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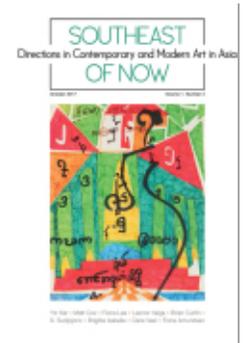
Rites of Change: Artistic Responses to Recent Street
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Fiona Lee

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Rites of Change:

Artistic Responses to Recent Street Protests in Kuala Lumpur

FIONA LEE

The past decade has witnessed the revival of street protest culture in Malaysia. This new wave of demonstrations arguably began in 2007, when the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) mobilised an estimated 30,000 people to march for the rights of a religious—and racialised—minority against government policies that favour *bumiputera* Malays.¹ Since then, street protests have been organised by a wide variety of groups and have become an increasingly common feature in Malaysia's political landscape. The most prominent of them are the Bersih [Clean] marches organised by a coalition of non-government organisations calling for ballot reform to ensure fair elections; to date, there have been five such rallies, each of which mobilised tens of thousands of participants. Coinciding with the early years of this new wave of protests were the general elections of 2008 and 2013, which saw record voter turnout and an unprecedented number of seats won by the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, breaking the political stronghold held by the ruling ethno-nationalist party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), since independence. Along with these political developments, the resurgence of protest culture was seen as signalling a rise in civic participation and an indication of Malaysia's maturing democracy.

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Yet, by 2015, if not sooner, it had become readily apparent that protests were not necessarily grassroots-based movements, but a site of power jostling for politicians in the wake of leadership crises affecting both the ruling party and the opposition coalition. For example, in August of that year, the former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Siti Hasmah, made a surprise appearance at a Bersih-organised protest that demanded the resignation of current premier Najib Razak, following revelations that the latter had embezzled 2.6 billion Malaysian ringgit (US\$700 million) worth of public funds through the sovereign wealth corporation, 1MDB. The irony of their presence at the protest could not be understated given Mahathir's earlier pronouncements that street demonstrations are inherently violent and not a part of Malaysian culture,² and the fact that the rally they attended took place in the same site as the Reformasi protests of the late 1990s, which directly challenged his administration's authoritarian rule. When asked by reporters about what she thought of the protests, Siti Hasmah declared, "*Ini kuasa rakyat*" [This is people's power], evoking the Philippines' People Power Revolution of the 1980s that unseated the corrupt Marcos regime.³ Her pronouncement not only revealed that the idea of protests as inherently signalling progressive democratic change is a romantic one, it also showed that this very sentiment had become a means for politicians across the spectrum to hijack and redirect the popular energies and attention generated by protests toward their own political agendas.

How have artists—broadly construed to mean writers, graphic designers, performance artists, theatre makers as well as various other arts and cultural practitioners—responded to street protests in Malaysia? In what ways have street protests shaped their artistic practices and political positions? How might these artists' responses be read to make sense of the complex political terrain that the street protest has become or, rather, has always been? This article addresses these questions by considering three artists who have actively and prominently engaged with street protests in a variety of ways: A. Samad Said (b. 1935) or Pak Samad, as he is often called; Sharon Chin (b. 1980); and Fahmi Reza (b. 1977). What perhaps sets them apart from the many other artists who have also participated in and produced works in conjunction with mass demonstrations is the degree of public visibility and prominence that they have respectively attained, whether it is through Pak Samad's public stature as *Sasterawan Negara* [National Literary Laureate], Chin's participation in the international, high-profile Singapore Biennale in 2013, and Fahmi's skilful use of social media networks to garner public and media attention. Their public visibility affords them a wider sphere of influence that enables us to more easily track the effects of the street protest,

insofar as it has shaped these artists' profiles and works in the various arenas of cultural representation—specifically, the Malay language and literary scene; the global contemporary art scene; and the activist and street art spaces—where they reside.

Although these artists constitute a narrow set, their responses to street protests comprise different modalities of expression and critique. All three artists may share a similar stance in their critique of the ruling government; however, their positions and tactics are by no means identical and reveal differing assumptions about the relationship between culture and political change. Moreover, given that these artists are situated in and simultaneously inhabit multiple publics, analysing their work occasions the opportunity to unpack the shifting meanings of protest in different sites, and how forms of dissent change as they move from one point to another. The point here is not just that political resistance is not homogeneous in kind, but that the diverse range of artistic responses might be read to reveal which forms of political dissent are made possible and which are constrained by contemporary historical conditions.

Working within the protracted time frame of academic writing and publishing intensifies the challenges of capturing the quickly changing grounds of the historical present. This article began as a conference paper that was presented two years ago⁴ and, since that time, the artists' responses I analysed have acquired new significance in light of the events during the interim period and the different directions the artists have taken in their careers. Indeed, the meanings of their work might well have shifted again by the time this piece is published. This effort of analysing responses, the significance of which continues to be written and rewritten over time, is akin to the Egyptian scholar Samira Mehrez's likening of attempts at making sense of the uprisings in Cairo as they happened to the "perilous task" of translating a text that had yet to be finished.⁵ However, the peril lies not so much in the fact that one's analysis may appear outdated or that time may prove one wrong. Despite its promise of progressive change, revolutions do not always deliver on that front hence the peril of attempting political change.

The artists' responses I examine below might also be thought of as acts of translation in that they engage in acts of resignification or of transferring acts and icons of protest from one site to another. Pak Samad resignifies the use of the Malay language as an ethno-nationalist symbol through his participation in street protests as National Literary Laureate, thereby articulating Malay political subjectivity anew. Sharon Chin recreates the process and social dynamics involved in staging a mass action in the contemporary art biennale. Fahmi Reza appropriates western icons of protest for the local activist scene.

