in terms of content, form and material—as the end of the modern period in Asia and the start of a new era. The Asian Art Show was held regularly by the Fukuoka Art Museum at roughly five-year intervals. It developed from the "Contemporary Asian Art Show" held in 1980 as part two of the "Asian Artists Exhibition" (part one, held the year prior, in 1979, had focused on modern Asian art from India, China and Japan). Differing from the previous three iterations, the 4th Asian Art Show replaced the national presentation format with an exhibition organized around six thematic sections, "Society as Reality"; "Nation, Nationality and History"; "The City and Consumption"; "Images of Communities"; "The Natural Environment"; and "Intimations of Violence." After the establishment of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in 1999, the Asian Art Show was succeeded by the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, organized by the same museum.

[KK]

Source: *The 4th Asian Art Show*
Fukuoka: *Realism as an Attitude*, exh. cat.
(Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994),
33–38. Translated by Janet Goff.
Revised by Andrew Maerkle, 2016.

— To confront and portray this reality is to redefine the very concept of "realism." This realism invites memory and desire alongside the naked eye to traverse into territories it was hitherto denied. It seeks spaces where time past commingles with the present, traditions telescope into contemporary consciousness, dreams do not contradict experiences of the wakeful vigils of our troubled times.

— Gulam Mohammed Sheikh ⁰¹

I

The 4th Asian Art Show is taking place five years after the previous edition of 1989. This year, there are 18 participating countries including Japan—the most yet. Conversely, the roughly 130 works by 48 artists on display are the smallest number so far. This does not mean, however, that the scale of the exhibition has been reduced. Rather, it is due to physical constraints (i.e., limited exhibition space) imposed by an increase in the size of the works, as is the case for installations.

It has been 15 years since the 1st Asian Art Show. In the beginning, there was no opportunity in Japan (or elsewhere in the world) to learn about modern art in Asia. But the situation has changed since then, and the Asian Art Show itself has introduced an ample number of artists. Consequently, it was determined that the time for showcasing as many artists as possible has passed, and that a thorough presentation of artists selected on the basis of a theme that clearly manifests the current situation for Asian contemporary art is more responsive to the demands of the times.

The theme of this year's exhibition is "Realism as an Attitude." The exhibition will focus on works dealing with social themes, which have become quite common in Asian art in recent years. Before discussing the theme and looking in detail at the works in the exhibition, it is necessary to consider the historical context surrounding the art. After explaining the theme, and the issues it encompasses, I will then provide an overview of the works in the exhibition.

II

The gears of history seem to be grinding hard as they revolve in large circles. In 1989 the wall dividing East and West Berlin—a symbol of confrontation between two rival political and economic systems—disappeared. The structure of the Cold War collapsed, and the global order changed dramatically. In Asia, too, several regimes have fallen, while democracy movements have led to bloody incidents. Even countries that rigidly cling to socialism have been forced to implement economic reforms and liberalization, and establish market

economies. The member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have followed on the heels of the "four dragons" that achieved dazzling economic growth in the 1980s (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore), and now, in the 1990s, China's economy is booming.

Although materially affluent nations and regions have emerged as a result of economic growth, various problems have also been created, such as the baneful side effects of industrialization and urbanization, the destruction of the living environment as a result of economic development, the endangerment of the traditional value systems underlying village communities, and disparities between rich and poor. Perversely, the emergence of material wealth and the information society, along with the pursuit of rationality and convenience, seems to have confused and distorted people's minds.

On the other hand, the dream of the nation-state, a concept that arose in the 18th century, is also facing a crisis. It has gradually become clear that the dream of people living within the same borders one day sharing a single language, culture and nationality is nothing but a fantasy. The various ethnic groups that make up a nation each possess unique characteristics. There is a growing perception of a need for mutual understanding based on the appreciation of each other's ethnic differences. When ethnicity is manifested in extreme forms, the result is violent ethnic strife and religious conflict of the sort that is now breaking out all over the world.

Neither modernization/Westernization, nor the founding of nation-states, economic development or internationalization have necessarily produced an ideal world, and today the values of modernism are being questioned on all sides.

