

"Con Art" Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in Southeast Asia

Apinan Poshyananda

Apinan Poshyananda is an art historian, critic and curator. After completing his PhD at Cornell University, he was Professor of Art History and Director of the Arts Center at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, before assuming his most recent position of Permanent Secretary, the Ministry of Culture of Thailand. He has curated numerous shows including "Contemporary Art from Asia: Traditions/ Tensions" (1996–98), organized by the Asia Society, New York; "Heri Dono: Dancing Demons, Drunken Deities" (2000), at the Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo; and "Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind" (2003) at Asia Society, New York. He is the author of books including *Modern Art in Thailand* (1992) and *Playing with Slippery Lubricants: Apinan Poshyananda, Selected Writings, 1993–2004* (2010).

This essay was written as a contribution to the catalogue of the 1999 exhibition organized by the Queens Museum in New York, "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s," which traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Miami Art Museum in Miami. Although conceptualism is largely seen as a European and American form, the author locates Asian artists "allied to Western ideas of conceptual art but who have created different 'concepts' for a specific locality." The Western art infrastructure has become "more inclusive, less hierarchical," and has learned to come to terms with this difference. Apinan Poshyananda identifies artists in Asia and its diaspora who have redefined "conceptualism in terms of local/global contextualization." In the process of reframing this practice, the term conceptual art or conceptualism would generate "confusion" and "misinterpretation" and be viewed as the opposite of the virtues supposedly held in esteem in Asian art: "technical virtuosity, indigenous elements and draftsmanship." He points to the art academy as a structure that "inhibited experimentation." As a response, conceptualism sought to "challenge institutional authority." In Southeast Asia, it was a direction taken to move away from an art practice that greatly invested in "national identity, decoration and elite aesthetic values." Apinan cites important entry points into conceptualism. First was Joseph Beuys's conception of social sculpture, which provoked Indonesian and Thai artists in the way it exposed "social 'wounds'" and initiated "a 'healing' process." Second was the political ferment created by activism and mass protest. And third were the programs of institutions like the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art in Bangkok; the Baguio Arts Guild in Baguio; and the Artists Village in Singapore. In the long term, artists in the region like Jim Supangkat, Montien Boonma, Santiago Bose and Tang Da Wu gained confidence in their engagement with conceptualism and infused it with a compelling critical energy.

[PF]

Source: Originally published in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum, 1999); reprinted in *Playing with Slippery Lubricants: Apinan Poshyananda, Selected Writings, 1993–2004* (Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, 2010), 253–260.

Apinan Poshyananda
Selected Writings: 1993–2004

01

Siva Kuma, "Contemporary Indian Art: The Last Fifty Years," in *Tryst with Destiny: Art from Modern India 1947-1997* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1997), 45-56.

As a major international phenomenon, conceptual art has been recognized as a Euro-North American invention that fits neatly into the linear art historical model of the West. The term "conceptualism" embraces various forms of art in which the idea of the work is considered more significant than the object itself. However, this definition of conceptualism has expanded considerably since its emergence. This article will focus on Asian artists whose work may be allied to Western ideas of conceptual art but who have created different "concepts" for a specific locality.

Since Western contact with modern Asian art has been limited principally to Japan, China and South Korea, it is often assumed that conceptualist production is confined to those countries. Recently, multiculturalism has permitted some artists to find a niche along with other neglected Others. Consequently, the Western art infrastructure has become more inclusive, less hierarchical. Asian artists living abroad (Anish Kapoor, Rasheed Araeen, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vong Phaophanit and David Medalla) have been situated in relation to "mainstream" conceptual artists, while those in Asia (Miyajima Tatsuo, Yanagi Yukinori, Vivan Sundaram, N.N. Rimzon, Montien Boonma, Lee Bul, Navin Rawanchaikul, Ellen Pau, Surasi Kusolwong, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Gu Dexin, Wong Hoy Cheong, Tang Da Wu and FX Harsono) have received attention for their attempts to redefine conceptualism in terms of local/global contextualization. In the process, they have demonstrated that conceptualism is a nonlinear phenomenon constantly in flux.

During the 1960s and '70s, the impact of the Cold War was clearly felt in the regions of South and Southeast Asia. For many countries, fear of communism and a desire for capitalism resulted in government promotion of Western curricula in arts education. For instance, many art schools in ASEAN countries offered courses on modern art adapted from English textbooks such as H.H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*. Here, modern art is traced in chronological order stressing Euro-North American artists, with virtually no consideration of modern arts in Asia. As for conceptualism, we were taught that "concept art" was peculiar to the West, along with happenings, performance, documentation, earthworks and body art. This practice of defining conceptual art through textbooks and lumping it with all kinds of other "isms" has often led to confusion and misinterpretation, and conceptual art was translated by Asian teachers and passed on to students in variable ways. At times, the concept behind works such as Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) was deemed irrelevant for art practices in Asia emphasizing technical virtuosity, indigenous elements and draftsmanship. Then again, many art schools and academies actively discouraged the exploration of conceptualism for fear that it

would incite students to challenge institutional authority. In South Asia—for instance, Calcutta, Mumbai, Madras and Lahore—a deeply entrenched colonialist pedagogy, which privileged painting and sculpture, inhibited experimentation in the arts.⁰¹ Moreover, anti-American sentiment contributed to resistance to "pop" and "cons" from the US. In the 1960s, talented artists such as M.F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta and Gulam Mohammed Sheikh were more interested in European figurative painting than North American conceptualist work. Although plenty of inspiration for "art and life" could be found in rituals and ceremonies involving the body and performance in India and Pakistan, relatively few artists ventured into the realm of conceptual art.

In Southeast Asia, conceptualism for a long time was considered less important than critical realism, surrealism and abstraction. But as artists became discontented with mainstream art forms that emphasized national identity, decoration and elite aesthetic values, they searched for new styles and media both at home and abroad. Many artists turned to Pop, Neo-Dada and Fluxus, experimenting with mixed media, assemblage and found objects. These forms of expression allowed artists to escape the confines of painting and sculpture and their conventional themes and techniques. As a result, individuals such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik found a receptive audience in Southeast Asia. In particular, Beuys's notion of "social sculpture" had a powerful impact on young Indonesian and Thai artists, who saw in it a vehicle adaptable to their own cultural circumstances capable of exposing social "wounds" and initiating a "healing" process. However, it was not only inspiration from abroad or the need to catch up to the West that drove local artists to challenge the stagnation of institutionalized art.

During the 1970s, the Pancasila philosophy of Indonesia's New Order did not encourage art forms to be critical of society. Officially sanctioned art was characterized by art for art's sake, internationalism and decorative realism or abstraction. In 1973, mass student unrest and criticism of the government resulted in repressive measures and the imprisonment of many students. At the same time, young artists protected the institutional structure of art. The Black December Incident, in which artists protested the jury selections for the 1974 Jakarta Biennial, represented the beginning of new directions and values in art production. Artists from *Academi Seni Rupa Indonesia* (ASRI) in Yogyakarta, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), and Jakarta formed a group which became known as the Indonesia New Art Movement (*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru*). This movement advocated the dismantling of aesthetic hierarchies through assemblage, happenings, readymades and found objects, and seriously questioned the relevance of the art education system in Indonesia. The manifesto accompanying

its first exhibition in 1975 called for an art that reflected the entire spectrum of society, as artists rejected the limitations of the abstract modernist schools. The exhibitions of the New Art Movement were open to all sorts of expression, including conceptualist.⁰² For example, Jim Supangkat's entries included a framed black canvas with a single word, *dicari* (wanted), painted on it. His mixed-media sculpture *Ken Dedes* (1975) featured the head and shoulders of the legendary queen of Majapahit, the 14th-century Javanese kingdom, together with a comic drawing of a woman wearing her jeans unzipped to expose her pubic hair. This merging of two seemingly unrelated and contradictory sets of cultural and aesthetic values into a grotesque image shocked the public. Supangkat was accused of degrading the traditional icon, since the posture of the work implied that she was a prostitute.