If the metaphor of translating an unfinished text also suggests that political change is an ongoing task that extends beyond the singular event of the street protest, then these artists might be viewed as continuing the work of creating political change in the multiple spaces that they inhabit. In examining these three cases, my aim is to consider the different forms of political dissent that have emerged through and beyond the street protests, their affordances and limitations, as well as the conditions that make them possible.

The Artist as Symbolic Figure

In 2011, National Literary Laureate A. Samad Said or Pak Samad joined the Bersih 2.0 coalition and was appointed alongside the lawyer Ambiga Sreenevasan as its co-chair.⁶ Pak Samad's involvement in Bersih is an indication of how the coalition mobilised artists as symbolic figures to garner broad-based support. Whereas another prominent member of the Bersih 2.0 steering committee, Hishamuddin Rais, the dissident arts practitioner known for his social activism during the late 1990s Reformasi period, helped to attract anti-establishment types to the cause, Pak Samad's involvement legitimised the protests for those working alongside state cultural institutions. Created in 1981, the National Literary Laureate title is the highest honour awarded exclusively for achievements in Malay literature and not in other languages. The title thus reflects the prescription espoused by the National Cultural Policy formulated ten years earlier, which designated Malay culture as the core essence of Malaysian identity, notwithstanding the diverse ethno-linguistic make-up of its citizenry. Given the symbolic significance of his title, Pak Samad's participation in Bersih, a movement that concertedly presents itself as representative of the nation's multiracial milieu, signifies an attempt at rearticulating Malay political subjectivity.

In order to unpack the cultural and political significance of Pak Samad's participation in Bersih, it is important to consider his involvement in adjacent struggles concerning the Malay language as well. From an organisational standpoint, Pak Samad's involvement in the Bersih 2.0 coalition stems from his capacity as the representative of the Movement to Abolish PPSMI (Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI, or GMP), an organisation opposed to the Education Ministry's PPSMI policy of switching the instructional medium of science and mathematics in national schools from Malay to English.⁷ On 7 March 2009, the GMP mobilised a street protest in Kuala Lumpur against the policy, one that was attended by notable Malay literary figures, including Pak Samad. While the GMP's decision to take to the streets may reflect the spirit of the times, given the numerous protests staged in the capital city in recent years,



FIGURE 1: Members of the Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia [National Association of Islamic Students in Malaysia] holding a coffin sculpture to reference the 1967 Keranda 152 protests at the 2009 Anti-PPSMI demonstration. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keranda_152.jpg, 9 March 2009 [accessed 3 October 2016]. Photographer unknown

the movement also traces its historical lineage to mass protests that date back to the pre- and post-independence periods of the late 1940s and late 1960s. Given that Pak Samad constitutes a link between these two distinct movements, one for electoral reform and the other for securing the national language status of Malay, his participation in both allows us to situate Bersih within a longer history of mass demonstrations, as well as makes visible how the street protest has long served as an important site for the articulation and resignification of Malay political subjectivity.

Participants of the anti-PPSMI rally linked the protest to the Keranda 152 demonstration of 3 March 1967, as evidenced by the presence of a sculpture of a coffin (*keranda* in Malay) at the 2009 protests (Figure 1). The Keranda 152 demonstration was staged at the Balai Budaya, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (National Literary Agency) in Kuala Lumpur in response to the 1967 enactment of the National Language Act, which effectively extended the recognition of English as an official language in the judicial and legislative branches of government. The extension violated the promise made during independence

from British rule in 1957, in which the provision for the use of English in governance to facilitate a smooth transition of power would be temporary, and that Malay would be the sole official medium after ten years. Using the coffin as a symbol of protest, Keranda 152 demonstrators viewed the extension as auguring the death of the Federal Constitution's Article 152, which recognises Malay as the official national language.

Whether in 1967 or 2009, both protests emerged in response to state policies that threatened to stifle the use of Malay, reducing the national language in one of the branches of government to a mere emblem of postcolonial sovereignty. In the case of the former, the continued recognition of English as an official language indicated reluctance on the part of the governing elite to undertake the work of cultural decolonisation by doing away with the former colonial master's tongue in favour of using the national language.⁸ In the latter, the idea that switching the instructional medium for science and mathematics to English is necessary to achieve the country's economic development goals is based on the assumption that Malay is inadequate as a language of knowledge production and scientific progress. However, while these concerns are by no means inherently aligned with ethno-nationalist cultural ideology, these protests have also served as vehicles for inciting and expressing Malay supremacist sentiments.⁹ This point is arguably expressed in Redza Piyadasa's mixed media installation, *13 May 1969* (Figure 2). The title of the work refers to the date of the deadly racial riots between Chinese and Malays in Kuala Lumpur, an event that paved the way for the passing of the Malay ethno-nationalist cultural policy in 1971 mentioned earlier. The installation features a black coffin, with parts of the Malaysian flag painted on it, standing upright on a square-shaped mirror on the floor to reflect an image of the emblem shattered into fragments. Its appropriation of Keranda 152's symbol may be read to suggest that the protests against the so-called death of the national language had brought on, intentionally or otherwise, the demise of a pluralist notion of Malaysian culture.

