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Suddenly Turning Visible:

Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989). A Review

T.K. SABAPATHY

The curators of *Suddenly Turning Visible*, a National Gallery Singapore (NGS) project consisting of an exhibition and a publication, introduce it grandly. I cite their opening remarks.

In 1981 the Filipino artist and curator Raymundo R. Albano coined the expression “suddenly turning visible” to describe the rapid transformation of Manila’s landscape. The visibility that Albano was evoking was an aspirational one, as the Philippines, along with other countries across Southeast Asia, had embarked upon their most ambitious infrastructural projects yet. The driving force was the logic of developmental-ism, a desire for rapid economic growth in tandem with massive infrastructure building to transform the cities of Bangkok, Manila and Singapore into modern metropolises. Art had a critical role to play in the cities formulation, with artists and architects advancing varying perspectives towards this new vision.¹

This is a vivid, forceful inauguration for an exhibition and its exegesis, setting out major premises for the two components.

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I identify the following as compelling attention:

- a. Raymundo Albano and his text as catalysts for this project
- b. rapid transformation of cities, from nascent or fledgling modern entities into fully-blown modern metropolises; three are named: Manila, Bangkok and Singapore
- c. focus on infrastructure
- d. developmentalism as a shaping, driving worldview or ideology, measured in economic terms and aimed at creating modern metropolises
- e. developmentalism esteemed as aspirational
- f. developmentalism as visual and suddenly turning visible
- g. art is critically significant in “formulation of cities”; art subsumes artists and architects
- h. two decades emerge prominently: the 1970s and the 1980s
- i. Three sites are nominated as formative: Cultural Centre of the Philippines (Manila), Alpha Gallery (Singapore), Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art (Bangkok).

All these are reiterated by Eugene Tan (NGS Director) in the publication’s foreword. In it he additionally reminds readers/viewers that this project may be connected to an earlier representation—*A Fact Has No Appearance: Art Beyond the Object*, in 2016—in that the two are anchored in comparative curatorial premises, whereby three artists from three locations in Southeast Asia are shown beside one another as discrete yet relatable practitioners.²

Whereas in the 2016 show, locations are named as coinciding with nations (i.e. the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore) and the three artists (Johnny Manahan, Redza Piyadasa and Tan Teng-Kee) appear as representing or as representative of these locations/nations, in the present they are identified as embodied in/by three art-spaces/institutions in three cities. Even so, the nation is not completely absent or cast aside; neither is Southeast Asia as a region! For that matter, the region is installed prominently.

Eugene Tan also underlines intentions to demonstrate relationships between art and architecture as integral to rendering phenomena (I read this as the city!), “suddenly turning visible” historically, materially and creatively.³ Indeed, the overarching title inscribes this ambition clearly, succinctly and firmly: *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)*.

The publication for this project is set apart from customary printed issues formally announcing, accompanying art exhibitions in public institutions such as the NGS. It is not devoted to illustrating, cataloguing works on display and advancing for them museological and art historical significance.

Nor does it dwell on rationalizing the exhibition as such, i.e. unravelling curatorial intentions and ambitions; explaining display schemes and strategies; recounting procedures for selecting, preparing works for showing; and securing for the institution a distinctive status in offering such an exposition. (These are sporadically inserted in the director's preface and the curators' introduction.)

Yes, works shown/seen in two rooms at the basement level of the Gallery are illustrated and each is captioned meagrely. And that is virtually all there is in the publication of the project as an exhibition—that is to say, as an exhibition encountered materially and visually, so much so that all else that is included is extra to the show. The show as such (residually registered by photographic illustrations of works in muted tones) is visually and textually interspersed with and immersed in multiple voices and images; all of these bristle with one and another crowdedly, loudly and densely to the extent that we lose sight of it as a pre-eminent feature (more on this later).

Is this a bad thing, something gone wrong? A short answer is that it is not, when we regard the publication as some other thing beside a conventional booklet, testament, record, catalogue of an art exhibition. In this instance it **is** something else.

