

About Art Studies 05

In April 2014, The Japan Foundation launched the Japan Foundation Asia Center with four “C”s as its guiding concept: to “Communicate,” “Connect and Share,” “Collaborate,” and “Create” in the Asian region. Spanning from the establishment of the ASEAN Culture Center in 1990 to the present, The Japan Foundation has planned and implemented numerous regional exchange projects in the field of art through activities that include exhibitions, symposia, and intellectual exchange. The Asia Center has developed exhibitions and other projects addressing the fresh challenges Asia is confronting in the age of globalization, and also engaged in the exchange, accumulation, and dissemination of art-related study and research. *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies* series is published as part of this program.

The previous volumes in this series are as follows:

- *Vol. 01 Cultural Rebellion in Asia 1960–1989* (2015)
The inaugural volume reported on “Cultural Rebellion in Asia 1960–1989,” an international seminar held in 2014 with researchers from around Asia sharing insights into avant-garde art movements in Asia from the 1960s through to the 1980s.
- *Vol. 02 THE 1990s: The Making of Art with Contemporaries* (2016)
This volume is a report on “THE 1990s: The Making of Art with Contemporaries,” an international symposium held in 2015 assessing trends and significant developments in art exchange in the Asia-Pacific region since the 1990s, from the viewpoints of curators, artists, and cultural policy makers.
- *Vol. 03 Shaping the History of Art in Southeast Asia* (2017)
This volume is an anthology of 15 essays by Asia-Pacific researchers and curators tracing discourse and currents related to contemporary Southeast Asian art that have developed in conjunction with artistic practices from the 1980s to the present.
- *Vol. 04 Condition Report: Shifting Perspectives in Asia* (2018)
This volume is a curators’ book of essays related to art environments and reflections on projects by curators who participated in the “Condition Report” series of programs developed collaboratively by young curators from Southeast Asia and Japan, held from the end of 2015 until 2017, with a focus on current art scenes.

This fifth volume follows on from its predecessor, once again focusing on the role of the curator, one which greatly influences the shaping of the art scene today. It collects together presentations and reflections by curators who participated in “Curators’ Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies,” which was held from October 17 to October 19, 2018 in Tokyo, and offers proposals for the future of curating and its engagement with art and society.

Five years have now passed since the launch of the Asia Center in 2014. Over the course of that time, the construction of collaborative spaces through joint projects has become a driving force in the field of art. “Media/Art Kitchen” (2013–14), “Run & Learn” (2014–15), and “Condition Report” (2015–17) form a series of projects embodying a process in which, within a context of not only the relationship between Japan and Southeast Asia but also the relationships mutually intertwined in manifold ways through histories, politics, societies, and cultures across the Southeast Asian region, up-and-coming art curators came to recognize each other’s commonalities and differences while exploring answers to questions of how a certain challenge could be interpreted not as a task for others, but rather as “our” shared task, and how we can then create environments that facilitate such empathy.

At “Curators’ Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies,” new participants joined curators who had taken part in the previous projects to discuss across three separately themed sessions (Public, History, and Education) the role of the curator, what it is they aspire to do through their curatorial practices, and how their activities and knowledge can contribute to the public. Along with sharing empirical knowledge acquired from participants’ own on-site activities and elucidating curatorial challenges facing contemporary art today, the forum searched for ideas that can reform and steer the current situation in interesting directions. This report is a documentation of the forum’s discussions but we hope it will also help us to think about our art environments in Asia so that we can move closer, one step at a time, toward the goal indicated by the title, “Imagining New Ecologies.”

In closing, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this project. Che Kyongfa, Horiuchi Naoko, Kumakura Haruko, and Le Thuan Uyen played proactive parts in the planning of “Curators’ Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies,” while the editing of this volume, as with the previous one, was greatly supported by Horiuchi Naoko and Beverly Yong. In addition, we are grateful to the curators for taking time out of their busy schedules to participate in the forum and write their contributions to this publication. We are truly indebted to everyone for their enthusiasm and generous efforts.

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Art Studies 05

Curators' Forum 2018:
Imagining New Ecologies

Report

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Curators' Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies

Report

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Curators' Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies

October 17–19, 2018, at The Japan Foundation Hall SAKURA, Tokyo
Organized by The Japan Foundation Asia Center

Session 1

October 17, 14:00-17:00

Public

Moderators

Che Kyongfa

Horiuchi Naoko

Speakers

Ayos Purwoaji

Goh Sze Ying

Kumakura Haruko

Maung Day

Selene Yap

Session 2

October 18, 14:00-17:00

History

Moderators

Beverly Yong

Che Kyongfa

Speakers

Hasegawa Arata

Le Thuan Uyen

Nishida Maki

Vipash Purichanont

Lisa Ito-Tapang

Session 3

October 19, 14:00-17:00

Education

Moderators

Horiuchi Naoko

Beverly Yong

Speakers

Leonhard Bartolomeus

Bill Nguyen

Shiraki Eise

Syafiatudina

Forum Participants

Ayos Purwoaji

Independent Curator

Born in Jember, East Java, Indonesia. Graduated from the Department of Product Design, Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology, Surabaya. Ayos Purwoaji's curatorial work lies at the intersection of history, architecture, and contemporary art. In 2015, he initiated an ongoing research/exhibition project investigating the modernization of architecture in rural Java and co-founded Surabaya Contemporary Heritage Council, a fictitious institution to critique heritage-related issues. Curated and co-curated exhibitions include The 7th East Java Biennale (Surabaya, 2017), "Adu Doro" (c2o Library & Collabative, Surabaya, 2017), "Almost There" (Vargas Museum, Quezon City, 2017), and "Lecture on Cities" (Bozar Center for Fine Arts, Brussels, 2017). In 2018, he became part of Kolektif Kurator Kampung. He participated in the Japan Foundation Asia Center's curatorial development program, "Condition Report" from 2015 to 2017. Lives and works in Surabaya.

Goh Sze Ying

Assistant Curator, National Gallery Singapore

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Received MA (Cities and Society) from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2015. Previously involved in researching and organizing artistic interventions in urban public space in Kuala Lumpur, Goh Sze Ying's current research focuses on photography and visual art in Singapore in the mid-20th century. Co-curated exhibitions at the National Gallery Singapore include "Minimalism: Space. Light. Object." (2018), and "Lim Cheng Hoe: Painting Singapore" (2018). Other curatorial projects include "Between States" (OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur, 2017) and "ESCAPE from the SEA" (co-curator, National Art Gallery and APW, Kuala Lumpur, 2017), connected to her participation in the Japan Foundation Asia Center's curatorial development program, "Condition Report" from 2015 to 2017. She is a curator for the upcoming 6th Singapore Biennale 2019. Lives and works in Singapore.

Hasegawa Arata

Independent Curator

Born in Salt Lake City, USA. Received BA (Social Anthropology) from Kyoto University. Curatorial projects include "Impurity/Immunity" (Tokyo Arts and Space, 2017, Barrak, Okinawa, 2018, and Barrak Pavilion, Bangkok Biennial 2018), "Chronicle, Chronicle!" (Creative Center Osaka, 2016–2017), "Palais de Kyoto/Nothing But Sounds" (ARTZONE, Kyoto, 2015), and "On the Desert Islands: Sculptures, 3D-works and Installations in the 1980s" (Gallery Aube, Kyoto, 2014). From 2017 to 2018, Hasegawa Arata was guest curator for PARADISE AIR. Catalogue essays include "On Walls, Walking on Parallel Paths" (*Roppongi Crossing 2019: Connexions*, Mori Art Museum, 2019). He is also an official reviewer for the Architectural Institute of Japan. Lives and works in Tokyo.

Kumakura Haruko

Assistant Curator, Mori Art Museum

Born in Tokyo, Japan. Received MA from Tama Art University. Curatorial projects with Mori Art Museum include "Roppongi Crossing 2019: Connexions" (2019), "MAM Project: 023 Agatha Gothe-Snape" (2017), and "SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now" (2017). Lives and works in Tokyo.

Le Thuan Uyen

Independent curator

Born Hanoi, Vietnam. Received BA (Politics) from the University of York, MA (Cultural and Creative Industries) from King's College London. Le Thuan Uyen's curatorial work investigates alternative histories, and current socio-political contexts and their impact on artistic production in Vietnam. Curatorial projects include "Chancing Modern" (Vietnam Film Studio, Hanoi, 2017 and The Factory, Ho Chi Minh City, 2018), "Sindikot Campursari" (Gudang Sarina, Jakarta, 2016), "Embedded South(s)" (San Art, 2016), "Mien Meo Mieng" (Bildmuseet,

Umea, 2015), and “Skylines With Flying People 3” (Nha San Collective, 2015–17). From 2014 to 2016 she was general manager of Nha San Collective. She participated in the Japan Foundation Asia Center’s curatorial development program, “Condition Report” from 2015 to 2017 and was also resident curator at Art in General (New York City) from April to August 2017. Lives and works in Hanoi.

Leonhard Bartolomeus

Independent Curator

Born in Depok, East Java, Indonesia. Received BA (Ceramics) from Jakarta Institute of Arts. Leonhard Bartolomeus’s curatorial projects have mainly addressed historical issues, but in recent years he has started to focus on open education and collaborative projects. Recent curated exhibitions include “Theoryless Painting” (Galeri Cipta III, Jakarta, 2017). Co-editor of *Publik dan Reklame di Ruang Kota Jakarta* (ruangrupa, 2013), and previously co-editor of *KARBONjournal.org*. Part of Jakarta collective ruangrupa and Gudskul Ekosistem, he is also co-founder of curatorial collective Kolektif Kurator Kampung. In 2018, he took part in the Artist and Researcher/Curator in Residence Support Program, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Lives and works in Depok and Jakarta.

Maung Day

Artist

Born in Yangon, Myanmar. Received MA (International Development Studies) from Chulalongkorn University. Maung Day is an artist, poet, and development worker. In 2008, with artist Moe Satt, he co-founded Beyond Pressure International Performance Art Festival. For a year in 2007, he was editor of *Pan*, a now-defunct art magazine focusing on the local art scene and introducing international artists and movements. Recent exhibitions include “Complicit: Maung Day” (Myanm/art Gallery, 2018), “A Beast, a God and a Line” (TS1 Yangon, 2018), and “SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now” (Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2017). Lives and works in Yangon.

Bill Nguyen

Curatorial Assistant, The Factory

Born in Hanoi, Vietnam. Received BA (Fine Arts) from the School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University. Bill Nguyen is an artist-curator interested in developing an alternative, locally-driven method and platform for curation in Vietnam. Projects include “0395A.DC: A solo exhibition by Ly Hoang Ly” (The Factory, Ho Chi Minh City, 2017), “Skylines With Flying People 3” (Nha San Collective, 2016), “Into Thin Air” (Manzi, Hanoi, 2016), and interdisciplinary education program “ARTLAB” (2012). In 2012, he co-founded non-profit art space Manzi. He participated in the 8th Berlin Biennial Young Curators’ Workshop (2014) and CuratorsLAB initiated by Goethe-Institut Jakarta (2017). Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City.

Nishida Maki

Independent Curator

Born in Fukuoka, Japan. Received BA (History of Art and Aesthetics) at Keio University, MA (History of Art) at University College London. Nishida Maki works as an independent curator and writer. Selected curated exhibitions include “On Line dot—Works on paper and other visible things, not necessarily viewed as drawing” (Devi Art Foundation/The Japan Foundation New Delhi, 2017) and “Kumi Machida” (Asia House, London, 2015–16). Writes for *Art Asia Pacific*, *Bijutsu Techo*, and other magazines and platforms. Lives in Nagoya and works across Japan and internationally.

Vipash Purichanont

Independent Curator

Born in Bangkok, Thailand. Received PhD (Curatorial/Knowledge) from Goldsmiths, University of London, and is a lecturer at the Department of Art History, Silpakorn University. Vipash Purichanont’s curatorial interests lie in the relationship between art practice and contemporary philosophy. He co-curated “Concept Context Contestation: art and collective in Southeast Asia” (Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre, 2013). From 2016 to 2018, he was an assistant curator

for the Inaugural Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, and he is a curator for the upcoming 6th Singapore Biennale 2019. In 2016, he co-founded Waiting You Curator Lab, a Chiangmai-based independent curatorial initiative. Lives and works in Bangkok.

Shiraki Eise

Associate Curator of Learning, Mori Art Museum

Born in Kumamoto, Japan. Received MA (Arts Policy and Management) from Fine Arts Musashino Art University. Shiraki Eise joined Mori Art Museum in 2003 as a Curatorial Assistant, going on to work as an Educator until 2017, when he assumed his current position as Associate Curator of Learning. Co-curator of international symposium “Can Contemporary Art Museums Become New Places of ‘Learning’?” (Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2017), and co-editor of *MAM Documents 003: Can Contemporary Art Museums Become New Places of ‘Learning’?* (Mori Art Museum, 2018). Lives and works in Tokyo.

Syafiatudina

Writer and Curator, KUNCI Cultural Studies Center

Born in Melbourne, Australia. Received BA (Communication Studies) from Gajah Mada University. Syafiatudina has been developing her curatorial practice at the intersection of art and political organization. She is currently working on “School of Improper Education,” an experiment to develop critical pedagogy models. Curatorial projects include “Radio KUNCI” (ifa Gallery, Berlin, 2016), “Gloves in Action” (Green Room, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, 2015), and “Made in Commons” (KUNCI, Yogyakarta, 2015). She has been curator in residence at Art Center Ongoing (Tokyo, 2018), *No Man’s Land* online journal and Nusantara Archive in Taipei (2017), and NTU CCA Singapore (2015); and artist/researcher in residence with KUNCI for “Heterotropics” at Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (2017). She participated in TRANScuratorial Academy at HKW, Berlin and Goethe-Institut, Mumbai (2017). Lives and works in Yogyakarta.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

Independent Curator

Born in Manila, Philippines. Received BFA (Art History major) from the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts (UPCFA); currently completing Masters in Art Studies (Art History) at UP College of Arts and Letters, and teaches art history at UPCFA. Lisa Ito-Tapang’s research and curatorial interests explore intersections between art practice, political engagement, and ecology. Curatorial projects include “Dissident Vicinities” (Bulwagan ng Dangal Museum, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, 2017) and “Almost There” (Vargas Museum, Quezon City, 2017), connected to her participation in the Japan Foundation Asia Center’s curatorial development program, “Condition Report” from 2015 to 2017. She is current Secretary-General of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP), an organization of progressive artists. She lives and works in Quezon City, Manila.

Selene Yap

Independent Curator

Born in Singapore. Received BSocSc (Hons) (Sociology and Southeast Asian Studies) from the National University of Singapore. Selene Yap was co-curator of “opening day,” a four-part series of artistic interventions (Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre, 2017–18). She was previously program manager for visual arts at The Substation, where she provided research and curatorial support for “Discipline the City” (2017), “Is That All There Is?” (2016), and “Each Blade of Grass” (2016). From 2014 to 2015, she participated in the Curating Lab program at NUS Museum, Singapore. Lives and works in Singapore.

Moderators

Che Kyongfa

Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

Born in Hyogo, Japan. Received MA (Art History and Theory [20th century]) from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2000, and completed Critical Studies (Post MA) at Malmö Art Academy in 2006. Before joining Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in 2013, Che Kyongfa organized various exhibitions, discursive events, and publication projects. Major curatorial projects include “Almost There” (Vargas Museum, Quezon City, 2017), “Time of others” (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2015), “Omnilogue: Journey to the West” (Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 2012), “Fog Dossier” (Artsonje Center, Seoul, 2010), “The Demon of Comparisons” (Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, 2009), “Recycled” (Unge Kunstneres Samfund, Oslo, 2008), and OK Video Festival (Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, 2005). She was a curator and project mentor for the Japan Foundation Asia Center’s curatorial development program, “Condition Report” from 2015 to 2017. Lives and works in Tokyo.

Horiuchi Naoko

Curator and Lecturer, Arts Initiative Tokyo (AIT)

Born in Nagano, Japan. Received MSc (Contemporary Art and Art Theory) from Edinburgh College of Art in 2005. Having worked as an independent curator in Edinburgh and as an assistant curator of Metronome Think Tank Tokyo (2006), Horiuchi Naoko joined AIT in 2008. Since 2016, she has been organizing AIT’s program “dear Me,” an art-based learning platform for children in alternative care. Selected curatorial projects include “Shaping Voices, Silent Skies” (Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo, 2017), “Shuffling Spaces” (Seescape Gallery, Chiang Mai, 2015), “Invisible Energy” (co-curator, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland, 2015), and “Divided Against Ourselves” (Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo, 2013). She was a guest curator of Kyoto Re-Search in Maizuru (2017), PARADISE

AIR (2015/2016), and ARCUS Project (2013). She is assistant editor of *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies Vol.04. Condition Report: Shifting Perspectives in Asia* (2018). Lives and works in Tokyo.

Beverly Yong

Director, RogueArt

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Received BA (English and Art History) from Cambridge University, MA (Asian Art and Archaeology) from SOAS, University of London. Previously a gallerist, Beverly Yong co-founded RogueArt, a partnership working on art projects, exhibitions, publications, and collections in Southeast Asia, in 2008. Selected curated and co-curated exhibitions include “Chang Young Chia: Second Life” (National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2018), “Thinking of Landscape: Paintings from the Yeap Lam Yang Collection” (Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2014), “Territories of the Real and Unreal: Photographic Practices in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art” (Langgeng Foundation, Yogyakarta, 2011), and “Wong Hoy Cheong” (National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2004). She is co-editor-in-chief of ongoing series *Narratives in Malaysian Art* (RogueArt, 2011–), and co-editor of *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies Vol.04. Condition Report: Shifting Perspectives in Asia* (2018), and *Today and Tomorrow: Emerging Practices in Malaysian Art* (Adaptus Design, 2013).

**A Note from
the Editors and
Forum Team**

This publication documents an exchange of ideas among a group of curators from Southeast Asia and Japan. The original exchange was held in the form of a three-day forum, “Imagining New Ecologies,” organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center at The Japan Foundation, Tokyo in October 2018.

In his opening address at the forum, Japan Foundation Asia Center director Shono Keiji talked of curating as an act of the imagination, and the forum’s theme focused on the role of curators, and how curatorial ideas and practices might expand to help change and shape art world ecologies going forward.

The invited speakers from Southeast Asia included individuals The Japan Foundation had encountered or worked with in their projects; a number of them had previously taken part in the Asia Center’s “Condition Report” curatorial development program from 2015 to 2017. Most were (or had been) independent curators who have established active practices in the past three to 10 years in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Artist, poet, and organizer Maung Day also came to speak on the situation in Myanmar and the potential role of curators there. They were joined by independent and institutional curators from Japan from their peer group. Some, but not all, participants knew or had worked with each other, and this gathering of passionate voices from very different contexts, and its potential for building new networks, in itself represented or functioned as the seeding of a new ecology.

The forum team identified three crucial topics for discussion, based on their observations of evolving tendencies and urgencies in art practices and infrastructures both in Asia and globally. With the proliferation of community-based art projects and also questions raised about the role and future of art institutions, the first topic, Public, was to address the question of “for whom” exhibitions, or other curatorial projects, are produced and presented. Recent discussions had highlighted the importance of accumulating archives, a process which invites or even necessitates the rediscovery or reinterpretation of art histories. As art histories are interconnected with history, and also in light of a growing interest in historical subject matter among practitioners and organizers, History was set as the second topic. “Learning,” or pedagogical, practices were felt to be equally important as exhibitions in the work of curators to engage with the public and history, so Education was pinpointed as the final topic for the forum.

Participants prepared short presentations in response to moderators' key questions and/or broad brief, and these introduced ideas and illustrations from the experience of their personal, independent, or collective practices, or their work within the institutions they represent. During each session, presentations were followed by lengthy discussions among panelists and with the larger group of participants, with occasional questions from observers.

For this publication, participants were invited to rework their presentations into essays; many expanded on their original material after reflecting on the forum discussions, and one or two found a new angle or format they felt they wanted to pursue with their presented topic. Syafiatudina's presentation, however, owing to personal circumstances, has been directly transcribed and edited for inclusion.

The transcripts of the session discussions reproduced here have been edited for readability and relevance. Readers may find that, with the topics of Public, History, and Education being interconnected, the discussions often overlap and inform each other. It should also be noted that participants visited two major current exhibitions in Tokyo, "Catastrophe and the Power of Art," Mori Art Museum's 15th anniversary exhibition, before the Public session on Day 1, and "Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s" at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo before the History session on Day 2, providing some additional context for the forum discussions. Many smaller discussions were generated, of course, after forum hours, and while we regret that these could not be documented as well, it is hoped that the transcripts here give a sense of the conviviality and openness of the exchange among participants.

In the reflections and conversations that make up this volume, we find a considerable range of perspectives and aspirations, and fresh ideas applied to specific contexts that might give rise to developments elsewhere. Participating curators working within or without institutions and/or as part of collectives, or moving between different spheres of practice, focusing on home terrain and/or operating internationally, may negotiate different conditions, but they seem clear on sharing the task of carving out spaces for engagement, criticality, and learning, in a world where these seem to be narrowing. They remind each other too that with the curatorial imagination comes curatorial responsibilities; and that it may be useful to acknowledge and accommodate differences, and to keep asking questions, going forward.

Session 1

Public

In the first session of the forum “Imagining New Ecologies,” presenters discussed concepts of the “public” in their respective curatorial practices. In our societies today where cultural production is swayed by neoliberal systems and political control, who might comprise a “public” beyond one of consumers or “administered” people? Taking the critical practice of art as something with the potential to impact existing discourse, norms, and values, and to bring about change, can curatorial practices envision and generate concepts of the public that activate those possibilities? Moreover, how can they interact with the political powers or the social divisions and discrimination that produce people repulsed from the majority of the “public”?

The five invited curators in this session work in very different sociocultural environments, and have worked on projects that range significantly in scale and nature. The presenters shared frank attitudes and views towards the authorities and existing infrastructures that shape received notions of a “public” in their respective societies, and ideas on the kinds of “public” they seek through their practices.

Based in Surabaya, Indonesia, independent curator Ayos Purwoaji noted that a curator reliant on conventional means and resources is not able to respond adequately to today’s fast-changing society. In order for a curator to engage fully with people, instead of only speaking on their behalf about social problems, curation should be an open system that forms itself through directly involving them. Artist and development worker Maung Day looked at shifts in Myanmar society and its art scene since the 1990s, explaining the background and challenges of the current situation, where more curators and researchers are needed to expand the dialogue between practitioners and the public, to move beyond nationalist agendas and encourage criticality. Singaporean independent curator Selene Yap searches for alternative forms of cultural production in order to envision new concepts of the public distinct from that targeted for the reproduction of values and meanings that embody government-sponsored arts and culture to “enrich [one’s] quality of life, broaden their mind and encourage their creativity.” She introduced her projects that explore the potential for self-organization in Singapore as one means of achieving this. Kumakura Haruko, an assistant curator at Mori Art Museum, reflected on the meaning of the public for her museum, which is operated by a private enterprise. Ranging from large-scale exhibitions that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to small-scale exhibitions, and learning programs that involve only modest numbers of participants each time, this diversity of scale and content is important to allow an art museum to respond to the

needs and interests of different kinds of visitors. Born in Malaysia and currently an assistant curator at the National Gallery Singapore, Goh Sze Ying stressed the importance of envisioning a model of the public that transcends a fixed time and place, not least the format of the exhibition, and the significance of means and practices that can generate such a model. Tracing the trajectory of a certain artwork removed due to political pressure, she argued for finding ways to extend the temporality of the exhibition frame and therefore its discourse beyond the battlefield of the exhibition space.

The respective responses of the presenters in this session to the question of how curators, who mediate the communication between a subject and art, can today envision and shape concepts of the public, related attitudes and strategies born out of a process of confronting the conditions within which they each operate, and their possibilities and restrictions. Their answers remind us that the modes of curatorial practice continue to expand, and underline the importance of considering manifold conditions in which curatorial practices are situated, and of reflexivity—to be fully aware of the motivations and decisions curators take throughout.

(Translated by William Andrews)

How Low Can You Go?^[01]

Ayos Purwoaji

*We have to come onto the streets
Go into the villages
See for ourselves every indicator
And experience the real problems.*
– W. S. Rendra^[02]

These days, it becomes more and more difficult for us to recognize traditional boundaries. What were previously known as two different territories can now easily intersect. Borderlines which in the past were assumed rigid now easily melt, fuse, creating new territories which have never been mapped.

And the world seems to go round faster with the shorter and more ahistorical cycle of popular culture. For the time being, we are more intimate with temporality and mediocrity (as a consciousness developed from the principle of *hic et nunc*, here and now) than things which are steadfast and worthy. In discussing the waning power and influence of the museum, Bambang Sugiharto, a philosopher of art, argues that today, daily life has become pivotal because it is considered to have real context, replacing the historical roles of the past, which are no longer perceived as holding the only significant value.^[03] We start to question the constructions which have sustained us for so long. What if the structures on which we were living suddenly collapsed? What would happen if a museum—an institution of knowledge renowned as authoritative—was burnt to ashes in one night?^[04] What if a public gallery was abolished within a minute, struck by an earthquake and tsunami?^[05] What would happen if there was a global crisis forcing the government to stop the funding of cultural works? And what if all the artists were kidnapped by extraterrestrial creatures?

What would curators do then? Will people in the future still need (the legitimization of) a curator in the conservative way, while out there knowledge is more and more accessible and the algorithms of artificial intelligence become more and more sophisticated?^[06] How does a curator position himself amidst ever-changing society?

01

The title of this essay is borrowed from the tagline of a 1990s advertisement for an Indonesian brand of cigarette. The tagline reminds me of the principle of *turun ke bawah* (descend from above) which was one of the foundational principles of Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat/People's Cultural Institution), a radical cultural organization in Indonesia from 1950 to 1965.

02

From "Sajak Sebatang Lisong" (Song for a Cigar, 1977), in *State of Emergency*, W. S. Rendra (Glebe: Wild & Woolley, 1978), 12. Translation from Indonesian Translation Service, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://indonesiantranslationservice.com.au/category/ws-rendra/>.

03

This essay owes a lot to Bambang Sugiharto's essay, "Estetika yang Mengembara: Setelah Berakhirnya Seni," in *The 3rd Asia-Europe Art Camp 2005*, eds Marie Le Sourd et al. (Bandung: Asia Europe Foundation & Bandung Center for New Media Arts, 2005), 71-79.

04

See Ed Yong, "What Was Lost in Brazil's Devastating Museum Fire," *The Atlantic*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/09/brazil-rio-de-janeiro-museum-fire/569299/>.