Even in the brief interval since the 3rd Asian Art Show five years ago, the face of the world has been radically altered. The changes extend all the way from the level of nations and societies to individual everyday realities. What are Asian artists feeling and expressing as these tumultuous changes take place?

III

Since the end of the late 1980s, a common outlook has been widely apparent in Asian art: namely, a highly "realistic" attitude. For instance, there are works based on an awareness of social problems. Sometimes this takes the form of a message protesting discrimination or the suppression of human rights by political and social systems. Some works deal with issues of feminism or gender, while others address the subject of the nation.

There are also works that focus on everyday events that happen around the artist. The advent of urbanization, industrialization and consumer society in the wake of economic development is changing people's lifestyles, while the traditional values that form the basis of village communities are being lost. Whether the subject is development or destruction,

01

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, "Artist's Message," in *4th Asian Art Show Fukuoka: Realism as an Attitude*, exh. cat. (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994), 204.

02

Ushiroshōji Masahiro, "The Labyrinthine Search for Self-Identity: The Art of Southeast Asia from the 1980s to the 1990s," in *New Art from Southeast Asia*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1992).

03

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

04

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

affluent cities or vanishing communities, this group of works probes the changing face of society through changes in everyday reality.

Through works that convey an interest in society and a willingness to get involved in everyday reality, Asian artists have shown a stance that indicates their desire to proactively engage with and express the reality in which they live. This is the "realism" that emerged in Asian art in the 1990s. However, this is not the narrowly defined realism as a formal style or exacting mimesis, nor does it necessarily complement such realism. As opposed to "realism as style," this effort to squarely face reality is the common trend in Asian art during this period, and I call it "realism as an attitude."

How did this stance come about? And what does it signify? To determine the answers to these questions, it is necessary to take a brief look at modern Asian art from a historical perspective.

IV

In as much as Asia's modernity was defined by Westernization, so too modern Asian art meant emulating Western art. The first task facing modern Asian artists was therefore to study Western art, which would in turn provide a foundation for searching for and establishing a "unique form of expression" that did not copy from the West. In other words, the typical image of a modern Asian artist was someone who had studied in the West and mastered Western art techniques, beginning with oil painting; incorporated Western styles and learned about Western aesthetics and discourses on art; and then used that knowledge as a foundation for trying to achieve an original form of representation that was not merely an imitation of the West.

While pursuing the often contradictory goal of establishing a non-Western identity while learning from the West itself, Asian artists until the 1980s relied on indigenous Asian "traditions" as a source of "identity" or "unique expression." The reason was that it was possible to believe that at least these traditions were not an imitation of the West but original or unique to the artist.

To put it briefly, "tradition" encompassed various levels, ranging from traditional art to the worldview and cosmology espoused by a particular religion, from traditional customs to historic buildings and ruins or exotic landscapes. Whatever the case, many artists racked their brains trying to figure out how to fuse the West and tradition. The most widely attempted solution to the problem of establishing one's identity was to use Western painting techniques to express non-Western subjects, such as Asian landscapes and scenes, traditional manners and customs and religious festivals. In addition, some works depicted religious stories and folktales, drew inspiration from a religious worldview, or introduced forms found in traditional art and crafts. Conversely, the application of Western methods—for

example, perspective and modeling, or themes unique to Western art—to traditional art forms and techniques was also widely practiced.

Many modern Asian artists have tried to forge their own identity by means of this approach (attempting to fuse the West and tradition). As I have stated elsewhere, modern Asian art was at basis a search for identity.⁰² Unable to achieve "fusion" at the level of artistic creation or representation, artists tended not to advance beyond a mere compromise between the West and tradition. In that endeavor—that is, in their identity—lay two problems.

For one thing, it was easy for artists to substitute their identity as a member of a nation (what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities"⁰³) for their identity as the creator of an artwork. An artist might seek out the identity of Indonesian art, for example, rather than his own identity. (One should remember that in Japan, too, what Kojima Zenzaburō sought was not the oil paintings of Kojima Zenzaburō but rather the "oil paintings of a Japanese person.") Behind this lay the complicated circumstances regarding nationalism and national identity that accompanied the founding of the nation-state. In other words, confusion arose from the fact that the issue of identity, which should intrinsically apply to the artist himself, was converted into "national identity," something that does not actually exist.