Let me say immediately it is a commendable publication for furthering knowledge of art in the region (i.e. Southeast Asia) and in the world. It consists of transcripts of conversations/interviews with architects connected with building or initiating three facilities (art spaces) for showing/curating art produced in the 1970s and 1980s: the Cultural Centre of the Philippines in Manila, 1969 (CCP), Alpha Gallery in Singapore, 1971 (Alpha) and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art in Bangkok, 1974 (BIMA). The assumption in this instance is that the three are equally weighted and equitably aligned with respect to status and stature, so much so that they are comparable without qualifications (this is discussed later).

There are also conversations with artists, curators, writers, patrons and makers of art worlds. These illuminate forces prevailing in domains of art in the 1970s and 1980s within and without these three sites. Art in these decades appears poised at formative junctures—between esteeming the modern at exalted heights and interrogating, doubting the continuing validity of these attainments as the modern, casting them aside as moribund, and turning towards directions that are unsettling and towards destinations whereby art and artistic activities are relatable to living conditions, urgently and palpably.

There are also re-publications of images and texts produced during these decades for showing, publicizing and reviewing art and artists at these three

venues. Towards the end, there are painstakingly assembled and tabulated time-lines that chronicle programmes and representations at the CCP, Alpha and BIMA.

The publication retrieves archival materials and frames them with current pertinence. It constitutes a rich resource and stimulating wellspring for advancing knowledge of art as manifested in three venues and three cities. Studies of late representations of the modern, as well as sudden interventions/initiatives/provocations/provision of things that strike back at the modern (stirrings identifiable as symptoms of the contemporary!) in Southeast Asian art will, over the years to come, bear testimony to its formative usefulness. It is a touchstone for researching art in the 1970s and 1980s. (The editors regard it functioning as “a reader of primary documents” [p. 7], which it is not in conventional terms.)

I applaud it enthusiastically. This is not to say that it is exempt from critical scrutiny or that I have nothing to say on the soundness of its premises, assumptions and claims, especially as set out by the curators in their introduction and in the director’s preface. For the present I deal with three matters, chiming in with a number that prevails in this enterprise; these are arranged in three movements. First, I take issue with the titular framing of the exhibition and publication, based on what I propose is a misreading of Albano. Second, I consider the extent to which the project engages with “art and architecture”. And third, I address the position of Alpha Gallery within the trio of venues.

I

As mentioned, the first movement in this review has to do with a premise defining this project. I mentioned it at the beginning of this account, underlining it as marking a dramatic overture: “suddenly turning visible”. It is the title for the exhibition and the publication, setting a tone for the curators when introducing this enterprise. “Suddenly turning visible” is hoisted onto a prominent, commanding register. We examine it a little.

“Suddenly turning visible” is extracted from a text by Albano, “Developmental Art in the Philippines” dated 1981 and acknowledged in the introduction. It is the third and final writing by Albano on the topic of developmental art; the first titled “A Decade of Developmental Art” was in 1979 (cited in the introduction, p. 11) while the second “Philippine Art: Young and Developmental” appeared in 1980. Albano considered “developmental art” to be a topic bearing weighty, urgent significance and requiring repeated discussion—one representation following another closely over three years—chiefly to

explain and to validate the new, the different, the shocking and the strange in Manila, and as they are shown and seen in the CCP. Although we note that the 1980 text, “Philippine Art: Young and Developmental” was written for an exhibition of *Contemporary Asian Art* at Fukuoka Art Museum, accompanying the Filipino representation in it.

In all three texts—and it is instructive to read them serially and as relating to one another—the abiding concept is “developmental art”, accompanied by a persistent concern to explain it. Albano is keenly aware of the awkwardness and quirkiness of the term (is it familiar, customarily used in art writing?). But he sticks with it, taking pains to describe its etymology and to demonstrate how and why it suitably points to newly emerging art practices and artworks, why show such things and especially at the CCP, how all of these depart from the modern and harken towards the contemporary. (He says, towards the end of the 1970s, that the contemporary is recognisable as bearing traces and tendencies that commenced at the beginning of that decade and with developmental art). Albano uses the term “developmental art” to specifically explicate art that is startlingly new, in encountering it in the CCP and how seeing such things affect being in the world.

I recall what he says, especially that paragraph in which “suddenly turning visible” is written and which is essential to this project.