05

Just recently, the building of Taman Budaya Provinsi Sulawesi Tengah was destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami on September 28, 2018, three weeks after the exhibition, "Pekan Seni Media 2018: Local Genius."

06

See Ben Davis, "Google Sets Out to Disrupt Curating With 'Machine Learning,'" *Artnet News*, January 14, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/google-artificial-intelligence-812147>.

07

Amanda Thomas-Johnson, "Museum of Black Civilisations aims to 'decolonise knowledge'," *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/museum-black-civilisations-aims-decolonise-knowledge-181204221519936.html>.

08

This phenomenon has also been noted in the research of Rifda Amalia, "Curating Socially Engaged Art in Indonesia: Reactivating Collaboration" (master's thesis, Graduate School of Arts and Science, New York University, 2018).

Without an understanding of changing realities, the profession of curator will lose its relevance. I admit that I myself have just realized recently that, without the support of art ecosystems—along with their complicated networks and legitimation—the position of a curator within society is actually very weak. Unlike artists, curators do not possess enough resources in terms of subjectivity and flexibility to enable them to move freely within the cultural epicenter–society itself.

I assume the consciousness of subjectivity and flexibility is not yet developed because there is still an assumption that the curator's domain of work is limited to the white cube, and that the activities of a curator are naturally separated from society's fluctuations. In the "Imagining New Ecologies" forum, Vipash Purichanont told an interesting story about how, during mass protests in January, 2014, Bangkok Arts and Cultural Centre, which was built as a "public institution," closed off access to the public in order to protect the artworks which were being exhibited.

In the meantime, the relationship between art and the public has become a subject for complicated, never-ending debates. An art institution unarguably needs the public; but how much does the public need an art institution? What does the public mean to the work of a curator? Can the meaning of the public be reduced to exposure and visitor targets? To what extent is a public institution *public*?

If we dig a little deeply, there are actually many art institutions born from social turmoil. Without the French Revolution, we would never have heard of the Musée du Louvre. Ars Aevi, a contemporary art museum in Sarajevo, was initially built as a conceptual response from artists to the breakout of the Bosnian War. Recently, the Museum of Black Civilization was inaugurated in Dakar, Senegal, supporting the strengthening discourse of decolonization in the African region. [07]

We must realize, however, that manifesting cultural works in the forms of traditional institutions or physical infrastructure will bring us new challenges in the future. The bigger the scale of an institution, the more difficult it is for it to move freely to respond to the phenomena surrounding it, that is, when the demographic composition of the society shifts and the public discourse suddenly takes a sharp turn, can traditional art institutions react correspondingly, with the same speed?

Being usually bound to an art ecosystem reliant on traditional institutions and infrastructure, it seems hard for a curator to actually move in society. But is a curator truly unable to widen his domain of work and escape from the white cube? Could a curator start his work without any artworks? Furthermore, could a curator curate people? Could a curator curate cities? Could a curator curate memories?

There has been an interesting phenomenon lately in the contemporary Indonesian art scene. Despite the lack of art infrastructure and funding from the government, 20 years after Reformasi in 1998, small cities are witnessing the growth of their art scenes driven by "young curators" who use various approaches involving socially engaged art. [08]

I use the term “young curators” arbitrarily, meaning to frame them within a more general phenomenon, namely cultural activism. Most of these “young curators” have had no specialized curatorial training, although basically they have been doing work similar to that of the curator: sorting, selecting, organizing, and orchestrating art activities. They mostly began from small-scale activities which have gradually developed into larger programs involving society. We can say that these small groups build their own “spectacle vortex,” a self-generating audience or public which grows without the intervention of the market or the involvement of the government. They have been able to survive by depending on a strong relationship with the community as the social context in which they are working.

We can take the example of Kalisat, a small town five hours away from Surabaya. A group of Kalisat youth has been actively collecting the photo archives of their neighborhood. Through this archiving activity, they conduct many interviews with senior citizens, excavating the *petite histoire* of the city. The collected photographs and stories are then compiled and reinterpreted in an annual art exhibition. The production budget is raised from the community. The creators and the visitors are the people of Kalisat themselves, and the exhibition is held as a medium to integrate, transfer, deconstruct, or reshape their collective memories. They bridge the past and the present in a context upon which they are all agreed, and this is what makes the exhibitions which have been held by the “young curators” of Kalisat so original and intimate.

What is occurring in Kalisat is an illustration of the organic curatorial practices which are now growing in the small towns of Indonesia—from Salatiga to Kendari, from Padang to Flores. They are a form of curatorial practice facing myriad complexities and tensions because it presents itself on the borderline of what and what may not constitute curatorial work, an area which, besides being an ideal base for creative process, is also a grey area of enquiry, challenging authority or long-established concepts. To quote a term coined by Alia Swastika, this is where the practice of “an individual as an institution”^[09] occurs, in which a “young curator” who is working in the middle of society is forced to always move dynamically, challenge his position endlessly, and negotiate various speculative strategies in order to adjust to the context and ever-changing society.

The idea of a curator “working for society” or “working with society” can often be misleading. Such phrasing seems to put a curator in a heroic position, one separated (or isolated) from the daily life of society and community, and frame the public as merely an instrument for a curator’s work. I much prefer the idea of a curator “working as society” which places him in an ordinary and casual position, where he is also a part of the everyday reality of the community with which he is living.^[10]

I agree with the proposition by Indonesian cultural thinker Nirwan Dewanto in 1991 that “everyone is potentially a cultural creator.”^[11] Curatorial practice needs to be viewed as a paradigm or an open circuit,

09

Alia Swastika, “Praktik Kuratorial di Indonesia: Individu Sebagai Institusi,” in *Turning Targets: 25 Tahun Cemeti*, eds Mella Jaarsma et al. (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art House, 2014), 97–122.

10

In a discussion session during the “Imagining New Ecologies” forum, Leonhard Bartolomeus differentiated between “working in the public,” “working with the public,” and “working as the public.” I thank him for proposing these interesting terms.

11

Nirwan Dewanto, “Kebudayaan Indonesia: Pandangan 1991,” in *Senjakala Kebudayaan: Refleksi Seni dan Budaya* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Oak, 2017), 13–53.

12

A play on the phrase “legislator of the world” used by Percy Bysshe Shelley, an English romantic poet, in his essay, “A Defence of Poetry.” It is very often quoted in writings which glorify (or mock) artists.

where society can partake in a curatorial work which then becomes a mechanism to work through existing problems. Therefore, these days, it is important for the curator to dissolve his position as a gatekeeper or “legitimater of the world” [12] and begin venturing down, to set foot on the border, to re-learn, as well as calibrate and make his work relevant to the conditions of contemporary society.

(Translated by Fuji Adriza)

The Shaping of Myanmar Art Scene and Who Can Play Which Role in It

Maung Day

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has come out of a long period of violence, bloodshed, and failed revolutions. The history of Myanmar art is closely tied to the country's political history as Myanmar artists have carried with them a strong sense of social engagement. Myanmar modernism is said to have developed fully in the 1990s. However, its early stages can be traced back to the 1960s and the 1970s with artists adopting the principles and ideas of Western modernism. In those days, big cities such as Yangon and Mandalay were teeming with art exhibitions and there was a lot of interest coming from the general public and diplomatic communities, with the latter collecting local art for their private collections. It was a thriving art scene.

Then came the days of General Ne Win's socialist regime that kicked the diplomats out of the country and drove the entire country into a comatose state culturally and politically. The regime imposed heavy censorship on modern art and promoted socialist-realist literature and art that "served the interest of the people." The art scene died slowly; some artists left the country and only a small number of artists kept practicing modern art. The era of censorship and dictatorship went on through to the 1990s and 2000s, with power changing hands after the 1988 Uprisings.

In the 1990s and 2000s, a new group of young artists emerged. They executed avant-garde experimentations and adopted performance art as key channels to express political opinions and to rediscover a relationship with the audience. But because of threats from the censors and the Special Branch, a large portion of the Myanmar art scene then was considered "underground." Exhibitions were organized secretly and performance artists performed in public spaces in a guerrilla style. Despite the censorship and suppression, the art scene was alive and kicking again, and attracted attention from media and the general public.

Many people were paying particular attention to this art scene because they believed there was a kind of political resistance going on in this art community. People and artists were on the same side as they

shared the same discontent and fears. But their relationship was hidden from sight. Almost all the art exhibitions in those days, except for the ones that showcased traditional themes, were self-organized by artists in various places that were deemed safe from the military police.

This also meant that not many people were interested to become curators by profession, which makes sense because they would have been faced with a lot of challenges if they were to put on shows which were substantial and cutting-edge. This led to a disadvantage for the country. While other countries, including its neighbors, had developed art scenes with trained and experienced curators, Myanmar had none. This remains the case today. Most of the exhibitions in Myanmar today are either organized by foreign curators or self-organized by artists renting space from galleries. There may be a few local curators starting up, but they are extremely small in number.

Going back to the relationship between Myanmar artists and the audience, in 2008, the organizers of Beyond Pressure Performance Art Festival, the first international art festival in Myanmar, decided to bring the artists and their works to public spaces. They invited the censors to talk to the artists, thus engaging the government officials in the process of interpretation and meaning-making. As a result, the festival was allowed to be organized in public spaces. This marked the beginning of a more open relationship between the general public and artists. Beyond Pressure organized four more editions using public spaces and brought the general public into social and cultural dialogue.

Since then, there have been other art festivals and events taking place in public spaces. Now with a new government in office, censorship has loosened, but has not been entirely removed. We are seeing more and more exhibitions, new trends in street art and thriving art scenes in Yangon and Mandalay.

Here, I would like to take a moment to critique the breadth and depth of these art scenes in terms of content and inventiveness. Despite the newly found enthusiasm and opportunities to make and show art, the language of art has not evolved much as the dominating narratives are still governed by nationalism, patriotism, political nostalgia, and a lack of nuances. The emerging trends in nationalism and the politics of fear still undermine experimentations and open interpretation in art. Curators and institutions still marginalize artists with a more experimental edge and a tendency to question the status quo of the society, calling them “too dark” or “niche.” This is their way of shaping the art scene by deciding what kind of art people should see and expect to see. However, we also need to acknowledge that there are young artists—often associated with Myanm/art Gallery founded by American art historian Nathalie Johnston—who have started making art that displays boldness, freshness, bizarreness, experimentation, and criticality. They may not be a close-knit group of artists but rather they are individuals who are capable of shaping a new, exciting art scene.

Speaking of the thematic content in Myanmar's art scene, curators and artists as a whole, with very few exceptions, have not so far shown interest in working with ethnic art and artists or art that touches upon the ethnic issues plaguing the country. When it comes to politics, a lot of artists focus on the past and present situations of militarization, which is important, but it is not enough, because there are other pressing issues such as marginalization of religious minorities, Burmanization of ethnic communities, state-sanctioned erasure of plural identities and histories, social and environmental injustice suffered by rural communities, and incessant urbanization with its effects on the urban poor.

There is an urgent need to open discussions into a broader range of issues in Myanmar's art scene, and cross-learning with curators outside of Myanmar would also help remove this stagnancy. And there have to be more opportunities and space for experimenting with a diversity of materials, techniques, narratives, and history. Most importantly, there should be a way to encourage local people who aspire to become curators. They would be instrumental in broadening the dialogue between the artists, the audience, and the issues afflicting the collective mindset of Myanmar society.

Making Room for Reasonable Disagreements

Selene Yap

01

Melissa Sim, "Growing audiences for Singapore arts a key priority in new 5-year plan from National Arts Council," *The Straits Times*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/growing-audiences-for-singapore-arts-a-key-priority-in-new-5-year-plan-from-national>.

02

The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2012), <https://www.nac.gov.sg/dam/jcr:1b1765f3-ff95-48f0-bbf9-f98288eb7082>.

03

Lily Kong, "Ambitions of a Global City: Arts, Culture and Creative Economy in 'Post-Crisis' Singapore," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18, no. 3 (January 2012): 279-294.

04

Carol Bacchi, *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* (Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson, 2009).

05

Siau Ming En, "Arts, sports 'can rally S'poreans, help overcome fault lines,'" *TODAY*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/arts-sports-can-rally-sporeans-help-overcome-fault-lines>.

I

[The Minister] Ms Fu said that with the emergence of new fault lines between foreigners and locals, the haves and have-nots and people who hold different values, one of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's tasks is to strengthen Singapore's social fabric. "We also want to draw on the power of the arts in building a more caring, cohesive and confident Singapore," said Ms Fu. [01]

Public discourse in Singapore on the arts and culture reads like a prescription for the general Singaporean malaise: a transformative antidote to "enrich [one's] quality of life, broaden their mind and encourage their creativity." [02] Used in heavy rotation in cultural policy papers and promotional material for art and cultural activities, these statements mark the language with which the arts has been entrenched in popular consciousness. More critically, they point to larger conditions governing the production and consumption of art in Singapore, where curators, artists, and cultural producers are bound by implicit assumptions about the forms of culture that are to be promoted and the kinds of outcomes that are valued.

Although policy attention in Singapore only began to turn more fully to arts and culture in the 1980s, ambitions for the arts and cultural sector have accelerated within the last 20 years. By the 2000s, we've heralded a new era of "cultural social policy" [03] drawing on the innate, transformative quality of the arts. Under this vision, there would be a formal and seamless integration of grassroots arts and culture participation and national development. Significant efforts and resources were channeled into policies, strategies, and infrastructure development for the operationalization of culture as a balm to all of society's problems [04] and a bridge for its fault lines. [05] Today, as our Southeast Asian neighbors remain largely reliant on communal resources or self-funding to build platforms for artistic production and circulation, Singapore's pursuit for cultural participation has driven it to

mount a bureaucratically-managed cultural powerhouse.

The impetus driving cultural policy-making sets the ground for a discussion of the nature of the arts and cultural infrastructure in Singapore and the ways in which curators, artists, and other producers have responded to or participated in the production of meanings within this kind of delimited field of knowledge production. The dream or illusion of a single public sphere upon which the arts can be applied is preceded by a neat model of cultural participation: where the production, circulation, and display of art is fixated with limited manifestations of the “public” as defined by official discourse. Inside this model, art is positioned as a “cultural offering” [06] by the state, in which mass audience engagement is the main aim, consequently narrowing the paradigm of what constitutes value in cultural participation.

II

In this essay, I propose that the predominance of formal art and cultural infrastructure in Singapore has resulted in an apparent “crisis of representative function,” [07] with the state determining the language of value and experience in the field. Yet, this distortion has also opened up paradigms for critical reflection—curators, artists, and independent producers have responded by taking a step *outside* the prescribed representational space for culture, pushing instead for other ways of structuring production. How might this “crisis” proffer a situated participation and generate new languages of reasoning and productive disagreements in the formation of meanings in contemporary art?

Having done curatorial work in and outside of an institution, I am actively involved in questioning the complex systems that underpin my work. The experience of moving between different platforms and operating with multiple voices necessitate a form of what has been described earlier by curator and critic, Mika Hannula, as “situated participation,” [08] where one seeks to commit to and shape different contexts in a meaningful and fruitful way.

This involves a presence that opens up rather than shuts down, i.e. the seeking of a contact that always exists on both the depth and breadth axes, with our focus shifting from the general to the individual, and vice versa... involves a reciprocity in which the differences discuss with and push up against each other and clap each other on the shoulder, whispering and teasing, yet in a way that by no means seeks to achieve synergy or complete mutual understanding, but in which the goal, in the words of John Rawls is—reasonable disagreements. [09]

Rather than echo the essentialist view of institutions as ideological state apparatus and necessarily operating in ways diametrically opposed to independent practice, I pursue the unfolding trajectory of the cultural field as a matrix of divergent exhibitions, practices, sites, and contexts

06

“Arts and Culture Strategic Review,” in *The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review*.

07

Maibritt Borgen, “The inner and outer form of self-organisation,” in *Self-organised*, eds Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen (Bergen, Norway: Hordaland Art Centre, 2013), 37–49.

08

Mika Hannula, *The Politics of Small Gestures: Chances and Challenges for Contemporary Art* (Istanbul: Art-ist, 2006), 75.

09

Ibid., 80.

10

Jason Wee, "Whither Artists Spaces," *Conditions of Production* (2014), tumblr, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://conditionsofproduction.tumblr.com/essay-jasonwee?fbclid=IwAR286-pLRDjMI7RAu9RUaAjZkgern5npoMk2C8-d8oLxrlYmeu-4LQP6OOM>.

11

"opening day" was a series of four two-week long artistic interventions unfolding within a disused double-void common space in Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre that ran from December 2, 2017 to January 31, 2018. Gestated over a year through conversation and discussion, this project invited four Singaporean artists, Chua Chye Teck, Lai Yu Tong, Susie Wong, and Sookoon Ang, to respond to the anomalous nature of the space in relation to the constantly maintained urban fabric of Singapore. "opening day" was curated by Cheng Jia Yun and Selene Yap.

12

The Substation was 26 years old when the current artistic director, Alan Oei was appointed.

13

Mayo Martin, "The Substation's new director Alan Oei announces changes for the arts centre," *TODAY*, December 11, 2015, <https://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/substations-new-director-alan-oei-announces-big-changes-arts-centre>.

where art is commissioned, produced, and displayed. In this shift, self-organization occurs as a phenomenon; it is in what artist-writer, Jason Wee, characterizes as "strategic, temporary alignments and aggregations of individuals, collectives, and institutions"^[10] that we find sufficient force to reconfigure our notions of the public.

III

In an attempt to lend more specificity to the ways in which practices have resisted presuppositions of participation and engagement that dominate the cultural policy discourse in Singapore, I draw references to my witnessing of and involvement in two separate but analogous events: the displacement and negotiation of The Substation following the 2015 appointment of its incumbent artistic director where I was involved as a staff of the independent art space, and the organizing of "opening day,"^[11] an independent curatorial project in 2018, of which I was co-curator.

The Substation

Founded in 1990 by the late playwright, director, and arts activist, Kuo Pao Kun, The Substation is a notable pioneer in the artistic landscape of Singapore. As a space, The Substation encompasses a spirit of artistic experimentation and criticality: it is fondly known to have been the starting ground for the practice of multiple generations of Singaporean artists, filmmakers, writers, and activists and a key convening space for critical dialogue and interaction between diverse artists and audiences. Much of this was thrown into disarray in 2015, when The Substation's appointment of a new artistic director, artist and curator, Alan Oei, paved the way for seismic changes. Impelled by a desire to keep the role and relevance of the ageing space from calcifying in the current artistic climate,^[12] laconic moves were made to streamline facilities and operations, reshaping The Substation into a "research and developmental space." As a result, longstanding programs were axed and new programs would follow a unifying curatorial theme in order to answer a larger cultural question each year.^[13]

This plan, seen as a rupture to a much beloved space, was met with heightened resistance and criticism from the arts community, resulting in a series of walk-in discussions and a larger town hall specifically focused on issues of openness, transparency, and plurality. Reflections on the pertinence of a "Home for the Arts" in Singapore written by members of the arts community were drafted and shared, and a community resource project, "Terms of Engagement," was initiated by a group of independent cultural workers to document, archive, and expand on conversations about the future of The Substation, borrowing from discussions on the right to space. Responding to the pushback, The Substation shelved its initial plans, dedicating a year to orientating itself and reassessing its relevance amid the changing arts and cultural landscape.

What we have is a lot of people fearing and worrying about what is going to be taken away from them... Some of it I could have managed a little better. I have apologized, I'm sorry that I didn't understand that The Substation was so much about the community and not just its own wherewithal to do whatever we wanted.^[14]

The account of how this period of reinvention transpired is worth telling for it revealed an important thing: The community's urge to self-organize in securing The Substation's "survival" and The Substation's programming reaction can be seen as sibling domains of redress. Rather than conceive of the self-organized reaction as a critical corrective of the former, I see it as encompassing modes of negotiation and tentative strategies from which the other might draw motivation. The Substation is unique in the way it is regarded by the community—it provides physical and psychological space for conversation, discussion, and debate; and it helps mediate between artistic community and community at large. These opportunities in space for different strains of artistic creation/interrogation, become the same mechanism by which society and community groups feel impelled to intervene in order to maintain and propagate values and positions.

Within such a context, self-organization is not merely a response but involves a certain dualistic dependency, between the meeting of wishes and fears, attitudes and knowledge, of self and a larger organized body. In the absence of clear change management strategies that would usually be derived from formal art infrastructures, users "gathered towards some semblance of community, acting collectively to protect shared interests."^[15] It is interesting to note here that the self-organized working group behind "Terms of Engagement" went on to develop applicable models of activation and formation based on its initial approach with the community resource project. The horizontal organization involved in examining The Substation's own history, vision, and relationship with the arts community was in large part fueled by what art historian Maibritt Borgen describes as inner and outer forms of self-organization^[16] underpinning the dynamics and ideology of the independent arts space.

"opening day"

"opening day" was conceived with an intent of precipitating effects and temporalities outside of the institutional exhibitionary settings that both my co-curator, Cheng Jia Yun, and I were familiar with.^[17] In referring to the project as a form of collective self-organization, we considered the project from its working method: a moving about of micro-gestures and flows of information, capital, attitudes, and desires produced and exchanged from a constellation of interest points. Thus, returning to Hannula's earlier proposition on situated participation, it was indeed from the pockets of continual back-and-forth between the "depth and breadth axes"^[18] of our everyday making and working that the project was born.

¹⁴ Joy Fang, "The Substation's Alan Oei reverses some decisions on its revamp plans," *TODAY*, April 5, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/lifestyle/substations-alan-oei-reverses-some-decisions-its-revamp-plans>.

¹⁵ Godwin Koay, "We never owned this space," *Medium*, February 7, 2016, <https://medium.com/@godwinkoay/we-never-owned-this-space-8f864dc05eed>.

¹⁶ Borgen, "The inner and outer form of self-organisation," 37–49.

¹⁷ Cheng Jia Yun is an Assistant Curator at the National Gallery Singapore and Selene Yap was previously the Programme Manager for Visual Arts at The Substation.

¹⁸ Hannula, *The Politics of Small Gestures*, 80.

19

Jean Wong, "Curating contemporary art in Singapore: young curators Cheng Jia Yun and Selene Yap—in conversation," *Art Radar*, November 13, 2018, <http://artradarjournal.com/2018/11/13/curating-contemporary-art-in-singapore-young-curators-cheng-jia-yun-and-selene-yap-in-conversation/>.

20

T. Sasitharan, "Art here: what price space?" in *Space, Spaces and Spacing* (Singapore: The Substation Conference, 1995), 55.

21

Hannula, *The Politics of Small Gestures*, 82

Drawing its basis from a desire to return to the essential act of making, expressing, and creating with nothing between audience and the work, "opening day" acquired a diaphanous form through its itinerancy and expressions. For one, the chosen site of the project, a disused common space in a local shopping center, extended beyond familiar sites of holding exhibitions but still remained part of the orbit of the daily routine of Singapore urban life and speed. Each series of expressions also expanded and contracted according to the artists and their personal readings of the space as told to us in conversations that permeated our many shared meals and moments of work and rest. We took part in the production of meanings in the way that was closest to us—through an invitation to a mode of working that was more open-ended, letting the preoccupations, methods, and sentiments of each practice speak in relation to the site. Seeing the project through was a way to remind ourselves that the spaces held for art could extend beyond what is familiar. As Jia Yun and I recall "opening day" a year on, [19] its ideological underpinnings continue to welcome and occasion new life into the project, allowing it to occupy a unique spot in an ever-growing discursive terrain of blockbuster exhibitions and headlining art festivals.

In sharing the microcosmic example of "opening day," I acknowledge the smallness of ways in which self-organization behaves. The same smallness can be found in the intimacy of artist-run spaces that provide a counterpoint to a largely visitorship-driven cultural field. In a country like Singapore where we are closely tied to notions of space or the lack of it, these spaces respond to the present cultural economy by "reclaiming and fortifying [an] inner space."^[20] An example is the artist-run Peninsular that occupies and maintains an important subplot in an increasingly flattened public sphere. The artists' studio eases into exhibition space every now and then, shape-shifting to accommodate an occasional audience between private moments of dialogue between artist and work. Visitor and artwork encounter each other through "sessions"—time devoted to a coming together of and making room for reasoning and recuperating of values and positions. In so doing, it partakes too in the production of meanings from its location in the interstices of cultural space.

IV

In all its forms, self-organization is a strategy that reacts to an initial binding condition. To self-organize is to coexist with the momentum and the inertia of an existing context; of getting and giving, pushing away and inviting in.^[21] As I proceed with curatorial work in the cultural climate of Singapore, my beginning is often a break with the conventional separatist notion of self-organization. In recognizing temporalities and references that would see cultural participation through conditions of pluralities and dissonance, perhaps we might write towards gestures that may have seemed too specific, too contingent, too obscure to have been considered through opaque measures of value and experience.

The fixed contours of infrastructure explicitly foreground the shrinking margins around an authorized mode of organizing and consequently, curators and artists are ostensibly made more aware of the inquiries that arise from the parameters they are operating in. Where the centralization of cultural power, perspective, and administration prevails, self-organization sees itself as being part of the overall structure within which its task is to take part in the production of meanings within the public sphere in the way that is closest to us. It carries a hope of shaping the value-creation process, and does so by familiarizing itself with the specific contours of the infrastructure and relocating points for entry.

The Role Required of the Art Museum

Kumakura Haruko

What is the “public” nature of an art museum run and operated by a private corporation? Mori Art Museum (MAM) opened in 2003 on the top floor of Mori Tower, the main structure in the Roppongi Hills commercial facilities complex. Embracing the concepts of “contemporary” and “international” in its mission to introduce cutting-edge global creative endeavors in visual art, architecture, and design through originally curated exhibitions and learning programs, Mori Art Museum works towards its principle of “Art + Life” to realize an enriched society where art relates to all aspects of life. The museum visitors are demographically highly diverse, including people living and working in the Roppongi Hills complex to local residents in the surrounding area, people generally interested in contemporary art and culture, and, increasingly large numbers of tourists from abroad. The museum is not a standalone facility but a department within Mori Building Co., Ltd. Naturally enough, there then exists a certain role expected of the art museum as part of a private corporation that is a for-profit organization. Put simply, this is to contribute to building an attractive community and to draw a lot of visitors. While it may be problematic to define this as the primary principle for running an art museum, it also does not necessarily run counter to the conventional values of the art museum. Many art museums seem to oscillate somewhere between having significance as a specialized institution and appealing to a larger number of visitors. In the case of a contemporary art museum, the specialized significance surely encompasses not only collecting and preserving but also urgency and criticality. I would like to consider the broader theme of publicness from the question of how we, as a contemporary art museum, can realize the two aims (having a specialized significance and appealing to a larger number of visitors) and whether it is possible to achieve a balance between them.