The New Art Movement's next show in Jakarta, the "Concept Exhibition" (1976), was framed by the question, "How serious is our art?" Included were action drawings, newspaper clippings, texts, everyday objects and lengthy debates on art. Meanwhile, equally provocative events were shaping up in Yogyakarta, where three exhibitions—"What Identity? (*Kepribadian Apa?*)", "Experiments in Living Sculpture," and "Spontaneous Exhibition"—were organized in 1977. Young artists such as Semsar Siahaan introduced body performance, while political satire and cynical commentary aimed at the government were conspicuous. Authorities began to suspect many artists of involvement in leftist groups. In 1978, student leaders were jailed and prominent newspapers banned after protests against President Suharto and the revival of Sukarnoism. Artists of the New Art Movement responded with overt condemnation of Suharto and his policies in their third and largest exhibition. For instance, Hardi's photomontage, *Presidential Candidate 2001* (1978), was comprised of self-portraits superimposed over the head of the late President Sukarno. Munni Ardi's *Free Speaker Platform* (1978), a performance staged in a red boxing ring, featured the text of a speech by Sukarno read aloud by visitors.

The New Art Movement was galvanized by social and political pressures within the local art scene, and not so much the desire to keep up with Western "isms." FX Harsono later recalled that members were vaguely aware of Duchampian ideas, along with the work of Warhol and Beuys, through artists like Hardi, who had attended Beuys's 1977 seminar in Düsseldorf. However, terms such as "conceptual art" and "installation" were widely used only later in the 1980s.⁰³ The New Art Movement disbanded after 1979, but its ideas continued to motivate later artists. Its spirit was revived in 1987 in the exhibition "Supermarket Fantasy World," a *mélange* of consumer objects, posters and advertisements. Rather than direct political attacks on state authority, however, many artists shifted

their focus to social issues such as consumerism, environmental degradation and public health.

In Thailand, the student revolutions of 1973 and 1976, which toppled the military dictatorship, provided greater freedom of expression and cleared the way for experimentation by Thai artists. Although many turned to critical realism, surrealism and neo-traditional Buddhist art, some explored conceptualism by going abroad. Prawat Laucharoen, Kamol Tassananchalee and Thana Lauhakaikul, who live in the US, play an important role as mediators, introducing conceptual arts to the Thai art scene. Prawat collaborated with Dennis Oppenheim on the installation *Launching Station* (1981), in which chemical "missiles" were launched onto large printing plates. Prawat's use of chance and improvisation here and in other works derived from an interest in John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Kamol Tassananchalee created conceptual works that included pouring colored pigments in the Mojave Desert. Thana created room-size installations and outdoor site-specific works dealing with water pollution and environmental destruction. These artists visited their homeland and brought back with them innovative concepts that encouraged the production of idea-based art.

Conceptualism flourished in Thailand during the mid-1980s as several artists, including Kamol Phaosavasdi and Chumpon Apisuk, returned from abroad to settle in Bangkok. In Thai translation, the term "conceptual art" (*sinlapa ruapyod*) refers variously to installation, performance and the use of readymades (initially, it embraced any "foreign" style that inspired artists to reject conventional practice.) Lively events sponsored by Bhirasri Institute of Art in Bangkok stimulated broader interest in installation, junk, happenings, performance and body art. Anti-art strategies were deployed by artists to attack the capitalist art market and its precious commodities. For the opening of the 1985 Thai Sculpture Exhibition, Kamol Phaosavasdi bound himself in a sack as a form of protest. Chumpon drank animal blood and shouted newspaper headlines about social conflict, sex and money in his happening related to pure communication. Vasan Siththiket, a poet-painter-happening artist, drafted a Neo-Dada manifesto to accompany installations of newspapers and poems about anarchy as a creative force and death as rebirth.⁰⁴

In the Philippines, the Baguio Arts Guild (BAG) became the nucleus for artists in search of "ethnified" art forms to counter the abstraction fostered by art schools in Manila. Filipino artists looked especially to the collaborative aspects of traditional art making, so different from Western standards of individualism and competition for commercial success. Indigenization, it was felt, could transform conceptualism, performance and installation. Some Filipino artists even hailed installation as the quintessential art of the region. Roberto Villanueva, a leading member of BAG who was inspired by

02

Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art Since 1966* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 1991), 23–77.

–

03

Interview with FX Harsono, Jakarta, July 16, 1998.

–

04

Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992), 207–217.

05

On Roberto Villanueva and Tang Da Wu, see *New Art from Southeast Asia* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1992).

06

Julie Ewington, "Five Elements: An Abbreviated Account of Installation Art in South-East Asia," *Art and Asia Pacific* 2, no. 1 (1995): 108–115. [See also pp. 35–39 of this volume.]

07

Apinan Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers: Desperate Dragons in Transition," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (New York: Asia Society, 1996), 23–53.

08

Montien Boonma: *Melting Void*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Marsi Gallery, 1998).

Cordillera highland culture and shamanism, created a series of site-specific works using bamboo to emphasize indigenism in resistance to Western cultural domination. Similarly, in Singapore the Artists Village sought alternatives to the dogma of academic training. Led by Tang Da Wu, who spent some time in England, the Artists Village produced numerous artists whose potential in idea-based art breathed new life into the Singapore art scene.⁰⁵

Conceptualist practices are now widely accepted in the art arenas of Southeast Asia and some parts of South Asia.⁰⁶ To varying degrees, artists in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and India have adapted conceptual strategies as vehicles for critique and reflection on their rapidly changing societies, and several international exhibitions in Asia and Australia have legitimized these forms of conceptualism based on local idioms. In the process, conceptual artists have gained confidence that their works are not merely stylistic quotations of Western "originals." In fact, many artists dismiss Western versions of conceptualism as self-reflexive, tedious communiqués between members of intellectual cliques.

Conceptualist works convey as well as conceal political, social and religious messages. The 1992 military crackdown in Bangkok, which caused the deaths of civilians and students, spurred Thai artists such as Vasan Sitthiket and Surapol Panyawatchira to make body art about rape and the military's abuse of power. In *The Four Elements* (1993), a series of print installations, Prawat Laucharoen confronted issues of national identity, Thai-ness, power and democracy, using images of the royal family, Buddhist symbolism and scenes of riot and mayhem. In 1995, Philippine citizens expressed outrage over Singapore's execution of Filipina domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in heated protests and burnings of the Singapore national flag. Feminist artist Imelda Cajipe-Endaya responded with a series of conceptualist works on overseas domestic workers, using quotidian objects like a chair, broom and luggage together with a text on the Filipina.⁰⁷

Religion has inspired many artists to ideas of faith and devotion through a conceptual framework. Conveying scenes of contemplation, void and emptiness, the site-specific installations of Thai artist Montien Boonma often demand the viewer's participation. In *Breathing House* (1996–97), *House of Hope* (1996–97) and *Melting Void* (1998), enclosures and corridors filled with herbs and covered with aluminum and wax arouse the sense of smell and taste to provoke an acute awareness of the viewer's relation to interior and exterior space.⁰⁸ India's religious turmoil of 1992–93 between Hindus and Muslims, which resulted in burning and bloodshed, became the subject of conceptualist works by Vivan Sundaram, Pushpamala and Sheela Gowda. Sundaram's *Memorial* (1992), an allegorical reflection on the frenzy of religious schism, is an installation with fragments of riot scenes, a fallen mortal and

a monumental gateway. Pushpamala collected burnt books and boxes as symbols of victims of communal riots in Mumbai. Gowda's decision to use cow dung as a medium was made during the riot of 1992–93. In India, cow dung is shit, but it also signifies sacredness and nonviolence, and is used as a fuel and in domestic chores. Gowda's flat cakes of manure mixed with sacred powder (*kum kum*) and gold leaf challenge the audience to define the boundaries of art and life, holiness and profanity, alternative media and aesthetic execution.