Secondly, the task of creating national art and searching for a national identity tended to demand an inordinate amount of "Asianness" from themes, styles and subjects. Behind the effort to learn from the West while directing one's attention to tradition in an effort to overcome the West lurked the danger that tradition would approach the view of Asia as seen from the West, an image of Asia that the West expected and created—what Edward Said calls "Orientalism."⁰⁴ (The stronger the awareness of the West, the greater the danger.) This approach all too fully contained the danger that Asian artists themselves would succumb to Orientalism. The serious attempts to discover an Asian aesthetic awareness in tradition are inseparable from this internalized Orientalism.

V

As explained above, the underlying framework of modern Asian art was invested with a desire to create original forms of expression in Asian art that would be neither a simple imitation of the West nor an uncritical revival of tradition. This position walked a narrow line between the overwhelming influence of the West and the powerful lure of tradition. The "realism as an attitude" that emerged starting from the end of the 1980s transcends this basic framework of modern Asian art.

Impressing us with their interest in society and their involvement in the everyday reality surrounding the artist, the works encompassed in the phrase "realism as an attitude" differ from earlier works in terms of both theme and substance. One senses in

such works an acute criticality on the part of the individual artist that was missing in the approach of fusing tradition and the West.

Furthermore, an attempt to transcend the framework of Asian modern art can also be observed in terms of format and material. There are more installations and performances, and there is a noticeable increase in the use of personal everyday objects. This marks the demise of Western modernist forms of expression—forms of expression learned from “advanced” Western art, in which painting meant working in oils on canvas and sculpture meant bronze or marble forms (whether abstract or figurative) placed on pedestals.

An Indonesian artist described how, when he tried to take on the new challenge of socially themed art, he needed an entirely new mode of expression. And so he tried making an installation—something which to that point he had known only by name. In this way, acquiring a new theme also required a new format and new material.

These developments are linked to the spontaneity of expression. One has the feeling that Asian artists have parted company with the rigid idea (the inverse of Orientalism) of seeking identity in tradition, and are beginning to freely address issues of intense personal concern to themselves, using familiar materials and methods that are easily imbued with emotion and significance.

This effort to once again place art in a social context can also be considered an attempt to restore something that Western-style modern art discarded in the quest for autonomous artistic expression and pure form.

VI

This marks the fourth time an Asian Art Show is being held. Over time, the situation that prevailed at the outset of the series has changed. With each exhibition, differences in the situations in the participating countries widened, and it has become difficult to put together a single, unified exhibition. (We may have simply overlooked this difficulty before.)

The sole intention of the 1st Asian Art Show was to introduce as many artists as possible from each Asian country. As a result (in hindsight), the show offered a lineup of the pioneers of modern Asian art. The 2nd Asian Art Show introduced trends taking place among young Asian artists. Under the theme of “Symbolic Visions in Contemporary Asian Life,” the 3rd Asian Art Show concerned itself with formalist tendencies that were manifested throughout Asia. The 4th Asian Art Show tries to grasp what is taking place in Asian art in the aftermath of modernism. The term “Asia,” however, encompasses different social circumstances resulting from different economic conditions and political systems. The situation in the art world is also affected by whether a country is either open or relatively closed to information from the outside world.

While acknowledging a certain arbitrariness, the theme “Realism as an Attitude” has been divided into six categories. (In self-defense, it could be argued that the interest and richness of Asian art lies in the very impossibility of categorizing it from a single point of view.) The categories include: society as reality; nation, nationality and history; the city and consumption; the image of the community; the natural environment; and intimations of violence. Below I will summarize the works in the exhibition under these categories.

1 | Society as Reality

The artists depict themes that deal with current problems in the societies in which they live. These problems include poverty, social alienation, human rights and politics. Although many works convey a strong message, it is often couched in terms of the artists’ own cultural roots, such as the traditional arts (including the performing arts), rather than by means of a direct appeal. The works confirm that contemporary Asian art constitutes a kind of search for the self.