Main Exhibitions and Small Projects

During a given exhibition period, Mori Art Museum holds two types

of concurrent exhibitions that can be roughly categorized as “main exhibitions” and several “small projects,” together with learning programs, implemented alongside the planning and running of the exhibitions, which are very important for the museum. Main exhibitions have included exhibitions with a focus on a single artist, such as Murakami Takashi, N. S. Harsha, or Leandro Erlich, regionally focused exhibitions such as “Arab Express” or “SUNSHOWER,” and thematic exhibitions like “All You Need is LOVE,” “The Universe and Art,” or “Catastrophe and the Power of Art.” The main exhibitions are, as the name suggests, the core events we organize; through flyers, posters, and so on, they are publicized to members of the general public and thus form the “face” of the museum. As such, the main exhibition is required to be easier to understand, to be an event that large numbers of people can enjoy. For example, the Leandro Erlich exhibition held in 2017 attracted 610,000 visitors, ranking fourth in terms of admission numbers among all museum exhibitions in Japan that year. [01] An influential factor in this was that photography was allowed for all the exhibits, increasing the amount of content posted on social media about the exhibition and leading to coverage in newspapers, television, and online news. The recent “Japan in Architecture” exhibition in 2018 had 530,000 visitors.[02]

Mobilizing large numbers of visitors makes it possible to operate an art museum more sustainably. In order to share the social significance of the art museum with more people, this “blockbuster” exhibition model is highly important and naturally also has potential with regard to developing the aforementioned “specialized significance” of an art institution. That being said, as curators, we must avoid pursuing only those things that large numbers of people can understand and enjoy, resulting in the loss of the diverse, chaotic, new, experimental, and at times smaller endeavors. As such, alongside the main exhibition, we also organize small projects and learning programs. The “small projects” are divided into four further categories: MAM Collection, featuring exhibitions of thematically selected works from the museum collection; MAM Screen, comprising screenings of single-channel video works; MAM Project, which focuses on experimental endeavors; and MAM Research, comprising archival exhibitions based on research into specific topics.

I would like to introduce a specific example.

MAM Project 023: Agatha Gothe-Snape

The MAM Project series develops experimental endeavors with artists from around the world, in many cases involving the creation of new work. Born in 1980 and based in Sydney, Agatha Gothe-Snape’s practice has a focus on improvised performance while encompassing a wide range of other methodological approaches, including PowerPoint slideshows, participatory workshops, text, and visual scores (including

01

“Number of visitors to the exhibition in 2017 (Heisei 29) BEST 30,” *Art Annual online*, April 5, 2018, <http://www.art-annual.jp/news-exhibition/news/70388/>.

02

“‘Japanese exhibition of architecture’ closing in success!”, *News, Mori Art Museum*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.mori.art.museum/jp/news/2018/09/1586/>.

music scores and instructions). For her MAM Project, Gothe-Snape made a new installation called *Oh Window*, dealing with the theme of windows. The title drew inspiration from the window of the Mori Art Museum high up on the 53rd floor, positioning the window as a medium or interface between art (what is on the inside of the window) and life (what is on the outside), and making it the central concept for the overall piece. She poetically gathered various elements from around the Roppongi Hills and brought them into the gallery space in order to create a virtual window (that is, an installation) that connects a windowless space with the outside. And then, employing the installation as a stage or a score (instructions), she created and enacted three performances, each in collaboration with different artists. A range of discussions has been taking place recently regarding exhibiting, screening, and collecting works of art that do not rely on materiality. Gothe-Snape's performances were the first such performances staged as part of the MAM Project series. They were examples of a practice reflecting the increasing diversification of expression in contemporary art and also, for the museum, a concrete case for us to consider how best to organize as well as document and archive the performances. In addition, "Oh Walk" workshops were held twice a week, where participants walked around the Roppongi Hills with the artist and her written instructions.

Such individual endeavors, of course, do not involve thousands or even hundreds of people, but rather mere dozens at a time. And yet, I think the art museum is an institution where it does not necessarily follow that these small projects are somehow less important than the large-scale exhibitions. These numerous experimental and dynamic endeavors are implemented through cooperation between the exhibition curator and learning program teams. When considering the roles of these activities as well as art museums and learning programs, I recall what the artist Pedro Reyes said at the international symposium "Can Contemporary Art Museums Become New Places of 'Learning'?" which was held at Mori Art Museum in 2017:

I believe there are two ways to think about the museum: as a fridge or an oven. As a fridge, it's like a perfect temperature. You keep things forever for posterity. That's the role of the museum as fridge. But then, you have the museum as an oven, which is when you produce new work and obviously, if you put something in the oven, you have to be watching because it may have too much heat, too little heat, etcetera. It demands a lot of attention, but you can cook up new realities.^[03]

In the case of an art museum, especially one that deals with contemporary art, we must take on multiple roles. The first is the conventional role of the art museum as a place for preserving, archiving, and sharing with future generations. Another role is that of the oven, that of creating new artistic work, expression, and practice. When it

comes to implementing projects and programs endowed with urgency and criticality, it seems important for Mori Art Museum that these two roles exist simultaneously. After all, if we don't keep ingredients in the fridge, we can't bake any bread in the oven.

I now want to think a little more about the significance of holding both large-scale exhibitions and smaller programs. To us, who are these people who visit the "blockbuster" exhibitions? Let's call them the "mass visitors." Being unable to identify them individually, we can only speculate that many of them are not particularly familiar with contemporary art and find it hard to understand, and perhaps might not even come back to visit the museum again. What is extremely important, though, is that, out of the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the exhibition, at least a few percent of them respond positively to what they see, even if they don't fully understand it, and perhaps spend some time viewing the small projects, and then come back to visit the museum again. They visit the museum as mass visitors, becoming one of hundreds of thousands. However, they might become one of dozens of attendees at a workshop or performance; they might become a "little visitor," an individual visible to the art museum.

We always want to implement inspiring ideas and experimental projects in partnership with artists. Attracting large numbers of people to the main exhibitions possibly enables the small projects also to be seen by more people. When considering the potential publicness of Mori Art Museum as well as how it is characterized, one aspect is surely that it is a place where various kinds of people with their own respective interests can visit. And I think it should be an open place where anyone can become both a "mass" and a "little" visitor, where they can come and go as they like as either, where various differing opinions can be shared. No matter how significant, if the things we put into practice are only ever shared with the same people, it cannot be considered public. Moreover, conversely, regardless of how many people we bring together, it amounts to nothing unless there is some meaning behind what we are doing. Addressing the issue of diversity is certainly no simple matter, yet by attempting to do so while embracing the multilayered practices within ourselves, we can turn contemporary art and its museums into something continually vivid and dynamic.

(Translated by William Andrews)

Untimely Deaths, Undying Time

Goh Sze Ying

01

Goh Sze Ying, "Giving Shape to Painful Things," in *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies Vol. 04: Condition Report: Shifting Perspectives in Asia*, eds Beverly Yong, Furuichi Yasuko (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2018).

This essay consists of fragmentary notes drawn from periods before, during, and after my presentation during the "Imagining New Ecologies" forum organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center in Tokyo from October 17 to 19, 2018. Structured in a non-linear chronology as a method of writing about time while thinking against it, these notes present my contemplations on how curatorial practice may endure beyond exhibition durations.

January 1, 2019

Two years ago, upon encountering a case of censorship, I wrote about the removal of artwork as a sort of loss one experiences, as a death. Back then, I had not considered that while such a loss could be sudden and mourning was long, rebirth was, in fact, possible—if not instant.

The pair of woodcut prints by Ranau-based collective Pangrok Sulap first exhibited and then taken down at the exhibition "ESCAPE from the SEA" in February 2017 has since had not only one but two recent rebirths. One pair, the fifth edition of *Sabah Tanah Air-Ku*, is on display at the 9th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9) in Brisbane. A few months earlier, another pair was exhibited at Pangrok Sulap's solo show, "Lopung is Dead!" at a private gallery in Kuala Lumpur. I return to this thought: *a censored object just does not disappear.*^[01]

On New Year's Day this year, between plotting the death of recalcitrant patterns and resuscitating aborted enterprises, an opportunity for a second encounter with *Sabah Tanah Air-Ku* at APT9. This encounter comes as a gentle assurance, a private moment of vindication that there are second chances and new rebirths, resilience, in the life cycle of art objects. This assurance gets me reflecting on the way our reading of time is parsed through exhibitions.

Exhibition time is linear: it is discrete and divisible. Time scrubs back and forth a passage between the relentless trajectories of exhibition-making enterprises and the retrospective, objectivist writing of art history. But within linear time, events—celebrations and

controversies—are bracketed within specific temporal containers, each in isolation across a progression where relationships are found only as what happened before and what takes place thereafter. *Old/new. Past/present*. Linear time frames our understanding and measurement of change through specific time markers just as we frame the first day of a new year as a temporal threshold through and after which new beginnings take place.

October 5, 2018

Shortly after the opening of “Lopung is Dead!” in Kuala Lumpur, a local news article reads:

Malaysians finally get to view art collective Pangrok Sulap’s “controversial” woodcuts in KL. In the wake of Malaysia Baru (new Malaysia), many previously silenced voices and forms of expression, are now finally being *given their time in the sun* [emphasis mine]. [02]

According to the gallerist, the exhibition provides “a platform for the work to be shown and be accessible to the public.” [03]

January 2, 2019

In configuring the public in the art world, space often takes precedence over time. The exhibition space is transformed into a temporary public space. For a specific duration, the white cube becomes a site in which private concerns meet public interests: who and what gets shown, how works are arranged and displayed, how relationships between art and public discourse are developed. Exhibition durations are embedded within particular rhythms, and artworks have assumed life cycles. Is *our time in the sun* defined by our time *around* the sun, with each return to full circle registering an arbitrary marker of change? This temporal linearity seems to skip a solemn examination of how recalcitrant patterns are formed or how transformation is sustained. And when our relationship to time is perfunctory, history risks repeating itself. *Old habits die hard*.

October 17, 2018

What happens to curatorial practice when we move outside of the model of self-contained, linear time? How else might the shape of time take and how does it, in turn, shape our practice and politics? More specifically, can this time not be contained spatially?

The spatial and temporal orientation within the white cube proceeds from a normativity which is regulated through schedules, calendars, time zones, deadlines. Elizabeth Freeman terms this as *chrononormativity*, a technique of “organizing individual human bodies towards maximum productivity” by which “institutional forces come to seem like somatic

02

Terence Toh, “Malaysians finally get to view art collective Pangrok Sulap’s ‘controversial’ woodcuts in KL,” *The Star*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.star2.com/culture/2018/10/05/pangrok-sulap-woodcut-print-sabah-art-exhibition-rizo-leong-ranau/>.

03

Ibid.

04

Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

05

"Is the Museum a Battlefield," on Vimeo, accessed October 17, 2018, <http://vimeo.com/76011774>.

06

Freeman, *Time Binds*, 9.

facts."^[04] The successes and failures by which exhibitions are measured are thus projected upon specific actors—sponsor, curator, artist, gallerists, et al.—working within specific durations, yet disembodied from invisible forces like machinations of the market and currencies and causalities of relationships, use value, and labour that go beyond exhibition timelines.

In Hito Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013), a lecture first shown at the 13th Istanbul Biennial, temporality takes the shape of an elliptical bullet path, drawing a reference to how the protagonist in the movie *Wanted*, played by Angelina Jolie, shoots a bullet on a circular path "killing all the villains" but eventually, even herself.^[05] This analogy is both ironic and instructive in revealing the complicity of various stakeholders within the art world around which we circulate. Time takes the shape of an elliptical curve, demonstrating along its path our involvement in the art world. The distance of that path is measured not by how far or close we are from the center but how long the orbit of our ethical and political work. The question here is of how this temporal orbit can be elongated, stretched for developing relationships beyond durations fixed within the white cube.

January 8, 2019

While the re-circulation of *Sabah Tanah Air-Ku* in Kuala Lumpur and Brisbane may herald a triumphant feat of the circulatory channels of the art world, the diptych continues to tell a tale of tangled negotiation with change and time.

In "ESCAPE from the SEA," the two panels were displayed separately, one at the National Art Gallery and the other at a privately-owned creative hub, APW (Art Printing Works). The second panel, which was removed from APW due to its "controversial" content, still bears indelible traces of the troubled state of affairs between the East Malaysian state and the federal government in Putrajaya even in the so-called New Malaysia. The *tableau vivant* depicting scenes of corruption, border issues, climate disasters, exploitative depletion of natural resources, and socioeconomic precarity frames a present that is perpetually fragile, or what Freeman characterizes as a present "always split, split by prior violence and future possibility."^[06]

In both the recent exhibitions in Kuala Lumpur and Brisbane, *Sabah Tanah Air-Ku* has been placed side-by-side as a pair within the same venue. Yet, in spite of and because of this proximity, the aspirational futurity of an autonomous state that is no longer disenfranchised in the first panel is turned into an image of an impossible future, no longer a critique of the distant institution.

This is why our imagination of and desire for a public must not contend with visibility on a mere spatial level but be sustained over a temporal dimension. Freeman goes on to ask how one can form an "ethics of responsibility toward the other across time—toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given historical moment,

each understood as calls for a different future to which we cannot but answer with imperfect and incomplete reparations.”^[07] This ethical commitment towards making time sustain beyond timelines is a productive approach, encouraging us not only to think of art not as a circulation but to make curatorial practice durational.

07
Ibid., 9.

What does it mean to develop a practice—both outside and now, inside an institution—within a temporality of undying time? It might involve the task of prolonging the duration of discourse, of making it more durable against time, and of considering multiple strategies which elongate duration of practice: writing, speaking, recording, restaging, relating, remembering, all of which extend the temporality of exhibitions and exceed its circumscribed spatial context.

The possibility of grasping the true indeterminacy of time allows us to approach change in less prescriptive ways. The show is over, but the discourse continues.

DISCUSSION

October 17, 2018, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo

Moderators: Che Kyongfa, Horiuchi Naoko

Horiuchi Naoko

Sze, your presentation highlighted this very interesting question of, “For whom” [as a public is our work as curators intended]? For example, as a curator touching upon very specific contexts and trying to reflect those contexts through an exhibition, I’m sure you’re imagining particular faces or publics. Who are you looking at when you do an exhibition? Also Maung, you mentioned the art scene in your country has been underground until recently. Because of this and political pressure, for the public it could be very challenging to understand the context of this situation. So a question to all of you, What would be the role of a curator as mediator between public and artist or artworks?

Goh Sze Ying

To answer the question of for whom or which public, I speak from a very personal perspective. Within how we contextualize the public, there are very visible publics—the art-conscious, art-initiate crowd who want to access culture or seek exhibitions—but in my practice, I always look out for the invisible public. It changes, of course. I don’t want to say that I specifically speak to a minority, but in my research I often look at how that informs the practice/research—what has not been written in art history or not prefaced already, rather than what we assume as things that are given or normal.

Maung Day

As you say, until recently, the Myanmar art scene has been very underground and under political pressure. Every single artist has been followed by military special branch, with a whole department dedicated to censoring art and literature. It was very risky, so artists always resorted to doing things very secretly, or guerilla style—just go into the public space, surprise the people, then go. But also, not a lot of people were willing to risk imprisonment or things like that. For me [the role of the curator is] maybe creating a space that could make it easy to connect with people, some kind of relational aspect of art we could apply. But it

would depend on the concepts of artists. Artists should come together and talk, to really get the public involved and also without seeming to threaten the authority. That's very complicated here, because people disappear and might be imprisoned for years. It wasn't that easy, but today it's possible.

Horiuchi Naoko

Because it's very risky for artists, you might sometimes have to interpret the ideas of artists into something a little bit more accessible or safe. How would you do that? What sort of language would you use?

Maung Day

I can give you an example of these performance artists, Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thin: they went about town selling art, like art vendors—they put art in baskets and asked the people to name their price and take it, shouting “we sell art” and things like that. At the time, exhibitions were almost not allowed so it's a kind of resistance, but people got the idea, it's very simple and relatable.

Ayos Purwoaji

Your question of how curators make/relate art in public—this is a very classical sense of how curators work. In Indonesia now, there's lots of collectives and initiatives in lots of areas that are experimenting in the way they curate—people curate people, people can curate together and see their work together. The question in my mind is, What's the role of the curator in the public when the public can curate themselves? When earthquake and tsunami hit Palu recently, I was thinking, what can curators do in that kind of disaster? I'm envious of artists who can easily go there and make something. There's a very different nature between artists and curators. Artists can be very flexible and subjective, they can go to the public easily and work there with the public. This morning, we went to Mori Art Museum and we saw a great exhibition about catastrophe, disaster. Can we as curators move out from the white cube to the public, to the very center of the disaster? Curators work in safe, normal conditions, but society doesn't work like that. Society is ever changing, but the museum and gallery stand still. That's why I present this ephemeral curating. In Surabaya, my hometown, there's a museum, but there's no director there. It's run by the government. My friends and I needed to work outside the galleries, with the public, trying to make collaborative curating with people, what people think, how people feel about how we should shape our program or event.

Selene Yap

I believe the value of the curator in the Singapore context is that of someone who understands the infrastructure. Instead of viewing it as a limiting factor, what the curator does is understand the language with which to speak to the infrastructure. That's much needed because you can have resources, artists, the wealth to put together everything,

but finding the language to mediate between so many of these different elements and to bring them together is a different thing. The value comes from being able to find the language to speak to [the infrastructure] so that you can help artists to convey the kind of things they want to put out.

It's a bit like building cultural literacy, and this applies not just to your audience who comes to your space, but also to your marketing team. I don't mean a high level of understanding of a concept, but just helping our teams to be able to express in nuances the context you are trying to explore helps make our work that much more meaningful and easier.

Kumakura Haruko

I want to add something about the show at Mori. Ayos, you talk about differences between curators and artists. I think there is a different role for us. I fully respect the artists who went directly to where the disaster hit, it's not an easy choice. Showing their work as a curated show is what we can do for the public who cannot visit these sites. We had a discussion series before the show, where Hasegawa-san said something important—there is always a discussion between someone who experienced disaster directly and someone who did not. So I was not in Fukushima but maybe you were there. This distance is always the issue. Showing artwork, and that artwork is somehow connected to you, to every one of you, this is what we can do. So when you show those artworks that are connected to everyone we can maybe go beyond that distance. On your other question—I try not to picture individual faces when I curate a show because faces I know are limited—and we have big audience numbers so there are always invisible visitors. So I always try to remember that I don't know most of them. But personally, I want to talk to people like high school students who are curious about not knowing specific things about contemporary art. I want to talk to me when I was a third-grade high school student.

Horiuchi Naoko

Sze has mentioned the interesting point that censorship is part of the circulation of art. If authority is also part of the public, how should we try to convince the authorities not to censor the work of an artist in an exhibition? The role of a curator is also to talk to authority—it may not be necessary to oppose it, but perhaps rather change their definition or perception of art and culture. How do you deal with the pressure of censorship?

Maung Day

In 2008, me and a friend of mine organized Beyond Pressure performance art festival. We just did it inviting people we know, behind closed doors because we were afraid. We also had international artists and we worried about their security. But in 2010, we thought about it and we thought, No, we had to somehow work with the authority. Because the authority is responsible for screening our galleries, censoring artworks,

we went to them and said, We want to organize a festival, we want you to come and censor us, or talk to us. They asked, Is it an art exhibition? We said, No, it's performance art. They didn't know what performance art is, so we explained only a little bit about it; they couldn't really wrap their heads around it. But they came to us and artists lined up to pitch their ideas to the censors. They also wanted to frame art in a way that's not subversive or dangerous to the authority. Say, artists wanted to burst balloons, censors would ask, What colors are the balloons, are there any red balloons you're bursting, maybe you might consider not consider bursting those? Things like that. It was a very interesting conversation to me, at least we could understand what they didn't like and they were iterating it to people that they didn't like these things so it was documented somehow. In the end, there was a list of things they didn't want us to do, so we sat with the artists and we told them, It's up to you. That's the risk that artists and the organizer can take, I'm not going to judge. [It gave] space to decide. In my country now, censorship is lifted but not entirely. Also I feel that censorship comes a lot from the public, especially today because of the rise of nationalism and Buddhist fundamentalism. Between Buddhist factions, they are also doing their work spreading hate; if I comment on Facebook, my comment can spread quickly, so I can be in trouble. Authorities let people do it that way because that's how they control things. So that's another challenge that we are now faced with.

Kumakura Haruko

We are not a public institution, so it's a little easier for us to broach touchy issues. For example, the exhibition we are having now, "Catastrophe," could be quite difficult in a public institution. But what we have to think about is self-censorship within the company because the company people have a very different mindset from us in the museum, yet we are one entity. We have to be careful how to talk to them; it's important to build relationship with people working in the Mori Building company who are not interested in art. I want to ask Sze how the situation is in a public institution like National Gallery Singapore.

Goh Sze Ying

I haven't had that encounter yet but [I find] the question of censorship is often masked in a confusing misinformed binary as if there is a censor and the censored. I don't think such a complex issue can be flattened like that. It comes down to power relay and power manifests in various spaces at various levels of hierarchy. We can often pinpoint who's got the highest consolidation of power—a state, institution, someone who's rich and self-important. We can say that's where the power lies, but the power shifts as well and, as culture workers, we need to be aware when it shifts, in what context and situation, and to see how we address this so-called censorship. Censorship is just an event where something or someone doesn't like a work and doesn't want other people to see this

work, and so it is removed from the public gaze. My specific lesson from “ESCAPE from the SEA” is to see how we can open up the space beyond the removal or absence of the work, and to continue to talk about it, to persist the discomfort of what someone wants to remove, but in other forms—discussions, forums, text, so that somehow then the work will find itself again in the psyche and consciousness of the public. I like how Maung described Htein Lin and his collaborator’s tactics—you can’t show this like this, so we’re going to show it like *this*—it’s a mode of sidestepping which is an important strategy. We can’t always confront power head on—I applaud all those who have, but sometimes it’s not so easy. So each of us has to deal with this in our own ways—sometimes we can confront it, sometimes it’s a longer turn. But for me it’s about thinking about ways to open up the space and allow more people to enter that discomfort together.

Ayos Purwoaji

Can you imagine a society without censorship? That’s Indonesia—after Reformasi in 1998, there is no censorship at all because censorship happened during Suharto’s, or the New Order, regime. Today, censorship is coming from the bottom and side, not from the top. When you say censorship, you always think about government or who has power, but today censorship in Indonesia is happening from the public itself, from Internet users—you can go to jail from your exhibition because people force police to jail you. It’s a different kind of challenge.

Selene Yap

At The Substation, we work with punks and transgenders for some projects [which can be a problem for the Media Development Authority (MDA) censors]. So the way we present their work, say a listening session or a project, to MDA, is as human beings just trying to enact their lives. We find that an effective language to use. As much as that it has to come down to that kind of level before the state can decide they don’t have to do anything about it, it’s still a useful way to think about things. We’re not sensationalizing the issue on behalf of the artists, we’re just saying it is a part of their life, and this is how they’re going to present their work. The other tactic good for mediating censorship authorities is to flood them with information. Instead of giving them the bare minimum that they need to process your application, give them everything they could possibly need and don’t need as well. It’s good to remember that the government is not a unified body, that there are also individuals that administer things, and to them it’s just part and parcel of bureaucracy to want your information and as long as they have it with them they’re okay for you to go ahead.

Che Kyongfa

Perhaps what Selene just told us, flattering them by giving them information is effective because censorship is so systematized in Singapore, whereas in most places including Japan, censorship comes very randomly, it’s a random

form of power. So Ayos, though you were saying there's no censorship, there is censorship in Indonesia and it comes from peers, the people. How do you avoid that, or try to convince them, or are you excluding these potential people who could disagree with you? I think this question can apply to all of us—who are you excluding from the public?

Ayos Purwoaji

When I go into the public, working with the public, I usually do a power-mapping so I can see, say, if I make an exhibition like this, there is a potential threat from some communities or groups, and so I should do my exhibition with the patron of another group. You need to sail through the rocks. Surprisingly, if we can see the threat, we always have a solution for that—that's the power of curators.

Che Kyongfa

Maybe that's why you say [being a] curator is survival strategy.

Ayos Purwoaji

Yes, in the Indonesian context.

Goh Sze Ying

I had a conversation with an artist Sharon Chin in Malaysia, about her experience of organizing a performance art festival at National Art Gallery Malaysia, which ties back to what you were saying, Maung, about inviting the censor to your turf and then asking them “what do you not like to see?” Because often it is the other way around where we offer them information or we show a work and get them to say whether they like it or not. But they seldom get put into positions where they have to clarify what it is that they don't like and what is wrong with this thing they don't like. So [Sharon was saying that] sometimes it would be great if we go to exhibitions and we get the direct contact of the curators, and if we don't like the exhibition we're invited to email the curator and tell them that specifically. It goes back to this concept of exclusion, but the gesture that is offered is that you also open up a space for people who get to say what they don't like and then have the power to proscribe and to state in a more public forum what it is that they don't like and for the curators to then have that conversation with them. I thought it was a lovely strategy, though I haven't tried it myself! There is this idea of this dialogue with that imaginary public that we often talk about but we never put into practice.

Bill Nguyen

Through your presentations, I have been thinking about notions of the opaque and the transparent—the opaque being something that is made silent or suppressed and the transparent that is something like being vocal and being in the light. So there is a power dynamics going on between what is opaque and what is transparent. Who can make things disappear, who can shine light on things? With the militarization that

is going on in Southeast Asia and also where being political/vocal in the context where I'm working in Vietnam could pose possible danger, staying opaque is political and a means to survive, and staying opaque sometimes is a means to make things more invisible or visible. And I'm wondering, as public workers, towards a public sphere, with or for the public, what do you imagine your responsibilities are to artists, your peers, or even yourselves when it comes to publicizing what is meant or made to be opaque, what's meant to be censored, when there are real life death kind of consequences, not just to your peers but also yourself? In your case, Ayos, for example you're visibilizing what is supposed to be forgotten; in Maung's case or the case of Myanmar, sometimes artists have to completely avoid certain issues in order to stay alive. Do you have artists talking about ethnic cleansing right now? In Sze's presentation, there's this idea to continue the state of the artwork, the censored artwork even after the artwork is not physically present anymore.