For many artists, performance offers opportunities for a fresh interaction with audiences, and capitalizes on the medium's sense of spontaneity to provide novel perspectives on social and cultural issues. In Singapore, Tang Da Wu's installations and performances reexamine Chinese traditions and myths surrounding the eating of animal parts as an aphrodisiac. Vincent Leow pushed the boundaries of censorship by drinking his own urine, while Joseph Ng shaved his pubic hair in public. In Yogyakarta, Heri Dono collaborated with villagers to perform social rituals and satires through shadow puppet theater and trance dance, as well as a play using homeless children as actors. FX Harsono staged a happening as a critique of deforestation and illegal logging, "slaughtering" rows of wooden chairs with a chainsaw before burying them. Filipino artist Santiago Bose made a labyrinthine journey through the town of Baguio, symbolically spray-painting his footsteps as he crossed many cultural borders. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, a group of young artists formed the Chiang Mai Social Installation, placing site-specific works in temples, cremation grounds, markets, public parks and along riverbanks. For his solo exhibition in Bangkok, "Give Me a Glass of Water" (1994), Kamol Phaosavasdi urinated in front of the works to add layers of meaning to the problem of water pollution in the metropolis. Vasan Sitthiket and friends produced a short video of performers wearing penis-shaped caps raping a map of Thailand. Kosit Juntaratip focused his performance work on love and infatuation, marrying a sex doll and painting with his own blood (after which he hired a nurse to give him a transfusion). Navin Rawanchaikul displayed a series of found objects intended to interact with viewers in *The Zero Space Which is Not Empty* (1995). He also promoted mobile art galleries for taxis and motorized tricycles (*tuk tuk*). In a performance at the "Live Art" exhibition in 1997, Surapol Panyawatchira drew analogies between corrupt politicians and toilets as he urinated in a box to the accompaniment of the national anthem.

Asian artists recognize that conceptual art in the West has a distinct genealogy, but their own interpretations of such art have often derived from different trajectories. Despite the economic meltdown in Asia, artists have developed conceptualist practices to the extent that various networks have been formed within the region. A dynamic conceptualist art scene thrives in

Bangkok, where events such as the *Huay Khwang Mega City, Art Performance Conference Bangkok* and *Plastic & Other Waste* (which included artists from Asia and Fluxus members from Cologne) attract sizeable crowds. However, even today the response among audiences to conceptual art is mixed. Many

viewers see "con art" as a stunt designed to garner attention and glorify the artists. Others argue that it broadens forms of aesthetic expression and ways of looking at art. Both readings are valid. After all, it is a matter of choosing between communication and confusion.

Asia: Co-figurative Identification

Sakai Naoki

Sakai Naoki is Professor of Asian Studies at Cornell University. He obtained his PhD from the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He has held his current position since 1997. His academic fields of interest are cultural theory and the history of Japanese thought. He is author of *Voices of the Past* (1991), published in Japanese in 2002, *Shizan sareru Nihongo/Nihonjin* (1996), *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (1997), *"Sekaishi" no kaitai: Honyaku, shutai, rekishi* (co-author, 1999), and *Nihon/Eizō/Beikoku: Kyōkan no kyōdōtai to teikoku-teki kokumin shugi* (2007). He is editor/author of *Globalization no naka no Asia* (1998) and *Sōryokusen taisei kara globalization e* (2003). He is Editor-in-Chief of *Traces*, a multilingual periodical on cultural theory and translation.

asia in transition
representation and identity

Reproduced in the publication documenting the proceedings, this essay was first presented as the keynote speech of the International Symposium 2002: "Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity," organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center in 2002. Sakai Naoki begins by describing how identity is an issue of identification, arguing that identity is formed in the contrast between self and other that occurs through referencing things that are outside the self. He says that Asia is not a geographic concept. Until the late 19th century, the people in "Asia" had not considered themselves to be "Asians." Rather, Asia is a concept that was produced by the Europeans as a means of distinguishing themselves from the others to the east. Stating that the figure of "us" is constituted within the projection of the figure of "them," Sakai refers to this effect as "co-figurative identification." He argues that Asia's self-awareness is a product of the colonization of the region by the European Great Powers, and that postcoloniality is essential to the possibility of Asia. Sakai goes on to address Japanese identity. When Japanese people distinguish themselves in contrast to Koreans, they engage in colonialist delusions of their own superiority and the inferiority of the other, informed by feelings of both guilt and pride. The pride is based on Japan's former colonial rule over Korea, which even today exerts a strong influence. Sakai argues that, consequently, postcoloniality does not refer to what comes after the end of colonial rule but rather indicates the irredeemability of the colonial experience, because that experience continues to affect the present situation, and even retroactively contaminates what came before colonial rule. This is exactly the postcolonial character of Asia. Sakai also touches upon the West. He says that the West is a mythical construct of recent currency, and as such is of suspect integrity. In the first place, since the earth is a globe, there is no one location that can actually be designated as the "West." The West is fixed on maps and imagined as an identifiable referent only in relation to Asia. Sakai says that the West is not a geographical index but a racial index, and as such it is closely linked to racial fantasies of "whiteness." Sakai thinks that the phenomenon of discussions about Asian values and the recovery of Asian culture that has spread since the 1990s is proof of the continued existence of Asia's postcoloniality, because here, too, Asia is being invoked through a co-figurative identification predicated on reconfirming the unity of the West. It is in this sense that the phrase "we Asians" suggests the continued domination of Eurocentrism. Sakai concludes his essay by questioning whether it is possible to engage in self-referential addresses like "we Asians" without getting caught up in such binary oppositions and postcolonial genealogies. [KK]

Source: *The Japan Foundation 30th Anniversary International Symposium 2002: "Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity" Report*, ed. Furuichi Yasuko (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2003), 222–231.

Regardless of whether it is civilizational, national, ethnic or racial, all identity is, first of all, a matter of identification. Asia is no exception to this insofar as it is comprehended as the identity of some collectivity. No individual or group can claim itself to be Asian unless, in its outward reference, it is distinguished from and contrasted to some entity that is not Asian while at the same time being identified, in its inward self-restitution, with Asia. In this respect Asia should be just like any such collective identities as civilizational and geopolitical identities—the West, Europe, the Americas, Africa, the East, the New World; national identities—Chinese, British, Russian, Indonesian, US American, South African, Brazilian; and racial identities—White, Black, Yellow, Semites, Mongolian and so forth. As Étienne Balibar said with regard to the problem of collective identities in general,⁰¹ all the geopolitical identities are fundamentally ambiguous. The ambiguity inherent in the Asian identity is not unique. In talking about the Asian identity and the transitional predicament in which this identity is currently perceived to be situated, what is at issue is neither its inherent ambiguity nor its complexity: it is instead the historically specific modes and modalities of its identification. The globally-accepted general consensus dictates that Asia is primarily one of the four major geographic regions (five when including Oceania, and six when separating North and South America or including the Antarctic). It is often mistakenly regarded as one of the large continents of the world, but as a cursory glance immediately reveals, it is not a continent—just as Europe is not. While the concept of continents is extremely dubious and has been called into question within the domain of geographic knowledge,⁰² Asia is qualified even less as a name for a geographically identifiable area of the globe. Nonetheless, the presumption that Asia is essentially an expansive but enclosed geographic landmass persists. This presumption forms an operational dogma that the identity of Asia is somewhat anchored in the location of a place through cartographic imagination.

It goes without saying that, following the colonization of many parts of the world by the European powers, such a presumption began to be accepted by the elite in various communities across the globe. Today the term Asia—or its equivalent in a local language—is instantly intelligible with respect to its connotation despite the fact that there is an extremely wide variety of its uses around the world. It is widely believed that Asia is a certain proper name that indicates a vast geographic area with a huge resident population. Accordingly, some people might assume that those who live in the geographic area called Asia are naturally designated as the Asians and that some common history or cultural attributes must be intrinsic to those who inhabit this vast area called Asia.

As a consequence of this, of course, it does not necessarily follow that the people thus called

Asians are able to gather themselves together and build some solidarity among themselves through the act of self-representation or auto-determination by enunciating “we.” Clearly, there is a wide gap between the fact that the population is described as Asians by some observers standing outside the population—we will inquire into the conceptual specificity of this “outside” or externality below—and the self-assertion by the people themselves in terms of the name attributed to them. Some sort of leap is required in order to move from the state of being described as Asians by some outside agents to their identification with Asia, to the self-representation as a subject. And let us not be negligent of a historical verity that such a situation did not exist until the late 19th century, so that, before that time, the majority of residents in Asia did not know they were living in Asia and referred to as Asians by Europeans. Until then, generally speaking, there were objects designated as Asians but there were no subjects who represented themselves by calling themselves Asians. Only in the late 19th century did a few intellectuals begin to seriously consider the plausibility of turning the objects “Asians” into the transnational and regional subjects of Asia. In this respect one can never overlook the particular genealogy of Asia: that the name Asia originated outside Asia, and that its heteronomous origin is indubitably inscribed in the notion of Asia, even if it cannot be taken as a geographic or cartographic locality.