As both these protests and the artistic responses they generated suggest, the invocation of the Malay language as a symbol of national sovereignty is conflated with an affirmation of Malay ethno-nationalist cultural ideology. Viewed in light of this historical background, Pak Samad's involvement in Bersih and his evolving political position as a result can be understood as an effort to disarticulate the Malay language from its ethno-nationalist significance. His attempt to disaggregate the two was already noticeable at the January 2007 launch of the GMP's campaign against the PPSMI, where he was seen holding a placard saying, "*Jangan Bunuh Bahasa Ibunda*" [Don't Kill the Mother Tongue].¹⁰ The use of the term *bahasa ibunda* [mother tongue] instead



FIGURE 2: Redza Piyadasa, *13 May 1969* (1970, reconstructed 2006). Acrylic on plywood and mirror. On display at the National Gallery Singapore. Collection: Singapore Art Museum. Source: Sunitha Janamohanam

of the usual *bahasa kebangsaan* [national language] not only suggests a subtle ideological shift, that is, language not as ethno-nationalist symbol, but as representing cultural heritage. It also recognises that Tamil- and Chinese-medium national schools are similarly opposed to the PPSMI policy and seeks to build solidarity across different linguistic communities. Though significant, the subtle intervention of this point may have been drowned out by the protest's religious overtones, its gathering point at the National Mosque and strong support by Islamic groups, revealing its ethno-nationalist tenor.

If the anti-PPSMI movement is unavoidably associated with ethno-nationalist ideology even though not all of its supporters necessarily subscribe

to it, the Bersih rallies offer a multiracial platform through which to rearticulate Malay subjectivity. The Keranda 152 protests were notable for inspiring poetry¹¹ and, befitting his role, Pak Samad wrote a poem, *Unggun Bersih*, to commemorate the announcement of the second Bersih rally in 2011.¹² As its title suggests, the poem figures the movement as a purifying or cleansing flame and sounds a call to spread this moral fire to counter the current state of democracy, described as wounded, grievous and arrogant (“*demokrasi luka*”; “*demokrasi lara*”; “[d]emokrasi yang angkuh”).¹³ Assuming the collective voice of “we” (“*kita*”), the speaker of the poem laments the “abuse” (“*dera*”) it suffers from the “burning coals” (“*bara*”) of the current political situation, and vows to persist in its call for independence (“*kita laungkan juga pesan merdeka*”). The poem thus implies that the work of independence remains incomplete and articulates a desire for a more enlightened democracy (“*demokrasi sebenderang mentari*”) and a purer voice of freedom (“*suara bebas yang utuh*”).

Curiously, the poem invokes Sam Adams and the Boston Tea Party, a key event in bringing about the American Revolution, as an example that imparts the following lesson for Bersih protestors: “Riotous shouts are unnecessary;/ only a noble fire is needed” (“*Tak perlu gempita sorak yang gebu;/diperlu hanya ungun api yang syahdu*”). While the reference to the American Revolution reinforces the problematic assumption that Malaysia lags behind the West in its political development, what is intriguing is its invocation to delineate what is needed and not needed in the struggle towards democracy. The dismissal of “riotous shouts” as “unnecessary” is contrasted with the image of “a noble fire” to emphasise the moral high ground on which Bersih stands. This rhetorical move is likely a response to ministers and government officials’ claims that sought to undermine Bersih by emphasising the illegality of the march and by insinuating that the protest would incite violent retaliation, often by invoking the 13 May 1969 race riots. That the poem serves as an attempt to counteract this racially inflammatory discourse is further underscored by the fact that it was recited at the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Chinese Assembly Hall, where the launch event was held, thereby conveying the message that Bersih is an expression of solidarity across different racial groups.

However, Pak Samad’s participation in Bersih is not significant simply because he affirms the movement’s multiracial support. Rather, his role in leading the 2011 march to the National Palace reveals the extent to which the symbolic structures that uphold the special position of Malays have eroded. This point appears counter-intuitive given that Pak Samad’s purpose—to deliver a petition to the King, whose role it is to safeguard the Malays’ special position, requesting a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the electoral process

—seemed contradictory to the movement’s own claim of representing a people-centred democracy.¹⁴ The full significance of this event comes to light if one recalls that the grounds for the relationship between the King and his Malay subjects, as articulated in the Federal Constitution, were laid in part through the anti-colonial mass demonstrations of the late 1940s. Led by the then newly formed United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which remains the ruling party to date, the protests were also directed at the Malay Rulers, who were deemed to have betrayed their subjects by cooperating with the British to form the Malayan Union, a federal entity that recognised non-Malays as citizens of equal standing with Malays. As Ariffin Omar argues, this accusation of betrayal marked a revolutionary shift in Malay political thought. Whereas to question the actions of the King was previously tantamount to treason, UMNO now claimed that the people had the right to do so because the King was not just an embodiment of state sovereignty, but—and this is what is new—that he also bore the responsibility of representing the will of the people.¹⁵ The protests succeeded in dissolving the Malayan Union and restoring the special position of Malays in the Federation of Malaya. As such, UMNO’s historical claim to power was thus legitimised on the premise that it could mediate between the King and his Malay subjects as its true representative.

Pak Samad was ultimately denied an audience with the King, having braved tear gas and water cannons only to be halted 200 metres from the palace by the police. This outcome was arguably expected given that he had also been involved in a similar attempt during the 2009 anti-PPSMI rally that ended in the same way. Viewed in relation to an older history of protests, the state’s prevention of its National Literary Laureate to exercise his historical right to speak to the King signalled that the relations between the monarchy, ruling government and Malay subjects had fundamentally broken down. That this scenario was, perhaps strategically, replayed at the Bersih protest highlights the impasse at which Malay political representation has arrived. Yet this crisis also brings with it an opportunity to redefine Malay political subjectivity. In 2015, Pak Samad joined the Democratic Action Party, an opposition political party with a predominantly Chinese membership, effectively breaking ranks with the Malay establishment on either side of the political divide. At the same time, he has remained actively involved in opposing education policies that diminish the role of Malay in national schools. These public stances might be read as an effort to dissociate the struggles concerning Malay language with ethno-nationalist ideology, as well as to embody a new form of Malay political subjectivity that refuses to identify with its historic special position status.