Goh Sze Ying

I'm not in that position to respond to situations of censorship which would be life-and-death situations; I think these are very delicate. I think of it often as two sides of a coin: transparency, the need to talk, and silence. I want to read this beautiful sentence written by Anne Boyer, "In silence, they clamor." It basically means that there is a power to sometimes not saying something, and I think [this entails] tactics which are sometimes necessary according to where you come from and what situation you face. At the end of the day, we do what we do because there is a care for what we do, and care comes from care for the material, the artists, the relationships, but also care for the smallest things, not "oh I got this artwork for my exhibition"—it's not these grand gestures. It's not as simple as we can all stand up together to power. But I think for every one of us in everything that we do, as long as it's informed by that humility and that care, that's [what's] important, and it is about finding where that care comes from. I don't think that my approach is always to publicize about it [the opaque]. But I think where you keep silent because it's convenient, that is an act of cowardice. But if we keep silent because it's necessary for us to survive, we sometimes just have to do it.

Maung Day

In my opinion, artists, public, authorities, we all are kind of testing each other. I also feel maybe one reason artists don't deal with these ethnic issues in my country is that they are not informed about these things. In my country, it's quite messy now, a lot of things are happening, and also I feel for some artists—trying to be safe has become their comfort zone, or maybe they're still struggling with self-censorship. With the issue of Rohingya, also a lot of artists in my country are Buddhist Burmese and they would be on the same side as the government on that. For me, I also sometimes draw a line where and how I should do it. I have written poems mentioning Rohingya in my work and hoped that some monks in Mandalay would read them and do something about it, but nothing

has happened. Sometimes I also want to test people, have conversations about it. These things are quite tricky.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

I want to continue in line with what Bill asked—how being invisible is sometimes also emancipating, which also reminds me of good quote by Saidiya Hartman about the right to remain a secret. That in order to be political the right to remain a secret must be protected. This is why I started to think, would it be possible to curate outside of the public gaze, to curate without a public? There is this one interesting question: Would you like to curate an exhibition no one can see? Or no one will see? The notion of curator as public worker is something that I find strangely unfamiliar for me as a curator working in a small space where visitors may number one a week. That creates possibilities for us to think of other publics or audiences; it's very liberating to be able to imagine a different public measurement or public interest. Of course, I understand from friends who work in museums you have “publicness” being measured by how many people come to your exhibition, how many receive your catalogue, but I also believe that there are certain things that we need to do as curators, and I like to emphasize the potential of curators as caretakers of knowledge, organizing knowledge and sometimes things that haven't been identified as knowledge yet. So maybe that's also in response to what Ayos asks: In times of disaster, what can curators do? I think what curators can do is prefigure disaster, maybe there's some mystical way of reading disaster without it being publicized yet. My question would be: Is it possible to curate outside of what is known as the public?

Leonhard Bartolomeus (Barto)

Another continuation actually. We've been talking about curatorial issues when the profession of curator still doesn't exist in Indonesia. If you're working for the government and try to register yourself as a curator, you wouldn't get paid. But then, of course, curating happens, following through from what's already there. One thing I've been figuring out as a “pseudo-curator” working in Indonesia is that there is a certain amount of role-playing involved. Becoming a curator in Indonesia has become something so powerful—you choose who's in and who's out, who's going to be chosen to be presented in public or not. So the question I would like to ask is, How do you consider these [issues of] power relations, what kind of resources could you share with the artists and the public in terms of that?

Ayos, you could respond to Dina on working without the public. I do some projects with Ayos working in a very secret area nobody can know about because it's really dangerous for the people living there. Such projects are bringing a lot of changes in our perspective on what is being a curator. [What] if the public that you're working with doesn't really know or doesn't care that you are a curator? Like, I don't care if you're a curator or not as long as you can buy my artworks or you can do some

programs in our villages. How should we consider the public—is it that curators are working in the public as a different entity or are we working with the public as a partner or are we working as the public? These are important questions at least from my perspective, in the Indonesian art scene.

Vipash Purichanont

Throwing one more addition to the conversation: There was a part of the discussion which made me feel quite uncomfortable—about the figure of the authorities perhaps because [it made me] look into myself and my work, because I'm assistant curator with Thailand Biennale. The model of this was that the authority wanted to do a biennale, which means that the censorship is internalized. So I started what I call my Wednesday happy hour, where the curatorial team go to the committee of experts—mostly modernists in their seventies, national artists—trying to negotiate with the authorities every week, thinking about how to reframe the way in which we interpret the artworks in such a way that would be acceptable. I wouldn't say I succeed in every attempt but it has been an interesting experience over the past three to four months; it's made me realize how [the dynamics of] censorship and public are sometimes very internalized. Censorship starts even before the exhibition starts. The idea of presenting something to the public actually starts once you encounter these barriers, sidestepping, coming back again, with different ways of interpreting. And a lot of times it's us as curators who hold the ability to interpret, to change the way we let people see things. Another model that is interesting for this discussion.

Che Kyongfa

There is a question to Sze from the floor, asking for examples of how to push beyond the boundaries of the exhibition.

Goh Sze Ying

This is more anecdotal than a suggestion of method, but something I've been practicing the past three to four years is the idea of sustaining a relationship. Every time I look at doing a commission, or inviting an artist, I ask myself a question: How long I would like to sustain a relationship with the person who is making this art? It comes from this question I was asked in school, which was, When we do our research on someone or something, or a community, what sort of stories are we writing? Are we emptying out other people's personal lives to advance what we desire in terms of our intellectual or social currency, or are we writing a story that [we] can read together? So that's where I find the durational aspect of my curatorial labour.

Being able to be there for the artist in the process of making the work is quite crucial for me. That relationship allows me to see that the object or the art is just the tip of the cumulative nature of what is being exchanged, so it doesn't become so transactional. It's a way of appeasing the turmoil of how fraught curating has become today, one

way of thinking outside exhibitions. One lesson I've learnt—you can't have too many relationships with too many artists because time is finite. This brings to the fore how fast production is in the exhibition world, in the art world. People just go through group show after group show, exhibition after exhibition. We almost churn out lists, but the labor of having relationships with artists actually takes a lot of time.

Hasegawa Arata

My suggestion is a bit abstract, but my suggestion is that every time we curate some project or exhibition, we explore some of the audiences in every single exhibition [every single exhibition redefines the public]. There are two methods of curating. One is expanding the definition of the public, various kinds of audiences, creating many layers. And then the other method is installing contingency in an exhibition—we should make opportunities to make errors. But these two methods are [already] used by those have power, like government and institutions, those who want to control the public. As independent curators, we should invite the third way of curating—expanding is very important, installing contingency is also important, but we should find another way of curating.

Session 2

History

History

—

Beverly Yong

(with thanks to Le Thuan Uyen, who led the development of this session)

Session 2 of the forum “Imagining New Ecologies” turned to the subject of history, recognizing it as an increasingly prevalent theme in contemporary artistic and curatorial practices across the globe, with a growing number of projects dealing with the making and unmaking of historical content, or revisiting history.

Looking at history can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the world, to discover alternative narratives to current existing socio-political conditions. With rising nationalism and militarism, and in a region where historical narratives may be tightly controlled or remain contested, it can also inform a search for individual or communal identity.

To attempt to look at history differently often requires or leads to identifying new methods of working, finding different audiences, as well as alternative modes of knowledge production and dissemination, thus effecting the formation of new knowledge, or ecologies. Curators in Southeast Asia may find themselves in a complex position where they are dealing with relooking histories through art while also shaping and reshaping histories of art through their work.

In this session, we investigated how different curators consider and approach working with history, and how they negotiate its representation to different publics. The presenters each spoke about the role and treatment of history in the development of their independent curatorial practices, introducing perspectives and projects involving artists working with history, historical contexts in which artworks are made/artists are practicing, or more directly, history as a material and even methodology.

Hanoi-based Le Thuan Uyen reflected on the motivations for the interest in history in the contemporary art world, as well as in her own practice, and focused on microhistory and alternative history as two modes of storytelling, looking at how artists reveal histories through the stories of individuals and smaller communities, or reinvent them to open up possibilities for how we engage with the past. Nishida Maki, whose practice to date has been situated mostly away from her home country Japan, shared thoughts on her curatorial role as an outsider highlighting personal and less visible histories contending with dominant narratives of “History.” Lisa Ito-Tapang spoke more forthrightly on the role of curatorial labor to counter hegemonic histories, and lessons learnt from projects engaging with histories of the subaltern and of visual dissent, and connecting archives, sites, and ecologies, in the Philippines.

Vipash Purichanont shared his experiences collaborating with an artist on an unrealized commission which attempted a hauntological approach, which seeks “not to perceive history anew, but to pursue surrounding absences of historical moments

which make history possible.” In his reflection for this publication, however, he expands on the appeal of hauntology as a response to the crisis of a present in which futures are being systematically canceled, particularly in Thailand, with the junta government narrowing public space for criticism and collective consciousness. The absences of the past suggest possibilities for thinking about the future.

Hasegawa Arata expands on his presentation which highlighted projects that look/have looked into the untold stories of artists, and more broadly possible curatorial frameworks for expressing “a perspective that art changes society at the same time as society changes art.” In discussing the ambitions and methodology of “Chronicle, Chronicle!,” an exhibition held twice at Creative Center Osaka in 2017, involving over 100 different events held over the year, he explores ways to rethink history, with its potential for conflict and error, and time itself, in exhibition-making.

There is a certain sense of urgency permeating these engagements with history. The past would seem to offer many different ways to look at and confront the future, offering up hidden voices, knowledge, and potentiality, and opportunities for reflexivity, which may form tools and strategies “to activate curatorial labor that sparks some sense of radical imagination even as we are running out of time.”

Microhistory/Alternative History: Artistic Production in Looking at Identity, Political Struggle, and Expression

Le Thuan Uyen

From East to West, from large-scale international exhibitions to humble local displays, across older and younger generations of art practitioners, history seems to be an unavoidable subject. Browsing through various artists' biographies and speaking with a number of practitioners, I have a sense that dealing with history—the making and unmaking of historical content—has become an increasingly recurrent theme. For many people, including art practitioners, dealing with history can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the surrounding world, to discover narratives that are absent in official records, and to reflect on their own identity. And perhaps history is indeed too broad a subject not to be referred to, as historical implications are present in every one of our social activities. Here, I would like to share some recent observations and reflections, and propose some assumptions on my part regarding the relation between this growing interest in history and different forms of political struggle.

I became aware of my preoccupation with history about two years ago, during a residency in New York City. In preparing my biography for their website, the coordinator from the host organization asked me: “So, what is your work about?” It was the first time I had been asked this question, and it took me a good few minutes to reply. I realized that the majority of my curatorial projects were concerned with history and memory. And I soon noticed that I was not alone. Everywhere I have been recently, the past appears to have a haunting impact on present societies. At the Whitney Biennial 2017, Documenta 14 and 57th Venice Biennale, works exploring the historical past, memories, and experiences of political struggle were omnipresent. Funding resources and exhibition organizers in the more developed art scenes have seemed eager to support and showcase works addressing these themes. Some commentators attribute this interest in history to ongoing global political turmoil and economic instability and criticize practitioners for capitalizing on key trends, while others consider the act of revisiting history to be crucial in understanding one's own roots and contexts, especially in the age of rapid social transformations (due

to globalization, technological advancements, and so on). Regardless of these different perspectives on why practitioners choose to deal with history, what is worth looking into are the various approaches they undertake in dealing with such complex subject matter.

There are several ways of recounting history. I will focus on two modes of storytelling: one deals with microhistory and the other with alternative history. These provide a more personal account of the past, weaving in personal story, memories, or individual imagination of what could have happened from a particular point of view. History, in common understanding, is often seen as a collective truth shared amongst people living in the same geographically defined territory or people who belong to one particular community. However, narratives of individuals carry their own significance. They are small fragments of a larger puzzle, which can enable us to see things differently.

Before I continue, I would like to clarify my perception of these two terminologies within the context of artistic projects:

- Microhistory involves the study of a well-defined smaller unit of research—a single event, a village community, an individual. It seeks to investigate how macro-level decisions or events impact smaller groups and individuals; and vice versa how such a smaller account contributes to or interacts with the larger narrative. An example would be the work of Oslo-based artist Damir Advagic, which includes conversations and letters exchanged among the diaspora community (to which the artist belongs) affected by the conflict in former Yugoslavia, reflecting on how history is passed between generations as well as its implications on how one relates to others and to oneself culturally and politically.
- Alternative history embodies a larger, more evident degree of fiction. The stories' sources may be ambiguous or be an amalgamation of various fragments of other stories and often ask situational questions regarding the course of history—what if one or more historical events were to be altered? Vietnamese artist Phan Thao Nguyen's *Tropical Siesta*, a moving image work, took inspiration and visual references from historical texts and other visual archival materials. In her work, Thao Nguyen imagines an utopian world where the main subjects—children living in rural Vietnam—create their own educational curriculum using only one textbook, about the journey of a French missionary in Vietnam called Alexandre de Rhodes. The children are free to interpret the book, re-enacting the journey in make-believe games, imagining a different version of the past which may have created a different present.

What these two methods of content sharing have in common is that, quite often, they provide differing, occasionally disparate accounts to the historical narrative that is officially or commonly circulated. I want to consider the implications this may have on society in the present. By referring to stories that may contradict mainstream records, artworks

dealing with micro- or alternative history can potentially resist, and challenge the mode of hegemonic historiography. Such works are testimony to the claim that history is forever a multifaceted, complex, and contested subject. They partially undermine the power of the authority to dictate a narrative, and contribute more story units to the larger picture, altering the orchestrated act of collective remembering. Consequentially, the act of revisiting and unpacking historical content can have an impact on how individuals relate to their community or to their physical and non-physical surroundings. In the process, newly acquired knowledge may result in the reconsideration or contestation of existing preconceptions of a group, a social landscape, or geographical relevance, thus changing their relationship accordingly and causing a kind of disruption, even if it takes place on a very small scale. In short, exploring narratives that are largely invisible and retelling them in the language of art can create interesting encounters between personal/micro-level questions and public/macro-level history.

How information and materials are presented to the public can have a considerable impact on how audiences see the work and interpret its meaning. In many artistic projects, artists work with materials deriving from their personal archives or hands-on experiences and encounters. This provides an interesting entry point in looking at the past due to the individual sentiments and perspectives that are embedded in these materials. Artistic articulation may differ tremendously from hard-fact historical documentation as it is not limited to texts, images, data but also includes emotions, personal and collective memories, romanticization of the past, myths, often drawing from oral histories. Historical exploration, therefore, in the eyes of the artist, may be quite different from the study of history in the context of the social sciences. Artistic projects offer a visual and sensual environment that embraces a certain degree of subtlety and ambiguity, encouraging reflexive thinking and interpretation rather than hinting at a fixed story. They create a space for interaction and interpersonal dialogue that differ from the exchange of academic knowledge or formal social debate.

This leads me to wonder whether the fascination with micro- and alternative histories has something to do with surviving change, locating one's value system, and expressing ongoing political struggle. Perhaps working with history in these ways can be seen as an effort to avoid disorientation in an era of impermanence. During a casual conversation with some friends and colleagues, a question was raised about the growing interest in historical research in Southeast Asia. There were a lot of case-by-case examples, listing out reasons why one did such and such. However, I felt they were a little too specific, and did not contextualize how this preoccupation with history is positioned within the broader social landscape. From my personal observation, the desire for historical investigation seems to be more strongly felt in regions that have experienced recent conflicts, or in postcolonial states. I must stress that this is an assumption made on my part and that I have yet to find concrete data or conduct thorough studies to ensure its credibility.

Perhaps in places that experience historical fragmentation due to conflicts, displacement, and political restrictions, causing the blurring out or erasure of former beliefs, ritualistic practices, and customs, there is a need to excavate all the fragments and assemble them in an attempt to form a shared identity and sense of belonging. This is further complicated by colonial experiences, which may lead communities to quest for a postcolonial identity by seeking to return to precolonial systems of behaviour and practices.

Take Vietnam, for example. In the past century, it has witnessed quite a number of major political events which have resulted in various ideological shifts (as a country and society once feudal then colonized then divided and now governed by a hybrid system where Leninist-Maoist Communism meets market capitalism), displaced people, and sidelined folk culture. The question of Vietnamese-ness is constantly raised, and it is a very contested discourse as Vietnamese values and culture are understood and practiced differently in different geographical areas (North versus South Vietnam) and by different communities (54 different ethnic groups make up the population). The postwar Vietnamese identity is a chaotic amalgamation of various sources of influence: Confucianism, local culture, Western ideals. Rapid development and the fast-paced invasion of new market-driven values and aesthetics, to a certain degree, have led to a staggering evaporation of traditional culture. Economic pressure pushes the nation to identify its “competitive advantages” or unique “selling points.” This demand drives not only policymakers but also community members to search for an identity/culture that is unique.

Previously, Socialist Realism dominated Vietnamese art as well as thinking nationwide between 1975 and the 1990s, which privileged positive collective spirit and narratives over individualistic conceptions and emotions. National identity was constructed carefully based on a fixed set of Communist/anti-colonial values by the Central Party Committee to unite and mobilize a poor, agrarian population, thus silencing all others. Having said that, this sometimes contradicted deeply-rooted existing customs, belief systems, and values. In a way, the highly controlling state apparatus unwittingly facilitated a sense of urgency to “speak the truth,” to unveil opinions ignored in formal records, counterbalancing the vast power vested in the central authority. By looking for different versions of the past, micro- and alternative histories provide a platform for critical commentary on social conditions, and for understanding the undercurrents, leftovers, by-products of changing politics, looking at social structures and dynamics at a deeper level.

While looking at history through artworks can potentially resist and provide other narratives to existing mainstream historical knowledge, and challenge the existing politics of historical documentation, it can also be problematic as it raises a number of ethical questions including that of historical truthfulness. When history is told by an “outsider” and not someone from the community itself, particularly when the

language of storytelling is one based on symbolic objects, space, and memories rather than statistics and straightforward facts, how can a practitioner correctly represent the issues of that particular group? Even if the practitioner assumes an “insider” position, one perspective does not reflect everyone else’s and therefore should not be understood as shared. Perhaps that is precisely why micro- and alternative histories are valuable as they deliberately open up different entry points. For they dismantle the institutional imposition of one single narrative onto a group of people and remind us to look at history in a more critical yet understanding and sympathetic way. Artistic productions inspired by such types of historical research therefore do not necessarily seek to uncover “the truth” but more importantly, they open up the possibilities for interpersonal connection as well as encourage some sort of confidence in practitioners and viewers alike to reflect on and share their own stories.

The Plurality of History: History and history

Nishida Maki

It is said that history is written by the victors. History—that is, History with a capital H—always belongs to power, to authority. It is Hi-story, or perhaps even *his* story—but what do we do with her story, their stories, our stories? This is a question with which I have long grappled. History is just one truth to the winning side, but there are countless truths around any fact, even an arguably singular fact. Those truths, or stories, are sometimes actively talked about, sometimes unspoken, in some cases suppressed, or even forgotten. While History is for me a subject to question—what is it, how did it form itself, who does it cater to?—my interest lies in histories that are very personal, with their own interpretation of a situation and context.

This tendency is in no small measure influenced by the 10 years I have spent in the UK as part of an ethnic minority. Spending a certain amount of time abroad, you start to question your own identity and start thinking that you want to know the history of your own country. On the other hand, once you become used to living constantly within the history of others, you come to realize the discrepancies that exist between the history you have been taught, received, or possessed until now and the history of those others, and you gradually learn to come to terms with these discrepancies. As the contexts and history of a foreign place gradually seep into your flesh and blood, what becomes the norm is a state of coexisting with yourself as the Other, always with a perspective one step removed, always questioning. You come to realize that the people all around are also living to no small extent saddled with two, or even more, histories. Imperceptibly your interests gradually turn more to the small stories or very personal histories of individuals, rather than the grand problematics of society, offering the possibility of an alternative history to existing History. Learning that, when it comes to History with a capital H, not everything is correct, you become more curious about how people respond to this condition.

Some want to learn more about their own countries and explore that path for a range of reasons—the history of their own countries might be interrupted or unformed, meaning they incline more towards making

that history. Some might even lose interest in the history of others. This attitude also appears when dealing with or considering history within curatorial practice. Among the Southeast Asian curators who participated in the “Imagining New Ecologies” forum, there were many enthusiastically engaged in history-making and research into the art history of their own countries in ways related closely to political history and rooted in the contexts of their home countries.

In my thinking and practice, I perhaps take an opposite perspective and approach. Based in and from countries where the histories and infrastructures of art are, to a certain extent, established, I feel no sense of vocation to shape something urgently. An independent curator like myself moves around between countries, communities, and facilities as specified by the needs of the current project. Frequently this entails entering the contexts and histories of the people there, reflecting on and interpreting them in my own way, and then presenting the results of this process to them. We might say that what I am doing from a curatorial standpoint is similar to what artists do at their residencies and research locations. And I think my approach to history is highly personal, one stemming from very personal interests.

As such, at the forum, I introduced two case studies that demonstrated this process of entering someone else’s history as an outsider and the question of how we can become involved with their history (and, indirectly or accordingly, whether or not this means involvement with History). The first was an exhibition in New Delhi co-organized by the local branch of The Japan Foundation with Devi Art Foundation, where I was the guest curator. The second was a joint artist and curator residency project in Maizuru, north Kyoto, I participated in.

The Japan Foundation New Delhi held an open call for a curator to plan an exhibition at their basement gallery using the contemporary art collection of Devi Art Foundation, a private foundation which holds Bengal School art and craft as well as contemporary art from India and South Asia, as well as Iran and Central Asia, established by a mother and son who were collectors that played a major role in encouraging the contemporary art scene in India. I was attracted by the sense in which the foundation had contributed to shaping contemporary art history in India, while the collection itself was reliant on a personal family history and individual interests. I found out that Devi Art Foundation had initiated the collaboration with The Japan Foundation, deliberately requesting for a Japanese curator to work with their collection. Presuming that this came from a desire to see how their collection might be interpreted and represented from an outside perspective (and one that just so happened to be Japanese), I felt that this was something that I could do, given that I had spent so long outside Japan.

I considered a few choices while preparing my proposal. The political and feminist approaches that instantly came to mind for a place whose national history and formation was so engrossing just did not seem to work, particularly due to the time constraints, so I decided to focus on listening to the personal voices of the collection that have

formed within the contexts and atmosphere of India. I repeatedly went through the list of works in the collection. In dialogue with the artworks, the significance of the drawings in the collection stood out, and I gradually realized that there were other works in the collection that could also converse in the language of drawing. I decided to make a show focusing on the characteristics of drawing that cut across media including painting, sculpture, and video. In other words, I made a two-pronged attempt at negotiating with the framework of art history, at one level exploring fragments of the country's history through the form of personal histories, and at another dismantling art categories and then reassembling them based around the properties of the artworks. The exhibition title "On Line dot—Works on paper and other visible things, not necessarily viewed as drawing" borrows from the title of Mel Bochner's seminal conceptual art exhibition, deliberately reframing drawing as the conceptual focus. So I did not in the end adopt a curatorial approach that dealt directly with politics or history. However, what proved fascinating was that the project inevitably became entangled with them.

Just as I was visiting India to do research for the exhibition and move forward with the planning, political tensions between India and Pakistan flared up. Since quite a few of the works I had selected were by Pakistani artists or were implicitly political, I was told that, though they wanted to respect my wishes as much as possible, it might be necessary to reconsider the balance and content of the show for various reasons. Considerations had to be made as well with certain artworks in the installation process. For example, with a work that used Pakistani books, I was unable to choose the pages which contained political terms to be exhibited. But if I had pushed my curatorial decisions through, regardless of how prepared I was personally to face danger, I would have been putting the lives and wellbeing of the other organizers at risk. And so I came to know directly the considerable disparity between trying one's best to fight against power, strictures, and censorship under conditions of peace and safety, and what can actually be done or not when not enjoying such circumstances.

In all, the project proved an opportunity to explore how you can relate to the history of a place whose history differs from your own, whereby I went to an unknown land, studied the people's contexts and history within a limited amount of time, looking, listening, experiencing, reflecting, and then presented to them my version of what I had understood.

In Maizuru, the project entailed doing research with an artist in the form of a residency and then leaving the results behind as artworks and documentation. Notwithstanding that it was in my own country and I presumably should have known some of the contexts, I was once again an outsider, not being personally familiar with the history of this particular region. Maizuru was the site of an Imperial Japanese Navy base from the Meiji period (1868–1912) onwards and developed as a naval port, becoming a key port for returning Japanese servicemen and

detainees from continental Asia after the war. This history is a major part of the city's identity and is heavily emphasized in how it markets itself to tourists. On my first visit to the city, I felt that this special history was indeed noteworthy, though I also felt uneasy and dissatisfied that this focus was predetermined. I rather felt that I did not want the subject matter of the project to be this history that was already something so evident. I think the primary aim of art lies in its ability to make visible what is invisible.

And so, when the opportunity came to nominate an artist to work with in Maizuru, I first wanted to try doing something related to what cannot be easily seen under the present circumstances in the area, even though it is obviously there. Moreover, if my work were to relate to the location through the project, rather than dealing with modern history, I wanted to try pivoting it around the indigenous contexts of the site, like its natural environment, ancient history, and folklore. In the course of my research in Maizuru and the surrounding area, I came to learn that water is closely connected to people's lives in various forms, not only because the region is coastal, but also because of difficulties in controlling river flooding. In both legends and actual history, I found various stories about traveling across the sea.

With this approach towards Maizuru in mind, I nominated SHIMURAbros, two Japanese siblings who live in Berlin and started their career as filmmakers, to work with as artists. What we call film or video is closely related to the elements of light and time, and I sensed an affinity here with the ideas of water and travel, and that we might make a curious discovery by combining them. However, after some research, SHIMURAbros came back to me with a proposal involving a theory they had heard that Jewish exiles from the Second World War reached Maizuru, which they wanted to use somehow if it proved true. I found their idea intriguing as it brought together various elements—their empathy as fellow expatriates, sea and travel, and a not-so-distant involvement with current world affairs—and stemmed from interests based on their own circumstances and perspectives. Because it was hard to find reliable information about the exiles, we found there was insufficient time to pursue the subject properly, and shelved this proposal.

Eventually, we developed our research through the concepts of light, water, and travel, starting from events and various things left behind at an abandoned elementary school along the coast. We ended up using a Meiji period house as the venue where we exhibited light effects employed during a film or video shoot, an installation of things and stories collected over the course of our research, and footage of the nearby open sea, as well as a previous work created in Singapore, another place that lies across that sea.

It was a great honor to hear from many residents that the exhibition gave them fresh perspectives while making them aware again of their everyday landscape. Someone said: "Watching the footage, I could suddenly taste the tide in my mouth, like I have occasionally experienced

since childhood. Perhaps it was also like this for people long ago when reading stories or looking at pictures of the sea.” Yes, I thought, here is the importance of art: to be able to create such a moment. In my view, art, or art with “true” quality, is a medium that can connect the personal to the universal, even if it does not focus on big mantras and cultural trends or address the world’s problems. Given the inseparability of History and history, if we continue working with small perspectives and approaches each in our own way, this surely then leads to negotiation with History itself.

