

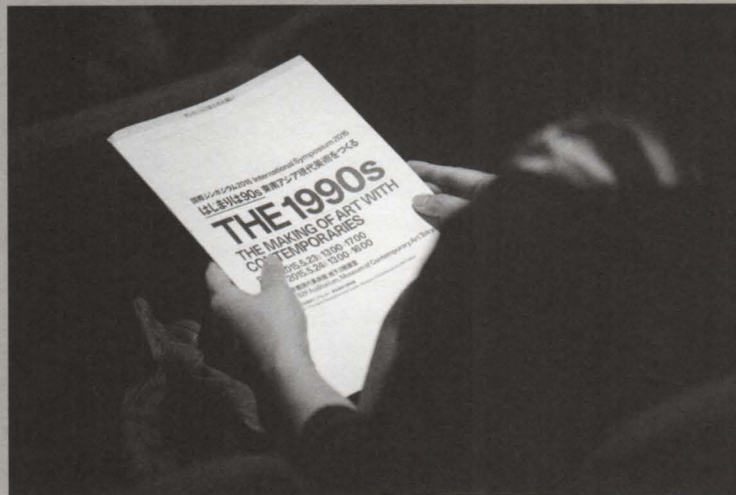
15

Datuin, "Land, Locality and
Communion," p.40.

interacted with artists in less formal, but more spontaneous and intimate terms. In the process, we were able to raise some questions—over bottles of beer and plates of pasta at the Café by the Ruins—which we discussed not in the usual academic manner and for which we had no definitive answers. As we swapped experiences, we realized that such issues were also on the agenda of similar multicultural encounters all over the world. While benefiting from some kind of support from official channels, these encounters were largely built on personal friendships, private funds and networks spawned for instance in such unlikely places as the Café by the Ruins. Many of the productive failures and nuances arising from such set-ups may have fallen between the cracks of neat curatorial pigeonholes and routes of more mainstream events. I therefore end my presentation by reiterating what I wrote so many years ago, when I was pondering over the uncertain fate of the Baguio Arts Festival:

—
In whatever form and scope and in whatever clime and time, exchanges like these should endure because they provide the ground, not only for a lively exchange of ideas, but also pave the way for the integration of the arts into the community's daily life.¹⁵
—

For it is in such multimedia and multicultural encounters that artists and anyone seriously interested in contemporary art can come together to eat and talk, drink, sing and dance while exploring new horizons, uncovering fresh paths, and debating yet-to-be articulated directions.



Homemade Structure and Small and Medium-Sized Speculation

Ade Darmawan

Director, ruangrupa

The mid-1990s, which marked the last years of the Suharto regime, were the years when the anxiety and anger culminated in Indonesia. For many years, “space” had been defined by the State and there was no platform to express critical thought in the public space. There was always fear in the air and lack of imagination. During this era, some strict policies restricted citizens from forming a collective, a group or an organization. Collectivism was a threat to those in power; it was easily framed as a subversive act. Art then played an important role in giving people something to hold on to, providing them with a little hope or an exit from reality using symbolism, metaphor and humor.

In the cultural field, we experienced and witnessed art and cultural infrastructure become part of the corrupt government, providing stereotypical State agenda and propaganda. For the younger generation, several university campuses with long histories of subversive, creative, progressive, and critical thoughts were where they kept their ideas safe and alive. University campuses were where they all met and started. This generation was raised by parents who were born in the Sukarno era and struggled under the Suharto regime, grew up with the 1960s and '70s music, literature and ideology, but were Americanized in the '80s during the golden age of Suharto regime. A series of cultural activism took place then: organizing underground music gigs; publishing underground comics; working on sporadic art exhibitions or projects in any places possible, ranging from the toilet, living room, train station, to the streets. These all happened with the spirit of providing or opening up an alternative system, creating a new space, or taking an oppositional attitude towards the establishment.

By then, an important and urgent need for space, to meet, gather, collaborate, and work on a process or a research-based practice, had emerged. There was the need to see art practice as not merely a production process but also a process for research, collaboration, and even intervention. Only in this way could art reach critical ideas. It was necessary for art to take its social and political relevancy and engagement. There were real necessities that called for experiments to find the best structure or a model, knowing that that's how art could survive in the long run. Thus, in the middle of the insufficient and useless infrastructure, we tried to build, develop and fill in the blanks and gaps, here and there, and do it all. The whole process had an experimental element in it because there were no ideal models to which we could refer; we only knew the existing ones—the government institutions, which we knew were worthless.

The Birth and Growth of the Artists' Initiatives

After the 1998 reformation, along with the propensity to aspire for openness and change, the surge of art spaces and artists' communities became eminent. There were those who celebrated their momentary choice without long-term plans or ideologies, and others who successfully developed art space initiatives with survival strategies. These spaces were seen as the evolution from many art-campus practices that occurred in parallel with the students' movement during Suharto's fall in the late 1990s. They were realistic about their capacity and desires and, although small, became significant by demonstrating their ability to survive with their organizational skills, ideas, and artistic visions. There were several

spaces and collectives that survived because they were specific with their target artistic medium, for example, photography, street art, performance art, new media art, or with their target issues, for example, urban issues and politics. With this strategy, along with their intensity and consistency, the fruits of these initiatives' efforts became more evident in the scene after three years. In the meantime, outside the life and death cycles of art space initiatives in major cities of art, namely, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Bandung, art space initiatives were emerging in smaller towns, with hesitation but with vigor.

The characteristic of the post-1998 generation and also the cultural changes that occurred in the post-1998 period in speculating the future can be seen in the strategies of art spaces and collectives. One of the characteristics is the development of art space initiatives that focuses on a particular medium or an approach, while at the same time keeping themselves very open in their approach and consciously engaging and working in cross-disciplinary areas. There was a progress in how art practices were perceived and addressed after 1998, and these practices expanded and extended to involve other disciplines as tools for observation. They involved many actors from diverse disciplines as artistic collaborator. Doing away with the need for an art education background also made future developments in the arts more attractive.

Where we (*ruangrupa*) and most of the space and initiatives started was a space that we could afford and a place that is very intimate and mundane: a house. We immediately had ideas to convert the house into a place of mishmash that oscillates between private/public spaces, the introvert/the extrovert, as well as a living/presentation spaces. We turned the living room into a gallery and workshop space, the bedrooms into studio, offices, library, archive room, and storage, and the bathroom became a working space.

In the last fifteen years, apart from the struggles of the artists' initiatives in the major art cities (Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta) to sustain themselves, several artists' initiatives have developed in other cities, such as Malang, Surabaya, Semarang, Padang, Makassar, Cirebon and Jatiwangi. Hence, the map of the art scene has been slowly changing. Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta have the tradition of developing art with their strong local art schools. But the new development in other area proves that artists' initiatives can grow anywhere as long as they are relevant and suitable to the local context. Many of these artists' initiatives also started from a house; it is affordable, intimate and serves the spirit of collectivity and communality.

In 1988, ten years before 1998, Cemeti Art House was founded in Yogyakarta, starting from a rented house that functioned as a contemporary art gallery. Rented houses then became the choice for artists' initiatives that developed in the post-1998 period, who were seeking a space to begin their projects. These rented houses were located in residential areas, and were affordable and accessible, enabling the artists to sustain themselves under better financial conditions. Using a house provided pragmatic solutions to the artists.