Given his status as National Literary Laureate, Pak Samad added new layers of political significance to the protests in which he participated. However, in seeking to rewrite the symbolic meaning of his honorary title, he saw it necessary to do so by entering into mainstream politics. While his decision may be a bold move as it goes against the race-based logic that largely shapes the party system, it nonetheless suggests that art derives its political nature from mainstream politics, rather than independently of it. In other words, art is subsumed under state and party politics, rather than seen as having the capacity to redefine the political on its own terms.

Mass Action and the Contemporary Art Biennale

The work of Sharon Chin provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between contemporary art institutions and current political events, specifically, how the former provides a space and epistemological framework for making sense of the latter. Chin is an active participant in the political activist scene in Malaysia, having attended protests, designed agitprop for various political causes and volunteered in civil-society efforts such as being an election observer. Informed by these experiences, her artwork engages with her country's cultural and political issues, and circulates in both the local and international contemporary art scenes.

Of Chin's works, *Mandi Bunga* (2013), a collaborative performance project commissioned for the fourth Singapore Biennale, most explicitly addresses and emerges from her experiences attending street protests. The work's title literally translates as "flower bath" and refers to a ritual practised by many communities in Southeast Asia using water mixed with a concoction of fragrant flowers. The bath is generally thought of as a superstitious practice performed to ward off bad luck or evil spirits; to bring about change, especially after a spell of misfortune; or to attract a romantic partner, but has also been known for its medicinal healing purposes. The staging of the collaborative performance recreated the elements involved in organising political protests—inviting members of the public to participate via social media; gathering people in a designated space to perform a mass action; and encouraging people to document and share their experiences. For the project, participants signed up for a workshop to decorate yellow sarongs to be worn during the performance, in a manner similar to how one might gather before a street protest to make placards. On the performance day, 26 October 2013, over 100 sarong-clad participants gathered at the Singapore Art Museum and marched through the streets to the nearby front lawn of the National Museum of Singapore, where tubs and botanical accoutrements were laid out, to perform

the bathing ritual. Instant cameras were handed out to several participants to document the event and these photographs were subsequently displayed at the Singapore Art Museum to commemorate the performance.

Mandi Bunga was borne out of Chin's reflections on her participation in Bersih rallies. She describes her experience attending the protests on her blog as follows:

My experience with Bersih left me both energised and confused. It called itself a people's movement, but didn't consult with the people. Instead, it had charismatic heroes and leaders who negotiated with kings—the 'people' were alternately the bargaining chip or trump card in a high stakes poker game. And yet, the experience of being on the street with a sea of fellow citizens was indescribable ... a glimpse of human solidarity and brotherhood, mingled with the smell of sweat and blood.¹⁶

In conceptualising the participatory performance art piece, Chin sought to explore what it means to exercise individual agency within a collective action, believing that it is the treatment of the masses as an undifferentiated whole that made them readily exploitable by movement leaders and politicians. As stated in the *Mandi Bunga* zine, which was circulated as part of the performance, the project aims to address the following questions: "What does it mean to do something alone? What does it mean to do something together? How can we be ourselves together?" (Figure 3). If the Bersih protests failed to live up to its expectations as a people's movement because it elevated certain individuals above the rest, then the performance would instead affirm the individuality of those who make up the crowd. Accordingly, the performance facilitated participants to create personalised designs of their sarongs; freely interpret how to go about the bathing ritual, itself a private act performed in public; and share their own reflections of the event on social media. These elements of the performance would, in turn, enable participants to exercise their own agency while collectively coming together to realise the artist's vision.

The Singapore Biennale thus served as a laboratory of sorts, a space in which to experiment with staging mass action that was not directed from the top down, but a genuine synergy of both the artist (a parallel figure to the movement leader) who choreographed the performance and the participants (that is, the masses) who made it happen. Yet, in providing a controlled environment that enabled the performance to successfully proceed as planned, the biennale also effectively stripped the performance of any political significance in relation to the protests in Malaysia. Although the significance



FIGURE 4: Singapore's *The Straits Times* (27 October 2013) features a photo of Sharon Chin, holding a flag, and participants of *Mandi Bunga*, marching through the streets. Source: <http://sharonchin.com/all-the-things-i-did-in-2013/> [accessed 3 October 2016]

instrumentalist use of contemporary art both as a means of raising Singapore's profile as a global city for the arts and as a means of softening its image as an authoritarian regime.¹⁹ Indeed, a cynical view might posit the work as embodying a definition of contemporary Southeast Asian art that befits the city-state's agenda, one that takes on the trendy form of participatory art and superficially alludes to current news event without stirring up too much controversy, while at the same time indulging Singapore's leisure class in the pleasures of art making.

It is perhaps for these reasons that critics have taken issue with Chin's incorporation of a Southeast Asian folk practice into her performance. In her review of the performance, Zarina Muhammad sees *Mandi Bunga's* invocation of a ritual of "magico-religious nature" as "deeply problematic".²⁰ The participants' probable ignorance of the ritual's deep cultural roots and rich historical significance, as I understand Zarina to be saying, risks reducing the performance to an act of cultural appropriation. The problem here is neither that the participants are called upon to perform a cultural ritual not their own nor that they were given licence to make it their own. Rather, the performance's desire to emphasise individual autonomy effectively diminishes the fact that the ritual is believed to possess a supernatural potency and,

depending on the specific ingredients used, can be concocted to bring spiritual protection or to attract a romantic partner. Were the participants and audience aware of these facts, the reviewer asks and, indeed, does it even matter whether or not they believed in the ritual's potency? At the heart of Zarina's concern is how a ritual like the flower bath is situated within the conceptual, historical frame of contemporary art. Such rituals are often relegated to the realm of premodern superstition and deemed a traditional cultural practice, rather than as inhabiting the modern, contemporary world.