The Museum’s curatorial policy was that of stimulating public minds and [at] the same time allowing the artists to question and investigate with their work. It was a powerful curatorial stance but it took the risk in establishing an attitude that prepared the public towards a more relevant way of seeing. For instance, bringing pieces of junk to the gallery for aesthetic perception would lead one to consider virtues of things considered ugly and cheap. It made one relatively aware of an environment suddenly turning visible.

This is a calibrated rationalization for throwing into relief the primacy of the museum/gallery and the power of the curator—in this instance himself (he is effectively talking about himself)—for precipitating change in the art world, particularly through the promotion of what he calls “developmental art”. It is the museum/curator that prepares the public for cultivating relevant ways of seeing; it is the gallery that enables bringing into its premises pieces of junk that are then available for aesthetic delectation; it is via ways of seeing such junk in the museum that virtues of things considered cheap and ugly are discerned discriminately; and it is the museum (and the curator) that risks itself in doing all of this. (At this juncture, it is well worth remembering

that the CCP is not only or even predominantly for showing visual art and, for that matter, art that is modern and contemporary. How may it then be appraised as a theatre for unfolding the region's re-imagining of modernism's utopian ideals, as the curators intend? I will end this review essay by returning to this matter.)

Cumulated acculturation in the gallery/museum awakens awareness of the everyday (i.e. "an environment") as visually intelligible and sensible, an environment rendered visible suddenly on account of the newly gained awareness, although it is not a situation that is settled but fluctuating and contentious, hence relative. In this vein, it is illuminating to interpret Albano's diagnosis as signalling the pre-eminence of the city, i.e. Manila. "Suddenly turning visible" has to do with the city inflaming or fuelling visibility and with ways of seeing that are radically new. (I am reminded of Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*, published in three instalments in *Figaro* in 1863, translated into English and republished in a number of editions. In it, the modern is embodied in and by the city; modern life is life in the city and to paint the modern is to paint the city and living in it, warts and all, and to paint it as tremulous and fleeting.)

Summarising Albano in this manner is not aimed at subjecting his writing to an intolerably over-determined reading; it is to highlight core claims and observations. I dwell on this paragraph as it is germane to appraising positions taken by NGS in offering this exhibition.

"Suddenly turning visible" is an experiential outcome of curatorial intentions, strategies conceived for enabling museums/galleries as public institutions to display works that are unconventional and inconvenient, troubling and troublesome, and to incur risks in doing so. And in doing so, claim for institutions for being "relevant for the moment". (Writing contemporaneously and in describing comparable situations in the USA, Arthur C. Danto offers a thesis whereby the commonplace, the everyday, mere things, are transformed when shown in art galleries and of how such encounters affect showing, seeing and talking about art. He dramatizes these conversions in numinous terms springing from Christian thought and belief, calling them transfigurations.)⁴

I say again that Albano employs the term "developmental art" primarily for explicating art that is startling and different, and for encountering unaccustomed things as art in the CCP; of how seeing such things affect being in the world and of how the CCP is in the forefront for staging a new art. Nowhere does he use the term 'developmentalism'.

Yet developmentalism features pivotally in this project. On this note, the NGS enterprise parts company with Raymundo Albano even as it signals

affinities with some of what he says. I re-cite the opening lines of the introduction.

In 1981, the Filipino artist and curator Raymundo Albano coined the expression “suddenly turning visible” to describe the rapid transformation of Manila’s urban landscape. The visibility that Albano was evoking was an aspirational one, as the Philippines, along with other countries across Southeast Asia, had embarked upon their most ambitious infrastructural projects yet. The driving force was the logic of developmentalism, a desire for rapid economic growth in tandem with massive infrastructure building to transform the cities of Bangkok, Manila and Singapore into modern metropolises.⁵

In the right-hand margin of the page on which this is printed is an acknowledgement of the source of this expression. Yet the editors do not mention “developmental art” in their text or that “suddenly turning visible” is an experiential, even existential outcome of showing, seeing a type or category of art in a museum/gallery. This is a serious omission, a misreading even leading to claims that may be mistaken as springing from Albano’s thoughts and writing. Yes, “suddenly turning visible” has to do with seeing an environment, the city, and seeing the city as aspirational as the editors wish, but also for what it also is—“cheap and ugly”—as Albano reminds us, and seeing the city via the mediation of art that is new, strange, and of seeing it in an institution such as the CCP.