Navin Rawanchaikul (Thailand) quietly remonstrates against the suppression of human rights. Adapting the traditional forms used in *wayang*, Javanese shadow theater, Dadang Christanto (Indonesia) wryly protests against mass murder. His compatriot, Heri Dono, employs the structure of the same theatrical tradition to depict social conditions that cause alienation.

Lu Shengzhong (China) tries to express social ills using the traditional folk practice called *zhaohun*, in which suffering souls are soothed by means of paper cutouts. In Lee Wen’s “Yellow Man” performances, the artist casts himself in the role of the “Oriental,” investigating Asian philosophy while problematizing social conditions in Singapore.

Two artists from the Philippines, a country with an inherently strong tradition of social realism, fit under this category. Noel Cuizon has created a microcosm of society in the form of a relief in which the figures can be freely rearranged by spectators. Elmer Borlongan presents fragments of social issues in the form of strange human figures placed in ordinary everyday settings.

Tsagaandariin Enkhjargal depicts Mongolia’s poverty and urbanization, while Kongphat Luangrath’s paintings deal with everyday urban scenes in Laos and fears about the future.

2 | Nation, Nationality and History

The works in this category take history and the founding of the nation as their themes. Inevitably this category deals with issues pertaining to multiethnic, multicultural societies. The reason is that most Asian nations have their origins in the colonial system imposed upon them by the Great Powers in the 19th century, and thus could not help becoming multiethnic states. Discussing the present inevitably means discussing history and ethnic issues.

Tan Chin Kuan probes interracial tension in Malaysia, which is pursuing economic growth with

05

Choindongiyn Hurelbaatar, "Artist's
Message," in *Realism as an Attitude*, 100.

the aim of joining the club of advanced industrialized nations. His installation takes up the race riots of 1969, which left a deep scar in the hearts of the populace, and the ensuing "bumiputera" policy, which privileges the native Malay population. His questions go back to the founding of Malaysia as a country.

Hong Sung-min's installation, *Between North and South Korea, the Loud Speakers at the Demilitarized Zone are the Most Active Way of a Cultural Exchange*, features loud speakers arranged in the shape of the South Korean national flag. The installation expresses Hong's sorrow at the division of his homeland, the tragedy of the Korean War and the confrontation between North and South Korea that still continues today.

The works by three artists from Bangladesh reveal the deep psychological scars that remain from the war of independence in 1971. Amirul Momanin Chowdhury juxtaposes history and the present political situation. Saidul Haque Juice and Mahbubur Rahman also refer to the present political situation while at the same time dealing with the war of independence. (Mahbubur Rahman, though, was only three years old when the war took place.)

History, the founding of the nation and the present also figure in the paintings of Choindongiyn Hurelbaatar (Mongolia), which depict the groundswell of nationalism after democracy in 1990, and the subsequent reassessment of Genghis Khan and criticism of the 1937 revolution that destroyed ethnic culture. "Just a few years ago," notes Hurelbaatar, "it wouldn't have been possible to send my paintings to your art show because no public works about Genghis Khan, the events in 1937, or homeless children were allowed."⁹⁵ His comment attests to the recent political, social and cultural changes in his country.

Surjeet Kaur Choyal explores the identity of India in a nostalgic portrait of a prince who ruled an Indian state long ago. Nilofar Akmut (Pakistan) addresses the problem of sexual discrimination in the history of women in the Indian subcontinent. Cho Duck-hyun (South Korea) uses old photographs of women from the Korean peninsula to lyrically depict the history of his homeland and the historical currents that have forged contemporary society.

3 | The City and Consumption

A segment of the population has emerged in major cities around Asia that enjoys urban life and the pleasures of a consumer society. Although there are large gaps between countries, overall during the past decade goods have become plentiful, and societies in which new media produces international trends have emerged in the cities of Asia. The plethora of information and goods has triggered an insatiable desire for consumption, and problems concerning traffic congestion, overcrowding and urbanization have also appeared. The materials used by the artists in this category all lie outside the traditional domain of the arts. The artists try to

re-examine the meaning of art as they communicate with reality via the material.