(Translated by William Andrews)

A Commitment to Telling: Curatorial Labor and Counter-Hegemonic Histories

Lisa Ito-Tampang

Why does history matter for both curatorial labor and imagination? If curation is an act weighed and invested in reflexivity, how do its practitioners engage with history as both material and message, record and lens, principle and paradox?

The process of negotiating this complexity can be likened, by way of a slightly biographical anecdote, to the irony of writing on walls. Fifteen years ago, I wrote about an anti-vandalism campaign initiated by the state agency Metro Manila Development Authority that was tasked to cover up graffiti and slogans by protesters across public spaces in Manila. They accomplished this “beautification” drive by hiring contractual painters to whitewash and decorate any offending public walls with geometric patterns or reliefs inscribed with nativist tropes.

For an operation where any curatorial impulse is largely driven by the mandate to erase, the act of whitewashing is usually wrought to completion, completely obliterating any previous marks on the wall. But not all cover-ups are successful. Sometimes even blanket blankness fails to obscure, and outlines or trace markings of the writings beneath the surface remain.

The historical impulse can be likened to these cycles of inscribing and painting over—defined by turns of visibility and invisibility, which we constantly navigate and take into account within our contexts of practice. What is seen, recorded, or written is not usually the entire story, but rather the dominant dispensation’s assertion of its power of representation over it—an inflection of hegemony. And observation, research, and reflection are necessary if one is to look further at what lies beneath.

Lessons from Political Detainees, Plants, and Protests

I thread through several projects that I was involved in for the past years as a means of accounting not only for curatorial labor but also on what reflections these offered in terms of engaging history as material, site, or strategy—and in conditions not always conducive to its inscribing.

Surfacing subaltern stories. The opportunity to help out with two exhibits on the subject of Philippine political prisoners, organized by Philippine human rights organization Karapatan (Rights) between 2015 to 2016, made me realize how often stories of the subaltern are dispersed outside dominant structures of representation.

The prison system, for instance, is an example of state power imposed on the body politic. Currently, there are close to 500 political prisoners around the Philippines, comprised of civilians, community organizers, and activists arrested, criminalized, and detained, often on false criminal or political charges, by the current administration. The condition of incarceration enacts their invisibility within society; our own curatorial response to this was exploring how their stories could be resurfaced through portraiture and handcrafted works by the detainees themselves.

The first exhibit solicited portraits of the detainees as a form of solidarity, appropriating an art form associated with status, privilege, and patronage into an assertion of visibility, personhood, and empathy. It seems simple but producing the portraits entailed different degrees of immersion: when it was not possible to visit and meet the subject, the artists relied on other sources such as photos, case reports, legal documents, and recollections, for instance.

Philippine political prisoners have made artworks as early as the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s. In the second exhibit, the political detainees went beyond being the subjects of works to being the participating artists themselves, with 16 of them contributing around 130 works. This body of humble objects should be handled with care because of the memories they represent. On the surface, they were a way of passing time or a modest means of income generation; but beyond that they also channeled catharsis, an expressive assertion of rights, and a means to connect to places for people cut off by their states of captivity.

Connecting archives, sites, and ecologies. The possibilities of connecting parallel histories of objects, places, and people formed a lesson from exhibits that threaded through the subject of Philippine native flora. Projects such as “Imaging Philippine Flora: 1877 to the present” (2014), co-curated with Ronald Achacoso, and *Propagate*, a contribution to the exhibit “Almost There” (2017), part of the project “Condition Report,” stressed the potentials of natural history, contemporary art, and archival materials in connecting histories, environments, knowledge, and contexts within and beyond the museum space. Through the juxtapositions of exhibition materials and public programs (such as the holding of native tree walks in the environs), it became possible to reference larger yet crucial moments of loss and injustice, such as the death of ethnobotanist Leonard Co (1953–2010), killed on November 15, 2010 with two companions during an incident involving the Philippine military in the forests of Kananga, Leyte in the Visayas region.

Continuing presence and dissidence. The last set of projects that have imparted interesting encounters in history-making revolves around

archived moments of visual dissent within Philippine social movements. I pursue such initiatives as a member of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, an organization of artists and cultural workers founded in 1983 as a response to the censorship of the Marcos dictatorship. As such, the motivation towards tracking and revisiting these archival encounters is also invested in contributing to the continuity of the practice.

Finding resonances between visual forms of protest across different generations is possible. In the case of the exhibition “Dissident Vicinities,” my contribution to the Japan Foundation Asia Center’s “Condition Report” project in 2017, the archival impulse connected the practice of groups such as the NPAA (Nagkakaisang Progresibong Artista at Arkitekto) active during the turn of the Marcos regime in the early 1970s to contemporary art collectives such as UGATLahi (Ugnayan at Galian ng mga Tanod ng Lahi), founded in 1992 as a progressive artists’ collective in the National Capital Region. As forms of mobile protests and agitation propaganda, the NPAA’s public paintings, fashioned from craft paper and daringly unfurled from buildings, connect to UGATLahi’s papier-mâché effigies of presidents, representing systems in need of radical overhaul. These visual histories of so-called objects of demonstration and disobedient objects, salvaged from different archives, also point to social and artistic practice persisting beyond and parallel to the art world, in the practice and production of broader social movements.

Curatorial Labor and Countering Hegemony

Art historian James Elkins, in *Stories of Art* (2002), writes about how it is necessary to “think about the shape of your imagination” in articulating the historical: how chronologies can be framed by intuiting the shape of stories and looking at modes of periodization. Thus, histories may be articulated in various ways: as durations, oscillating relationships, organic or life models, and paradoxical encounters with the present—but also as developing in relation to existing models which are all intricately embedded in politics, not occurring within a vacuum.

In reflecting on curatorial labor and its role in the shaping of counter-hegemonic histories and organizing networks of representation, a challenge would be how to embrace subjects and ecologies outside of margins mapped, while never forgetting the following:

Answering the questions “for whom” and “why”? Kasaysayan, the Filipino word for history, is rooted in the term *saysay* (significance, or value), which emphasizes its importance, relevance, or role in meaning-making. Translating an affinity for the subaltern into curatorial practice is a challenge, as current models may reinforce structural conditions and geopolitical turns. These questions, posed by the Marxist tradition since the beginning of the 20th century, are as relevant as ever. For precariousness is an everyday reality for people visually represented but not always physically reached by such practice: the rural poor; workers, unionized or contractual; indigenous peoples and national minorities;

the urban poor; migrants and other mobile communities within the global economy; broader movements for social and ecological justice. Is this heterogeneous mass of subalternity engaged as publics within histories of curatorial practice, across horizons of curatorial labor and imagination?

Taking the side of the subaltern requires knowledge and engagement with its history, also considering the process and contexts of objects and the social practice of their individual and/or collective makers. History is not the sole domain of the monumental and the privileged. Even the humblest and most transient of objects, people, and places have their own narratives. It is a challenge to be able to hold, echo, or retell them through curatorial intervention. Conversely, there is also the challenge to apprehend objects and narratives coopted by the status quo in this time where historical revisionism, fake news, disinformation, neoliberal hegemony, and Internet trolling of critical engagement flattens the importance of truth-telling.

History is a continuum, from which we negotiate and respond to the present crisis: globally, regionally, and at levels closer to home. What potential lies in activating historical archives, objects, and activities to converse and critically engage beyond the exhibition space in the larger ecology, community, and discursive space? Some plans in the making include “memory projects,” continuing activation of archives, and mapping and interfacing moments of cultural and grassroots solidarity. There is a need for mobilizing, educating, advocating, questioning, and activating a longer process of discourse and interaction with publics.

Curatorial desire originates from material conditions and relations of power. A materialist conception of curatorial practice recognizes how it is shaped by particular historical conditions of access, networks of geopolitical production, and structures of cultural distribution. Being aware of this process and its potentials—whether it involves research, conceptualization, organizing, or mobilizing people around a particular vision—can contribute to a historization of reality and situations that require our intervention as people concerned with the future of our world.

How to activate curatorial labor that sparks some sense of radical imagination even as we are running out of time?

A Ghost of Collectivity: Hauntology and Curation of the Future ^[01]

Vipash Purichanont

At the end of 2013, the PDRC (People’s Democratic Reform Committee), or “whistle-blower” mob, marched through Prayathai road and started to occupy Pathum Wan Junction where Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (BACC) is located. They demanded that then prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra resign as the head of the government. After the PDRC occupied the forecourt of the art center, the entire junction, and the main street of the shopping district, they set up a “market” that sold PDRC-related goods and merchandise, typically with designs inspired by the Thai national flag, map of Thailand, and the protestors’ whistle symbol. They also set up stages shared by speakers and musicians. It was a mixture of protest and festival. During the time of the protest, I was installing the exhibition, “Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia,” an art historical investigation of the relationship between conceptual practice and collectivity in Southeast Asia. ^[02] Artists, curators, and art institution officers witnessed the rally from BACC’s fifth floor balcony. Perhaps none of the protestors would have known that in one of the high-rise buildings located on the same street was a space hosting a contemporary exhibition that shared the same common ground; it presented artworks and art projects that derived from the kind of collective consciousness and social movements the protest was based on.

The significant contrast between the festival-like protest in the street and the seriousness of an academic and art historical driven exhibition in one of the biggest cultural institutions puzzled me greatly. I could not sort out the relationship between the two. Nonetheless, it did not take long for one event to override another. In the second week of January 2014, the PDRC began their “shutdown Bangkok” campaign by trespassing and occupying government-related buildings in the capital, which included BACC, in order to prevent the government sector from functioning. Out of fear that the art center would be damaged, BACC chose to close the building the night before the protest. Thus, the “Concept Context Contestation” exhibition would not be available for the protesters to see after they arrived at the exhibition space as I had

01

This essay is adapted from a presentation titled “The Crisis Would Never Leave Us: Notes on Hauntology and Artistic Intervention,” which I presented at the forum “Imagining New Ecologies.” The presentation was based on notes from my collaboration with a Thai artist, Anon Pairot, which explored the concept of hauntology. However, I have shifted the focus of the essay slightly in response to feedback from the forum.

02

“Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia” was curated by Iola Lenzi, Agung Hujatmikajennong, and myself. It was first exhibited at Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre from December 13, 2013 to March 2, 2014 before traveling to Hanoi in 2015 and Yogyakarta in 2016.

03

After repeatedly postponing the elections, the junta government has set the date of the general election as March 24, 2019. See Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Thailand to hold elections on 24 March,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/23/thailand-marks-stilted-return-to-democracy-with-march-election>.

04

See Sonia Yu, “Thai Soldiers Censor Art Exhibition in Bangkok,” *Art Asia Pacific*, June 20, 2017, <http://artasiapacific.com/News/ThaiSoldiersCensorArtExhibitionInBangkok>.

05

Asaree Thairakulpanich, “The City Actually Wants to Turn BACC into a ‘Coworking Space,’” *Khaosod English*, May 12, 2018, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/bangkok/2018/05/12/the-city-actually-wants-to-turn-bacc-into-a-coworking-space/>; also BK staff, “Bangkok governor backs away from ‘BACC co-working space’ talk,” *BK*, May 14, 2018, <https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/bangkok-governor-backs-down-bacc-takeover-talk>.

06

See “Monumental movement,” *Bangkok Post*, November 5, 2016.

07

Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011) Kindle Edition.

08

Ibid.

hoped. The question of what would be the reaction of the protestors when confronted with an exhibition that featured artworks from around Southeast Asia that engage with the history of social movements was left unanswered because that possible encounter was rendered impossible by the institution’s decision.

The outcome of the PDRC protest affects the future of Thailand tremendously. On May 22, 2014, the military seized power in a coup d’état while the movement remained active. The PDRC disbanded shortly after the coup, but the junta has remained in power until today.^[03] Under four years of military rule, I have noticed three significant changes which do not only affect the field of art and visual culture, but also the contemporary life of the people and their view of history. First, contemporary art, especially any exhibition that makes commentary on the regime, has become subject to severe censorship.^[04] Secondly, alongside this reduction of freedom of expression, public space in a classical liberal sense is declining, an obvious example of this being an attempt by the Junta-appointed governor to convert BACC into a co-working space.^[05] In a sense, I think Thailand is experiencing a unique militarization of neoliberalism where all social spaces have been transformed into semi-public spaces that belong to private companies which support the regime. Thirdly, the public memory has been slightly altered. Two examples are the relocation of Anusawari Lak Si or Guardian of the Constitution Monument, and the conversion of the Democracy Monument—which most social movements have historically used as their battleground—into unoccupiable space.^[06] This third and last change is very crucial here in this essay because it does not only deal with the present directly but also attempts to manipulate the collective historical consciousness to serve the militant capitalist present.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, I argue that Thailand is currently undergoing a social transformation in which the physiological perception of a future as a progressive development has been rendered unthinkable by the reduction of public, social, and artist spaces that are not directly connected to capitalism and the manipulation of public memory in relation to democracy. This phenomenon can be referred to as “the slow cancellation of the future,” a term coined by Italian media activist and thinker Franco “Bifo” Berardi.^[07] The term originally refers to the phenomenon in the zero zero decade when the modernist utopian view of the future was slowly converted into dystopian imagination by the forces of neoliberalism. One of the major effects of this socio-political development is the production of individuals who lack collective consciousness, as Berardi puts it, “a generation of human beings lacking competence in sensibility, the ability to empathically understand the other.”^[08] In other words, protests where people gather together and form a united social body have become a thing of the past. Although this process is happening slightly later than in the European context and being activated by a different ideological drive, the reduction of collective consciousness regarding the “future” created by modern liberal democracy movements in Thailand from the 20th century points

to a similar result to the European pattern. Unable to see the future, I find my interest slowly turning back to history, or to be more precise, to the continued eradication of political, social, and historical conscious which makes the current understanding of history possible. Indeed, it is quite ironic to turn back to history in order to talk about the future. But perhaps the past (or what should have happened in the past) is the only access to unthinkable possibilities in the present.

Exploring the lack of a notion of the future from a cultural perspective, I have been greatly inspired by *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* by Mark Fisher, a British cultural theorist. In his book, the author explores widely the current condition of lack of development and a sense of a future in contemporary culture—especially in music, fiction, and film—using hauntology as a methodology. Hauntology, a concept Fisher has borrowed from French philosopher Jacques Derrida, is not a concept, but a lack of one. Its approach toward history is not to perceive history anew, but to pursue the absences surrounding historical moments that make history possible. In a sense, one can think of hauntology as a philosophy of absences in comparison to ontology that seeks to study reality. Mark Fisher explains, “it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does.”^[09] Elsewhere, he discusses hauntology as “the agency of the virtual, with the specter understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing.”^[10] According to Fisher, there are two forms of hauntology. The first refers to something does not exist anymore in reality, but remains effective in a virtual realm—an obvious example is in mental symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder. The second form refers to something that has not yet happened in actuality, but affects the virtual, for example, the specter of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ communism that has not happened in the history of human civilization, but continues to haunt it.

Using hauntology as a conceptual framework for his research, Fisher draws the attention of his reader to the problem of why contemporary cultures, especially music, are unable to produce anything new, and tend to mix and match inspirations from existing genres. But the greater question that Fisher asked was, How can hauntology become a productive methodology in resisting the cancellation of the future? He found the answer in hauntological music, where melancholia—which is the refusal to give up on the desire of future—develops into a political strategy. Fisher noted:

The kind of melancholia I’m talking about, by contrast, consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield. It consists, that is to say, in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call “reality”—even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time.^[11]

09

Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014) Kindle edition.

10

Ibid.

11

Ibid.

In a sense, melancholia here can be seen as an attitude, a condition of living or a mode of operation, where a subject continues to function in the present as if alternate conditions are possible rather than retreating or withdrawing from it. It can be activated by restlessly living a life while continuing to recall and resurrect specters of possible futures that reside in historical consciousness. However, it is important that it is not read as a refusal to give up on history per se. Rather, it is the refusal to give up on a practice of historiography that would continue to make ghosts visible. This struggle can be applied to both artistic practice and curatorial practice as a mode of knowledge production, whether in the act of making exhibitions, organizing talks, or even attempting to sustain the discussion. Furthermore, one can potentially pursue these specters, or “bring them back” by making use of telecommunication, cyberspace, and uncommon that are regimes of the specter, or of the ontological absences. They are parts of the range of potentiality that belongs to the outcast.

Looking back into the field of the curatorial, I have come to accept that my account of the clash between the political protest and the contemporary art exhibition at the start of this essay is one of the ghosts of my life for two reasons. First, the “Concept Context Contestation” exhibition might have already presupposed the loss of a utopian view of the future in Southeast Asia because it aimed to explore a relationship between conceptual art in Southeast Asia and collectivity from the 1950s until today as a historical phenomenon. Secondly, its existence generated a specter of possible engagement between a knowledge event in the exhibition space and its potential audiences when this possibility turned into an absence due to highly complicated circumstances. Nonetheless, it is important to not give up on this ghost of collectivity because it is its absence which opens us to a new horizon. I am proposing that the future of curatorial approaches in Southeast Asia should shift from historical to hauntological, that they should be interested in the series of absences which make Southeast Asian contemporary art possible rather than the history of Southeast Asian contemporary art itself. In other words, future curatorial practice should aim to create spaces of knowledge production that are historiographical rather than historical and knowledge events that bring back a disarray of specters not a singular historical moment, and engage with public memory and historical consciousness of the public as a haunting not an enlightening. Such a change in methodology to explore the ghosts of modernity can lead to the rediscovery of the passages from the past which are full of possibilities that can help us to think of a better future than the present can offer.

When the Exhibition Recurs

Hasegawa Arata

I'm finally catching up with the TV drama *Sherlock* on Netflix. It's really good. In terms of "communication" techniques in an exhibition, we can learn much from current television drama, just as user interface design has done from contemporary video games. "Your exhibition is really interesting," someone once told me. "While a charming Sherlock appears in it, there's no Watson." Simultaneously harsh and highly pertinent, the remark has since posed a major dilemma for me. In the paragraphs that follow, please allow me to unpack this problem. (But if you still haven't seen *Sherlock*, don't miss it!)

Looking back on what I talked about in the curators' forum, "Imagining New Ecologies," I want to develop the discussion further. I would like first to present the question of whether or not we can make a framework for considering something that corresponds to so-called art history alongside modern and contemporary history in general. We can rephrase this as a perspective that art changes society at the same time as society changes art. Let's examine the issues in turn.

From 2016 to 2017, I curated the exhibition "Chronicle, Chronicle!" at Creative Center Osaka, which is based at the former site of Namura Shipyard. The title was taken from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, reflecting my desire to implement what could be called that novel's aberrant mix of voices, multiplicity of speakers, and complexity of tenses and chronology. The exhibition took place twice. The same artists were shown at the same time and in the same venue exactly one year after the first exhibition. Moreover, during the year, more than a hundred other events were held. The exhibited artists included the Lumière brothers Auguste and Louis as well as leading figures in Japanese modern and contemporary art like Saito Yoshishige, Kiyomizu Kyubee, and Yoshihara Jiro, and mannequin makers and sculptors such as Omori Tatsuro, Jean-Pierre Darnat, and Shimizu Yoshiko, and the painter Ogihara Issei, who spent his life creating images of castles over the course of three attempts, though all of these artists are now deceased. On the other hand, there were also artists from the same generation as myself (Araki Yu, Kawamura Motonori, Endo Kaori, Taninaka Yusuke, Makita Ai)

and artists who had already built up a substantial career (Ito Takashi, Sasaoka Takashi, Suzuki Takashi, Tashiro Mutsumi, Mochizuka Miki, Mishima Kimiyo).

At Namura Shipyard, a large number of laborers worked hard day after day from the moment the site went into operation in 1911. They drew up blueprints, cut out materials, assembled things, took lunch, worked in teams, read the noticeboard, and then finished their shifts when the siren sounded. I felt a keen sense of wanting to pay tribute to the richness of this cycle. In some exhibitions, the keyword “everydayness” is used with a certain conscientiousness: instead of something special, exhibition makers might define their shows as something contiguous with daily life. However, an exhibition is indeed something special, limited, and exclusive—or, at least, if it is too much to say “exclusive,” it is nonetheless based on a process of rejection and selection. With this conundrum in mind, a plan to repeat the same exhibition one year later was put into practice.

This plan to repeat the exhibition a year later was also a response to the problem of exhibition reproduction with which people have recently engaged in various ways. “When Attitudes Become Form,” organized by Fondazione Prada, was an ambitious attempt to recreate a 1969 exhibition in the year 2013. I felt uneasy that the time spent on the project as well as the second exhibition itself were entirely subordinate to the original exhibition. This is a largely structural problem; more concretely, it is a problem inevitable and congenital to conceptual art. I wanted somehow to change the way time is, whereby we are attracted to something original, to something legendary, and are controlled by the full-throttle desire to archive. In holding an exhibition one more time, there is the idea of doing so without changing it. I wanted to aspire toward an exhibition that, when the exhibition period ended, would nonchalantly and openly inspire you to tackle tomorrow’s work. This certainly does not mean making light of the weight of history. Rather it is the reverse, defending the true meaning of “contemporary,” whereby the present is not the present, and the past not the past (as Agamben says, the contemporary is the relationship between people and time through anachronism).

Another of the distinctive features of “Chronicle, Chronicle!” was a resistance to the dichotomies of labor and production, or original and copy. *La Sortie de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory), the first film screened by the Lumière brothers, as its title suggests, shows employees in the brothers’ own factory (Didi-Huberman rightly identifies this as the origin of the extra in cinema), ushering in the age of reproducible art, during which, ever since, we have fixated upon the concept of the “original.” Yoshihara Jiro exhibited reproductions of pictures he made for the drop curtains at the Asahi Kaikan in Osaka, though the actual curtains had already been disposed of and no longer existed. Ogihara Issei twice lost his work due to an air raid and typhoon respectively, but nonetheless continued with his castle paintings for a third time. We exhibited Saito Yoshishige’s installations

of model reproductions and copies of plans, alluding to the fact that Saito made on-site corrections to his work every time. Following the artist's death, his students and colleagues continued to experiment with the best ways to reproduce his installations and recreated models from the plans. Moreover, since the original plans are held by his gallery, when it came to assembling the installations on site, copies of the plans were used, onto which further notes and re-drawings were added in pencil and so on. At this point, it made much more sense to interpret the plans as a sequence in the practice process, rather than framing the floor plans in a hierarchy of original versus copy, or artwork versus materials versus preparation document. It is an expression of the richness that exists within repetition.

Almost all artists, both now and in the past, are unable to make a living through their practice alone and must do other work in order to eat. The history of mannequins in Japan is, thus, also the history of sculptors. In many cases, we keep our focus on their "works" as artists and the time spent on jobs to make ends meet is concealed like something embarrassing. However, refuting Arendt's categorization of labor, work, and action, we connect work and labor together as one, showing it is no mistake to assert that work as a mannequin maker and work as a sculptor are both important practices.

The exhibition's curatorial approach rejected the half-baked bashful tendency to internalize the oppositions of worker versus artist, the everyday versus the special, and art history versus history, and accept those arbitrary divisions, demonstrating rather that society and art naturally influence one another. The various events that took place during the exhibition period included lectures and talks (the lecture by Fukuo Takumi on Deleuze's *Cinéma* later caught the eye of an editor and was published as a book), but also such activities as loading in and taking out, meals, and even fishing. At the workshop led by a lighting professional, participants experienced the way lighting is used in exhibitions merely as the optimal solution for current art museum facilities, and how the method and type of lighting can give an artwork a completely different appearance. An exhibition is never something created by curators and artists alone. To my surprise, this workshop later took place again at the Aichi Triennale and at Tokyo Zokei University. Naturally, these events cannot help but lead us to suspect that an exhibition could be turned into anything. And yet this is precisely where the meaning of the actual and physical limitations of a period and venue come in. The finitude is simultaneously a restriction and a condition whereby we can start, and end, anything.

Rather than *consuming* an exhibition, how about if we were to *waste* or *squander* it? What are the possibilities for a viewing experience that isn't satisfying just as a one-off, taking a snap on one's phone, and then posting it on social media? Is it possible to affirm the time spent on the train home days later, perhaps a year or more later, looking back unhesitatingly at the exhibition, as a viewing experience? Here a perspective comes into view that can penetrate across the forum's

categorized themes of “history,” “public,” and “education.” There is no need to be diffident about assembling a certain project in the rather old-fashioned (or what Christov-Bakargiev more frankly calls “obsolescent”) framework of an exhibition. The ambivalent attitude to enlightenment, discussions about how much contextual information to write in captions, and preparing a place for debating how to deal with history and for making that position clear—these all come up for debate through the perspective that an exhibition is repeatable. What is formidable about this perspective is that, in the moment when an exhibition recurs, artists, curators, artworks, viewers, members of staff, people in the future, and of course those who have died, become arbitrary and duplicate.

(Translated by William Andrews)

DISCUSSION

October 18, 2018, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo

Moderators: Beverly Yong, Che Kyongfa

Beverly Yong

My first question to presenters is: What is your interest in history? In your particular context, how did you start [being interested in history] and what is it to you?

Le Thuan Uyen

I think it started with art history. I studied abroad and when I came back to Vietnam, there was very little documentation on Vietnamese art history, and when I was working, there were so many gaps. There is a need to fill in those gaps to understand overall development and also the implications that such development might have on contemporary art in Vietnam nowadays. From then it just expanded, because we all are products of social construction so the broader history of Vietnam also affects how artists develop their practices and what can and cannot be said or raised or asked.

Nishida Maki

I don't really know where my history is. I guess that's the point of departure—which history I should take as my history, or which history I belong to or have to deal with, because I studied in Japan then in my early twenties went abroad so didn't have a chance to work properly with Japanese art history or history until my return two years ago. Even after that I've been going out quite often to work, for example, on projects in India, Spain, and so on. Which histories do I need to be working with, and do I need to be working with all of them, are they all part of my history?

Lisa Ito-Tapang

My interest is also rooted in art history—my undergraduate course was in fine art and art history, and now, that's my profession—I'm teaching art history to undergraduates. Art history informed a lot of the thinking that I wanted to explore as a curator. I also had to negotiate with another aspect of what I did [with] organizations which have an active stake in shaping history, so to speak. So it was trying to reconcile these two—being

able to articulate what was documented but at the same time actively pursuing some particular frameworks, agendas, ways of seeing history that constantly inform the kind of problems that I want to take on. For instance, when I was an undergraduate, I wanted to take on the study of effigies as protest art in the Philippines but at that time it wasn't really accepted as a proper topic for art historical research, so you had to fight for that and assert its validity and its place in that whole story. So those are my entry points into this interest.

