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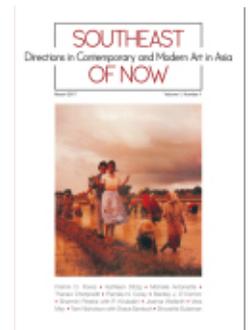
Introduction

Vera Mey

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Introduction

Vera Mey

At an undisclosed location in Singapore, artist Shooshie Sulaiman has carved the faces of various Southeast Asian postcolonial political figures into found rubber trees. Their faces hauntingly stare out from the woods as a reminder of past victories, democracies, dictatorships and failures. These include the iconic figures Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohamad and Sukarno who are attributed with transforming their countries to independence but who in equal measure left behind ambivalent legacies. Rubber has been fundamental to the Southeast Asian economy as a main export from the region to the world. Currently Malaysia is the world's sixth-largest producer of natural rubber after Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, China and India. It was through the development of rubber plantations that structures of systemic slavery and industry were introduced and in relation to these processes and the movement of labour involved that where new forms of multiculturalism emerged.

In the initial project proposal, Sulaiman wanted to transport nine seedlings of rubber from Malaysia to Singapore. Upon further research carried out by an international rubber organisation based in Kuala Lumpur, it was discovered that in order for the trees to make it across the causeway, Sulaiman would need permission from Malaysia's Minister of Agriculture. Her gesture in attempting to transport these trees references the first nine seedlings reputed to arrive in Malaysia via colonial channels through the port city of Singapore in the 1870s. Sulaiman, who worked closely with collaborator I Wayan Darmadi, titled the work *Getah Bening* (2015), an Indonesian term for the lymph. This is a suggestive metaphor as the lymphatic system works in the human immune system by circulating oxygen and nutrients, draining waste and combating infections, but also sometimes by spreading pathogens and cancerous cells. This potential

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for a contradictory effect is part of the concept of the piece, as Sulaiman explains:

Getah Bening is an Indonesian term for lymph. Indonesia also considers it as Lymphoma Cancer. Metaphorically it is similar. What we did to the rubber trees has similar impact visually and technically. Only spiritually we tried to accord with the nature as our true intention. We were very aware that the collaboration in producing the artwork may receive negative vibes in Indonesia. But as an artist I convinced Darmadi that we collaborated not only in the positive side but also the negative side of the manipulation of nature. The collaboration is a kind of a reminder for us about the 'inverted overlapping' position in every living nature. Never to settle with positive elements only. We need to expect every positive manner will manifest into some negative act. Contradiction is the best knowledge. The trees were able to colonize the landscape and ancient knowledge. Such prominent entity, *Getah Bening* is also something related to our issues between craft and art, artists and artisans. Both are commodity slaves.

For this inaugural issue of *Southeast of Now*, there is a heightened awareness of these contradictions in conforming to a concept of, yet resisting a notion of, region. The two works accompanying this issue explore these shifting historical tides which place figures from the region in a quasi-heroism, earned by power and reverence along with fear.

The first example is a collaboration between Australian artist Tom Nicholson with Indonesian curator Grace Samboh in the video work *Towards Figures of Dedication, and a Flood* (2015), an elaborate and detailed interview of Sukarno's most trusted sculptor Edhi Sunarso. He was an artist commissioned by Sukarno to create monuments as part of Jakarta's independence era and city beautification including the *Selamat Datang* Monument (1962). He is also the artist behind the dioramas in the museum underneath Monas or the National Monument in a museum called History of National Struggle Museum. Artist Tom Nicholson explains in the video piece: "In 1965, not long after Sunarso presents the final set of drawings to be made into dioramas, President Sukarno is removed from power." Sunarso is interviewed on his adjustment to a radical rewriting of history in relation to planned displays of Sukarno's brilliance, only to experience an abrupt change of government to the Suharto regime via coup d'état in 1965.

Included in this issue of the journal is a transcript of this video, translated into English which still dominates as the lingua franca across the region for

the circulation of various texts. The process of reading the transcript reveals a methodology of consultation in the building of the museum dioramas, common in nation-building narratives. We are also privy to a revelation in the representation of a sick or dying figure: someone who was understood to represent independent leader Sukarno but was really the then leader Suharto.

Not long after the interview was conducted, in January 2016, Pak Edhi Sunarso passed away, reminding us how crucial this research continues to be, whether it masquerades through an artwork or historical research.

BIOGRAPHY

Vera Mey is an independent curator and a PhD candidate at SOAS, University of London. She was part of the founding team of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore led by Ute Meta Bauer—a contemporary art research centre of Nanyang Technological University—as Curator, Residencies. She was Assistant Director of AUT University's ST PAUL St Gallery in Auckland, New Zealand from 2011–14. For 2013, she was the convener of the AUT University Master of Arts Management Curatorial Strategy programme. Her curatorial projects include: *The Disappearance* (2014), NTU CCA Singapore; *FIELDS: an itinerant inquiry across the Kingdom of Cambodia* (2013) co-curated with Erin Gleeson, SA SA BASSAC; *Invisible Energy and In Spite of Ourselves: Approaching Documentary* (2012) at ST PAUL St Gallery and The Dowse Art Museum, Wellington. In 2015–16 she joined *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art*, a research initiative of the Getty Foundation. She is currently on the curatorial team of *SEA Project*, an exhibition due to open in July 2017 at the Mori Art Museum and National Art Centre Tokyo.