INTRODUCTION

HORIKAWA LISA

Imagining "Southeast Asia"

The notion of "Southeast Asia" has been contested, desired and imagined throughout history. From its initial appearance in the 19th century as a geographical entity in maps and travel literature to the establishment of the South-East Asian Command by the Western allied forces in 1943, followed by the conscious post-World War II promotion of a regional concept by its constituent states against the backdrop of the Cold War, and to the current political configuration of ten countries under the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the evolution of the entity that is Southeast Asia reflects the immense malleability of this construct.[1] Given that the term "Asia" is already of heteronomous origin, the dynamics between external and internal, and intra-internal forces have further fed into the imagining and re-imagining of "Southeast Asia."[2]

"Southeast Asia" has served as a framework for developing both the discourse and production of art and networks amongst practitioners and patrons in the region. In 1957, the Art Association of the Philippines (established in 1948) organised the First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition in Manila with participation from the Philippines, Malaya, Vietnam, Indonesia and also countries from South and East Asia. In as early as the 1950s, Singapore also was already a conducive environment for seeing and collecting modern art of the region. Local art groups like the Singapore Art Society were actively holding exhibitions of art from the region. For instance, in 1958 alone, the Society presented shows featuring Indonesian artist Basoeki Abdullah, contemporary Philippine art, Vietnamese lacquer artists, and also an exhibition of photography in Southeast Asia.[3] In a compilation of writings by Koh Cheng Foo (penname Marco Hsu, or Ma Ge) published in 1959 in Chinese under the title "The Beauty of Nanyang," the writer examines the aesthetics of the region by analysing the vernacular traditions of textile, weaving, ceramics and metalwork, concurrently casting his attention on the recent paintings by Indonesian artists such as S. Sudjojono and Affandi with ease (fig. 1).[4] Hence, it is not surprising to learn that Indonesian artworks formed part of the 115 artworks donated by Dato Loke Wan Tho to the Singapore government in the early 1960s: a nascent

1 Cover of *Nanyang zhimei* (The Beauty of Nanyang)

2 *Modernity and Beyond* exhibition (Archival photo) 1996 Image courtesy of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Introduction

Horikawa Lisa

regional outlook was in making.[5] Southeast Asia as a concept was also being promoted in official circles. For instance, in 1963, the Singapore government organised the South-East Asia Cultural Festival to foster closer relations through cultural exchange. The countries that took part were Singapore, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Laos, Malaya, North Borneo (now Sabah), Pakistan, the Philippines, South Vietnam and Thailand. It was the first time that so many countries in the region came together for a single cultural event.[6]

In the decades following the formation of ASEAN, as Cold War politics intensified, more initiatives to promote a sense of regional identity through cultural exchange activities followed. Reflecting on the discussion at the *Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics*, Filipino artist Brenda V Fajardo held that "'ASEAN aesthetics' seems to be invoked as a call for cultural solidarity among its member nations, as part of a process of decolonisation that hopes to move ASEAN art from being a marginal or a footnote to being the main subject."[7] In the same text, she also quoted a comment by a fellow Malaysian artist Redza Piyadasa that "ASEAN art" should aim "to disturb and contribute to international art and should open itself to the public so as not to be perceived as a secret society."[8] These artists' voices attest to the fact that "Southeast Asia," could be effective as a framework in negotiating a space of cultural discourse for the region in the postcolonial era, but it was necessary to avoid being self-limiting by working too much within narrow regional artistic and ideological parameters. As we embark upon establishing a new art museum with a focus on the region, an awareness of the historical malleability of this regional concept and the inherent tensions, incongruity, and dynamics contained within this concept must be embraced as a fundamental basis to its very existence, paradoxical though that may sound.

Exhibiting the Modern Art of Southeast Asia

Whilst the drive for regionalism had been active as aforementioned, the display of modern art of the region has been largely dominated by nation-based framework. Two preceding seminal exhibitions should be considered here as a reference point for our discussion: *Modernity and Beyond* (Singapore Art Museum, 1996), and *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia* (Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997). Marking the opening of the museum in 1996, *Modernity and Beyond* (fig. 2) was the first comprehensive survey of modern art in the region. In the introductory essay of the exhibition catalogue for *Modernity and Beyond*, head curator T.K. Sabapathy noted that "Art writing by Southeast Asians have developed along lines circumscribed by national boundaries […] a glaring consequence of this is the absence of a

3

4

3-4 *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia* exhibition (Archival photos) 1996 Images courtesy of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

regional outlook."[9] Given the discourse of modernism in Southeast Asia was formed in close dialogue with the fledging nationalism in a postcolonial world, it is no surprise that the display and discussion of modern art have largely taken place along national boundaries.[10] The exhibition and the new museum aimed to push the perspective further by exploring possibilities of connection in the art across the region. Organised thematically, artworks from a range of time periods from the 20th century and countries were exhibited together to underline common issues across time and space.[11] This was the first time that a regional approach had been adopted to this magnitude by a museum within the region. In contrast, Fukuoka's approach was a historical survey in which works were organised by country and in a generally chronological manner (figs. 3 and 4). The aim was to highlight the variant unique trajectories taken by the artists of each country.

