



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Editorial: Movement

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,  
Volume 2, Number 1, March 2018, pp. 1-6 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2018.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690542>

## Editorial: Movement

The theme, “Discomfort” for the first volume of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* was intended as a productive register to address the tensions and anxieties arising from dealing with the concept of regionalism. We hope that the theme of “Movement” in this second volume encourages multiple readings of the processes of making and unmaking of the region, that would in turn draw attention to different scales of temporal and geographical boundaries. In adopting a reflexive and critical consideration of movement, we hope to problematise fixed, geopolitical determinations of this area we refer to as Southeast Asia. The notion of localities can expand or transgress as a concept, thus resisting any authentication of fixed and stable forms of national or regional identities. In this regard, we propose to test this idea of Southeast Asia as comprising “contact zones” for encounter. Herein, artists, art groups, artistic movements and art objects may well function as interrelated coordinates in the network and traffic of cultures.

We are in a time in which the circulation of Buddha images across and beyond Southeast Asia and the proliferation of contemporary art residency programs for artists in the name of “global art” sit side by side. Cross-border movements of bodies, ideas and objects are foundational to artistic production, moulding Southeast Asian art and its representation in both the past and present. Through displacements of culture and context, this movement has dynamically transmuted the location of identity through a redefinition of borders in the situation of travel and mobility. Overlapping social legacies and forces of colonialism mark a history of movement overlaid with Cold War politics and the consequences of globalisation. Motion and distortion of movement happen against a background of power relations informed by notions of import, export, exchange, transfer, translation, exile, refuge, migration and repatriation. Amidst the increasingly complex movement of people

[ **Southeast of Now**  
Vol. 2 No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 1–6 ]

and objects in the world, we are curious as to how we might locate notions of movement and agency within art historical frameworks.

Our notion of “movement” also refers to the use of this term within art history, often used to describe groups of artists who collectively demonstrate a similar style, shared politics or the zeitgeist of a cultural moment. It is in this vein, in much art historical writing, that the movement of art through ideas, collections and exhibitions has continually morphed in meaning, adapting as contexts shift. These artistic “movements” demonstrate the collective effort required to create cultural momentum. Moreover, their prevalence in much art historical writing is suggestive of tendencies within the discipline.

Recent exhibitionary tactics, as seen especially through the proliferation of biennial culture, have involved the movement of audience members to multiple venues spread as far apart as in different countries, in order to view an entire exhibition. Despite the flow of images continually propagating through the endless documentation of art reproduced, the demand of “being there” in real time for the physical presence in viewing remains a requirement in the task of looking at art. Underscoring these curatorial tactics of dispersed, multi-sited exhibitions is the privilege of being able *to move*: a privilege assumed of exhibition viewers as well as exhibition makers. These patterns of movement enable and disable access to flows of culture.

Our awareness of this recent exhibitionary phenomenon and the political and socio-economic privileges it depends on further prompted the urgency to take a historical perspective. Doing so could reveal processes of territorialisation and reterritorialisation of this region, be it as a political brand, an academic and artistic concept, or a personal expression of home and elsewhere. Here, we refer to movement not only as the physical movement of artists and objects, but also the ways in which images and texts traverse cultural distances and unsettle established or conventional labels of “traditional”, “modern” and “contemporary” art. Indeed, movement can be interpreted as a discursive gesture to rethink the linear logics and teleological tendencies of art historical progress.

The contributors in this issue have responded to the theme of “Movement” with various scales of time and distance in art history, demonstrating the complexity of cultural production within, around and beyond Southeast Asia. In the responses to our call for papers, it became apparent that the directions of movement within art continue to be complicated through positions of diaspora, within and beyond the region.

Complicating the terms of traditional, modern and contemporary art, the article “Itinerant Cinema Practice In and Around Thailand during the Cold War” by May Adadol Ingawanij explores ritual projection performances

in Thailand practised by travelling film troupes. Ingawanij's incisive article offers a theoretical intervention to define "animist cinema" by engaging with media archaeological theories. She bases her argument in part on the ethnographic data of interviews, scrutinising the story of artists whose cinematic practices fall outside the logic of national modernity and the fantasies of cultural elites. Such practices were made possible by the war-fuelled expansion of road infrastructure funded through the US-Thailand military relationship, especially during and after the American War in Vietnam. Ingawanij's conceptualisation of animist cinematic practice as "paracinematic" works in part as an attempt to unsettle the modern and traditional framework of classification in the exhibition of cinema and discourses on it.

"Community and the Rantau: West Sumatra's Artists in Indonesia's Art World" by Katherine L. Bruhn also centres on movement within the layers of the nation-state space. Bruhn discusses the entanglement of *merantau*, or male-out migration, practised by West Sumatra artists to Indonesia's art capital in Yogyakarta, Java with the formation of a contemporary *sanggar* collective by the ethnic-based art group Sakato Art Community. She examines how these practices have mediated the articulation of local-primordial identity within the nationalist imagination as well as the global art market, arguing that maintaining local modes of social practice is vital to problematise the homogenisation of globally-oriented cultural production.

In her article, Mi You focuses on the transhistorical movement within the intellectual history of the former state of Manchukuo, as played out by Hong Kong-based Australian artist Royce Ng in his lecture performance titled *Kishi the Vampire* (2016). Ng's work, in You's words, is, "a lecture-performance on the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo (1932–1945) and the invention of the East Asian capitalistic system under its finance minister Nobusuke Kishi, portrayed as a vampire". You's account of the artistic research project of a conceptual history surrounding Manchukuo and East Asia demonstrates ways to reconfigure the world by re-coordinating critical components of East Asian and Southeast Asian post-war politics.