Choi Jeong-hwa (South Korea) shows an interest in the goods that abound in consumer society. Through the appeal of cheap, kitschy, mass-produced goods, he questions the relationship between real and fake, original and copy. In the past, Lim Poh Teck (Singapore) has depicted with nostalgia and festive delight the transformation of the city of Singapore from a *kampong* (village) into a metropolis. This time, however, he transforms everyday objects—the forgotten items of urbanization—into beautiful objects.

Using scrapped industrial products and automobile parts, Kade Javanalikhorn (Thailand) takes up the problem of environmental destruction caused by urbanization, a common concern among Thailand's younger generation. At the same time, though, his work seems to be underpinned by a sense of enjoyment of consumer society.

As indicated by its title, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed's series "Ninja Turtles Visit Malaysia" depicts the popular cartoon characters looking at typical Malay crafts and souvenirs displayed on traditional cabinets, of the kind invariably encountered by tourists visiting Malaysia. The work also denotes Malaysia's complex culture, which includes the cultures of the indigenous people who inhabit East Malaysia.

Drawing upon his experience studying in South Korea, Nakamura Masato (Japan) focuses his attention on differences in the meaning of signs found in Korean and Japanese cities. His subject in the present show is barbershop signs.

4 | Images of Communities

In Asia, traditional communities and their values are still alive today only a short distance from the city. They by no means recall the past nostalgically as the good old days. The combination of modern urban life for a few and traditional, premodern life for the majority is the reality in Asia today.

Artists from Myanmar are participating in the exhibition for the first time in a decade. Among them, Saw Hlaing affectionately paints scenes of people's lives in farming and fishing villages, while Kyee Myint Saw depicts city life, and Min Wae Aung deftly evokes the light and dark sides of life.

Kanha Sikounnavong (Laos) and Hajah Masnah Haji Lusin (Brunei) depict traditional customs, while Jack Kulasinghe (Sri Lanka) and Kiran Manandhar (Nepal) probe the identity of the community in their treatment of traditional myths and religious images. Baet Yeok Kuan (Singapore) seeks the point where Eastern images passed down from his ancestors merge with contemporary elements: it is there that the four cosmic elements and the bodily organs encounter manufactured goods.

5 | The Natural Environment

The awareness that environmental destruction on a

global scale is a problem that demands an immediate solution is shared by all mankind. More so than in industrialized countries, the sense of crisis is deeper in non-industrial countries, where nature is still plentiful. In some instances, what seems to industrialized countries like only a slight change may spell doom for a traditional way of life.

A sense of crisis regarding the spread of entropy on a global scale underlies the installation made by Fuji Hiroshi (Japan), who uses the life of a frog to portray the global food and population crisis, international problems exemplified by the decline of the traditional Oshima textile industry and the torrential rains that struck Kagoshima, and local issues facing individuals.

Pg. Timbang Pg. Haji Tuah (Brunei) depicts nature's force in compositions that evoke the sea. Khamsouk Keomingmuang expresses the importance of the water and animals essential to life in Laos, as well as the fear that the tropical rain forests will disappear.

Among the four Vietnamese artists in the exhibition, Nguyen Quan depicts personifications of nature, while Van Thuyet compresses the force of nature into primitive anthropomorphic figures. Dao Hung directs a gentle gaze at the natural environment around him, and Tran Hoang Co renders the ecological crisis symbolically as a fossil-like bird. Tserennadmidin Tsegmed employs personification to depict nature in Mongolia as a transcendent presence. Niloofar Chaman (Bangladesh) treats barren, ruined nature as an allegory for society. Birendra Pratap Singh (Nepal) expresses nature's power as an abstract organic form.

6 | Intimations of Violence

There are hints of violence, evil and oppression in the works in this category. These works may suggest actual historical events, or they might obliquely criticize various government regulations and restrictions. Or they might reference the absurdity of human existence, or express the uneasiness of the times.

Although Jagath Weerasinghe's painting is said to have been inspired by the ethnic riots in Sri Lanka in 1983, one has the sense that rather than directly addressing the issue, he is depicting more elemental, violent emotions harbored by society and human beings. Antonio Leaño (Philippines), too, focuses on the violence and bestiality in human existence.