We may suppose that these artists' initiatives represented a certain social class, because the use of rented houses implied that the artists managing the space belonged to the same class with similar financial standing as their neighbors. But the house would be changed or subverted or super-reused to become a headquarter, studio and meeting place, to conduct collective projects such as exhibitions, workshops, discussions, film screenings and events of music and many other forms. It would provide the artists to get involved with the idea of living together with the ordinary citizens.

Social Acceptance of Artists' Activities and Establishment of an Alternative System

The condition in which the artists' initiatives based themselves among the citizens, naturally made the artists to be conscious of the local values in executing their projects. The artists thus could take the same position as the citizens and become part of the society. The

involvement of the local people, whether indirectly or not, became a strategy for and a part of their artistic negotiations. Moreover, the citizens' involvement, whether intentionally or not, influenced the artists to become more open to the possibilities of artistic explorations. Hence, they combined various mundane social activities with their projects: neighborhood events on Independence Day; workshops for local youth and children; and outdoor film screenings at the square. Art projects became a social activity.

Such practices and events have enabled art to naturally find its position among the people. This "living together" position has offered an example of an ideal relationship between an art organization and the society: art exists within the society and becomes part of it. It is a strategy that is also developed based on intimacy and fondness. By overcoming the obstacles in their own ways, the artists' initiatives continue to actualize their creative work.

The surge in public awareness among the artists' initiatives can be seen in the various kinds of collaborations demonstrated through art interventions in the public and commercial spaces, such as malls, town squares and other urban spaces. By participating in the process of claiming the space, fighting for it, and attracting the public the way corporate products do, the art intervention has expanded its space and ideas, while offering different experiences to a broader public.

Such public awareness can also be seen in the activities that function as daily social events. Therefore, a broader access has been made available to the public with various back-grounds and networks. The activities have been designed to meld into the public's daily lives so as to provide them with a free opportunity to interact and participate. At the same time, these practices also widen the artistic experiences, redefine ideas and memory of the public and rediscover and recreate new spaces of expression and reflection.

This development has also raised the consciousness of the importance of art practices that convey critical ideas, social discourses and artistic principles, combined with organizational work, local and international networking, public involvement and financial management.

Another outcome is the networking among organizations, individuals and communities. These networks are very advantageous as a medium of information exchange and especially sharing artistic strategies. The activities show the formation of consistently productive and dynamic units in their local sites that are interlinked to each other, becoming a constellation of networks.

The combination of the artistic and social practices as described above, gives way to a more specific and organic method, since it can openly adjust to the various contextual needs. Imaginative and speculative artistic approaches can exert a great influence on the event formats, not only in terms of their program design, but also in terms of the whole strategy to produce outputs, communicate their activities, and deliver the contents so that they reach the public for the idea to be absorbed. With these functions, an event can become a particular form of expression, just like an art work: an "event" becomes an "art piece"; an "event" can be seen as a "happening." Some elements of the artistic event can also become an open interface for any kind of intervention and unpredictable moments that allow encounters with many aspects of the society which leads to organic and flexible discoveries that in the end can be appreciated by the public. These communal activities then become a way or a strategy to enter the area of public ideas and to intervene with the corporate and State-endorsed structures that have shaped the consumer culture in the society.

Such creative and art-based activities have further evolved as social practices. They are different from art exhibitions that have the tendency to be centralized; they are media for developing interdisciplinary works and professions; they combine art with activism, management and networking abilities; and they develop capabilities to get support, analyze circumstances, and utilize local support. In other words, they are one of the driving forces

that produce images, ideas, discourses and values.

The initial intention to claim the space has also evolved and become a strategy to claim the public. The social interactions that happen at the “events” have made art practices more attractive and familiar to the public. In general, these art practices have become a facilitator for the public to gain experience and redefine their meaning on their own, in their own private spaces.

Other negotiations that can and have occurred are defined by the level of public openness in the practices demonstrated by these organizations. Some organizations, with a strong bargaining power, have been able to inject their ideas and projects into spaces that were previously almost impossible to enter, such as private or government-owned properties and art institutions. These practices have grown and functioned as a receptacle that can continuously maintain ideas, passions, joy, imaginations, dreams, and, of course, friendship.

With the ability to read, map, and negotiate the realities in the public, we have been able to create a space that continues to seek our relevance through reviewing the needs and positions within the social context, while simultaneously expanding our spatial awareness. These contemporary initiatives, which combine both individual/collective artistic productions with the public-oriented programs, are executed with long-term vision under a specific management strategy. Thus, they project a vision that takes the artists’ initiatives/collectives as small and medium-sized enterprises/institutions. In a similar context to the other examples in other countries in the Asian region, such initiatives offer an alternative proposal to the ideas provided by the more traditional or conventional art institutions.

Some part of the texts is taken from “The Personal and The Social Aspects of Artists’ Initiatives in Indonesia,” written for the catalogue of the “3rd Manifesto – Order and Conflict” exhibition (co-curated by Rizki A Zaelani, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 2012).

Discussion | Session 1

Moderator
Kamiya Yukie

Starting out in the 1990s:
The Problems and Potential in the Arts

Kamiya Yukie

Thank you all very much for the great presentations. For session one, we had three speakers from Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia who have all played key roles in the art scenes of the 1990s until now and who have also witnessed the many transformations in the art scenes. What I find interesting is that we were able to see instances or case studies of information sharing, problem solving, and challenging existing notions across many regions discussed in the presentations. I would like to dig a little deeper in these sorts of movements, but before then, I would also like to point out that this was made possible by artists and curators who traveled and were educated abroad during the '90s. Some of you, too, studied outside your homelands and, maybe, upon your return, you were able to have more objective perspectives on what was exactly happening in your home countries and what was needed. You could see both the problems and the potential of existing systems of art. For instance, I doubt anyone in Japan would have been able to even imagine that residential houses or abandoned spaces could become spaces for art. But your individual activities and research have really made a great impact on the art scene and challenged the conventional system. Could you talk a little bit about the situations of when you started your spaces in the '90s? What did you have in your minds and what did you think you could do through artistic practices?

Ade, could you spearhead the discussion for us?

Ade Darmawan

Sure. It was a discussion about literally needing a space to meet and gather, and also to figure out how artists could be

different from the conventional notions of "artists," and how they can be rooted in the society, et cetera. I think it actually started, as I mentioned earlier, when I was in art school; so even before I went to Amsterdam, to the Rijksakademie. So the seeds were already planted. But it was when I went to the Netherlands, of course, that the distance enabled me to see things more clearly; it was sometimes even more inspiring. So there were waves of emails and discussions that were exchanged when I was in Amsterdam with five or six other members in Jakarta, and additional one or two in Yogyakarta, too. The problem is that my email was still using hotmail then, and I've forgotten my passwords to recover the emails. They're somewhere.

Kamiya Yukie

I see.

Ade Darmawan

There were heavy discussions going on at that time. In 1998, I was in Amsterdam, not in Jakarta. So, while my friends were going to the parliament building—as you saw in my presentation—I was doing my part in Amsterdam, doing demonstrations which was actually very, very light. To be honest, it was more like an exhibition opening rather than a demonstration. [laughter] But I did a lot of networking with activists in Amsterdam. I think being a student, an artist, and also an activist can easily occur in Indonesia. In short, the seeds were already planted, but when you go outside your home to a foreign country, you see the seeds grow. I think that in itself was very inspirational, and I tried achieving something from that very moment.