Hasegawa Arata

Actually, I majored in cultural anthropology so I didn't learn art history in university, but during college life I was told by professors to doubt history so at least for me, history is very doubtful. As a curator, I always think about how we can install plurality and plural flows of time in an exhibition. An exhibition is a very physical existence, in very limited time and space, so we have to simplify the complicated things. So we can use history to make complicated [things] visible. History is something like that for me.

Vipash Purichanont

A hard question for me. Perhaps it's become not just an interest anymore but more of a requirement. Once it becomes a requirement, I become more interested in ways of thinking about it differently, the possibility of hauntology and maybe the lack of history as possibility.

Hasegawa Arata

I doubt history, so in my case I always start to find contradictions or errors in history—that is my starting point for curatorial projects.

Beverly Yong

Linking back to yesterday's session and thinking about audiences, What are some of the issues surrounding representing artwork representing a particular history to different audiences?

Le Thuan Uyen

When you're telling a story that is about something that you may not be a part of, like a community, then there's always this question of representation, so that is one of the biggest challenges. In my experiences working with some of the artists, that comes up a lot. For example, in Thao Nguyen's work *Tropical Siesta*—there's a part of her that's in the work, but at the same time people critique her as looking back at the past, coming from a different context.

Beverly Yong

How do you try to resolve these issues?

Le Thuan Uyen

It's a different approach each time, depending on where you show your

work, the geographical context and your audiences. In some places, you have a very unique specific group of people who come and see your art so it varies. I work a lot in spaces that are not designed to be an art space—spaces of collective memories—so each time it's completely different. In the process, what I try to do is talk to the audience. I'm there as my own exhibition invigilator, I'm there to talk to random people and then listen to them and learn from that and try to address that in my next work.

Nishida Maki

I also tend to work outside of white cube, and so the audience usually aren't really exhibition goers or art crowd—local people, for example, or those who don't necessarily come specifically to see the exhibition, who may just walk in. So when there isn't any art expected, the role of artist and curator and art perhaps is to offer a new experience or new perspective of something of their everyday life, to open up visibility to those unknown worlds to them.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

Two issues which are very important. First is how the exhibition connects to the audience's experiences in everyday life. Not all would be familiar with art or art history or have an interest in such. It's quite a challenge to be able connect with what you think should be with how different publics would experience the material. Connecting them with everyday experience, like Uyen said, would also depend on having a keen sensitivity to what ecologies, what sensitivities are at work with the audience. I like it when different people from different walks of life go to the exhibition, and try to talk to them even before the exhibition starts, to get ideas or ask people who are part of it what they think about the whole process and what's being shown, from the museum or gallery staff to everyday people who are part of building the whole thing, like the carpenters. So that's how I start to build an idea of how different people view this thing that we have put so much work into.

Then second would be, particularly for our context, navigating situations or milieus where there's a lot of fake news, disinformation, questions of historical revisionism, especially with regard to martial law history, history of dictatorship, these kinds of contexts where history is contested in ways that are detrimental and not contributing to critical discourse. One way of facing these kinds of situations would be ensuring that one's treatment of history is grounded in research, whether art historical, sociological, socio-economic; that it's a research-based project which you can defend.

Che Kyongfa

So in your case, this curatorial process is really the process of historicization, [reviewing] the canon and what's not talked about in the past, including the moment of exhibitions.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

Even the public programs are an important part of asserting that history because the works, of course, will have to speak for themselves but a lot of the context will be articulated from public programs—talks and activities which help bridge and help us connect to audiences trying to enter that conversation.

Vipash Purichanont

I have another way of doing it, which has been on my mind for a while. I was thinking about, for example, this morning when we went to the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo—I find one of the ways in which we curators are dealing with, let's say, Southeast Asian contemporary art history is that we replicate the flow of time so we start things quite chronologically, we let people walk through the exhibitions with the flow of that time. The question is, would it be possible to open up to new, more open structures—the structure of rapture, or perhaps a deconstructive structure which allows people to interpret a moment in history—and how would that change the way we approach the history of contemporary art?

Le Thuan Uyen

Besides the challenge of representation, a lot of the time artworks don't really touch directly on history as we understand it, not like a documentary or a book where a timeline is laid out. It provides a setting somewhere in the work where visitors will find references or symbols they can relate to and then there's a possibility of opening up conversation, interpreting the work, making sense of the work from their own knowledge or background. It's not a rigid piece of history, it's very fluid and different people looking at it might have different narratives, and that is absolutely the beauty of it.

Che Kyongfa

At the same time, when art deals with certain pasts and histories, or certain unarticulated subjectivities embedded in them, there's this problem of being truthful to them. How can we be truthful to the past or the dead? How can curators support artistic modes of historicization and re-historicization, while keeping a critical distance from them, as part of their responsibility to the past as well as to the public?

Vipash Purichanont

My presentation was about an exhibition that didn't happen, partly because once we got all the research done or sent the proposal to the commissioners, there was a [tension] between telling the untold history or absence of life in factories, and the ones that own the factories. There were conversations after it was cancelled, and one important thing we found was that we need to extend life of the exhibition, similar to what Sze said yesterday about temporal turns. Even though an exhibition might not happen, we still have the responsibility to present it, to talk about it, and maybe to rethink about things that fail again and again.

Che Kyongfa

I was also wondering, with Hasegawa-san's show "Chronicle, Chronicle!," you're showing these objects that artists made but not as an artwork, so there's a whole load of stories behind it: How do you present these untold stories?

Hasegawa Arata

Actually my intention is a little different. In this discussion, we all talk about accurate audiences I guess, accurate, good, understanding audiences. So we should think about how we affirm misunderstanding and inaccurate understanding. Of course, we should research in detail and we have to tell tiny hidden facts, but audiences like to misunderstand and they can get some inaccurate but very interesting information from the exhibition. So in this perspective we can affirm audiences [who are] different, from other backgrounds, different from the background of the exhibition itself.

Che Kyongfa

You also wanted to say that there are contradicting histories behind an artwork. How do you show these contradictions or multiple layers if you let audiences misunderstand?

Hasegawa Arata

Ideally, I would like to just put artwork in exhibition space, that's it. I believe artwork has a lot of information, tells various kinds of information and background. I want to believe that audiences can know lots of various kinds of information from the artwork, the material itself. But as a curator, I want to make artworks more visible or [create] contradictions—this is my direction.

For me, the events and the exhibition are equivalent. Text, catalogue, video archive, exhibition itself, and talk session—these elements are integrated into the exhibition project. My texts are written in catalogue but in the space there is no text, for example.

Bill Nguyen

For me, the art of curation is the art of storytelling but when it comes to history, it is also the art of documenting, interrogating, representing facts, fictions, what is considered concrete and what is considered obscured. You can do that through the archive, the repertoire of embedded memories, and whatever means of transportation and display. The art of listening is the art of time, or how to produce this time space for listening. Both of these acts require care, attention, respect, and responsibility from not just the makers but also the viewers, receivers. How do you guys attempt to create the sense of urgency in the work that you do, and how do you deal with creating the time and space, for the listeners, the viewers to have that sense of urgency?

I'm asking because, in the last two days we visited two exhibitions—"Catastrophe and the Power of Art," and "Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s." "Catastrophe" for me was very celebratory in tone,

and very spectacular in terms of the visual. Both of these exhibitions deal with either natural or man-made violence, and so for catastrophes to be consumed in a kind of fast and populist manner, I was highly troubled by that. This morning at “Awakenings,” I was doubly disturbed by the decisions made when it came to the including and excluding of certain information or countries or representations, and felt that these were not addressed. So for me both of these exhibitions are willing to compromise these requirements of care, attention, respect, and responsibility.

Beverly Yong

Another question that comes up in relation to this, is about the agenda behind such projects: Who wants to address these histories and for what reason? It's not just about a lack of care, I think there are also agendas—how do curators deal with those agendas?

Le Thuan Uyen

That's a broad question that can be applied to curatorial practice in general and not just to the theme of history. [Bill], is your question about how do we create an environment where the viewers can also get the sense of the process that goes in [to the exhibition]?

Bill Nguyen

I guess so. What do you as a curator share with the audience about your process of curating, and curating with limitations, and curating with possible agendas? How are you willing to reveal this information, and also [support] this idea of creating a space for viewers to stop and to think and not consume but to look at the work with care and respect?

Horiuchi Naoko

Can I ask you about feminist art, gender-specific movements in your region? In Europe and America there was a big wave of feminist art movements, and in Japan as well, though not as impactful. Continuing from Bill's comments on the exhibition this morning, I noticed they touched a bit on feminist art movements but the works were quite limited, to [works from] Korea and the Philippines. Then I was having a conversation with Sze about Simon Fujiwara's work that was taken down in Singapore several years ago, so maybe [my question] has something to do with subaltern and untold histories, that there are certain expressions that are actually not really open for discussion or taken away from official histories.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

There are a lot of rich entry points to that question, especially in the Philippines, which has a rich tradition of women's liberation movements and movements for gender in recent years. For art production, there have been records of women constantly participating in art production throughout history, but that kind of self-conscious participation of women as women, much of it is related to larger histories of social

movements in the Philippines. For instance in the exhibition earlier this morning, there were several works by Filipina artists who belonged to collectives like Kasibulan, which was founded in the 1980s and still exists, [which] can be connected to feminist movements in the early 1970s—women’s organizations both legal and underground during the time of dictatorship. During the 1980s, when resistance against dictatorship began to grow, women artists became more vocal, founding their own organizations or divisions within existing organizations. The Concerned Artists of the Philippines had a women’s desk. Then of course there is also the tradition of feminist scholarship in Philippine art history [and] there is also the active participation of women curators, gallerists, art managers, part of a history which has not been written entirely—[the] big factor of how women have also actively participated whether as artists or part of the infrastructure making exhibitions possible.

Le Thuan Uyen

We’ve had feminist figures but I don’t think we’ve had a feminist movement in the art scene in Vietnam. As soon as Vietnam gained independence, the Communist movement gave a lot of power to the women—or [rather], an extended role to women, so women were celebrated as caretakers but also as national heroes contributing to national salvation. At the same time, the same sets of duties and domestic responsibilities are maintained, so it takes a strange form where women both feel empowered and suppressed at the same time. As a woman working in Vietnam I feel that.

Beverly Yong

With the exhibition this morning, I didn’t have an issue so much with the historical trajectory—the chronology helped us to make comparisons and that was quite interesting. I had more of a problem with the categorizations, like the little corner for the women, being applied to these very different contexts.

Leonhard Bartolomeus (Barto)

Touching on categorization, that kind of stuff, I followed that there are different situations [depending] if you’re working with macrohistory or microhistory. With macrohistory, it’s like you chew this big cake and you try to spit it out in different forms, and expect the audience to taste it the same as you chew it, but then working with microhistory, there is the ethical part. When you’re borrowing someone’s stories or context from an event, artists can do anything that they want, but when you bring it to the galleries, or present it to the public as a framework then as curators, how could we be responsible to that ethical part? How can we deliver back the things we have taken as our advantage, at least to do research or presentation?

Goh Sze Ying

I really like Barto’s analogy of taking a bite and spitting out the cake. The kinds of strategies in creating an exhibition that deals with histories or

a span of time that is quite large: I'm just curious as to whether or not these kinds of ways of thinking—chronologically, or putting them into specific categories—is perhaps just a bit of an outmoded lazy display strategy. Because when you're working with a space that is so large, or over a hundred works, you have to think about how they are placed in relation to one another, and we can't change the way in which a visitor will flow from a start to an end, and that already is a kind of chronology of experience through a space. So, in your practice, what are the ways in which you have dealt with display strategies? Ultimately history is about the passing of time, but how have you dealt with that in your own projects? Even a solo show, like a breadth of the [an artist's] work—we often see this chronologically as well.

Lisa Ito-Tampang

Whether you're dealing with the work of an individual artist or a more thematic selection of works, chronology is still important. I speak from the point of view of someone who needs to get facts in order. Before you can go into imagining more shapes of history it's important to at least get the factual timeline and other factual information correct before you can configure and start to reimagine where this can go. I agree that there are many ways of how exhibitions can approach telling a story and it need not always be linear in the sense that you tell it from chronological time from start to finish, although it helps in many instances and sometimes that's the most logical way to do it. But there are also other instances where opening up other aspects which appear across time or at certain moments or points could be the best way to approach an exhibition topic.

Selene Yap

My understanding is that there are official ways that you get written into history. It's great that you excavate these histories, microhistories, but at the same time is it also one of your desires to have these histories written in a wider space than exhibition-making? Because I feel that sometimes exhibition-making may somehow just seem to remain a method to talk about things. But then I also understand that academia has a very strong gatekeeping force to keep what is official discourse, keeping out smaller voices. So how do you get attention to the things you speak about in your projects? After working with artists and getting the project done, how does one get the history that gets excavated through your projects written?

Le Thuan Uyen

For me, it's not so much about writing that particular story into a larger narrative but more an attempt to question this fixed approach to looking at something, to be aware that there are so many other possibilities that exist outside of what you see or read or get told. Trying to get the audience to see that this is not an alternative history but that you can add [to history] or somewhere other people may have other stories to add.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

It's important that curatorial research turns into knowledge production—you go into a lot of research into artists, archives, everything you need to understand a work, and it would really be a waste if after an exhibition there's no afterlife of that knowledge. For us in academe, that would translate into writing articles, texts of different types in order for the research material to have translation apart from exhibition. Parallel production is something that I would always aspire to. Of course there would always be limitations in terms of how that gets produced because translating research from an exhibition into a longer-term, more extended research initiative also entails being aware of the limitations of your curatorial framework and there would be gaps which you would need to fill in order to tell a story that is more comprehensive.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

I just realized that today's presentations are all based on exhibition-making practices. I think if we put exhibition-making practices [against/together] with the practice of writing history, there are issues where exhibition-making cannot fill the gaps of historiography—for example, the problem of objectivity in history based on objects, on material. There are things that cannot be or haven't been documented yet that cannot be easily fact-checked, for example, memory or effect or embodied knowledge (knowledge that is attached to body) cannot easily be materialized into another form like art form or archive. There are limitations. To continue what Sze said about exhibition-making as a response to provide alternative historiography, I think this cannot be separated from issues or politics of knowledge production—who can write, who can read, what voices can be heard and not—and that goes into what Bill said about how to treat [our work] with care, which goes to checking what are the limitations, what privileged modes are working around the practice of art-making, what art spaces are being used for exhibition, for example. I want to respond lastly to Barto's analogy of cake-chewing, [to propose] that sometimes, in order to prove that the cake exists, it's not necessarily based on what remains of the cake. Sometimes the cake is already gone but what remains are the stories of the cake. And we don't need the picture of the cake to say the cake exists. Sometimes the cake exists not in forms of materials we already know, sometimes it's in a way of working. Using the analogy of cake, what kind of materialization of cake can we think of not to fall back into the trap of what is seen is what exists, which is the problem of historiography?

Le Thuan Uyen

When you're talking about a piece or form of history, you can't avoid a certain subjectivity. Listening to all this exchange, I think of two things. One is text: A lot of artists don't emphasize the need for text in the exhibition space—how issues are raised in your curatorial text or even description of works is something to be aware of, how to speak about certain things, not just what you see. Second is how you deal with space:

I haven't had experience of working with large institutions or massive spaces, but choosing the site for your artistic activity—exhibition, workshop, performance—could also be a strategy to address your own limitations or contradictions, a way you can try to visualize your contradictions.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

A lot of the anxiety surrounding the issue of historiography, history, and art history is also related to the more general state of how art history of the region, of Southeast Asia is told. Whenever we have to discuss histories of Asian art, it's challenging to find particular references where you can get an overview or a sweep of the region, or even specific countries. A lot of that writing of history is happening as we speak and a lot of the exhibitions that we see are reflections of this ongoing process of how this history of individual countries and particular regions is being negotiated on a large scale. So it's all in flux and that's where the problems and anxieties arise of who gets to be represented. Perhaps in the case of Western art history where the narrative is more consolidated, historical responses go towards the critiquing or deconstruction of narratives. Here we have a different situation. It's an interesting process to be looking at and to be part of.

Che Kyongfa

How to wrap up? There's no way to wrap up. My curiosity is, Why are we talking about history so rigorously now—maybe because there is a revisionist power all over the world? We're sometimes using the same tactics but trying to do something else or to do the opposite.

Session 3

Education

Education

—
Horiuchi Naoko

At the third session of “Imagining New Ecologies,” which dealt with the theme of education, four presenters from Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam spoke about aspects of education from the respective standpoints of an art museum, a privately funded public art space, and artists’ collectives. As artistic expression expands and curatorial approaches diversify, creating a place for learning that caters to a wide range of audiences and participants is indispensable today, whether for reflecting on an exhibition and the social and political contexts that surround it, or finding alternative ways of learning and sharing knowledge.

What kinds of dialogues and critiques can artistic and curatorial expressions and practices take on, and what kind of discussions can they produce through “educational” programming or formats? What kind of knowledge can we obtain from artistic and curatorial expressions and practices? The presenters spoke about these questions based on their individual contexts of region, history, and community.

Mori Art Museum, where Shiraki Eise works as an associate learning curator, changed the name of its Public Programs division to Learning in 2017 as part of a major gear change in its efforts in education, which saw it take initiatives beyond the walls of the museum located on the 53rd floor of a skyscraper and out into the local area and schools. Accordingly, its programs have incorporated the ideas of artists that go beyond the space of an exhibition and its duration to create two-way learning that takes into account the diversifying Tokyo community and the increasing segmentation of viewers that accompanies this. Partnering with organizations, groups, and individuals outside the museum serves to integrate multifaceted perspectives and provide a more comprehensive view of an exhibition.

Speaking from a rather different community context, Bill Nguyen, a curatorial assistant at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, founded in 2016 in Vietnam, explained that negotiation is key to how many of its programs are able to evade government censorship. With the criticism of society and politics that contemporary art frequently employs, one of the roles of the center is to “translate” and convey its value to the authorities. A never-ending process of negotiation, with government censors, artists, and audiences is part of developing multi-layered learning that encourages participation in a place for debate without chipping away at the critical nature of the artworks exhibited. This is an ambitious activity that transforms ideas and perspectives on art at a grassroots, yet assured, level.

Leonhard Bartolomeus, a curator who has been running Indonesian collective ruangrupa’s educational programs,

explained their evolving efforts to create educational programs and platforms, developing different models along the way, and partnering with different collectives to pool knowledge and resources of people, funding, and information, to be “hacked” by others. These endeavors recognize that art is constantly in flux and knowledge fluid, along with constantly finding new directions for ruangrupa’s own activities. Currently, they form part of Gudskul, an ecosystem for art learning within the framework of collectivity and collaboration.

Curator and researcher Syafiatudina of KUNCI Cultural Studies Center in Indonesia spoke about the center’s School of Improper Education, which focuses on collective study, on learning together through failure and uncertainty, testing different models of education. For example, in trying out the Turba methodology of Indonesian 60s art collective Lekra, the students chose to spend a certain period of time as farmers, taxi-drivers, and temporary schoolteachers, observing and experiencing the dilemmas and conflicts in the lives of a range of different people. This prompted participants to realize that “knowledge” is, in the first place, not something that we receive passively from above, but rather something deeply rooted in the lifestyle around us, not least our shared difficulties.

Looking back over past movements in the history of art, it is clear that numerous artists have urged societal and lifestyle reform, and one expression that has emerged from this has been the development of the field of experimental education. Today’s artists and curators, like those who have preceded them, advocate the kinds of alternative learning outlined above in order to transcend the frameworks of systems, markets, and conventional art education, and to explore questions of how people can live more freely and flexibly. In the future, we should continue to observe the ways in which the various insights produced by these kinds of practices will continue to change, give us fresh perspectives on richly nuanced conceptions of the “public” and interpretations of history, and lead to the further expansion of curation and the utility of art.

(Translated by William Andrews)

Can the Contemporary Art Museum be a New Place for Learning?

Shiraki Eise

From the perspective of someone working at a contemporary art museum, what should I share with my fellow curators in Asia vis-à-vis the three themes presented by The Japan Foundation of public, history, and education? In particular, in regard to the final day's theme of education, what should the role be for the educational activities conducted by art museums, and are there possibilities for partnering with external organizations like nonprofits developing alternative activities outside the art museum? On the premise of these questions, I shared knowledge I have gained from on-site experience through introducing case studies of learning programs implemented at Mori Art Museum. My presentation dealt with a question that has long been a compelling one for us: Can the contemporary art museum be a new place for learning—a third place that is neither school nor family?

Forming part of the Roppongi Hills complex in Tokyo, whose wide range of facilities include commercial spaces, residences, restaurants, a television and radio broadcaster, movie theater, and school, Mori Art Museum set its mission as “Art + Life” right from its opening in 2003 and has since conducted activities with the aim of forming a new cultural hub in Tokyo. In 2017, the museum changed the name of its outreach department from Public Programs to Learning. This name was determined after a two-year process of consultation with staff from each department in the museum. It was not simply a departmental name change, but also incorporated the sense of expressing the attitude of the museum toward its activities. In the wake of the renaming of the department, we have placed a stronger emphasis on creating programs that facilitate the sharing of the results of research by the curators that plan exhibitions and of the knowledge that is naturally shared during the exhibition creation process with a wider age range of viewers. In terms of the goals of our learning programs, we also aim to create situations in which audiences can encounter contemporary art, can learn through contemporary art, and can enrich their lives with contemporary art.

Mori Art Museum's Learning division works with the exhibition curators to organize events related to exhibitions, including symposia,

panel discussions, performances, artist talks, workshops, and curator talks. It also has programs that are planned and run by the department's team, such as school programs, access programs for visitors from various backgrounds, and the Community and Art Museum Program, run with other Mori Building departments, that cultivates cooperation with locals. It implements over 100 learning programs annually, attracting a total of more than 5,000 participants. The division's programs are divided into the following three categories: Exhibition-Related Programs, Audience Development Programs, which are aimed at new visitors, and Academic Programs, which are aimed at visitors with interests in art. In my presentation, I introduced the Audience Development Programs, which have been growing from strength to strength. This category actually comprises two subdivisions: Creative Learning Programs and Community Engagement Programs.

The Creative Learning Programs mainly comprise exhibition-viewing events for students (from preschools and kindergartens up to elementary, junior high, and high schools, vocational colleges, and universities), to help them maximize their learning from the exhibition on view. Programs are designed not only to relate to art or drawing and crafts in school but also to complement and go beyond standard school curricula for subjects like Japanese and social studies. The Schools and Art Museums Programs, which feature discussions about exhibitions with participants from the teaching profession, function also as a platform for information exchange between colleagues and peers.

Meanwhile, the Community Engagement Programs are aimed at participants of different ages from various communities, creating environments based on easily accessible themes. We often provide programs targeted to specific age groups at first, following up later with a second round of events whereby those different groups, who normally have no contact with one another, can meet and interact. The participants interact inside the art museum, which functions as neither a school nor a home, but as a third place for learning. And each time, there are also artworks and artists in the space with them.

In my presentation, I introduced a few concrete examples of the programs.

Kids' Workshop: Future

This was a workshop for elementary school students from the local Roppongi Hills area, led by the artist N. S. Harsha, who is based in the city of Mysore in south India. Harsha collaborated with us to engage local school children during one of his visits to Tokyo in preparation for his 2017 solo exhibition at the Museum, "N. S. Harsha: Charming Journey." We went to a nearby public elementary school and discussed with teachers what we wanted to do, upon which it was agreed to carry out this workshop. Over 100 elementary school children participated. Harsha asked each of the children to portray what they wanted to be when they grew up on an adult-sized white shirt. After the children

depicted their ideal future on the shirts, they gathered in Roppongi Hills, wearing their shirts, for a parade around the complex, where thousands of people work in their offices wearing the same kind of shirts. Shouting “*mirai*,” meaning “future,” the children’s cheerful voices transformed the expressions on the faces of the gloomy-looking businessmen that were heading to work that Monday morning. This is a very good example showing our collaboration with schools, or so-called “formal education.” We succeeded in making a new kind of program—working with schools and artists—where children can learn and have a new kind of experience, not constrained by a specific curriculum.

Meet the Artist Together with People of Various Generations

This was an event program that was not targeted at one specific age group but rather aimed at bringing together participants from various different generations. We held a workshop with the Thai artist Dusadee Huntrakul, who was one of the exhibitors at “SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now” (organized by the National Art Center, Tokyo, Mori Art Museum, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center in 2017). On the first day of the workshop, groups from different generations—children, teenagers, and seniors—gathered and viewed the exhibition together with the artist, followed by a discussion directly with Huntrakul about such topics as how he makes his work, what are the concepts behind his work, how he spent his childhood and student years, and why he became an artist. On the second day, the teens served as the guides on a gallery tour for seniors, sharing their respective impressions of the artworks in their own words. The younger children listened to Huntrakul explain his work and then took part in a hands-on workshop to make things. On the final day, all the groups came back together and joined in cooking and eating *pad thai*, which for the artist is a dish with special memories of family. The workshop program then concluded with another look at Huntrakul’s work in the exhibition venue. One of the participants from the group of teens said that it was the first time he had interacted with seniors in this way. “I discovered new things and it was fun,” he said. For him, seniors were schoolteachers and he had had no prior chance to interact with them in a more familiar setting. Participants learning about and respecting the opinions of others through encounters with artists and works of art: this is what can occur in an art museum functioning as a third place for learning that is neither a school nor a home. The program was an example of one result of audience engagement and our mission to promote “Art + Life.”

Designing a Country without Sight

This program hypothesized, “What if our daily lives were spent in a world without sight?” In this way, it aimed to encourage participants to rethink the things they took for granted that would not be the same in a world that had no visual sense, from the way we communicate to traffic

rules, laws, and art. Specialists from a range of fields including an artist, a furniture designer, a TV video producer, an architect, and a chef were invited to take part as advisors, and over three days the blind and the sighted joined together to think about “a country without sight.” Starting with a walk around the Roppongi Hills area and talking about the world in its present form, the program enabled all the participants to reassess how they perceive society through dialogue with the visually impaired facilitators. After the event was over, the participants shared a range of comments. “It felt like I used a way of thinking I don’t normally use,” one said. “The experience in an art museum is almost entirely constructed by sight, so I was intrigued by the program’s theme of designing a nation without sight inside an art museum. I could learn of a world I did not know about,” remarked another. “The process of thinking with others from scratch was fun.” “Given that our senses, including sight and hearing, all deteriorate with age, this is a topic that I want to continue thinking about carefully.” In this program, the art museum became a platform whereby participants from various backgrounds could think together with artists, architects, and other creative people. It enabled participants to consider the others who are around us.