All articles, including those mentioned above, have passed review by the editorial collective, and also double-blind peer review by two specialists in the field. In addition to this peer-reviewed materials, we also invited John Clark, who is a member of our advisory board, to contribute an article. Originally presented as a lecture at the Asia Society in New York, the article has been revised and expanded in conversation with the editorial collective.

Clark's special invited contribution takes the concept of negotiation to understand artistic practices which consider multiple histories and positionalities, defying the straightforward categorisation associated with nation-based

art histories. Included in Clark's reading are modernist artist S. Sudjojono, spanning across the pre- and post-independence eras, including the tumultuous New Order regime, as well as F.X. Harsono, whose contentious identity as Chinese Indonesian and the trials involved in this within the national discourse are read as resistant and even antagonistic to the nationalist position. Clark also considers Vietnamese artist Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm and diasporic artists Dacchi Dang and Dinh Q. Le from multiple directions: some directed out, and some attempting to come in from different distances to the "home" culture. Clark thus continually questions the parameters of the regional purview, within which movements flow both in and out.

Also interested in plural perspectives on history is Eva Bentscheva, whose short response is a lyrical reflection on the place of contested and forgotten histories in contemporary artworks, taking as its primary case study a performance titled *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go* (2016) by UK-based Philippine artists Noel Ed De Leon, Kulay Labitigan and Lawrence Carlos. The work engages both British and Philippine history through a symbolic act of excavation, which Bentscheva takes as a generative metaphor for considering research-led projects in what she terms Southeast Asian diasporic art.

The curatorial text "The Spirit of Friendship" was written to coincide with the eponymous exhibition at the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Ho Chi Minh City in 2017. Tracing a history of "artist groups" across Vietnam since 1975, the exhibition and text position the commitment of friendship as central to the legacy of these groups which enabled a movement of dialogue within the group and across Vietnam and beyond. Drawing on extensive interviews and archival research, it makes public, in both English and Vietnamese, many stories and histories otherwise unknown outside of Vietnam. It thus serves as a resource for further research, while also proposing a model for considering collective practices in other contexts.

The intervention of artists' pages by collaborating artists Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho demonstrates a literal movement of images and texts with their piece created specifically for *Southeast of Now* called *Manananggal has Appeared in Yiwu*. This artwork references both the small commodities market in a Chinese town called Yiwu, and the female folk monster, known in the Philippines as *manananggal*, whom the artists say "appears as a human woman during the day, but gruesomely splits in half at the waist at night". Lien and Camacho's sculptures of this ghostly and sculptural presence were originally exhibited in galleries, stores and private spaces across Berlin, revealing a dismemberment of an exhibition disrupting the idea of a singular viewing plane for the piece and the necessary movement required to capture the artwork. Images of these sculptures are combined with photographs from

Yiwu, where the production and distribution of commodities also appears fragmented and incoherent.

John Clark's incisive review of the *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit is a timely reminder of how new historical writings may have implications for art meaning. This elegant study by Baker and Phongpaichit reveals the "startlingly analytical discovery" that Ayutthaya was already an internationally trading kingdom with a rich riverine culture. Contact with the exogenous indicated that circulation and influence of artistic ideas and forms may well be part of the cultural structures of Siam. Clark's assessment of the gap in existing scholarship on possible intercultural influences on Thai paintings is a further reminder of how history can open and generate new perspectives on art and meaning in Southeast Asia.

Whereas Clark's review of *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* suggests that reading about the premodern kingdom may shed light to readers of modern and contemporary art in the region, Atreyee Gupta's review of David Teh's *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* points to a relationship between the modern state that we now know as Thailand, internationalism and the circulation of contemporary art. Teh's discussion of the "currencies", a term that implies both a sense of the present and an interconnection between the local and global economic and cultural exchanges, in Thai art demonstrates the shaping and reception of contemporary art in Thailand as a field of contestation. Gupta elucidates the points where Teh's account could possibly be a way to re-read contemporary art in South and Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the inclusion of Lay Sheng Yap's review of the *This World, Out Here* exhibition (2016) is a reminder that the "contact zone" of Southeast Asia is undergirded by capital. By historicising the erection of a pavilion in relation to the Colonial World's Fair, Lay returns us to the centrifugal point of the region through a theorisation "against an anxiousness experienced by indigenous Capital". Asking us to reconsider Southeast Asia's geographical position as an equatorial centre, Lay's review does not play to notions of the region being real or accurate. Rather, he pays attention to the construction of space as an abstract imagination within this exhibition seen through attention to the construction of the interior and exterior of the pavilion. This serves as its own kind of psycho-geographic zone, acting as a metaphor for the regional order in relation to the worldview.

The content included in this issue demonstrates different approaches to the theme of movement. Continuing our enquiry into the modern and contemporary of Southeast Asia, the articles reveal categories which move

and alter between spaces within and beyond the region and the disciplines which encounter it.

Last, as part of our commitment to supporting the development of new writing in the region and to providing an opportunity for emerging writers to develop their research and writing skills, we are pleased to announce a new donor-funded mentorship programme, to commence with vol. 3 (2019). We are grateful to our anonymous donors for supporting this fellowship. Details on how to apply can be found on our website, and are also listed on p. 203 of this issue of the journal.