It is well known that the word Asia was coined by the Europeans in the protocol of indexing themselves as a sort of geopolitical unity in order to distinguish Europe from its eastern others. It later turned into a term in the service of the constitution of Europe’s self-representation as well as its distinction. Asia is necessary for Europe because, without positing it, Europe could not be marked as a distinct and distinguishable body. What one sees here is the most illuminating instance of the schematism of co-figuration, the working of a schema thanks to which the figure of “us” is constituted in the projective imagining of the figure of “them.” As the figure of the imaginary entity called “Asia” is consolidated, the figure of “us”—in this case “us” as Europe and more recently as the West—is posited as a unity. Yet since the putative unity of Europe is inherently unstable and constantly changing, Asia has been defined and redefined according to contingent historical situations in which the relationships between Europe and its others have undergone vicissitudes.

Since the 19th century there have been an increasing number of occasions when “the West” has been used almost as a synonym for Europe. The mytheme West came to assume a global currency as Euro-American domination was increasingly perceived to be an ineluctable reality in many parts of the world. Clearly the West neither signifies nor refers to the same thing as the word *Europe*. Yet in its paradigmatic discriminatory function in this schematism of co-figuration, the West began to behave like

01

Étienne Balibar, “Ambiguous Identities,” trans. Chris Turner, in *Politics and the Other Scene* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 57.

02

For a critique of geographic knowledge and the concept of continents, see: Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Despite their thorough examination of the basic assumptions concerning the geographic categories, however, the authors still believe that the term “the West” can be somewhat rescued.

Europe. In other words, Asia was placed in a similar opposition to the West as it had been to Europe.

There are many other names and identities with similar histories of conquest and colonization by which people form their habits of collective identification. Hence, one cannot steadfastly assume that people continue to be subjected to the initial relationship of domination simply because they collectively identify themselves in the terms which originally were coined by that relationship. Today Asia is not necessarily subjugated to the colonial domination of the West. Most Asian countries are, at least in theory, independent of their former colonizers. Yet we are still not justified in overlooking binding historical legacies which stem from the fact that Asia arrived at its self-consciousness thanks to the West's or Europe's colonization. The historical colonization of Asia by Western powers is not something accidental to the essence of Asia; it is essential to the possibility called Asia insofar as the post of postcoloniality is not confused with that which follows in chronological succession. Paradoxical though it may sound, Asia was a *postcolonial* entity from the outset—postcolonial in the sense that the identity serves to constitute a subject out of an amorphous crowd of people on the basis of a fantastic colonial structure imbedded in that identity.

Perhaps, as an example to demonstrate what I mean by postcoloniality, I should mention the recent reaction of the Japanese mass media to the revelation of North Korean kidnapping maneuvers. As many people are aware, the North Korean government's official acknowledgement of its abduction operations from the 1970s understandably gave rise to a series of incidents provoking strong sentiment among the Japanese public, and the abducted Japanese who were allowed by the North Korean government to return to Japan became the point of so-called condensation around which not only public sympathy for their victimhood, and patriotic camaraderie based on the collective disavowal of colonial guilt, but also the gush of vengefulness against the resident Korean population within Japan were conjured up.

By projectively identifying with the abducted, many Japanese believed that they managed to shield themselves from a possible denunciation of Japanese colonial responsibilities, against a fear that they would necessarily be exposed to the accusing gaze of the Koreans whenever they posed themselves as Japanese before them. Please allow me to remind you of the specific historical relevance of the set of terms "abduction," "abductor" and "abducted" in this context. Regardless of whether an individual is aware or not of the histories of Japanese colonialism and postwar East Asia, the majority of the adult Japanese population today has an apprehension that to fashion oneself as a Japanese in a face-to-face relation with the Koreans means accepting the role of colonizer, oppressor, victimizer and, particularly with regard to the cases of the Comfort Women

and Forced Labor Transfer, the role of "abductor," as opposed to that of colonized, oppressed, victim and "abducted." It is, however, important to note that such a self-fashioning also implies the Japanese monopoly of the attributes of being the modernizer, rational, enlightened and militarily and scientifically superior, as opposed to being premodern, irrational, traditional and militarily and scientifically inferior. The distribution of qualities in this neatly binary configuration is undoubtedly typical of the colonial imagination. And I would never argue that there was in fact any moment in the past in which the contrast between peoples of Japanese and Korean ethnic backgrounds could be described adequately at all in terms of these binary sets of attributes. This is rather a projective description at the service of colonial imagination.

Nevertheless, the Japanese identity could not be imagined without resort to this binarism because the regime of identification without which one cannot fashion oneself as Japanese necessarily involves this binary configuration. Of course, here, I am talking about the putative identity of the Japanese nation in relation to Korean identity. Such a regime is utterly irrelevant when we talk about the Japanese identity in relation to other ethnic, national, civilizational or racial identities—the putative national identity of the United States, for example. And let me note that I am not postulating the Japanese identity in general here, irrespective of its relation to the other identities. Rather, what I call the Japanese identity is an assemblage of Japanese identities which are constituted fantastically in identifications in differing and varying relations.

First, what is to be underlined is that the attributes which cause some sense of guilt in one who fashions him/herself as Japanese in relation to the Koreans are unavoidably tied to the qualities which make the same person feel proud of being Japanese. This is why an admission of colonial guilt is often accompanied by secret conceit. "We are sorry to have colonized you. But, let us admit, we were so strong that we could conquer you with ease." Given this structure of a binary configuration, it would be much less tormenting and even comforting for one to fashion him/herself as Japanese if the attributes of embarrassing qualities—being victimizer, "abductor," and so forth—are openly disavowed or if one is allowed to overlook them. It seems to me that the figure of the Japanese abducted offers the Japanese public a most convenient excuse to disavow not only their colonial guilt but also the attributes which might invoke the sense of that colonial guilt. In sympathizing with the abducted, many Japanese put themselves in the position of the victim, the abducted and the oppressed, and this fantastic positionality allows them to enjoy a colonial binary configuration without colonial guilt. This explains why the outburst of public sympathy for the abducted Japanese so easily led to such a sentimental affirmation of national solidarity and served

as a rather comforting opportunity to feel proud of Japanese nationality without the hindrance of colonial guilt. It is an outburst of patriotic sentiment that is somewhat similar to what we witnessed in the United States after "9/11."

Second, the Japanese identity thus constituted is totally dependent upon a colonial imagination which projects a binary configuration retrospectively back to the relationship between the Japanese from Japan proper and the Japanese of the Korean Peninsula under the Japanese Empire. Let me stress that I am not focusing on the mode of identification during the colonial period but rather the Japanese identity today. The imaginary relationship between Japanese and Koreans must constantly call on the colonial imagination for the very reason of constituting the Japanese and Korean identities in terms of the binary configuration after the loss of the Japanese Empire. Precisely because the qualities of which one who fashions oneself as Japanese today should feel proud are irresolvably implicated in the colonial imagination, the Japanese simply cannot rid themselves of the legacies of the past which are preserved in the colonial binary configuration and incorporated into the regime of identification through which they identify themselves as Japanese. The self-confidence in "*nihonjin no jikaku*" (the self-awareness of being Japanese) is sustained in the colonial configuration, so that one would have to go through the loss of such self-confidence in order to get rid of the colonial legacy in the mode of collective identification. We simply cannot subscribe to the general presumption, endorsed by both progressive and conservative intellectuals in postwar Japan, that there is some substantial Japanese identity unaffected by historical vicissitudes and that, once the external colonial conditions of the colonial reign are removed, that substance returns to its original shape. On the contrary, the colonial experience has irredeemably and decisively affected how one can be Japanese; being colonizers and seeing things from the civilizing positionality are not some accidental attributes to Japanese subjecthood. Such qualities as making the Japanese feel superior to other Asians even after the loss of their empire are part and parcel of the essence of Japanese subjecthood, and one will remain caught in the colonial past as long as one refuses to question the mode of identification by which one enjoys the sense of collective confidence as Japanese.