Whilst these two exhibitions contributed tremendously in advancing the discourse of modern art from Southeast Asia, some critical lessons have been drawn from them; they provide points of reference in the planning of our own exhibition.

For instance, the curatorial decision in *Modernity and Beyond* to display works from a wide time period under overarching themes might have diluted the historical specificity of each artwork. Under such framework, the use of umbrella themes such as "Mythology and Religion" and "Traditions in Tension," which are intended to pinpoint qualities of art specific to the region, runs the danger of "essentialising" the region without unpacking the historicity of each work. Fukuoka's carefully surveyed exhibition which involved leading scholars in each country provided an immensely rich resource, but artworks presented were circumscribed by national boundaries.

Today, the context surrounding the art of Southeast Asia is markedly different – in fact it seems to belong to a different world. Concurrent with the initiatives in the region, the 1990s also witnessed a growing number of exhibitions organised outside the region, most notably in Australia and Japan.[12] The market for modern and contemporary art from Southeast Asia which also emerged with the beginning of art auctions during this period continue to thrive today, growing to an immense scale further facilitated by new systems like biennales, both private and state-led gallery networks, and art fairs. In Singapore, the Singapore Art Museum (established in 1996) and the new National Gallery Singapore will collectively oversee a collection of over 10,000 works, one-third of which are works from Southeast Asia. Even museums like the Guggenheim and the new M+ in Hong Kong have also started to include Southeast Asia in their scope, albeit by mostly collecting works from the region after the "contemporary" turn. The regional networks amongst

artists have expanded, thereby increasing the visibility of artists at international biennales, museums at home and overseas, and community-grounded residency programmes.[13] Whilst contemporary art and artists seem to be at the fore of "international" (Euro-American) attention as indicated by recent group exhibitions staged at the Guggenheim in New York and Palais de Tokyo in Paris, serious discussion, engagement, and exchange of ideas on the modern art and modernity of the region leave much to be desired.[14]

The birth of National Gallery Singapore aims to bring together the resources and knowledge already cultivated by the committed institutions and individuals to lay out a solid platform to generate, interrogate, and imagine the ideas of modern art of Southeast Asia. This of course, in the process of doing so, leads us to rethink the "contemporary" as well. Connecting perspectives on the region allows us to reframe and revise not only the ways we have conceived the art histories of the region, but also global art histories. Hence, as the curators reflected on these past examples, it became apparent that a chronological display paired with a strictly thematised display across the region was a viable direction to take. As an exhibition that sets out to highlight new entry points in exploring the art histories of the region, it was critical for the new display to situate each artwork more specifically to its particular time and space, whilst also locating their shared qualities as well as disparities, taking into account the diversity across the region. Curators also included the 19th century, which was absent from the previous two exhibitions. By acknowledging the 19th century as a critical juncture which signalled a tremendous change to the socio-political conditions and visual culture of the region, the display will further historicise and provide a concrete grounding to our understanding of the emergence of the modern. It is also important to note that our aim is not to present an exhaustive survey with all of the important artists from the region being represented. The exhibition is naturally shaped by National Gallery Singapore's institutional history, its capability in engaging supporters, resources and the current state of research in the field. We aim to provide the foundational grounds on which art and art historiography can continue to evolve and be nurtured by not only ourselves, but by all who partake in imagining and writing the histories of art in this region. Having at last a permanent space dedicated to the display of modern art in Southeast Asia drawn from both the National Collection and key collections within and beyond the region can provide for sustained and deeper explorations and re-examinations of the art of Southeast Asia.

The five chapters that follow provide an extensive discussion of the four themes which highlight the main impulses to art-making in four imbricating time periods: "Authority and Anxiety" (the 19th century to the

beginning of the 20th century), "Imagining Country and Self" (1900s–1940s), "Manifesting the Nation" (1950s–1970s) and "Re:Defining Art" (1970s and after).