Kamiya Yukie

You are talking about 1998, the year the student movement occurred and the Suharto's regime ended. You did not join this

movement in Indonesia, did you? You were in Amsterdam?

—
[Ade Darmawan](#)

Yes. So it was a very emotional moment as well. I did demonstrations with many activists in Amsterdam, who could not go back to Indonesia at that time. Now they can; but back then, they couldn't because they would be captured for sure under the police surveillance. So, we organized our own demonstrations in Amsterdam. It was the first time, I think, that such a demonstration happened in Amsterdam, too. It was a very emotional experience. Why? Because during all of this, we saw our friends get shot in Jakarta.



[Ade Darmawan](#)

—
[Kamiya Yukie](#)

How about you, Gridthiya? You came back to Thailand in the early 1990s and started Project 304. What kind of urgency did you feel that made you begin the project?

—
[Gridthiya Gaweeewong](#)

There were three main reasons that I found urgency in the Thai art scene. The first is that Thai's society was mono-cultural and everything was monopolized by the State. The second is in that mainstream culture, we only had Hollywood movies and mainstream music. The third is that the visual arts were monopolized by a single school, the Silpakorn University. I felt suffocated by all of this, and personally felt that I cannot live in this kind of society. I needed an alternative; I needed something different. I remember how when I came back from the United States, I was sitting with Apichatpong Weerasethakul and we were looking at each other thinking, "We *have* to do something."

Project 304 is actually the outcome of my thesis from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I studied the possibilities of creating an alternative space in Thailand where there

are no infrastructures or support. I was looking at alternative spaces in the United States during the 1960s and '70s, I must admit that the PS1 in New York, found by Alana Heiss, was one of my inspirations. So we were trying to start with that kind of space for artists, who worked on things which that were different from the mainstream. I'd seen artists who were working with experimental, conceptual work, such as the late Montien Boonma and younger generations like Apichatpong, but they didn't have a place to show their works. So, as I spoke in my presentation, we existed as an alternative to nothing, because of the lack of the infrastructure, such as museums and funding from the government. We had no supporting institutions. If there were any, they supported and promoted only traditional art. I have to admit, unlike such institutions, I didn't really think about the audience then. When I created Project 304, the priority for me was to serve the artists in the community. I just wanted to create a platform for artists of my generation where they can express their ideas. So it was more of a laboratory. That's why, when I joined the Jim Thompson Art Center, it was the first time that I came to value the significance of the public, because that was what was required from working in an institution. A small institution like Project 304 is niche, and I don't think that the kind of art that we showed there were for everyone. And that sometimes made us question ourselves. We would think, "Why are we doing this?" I remember sitting with my friend, Michael Shaowanasai, looking at each other and asking ourselves, "Why are we doing this?" We just wanted to help our friends to show his or her artworks, but no one came to see them. Back in 1996, there was no email or Facebook to promote or spread the word; it was such a dramatic experience then. Nevertheless, I am happy that I did that. Otherwise, we wouldn't have had people like Apichatpong who won the Palme d'Or in the



[Gridthiya Gaweeewong](#)

2010 Cannes Film Festival. There aren't many "unique" artists with whom I work with now. So that is the sense of urgency that I felt: I *had* to, otherwise, I couldn't live with myself under the conditions I was in.

[Kamiya Yukie](#)

Yes, I can see that both of you interestingly had the same idea of opening a space as an artistic platform out of necessity. And what is interesting is that you started the space by having dialogues among your friends and peer artists who worked very closely with their communities on socio-political issues. I found a similarity in Flaudette May's presentation, too, which outlined the situation outside of the metropolitan area in the Philippines, where people started to gather and make a platform for the arts. So, May, could you also share with us your thoughts on how practices were not merely for cultural and artistic purposes, but also were closely related to their socio-political contexts and their necessities as such?

[Flaudette May Datuin](#)

The Visayas or Bacolod where the Black Artists in Asia were located is one of the most depressed regions in the Philippines. It had a thriving sugar industry but it fell during the 1980s and the '90s. So we see a level of poverty there that we cannot even start to imagine. Nuneucio Alvarado and Norberto Roldan belonged to different socio-economic strata. They were not as poor as those in the communities who were less better off, but they were generally living in similar conditions. So, the necessity for connecting with a community was done by default. There was an urgent socio-economic condition in which these artists came together, not only to expose what was going on, but also to employ or mobilize art for transformation, regardless of how limited the effects could be.

I grew up in Baguio in the late 1980s. If

you see the place now, it's an entirely different Baguio altogether. The environment is deteriorating because one of the biggest malls called SM (for "Super Mall") has cut down a lot of trees. Water also has become a problem. One of the most memorable things that Café by the Ruins and the Baguio Arts Festival did in the 1990s was to establish a soup kitchen. We had a very large earthquake in 1992 and so the artists came out of their studios and helped out in the soup kitchen. You could see gradual changes among the participants and organizers from events like these; artists became relief workers, et cetera. I think this has been duplicated in Mindanao already and in other places in Luzon, which deserves further study.

VIVA EXCON has a very, very long life and we are puzzled over this. Maybe it has to do with the geography because each island is just thirty minutes away by SuperCat, or maybe the Visayas artists are just simply really good organizers.

But those are the socio-economic conditions. So, as I said, the artists inevitably got involved, whether they liked it or not. They *live* it and *have* to be researchers [at the same time]. Art has become the methodology for them.

[Kamiya Yukie](#)

I agree. The case in Baguio reminds me of the Belgium-born, Mexico-based artist, Francis Alÿs. After the earthquake in Mexico in 1985, Alÿs relocated from Europe to Mexico. Alÿs said—and I'm paraphrasing—when existing systems collapse, there is room for artists to get involved, intervene with the city, and create new systems. So, art, being an innately creative energy, can trigger a new infrastructure to surface in an environment where, as you all say, there is *no* infrastructure. Artistic imagination can become or instigate a new infrastructure whereby new forms or practices can be made. Although the three of you all presented different cases, you all share similar



[Kamiya Yukie](#)



[Flaudette May Datuin](#)

situations and conditions: creating something, “an alternative,” where there is no infrastructure. I think people like yourselves embraced your opportunities to explore this new kind of possibility.

Another keyword here is “sustainability.” Within this new infrastructure, sustainability is one of the issues that is very relevant and unavoidable. In addition to that, maybe “temporal”—as opposed to sustainable—is also an important nature of these spaces because they allow for more freedom to challenge and create something that does not yet exist. How do you think “alternative” spaces can sustain themselves within the new infrastructure?

Sustainability of the Art Alternatives:
An Alternative to “What”

—
Flaudette May Datuin

Yes, the “alternative” is bandied about, but in the Philippines it is not as clear-cut. For instance, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) was established by Imelda Marcos, but it also became the site for rebellion against traditional art and the avant-garde. That is where Roberto Chabet started; he became mainstream, but then, developed the modernist aesthetics and went into conceptual art, and so on. The Baguio Arts Festival (BAF), Baguio Arts Guild (BAG), and the Black Artists in Asia (BAA) are “off-track”—they’re not in Manila—but most of their artists are very mainstream. That is why they have private funding. It’s quasi-everything. So, it is hard to definitively say that they are “alternative.”