While the review's concerns are valid, the performance's use of the flower bath ritual nonetheless offers us new ways of thinking about the significance of street protests in contemporary times. By linking the flower bath to Bersih, Chin's *Mandi Bunga* invites us to conceptualise the street protest as a kind of magico-religious ritual. "Can flower, fruit, leaves and herbs effect change?" Zarina's question registers the simultaneous doubt and desire to believe.²¹ These feelings are also palpable when we ask, "Can street protests effect change?" In raising this question, my point is not to give credence to those who denounce Bersih demonstrations as illegal or illegitimate because there are alternative, more viable means for seeking political redress. The practice of magico-religious rituals may be seen as a sign of helplessness and desperation, and considered to be irrational because no reasonable explanation can be provided for how they work—if they work at all. Yet, taking to the streets—like people in Malaysia and around the world have done—actually constitutes a rational response when the very political institutions designed to serve the public have not only failed to be accountable, but are perpetuating the very conditions of crisis that give rise to protest. The magico-religious ritual of street protest may be a kind of last resort, but it also mitigates the paralysis of inaction. It is an action that culminates from the belief that change is—and has to be—possible.

To see the street protest as a magico-religious ritual is to recognise the importance of being open to the unknown, the unpredictable, in bringing about social change. Along these lines, we might consider the following description by scholar and activist Marina Sitrin of the role of protest movements in reimagining what democracy should be and look like, noting in particular the presence of uncertainty embedded in such work:

[Protest movements] are our collective refusal to remain passive in an untenable situation. And so we pull the emergency brake, freeze time, and begin to open up and create something new. *We are not even sure what that something is.* We know we want to create open space. What that looks like we are discovering together, as we create,

which is also how we create: together, horizontally and with affect. What we are doing and how we are doing it are inextricably linked, and both are part of this prefigurative movement.²²

Sitrin borrows Walter Benjamin's image of pulling "the emergency brake" on the onrushing "locomotive of world history" to describe the wave of political protests that have occurred in the last few years.²³ In so doing, she underscores the importance of pausing—of interrupting the mindless mechanical actions that have produced the "untenable" present—in altering the course of history. This act of pausing is not passive, but a creative one precisely because it is an opportunity to reorder social hierarchies into horizontal ties.

While Sitrin's description of the protest is meant to highlight its radical political potential, which derives from what is not yet known, what I wish to emphasise here is that this openness to the unknown, as Sitrin also warns, is vulnerable to exploitation. To wit, Chin's *Mandi Bunga* may well serve as an example of how art that emerges from street protests can be disarticulated of its political significance, and even co-opted to advance the interests of an authoritarian city-state. However, this does not necessarily mean that the artist is being complicit with the state, but that the work was doing what the artist Intan Rafiza believes performance art does, which is to reflect the space in which it inhabits.²⁴ In so doing, the performance also underscores how the biennale's instrumentalist use of contemporary art for geopolitically strategic reasons parallels how the force generated by mass demonstrations from the ground up can also be harnessed by politicians from all sides for their own agendas, as has happened with the Bersih protests in Malaysia.

Branding Dissent²⁵

Like the two artists discussed above, graphic designer Fahmi Reza has also actively participated in the many street demonstrations that have occurred in Kuala Lumpur in the past decade, and many of his artistic productions reflect and draw upon protest movements past and present, both in Malaysia and overseas. However, in my analysis below, I have chosen to focus less on his work that is directly about or for street protests in favour of examining the street art—more specifically, political graffiti—he has produced in more recent years. While street protests and street art are not directly linked, both are similar in that they constitute acts of reclaiming public space. Moreover, both are also generally understood as acts of defiance against institutional authority, with the former resisting the authority of museums and galleries as gatekeepers to the art world and the latter a mode of dissenting against the

state. Yet, as I have suggested above, the meaning of street protests can also be repurposed by mainstream politics and contemporary art institutions to further different agendas that run counter to the spirit of dissent. Similarly, despite its anti-establishment aura, street art around the world has become increasingly commodified, whether in the art market or as a branding tool for corporations, a situation that also applies to the street art scene in Kuala Lumpur. Situated within this cultural political milieu, Fahmi's recent political graffiti is an example of how acts of dissent can use the tools supplied by the very institutional frameworks that they seek to critique.

A self-taught graphic designer, Fahmi's attributes his coming into political consciousness through his exposure to the punk music scene in the United States, where he pursued his university studies.²⁶ It was also through the punk scene that he developed his design skills, creating flyers for music gigs and LP record covers. Upon returning to Kuala Lumpur in the early 2000s, Fahmi contributed his graphic design skills to non-government organisations and human rights groups, his poster designs becoming a prominent part of the visual landscape accompanying the wave of street protests that emerged in the later part of the decade. In addition, he also used other artistic media to engage in political dissent, incorporating elements of protest art and music from around the world, mainly the West, to address issues closer to home. In his early stencil graffiti work featured around the city, Fahmi drew inspiration from Atelier Populaire, the printing workshop of the May 1968 student protests in Paris, as evident in his work objecting to compulsory national service for secondary school leavers implemented in 2004. Similarly, British punk music features heavily in *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* [Ten Years Before Independence] (2007), a short documentary film on the suppressed history of leftist anti-colonial movements in 1940s Malaya, as does the punk visual aesthetic of collage made from newspaper cuttings in his slideshows for *Student Power* (2010), a series of performance lectures on the history of student activism at the University of Malaya in the late 1960s. Riding on the wave of Occupy protests, Fahmi convened a series of local assemblies in Kuala Lumpur's Dataran Merdeka [Independence Square], Occupy Dataran, which served as a gathering for people to discuss political issues at home in relation to uprisings elsewhere.²⁷