Neighborhood Seen through Art Version 1: The Furniture

This project looks at Nishi-Shinbashi, a district near to Roppongi that Mori Building is planning to redevelop. Based on a preliminary survey by architecture researchers, it worked with artists to bring out the history of the area, its various cultural elements, and its local characteristics. Nishi-Shinbashi was once renowned for furniture manufacturing and was actually the area that produced the most furniture in Japan in terms of volume from the 1910s to the 1980s. Many furniture artisans lived here and communities formed according to the industry’s divisions of labor. The project comprised imagining the state of the neighborhood at the time as well as re-examining the way the community is now divided up. We interviewed the head of the neighborhood association, a former furniture craftsman in his eighties, and also young businessmen who work in the district today. Based on the various themes that came to light in the course of these conversations and drawing on the results of workshops and talks held with local residents, artists created works and put them on display in vacant buildings. This was a project held over the course of a year, starting from the initial research stages in 2018 and set to continue until February 2019. It is an example of a learning program that introduces art within the community at a different pace and rhythm to the format of an exhibition.

Mori Art Museum considers it vital to develop activities that go beyond the walls of the art museum and to venture out into the city and society. This is because we are members of the Roppongi Hills community and of society at large. We run programs aimed at different communities, including the people visiting Roppongi Hills for sightseeing, those

coming here to work, and local residents, and organize learning programs beyond the museum walls for future visitors who may have yet to visit an art museum. Learning programs help to form bridges between audiences and artists and between different audiences; they allow us to become aware of our neighbors, enhance our understanding, and enrich ourselves. These are examples of the learning practiced in our programs based on the Mori Art Museum mission of “Art + Life.”

(Translated by William Andrews)

Ways of Negotiation

Bill Nguyen

In Vietnam, we possess an independent and different artistic landscape, with the majority of contemporary art activity occurring outside the officially sanctioned state-sponsored cultural institutions. Art education (specifically for art practitioners) and education through art (for the general public) have thus taken the shape of grassroots, bottoms-up initiatives, occurring privately and internally amongst the art community, or semi-publicly with a moderately sized dedicated audience.

As Vietnam's first purpose-built public space for contemporary art, on the one hand, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre faces challenges in maintaining our creative and critical work in a climate where criticality is not favored by the authority, especially when it is executed publicly and with the involvement of the public. On the other hand, the role of art is often misunderstood by various parties, resulting in a lack of public appreciation, intellectual investment, and dialogue. I wish here first to interrogate some of the historical contexts and current events which led to such a situation. Secondly, I would like to discuss the different "ways of negotiation" and strategies which The Factory adopts to deal with such difficulties and challenges.

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At The Factory, we are in constant negotiation with three types of "public": the authority, the artists, and the audience, which we consider as interchangeable and as important as one another. We treat them as "horizontally" as possible, where a balanced amount of care is given towards all three. But how did we get here?

Skepticism and hostility from the authority, for fear of demand for freedom of expression, leading to a heavy and unclear structure of censorship

The view of the authority towards contemporary arts in Vietnam is one of skepticism, fear, and hostility. An earlier development shaping this

attitude was the Nhan Van-Giai Pham (“Humanity-Works of Beauty”) movement in the late 1950s in North Vietnam. Initiated by intellectuals (including writers, poets, musicians, artists, and so on), this was one of the first artistic-cultural-political movements that publicly demanded political reforms and greater intellectual freedom for the arts. Although it failed, and its participants had to suffer the consequences of their actions, the government realized how the power of arts and critical thinking could alter the course of the official narrative and ignite change. Today, the strict, but also very ambiguous, system of censorship in place is a clear manifestation of this skepticism, fear, and hostility.

In recent years, the government has shown its hostility in its systematic crackdown on intellectuals, citizen-journalists, and activists [01] who write and produce online blogs, who are punished and jailed for “conducting propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” “activities aiming to overthrow the people’s administration,” and “abusing the rights to freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the state, the rights, and interests of individuals.” [02] Additionally, the government’s recent introduction of the Cybersecurity Law (which will take effect as early as January 2019) shows their determination to “flatten” our only public forum for critical thinking and sharing.

Lack of interest from the public and media, contributing to a growing neglect of art, deeming it not useful and uneconomical in a society driven by capitalism

The landscape of art criticism and writing, and its reception by the public, in Vietnam, is grim.

Two official art publications are run by governmental bodies—*Tap chi My Thuat* (Fine Arts Magazine), published by the Fine Arts Association since 1977, and *Tap chi My thuat & Nhiiep Anh* (Fine Arts and Photography Magazine), published by the Department of Fine Arts, Photography and Exhibition, under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism since 2012. Having rarely been best-sellers in terms of public consumption, these publications have gone through interesting transformations over the years—sometimes incorporating design and fashion elements into their content to stay relevant, other times promoting critical and experimental ideas that were finally deemed too foreign for the Vietnamese public. [03]

The online art journal *SOI* (<http://soi.com.vn>), launched in 2010, focuses on reviewing local art practice and exhibitions, translating select foreign materials, and providing an interactive platform for public participation where people can freely offer opinions via the “comment” function on the website. 2010 also saw the suspension of the influential online forum Talawas (<http://www.talawas.org>), mainly due to political reasons. Launched in 2001, Talawas offered important articles and discussions on the literature, culture, and politics of Vietnam, including contributions by well-known Vietnamese and foreign authors, writers, researchers, and scholars from inside and outside the country.

01

Press freedom campaign group Reporters Without Borders ranks Vietnam 175 out of 180 in their 2018 World Press Freedom Index, naming the country among the “world’s worst enemies of the freedom to inform.” “Well-known Vietnamese journalist hounded, facing imminent arrest,” *Reporters Without Borders*, February 27, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/news/well-known-vietnamese-journalist-hounded-facing-imminent-arrest>.

02

According to articles 88, 79 and 258 of Vietnam’s penal code. “Vietnam: Reform Criminal Law to Respect Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/17/vietnam-reform-criminal-law-respect-rights>.

03

In 1984, the art historian, critic, and painter, Nguyen Quan was appointed editor-in-chief of *Tap chi My thuat*. He was dismissed in 1989, largely due to his advocating of international ideas of art-for-art’s sake.

04

Hue College of Fine Arts is the only art school in the country that offers a course in multimedia art, which began in 2013.

05

In 2018, we see a Vietnamese presence across various international art exhibitions and biennales: Tran Luong and Richard Streitmatter-Tran at the 1st Thailand Biennale; UuDam Tran Nguyen at the 12th Shanghai Biennale; Art Labor at Carnegie International 57th edition; Nguyen Trinh Thi and Ly Hoang Ly at the 9th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. In 2019, Phan Thao Nguyen and Tuan Andrew Nguyen will be exhibiting at Sharjah Biennial 14.

Even though there have been individual efforts from both inside and outside state-run art and cultural institutions, today there exist almost no adequate publications on arts and very few regionally/internationally-involved art writers. Mainstream media offers little coverage on art exhibitions, which are not considered “marketable products.” Online platforms tend to become spaces for biased debates, with no comparative and constructive arguments, or appreciation for (art) historical and theoretical contexts.

Outdated curriculum leading to a neglect of self-directedness, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary research methodology in art education; and an erosion of intergenerational exchange

During an interview with Minh Hoang, a recent graduate of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, he shared with me two interesting facts. Number one: only 10 students—including him—graduated from the painting department in 2018. And number two: a friend of his once brought in the Taschen compilation *100 Contemporary Artists*, to which a teacher responded, “Unnecessary materials!” In another interview, with Phan Le Chung, a professor at the Hue College of Fine Arts,^[04] I learned that in 2015, the number of students enrolling to study painting was so low that if this persisted for three continuous years, the department would be suspended; and for five continuous years, closed for good.

While Vietnamese art is gaining international exposure and recognition elsewhere,^[05] internally, we are facing a crisis where art as a discipline, together with its preservation, development, mediation, education, and workers, are often deemed unnecessary, even disregarded, with undesirable consequences for how art is perceived by the public, written about in the media, or taught in public schools. Students are skeptical about applying for Fine Arts; even if they do, upon graduation they redirect their interest into money-making fields such as advertising. This makes it almost impossible for us—organizers, curators, spaces—to identify and gather the next generation of artists to work with and support. But, how are the students to be blamed when the local official textbook on world art history stops at Pop Art, when they are told by their teachers to dismiss contemporary and experimental art because they are “impure”? Being thus disengaged, students also lack awareness of the real-life ecology and system of art, outside the outdated parameters of the university. How can we blame them for getting lost—not having a system of peer-colleague-finance-knowledge support, not fully understanding the historical contexts in which they work, not knowing how to learn from the past in order to move forward into the future?

II

While the first part of this text introduces the context that shapes our work at The Factory, this second part will delve more into the

practicalities of the different “ways of negotiation” and strategies we utilize. Although not new or revolutionary, they are reflective of the times and contexts in which we live and work.

Choosing “Language”

At The Factory, we take care in our choice of “language.” This entails deciding, within different styles of writing and modes of communication, what content is announced (or erased), in what most fitting forms, when, and to whom. In short, we choose carefully which “voice” to use when speaking to whom.

We take a “multiple voices” approach to writing—breaking down the “verticality,” or hierarchy, of different forms of writings (with academic texts at the top and everyday speech at the bottom), utilizing this strategy repeatedly in every exhibition and public program. It requires us to adopt the multiple viewpoints of our multiple publics: the authority, the artists, and the different groups of audiences.

Negotiating Authority

Running an art space as public as ours means that we have to seek permission for all of our exhibitions and public programs, and information has to be screened months in advance by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism via a process of license submission. Thus, a significant amount of time, attention, and care has to be given, first, to the kind of “language” we choose to negotiate with the authority, and secondly, to the maintenance of our “friendship.”

“Friendship” here means social time spent with members of the authority out of office hours—drinking, talking about art, informing them of the latest trends and developments taking place regionally and internationally. In other words, we adopt a fluid, soft, human, and relationship-based approach to dealing with them.

In choosing a “language” when addressing the authority, it’s about walking between the lines—acquiring their permission while staying (more or less) true (we all have to compromise!) to the integrity of the artists and their works.

Example:

Tuan Mami’s project *In One’s Breath—Nothing Stands Still* looked at the degradation of landscape and the destruction of human lives due to heavy pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources in his hometown Ha Nam. To avoid complications, we decided to rework the description of the project and approach it more poetically when applying for the license. We stated that it was an investigation into how landscape—as an artistic theme and medium—is practiced today: a contemplation on the aesthetic qualities found in ruined landscapes and a questioning of the spiritual relationship between man, Mother Earth, and the universe.

Negotiating Artists

As part of our ethos, we look for and support artists who are responsive to, and also critical of, their surrounding contexts (it cultural, social, or political), and who understand and utilize their art making as a way to build and share knowledge. Naturally, works by such artists are often considered “sensitive.” In order to exhibit them in an art space as public as ours, there must be a conversation with the artists about compromise and about the need to come up with, and carefully orchestrate, alternative ways of presenting, writing, and talking about works that are deemed “sensitive.”

Example:

In the previous example of Tuan Mami’s project, we explored how else we can talk about an art project that deals with environmental issues—a topic which would definitely raise red flags. Man’s exploitation of nature is also the subject of Tuan Andrew Nguyen’s film *My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires*, which was shown in his solo exhibition “Empty Forest.” In this case, we had to negotiate the display of the work itself. Discussing the extinction of certain animals and species in relation to humans’ greed and spiritual belief in the power of their body parts to heal and cure diseases, the work was integral to the exhibition. Even though the work was part of the exhibition, it was housed in a hidden room separated from the main exhibition space by a curtain and was only available for private viewing to the art community, the artist’s friends, and our contacts.

Excluding the film from the eyes of both the authority and the public was necessary for the safety of those involved in the project, because of the “sensitive” nature of its content and imagery. Our solution was to carefully select other works and design the main exhibition space so that even without the central video work, the general public could still experience and get a sense of what the artist was trying to discuss.

This “compromise” approach to solutions is reflective of our context responsiveness. In this case, it was the social/political circumstances and conditions in which we practice as creative workers that dictated the outcome, and we can only embrace them if we want to move forward. Compromising is not ideal, especially for the integrity of the artwork; it is not easy either when there is no sense in the system of censorship. This was a compromise Tuan Andrew had to make.

I am sure not all artists would be willing to take similar risks with their work, which is completely understandable and respectable. However, if artists care about the longevity and intellectual infrastructures of their local art scene, they would be willing to trade, sacrifice, compromise. Because sometimes, saying the unspeakable and doing the unthinkable—even if it is only semi-publicly and amongst a small community of peers, colleagues, and supporters—is enough to ignite changes elsewhere.

Negotiating Audience

The audience—from the dedicated art community to the general public—plays an important part in the development and sustaining of our exhibitions and public programs. In attempting to understand and serve their different backgrounds, needs, modes of reception, and expectations, we have come up with a strategy of providing a range of entry points to our space and what we do.

Example:

In terms of formats, we provide a variety of activities, each targeting particular groups of audience:

- discursive talks (with artists, scholars, and researchers) and creative talks (with workers from other fields such as music, fashion, design, and architecture)
- workshops—some skill-based (such as for silk painting or photography) for the general public, and others more in-depth or specifically oriented towards art students and young artists (for example, on “how to write your artist statement,” “how to value your work,” “what an art ecology looks like”)
- art walks and tours with curators and artists
- live arts, including music performances, and so on.

In terms of content making, language, and writing, we take into careful consideration the reading habits of our public nowadays. Inspired by Facebook and Instagram “swiping” culture, we provide different “contents”: “short read” for our newsletter and social media channels (written in a more light-hearted and general tone); “long read” for our press release and exhibition introductory text (more in-depth, informative, and expansive); and finally, “critical read” for our essays and catalogues (historically and theoretically weighty, always arguing from different points of view).

All of these efforts are to ensure that we treat different groups of audiences as “horizontally” and “diagonally” as possible. On the one hand, we try to provide them equal access (by designing programs and writing that cater to their interests) to “enter” not only the physical exhibitions at The Factory, but also the spaces of artistic experience, emotional contemplation, and critical thinking that these exhibitions create. On the other, we aspire to not “flatten,” underestimate, presume, or categorize audiences into established groups (with particular capacities and interests), ensuring that these points of access (the different types of programs and writings) are not forced upon them, but rather presented as open and equal options.

Collective as School

Leonhard Bartolomeus

Since it was first established, ruangrupa has distributed information and knowledge about contemporary art as part of its artistic working process. However, to arrive at the point when the practice of education became the main motor in ruangrupa's artistic work, we could trace a long line back through their practice, and even through the journey of Indonesian contemporary art.

In the mid-1990s, the art scene in Indonesia was getting pretty hot for various reasons. The political situation was tense, following several issues related to corruption and the financial crisis. Nevertheless, the art market had just experienced a big bang. Some paintings were being sold at crazy prices. Meanwhile, alternative art movements—preferring to avoid the label of “contemporary art”—also emerged, especially in the art centers of Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Jakarta. These took a very specific form: artist collectives.

Cemeti Art House was one pioneer driving the emergence of independent art groups in Yogyakarta. Their artistic practice also had another mission: To disseminate knowledge and information regarding various kinds of social-cultural-political issues directly into the community as much as possible. Commercial galleries were considered as no longer able to accommodate the need for art to be a tool of expression and communication. This alternative character grew stronger when art groups began crossing paths with academic activist groups to reject the authoritarian New Order regime—becoming part of a movement which would later become known as “Reformasi.”

In Jakarta, which became the center of all the political chaos, the art community also experienced this tendency. Students from Jakarta Institute of Arts (Institut Kesenian Jakarta) joined hands with the movement, alongside students from various disciplines, and then joined forces with others to create a larger group. After the regime was overthrown, the enthusiasm for resisting establishment, finding new forms, and creating opportunities independently continued to be one of the main characteristics of the art movement in Indonesia.

In the tension and spirit of this era, ruangrupa was founded by six

young artists in Jakarta. The goal was simple: opening a space that could support the work of young Jakarta artists.

Since then, ruangrupa have focused on encouraging art's progress in the broader scope of urban culture. This intention is manifested through a variety of programs, exhibitions, festivals, art laboratories, workshops and research projects, and publishing books, magazines, and online journals.

When moving to a new place in 2008, ruangrupa made several changes in their "organization" workflow. One was forming a special unit for Support and Promotion. This division aimed specifically to prepare and develop programs carried out by ruangrupa in order to support the development of cultural agents in Jakarta. Several programs were carried out to fulfil the plan; the thinking then was not just about being "alternative" but also to support different elements in the art ecosystem, especially in Jakarta.

Art schools in Indonesia produce many artists, but rarely consider or present other supporting roles such as curators, critics, or art researchers. Meanwhile, the global art world at that time was busy talking about cross-disciplinary work. For this reason, then, ruangrupa designed curatorial workshops and critical writing workshops on art and visual culture. The project took the form of a two-week lecture course that was led by professionals from the contemporary arts and culture scene in Indonesia. This program tried to fill a role in our arts ecosystem that had not been taken up by art schools.

The lecture course, which later became a long-term collaboration project with the Jakarta Arts Council, became an example for us in ruangrupa to see collectivism as a way to create a learning site/ educational platform. This concept then led us to create another division to focus on educational programs in 2015, the so-called Institut ruangrupa, or Ir. (as a pun on an early bachelor degree title in Indonesia). Ir. was meant to take over all the educational programs and set them in a specific curriculum.

One of the highest goals we set at that moment was to explore how or find ways to transfer the knowledge we have in our collective, whether as individuals or the collective. How do we extract this tacit knowledge about object research or, say, making an affordable music festival, without losing its meaning of collectivism or causing confusion?

Despite the fact that Ir. never actually developed into a division for various reasons, ruangrupa wanted to keep the idea alive. So, instead of forcing it into a rigid program, we tried to inject it into some art projects we did abroad, traveling through several continents while still maintaining a core concept, to examine "collectivity" in different contexts around the world.

One of the best examples is RURU GAKKO at Aichi Triennale 2016. For this particular event, Ir. implemented methods and practices that have been used by ruangrupa before. In the project, Ir. functioned as a shelter of knowledge and the process of "human manufacturing," building a special context with young Japanese artists and local residents

in Chojamachi. In Japanese culture, we proposed Ir. as a style of *dojo*, a place to be specifically trained in or learn something. In corresponding with the Triennale theme “Rainbow Caravan,” Ir. presented a model of ruangrupa’s way of thinking as a collective space. The project started with eight participants who joined the school and developed their own projects over three months. After the Triennale ended, the school as a site vanished, but some of the participants are still running their own projects.

At the end of 2016, we moved to a monstrous 6,000 square meter warehouse as our new base alongside several other collectives: Forum Lenteng, Grafis Huru Hara, and Serrum. Here, we challenged ourselves to work as one entity while still maintaining our own individual programs and characteristics. We were beginning to transmutate ourselves into something else but we were not sure yet what this might be. But one thing we were certain of was that we shared the same passion for creating an educational platform that could be accessible for the public. Even though it was a challenge to maintain consistent schedules, we tried to create several different education programs.

From that experience, we developed another model that could be suitable for our artistic practice. We called it Ekosistem, to point to the richness of resources that we had and also the variety of knowledge and functions that existed within our space. We were still far away from announcing this as our ideal model, but it could be adjusted in ways that could be beneficial for everyone living in the environment.

However, in 2018, there was yet another move to a new place: an ex-futsal field. This time, we acquired the land together and by doing so opened the possibility of creating a sustainable program. Learning from this working experience, we outlined a knowledge-sharing platform for everyone interested in the practice of similar approaches. We decided to create an educational platform using a new alias, Gudskul—a short name that we borrowed from Serrum’s program while we were still at the warehouse. The name itself has no special meanings, even though said aloud it sounds like “good school.”

Taking a different form as a “school” opens the possibility for us to allow others to hack into our resources—something that we have been thinking about for a long time. Gudskul Ekosistem operates by using any resources available from the collectives within it: people, programs, hardware, time, and money.

Under its new official name, Gudskul: Studi Kolektif dan Ekosistem Seni Rupa Kontemporer (Contemporary Art Collective Studies and Ecosystem), we have published a regular, one-year long program which is conceived as a space for participants to work collaboratively as a collective on experimentations and simulations. To achieve this, Gudskul employs a series of experiential learning processes using face-to-face meetings, studio work, field trips, internships, and residencies as our methods.

Participants are selected through an open application process, sending their portfolios and filling out a form that includes several

questions to give us a picture of their interest in collective practice. After that, we interview them, either in person or online. From the 30 applicants that registered for the first session, we selected 15 participants from different cities across Indonesia, including Jakarta, Majalengka, Bandung, Bogor, Bekasi, Medan, Pontianak, Surabaya, and Makassar.

Since we develop via a non-profit working model, there is the need to think about different methods of support to keep this program running smoothly. We have initiated a financial plan which is inspired by a *lumbung* (rice barn) economy model where resources are stored, to then be distributed proportionally to each collective based on their different needs. Resources from each collective are gathered in a variety of forms—funds, programs, equipment, even books—and redistributed to each collective in the Ekosistem.

The platform itself does not only act as a program but serves a bigger role as a collective framework. It still carries the idea of the ecosystem. The vitality of its networks as resources in our collective practice is attained through artistic exchanges, residencies, symposia, and the development of sustainable collective economic models. Also, coming from different collectives, there are a lot of educational programs—we try to be efficient by merging some of these under Gudskul programs.

Gudskul might also be a good response to the question of “membership” of our collective/s, which is often raised by other people, and which we can never answer because we have no such thing as “membership.” We dedicate our time and space to hanging out—or what we famously call “*nongkrong*”—with people who can and want to work together with us. By involving the participants in our programs at the Ekosistem, we can simulate the time and value of *nongkrong*, while becoming closer to being part of a bigger ecosystem.

While reflecting through these phases of change gives us a perspective on how *ruangrupa* is trying to find a new role, function, character, and also a strategy for sustainability, we are reminded that the spirit of learning and sharing is always present in collective practice. Instead of following the concept of the modern “school” where we are taught to always compete with each other, using the collective as a basis of learning practice can help us to understand the concepts of togetherness and collaboration.

School of Improper Education: Education of the Heart, the Mind, and Everything in Between ^[01]

Syafiatudina

⁰¹
This text is an edited transcript of the presentation by Syafiatudina given at the forum “Imagining New Ecologies.”

Hello, my name is Dina, full name Syafiatudina. I am practicing as a writer and curator in Yogyakarta Indonesia. I’ve belonged to a collective called KUNCI Cultural Studies Center since 2009. It was my first job and I’m still there. Here I am going to talk about our current work called School of Improper Education (or Sekolah Salah Didik in Indonesian).

There are two points I want to underline in this presentation. First is the move or shift between education and study, and second is the importance of uselessness in this process. Uselessness as a way to resist the imposed values of education by neoliberalist logic. That is why the title of this presentation is “Education of the Heart, the Mind, and Everything in Between.”

I also need to remind you that in the School of Improper Education, art exists in a very loose way. Most of our members are not artists, maybe only two of them are artists. The other 18 of them are students, unemployed; we have cleaners, we have different people with different types of jobs.

First I would like to share with you the aim of School of Improper Education, which is about study. And what we study is studying. So it is a school to learn how to study. Everyone can come to the school with their own plan of study, but we study it in the same way. That is how the school operates. And whatever we study and however we study, the important thing in School of Improper Education is that we study it together. And by studying it together, we study what we can do together. That is the idea.

People say our school is popular because of the very catchy name, but actually the name comes from two main references—one is an album by Lauryn Hill called *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (a very good album), and the second is a novel by Indonesian writer, Abdul Muiz, called *Salah Asuhan*—“wrongly nurtured,” or “wrongly educated.” The story moralizes about an Indonesian man who gets too Westernized and this is also the context of how education is seen as something liberating, but if you get it from the wrong source it will damage you. However, since our school name is School of Improper Education, we believe that

education is not about getting it right, it is about getting it together. Along the way, there may be many failures or confusion, but as long as we do it together, that is what matters.

I would like to share with you the overall structure of our school. For the first two years we plan to experiment with four learning methods, and we hope by the end of these two years we are going to find a school model that we want to continue. If not, then we will continue looking for or duplicating the existing school models. We practice each method for six months, and then after six months we reflect on it and move to another method. And we see that moving from one learning method to another is a form of rehearsal on studying. A very important point in our study is the process of repeating, of continuing, of rehearsing.

The school has been running for one year now, and in the first year, we have been experimenting with two methods of school. For the first year, the school focused on studying outside the dominant model of school. So, in the first six months, we tried a school with the structure of no teacher and student. We took this method from Ranciere's book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and learned using the experience of Jacotot. The second model we tested last year was learning based on the shared struggle of the people, using a method called Turba by an artists' association in Indonesia in the 1950s called Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat / People's Cultural Association). At the end of this month we are going to start the second year of our school and the focus will be on embodied knowledge—or knowledge that is not based on words, but based on materials, and for this year we are going to focus on collective publishing with methods that we took from the Nyantrik learning model and the Javanese educational movement Taman Siswa.

I will focus here on our experience experimenting with the model of Turba or “learning from below.” As a model conducted by Lekra in the 1950s, it is actually a method of artistic research, because what this artist group aimed for through Turba was to understand the life of common people in Indonesia as a way to create revolutionary artworks. In their idea, revolutionary artwork comes from the material basis of everyday people's realities. In School of Improper Education, every member chose a topic or community they wanted to research on or “go below” to learn about. Some chose to go to a village and live as a farmer, or went to work as online taxi drivers. Others decided to go and live in a school, a real school not like our “fake” school, for a week to understand the life of temporary, part-time teachers in that school. Everyone had their own topic or focus but the requirement was that they had to practice the principles of Turba. There are a lot of principles, some of them quite funny, but one principle is “Three alike”: “eat alike, sleep alike, and work alike.” So during their Turba period, the school members had to go and live in these people's houses, work the same way, and also eat the same food. At the end of their stay, they came to the school and reported to the assembly what they learned.

And throughout the six months of the school, we learned, or we heard stories from, the struggles of farmers, of online taxi drivers, of

teachers, of mothers who live in the riverbanks of Yogyakarta city, of a village of painters in West Java. So we heard how the stories of different people connect with each other. Oftentimes they are represented as different from each other but through the school, we found their connection and the connection is, how despite different professions, everyone experiences the same uncertain life. The future is unknown for all of us—for the farmers, for the freelancers, for the designers, for the artists, the curators. There is no healthcare provided for us—being privatized, we have to pay for it. We cannot afford to live in the city because the property rent is getting higher and higher; and so living is hard. But what can we do with this?