There is just one basic thing that we lack: funding. But despite that, we produce knowledge with the help of The National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), the one that brought us to the Venice Biennale. So, with such a complexity, it is so difficult to name the “alternative”; an alternative to *what*? So, what is the urgent thing that we can do, as

educators, researchers, and theorists? Maybe we can, or need to, establish a genealogy of the alternatives first.

Again, let me introduce another example. The Philippine Art Gallery (PAG) was established by a woman named Lyd Arguilla, and it was through this gallery that modernism became established in the Philippines. The Manila artists are enjoying the boom in art with auctions, et cetera, in the system and mechanism which have become irrational in terms of how works of a very small number of artists are becoming unbelievably expensive, while a large number of artists are hardly able to sell or sustain themselves through their art. The market has become fickle and skewed.

However, in the provinces there remain “cultural workers” who do have other markets, that are just not as large-scale as in Manila. Nevertheless, some of them come to Manila to sell their works. So, within this shuttling back-and-forth, where are they now? Maybe the question to ask is, “Alternative to *what*?”

—
Kamiya Yukie

I see, that is true.

—
Gridthiya Gaweewong

I would like to share my case in Bangkok. I think that there is no alternative anymore, because, like you say, May, alternative has become a mainstream. That’s why Project 304 became defunct; I was afraid that it’ll become an “institution.” I have shifted my work to another area since. But the question is, “alternative to what?” as May said. For us, before the 1970s, ‘80s, and the ‘90s, it was an alternative to the “lack,” the non-existent, or the absence of infrastructures. It was an alternative to the mainstream in the arts, academia, and also the market. Now, most of the people with whom I have worked have become pretty well-known, and they travel around the world.

The younger generation is different. The

way they create art spaces is not based on the same ideas as ours because they know that we were too idealistic in the '90s. We didn't really care about funding even though we needed it. We may not have worked hard enough to really get ourselves going. Even though we wanted to create a platform for artists, we were not really good at marketing, fundraising, or PR. So one of the reasons we had to close was that we couldn't get enough financial support. Also, we didn't have a sound government-level infrastructure like the Philippines in the '60s; we didn't have somebody like Imelda Marcos to build something like CCP. The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) was only built in 2005 and it took ten years to realize it. We had been in constant fight with the government because they would not understand why our city needs a museum. It was the first time that the artists fought for a space.

But now that we have the BACC and the Ministry of Culture, there is no "alternative." Everyone, at some point in their careers, now receives grants from them and works for them, so to speak. Ade, you are also one of them now; you've become like a mafia in Indonesia. [laughter] I try not to be a mafia in the Thai art world. That's why I've tried to constantly remain on the edge, to be in the margin, to not be consumed by the mainstream, and to work independently, which, I admit, is very difficult. It's very difficult to continue to be in that position.

Kamiya Yukie

Can we hear from you then, Ade?

Ade Darmawan

I think there are two things: first of all, I think we sometimes use the term "alternative" too carelessly. There is, of course, the Western notion about being an alternative to the traditional system of museums and academies. Maybe, for some in the region, yes, this

may apply. But in Indonesia, for example, we don't have that. That is why I preferred to use the word "oppositional" in my paper, because we have actually been an opposition to something, working *against* something. In the first draft we wrote about ruangrupa—how it should be run, the principles, et cetera—I remember how in article 2.1., we discussed the market at the time (in early 2000) and how it had slowed down the progressiveness and criticality of the works. That's why we came up with research-based projects. Second of all, we have always thought that the infrastructure provided by the State were too formal, slow, and irrelevant. So, we felt we should oppose to that. At the same time, just as Gridthiya said, there was a lack. There were many spaces that we thought should be there for young artists to pursue their artistic experimentations, research, and projects. But the infrastructure, at the time, was not there to support that. And so, we thought that we should continue to act as an opposition.

But when comparing the current market and the State infrastructure to those when we started back in the early to late 1990s, the market in Indonesia has become even stronger. [laughter] So, it is interesting to see how that actually becomes a strong reason for us to think that we should exist, although, it is not direct cause for us to exist. I think creating our own scenes, our own fields of practice, or slowly building our network, is actually far more interesting.

Let me respond to your remarks about "sustainability." I think sustainability has become the buzz word; everybody is talking about sustaining themselves. But we need to think *why* we need to sustain ourselves. Maybe that is also one question we should ask ourselves. Are we going to work like other institutions or corporate bodies where "sustainability" is one of the key to success? In terms of ideas or strategies, the artist

initiatives or collectives that I've been looking after for some time, probably *will* survive because they are in need, relevant, and, finally, slowly but surely accumulating social capital. For example, if you go to the Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) or Histeria in Semarang, you can experience how it [art] is literally connected to the public. They make true and sincere gestures which cause a real impact on the public—something a politician can only dream about. That's why initiatives like them have been able to really change the power structures in certain local contexts. It really is interesting to see how something like what they do can be strategized, adapted and expanded into the future.

—
Gridthiya Gawweewong

I think one of the reasons that the alternative spaces in Bangkok failed was that their life-spans were very short. For example, Project 304 and About Café only lasted for about six or seven years. I also realized that we were not involved enough with the communities; communities not only in the sense of art communities, but the public. This was one of our weaknesses. Another weakness was, as I already mentioned, funding. We weren't able to secure substantial or continued support of both private and public funding. Those, I would say, are the two main weaknesses.

I want to say, however, that what I thought is very important for institutions, regardless of them being the mainstream or alternative, is the idea of building up social capital for the public. This is very important for a lot of us and especially for the alternative spaces. Many of us [in the alternative spaces] haven't been able to really concern ourselves with this, but I think museums, both private and public, municipal museums, in particular, place social capital as one of their priorities. They have to build up their social capitals to educate people and really get them involved.

We were not able to engage with enough people; we didn't make ourselves relevant. I think that's why we couldn't sustain ourselves.

—
Kamiya Yukie

I understand. We often use the term, "alternative" out of convenience and practicality, as a notion of another, or an opposite to institutions, or something merely different from the existing institutional conventions. But as you all say, "what exactly *is* an alternative?" It really is what you've all been doing: filling the gaps, addressing urgent issues in societies and local communities, figuring out what the socio-political needs are in a community, et cetera. Tackling those issues has become in itself the so-called "alternative," changing the system and transforming the very notion of artistic idea and activity.

In a sense, you could say the same thing about "sustainability." What does it mean to be sustainable? The kind of flexibility and imagination you have maintained, finding the most urgent necessity and changing your activity accordingly, has really activated the local communities. The fact that your spirit has continued until now means that your spirit has lasted throughout the decades.

From your presentations, I could also pick up, not only connotations of intra-Asian activities, but also global ones, stemming from questions addressing how one can relate to the local activities within the global contexts and networks. This question, I think, could be really quite influential to the following generations, as well as to the other regions. So, I am very impressed and inspired by how all of you have been engaged in and have pursued your own respective fields.

The discussion may very well continue into the later sessions, but for now, I think we should close the first session. Thank you.