Postcoloniality, therefore, has little to do with what comes after the demise of the colonial reign. It indicates how decisively and irredeemably the fantasy of the colonial relationship is etched in our identities, regardless of whether that fantasy adequately summarizes the collective experience of the past or not. This is to say that the *post* of postcoloniality means the irredeemability of the colonial experience due to which it is impossible to posit some original identity prior to the colonial reign: a collective essential identity not yet contaminated by

the violence of the colonial power relationship.

My concern is with the postcolonial aspects of that identity, namely, Asia. Even though genealogically Asia retains its colonial structure, I do not hesitate to admit that it could well be free of the fantasy of the colonial relationship. So let me examine whether or not the contemporary appraisal of Asian things has dealt with the postcoloniality of this identity. And my examination begins not with Asia but the West, in paradigmatic relation to which Asia maintains its identity.

The West is a mythical construct of a historically rather recent currency, whose unity is increasingly suspect. Compared with the other old uses of this word—or its equivalent in other languages—in which the West bespoke the Western portion of the Roman world after its division into two empires, the so-called New World, or the oceans located furthest west of the Central Kingdom, the West came into general use after the capital originating in Western Europe was perceived to be omnipresent in global colonial domination.

The West is supposed to indicate a certain group of people called "Westerners" in terms of their residential geographies, traditions, race and pedigree. It may appear to be a proper name, and its propriety is often marked by the capitalization of its first letter. Whereas "west" suggests a direction, "the West" (the Occident) retains the denotation of a geographic area in the direction of the setting sun, and accordingly, Asia (the Orient) acquires its directional sense of the rising sun. But it derives from the directional adverb and, since the earth is a globe, there is no fixed location that can be designated by "west," so any point in the world can potentially be called so. The West as the delimitation of "west" must then be diacritically distinguished from that which is not the West, that is, the Rest of the world. Only insofar as it is distinguished and separated from the Rest can it refer to something other than a mere west. In this respect the West is dependent upon how the Rest is determined, and the binary opposition of the West and the Rest prescribes the meaning of this word. Thus the West can be imagined as a fixed and identifiable cartographic referent only when the Rest—particularly Asia, the East and the Orient—is thought of as a fixity.

As a cartographic index, however, it sustains little coherence. What is often overlooked is the undeniable economic, social, cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity that has continued to exist in the geographic areas imagined to constitute the West. The majority of those who live in countries in Western Europe believe themselves to be Westerners, but at the same time some white people in South Africa and Australia, for instance, might also insist that they are "Westerners." Conversely the colored population in North America are rarely recognized as "Westerners," even if the majority of residents in North America have claimed, more frequently perhaps since the end of the Second

03

Relying upon Tanabe Hajime's "Logic of the Species" (*Shu no ronri*) and supporting the Tōjō Hideki government's efforts to construct a multiethnic transnational and regional empire (the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere), Kōsaka Masaaki argued that the concept of ethnicity or nationality (*minzokusei*) was subjective in the Hegelian sense. *Minzoku no tetsugaku* [Philosophy of the Nation] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1942).

World War, that they too are in the West. So it may appear that the West is primarily a racial index rather than a cartographic one; it is closely associated with the racial fantasies of whiteness. But, once again, this assessment contradicts the historical fact that Eastern Europe has been generally excluded from the West, not only during the period of the Cold War but throughout the 20th century. Generally speaking, the racial notion of whiteness is organized loosely enough to allow those groups who would be excluded from being white in other regions in the world, such as certain peoples from the Middle East, to be recognized as such in East Asia or North America. As people move from one place to another, their racial identity may well change. Furthermore, we now know that not only the concept of race in general but also whiteness as a social category is historically so arbitrary that it is hardly an index of a stable identity.

Just like the racial notion of whiteness, the West does not cohere as a concept in empirical knowledge. The unity of the West is far from being unitarily determinable on empirical grounds. The West, therefore, is a mythical construct, which achieves powerful effects on us as it gathers varying and contradicting properties around itself. Yet it is important not to forget that what we believe we apprehend by this mytheme is increasingly ambiguous and incongruous: its immoderately overdetermined nature can no longer be shrouded. This does not mean that the West has ceased to be a reality whose putative objectivity is globally accepted; our senses of the world are still directed by this historical construct. This is why the West must be understood, first of all, as a mytheme which regulates our imagination about how to hierarchically configure peoples and institutions on the world map, and which also functions powerfully as one term of the binary opposition of the West and Asia.

Until a few decades ago, the West was unquestionably perceived to be not only a geographical but also a historical index by means of which it was thought possible to measure how modern a given social formation was in relation to another. It served and still serves as a powerful trope whereby geographic location has been mapped onto the historicist chronology of progress. For many people in many parts of the world well beyond so-called "developed countries," modernization was Westernization, and this formula made it possible for them to entirely overlook a painfully obvious antinomy in the statements that some societies run ahead of others and that those societies are located in the West.

It is safe to say that today the West as an analytic concept is bankrupt and generally useless in guiding our observation about certain social

formations and people's behavior in many loci in the world. It obscures our observation and misdirects our comparison, particularly in the cases of social formations and cultural phenomena encountered in not only cosmopolises such as Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Seoul, Shanghai, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, Beijing, London, Cairo, Bangkok and Jakarta, but also hinterlands in the North American Plain, increasingly depopulated villages in Northeastern Japan, the Midlands in the United Kingdom, and suburban Bangalore. With Japan being customarily located outside the West, can such a sweeping comparison with the West tell you anything unique about Tokyo culture? Does Japanese film demonstrate some distinctively non-Western property or propriety more significant than the fact that what the individual researcher perceives to be non-Western indicates only that the person happens to be unfamiliar with it? Yet the uses of the West and Asia cannot be discarded at whim overnight. For both the West and Asia are subjective in the sense that an ethnic identity is not an objective but a subjective reality.⁹³ Certain people will persist in relying upon these mythemes because they have to fashion themselves in these categories and also by means of their distinction from each other. By positing the West as "over there," away from Asia as "this side," they invent an optic that is Orientalist in reverse. Just like the Orientalist one which posits the Occident as this side and the Orient as over there, this voyeuristic optic re-invigorates a fleeting sense of a distinction between Asia and the West, an ephemeral extenuation for not submitting things Asian to the same analytical fields of investigation as things modern and Western; as if the appreciation of things Asian—which for some miraculous reason are all supposed to be immediately "traditional"—could in due course redeem us from the evils of modernity.

It goes without saying that the discussion of Asian values popular in the 1990s and the recurrent Asian culturalism in a variety of forms are the best testimonies to the persistent existence of postcoloniality in the modes of identification by which people fashion themselves as Asians. These instances tell us that, in these modes of identification, Asia continues to be invoked against the background of the culturalist binary co-figurative schema of the Occident and the Orient. In order to affirm the solidarity of "us Asians," then, we would have to re-confirm the putative unity of the West and remain subordinated to Eurocentrism.

Given the aforementioned schematism of the West and Asia, how can "we" possibly identify ourselves as Asians? The final provocative question I would like to ask, then, is: how can we possibly prevent our self-referential address, "we Asians," from being caught in this binarism or postcolonial genealogy?

Moments of Regionality: Negotiating Southeast Asia

Ahmad Mashadi

Ahmad Mashadi is Head of the National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum). Prior to assuming his current position in 2007, he was Senior Curator at the Singapore Art Museum. He curated and co-curated exhibitions at the Singapore Art Museum including "Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art" (1996), "Telah Terbit (Out Now)" (2006), and "Cubism in Asia" (2006). At the NUS Museum, he has co-curated "Picturing Relations: Simryn Gill and Tino Djumini" (2007), "We" (2007), "Jendela: A Play of the Ordinary" (2008), "Camping & Tramping Through the Colonial Archive: The Museum in Malaya" (2011), and "Archiving Apin: Works and Documents from the Mochtar Apin Collection" (2013). He also curated Singapore participations in the 10th Triennale-India (2000), the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), and the 26th Bienal de São Paulo (2004).