In this sense, precariousness and uncertainty becomes the basis of our study together. And through acknowledging our precarious life, our uncertain life, we try to think about what we can imagine. From this comes the question of what we can do, or what we cannot do.

I believe that the process of School of Improper Education is not about mediating—mediating from the ignorant to the knowledgeable or from the knowledgeable to the ignorant—because we all possess knowledge although it has different forms. We resist the idea that one is more knowledgeable than the others. Education or study is a process of evoking the empowered subjects in everyone and with everyone.

I am pointing out here education should not be about “disciplinizing” —it is not about giving rules or orders to the mind and body. The importance is to challenge the existing discipline. And challenging the discipline of education can be done through the practice of study because study can exist everywhere, it is something that we do together—it is not happening in the classroom or in school; it happens in places like dancehalls, in secret smoking areas, in back alleys, in bars. One of the findings of School of Improper Education is how the process of study gives a space for people who are not recognized as part of public—the refugees, the fugitives, the people who try to escape from education.

So that is what I think is the importance of education. And also I want to emphasize the importance of being together when these days our society is being more and more separated; we are falling into a disparity of nations and religions. So I think, in order to imagine an alternative world, or a different world, it is important to keep rehearsing what we can do together. And I think this will be the next project of School of Improper Education.

DISCUSSION

October 19, 2018, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo

Moderators: Horiuchi Naoko, Beverly Yong

Horiuchi Naoko

At AIT [Arts Initiative Tokyo] where I work, we've been doing art education programs, mainly focusing on curating and theory, since 2001. We have this excitement that although education takes time, and doesn't have an immediate impact, or a big impact on people, we are slowly changing brains. After 18 years, we feel like the cultural landscape or art scene has been changing a bit after we've had approximately 2,000 people participating in our school. Some of them are working at the museums, studying abroad, starting new collectives. It's becoming easier to work [in more diverse ways] or to have more diverse discussions. My question to all of you is: Do you feel like, through your programs, you are actually making an impact on your cultural landscape? Or art scene? Or people's lives, even?

Bill Nguyen

I think collectively, everyone in Vietnam, the art spaces and collectives, are all trying in one way or another to slowly shift this perception of what art is and the role of art in our society. It's going to take a long while to hopefully see some kind of change. We're actually facing quite a severe situation right now where we don't have the next generation of artists to work with yet. Internally, are we making changes in the thinking of art practitioners if there are now less and less students going into art school? So, externally, it's too soon to even dare to think that what we do is making changes. I think it's good to stay skeptical toward our own work, too, in the context of where we are.

Leonhard Bartolomeus (Barto)

I am not sure whether we have culturally impacted people or not. Jakarta is much like Tokyo, very dense. And I think not so many people consider art as part of their priority in their life. But we're trying to focus on working together with younger artists. At least, what we know is there is a new generation that always comes up every year—there are art schools, of course, like Jakarta Institute of Arts, and then universities that have graphic design as their program study, which also turn out artists. When

they graduate, they basically have no point [of reference]: “How can I work as a contemporary artist?” “How should I deal with galleries,” or, “If I want to be a curator, how should I start?” This kind of thing began the idea to start the educational program.

We didn’t try to pursue a big target like working with the government. By coincidence, the Jakarta Arts Council came to us and wanted to do the same thing, so we sort of said, Give us your money and we do the programs. Mutual collaboration. Some of the people that followed the curatorial or art writing workshops are now working in a professional way, for example the one sitting there... [indicating Ayos]. We’re trying just to reach small numbers of people, very specific targets, and at the same time, trying to work with more popular mediums. For example, we always include music, bands, when we do an opening of an exhibition, so more people come.

Shiraki Eise

I could not say yes or no, because our museum is still only just 15 years old, but [our efforts have created] a result in our museum’s attitude, because [while] our curators always have very big voices in the museum, they could [now] hear our—another department’s—voices. We managed to change the department name, and the meaning of how education is run.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

For KUNCI and also for the school, something that we are proud of, and something that we will keep doing, is making culture as accessible as possible, making cultural and artistic work a less privileged thing. In my own words, I would be very happy if less and less people take “artist” as their profession, and do art in their life. Everyone can do art. Of course, I am happy for my artist friends, but I also want to see more and more people creating their own voice through artistic practices. That will be the aim, and that will also be the process that we will go through.

Beverly Yong

Bill, you were saying, in your context it’s a frightening future because you’re not sure what you’re trying to aim towards, with the lessening of artists. Maung, you also work in a pressurized context, different in the sense that in Myanmar, the commercial art scene has been encouraged: Where do you see the future of art and education in Myanmar?

Maung Day

Over the past 10 or 20 years, it has always been about artists and their movements, and the development of art. Like I mentioned on the first day, we didn’t have curators, especially local curators, and there weren’t many activities promoting art education. We didn’t have anybody who studied art history. That’s still kind of the case today. Though now we have a couple of art historians from the outside who are living in Yangon and, from time to time, they produce articles and papers, that aspect

is still pretty much lacking. But people are now starting to realize that there are gaps that we have to fill up, and so that might be the future.

Bill Nguyen

I actually have a question for Dina. I really appreciate the kind of philosophical and romantic quality of this idea of being together, or togetherness, in order to learn or to study. You mentioned in the explanation of the format of the School of Improper Education that usually you would have six months of trial and error, and then you move on to a different form to see whether that form works or not. Who gets to decide whether this format works or not? How do you reflect on, or measure the outcome of the six months? How do people get to join the school? Is there a set of criteria that they have to meet? Finally, the participants of the school proposing to go into different communities to learn more about these communities, what do they then do with this information? I understand that my questions are going totally against this idea of uselessness, but I think, as the way to move forward and try to measure the quality of the work we do, there must be a system of measuring.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

Thank you, Bill. The question about measurement is important, it is something that we're constantly struggling with. For example, in the first experiment we tried this model of establishing this class without teacher and student. It was a failure. We measured it as a failure because a lot of people left the school, maybe 20 or 30 percent. Some who remained said that they couldn't find a reason to learn if there's no one telling them to learn something; if there is no teacher, there is no order, there is no rule. So what makes us learn? That's one of the group reflections we [explored] at the end of the first experiment. Yet, it's also one of the characteristics of our meetings that they always start with a very gloomy situation. Like, "Oh, I don't know why we are doing this. This doesn't make any sense." But then, towards the end, we found the meanings behind this frustration, like, "Oh, it turns out it's very difficult to resist the dominant models of education, because inside ourselves we have the desire to be ordered, to be governed, to be controlled." So, it was a failure, but [one which] turned out a productive reflection.

Answering your question about measurement, there is no single measurement. The values for measurement are always created through the meetings, through the collective reflections, and these are always documented. We're going to publish a book with the documents that we created out of these meetings. We decided that it is important that this information about the study process that we go through can be accessible for everyone. The key to the mobility of knowledge is reproduction. We try to make our knowledge as reproducible as possible and we see that books that include different ways of writing and language are the most feasible way to distribute the knowledge.

How people join is through open call. We distribute posters saying we are looking for new members, and they can send their

applications through email to KUNCI. For the first class, KUNCI selected the participants, and for the second year, the first class selected the participants together with KUNCI members.

Le Thuan Uyen

I have a question. I guess this is a question directly towards Shiraki-san and Bill, but also to all of us here today. With Barto's and Dina's presentations, compared to Shiraki and Bill, you're geared towards a much smaller community or smaller public. Bill, The Factory is as close as it gets to a contemporary museum in Vietnam at the moment, so it does function like a public institution for art, and my question is: Do you feel there's a need or a sense of urgency to make the museum such a rigorous site for learning? Why is that? Especially at The Factory, where I know you're increasingly doing a lot of public programs that allow for conversations to be exchanged, and also [providing] a platform for knowledge generation and dissemination. Why do we have to have an education department within our institution?

Bill Nguyen

At The Factory, we see the visual as interchangeable with everything else, whether it's dance, workshops, talks, public programs, and this is also how we view our own ecology. We don't put artists at the top, we don't put the visual arts at the top, we put artists, the public, the authority, and everyone else on the same page, so there's this understanding of horizontal treatment. But we also kind of approach everyone vertically as well. In the example of the short read, the long read, the critical read, there's also the easy view, the time-consuming view, and the critical view. We try to use these as philosophical anchors, and we try to physically replicate them with the different publics that we deal with, with different formats. I think it's important because, what other fields allow you to just contemplate, think, and be critical, and not have to have a kind of an economical outcome? It's a romantic way to view what we're doing, but I'd like to believe that there's still space for us to think like that.

Of course, The Factory is also governed by money. Everything right now is coming out of the founder's pocket, even though we're trying to function as a kind of social enterprise, meaning all the profits made from the artworks or the restaurants go back into the exhibition-making and public program-making process. We're very much aware of and acknowledge fully the fact that we're still governed by capitalism. But, it's about what we do with those limitations, and trying to do the best that we can.

Shiraki Eise

I think the art museum could become a third place—maybe it's not your family, it's not a school, maybe the audience could meet people from different backgrounds and also different generations. That is a very important thing for an art museum, so we have to do learning programs in front of the art works in the museum.

Le Thuan Uyen

In my experience of running public programs in Hanoi, once you call it a course or something with the term “education” in it, people are actually scared. Nobody [wants to] go. People feel, “Oh. I’m going to be judged. I’m going to be examined. I’m going to be analyzed. I’m going to be gazed at.” So then you have to find a different way of telling them, “No, no, this is sharing;” or “This is just conversation.”

Syafiatudina (Dina)

It’s very interesting because it’s different from my observation, at least in Yogyakarta, because I cannot speak for the whole of Indonesia. KUNCI and ruangrupa are turning ourselves into schools around the same time, because when you use the idea of school or education, it attracts a lot of people. Ever since KUNCI opened the School of Improper Education, our library is not only visited by graduate students, there are now more people coming to our space. This goes also to the idea of how the school in Indonesia’s context, or maybe elsewhere, has become the place and space for organizing, for meeting, for gathering. Maybe that’s why the idea of having a school is very open or humble for many people while, on the other hand, art makes people think, “I don’t really know art, art is very difficult. I’m not educated, so I don’t really understand what you are trying to say.” KUNCI also organizes reading groups, and reading groups are the kind of thing people don’t think they belong to because reading is a privileged mode of accessing knowledge. Not all people like to read, or think they are entitled to read.

Leonhard Bartolomeus (Barto)

For ruangrupa, of course the question is also within us, of “Why should we make a school?” It’s kind of against all that we’ve been doing, you know, those chaotic things. Now we’re trying to make this structured thing. The idea actually came from the question, “Okay, now we are three collectives [merging] into one—what should we do?” If we just became a new collective, it wouldn’t make sense. Basically, we would be reproducing the things we have been doing before. So, [we thought about how] we could be more open to people not from our circle, let’s say; how they could actually use, like hack, our resources, basically copying stuff or using our networks, working with our friends. And from there we got thinking that a school could be a good way of trapping people inside. Then also, continuing from what Dina said, it’s kind of like an opening for people. It will be an exchange of something. Even though we’re not trying to be like the kind of schools that we’re actually trying to oppose, we’re trying to mimic the structure, just to make people believe that we are doing the right stuff.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

I think Furuichi-san mentioned, when she introduced this forum session, education as a way to communicate, as a way to reach people, and I’d like to maybe extend the discussion about school or about

reaching others in relation to the other two topics of the forum, public and history. Because, on the second day, Sze started talking about how maybe the exhibition is an outdated form, maybe we should think of something else. Then there are also the questions: Who are the public that we are trying to address? Who do we imagine as the public? To add school into this conversation, maybe curating a school is another method? Or, what do curators do in a school?

Horiuchi Naoko

That also leads me to question those who work at museums. At Mori, for example, learning programs are becoming bigger in the museum—what's the relationship between the curatorial team and the public program team? Could curatorial and education programs be interchangeable along the lines of what Arata and Bill have been talking about, or would they still be very different in your museum?

Shiraki Eise

Sometimes I ask education or learning curators of other museums, Who decided the exhibition title? So, that question is very interesting for me, because [from the answer], I could see the [how] whole thing [works] in their museum. In most museums, the title is decided by the exhibition curators, while in some other museums, it is decided with the marketing group or education team.

Che Kyongfa

At Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT), most of the public programs are related to the exhibition that curators curate, so it's very straightforward, classical—artists' talks or symposia on art discourse, public programs for school kids touring the exhibition space. We have a lot to catch up, or elaborate. But we are closed right now for renovation, and we are going out to schools with artists. It's an ad hoc sort of educational situation where artists can do whatever they want, imagine what they can do in such a unique situation in a certain limited amount of time. We choose, or education curators choose, a variety of artists who work with sound, paintings, and so on. So, these are things that MOT is trying to work on.

I was thinking, Ayos, about your heritage project, discovering heritage with the people, which resists the idea of heritage as designated by the authority. It involves this process of learning together, so I thought you could comment or respond to the conversation we've had so far.

Ayos Purwoaji

[It's] interesting to reflect on Dina's idea of connecting this discussion about education with notions of what is public and how we perceive history. As Arata-san said, we need to have critiques about history, what is written, to continue to ask about the history that we perceive to be true. I think my curatorial project is based on the idea to think again about our history, and how we work with people to choose or to write

their own history. I think it's part of education itself because a lot of people in the Surabaya context take heritage as a given concept. When the government says, "This is your history, this is your heritage," people just think "Okay"; they don't ask the question, "Why is this my heritage?" So, with this program actually, I make people question again: What is history? What is heritage? It's based on their reflection, based on their understanding about what is history by themselves. Not by government, not by us as curators, not by other people, just by themselves.

Che Kyongfa

What's great about this project is that people who are involved in it have the potential to articulate, which is pretty difficult for a lot of educational programs in larger institutions, where people are in the mode of receiving, and being [taught]. Of course, we do workshops where people can make things and all that, but it's slightly different from learning and articulating their own subjectivities.

Kumakura Haruko

I have a question for Kyongfa-san. [At Mori], I am a curator and Eise is a Learning curator and we're trying hard to work together during the process of exhibition production, but as you know, they are doing a hundred projects a year, and we're producing the big shows, and sometimes we really have a challenging time to discuss enough before the opening day how to make the public program, physical exhibition, and publication "on the same page," as Bill said. I know MOT is having the MOT satellite, so I was just wondering how it works: Who curates the shows, and do the curators work with educators or do the educators initiate?

Che Kyongfa

We have been closed for almost three years, two-and-a-half years. We got this funding to do an outreach program outside the museum. The mission is to engage with the people in the community of Fukagawa or Kiyosumi-shirakawa area, which is pretty much an old, downtown neighborhood with newly built tower blocks and mansions; so, a mixture of residents, and a long history. Our question was how to engage without having our own "house." We started with going around the neighborhood, and trying to find spaces; literally, I was walking around the neighborhood, and if I found this empty house, I knocked on the door, then the next door. The curators did that. It's a bit different from education per se, more a continuation of engagement; and also using this as an opportunity to invite a wider range of people back in the museum when we reopen. As part of it, I did this exhibition at Tokyo University of the Arts. We don't [usually] have opportunities to work directly or workshop with students, so it was an interesting experience for me, but it's not as radical as what ruangrupa is doing.

Leonhard Bartolomeus (Barto)

I'm trying to think what's the difference between what the museums do

and what we as artist collectives are trying do. Continuing from what Dina has said about creating a site, to make a hub, I've found it's this that keeps the younger generation going through art school. They don't actually learn much from the school except technical stuff. I don't know whether it's the same with other schools, but based on my experience, they actually want to go to art school just because they could meet friends that have the same ideas, same visions, those kinds of things.

It might be an interesting perspective also to see learning sites, study, education platforms, as a hub, just to put the people there. In terms of Indonesian culture, like Dina said, reading things is not working for us. If you say, "Okay, we are going to do some reading from these books of philosophy," nobody will show up. But if you say, "Okay, we set up a thing and then do some talks, make things, draw stuff," then a lot of people will show up. That's actually the real exchange of knowledge happening. Trying to find different methods of distributing knowledge is also interesting. Not only in the physical form, though documentation is always important—what we've talked about today, if it has been documented, it will be there for the archive and historical record. But in the current situation, the real exchange is happening when we are talking directly, or doing stuff together.

Lisa Ito-Tapang

Just to express some discomfort with regard to how we regard art schools. Not because I work in an art school. And of course, recognizing the limitations of what can be taught within the structure of an art school. The notion of school appeals to many, even in very informal contexts, because being in school means that you are being committed to work, and to be together with a certain group of people for a certain amount of time. An extended amount of time; sometimes too long. Within that time, we start to see some substance or transformation going on; whether that is for better or for worse really depends on our respective experiences. Perhaps it is that promise of transformation which makes the idea of a school, not literal schools, but the concept of a school, appealing, or repelling as well.

I was also thinking, what are the possibilities for such transformative strategies of reaching publics within schools as well? Like in art school, one of the things we were always talking about was how important giving students a sense of history was in relation to art production. Otherwise it just becomes solely about technique, ways of making without sense of, or grounding in, the larger historical or theoretical context. It really just becomes an exercise in skill building, which is needed, but which will not complete that sense of transformation. There is that kind of problem ongoing in schools. Although we all have our respective contexts and situations that we face, I think one common factor that I sensed in a lot of the discussion was how many of us are feeling the effects of neoliberalism across the school systems, especially the public school systems, where a lot of the anxiety and pressure measurement comes in, a lot of trying to quantify, and to

deliver the numbers while the more substantial aspects of education sort of fall by the wayside.

Syafiatudina (Dina)

I want to respond to what Lisa said first, about how to build this transformative process of reaching the public within school. Last month I was in Mexico City for a conference. It was a conference in a school. The conference was almost canceled because the students were on strike, and one of the demands of the students was the opportunity for them to organize with neighbors of the university. They wanted to organize with their neighbors to discuss the impact of the university development—gentrification, the rise of property values. I think this is the important moment where the separation between the institution and the public disappears. Perhaps it is also useful to use the notion of commons, that education is a form of resource, and something we manage together. Therefore, the positions of the actors and the recipients are interchangeable. And this is something that Bill also said, publics, internal or external, and institutions are interchangeable. I'm part of the organization, but I am also a part of the public. Maybe this also goes into what Eise said about the importance of going out of the museum as a way to think about being part of the public, but also to think of different ways of publicness.

The other response is to what Ayos said about curating with people. I think curating with people and doing or studying with others are powerful ways to open the means of production. And I don't mean only production in the Marxist sense, of factory or tools, but production of knowledge, and the means of knowledge production. I think the importance of education is to open the means of production as much as possible, including artistic production. What are these tools of artistic production? Abstract thinking, freedom, emancipation, or it can be also the paintbrush, or silkscreen. I think it connects to what Lisa said, this anxiety about how industrialization and neoliberalization of education are going into the way we think about education, that it has to be useful, that it has to create more workforce. Maybe this also goes into history, [helps us] to think of a different history. Yes, it is a response to the lack or the gap of formal history, but also when the tools to write history are being shared, like what Kyongfa shared about Ayos' project, then we can also find other forms of history that are excluded. So, that's public, history, education. Okay, I'm finished.

Hasegawa Arata

Can I share my example to you guys? "Chronicle, Chronicle!" as you know, includes a lot of events. "Chronicle, Chronicle!" regards installing itself as one of the events. So, one of the events is installing the lighting equipment in the exhibition. It's very important, okay? So, audiences can see professional lighting staff installing lighting equipment on each sculpture or mannequin or the drawings. So people notice there is a big difference between kinds of lighting. And professional lighting staff

talked to the audiences about these differences, how to install, what equipment is the cheapest, or the very best. Actually, to my surprise, some public curators also came to our exhibition. One of the curators who came to “Chronicle, Chronicle!” adopted the lighting equipment lecture in Aichi Triennale, and then one of the professors in Tokyo Zokei University also adopted it in their class. So, people can understand lighting in the public museum is not the only way of lighting. Of course, we curators, conservators, must protect art pieces from strong light or ultraviolet light, but some sculptures, like iron sculptures or replicas, can be lighted up with various kinds of light, even in colored light. We can see lots of variations of seeing art pieces. What I want to say here is, we can share the production of knowledge and the curiosity in independent curator projects, but also in the public museum and art university.

DISCUSSION: Closing Thoughts

October 19, 2018, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo

Moderators: Che Kyongfa, Horiuchi Naoko, and Beverly Yong

Bill Nguyen

Throughout the three sessions, and also outside of this symposium when we we've been hanging out together, we've been talking quite a lot about the pros and cons of things, of different formats that are used to tackle public, history, education. I'm just thinking, are we being too harsh on ourselves? Because, I'm sitting here and thinking about the pros and cons of what Dina's doing, and the pros and the cons of Mori Art Museum, the pros and cons of what you are doing with Gudskul. Why can't we be a little bit kinder, and just be okay with the formats we have? They cannot satisfy everything and everyone. What may work for this particular audience or public may not work for another. Maybe it's okay to be a little bit kinder to the limitations we're working with, okay with the fact that maybe a symposium like this cannot be documented, or maybe it should be documented, and maybe we should be okay with this kind of seating arrangement, even though it obviously doesn't work for some people. Maybe by doing that we'll be able to lift off a little bit of this pressure from industrialization or neoliberalism.

Che Kyongfa

Bill, at the same time you shared this discomfort with the show you saw at Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, no? I mean this institutional representation of history, or historiography of a representation of Southeast Asia, which Japan is not part of. Of course we can be kind to limitations, but there are limitations that are not forgiven, even among us. So, this place and time is really to understand each other, whatever the intentions we have. It's also time to share knowledge. I've been thinking, what comes out at this kind of forum? I'm interested in what your response is to being part of this kind of gathering. We have curators from huge institutions and non-institutional, independent curators in Southeast Asia and Japan. Why are we here?

Bill Nguyen

I actually have never done a symposium like this before, and this has been really useful for me, to be physically dislocated from my context, to reflect my position in my work—where am I going to go next? I cannot speak for everyone, this is just my very personal experience. As a newcomer, it's been eye-opening.

Le Thuan Uyen

Following from what you said, Kyongfa, I just have this question.

How do you know when something is unforgiven? Yesterday, when we talked about history, or even today, we have to be aware of what we are saying. [The fact that we are discussing certain issues may] put us in positions of power [to play a role, for example, in the shaping of codes of conduct in curatorial practice]. On another note, one of the best things is what Ayos and Dina and others have been talking about—learning together. It could just be being [made] aware of what you have been doing, because sometimes when you are grounded in your own work, in your own context, and you're at hundreds or thousands of administrative tasks that even an independent curator has to do, you forget to think critically. Also taking inspiration and examples to continue our work in this crazy, messy, problematic world.

Vipash Purichanont

What I have been feeling is that this is kind of a privileged place to be—a place to stop and perhaps talk about the stuff that we don't have time to talk about. It has been a force to get me to talk about what I have been thinking but never explained to anyone. I hope this kind of thing can continue. It's been a space for reflection, to think about something collectively. It's been a great experience. Thank you.

Le Thuan Uyen

All the issues we've touched on have been discussed in various contexts and settings and there are no answers. So, are we hoping for suggestions of possible solutions or, what are we doing? I think sometimes it's okay to be confused, and it's okay to accept that we just have to keep trying to find them. Perhaps this motivates us to keep working. When it's all set in stone, then what is there to talk about?

Selene Yap

The Substation used to run conferences from the 1990s to the 2000s, and these conferences were titled really bold things, like "Art vs. Art" or "Space vs. Space," and were transcribed and bound into volumes. I detect that kind of existential crisis on their end, at that point of time when they were sharing. It was a panel like this; they had no answers to what they were confronting at that time. But it acts as a marker of time, with me, a younger generation cultural producer looking back on their conversations and how it adds value to what we are doing now, in this era and period of time, grappling with the same problems or not. Maybe, just simply, we are that marker of time for the next generation as well.

Hasegawa Arata

The title is very good, isn't it? Not creating new ecologies, just imagining new ecologies. A good title.

Beverly Yong

That's a nice note to end on, thank you very much.

Afterword

Five years have now passed since the Asia Center was launched and we have now reached the fifth volume of the *Art Studies* series. The aim of the series has been to look back over the art exchange that has taken place in Asia, including Japan, over the past 30 years from the 1990s until the present, and to offer an outlook on future art environments and infrastructures in the region.

Against a backdrop of increasing numbers of biennales, triennales, and other art projects around Asia including large-scale regional exhibitions, a rush of new art museums, cultural policies promoted at the national level, the booming art market, and the emerging virtual environments unique to the information age, we who live here in the present must respond speedily to these currents in the changing environment. However, as we follow the flow of these currents, we are often gripped by uncertainty. Is this the way things should be? What will be left behind? Should we not stop for a moment, look at things in the long term, review them objectively, and give them careful consideration?

The art environments in which we find ourselves did not appear out of nowhere, but are the results of the various relationships and activities of our predecessors. As such, fresh perspectives regarding how we can reform, develop, and pass on what has been inherited are vital to meet contemporary conditions.

The curators who participated in “Curators’ Forum 2018: Imagining New Ecologies” may be, like those who took part in the “Condition Report” project, prominent actors of the art scenes in Japan and Southeast Asia. Following on from those who developed the artistic activities from the past 30 years documented and discussed in the first three volumes, it is their ideas and practices that will shape the next art environments in the region. Art exchange between Southeast Asia and Japan requires more effective cultural policy that can respond to changes in conditions as a new generation takes over. We sense the necessity of reconsidering our next steps in anticipation of the future.

Recognizing these issues, the “Imagining New Ecologies” forum was organized as an event that should look toward practices for the 2020s, framing its discussions around the three themes of Public, History, and Education. These intricately interrelated and inseparable topics are important elements that people involved in art, and perhaps curators in particular, must always remain conscious of in their respective practices. The dilemmas we face today have to be addressed on a daily basis through our work and activities. I believe that it is from this process that visions of new ecologies can emerge and start to be created.

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to the participants for taking time out of their busy schedules to write their contributions for this report. These curators are pursuing remarkable activities at the very forefront of the field in ways unimaginable five years ago. As with the previous volume, this publication benefited from assured editing by Beverly Yong and the support of Horiuchi Naoko right until the final stages of its preparation. I am greatly indebted to them both. I also look forward very much to hearing candid opinions and feedback from readers. This is because it is everyone’s interest and support that will become the driving force for building our art scene in Asia.

Furuichi Yasuko

Art Coordinator, The Japan Foundation Asia Center