Fahmi's various artistic projects introduced a powerful, arresting visual vocabulary of dissent to the local activist scene, one that was primarily designed to activate the political consciousness of youths and university students. By appropriating western protest icons (for example, the raised fist, the Guy Fawkes mask and protest slogans or hashtags echoing ones in the USA) to speak to local political issues, Fahmi tapped into the cultural capital

of these symbols in order to make activism look cool. Although a well-known figure in Kuala Lumpur's artist and activist scenes for some time, it was his sinister clown-faced portrait of Prime Minister Najib Razak that brought him mainstream national and international media attention. On 31 January 2016, following reports that Najib had been dubiously cleared of corruption charges and in light of the government's heightened use of the Sedition Act to silence its critics, Fahmi posted the portrait on his social media feed. Like his previous works, the sinister clown face echoes 1970s British punk aesthetic, wherein the performance of musicians was likened to villainous fools or jesters, figures that came to be coded as subversive.²⁸ By portraying Najib as such, the portrait suggests that the prime minister had become the nation's ultimate punk by violating the very laws his office is designated to enforce. The accompanying caption plays with the double meaning of the Malay term for sedition, *hasutan*, which in its root form can also mean to agitate. Accordingly, the caption—"In a country filled with corruption, we are all seditious/agitators"—insinuates that the head of state's actions have thus licensed its citizens to defy the nation's repressive laws.

Shortly after posting it online, Fahmi began wheatpasting the portrait in public spaces around Kuala Lumpur, which initiated a cat-and-mouse game amongst members of the public who sought to locate the graffiti before the authorities could erase it (Figure 5). The public excitement generated by Fahmi's graffiti portrait led to his being called the Malaysian Banksy. The comparison to the famous England-based graffiti artist is not entirely accurate, though illuminating in some respects. Unlike Banksy, who has gone to extreme lengths to conceal his identity, Fahmi deliberately exposes himself and claims responsibility for the graffiti work. As a result, this has subjected him to police surveillance as well as court charges that could result in imprisonment or burdensome fines. Furthermore, whereas Banksy's work has been sold at staggeringly high prices, Fahmi has, thus far, shared his work online under a creative commons licence, encouraging others to use and remix his work as long as they do not use it for commercial gain. To meet the popular demand for T-shirts featuring the clown-faced portrait, Fahmi shared the image file with small printing businesses around the country and granted them sales permission, provided that proceeds go towards supporting a political cause or charity.

In my view, Fahmi is similar to Banksy insofar as both artists have become "brands in and of themselves".²⁹ Banksy's star power, as Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, derives from the fact that the artist has been able to brand himself as a politically subversive artist by capitalising on the notion that the unsanctioned, guerrilla nature of street art makes it inherently counter-hegemonic.



FIGURE 5: This image of Fahmi Reza wheatpasting his clown-faced portrait of Prime Minister Najib Razak was posted on the artist's Facebook page. It was accompanied by a message to his detractors, inviting them to locate the graffiti. Source: Artist's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1080560288646071&set=pb.100000763298189.-2207520000.1490848252.&type=3&theater>, 26 August 2016 [accessed 28 March 2017]

The point here is not so much that Banksy is a sellout, but that he embodies the artist-as-entrepreneur,³⁰ a figure that emerges in light of the contemporary conditions of neoliberal capitalism, wherein “social domains [for example, street art] are recoded as economic ones”.³¹ Within this neoliberal framework, Banksy’s political stance against the commodification processes of graffiti art contributes to his brand, which in turn generates economic value for his art.

The high level of public visibility that Fahmi has attained is arguably due to his use of similar branding strategies. Contrary to Banksy, whose “recognisable anonymity ... is an important, if not the crucial, element of his self-brand”,³² disclosing his real identity is central to Fahmi’s persona as dissident artist given that it exposes him to the risk of criminal charges, which in turn makes him the underdog bravely defying a repressive government. Moreover, Fahmi’s “copyleft” ethos of making his work freely available

has also reinforced, rather than diluted, his brand identity, as evidenced in the way that the clown portrait has been merchandised as T-shirts, stickers and posters. The portrait has also been posted in public spaces by other anonymous persons, thereby increasing its—and Fahmi’s—visibility. Thus, in addition to being a means of mass dissemination, the Internet also serves as an important medium through which Fahmi identifies himself as the artist of his work. His persona is further reinforced by his distinct personal style that matches the artist’s typical all-black clothing with a Che Guevera-esque beret and wavy hair, his face framed by thick-rimmed glasses, an ensemble that makes him easily recognisable in public.

In pointing out that Fahmi is participating in—rather than being critical of—brand culture, my point is not to suggest that he has deliberately fostered a cult of personality, opportunistically riding on popular political sentiment to gain prominence. Rather, it is to acknowledge that artistic productions, even when used explicitly for political resistance, are shaped by—and not in spite of—neoliberal capitalist conditions. Indeed, to dismiss Fahmi as selling out because his political activism also serves as a vehicle for self-promotion, would be to overlook the ways in which self-branding can also be a means of pushing back against efforts to police artistic expression.

As is the case in many places around the world, street art is increasingly viewed as a means of “urban rejuvenation” and of branding the creative city in urban centres throughout Malaysia. While such efforts capitalise on street art’s edgy, subversive aura to brand the city as such, the works themselves tend to avoid controversial political content. Along similar lines, Eva McGovern notes that although the street art scene in Kuala Lumpur is vibrant, there is “very little political graffiti art coming out of the community” and that many artists readily embrace corporate sponsorship and working with art institutions.³³ These partnerships might be viewed as a form of selling out on the part of graffiti artists seeing as the unsanctioned nature of street art and institutionalised structures of corporations and art galleries are often deemed to be antagonistic with one another.