THE 1990s
The Making of Art with
Contemporaries

Day 1

Session 2

Artists' and Curators' Views: Foreign and Domestic Representations of "Asia"

The rise in Asian-art-related exhibitions and biennales/triennales—an outcome of the pervading trends in multiculturalism and subsequent postcolonialism—gradually spurred the rise of the “curator” in the Western sense. Extending their professional arena to the West, these so-called mediators of culture played key roles in the dissemination of the Asian arts. Exhibition such as “Traditions/Tensions” (1996) and “Cities on the Move” (1997–2000) are two that are notable.

In this session, artists and curators who have traveled abroad to pursue their careers and who have been involved in Asian exhibitions held outside of Asia were brought together to discuss the overlaps and differences in the representation(s) of “Asia” from both local and global perspectives.

True Journey is Return

Dinh Q. Lê

Artist

My first return after living in the United States for fifteen years was in 1994. With a US government grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to research on Vietnam War photography by Vietnamese photojournalist from the communist side.

With the recently collapsed Soviet Union, Vietnam was forced to open its doors to the world and liberalize its economy in the early 1990s after closing its doors for almost twenty years. With a communist government and a struggling economy under the US economic embargo, Vietnam was struggling.

Black out was a regular event. Internet was forbidden. The Internet became legal only in 1996 but it was impossibly slow. All foreign newspapers and books had to go through the censor before they were allowed to enter the country. Vietnamese national has to apply for an exit visa in order to travel abroad. Vietnam was completely cut off from the outside world.

In the visual arts, the government ran organizations like the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association and the Ho Chi Minh City Photography Association where memberships are only by invitation. Membership is very much sought after by artists because the associations control the exhibition scene. They control who gets to exhibit and who gets to participate in exhibitions outside of Vietnam. The Fine Art Association usually favors artists that are communist party members. New forms such as video, installation, performance are not accepted as art forms by the associations.

In Hanoi, under the guidance of visiting German artist Veronika Radulovic and funding from many embassies in Hanoi, a group of young artists from Hanoi began to explore installation, performance, even painting, in underground space Nhà Sàn and NGO spaces like Alliance Française.

Ho Chi Minh City is another story. The city was under greater control by the communist government because Ho Chi Minh City was on the wrong side of the Vietnam War. With no funding for the arts, there were virtually no art activities outside of the government-run Fine Art Association.

My research on Vietnam War photography on this first trip was a total failure because the Vietnamese photojournalists saw me as a traitor who had left the country. They were not co-operative because they could not trust me. They feared that I might misuse their images.

But for me it was a very important trip. In Saigon, I felt at home for the first time in a long time and the issues I was interested in were there. So for the next three years, I would split my time between Vietnam and Los Angeles. I had finally moved back and started living in Ho Chi Minh City full time by 1997.

By 2000, I was living and working in Vietnam and showing regularly in the United States and sometimes in Europe. But none of the Asia-based curators contacted my

representative galleries in New York City and Los Angeles or try to contact me to meet or show my work in Asia.

They simply didn't find my work interesting. At the time there were also not much funding for Asia-based curators to travel in the region to do research, or funding for cultural exchange in the region. Maybe because of this, they were not aware of my work. At the time, the criteria to be considered as an "Asian Artist" were also different. One of the criteria was you had to live in the region to be considered as an "Asian Artist." A lot of Asia-based curators thought I was living in the United States.

From my first visit in 1994 to living in Saigon full time in 1997 to the year 2000, I was not invited to participate in any exhibition in Asia.

In 2001, the curator Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand saw an exhibition of mine in Los Angeles and was told that I live in Ho Chi Minh City. He invited me to participate in a group show "Floating Chimeras" that he curated in Stockholm, Sweden. This exhibition was the first time that I worked with an Asia-based curator.

Then in 2002, curator and theater director Ong Keng Sen invited me to participate in his workshop "Window to Asia" in Hanoi, which lead the artist / curator Tran Luong to invite me to participate in a group show "Red Yellow Green" in Hanoi at the Goethe-Institut. Not much followed even after I was invited by curator Francesco Bonami, who saw my work at the Chicago Art Fair, to participate in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Because of the Venice Biennale, I was invited to show in many places in the United States and Europe but in Asia it very much remains silence.

In 2005, I helped organize an international exhibition in Ho Chi Minh City called "Saigon Open City" with curator Gridthiya Gaweewong and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. Unfortunately, the exhibition never took place because of censorship by the Vietnamese government. Out of this experience, I co-founded Vietnam Foundation for the Arts (VNFA) with Los Angeles gallerists Shoshana and Wayne Blank of Shoshana Wayne Gallery to promote more art exchanges between Vietnam and the rest of the world. In 2007, with funding from VNFA, myself and three artist friends (Ha Thuc Phu-Nam, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Tiffany Chung) opened Sàn Art, a not-for-profit contemporary art gallery in Ho Chi Minh City.

Through all these activities in Saigon, showing that I was living in Asia and committed to the community in Vietnam, I was finally viewed by the curators in the region as a "Vietnamese" artist. But by this time, the art world was also changing rapidly. More and more curators started to travel in Asia, Southeast Asia in particular. The makeup of artist in the region also were changing. Many are now coming back from Europe or the United States after being educated there. Many artists in the region also split their time in Asia and Europe or the United States. Some even live full time in Europe or the United States now. The old criteria like residency to determine what makes an "Asian" artist are no longer applicable. Today, the term "Asian artist" is applicable to anyone artist who is of Asian descendant.

My journey home to Vietnam has been a long and interesting journey. These days, I work often with curators based in Asia and elsewhere. This year, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo will host a survey of my works over the last twenty-five years. "Memory for Tomorrow" exhibition is my first solo museum exhibition in Asia.* The journey home feels complete. I look forward to the next journey.

The title of this talk "True Journey is Return" is borrowed from Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (first published in 1974 by Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.)

* Editorial Note:

"Dinh Q. Lê: Memory for Tomorrow," Mori Art Museum, July 25–October 12, 2015, Tokyo

The Scale Question in Contemporary Asian Art

Joan Kee

Associate Professor, Department of the History of Art,
University of Michigan

Although we tend to think about histories of art in terms of periods, chronologies, events, and moments, it is "scale" that perhaps best encapsulates the concerns of art produced in the 1990s. More than a synonym for size or volume, scale refers to the ways through which we conceive the world. Consider, for example, how what was previously known as "international" was increasingly rebranded or reframed as "global." In the 1980s, the international often figured as a collection of nations stitched together with the seams always showing; in the '90s, that collection slowly gave way to a contiguous panorama that was not so much large or overwhelming than it was seamless. Take, for instance, the number of exhibitions revolving around the dissolution of borders: "beyond borders," "boundary rider," and "hybridity."⁰¹ Even more telling was how spatial generalizations reached an all-time high by the mid-1990s as indicated by the all-too-frequent use of dualisms like "West against the Rest" or "center-versus-periphery."