"To regard Southeast Asia as a geocultural category is to negotiate its regionality." This is how Ahmad Mashadi frames the context in which Southeast Asia is placed under conditions of visibility and consideration. This is an important strategy for Mashadi, because it casts Southeast Asia as a subject of study that warrants a reflexive technique of seeing and considering. Furthermore, this Southeast Asia is understood as a potential geocultural category, a subject that makes sense or becomes sensible only in relation to place and social life. In order to put these notions together within a relationship, Mashadi introduces a process of negotiation of its coming together as a region. His choice of "regionality" over "region" is significant; it calls out a process of becoming, perceiving the region not as fully formed but as forming or formative. This is why he stresses that this regionality is "contingent on mechanisms" and requires a "currency of exchange." In this discussion, he acknowledges the forces at work in the formation of a region: colonialism, revolution, nationalism, modernity, authoritarian rule, democratic resistance. It is in this climate that a possible historiography is written, one that dares to speak about a region in a comparative register. Mashadi teases out two moments that weave this regionality: in 1957 when the First Southeast Asian Art Conference and Competition was organized in Manila, and in 1993 when the Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics was held in Manila and the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art opened in Brisbane in Australia. He trains his focus on two historical periods: the post-Pacific War and the post-Cold War. These seminal instances stage a "plurality of internationality" through the making of exhibitions, discourses and institutions so that the region could finally gather.

[PF]

Source: *Crossings: Philippine Works from the Singapore Art Museum* (Makati City: Ayala Foundation & Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2004), 25–37.

Crossings

Philippine Works
from the
Singapore Art Museum



SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

110 RAFFLES PLACE

Ayala MUSEUM

01

Alice G. Guillermo, "Social Concerns in Southeast Asian Art," in *Visions and Enchantment: Southeast Asian Paintings*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2000), 44.

02

Maximo M. Kalaw, *Introduction to Philippine Social Science* (Manila, 1937), 185, quoted by David Joel Steinberg et al., ed., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 280. See also note 13 illustrating the Philippines's ambivalent outlook towards Asia during the 1950s.

To regard Southeast Asia as a geocultural category is to negotiate its regionality. It is not simply a regionality sustained by fluid artistic interactions, exchanges, dependencies and sharing of experiences and ideals, but one that is contingent on mechanisms and instruments that host such encounters—institutions and their practices—encumbered by the contexts and conditions within which they operate. Whether initiated by governments and public institutions or independent entities, concepts of cultural mapping are framed by specific aesthetic and political references. These initiatives are expedient in their response to the nature of international relations—the patterns and shifts in political interactions and prospects. Regionality also requires a currency of exchange. Culture offers itself as a currency that is often seen to be particularly neutral, pliant to the needs of bilateral or multilateral interests. For this, histories and claimed destinies are offered as comparative markers to solicit positions of collectivity. However, regionality need not be seen simply as a desire for an imagined fraternity. Enmeshing practices, histories and ideals into a crucible of dialogue dismantles the frames and assumptions, unpacking national categories and allowing for cycles of formation and deconstruction. Efforts in regionality can be seen as acts that simultaneously shape and reshape configurations of culture and geography, rendering categories dynamic and unstable.

Over the past years, particularly in the decade of the 1990s, we have seen the proliferation of exhibitions on modern and contemporary art of Southeast Asia organized by regional institutions as well as those from places outside the region such as Japan. The concept of Southeast Asia as a coherent cultural entity is largely accepted, but often underpinned by diverse or differing motivations, given the uneven economic and political basis relevant to such undertakings. Earlier mappings—"Nanyang," "East Indies," and "Far East"—project Southeast Asia as a sphere of colonial interests often referenced to nodal centers of power or domination. War and ideological battles further impose other temporary configurations useful in activating strategies and policies. But imposed mappings transact with emerging conceptions of self and attempts to clarify the self within an alliance of selves seen to be sharing similar predicaments and positions. In the 1950s and 1960s, nationalism provided a driving force as newly independent countries sought to share their common colonial histories and aspirations working towards mutual aims. Early political regional frameworks, however, need not be translated into forms of regional artistic actions or collectivization. In the 1950s, given the relative isolation of national practices, Vicente Manansala's transparent-cubism could not have been vigorously compared against the cubo-figuristic styles of the Malaysians Tay Hooi Keat and Syed Ahmad Jamal. Under these circumstances, development of art historiography takes

place within the processes of regional formations over time, which by the 1990s allowed for a more considered reading and appreciation of history. As aptly illustrated by Alice Guillermo, writing for the exhibition "Visions and Enchantment: Southeast Asian Paintings" (2000), "peoples [of Southeast Asia] have shared common historical experiences: colonization, anti-colonial revolution, the Second World War, martial rule and dictatorships. Through the pervasive influence of colonialism, they confronted the issue of national identity and re-examined their cultures, arts and values in the new light of independence."⁰¹ Here, we are able to invest in the works by Manansala, Tay Hooi Keat, and Syed Ahmad a cogency of significance specific to the conditions of modernity, layering them against a declared internationality of universal aestheticism founded in abstraction. Investigations into Southeast Asian art history currently place significant interest on such features identified by Guillermo, for their cogency in framing the diverse artistic developments that took place and the ensuing responses.

Regionality can also be counterpointed by other forms of regionalities. This is not new given that aspects of regional art are explained in relation to other cultures considered seminal in Southeast Asian development—Southeast Asia in parts was Islamized, Christianized, Americanized, Indianized, etc. This creates a sense of ambivalence that keeps opposing and complementary concepts in tension. A Filipino social scientist wrote in the 1930s that the Filipinos were "an Oriental people standing at the portals of Asia, in deep sympathy with its kindred neighbors yet with hands outstretched to the cultures of Spain and America."⁰² Evolving economic and political landscapes nurture the shifts from the old and the emergence of new configurations. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere may have been ill-conceived as a vehicle of political domination during the Pacific War, but by the 1990s we witnessed the rise of Asia-Pacific as a term that resituates Southeast Asia within a new global order of economic prominence and power. Patterns of practice in Southeast Asia are compared across a larger geographical space, profiled in correlation to countries such as Australia, Korea and China. As such, this new task of regionality brings with it differentiated means of reading and examination. For countries such as Australia, configuring the Asia-Pacific through mega-events such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (established 1993) brings with it an added advantage of determining the terms of fraternity. Entry can now be qualified in relation to degrees of negotiated civil liberty and exoticness. Southeast Asian art dynamically configures and reconfigures itself as it alternates between the different platforms of ASEAN and Asia-Pacific.

This essay offers a modest look at moments of regionality in Southeast Asian art, indexed through specific events that took place in Manila. These

events are by no means monumental in scale, but significant as they propose and affirm directions of regional discourse during specific periods of Southeast Asian art history.

Part One: 1957

In keeping with the desire to make Manila the artistic center of Southeast Asia, a Southeast Asian exhibition and competition was launched in the city ... Malaya emerged the winner in the competition, followed by the Philippines. The plan was to make the competition an annual, round-robin affair, but somehow a new Southeast Asian exhibition never materialized. Nonetheless, two important ideas emerged from the competition. The first was that all men are brothers and art transcends all barriers because it is universal. The second—and this may not be as diametrically opposite as it may seem—was a belief in national identity.⁰³

The year was 1957. Writing a chronicle of the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP, established 1948), Purita Kalaw-Ledesma described what perhaps was the first attempt to organize a regional exhibition of modern art. This exhibition, according to Kalaw-Ledesma, is to be seen as part of a larger move towards internationalism, within an environment dominated by the Cold War and American efforts in sustaining political influence over the region and, in particular, the Philippines. Artists represented in the exhibition were emerging modernists, including Manansala, who took one of the prizes. A Pan-Asian Art Conference was held in conjunction with the exhibition. Syed Ahmad, who together with Tay Hooi Keat represented Malaysia, gave his impression of the event:

Malaysia's participation in the Southeast Asian Art Exhibition in Manila in April 1957 was an important step for the state of art in this country, both in terms of recognition from the government and exposure of Malaysian art outside the country.... This was the first important international art exhibition in which Malaysia participated, where works by Malaysian artists were exhibited side by side with those of other countries.⁰⁴