However, the case of Fahmi suggests that showcasing street art under the aegis of art institutions does not always reflect that the latter has successfully co-opted and depoliticised the former. For example, the 2014 retrospective exhibition of Fahmi’s poster art, *12 Years of Visual Disobedience*, curated by Wong Tay Sy for the multidisciplinary arts organisation Five Arts Centre, fashions a narrative of Fahmi’s career trajectory as an activist through the medium of the political poster. In this case, the art institution serves as a medium for legitimising the activist as artist, thereby contributing to Fahmi’s personal brand. Similarly, albeit unintentionally, the display of his work at



FIGURE 6: Fahmi Reza, *Najib's Head Stolen From Billboard* (2009). Mixed media installation, Rock Kaka exhibition, Valentine Willie Fine Art Kuala Lumpur. Source: Artist's Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=958935187475249&set=a.100378253330951.605.100000763298189&type=3&theater>, 11 February 2016 [accessed 28 March 2017]

the 2009 Rock Kaka group show, curated by Erna Dyanty for the private art gallery Valentine Willie Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur, helped accentuate, rather than diminish, his political dissident status. The work was an installation that featured a vinyl cut-out of the then newly elected prime minister's portrait, one large enough to fill an entire wall and spill onto the floor (Figure 6). The black tape masking its eyes is a reference to the record cover of the Sex Pistols's monarch-mocking punk anthem, *God Save the Queen*.³⁴ The yellow police tape criss-crossing its mouth forebodes the repression of speech even as it presents the defaced image as a crime scene. A YouTube video accompanying the portrait showed two unidentifiable individuals climbing up a billboard featuring a congratulatory message to the new prime minister in an attempt to remove his image, presumably the same one hanging in the gallery as the work's title, *Najib's Head Stolen From Billboard*, suggests.³⁵ Viewed in retrospect, the work might be seen as an early precursor to Fahmi's 2016 clown-face portrait, and one that draws attention to the Internet's role in mediating the relationship between political graffiti and the art gallery. While the exhibition appears to legitimise vandalism as a form of art, that the installation was permanently taken down during the show suggests otherwise. The removal of

the work was done shortly after two viewers, one of whom was an aide in the prime minister's office, reportedly expressed their disapproval to the gallery in anticipation of a private function held in the space that would be attended by politicians.³⁶

However, the Rock Kaka incident is hardly a singular case in the Malaysian art scene. The removal of a controversial artwork following its negative reception, despite the lack of a legal injunction to do so, has become an almost regular occurrence. Without having to be explicitly invoked, repressive state laws have produced a culture of policing and censorship amongst different stakeholders within the arts community. At the same time, incidents such as these have not prevented street art from entering into formal arts institutions. On the contrary, while the interest showed by corporations and art institutions towards street art have enabled the medium to flourish, it also indirectly contributes to the policing of expression.³⁷ In light of this repressive cultural environment and the depoliticised street art scene, Fahmi's efforts at branding political dissidence can be viewed as a means of claiming space for critical expression and resisting efforts by institutional patrons of street art to police expression on their own terms.

Even so, it is important to note that what makes Fahmi's political dissidence an effective brand is its performance of masculine bravado. While he may be resisting the culture of censorship, he nonetheless does so by relying upon, and thus reaffirming, dominant male-centred narratives that give rise to the romanticised image of the male rebel hero. Indeed, as the cases of all three artists suggest, the street protests and the artistic responses that emerge from them ought not be viewed as inherently signalling progressive democratic change. While street protests are, undeniably, a political force, they do not necessarily represent the will of a civil society that operates autonomously from representatives of state power, as the case of Pak Samad suggests. The case of Sharon Chin demonstrates how the street protest can be repurposed towards different—even, contradictory—political ends when it is translated into the global contemporary art institution. However, the point here is neither to dismiss street protests as an altogether ineffective mode of resistance nor to suggest that the complicity of these artists in respectively furthering the interests of political parties, contemporary art institutions or their personal brands, as an indication of their politically compromised positions. Rather, it is to recognise how street protests have gained social currency and cultural capital that may be repurposed toward various ends. In tracing the different meanings and uses street protests have come to acquire, we might then work towards thinking of the new forms of resistance and dissent required to respond to the shifting political present.

BIOGRAPHY

Fiona Lee is a Lecturer in English at the University of Sydney. She researches and teaches in the fields of postcolonial studies, 20th- and 21st-century literature, and cultural studies. Her research explores the history of decolonisation and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, with a particular interest in Malaysia and Singapore, through the prisms of literature and the arts. From 2014–16, she held a postdoctoral fellowship in Cultural Studies at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She can be reached at fiona.lee@sydney.edu.au.