The matter, or rather, problem of scale was vividly apparent in the rise of contemporary Asian art. By "contemporary Asian art," I do not mean contemporary art made in Asia or by artists of Asian national and ethnic origin. Such art has been shown in numerous exhibitions well before the 1990s.⁰² Instead, I am referring to a particular set of discourses circulated and made available to multiple audiences through various institutions, publications, and, most importantly, exhibitions.⁰³ Among the most significant were discussions generated by the group exhibitions "Cities on the Move: Urban Chaos and Global Change, East Asian Art, Architecture and Film Now," which took place in seven venues across Europe, North America, and Asia from 1997 to 2000, and "Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions," a show of twenty-seven artists held in 1996 in New York. Both stressed the degree to which contemporary Asian art actually took root as a sustained field of inquiry in Western Europe and the United States during the mid-to-late 1990s. Although significantly different in conception and presentation, both shows were indebted to larger streams of identification present in the European and US art worlds, namely, the institutional acknowledgement of non-Western art in Europe and the debates over the idea of multiculturalism in the North American art world.

Journeys to the West: "Cities on the Move" and "Traditions/Tensions"

Co-organized by Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru, then among the critical mass of Chinese expatriates based in Paris, "Cities on the Move" was another instance of the kind of recognition paid to modern Asian art by European institutions during the mid-1980s. Cases in point include "Japon des Avant Gardes 1910–1970" (1986–1987) at the Centre Pompidou and "Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan, 1945–1965" (1985) at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford. Sustaining such recognition were initiatives like the journal *Third Text*, founded in 1987 by the Pakistani-British artist and critic Rasheed Araeen, and the Institute of International Visual Artists (Iniva), created and funded by the British government as part of a kind of "New Internationalism" arising in the context of state-mandated multiculturalism.

Featuring artists from India, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, "Traditions/Tensions" was curated by the Thai curator and critic Apinan Poshyananda. Its

01

"Beyond the Borders" was the title of the first Gwangju Biennale in 1995; "Boundary Rider" that of the ninth Biennale of Sydney in 1992. Discussed by theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, and Stuart Hall, "hybridity" became an immensely popular term in critical and curatorial discussion even to the point of becoming a cliché by the end of the decade. On the overuse of hybridity in the context of contemporary art in Hong Kong, see Joan Kee, "Art, Hong Kong, and Hybridity: A Task of Reconsideration," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2, no. 2, June 2003, pp.90-98.

02

Examples include the first Biennale of Sydney in 1973 and the Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh in 1981. I thank Alison Carroll for reminding me of these important events.

03

As a case in point, in Korea, the idea of "contemporary art" or "contemporary Korean art" has long been used (the former since the 1920s; the latter from the mid-1950s, just after the Korean War) but only from the 1990s did the idea of a "contemporary Asian art" gain any currency in popular or academic discussion. Japan is the exception; "gendai ajia bijutsu" has been in use since at least the late 1960s. See Hariu Ichirō, "Ajiateki seikaku wa kureruka umareruka? (Can an Asian sensibility arise?)," *Asahi Journal*, August 18, 1968, p. 47.

curation-by-nation approach belongs to a genealogy that includes the long, if inconsistent string of attempts to recognize a distinct contemporary Asian art field within Asia. Not only did Poshyananda's model echo how Asian artists were directly supported by US institutions and individuals eager to secure East and Southeast Asia from Communist encroachment, it also recalled events like the Saigon International Festival, whose first and only edition took place in 1962, just before the Vietnam War escalated with increased involvement of the US military.⁹⁴ Patterned after "the examples of Venice, São Paulo, and Paris," twenty-one countries were invited to send artists to participate in what was basically a communion of anti-Communist countries "friendly" to the Vietnamese government then under duress from insurgent Communist forces.⁹⁵ The counterpart to this mode of international exchange was one that revolved around Socialist Realism, the embrace of which in China, North Vietnam, and North Korea amounted to a de facto pledge of allegiance to a unified Communist visual imaginary.

"Third World" Internationalism and the Asian Postwar Era

The deliberate omission of artists from China and Japan read as a tactical move, one perhaps intended to help balance a field of Asian art history which in North America was then dominated by studies of Chinese and Japanese art. In this way, "Traditions/Tensions" might be regarded as a distant cousin to what might be called the rise of a "Third World" internationalism as exemplified by the Bandung Conference of 1955 or by the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in a Soviet-wary Belgrade in 1961. For many artists living and working outside the United States, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, or areas controlled by the latter such internationalism helped provide a means of thinking differently about the postwar era.⁹⁶

Perhaps the most ambitious manifestation of Third World internationalism vis-à-vis the visual arts was the Triennale-India. Established in 1968 and organized by the state-run national academy of art, the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi, the Triennale was intended to address the situation in which "many Asian, African, and socialist countries have not been able to establish a platform where the desired images of the oldest and youngest continents (youngest in the sense of secular achievement in the arts) may be seen together with the achievement of the dynamic West."⁹⁷ Certainly it was the only major international arts event of the 1960s and '70s to include works from the so-called First, Second, and Third Worlds as well as those dubbed "traditional" and therefore excluded from mainstream narratives of modernism. Only the second Havana Biennial (1986) would actively feature works from Communist and supposed Third World countries, with the third edition moved towards what art historian Rachel Weiss described as a "post-realist, post-nativist, transnational solidarity."⁹⁸

Against a socio-political context deeply inflected by Cold War politics, the Triennale-India managed to preserve a measure of political neutrality that enabled a level of inclusiveness unmatched by any other visual arts event of that time. Yet it attracted substantial criticism for its endorsement of what critic Geeta Kapur described as the "cult of internationalism."⁹⁹ What I think Kapur meant was not only that the Triennale *repeated* the logic of the exhibitions it hoped to challenge, but that it did *nothing* to create a new community of viewers and makers to which prior models of exhibition-making would no longer be relevant. Her admonition was taken up decades later by Singaporean critic C. J. Wan-ling Wee who traced the Fukuoka Art Museum's attempts to promote a discrete body of contemporary Asian art through its series of "Asian Art Exhibitions" to Japanese imperial ambitions. He claimed that the resurrection of Okakura Tenshin's famous declaration, "Asia is one" in 1903, at the first "Asian Art Exhibition" in 1979 was nothing short of a decided "inability to transcend or obviate the older moment of the modern."¹⁰⁰

In an important 1994 article on the growing phenomenon of exhibitions on contemporary Asian art, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum curator Kuroda Raiji fretted over the "serious

04

In 1962, the US drastically increased military assistance to the South Vietnamese government in its attempts to quell the rapid expansion of the Viet Cong. Boitran Huynh Beattie has suggested, however, that US influence had far less of an impact on visual art in South Vietnam in the 1960s than it did on other forms of cultural production. "Modernity versus Ideology," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 87, 98.

05

"First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon," *Catalogue of the First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon*, exh. cat. (Saigon: Tao-Dàn Garden, 1962), p. 20.

06

An important recent attempt to historicize this alternative view of postwar art was "Postwar—Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965," a conference taking place at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in May 2014. <http://www.hausderkunst.de/en/learn/symposium/2014/postwar-art-between-the-pacific-and-the-atlantic-1945-1965/> (Accessed June 30, 2015)

07

Mulk Raj Anand, "Chairman's Welcome Address," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 36 (September 1990), p. 12.

08

Rachel Weiss, "A Certain Place and a Certain Time: The Third Bienal de La Habana and the Origins of the Global Exhibition," *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989* (London: Afterall Books, 2011), p. 69.

09

Geeta Kapur, quoted in *Link* (February 7, 1971), p. 38.

10

C. J. Wan-ling Wee, "We Asians? Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, and East Asia," *boundary 2*, Spring 2010, 37 (1), 2010, p. 115.