Although based on these statements it would be difficult to suggest artistic and institutional commitment to forms of regionality, we may draw several implications that are useful to estimate attitudes and thinking towards Southeast Asia as a collective entity. Kalaw-Ledesma's reference to universality is not simply confined to the brotherly spirit of artistic encounters, but also to the emergent force of modernism—expressed at the time by modes of abstraction—that swept fervently across

the region, aided by access to Western aesthetic education and the domination of American Abstract Expressionism. While she postulates that there is no contradiction between the pursuit of modernistic aims grounded on an internationalist form of expression and the need to develop national identity and the needs of nationalism, Syed Ahmad was more forceful in making such claims. For him, abstraction was an expression of newly found national independence which itself accommodated the search for national and cultural identities:

The Merdeka [Independence] artists of the fifties and sixties subscribed mainly to the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. The immediacy and mystical quality of the mainstream art of the '60s *appealed* particularly to the Malaysian temperament, sensitivity and culture heritage, and with the tradition of calligraphy found the idiom the ideal means of pictorial individuation.⁰⁵

Syed Ahmad, who himself is an abstract artist educated in London in the late 1950s, could not have made these claims as a neutral observer. Yet the statement is marked by a measured degree of ambivalence. Like Kalaw-Ledesma, Syed Ahmad was also championing the modernist cause through institutional mechanisms of exhibition-making and writing. As in the case of the Philippines, the strife between the modernists and conservatives—those boycotts and walk-outs—had often been highlighted to establish opposing conceptual positions and hence, by implication, declare the virility of the modernists in their articulation of the modern. Syed Ahmad however, was reserved in his claims. Writing in 1982, and having witnessed and participated in the vexing debates on the role and position of art in the construction of nation or community, and the ensuing rise of indigenous interests in artmaking grounded on traditional Malay culture and Islam, he confers on Abstract Expressionism or mainstream art the role of catalyst for departures, enabling new trajectories in art practices, conditioned by social, political needs and interests. For Patrick Flores, writing in 2000, this necessitates that we “recast [abstract art's] ... role from an ‘influence’ of the so-called ‘West’ to a negotiated aesthetic of ‘translocal’ cultures.” Flores regards abstraction “not only as a style or a look or a market integer, but also a specter of struggle of artists and audiences, institutions and imaginations in making art a condition of possibility in the image of the new and its retroactive inheritance.”⁰⁶

In expressing international fraternity, abstraction provides a currency of exchange, and while Southeast Asia forms the intermediate, the principal stage was the biennales.⁰⁷ Artists of the Philippines set their sights quickly, although not without trepidation. A cursory survey of artists participating in international events included Manansala and

3 Purita Kalaw-Ledesma and Amadis Ma. Guerrero, *The Struggle for Philippine Art* (Manila: Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, 1974), 68–69.

04 Syed Ahmad Jamal, “25 Years of Malaysian Art,” in *Seni Lukis Malaysia: 25 Tahun* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1982), n.p.

05 Ibid.

06 Patrick D. Flores, “Reworlding Modernity: Abstract Art in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Visions and Enchantment*, 34, 42.

07 Kalaw-Ledesma remarks that “internationalism ... took the form of a desire to compete with the rest of the world. This was a very subtle trend: to crash the international scene, it was believed that one had to paint in the international style. The feeling grew that the Filipino artist was as good as anyone, and the only way to demonstrate this was to compete in international competitions. Consequently it became the ambition of many Filipino artists to be represented in the biennales.” Flores, “Reworlding Modernity,” 67. Flores's remarks add to this assertion: “At the time, it was customary for Joya, a student of Zoltan Sepeshy, to invoke the names of his exemplars in an interview: Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko and Motherwell from the US; Soulages and Mathieu from France; Tàpies and Saura from Spain.” Ibid., 36.

08

Kalaw-Ledesma, *The Struggle for
Philippine Art*, 68.

—

09

Ibid., 71.

—

10

Emmanuel Torres, "How to Create an
ASEAN Mainstream," in *The Aesthetics
of ASEAN Expressions: A Documentation
of the Second ASEAN Workshop,
Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics*
(Manila: ASEAN Committee on Culture
and Information, 1994), 171.

—

11

Flores's reading of abstraction in
Southeast Asian art best indicates con-
temporary attempts at reframing the
contribution of Asian art to modernity at
large, referenced to colonial and post-
colonial aesthetic education, its currency
in expressing nation and nation building,
its intimacy with art patronage, and its
ability to contain and accommodate the-
matic and figurative interests. See Flores,
"Reworlding Modernity."

—

12

Torres, "ASEAN Mainstream," 172.

—

13

Turnbull assesses the Philippines's
position as a postwar regional leader:
"While the Philippines boasted a nation-
alist movement dating back to the 1870s
and was the first Asian colonial territory
to gain independence—predating even
India in this respect—its ongoing links
with the United States made it spokes-
man and docile ally of that country rather
than an acknowledged pace-setter of
regional nationalism. This was accentu-
ated by the strong social and cultural
influence of the Spanish and American
colonial period, which left a Christian
majority and the largest Western-
educated community in Southeast Asia.
Filipino statements praising the United
States at an Asian Relations Conference
held in New Delhi in March 1947, only
months after the Philippines became
independent, shocked other delegates,
as did a statement at the Manila Treaty
conference in 1954 that Filipinos did not
regard themselves as Asians." See C.M.
Turnbull, "Regionalism and Nationalism,"
in *The Cambridge History of Southeast
Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, vol. 2, *The
Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1992), 593.

Nena Saguil (Spanish-American Biennale, Cuba, 1958),
Napoleón Abueva and José Joya (Venice Biennale,
1962), and Arturo Luz and Lee Aguinaldo (Bienal de
São Paulo, 1971). This partial list included many artists
who were associated with the Philippine Art Gallery
(1950–60)—a commercial gallery that functioned as a
vanguard for progressive modernists of the country,
providing an indication of the range of artists being
selected to represent the Philippines. These partici-
pations were undertaken with considerable cost and
effort. Expectations were high. Venice was a difficult
proposition. Kalaw-Ledesma recalled, "the general
impression was that our entries were lost in the sea
of similar works, each working in the same school of
abstract thought. Our entries did not have originality
... Joya, for example, may have been an outstanding
painter in this country, but in [the] Venice Biennale he
was just one out of many."⁰⁸ São Paulo for one was
seen as an expensive exercise. Disappointed by the
outcome, Arturo Luz reported:

In my opinion the Bienal de São Paulo is a
showplace for the big nations determined to
gain prestige, and [was a] rather expensive
exercise for the small participating nations....
At this stage it might be sensible to ask pre-
cisely what we are after in participating at the
São Paulo Bienal. My own guess is that interna-
tional recognition will come if we win an award
or send an exhibition which is truly original and
outstanding by international standards ... and I
seriously doubt the benefits of such an effort in
relation to the artists and the Philippines.⁰⁹

Striking in these remarks are the prerequisites
of internationality assumed. Many of the Filipino
modernists had studied abroad in centers such as
New York and Paris, choosing to connect with the
"Western avant-garde," according to Eric Torres, in
the "same spirit of Luna and Hidalgo [who] fired their
attempts at making it abroad" over half a century
earlier in Spain and France. Torres continues that it
is "all too typical of countries colonized for as long
as the Philippines has been, that the artist's rightful
ambition is winning international recognition.
This, nationalists would say, is like looking through
the wrong end of the telescope."¹⁰ Abstraction,
regarded in the 1950s and 1960s as a universal
idiom, was strategically preferred in order to
demonstrate artistic and national progressiveness.
Forms of artistic conceptualisms and art historical
contextualization were at their nascent stages of
development. Conditions of colonial legacy, nation
building and social contexts, carefully activated
today in art historical readings to articulate the
dynamism of Southeast Asian abstraction,¹¹
certainly could have featured only as mitigating
circumstances to their perceived lack of originality.
Modern art from Asia would have not been received
in light of colonial discourses and post-colonial
struggles. Torres's view is indicative: "the notion of

'international or mainstream art' is the hegemony
of the West, the myth of Euro-Anglo-American
supremacy, underlying which is a capitalist ideol-
ogy based on domination and power."¹² Under
these circumstances, modern Asian art was often
dismissed as derivative. Framing Luz's observations,
Venice and São Paulo presented challenges for
which achievements could be measured and where
the "original and outstanding" is found wanting.