NOTES

- ¹ Derived from Sanskrit, *bumiputera* literally means sons of the earth, referring to citizens deemed autochthonous to the land. The term is used in the Federal Constitution and in social political life to articulate a racialised distinction between native and so-called migrant citizens.
- ² “Demo Jalanan Bukan Budaya Kita—Dr. M.”, *Bernamea.com*, 7 Feb. 2009, http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/state_news/bm/news.php?id=388374&cat=ut [accessed 5 Mar. 2017].
- ³ “This is People’s Power, Says Siti Hasmah”, Malaysiakini Team, *Malaysiakini*, 29 Aug. 2015, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/310397> [accessed 5 Mar. 2017].
- ⁴ The conference was “Mob Politics in Asia”, and was held from 12–3 Mar. 2015 at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.
- ⁵ Samia Mehrez, “Introduction”, in *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, ed. Samia Mehrez (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), p. 2.
- ⁶ Bersih 2.0 is the official name of the coalition of non-governmental organisations. For clarity’s sake, I use “Bersih” to refer to its cause and multiple street demonstrations and “Bersih 2.0” for the coalition. Since 2013, Pak Samad and Ambiga have stepped down from their leadership positions.
- ⁷ The PPSMI policy was also opposed by communities from national Tamil- and Chinese-medium schools which were also affected; however, the GMP largely represented the voices of those concerned for its impact on Malay.
- ⁸ *Keranda 152: Bahasa Kita, Air Mata dan Maruah Kita* [Keranda 152: Our Language, Tears and Dignity], 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Linguistik Malaysia, 2002), p. 55.
- ⁹ The presence of Malay ethno-nationalist ideology is evident in a speech and memorandum opposing the extension of the provision, the former delivered by the opposition Islamist party PAS member Mohamad Asri Muda, and the latter presented by Syed Nasir Ismail, director of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, to government ministers and to the Supreme Council members of the ruling party, UMNO. For example, although the parliamentary provision involves the use of English, both the speech and memorandum refer to the Chinese language movement’s call for the recognition of Mandarin as an official language as a direct threat to the standing of Malays in the country. See *Keranda 152: Bahasa Kita, Air Mata dan Maruah Kita*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Linguistik Malaysia, 2002), pp. 10–20, 29–59.
- ¹⁰ Jimadie Shah Othman, “Gerakan Anti-PPSMI Julung Kali Ke Jalan” (Anti-PPSMI Movement Take to the Streets for the First Time), *Malaysiakini*, 31 Jan. 2009, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/97350> [accessed 18 Mar. 2017]. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for drawing this point to my attention.

- ¹¹ Poems that were written about Keranda 152 were anthologised in Ayub Yassin (ed.), *Sajak-sajak penyair tanah air diabadikan dalam Keranda 152* [Poems by the Homeland's Poets Memorialised in Keranda 152] (Kuala Lumpur: Badan Penerbitan, Persekutuan Bahasa Melayu University Malaya, 1967).
- ¹² A. Samad Said, "Unggun Bersih", *Hujan Pagi*. 26 June 2011, <https://samadsaid.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/unggun-bersih/> [accessed 3 Mar. 2015].
- ¹³ Significantly, National Literary Laureate Usman Awang's 1967 poem commemorating the Keranda 152 protest also invokes the image of the fire, albeit one that is invoked in relation to a call to burn Article 152 of the Federal Constitution and to the fiery passions of students participating in the demonstration. See Usman Awang, "Malam di Balai Budaya" [That Night at the Cultural Centre], in *Keranda 152*, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ This position is held by, among others, Sharon Chin, the artist whose work I discuss later in this article.
- ¹⁵ Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945–1950* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 54.
- ¹⁶ Sharon Chin, "Mandi Bunga Non-epic Blog, or, The Opposite of Monumental", <http://sharonchin.com/mandi-bunga-non-epic-blog-or-the-opposite-of-monumental/>, 18 Dec. 2013 [accessed 28 Mar. 2017].
- ¹⁷ "Sesi Semuka: Karya Seni Pertunjukan *Mandi Bunga* Bersama Sharon Chin" [A Public Conversation on the Performance Art with Sharon Chin. Moderated by Intan Rafiza], Kelab Bangsar Utama, video livestream, <https://www.facebook.com/intanrafiza/videos/10154323934561935/>, 4 Mar. 2017 [accessed 28 Mar. 2017].
- ¹⁸ See Simon Soon, "Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism", *Obieg 2*, 2016, <http://obieg.ujazdowski.pl/en/azja/rethinking-curatorial-colonialism> [accessed 14 Mar. 2017].
- ¹⁹ Jeannine Tang, "Spectacle's Politics and the Singapore Biennale", *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, 3: 367.
- ²⁰ Zarina Muhammad, "Remembering Rituals of Renewal: Sharon Chin's *Mandi Bunga* Performance", *Article: The Singapore Biennale Review* (Dec. 2013): 21.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Marina Sitrin, "Pulling the Emergency Brake", *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy* 2 (Mar. 2012): 6. Emphasis added.
- ²³ Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 402.
- ²⁴ "Sesi Semuka".
- ²⁵ I would like to thank Ezrena Marwan of Malaysia Design Archive for her generous insights on graphic design and protests in Kuala Lumpur that shaped my thinking in this section. Any errors are, of course, mine.

- ²⁶ Personal conversation with Fahmi Reza, Feb. 2015.
- ²⁷ Although named after the Occupy Movement in the United States, which began in Sept. 2011, Occupy Dataran commenced earlier in July and held gatherings until Apr. 2013.
- ²⁸ Lane Van Ham, "Reading Early Punk as Secularised Sacred Clowning", *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, 2 (2009): 318.
- ²⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding Creativity: Creative Cities, Street Art, and 'Making Your Name Sing'", in *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), p. 96.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–5.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ³³ Eva McGovern, "The Street is Our Canvas: Graffiti Art in Kuala Lumpur", in *Reactions—New Critical Strategies: Narratives in Malaysian Art, Volume 2*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin and Beverly Yong, with T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), pp. 290, 294.
- ³⁴ "Hot Shit: The Rock Kaka Thing", *Arteri*. <http://arteri.search-art.asia/2009/06/14/hot-shit-the-rock-kaka-thing/>, 14 June 2009 [accessed 27 Mar. 2017].
- ³⁵ "Najib's Head Stolen from Billboard", https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=107&v=kGHgWU8fV0o, 22 May 2009 [accessed 28 Mar. 2017].
- ³⁶ "Hot Shit".
- ³⁷ The relationship between corporate sponsorship and the curbing of political dissent in Kuala Lumpur's street art scene is explored in a work of speculative short fiction by Zedeck Siew. See "The White Mask", in *Cyberpunk: Malaysia*, ed. Zen Cho (Kuala Lumpur: Fixi Novo, 2015), pp. 279–99.

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