11

Kuroda Rajji, "Practice of Exhibitions in Global Society by Asians, for Asians and Some Associated Problems," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), p.144.

12

Julie Ewington, "A Moment in a Journey: The First Queensland Art Gallery Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art," *Art and Asia Pacific* 1, No. 2, April 1994, p.12.

13

The "Asian Art Shows" first held at the Fukuoka Art Museum later gave way to the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale held at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, an institution planned in 1992 by Fukuoka City and completed in 1999 in time for the first Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, also the 5th Asian Art Show.

http://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/eng/about/abt_history.html# (Accessed July 4, 2015)

14

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Mega-Exhibitions, New Publics, and Asian Art Biennials," *Art in the Asia-Pacific: Intimate Publics*, ed. Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King, and Mami Kataoka (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p.30.

15

Francesca dal Lago, "Cities on the Move," *ArtAsiaPacific* 20, 1998, pp.36-38.

16

According to the Hayward Gallery archives, Hou and Obrist contemplated expanding the show to cover India.

17

Other proposed venues included the San Francisco Art Institute, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, and an unnamed venue in Tokyo.

18

Yung Ho Chang, "Cities on the Move: A Dialogue," roundtable discussion with Hou Hanru, Shigeru Ban, Yung Ho Chang, Judy Freya Sibayan, David d'Heilly, Wong Hoy Cheong, Chen Zhen and Ole Scheeren, *Art Asia Pacific* 25, 2000, p.70.

19

Hans Ulrich Obrist, *ibid.*, p. 73.

20

Marianne Krogh Jensen, "Cities on the Move," *NU: The Nordic Art Review* 1 (1999), p. 86.

problem" of "cultural, geographical and political classifications" obviating the physical and psychological mobility of artists and artworks.¹¹ He may have been subtly referring to other concurrent attempts to consolidate the contemporary Asian art field, in particular, the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery. First established in 1993, it was marked by what curator Julie Ewington observed was its attempt to be "determinedly inclusive" by delegating some curatorial duties to various country specialists.¹² Art historians Anthony Gardner and Charles Green have pointed out how the APT sought to distinguish itself from other events of this scope by promoting regionalism without reverting, as the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum did, to the nation as the core unit of organization.¹³ Such inclusion also supported the efforts of the Triennial and similar other events to secure a central position in a newly recalibrated geography of artistic circulation (a tactic also pursued by the more recent efforts of Singapore to establish itself as a cultural hub for Southeast Asian culture). Yet having to "outsource" knowledge meant reinforcing these divisions between those who understood the specificities of a particular place versus those who did not or were generalists.¹⁴

But few initiatives were as successful as "Cities on the Move," whose own movement from Europe to the United States, and, finally, Asia helped propel contemporary art from Asia into the very forefront of how globalism was seen in Europe and North America.¹⁵ Valorizing the city as the unit for the new globalism that contemporary Asian art was said to represent, the show included over seventy artists and architects primarily based in Asia yet not exclusively Asian by national or ethnic descent. Although technically a survey show focused on a single region, "Cities on the Move" differed from other shows of Asian art in its refusal to group works according to the nationality of the artist or to style.¹⁶ In fact, the show all but subjugated any possibility of looking at individual artworks in favor of promoting a distinctive general viewing experience. Designed by various architects, the exhibition was a carnivalesque sprawl of objects—Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* for the anticipated twenty-first century realized a thousand-fold.

The other significant aspect was how different each of the show's six iterations looked from one another.¹⁷ On one level, the difference in appearance reflected the disparate levels of financial and logistical support offered by each host institution. At the Vienna Secession, the show looked more like a project of triage. Though designed with care by the architect Yung Ho Chang, his attempt to make the show "reflect the density of Asian cities" sounded more like an alibi for what was a highly claustrophobic display that inadvertently encouraged audiences to seek refuge outside the museum.¹⁸ Less convincing still were the second and third versions at the Musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux (CAPC) and MoMA PS1 in New York, respectively. The former had to forego the services of an architect due, perhaps fittingly given the frenetic pace of the show, to "timing problems"; the latter had serious financial limitations that compelled the show to exist largely in the form of slides and projections (Obrist even described this edition as a "trailer" to the show).¹⁹

The closest "Cities on the Move" got to being a conventional exhibition was when it took place at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. Despite Yung Ho Chang's best efforts, the viewing experience was relatively contemplative, one that ran counter to the helter-skelter clutter marking "Cities on the Move" Vienna, Bordeaux, and New York. Certainly audiences seemed to behave according to conventional museum protocol by keeping their distance from the work, even when interaction was encouraged. A red carpet laid on the gallery floor as part of Malaysian artist Liew Kung Yu's installation *Pasti Boleh/Sure Can One* (1997) was left pristine, a stark contrast from its display in Bordeaux where so many people walked on the carpet that it had to be replaced. Marianne Krogh Jensen applauded the show for trying to do away with traditional modes of exhibition based on fetishizing single works of art. Yet she wondered whether the "perfect white cube" of the Louisiana Museum with its elegant interconnected spaces prevailed after all.²⁰

By far the most coordinated version took place at the Hayward Gallery in London. There,

it seemed to have a third curator, Rem Koolhaas, then so famous as to prompt one British critic to describe him as the “flavor of the millennium.”²¹ Together with German architect Ole Scheeren, Koolhaas designed the exhibition so that viewers might experience the gallery as opening up onto “the whole of London outside.”²² It was a show bent on refusing object-oriented aesthetics of the kind evident in “Magiciens de la Terre,” the show cited (sometimes uncritically) in numerous histories of art as a starting point from which globalism became central to how contemporary art was discussed and presented. Held at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris in 1989, the show was a blockbuster with a twist, one whose claims to social relevance were based in its attempts to rebut “‘PRIMITIVISM’ in 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” the 1984 show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that sought to explore how “modern” European and American artists understood “primitive” non-Western art by juxtaposing works from both camps. “Magiciens de la Terre” featured over one hundred artists and sought to position works by non-Western artists on a par with those of its Western counterparts under the sign of “universalism.”

What “Contemporary Asian Art” Means

But did “Cities on the Move” do enough to distance itself from the “Magiciens de la Terre” paradigm? In New York, the show looked like a holiday-in-a-box geared towards a certain sector of Western city dwellers seeking a taste of the “speed, chaos and ostentation” associated with Asian cities.²³ The press release for the CAPC show described it as a “sweeping tour of art and architecture in Asian cities” while the catalogue for the Hayward edition inexplicably included a *Time Out*-like guide to Asian restaurants and retailers in London. Others had similar reactions; one viewer of the Hayward version wrote that [in “Cities on the Move”], “the East comes across as inscrutable, mysterious and alien, which is how it was seen a century ago.”²⁴ For some, at least, “Cities on the Move” was “Primitivism” for the 1990s, with high-tech wizardry and urban acceleration being the new exoticism. Or to paraphrase artist Ken Lum’s description of his 1998 work *Souvenirs from all the Chinese restaurants in the world outside China*, the show had less to do with the fact that it was about Asia than with the idea that Asia was now a de facto symbol of globalism. As the proposal for the Vienna Secession edition noted, this was a show of “contemporary Asian art” that was a “driving force in global art at the brink of the 21st century.”²⁵