As a regionalist statement, the 1957 Southeast
Asian Art Exhibition was at best tentative. The series
of exhibitions planned for other cities within the
region did not materialize. This may be explained by
the lack of formal structures of institutions—national
and regional—required to organize and host such
events. Abstract Expressionism as an aesthetic
reference was adopted widely in the Philippines as
elsewhere around the time, but had largely been
read narrowly in relation to the economic and politi-
cal dependency between former colony and former
colonizers. Southeast Asia as geo-political space
was fragmented, as each country in its relative
isolation struggled to articulate concepts of nation-
hood, which did not necessarily preclude a rejection
of the heavy role and influence played by former
colonizers.¹³ The nature of postindependence
patronage between newly independent nations and
their former, colonial masters meant that for coun-
tries like the Philippines, the United States remained
exemplary as both a political and cultural reference.

Part Two: 1993

Fast forward away from the internationalism of 1957
and the heady days of participations in Venice and
São Paulo. It is October of 1993 in Manila, the occa-
sion of the Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition
and Symposium on Aesthetics, organized by the
ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information. By
this time, the political grouping ASEAN (Association
of Southeast Asian Nations)—which was formed in
1967 with its chief aim being the encouragement of
cooperation within the region—had put in place a
range of regional initiatives on culture and the arts.
The symposium was indicative of increased regional
interest in establishing, if not estimating, the level of
cultural congruency between member states, and
in doing so, transcending the political expediencies
that had largely governed regional relations to that
point. The period of the late 1980s and early 1990s
was also significant as it witnessed a proliferation of
artistic and exhibition practices within and outside
the region. The geo-economic map of Asia had been
transformed by post-Cold War optimism and the
meteoric rise of China and East Asia. The collective
emergence of East and Southeast Asia as an eco-
nomic entity also prompted Australia to articulate its
interests both in diplomatic and cultural terms, lead-
ing to the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Triennial
(APT) in 1993.¹⁴ In Southeast Asia, the APT has
been received with excitement. For one, it provides

a new modality in presenting and representing Asian and Southeast Asian art. Creating a network of dialogues between Australian, international and local experts and art historians, the APT provides a collaborative curatorial framework that promotes inclusivity of cultural viewpoints, albeit structured to advance Australia's position in a post-hegemonic world with a "newly de-centered center."¹⁵ The focus on Australia and the APT, from the perspectives of Southeast Asians, can be contextualized in the floundering state of ASEAN-sponsored exhibition practices. This includes the Traveling Exhibition of Painting, Photography and Children's Art. Apinan Poshyananda provides a layered observation about ASEAN and its cultural programs:

— ASEAN is designed to encourage a feeling of enhancing multilateral economic and security cooperation. For the sake of international cultural relations, public diplomacy, and [the] search for homogeneity, common threads within hundreds of different cultures are interwoven to envisage the "Asian family." [The] visual arts have become the vehicle to bind ASEAN linkages into an overlapping and interlocking network. Overzealous and sometimes forceful official art exhibitions among ASEAN [members] are perceived as the outcome of communities with long-lasting comradeship. Therefore, at times socio-political problems among these countries are de-emphasized or sidestepped for the sake of cultural diplomacy.¹⁶

— Away from the "flabby, directionless ... lethargic and tired"¹⁷ ASEAN exhibitions, the APT offers fresh ground for conceptualisms around and about Southeast Asia, despite and in response to the APT's broad geo-cultural frame. Writing in 1996, T.K. Sabapathy used the occasion of the APT to tease out perspectives on Southeast Asian regionality. He asked: "Or is it the case that the mapping of the Asia-Pacific can usefully lead to constituting a mosaic of sub-regions, each having distinct historical demographics [which] yet overlap, abut, with neighboring and even far-flung sub-regions?"¹⁸ To illustrate the potential of this question, he reactivated the question of encounters between Southeast Asian cultures and those from the Indian sub-continent, referencing Ananda Coomaraswamy's studies of Farther India (represented in Coomaraswamy's works by the term "Indonesia"). Sabapathy's motivation surely should not be read as an attempt to reinvigorate a Southeast Asian historiography that privileged India as its originating center. Underlying this historiographical approach is a critique that shares the concerns raised by Apinan Poshyananda quoted earlier. Whereas conceptualisms of regionality are often defined in complicity to the needs of contemporary diplomacy, they can perhaps be only

self-referential in relation to the prevailing concerns of the hosting institutions or organizations, foregoing the discursive possibilities that historical, social and political dynamics may offer.

We return to the 1993 ASEAN symposium. The subject at hand was traditional aesthetics—a search for regional aesthetics and cultural integrity. The choice of theme relates to developments that were taking place in the Philippines and elsewhere in the region, as seen in the practices of Roberto Villanueva, Santiago Bose, Paz Abad Santos and Junyee, and the formation of the Baguio Arts Guild (1987). Yet, as we overlay it against the historical baggage brought about by the disappointments of the 1950s and 1960s, this symposium can be read as continuing efforts to strategize regionality in tandem with the vexing question of internationalism, this time seeking ways in which the hegemony of the West could be circumvented rather than just simply confronted. Quoting Alice Guillermo, Fajardo describes the symposium as "an assertion of the integrity of [the] culture, art and aesthetics of ASEAN countries, [as] part of [the] decolonizing process that puts forward an alternative aesthetic discourse. This independent aesthetics is the primary reason for the symposium."

— This "ASEAN aesthetics" seems to be invoked as a call for cultural solidarity among its member nations, a part of a process of decolonization that hopes to move ASEAN art from being marginal or a footnote to being the main subject. There seems to be an upsurge of art from the region as its artists and art scholars veer away from Euro-American paradigms in an effort to respond to the immediate environment, using indigenous forms, materials and technology.¹⁹

— If the task in the 1950s was to attain international recognition through a demonstration of Asian ability to emulate and connect with an international mainstream as part of an attempt to express the nation and modernity, the 1990s had brought a newly found confidence in locating artistic practices within the regional-local milieu. While it is recognized that the problems of authenticity and origination are complex given issues of hegemony and cultural imperialism, and definitions of high/low art, they can be partly addressed by developing a language and vocabulary based on indigenous aesthetic systems that may be found in traditional forms of expressions. The symposium was structured along three interrelated topics: a survey of traditional aesthetics, emerging contemporary practices, and articulation of strategies in the visual arts. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, one of the participants invited to speak about strategies in artistic practices, outlined several considerations—including the need to situate the message in relation to the inscribed ideas already constituted within the medium itself,

14
Doug Hall explains APT's place in evolving Australia-Asia relations: "In government, diplomatic and trade terms, Australia has always placed emphasis on Asia, but it has never been more openly articulated than now. In the context of this extraordinary public discussion about Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region, including spurious claims that it might aspire to be Asian, lay the challenge in developing the philosophy of the Triennial." Doug Hall, "Preface," in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993), xi. Writing in 1997, Emmanuel Torres wrote, "As for Australia, its 'Asian initiative' is seen as a pragmatic breakaway from its Eurocentric image by identifying with Asian interests (as Australian PM Paul Keating has announced, 'Our future lies with Asia'), quite a turnaround for a nation that had a racist 'White Australia' immigration policy two decades ago." See Emmanuel Torres, "The Pinoy Visual Artist," in *Pananaw: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts* 1 (1997): 14.

15
Apinan Poshyananda celebrates, "the time is ripe for contemporary art to take on a major role in cultural exchange... so, out of all the places in the newly designated de-centered centers, the Asia-Pacific Triennial has been invented for the first time in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia." See Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism; Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)," in Turner, *Tradition and Change*, 5.

16
Apinan Poshyananda, "Traditional Aesthetics in the Visual Arts of Thailand," in *The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions*, 120.

17
T.K. Sabapathy, quoted by Brenda V. Fajardo, "Rethinking ASEAN Aesthetics: An Overview of the Symposium Topics and Discussion of Emerging Issues," in *The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions*, 61.

18
T.K. Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in Southeast Asian Art Historiography," in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996), 13.

19
Fajardo, "Rethinking ASEAN Aesthetics," 64.