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In the Interiors of the Pavilion:

Capital, Space and Anxiety in This World, Out Here

LAY SHENG YAP

This World, Out Here—an exhibition curated by PUSAKA and sponsored by Maybank Kim Eng—opened in July 2016 in Kuala Lumpur. It was organised as part of a larger arts initiative, *KataKatha*, which aims to “document Southeast Asian arts ... [f]rom the traditional up to its contemporary”.¹ The exhibition featured ten creative figures from Southeast Asia whose works span an entire artistic continuum from photography, film and poetry to dance performance. These works were presented in a temporary pavilion constructed in the foyer of Maybank’s headquarters.

Upon entering the foyer, visitors encounter an enclosed structure made of bamboo and clothed in white drapes, where its interior houses the various artworks (Figure 1). The architecture in the foyer evokes, at once, the starkly opposed exterior/interior domains. Being invited, by a gallery guide, to remove our shoes before venturing into the pavilion brings into awareness, for visitors, the decision to build an enclosed structure by the curators. This is nested within an iconic postmodernist building inspired by the form of a deconstructed *keris* that already shields the visitor from the scalding tropical heat. Moreover, it reveals a curatorial intention to introduce a variegated spatial experience for the visitor. Further, how should we reconcile the curators’ selection of props outside the pavilion, where we encounter a scarecrow (Figure 2), scattered farm equipment and a mat that evokes the communal activities of a pastoral life? These are, after all, tangential to the aims professed in the artistic brief. It follows then that the props are part of simulation of the

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FIGURE 1: The interior of This World, Out Here. Photograph courtesy of Dennis Ong

FIGURE 2: Props used in This World, Out Here. Photograph courtesy of Dennis Ong

external landscape outside the pavilion. This completes the visitors' experience of the interior/exterior space, even if cloaked in such obvious artifice. The curation borrows the leitmotif of inside versus outside, civility versus disorder and public versus private to remake space as a politically charged medium. In contrast to the professed apolitical attempt of *This World, Out Here* to "document" the arts, as critical consumers of the culture we cannot take the spatial organisation in *KataKatha* as evocative of just a mundane act of documentation.

This review is a critique of the pavilion in *This World, Out Here* as an architectural motif that reorders spatiality in Southeast Asia in the name of the regional ambitions of financial capital (that is, Maybank). As a recurrent architectural environment since the international exhibitions fashionable at the turn of the 19th century, the pavilions in the World's Fair were immersive spaces that staged the "world" to create a condition of globality. Reading the pavilion as a powerful device capable of mapping and reordering spatiality, I consider how the site is complicit in the construction of a simulacrum of the "world" in service of the expansionist claims of capital. The self-enclosed interior world of *This World, Out Here* needs to be theorised against an anxiousness experienced by indigenous capital—a result of its marginality in the global circuits of capital—and the consequent urgency to reconstitute Southeast Asia's geographical centrality.

A Retreat into the Interior

We begin our critique with an exploration of the interior, suggesting that its emergence in *This World, Out Here* shares with its antecedents in the World's Fair an underlying anxiety experienced by capital. For Walter Benjamin, "[c]apital alienates the employer ... from his means of production ... culminat[ing] in the emergence of the private home".² The private interior is a refuge shielding the bourgeoisie from seismic changes in the modes of production that increasingly produces an unfamiliar capitalist exterior. In this private space, he "assemble[s] the distant in space and in time" to "maintain him in his illusions".³ The illusory private interior, assembled from "distant" objects, renders the bourgeois subjectivity ontologically secure.

Benjamin's notion of the interior as a retreat from an unfamiliar world is palpably felt in its use in *This World, Out Here*. The construction of the temporary pavilion betrays the ontological insecurity experienced by purportedly "Southeast Asian" cultural figures. In the exhibition's principal curator Eddin Khoo's own words, it is a forum for creative figures who "meet in Paris, London and New York *but do not meet in our own landscape*" (emphasis mine).⁴ In a textual display by architectural historian Lai Chee Kien, the anxiety is more

prominent: “The term ‘Nusantara’ enjoys wide usage in the Malay world, and seen from the great ‘poles’ of China and India, the area is, respectively, ‘Further India’ (and earlier as ‘Suwarnadvipa’) or ‘Nanyang’ (the South Seas).”⁵ At heart is an ontological anxiety echoed by Donald K. Emmerson, who argues that “Southeast Asia” bears the traces of the European cartographic gaze projecting onto peripheral land.⁶ The marginality of Southeast Asia in the global circuits of capital drives the retreat into the interior. As Benjamin has theorised, the bourgeoisie—propelled by an increasingly alienating world—condenses the nucleus of “[the] universe of the private individual”⁷ in the interior. The interior becomes a space to reassert the private importance of the individual increasingly anxious about his status in the public.