The narrative begins with "Authority and Anxiety" by exploring the role of art production in asserting cultural authority in a period of immense social instability brought about by widespread colonisation of the region in the 19th century. "Imagining Country and Self" then highlights the period when art academies as well as formal and informal structures like exhibition societies and spaces were first established in the region, giving rise to the new modern identity of "professional artists." "Manifesting the Nation" is organised along the different perspectives on the art produced from the decades of decolonisation and nation-building to the Cold War period. Works from "Re:Defining Art" mark a turn against conventional and academic definitions of "art," as well as new social commitments with interest in gender, class, identity, and institutional borders.

As discussed earlier, the decision to use the 19th century as an entry point is based on the major impact which the encounter with the "new" had on the art in this region from this period onwards, a quality which in fact continue to be identified through all the time periods in the exhibition. The factors of "new" are conveyed by the four artistic impulses defined for each period. The encounter with the "new" occurred either through the impetus of foreign contact – brought about by processes like trade, colonisation and globalisation – or through internal impulses toward reform, innovation and experimentation. The "new" exists in a dynamic and productive tension with the desire to connect with the local past. Concurrently, the concept of "tradition" is brought into relief by the experience of societal modernisation, while continuities with the past mean that the pre-modern, modern and contemporary are not separate but interdependent spheres. New ideas are contextualised and in constant dialogue with aspects of existing cultures, such as spiritual practice or local material forms. Across the narrative, we also find "tradition" mobilised in various ways such as the representation of emergent nation states, the quest for authenticity and identity, or the deliberate rejection by artists seeking a cosmopolitan mode of representation.

Art is also inextricably linked to the socio-political history of the region as it was used to communicate a range of ideas about anti-colonial and national resistance, political protest and war, and aesthetics. There are complex heterogeneities of temporal-historical developments in each locale. The respective period demarcations devised as an organising structure of the exhibition of course need to be contested and re-examined.[15] Whilst vast diversities within the shared artistic impulses and historical experiences in the region are presented, exceptional cases had to be set aside. The original architectural structure of the permanent

gallery spaces in the former Supreme Court also necessitated the organisation/arrangement of the works into multiple rooms, each under a separate theme. This would have carried the potential risk of conveying the impression of a disjointed narrative, as visitors moved from one room to another. Thus, it was eventually decided that each room would not have a specific thematic title. The intention was to highlight the connections between themes and open up more opportunities for nuanced visitor encounters with the works on display.

An open-ended approach to the exhibition framework was devised through the display of primary sources which had informed the curatorial selection of artists and artworks. The Rotunda on the third level and the corridor space on the fifth level of the former Supreme Court have been designated for the display of such documents. For the inaugural display, the Indonesia Visual Art Archive will be using the materials in their collection as well as responding to the surrounding display in the gallery. This feature will evolve in the coming years through further engagements of regional archiving initiatives which have grown strongly recently, in collaboration with National Gallery Singapore's own Resource Centre.

Creating a multi-layered experience was another critical objective for the curators. Where possible, efforts were made to generate more layers to the display by situating artworks within a wider visual culture sphere through incorporation of visual materials drawn from popular circulation such as film, illustrations, and photographs. The exhibition spaces, particularly the historic courtroom features dating from the inter-war period, were used to advantage in presenting works sympathetic to the setting. This serves as a reflection on the formative process of the white cube aesthetics which has dominated our encounters with artworks.

Between Declarations and Dreams

Finally, I would like to end this reflection by commenting on the title for the exhibition. *Between Declarations and Dreams* is taken from the poem "Krawang and Bekasi" by Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar (1922–1949). In addition to being a founding member of the Indonesian art group "Gelanggang" (Arena), whose work, most notably by Mochtar Apin, will be on display, Anwar is a poet remembered for writing with a sense of acute individualism. This is best represented in a line from one of his most well-known poem "Aku" (Me), from 1943: "I am but a wild animal, exiled even from his own group."[16] Anwar is seen as the epitome of a modern creative individual, someone who transformed "the character of Indonesian poetry, almost overnight, from a dreamy, introspective romanticism to a dynamic, unsentimental and unsparing realism."[17]

"Krawang and Bekasi," written one year before

his death, is a response to the massacre of villagers in West Java by the Dutch colonial forces, thereby giving a voice to Indonesia's struggle for independence. In the poem, "between declarations and dreams" refers to the gap between the desire for independence and its achievement in political terms. He writes:

> Either we died for freedom, for victory, for hope
> Or for nothing.
> We don't know, we can no longer say
> Only you can speak, now
>
> We speak to you out of the evening's
> suspended silence
> When the chest feels empty,
> when clocks tick away time
>
> […]
>
> We are corpses
> Give us meaning
> Keep watch over the line between declarations
> and dreams
>
> Remember, remember us
> who survive only in these dust-covered bones
> Thousands of us, lying between Krawang
> and Bekasi.[18]

"Between declarations and dreams" conveys the position of modern artists in SEA, working between declarations – the historical, ideological or political markers that frame their work, and dreams – the subjective, expressive and creative logics of art. The pull from these polar dynamics seem to resonate with artists across the region. Artists have always acted as agents of declarations and carriers of dreams. Now let us continue to keep watch over that line.[19]

1 Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15 (Mar. 1984): 5; Amitav Acharya, "Imagined Proximities: The Making and Unmaking of Southeast Asia as a Region," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 27 no. 1 (1999): 63–7. For Emmerson, it is possibly in 1839 with the publication of *Travels in South-Eastern Asia* by Howard Malcom that the term was first used. Founded in 1967, Cambodia was the 10th and final country to join the ASEAN in 1999.

2 Sakai Naoki, "Asia: Co-figurative Identification," in *Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 2002), 222.

3 *30th Anniversary Singapore Art Society*, exh. cat. (Singapore: s.n., 1979), unpaginated.

4 Marco Hsu, *Nanyang zhimei* [The Beauty of Nanyang] (Singapore: Qingnian Shuju, 1959). Hsu, also known as Ma Ge (玛戈) in Mandarin, is noted for this strong familiarity with contemporary expressions of the region at this period.

5 Loke Wan Tho (1915–1964) was a film tycoon and owner of Cathay Organisation who was also known for his interest and practice as a photographer and as a patron of art.

6 Jennifer Lindsay, "Festival of Politics: Singapore's 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day & Maya H.T. Liem (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010): 227– 45.

7 Brenda V. Fajardo, "Rethinking ASEAN Aesthetics: An Overview of the Symposium Topics and Discussion of Emerging Issues," in eds. Nicanor G. Tiongson and Jovenal Velasco, *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), 64.

8 Ibid., 61. Redza Piyadasa was responding to a query about his vision of ASEAN art projects at symposium in Kuala Lumpur on 6 October 1993. The symposium was titled "The ASEAN Project: The Future or Bust."

9 T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction," in *Modernity and Beyond*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 8.

10 This situation of the dominance of national based art historiography is shared to a certain extent with East Asia. Exhibitionary practice to re-examine such framework has been visible in Korea, Taiwan, Japan and China with ambitious attempts in seeking to re-connect and re-map the modern art histories across the region.

11 The themes were: "Urbanism and Popular Culture," "Traditions of the Real," "Modes of Abstraction," "Mythology and Religion," "Traditions in Tension," "The Self and the Other," and "Nationalism, Revolution and the Idea of the Modern."

12 Australia's Asia-Pacific Triennial and *New Art from Southeast Asia 1992* organised by Japan Foundation are some of the examples.

13 For more on this subject, refer to Nora Taylor, "Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography," *Art Journal* 70:2 (Summer 2011): 6–23.

14 No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (22 February 2013 to 22 May 2013) and Secret Archipelago at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (27 March 2015 to 15 May 2015).

15 The artistic impulse largely shared across may not be applicable or may not have happened concurrently in other contexts. The task remains for us to develop a methodology that allows us to engage and articulate such moments and disjuncture in the narrative(s).

16 Chairil Anwar, "Me," in *The Voice of the Night: Complete Poetry and Prose of Chairil Anwar*, trans. Burton Raffel (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993), 19.

17 Ian Caldwell, review of *The Voice of the Night: Complete Poetry and Prose of Chairil Anwar*, trans. Burton Raffel, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, No. 2 (Sep. 1994): 435.

18 Chairil Anwar, "Krawang and Bekasi," 123–5.

19 The core curatorial team of the Southeast Asia Gallery consisted of Low Sze Wee, Adele Tan, Phoebe Scott, Clarissa Chikiamco, Syed Muhammad Hafiz and myself. The development of the narrative and exhibition design took almost three years, extending back to 2012, with preceding research and preparation work undertaken by Seng Yu Jin, Joyce Fan and Adele Tan in the initial phase. Adjunct curators involved in curatorial feedback and support were Patrick D. Flores, and Aminudin H. Siregar, both playing advisory roles. Numerous other scholars and specialists in the field provided invaluable guidance, for which we are grateful.