The sculptures of Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin (Malaysia) are handsome works, but they brim with a blood-curdling violence that quietly pierces the soul. According to Gulam Mohammed Sheikh (India), his painting, entitled *Predator*, reflects the heyday of Fascist power, yet it does not appear to depict anything particular; instead, it seems to symbolize gratuitous evil and brutality.

The paintings by Jamal Shah (Pakistan), which seem to be looking outdoors through a series of windows, do not tell a clear-cut story either. Sometimes rain is depicted: I understand from the artist that the rain denotes social violence. A cold, silent rain falls on fragmentary, disjointed scenes. Kanchan Chander (India) juxtaposes a woodblock print and a picture painted on the woodblock. Rather than simply expressing the brutality of (the king's) power, something more ominous and evil is suggested.

Fang Lijun (China) epitomizes the tendency toward ambiguity that characterizes the works in this category. His paintings tell no story; nor do they depict any violent or destructive act. A young, shaven-headed man simply wears a humorous and somehow fatuous expression on his face. And yet this quite inane scene suggests the existence of something brutal. One cannot help sensing the power of something dangerous. The artist does not divulge what it is or where it comes from. But he could be said to have adroitly captured the spirit of the age.

VII

New themes and subjects (the transformation of society and reality) are beginning to be expressed by means of new formats (installations and performance art) and new materials (items close at hand). One could also say that an acute critical sensibility is maturing as an expression of artists' inner feelings. Instead of representation that employs borrowed techniques, concepts and materials, artists are trying to discuss issues that need to be discussed, using a personal mode of expression. This stance offers new potential for transcending the framework of modern Asian art.

The curtain is about to close on Asia's modern age, when learning from the "West" was insisted upon as an absolute value. In keeping with this, the framework of the "modern period" of Asian art is also being transcended. The advent of a new kind of realism proclaims the start of a new postmodern age in Asia.

Art as Criticism

Tatehata Akira

Tatehata Akira is a poet and art critic. He is currently President of Tama Art University, Tokyo, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, and Director of the Kyoto Art Center. Previously, he was Director of the National Museum of Art, Osaka, and President of Kyoto City University of Arts. He has organized numerous international art exhibitions and projects related to Asian modern and contemporary art. In both 1990 and in 1993, he was Commissioner of the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 2001 he was one of the artistic directors of the 1st Yokohama Triennale. In 2010, he was Artistic Director of the 1st Aichi Triennale. As a poet, he has been the recipient of honors including the Takami Jun Prize and the Hagiwara Sokutarō Prize.

This essay was written for the catalogue of "Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand," an exhibition held in Tokyo and organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center in 1995. Examining the process of the reception of Western modern art in three ASEAN member states, the exhibition considered the nature of modernism in Asia. It traveled to Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta the following year. Working in cooperation with local researchers and curators, the three Japanese curators each took responsibility for different countries. In Indonesia, Tatehata Akira selected 59 works by 15 artists with the support of the art critic Jim Supangkat. Even though he fundamentally approves of multiculturalism, Tatehata is aware of the problems that can be engendered by its relativism. He cautions that, while finding value in the culture of the other and treating it equally to one's own is certainly admirable, in its vigilance against cultural exploitation, this relativistic stance can lead to reductive claims that the only acceptable approach to understanding the culture of the other is by assessing it in its original context. He argues that to avoid falling into repressive discourses that inhibit our capacity to imagine the other, we should not proclaim Asia as an oppositional value, because such oppositionalism excessively heightens vigilance against cultural exploitation. Believing that it is important to recognize that something that has value for one culture can also have value for another, Tatehata has high praise for multiculturalism's faith in the possibility for sharing values. Identifying the seeds of postmodernism in the New Art Movement (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*), active in Indonesia in the late 1970s, Tatehata says that the movement's critical social awareness and its focus on installations and objects are continued in the current Indonesian art. Singling out the contemporary artists Anusapati, Nindityo Adipurnomo and Tisna Sanjaya, Tatehata states that, in maintaining an objective viewpoint that relativizes their own culture, all three have produced visual languages that are rich in satire and humor, while also avoiding reductive oppositionalism.

[KK]

Source: *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1995), 200–203. Translated by Stanley N. Anderson. Revised by Andrew Maerkle, 2016.