As argued by Graham, the notion of *inclusion* presupposes the centrality of the world within. Implied in the act of “bringing in”, the interior becomes the sacral (or central) space in which the included Other is textualised through the materiality of the interior.⁸ The spatial interior has therefore come to connote a space of order, and the exterior of disorder. This World, Out Here reflects an acute awareness of this technology. The reference to “here” locates a spatial privilege of the centre (“here”) over the periphery (“there”), while the phrase “out here” exerts a disciplining potential of the interior space as it absorbs and metamorphoses the outside. Together, This World, Out Here invokes a spatial disposition of Benjamin’s interior space as the private sphere that is at once a space of discipline, power and control. The discursive bifurcation of the interior and exterior, of centrality and the periphery, and finally of order and disorderliness is problematically employed to reorient the spatial order of Southeast Asia.

Reordering Spatiality in Southeast Asia

The fair, like the many entertainment ventures before it—such as the panorama and curiosity cabinets—are means to “[expand] the cultural horizons of the cultivated upper class of English men and women”.⁹ Through the immersive staging of cultural objects in its interior, Maybank Kim Eng hopes also to form “new bridges” between “like-minded people” across the region.¹⁰ This statement is not trivial, because it foregrounds the ambition of the exhibition to convey a sense of common experience grounded in the same temporal and spatial order. The ability of such a spatial device to reorder a bordered capitalist spatiality in Southeast Asia is not lost on Khoo, who is aware that “the borders that define contemporary geography ... impinge on the landscape of imagination”.¹¹ If space appears to limit the formation of what Benedict Anderson calls the “horizontal comradeship”¹² between

geographically distant peoples, then the compression of space is reworked in the interior to give impetus to Khoo's "imagination" of "commonality".¹³

The Great Exhibition came about in western industrialising countries in the late 19th century as a spatial device to consolidate Empire. For Sloterdijk, the Crystal Palace (Figures 3 and 4) was an interior formed through the "complete absorption of the outer world" to constitute a spatial totality within "an inner space that was calculated through and through".¹⁴ The triumph of the West lies in the ability of "the will of the Western fraction of humanity" to write a post-political condition of *all* humanity where "... history could only play out in an extensive interior space" of the West.¹⁵ Therefore, the Crystal Palace as spatial motif has shrunk the distance between the division of labour between discontinuous nations into a continuous display of their proximity in the interior. Reducing the entire globe into a single dioramic frame has the effect of simulation of the hyperreal. For Jean Baudrillard, the hyperreal is a "generation by models of a real without origin or reality".¹⁶ The simulation of the hyperreal has superseded the question of ontology of the "world" as staged in the interior: the exhibition has become the world.

The taxonomisation of artists by their countries of origin in KataKatha, who, as cultural ambassadors of the various countries in the ASEAN Economic

FIGURE 3: The Crystal Palace in The Great Exhibition, 1851

FIGURE 4: The interior of the Crystal Palace

Community, reproduce the bounded entities of the nation-state at a scale that enables the visitor to absorb the “world” in the pavilion in one sweeping gaze. In a media statement that accompanies the exhibition, these national differences are emphasised through the attendance of

eminent *Malaysian* poet and painter, Latiff Mohidin, together with other prominent Southeast Asian artists & cultural figures such as Anocha Suwichakornpong (*TH*), Kanakan Balintagos (*PH*), Pichet Klunchun (*TH*), and Lai Chee Kien (*SG*) (emphasis mine).¹⁷

Despite the presentation of the national units as informative labels, visitors are encouraged to see cultural objects as national artefacts. The interior space reshapes our positional understanding in a globalised division of labour. The distance of production is compressed into a single frame that enables the temporality of regional globalisation to be grasped. Maybank repeatedly emphasises that “we have various gaps to bridge” and calls for concerted efforts to “erase the differences” to become an “integrated society”.¹⁸ The spatial compression in the interior to achieve a “hyperreal” of the world functions to plug these “gaps” and “differences”.