For the parochial or less affluent, perhaps. Architecture critic Jonathan Glancey implied a class element at work by describing Koolhaas’s design for the Hayward show as a reflection of the déjà vu travelers sometimes experience when going from one metropolis to another. Was the show best understood only by those well-heeled or well-connected enough to know first-hand how there were “moments in Hong Kong when you suddenly think you are in London, and, equally, moments in London when you think you are in Hong Kong”?²⁶

The elitism implicit in the design of “Cities on the Move” at Hayward was far less apparent in the Bangkok version, the only time “Cities on the Move” took place in multiple venues across the city. It was organized by the Siam Society, a well-established non-profit in Thailand dedicated to the promotion of Thai culture, and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁷ The show’s impact was significant for at least three reasons:

- 1 It was the first large-scale exhibition of contemporary art in or on Asia to take place in Thailand.
- 2 It took place in non-traditional as well as conventional exhibition venues including a shopping mall (Central Rama 3), an alternative space (Project 304), and a café (About Studio / About Café) which were all freely accessible to the public.
- 3 Given the lack of infrastructure and funding for contemporary art in Thailand, it was a chance for the various constituents of the contemporary Thai art world to work together.²⁸

21

Thomas Dyckhoff, “See the future,” *The Times*, July 17, 1999. In a letter to Hayward exhibition organizer Fiona Bradley, Koolhaas himself vigorously objected to being seen as one of the show’s organizers lest he be seen as taking credit away from Hou and Obrist: “it is crucial that my role as designer remains secondary in respect to the role of the curators.” Koolhaas, letter to Fiona Bradley, March 29, 1999.

22

Ole Scheeren, “Cities on the Move: A Dialogue,” p. 74.

23

Joan Kee, “Cities on the Move,” *Parachute* (October-December 1999), p. 88.

24

“Fast Cities of the East,” *Evening Standard*, May 18, 1999.

25

Proposal for “Cities on the Move,” Vienna Secession, undated.

26

Jonathan Glancey, “Hayward Gallery: Urban Myths,” *The Guardian*, May 8, 1999.

27

The Thai Art Archives in Bangkok is currently gathering research on “Cities on the Move” Bangkok which it plans to make public.
<http://thaiartarchives.mono.net/special-projects1>
(Accessed June, 2015)

28

For an account of the exhibition’s hectic opening days see Kok Meng Tan, “Invisible Cities on the Move.”
http://www.art4d.com/bangkokonthemove/2542/list/webwork/invisi/invisi_1.html
(Accessed June, 2015)

29

Hou Hanru, "Cities on the Move: A Dialogue," p. 75.

30

David Teh, "Travelling Without Moving: Historicising Thai Contemporary Art," *Third Text* 26, no. 5 (September 2012), p. 575.

31

I have argued this point elsewhere vis-à-vis "Cities on the Move," in "Trouble in 'New Utopia,'" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12, no. 3 Winter 2004, pp. 667-686.

32

From 1992 to 1999, the Queens Museum of Art was among the most active in hosting exhibitions of non-Western artists and their diasporic counterparts, largely thanks to its director of exhibitions, Jane Farver. Iwasaki Hitomi, who has continuously worked in the museum's curatorial department since 1994, has stated that the museum "tried to do shows other institutions would, or could not do. Part of this has to do with the pressure of competing with the many cultural institutions [in New York] for a limited audience." Iwasaki Hitomi, interview with the author, November 30, 2005.

33

Jim Supangkat, "Multiculturalism/Multimodernism," *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society, 1996), pp. 70-73.

34

Apinan Poshyananda, "Positioning Contemporary Asian Art," *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 12.

35

Jane Farver, interview with the author, November 11, 2005.

36

Apinan Poshyananda, "The Acrobat, the Chef, the Go-between, and the Dreamer," *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Independent Curators International, 2001), p. 135.

Perhaps ambivalent towards the Hayward version, Hou saw the Bangkok show as an attempt to establish "a much more direct dialogue with the Asian city itself."²⁹ "Cities on the Move" Bangkok was the most poly-vocal of the six editions; its very lack of cohesion ironically made visceral the abstract intentions of Hou and Obrist in a way not evident in any of the five previous versions. Yet as critic David Teh observed, the show was regarded as a show of "international" artists rather than an exhibition of Asian artists per se, one that amounted to a biennale without being explicitly called such.³⁰

Still, if "contemporary Asian art" is now more convincing as a term used to refer to a system of institutions, images, and discourses, rather than artworks or artists, it is in large part because of "Cities on the Move." It refigured the material work of art as a metaphor or allegory, an entity operating primarily at the level of pure image.³¹ The show asked whether a global art world was only possible if we let go of close looking much in the same way that the idea of world literature only makes sense when one doesn't read texts so closely. Does one scale of operation exist only when another disappears? The great lesson of "Cities on the Move," then, was to show how entities (human or otherwise) mattered less than their circulation in a network over which they as individuals have little, if no control.

The frequency of artist and artwork movements between continents, nations, and categories exemplified the heightened sense of scale that helped flush into circulation the very idea of being "global." Many of the artists featured in "Cities on the Move" exemplified larger social, economic, and political concerns including the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989—which indirectly led to the expatriation of numerous Chinese artists, particularly to New York and Paris—as well as the economic liberalization of South Korea and Taiwan. Not only did the latter make it possible for an unprecedented number of artists to move overseas, it also helped finance the construction of new artistic infrastructures. An example is the founding of the Gwangju Biennale that first took place in southwestern Korea in 1995.

The magnitude of migration compelled US institutions into broadening their own scopes, as demonstrated, for example, by the decision of New York's Queens Museum of Art to host "Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art" in 1993.³² "Traditions/Tensions" took place in this context, one inflected by a decade-long struggle by multiculturalism's advocates to promote the works of non-white artists memorably emblemized by the 1993 Whitney Biennial.³³ One cannot think of the show, for example, without also thinking about "Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art," the panoramic survey of recent Asian American art which took place at the Asia Society in New York two years earlier in 1994. Only in this case, the argument was repurposed to bring non-Western artists into the contemporary fold, a point made clear by both the Asia Society (who took the lead in bringing the show to New York) and the curator.³⁴

Could Poshyananda forego the nation-state as his organizational rubric? In 1996, probably not. As reviews of "Traditions/Tensions" suggest, even New York audiences were not quite ready to think about non-Western art outside national or regional frameworks. Moreover, among the seventy works that were exhibited, in the limited gallery spaces of the Asia Society and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, it was hard to see the works in these galleries individually. Art fared somewhat better at the relatively spacious Queens Museum of Art where each work had its own space, which in fact was Poshyananda's original intention.³⁵ But it was hard not to see the work as so many goods in a trade fair booth, a perception Poshyananda was perhaps all too well aware when he described himself as a "broker of cultural goods, [an] aesthetic arbiter, and gatekeeper," language reflecting an acute, even painful awareness of the market-like art world.³⁶

An under-recognized issue for both "Cities on the Move" and "Traditions/Tensions" was that the larger and more inclusive exhibitions became, the more likely it was that artworks from poor and/or authoritarian countries would be routinely excluded. In his essay for the "Traditions/Tensions" catalogue, Indonesian critic Jim Supangkat observed how the