The pavilion of *This World, Out Here* discursively dismantles the “global” (an order in which Southeast Asia is perpetually marginalised) to reconstitute the self-centrality of Southeast Asia in a “regional order”. This is chiefly done

FIGURE 5: Historic Maps depicting Southeast Asia. Taken from the catalogue of This World, Out Here

through the simulacrum of the “region” as a holistic entity. The removal of barriers to the expansion of local capital into the region is complete only by rescaling the nation-state as an enframed entity within a larger regional order. This is precisely the function of the architectural structure of the pavilion in service of capital.

Conclusion

The repeated emphasis on bringing culture to the masses instead disguises the neocolonial and the conceit of capital at restructuring our perception of the region. At the end of the exhibition, as though to emphasise the triumph of capital at reorganising the bordered spatiality of the region, the visitor is shown three maps (Figure 5). According to the guide, these maps function to interrogate “impressions of Southeast Asia” through “... the eyes of different regions”.¹⁹ Here, the ontological unity of Southeast Asia is sought through the cartographic gaze of the seafarer, who, in conquest of new markets and colonial outposts of the Empire, has produced the first comprehensive maps that “chart[ed] [the] contours of land and sea” in Southeast Asia.

The question of whether the world of “Southeast Asia” is real is abandoned entirely. Instead, its ontological unity is sought through the imperial gaze that has long ago colonised the social space of Southeast Asia. With imperial scientific instruments, space in Southeast Asia is rendered *abstract*. As Henri Lefebvre has reminded us, *abstract* space is conceived of as a homogenous plane in which social space becomes an exploitable resource, a “neutral medium into which disjointed things, people, and habitats might be introduced”.²⁰ Precisely because the interior is now articulated from an exterior position, this representation renders space *abstract*. This representation is not created by those it represents, but by the outsider for whom space is merely a cartographic measurement for capital accumulation. A corporate-capitalist vision of Southeast Asia is complete.

BIOGRAPHY

Lay Sheng Yap is a final-year political science undergraduate at the London School of Economics. His interests span areas as diverse as contemporary art, gender studies and the political history of Southeast Asia. Besides his preoccupation with art in the region, his next project looks at the potential of feminist empathy and rage in the mobilisation of transnational women’s movements. Outside the silos of academia, he is also involved in a youth-driven organisation, Imagined Malaysia, that is active in disseminating subversive histories that contest the Malaysian officialdom.

NOTES

- ¹ Vijenthhi Nair, "On a Journey with South-East Asian Artists", *The Star Online*, 5 Aug. 2016, <http://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2016/08/05/on-a-journey-with-southeast-asian-artists-exhibition-shows-how-environment-climate-history-movements/> [accessed 25 Mar. 2017].
- ² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 226.
- ³ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", *New Left Review* I, 48 (1968): 83.
- ⁴ Nair, "On a Journey with South-East Asian Artists", *The Star*, 5 Aug. 2016.
- ⁵ Wall Text, *This World, Out Here*, Balai Seni Maybank, Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan.
- ⁶ Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, 1 (1984): 1–21.
- ⁷ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 19–20.
- ⁸ Linda Graham, "Caught in the Net: a Foucaultian Interrogation of the Incidental Effects of Limited Notions of Inclusions", *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10, 1 (2006): 20.
- ⁹ Carol Breckenridge, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, 2 (1989): 197.
- ¹⁰ Megat Zaharuddin Megat Mohd Nor, "Chairman's Statement", in *This World, Out Here: KataKatha – The Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 1.
- ¹¹ Eddin Khoo, "Curator's Statement" in *This World, Out Here: KataKatha – The Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 2.
- ¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London and New York, NY: Verso), pp. 5–7.
- ¹³ Khoo, "Curator's Statement", in *This World, Out Here: KataKatha – The Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, "The Crystal Palace", *Public* 37: 15.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation" (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.
- ¹⁷ Maybank Kim Eng, "Launch of This World, Out Here – The KataKatha Exhibition", press release, 27 July 2016, <http://www.maybank-ke.com/media/1453187/2016-0727-press-release-for-katakatha-exhibition-final.pdf> [accessed 25 Mar. 2017].
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ *This World, Out Here: KataKatha – The Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 34.
- ²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), p. 308.

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