Such an omission/misreading misses discussing “developmental art” as a term, a root term; of gauging its usefulness, appropriateness, idiosyncrasy and currency in discussing art. Is it the case that developmental art meets a comparable fate as *kagunan*, a term inaugurated and forwarded earnestly by Jim Supangkat in discussions of the modern in Indonesian art, now fading into a kind of forgetfulness?⁶

What might we make of such occurrences? As a question, it is of abiding pertinence for the NGS as it is in the thick of devising programmes for not only showing art but for talking, writing, knowing about art. It is in the thick of developing languages for articulating art so that it yields to a range of cognitive, social and subjective demands. Hence its publication of *Modern Art of Southeast Asia: Introduction From A-Z* (2019), consisting of a compendium of key terms nominated by its writer Roger Nelson as having “contributed to the making and discourse” on the modern in the art of the region.⁷ As a question, it is of abiding pertinence as the Gallery has initiated and hugely

contributes to teaching modules in art's histories to undergraduates in the National University of Singapore.

I have gone on and on in this vein to demonstrate what I ask, namely: terms used for categorising, explicating art be discussed, is not an alienating intrusion in and for this institution. And I am not through yet.

'Developmentalism' is a declension of 'developmental', I presume; or that one has been prompted by the reading of the other. As a declension it needs some explanation as it is not sanctioned in a dictionary, nor is it familiar in art writing. For this reason and more, it needs discussion; its legitimacy needs demonstration. In doing so, Albano's designation "developmental art" is scrutinised, the genealogy of this project is clarified, and its distinctiveness is underlined. These are germane for stabilising approaches and consolidating methods; methods and approaches propelled by developmentalism—a pre-siding, driving force for this project.

Matters raised so far are not expected to be unravelled in this publication in as much detail as I have set them out. But they need to be raised onto sufficiently prominent registers, a little more emphatically than they are here, and written succinctly and sharply. Citations are to be made to matter when advancing a position; they have to be constructively directed to illuminating perspectives springing from existing thoughts and now cast newly and differently.

Earlier I remarked in passing that the nomination or coining of developmentalism as a consequence of encountering Albano may be construed as a misreading. I return to that remark only to turn it around; that is to say, developmentalism may be construed as leading to advantageous outcomes.

It is conceived as a driving force transforming "the cities of Bangkok, Manila and Singapore into modern metropolises". Developmentalism emboldens artists and architects to create schemes and representations that visionally elevate these locations into appearing as new cities/metropolises, suddenly. Developmentalism spawns the CCP, Alpha and BIMA and it is at these venues/institutions that artists and art, architecture and architects, and the city converge; and it is at these venues/institutions that developmentalism is made manifest. This is the premise for this project, at least my reading of it; its scope is far, far more extensive in reach and realization than that of Albano's. In dealing with it, we depart from the world envisaged by Raymundo Albano and move to the second of three matters, although not forgetting it or Albano altogether.

Before doing so, I pause at Albano's invocation of "suddenly turning visible" to recall the following.

1. This text is cited by Patrick Flores in his field notes for the Singapore Biennale 2019 *Every Step in the Right Direction* publication, appearing simultaneously with the NGS' show. For Flores, developmental art and "suddenly turning visible"—he singles these prominently in his discussion—signify vital moments in history, signalling beginnings for the contemporary. Albano's text is installed as an art historical threshold for aligning and gaining entry into contemporary worlds in Southeast Asia and as they are represented in this biennale; developmental art and "suddenly turning visible" are secured as landmarks for orienting the 2019 Singapore Biennale and for framing it historically. Albano's text of 1981 is effectively historicized.⁸ There is an added dimension to all of this and it has to do with Flores' esteem for Raymundo Albano. He is installed virtually as a talisman in Patrick Flores' art world—he cites Albano frequently with abiding deference, reverence even. It is a relationship that promises some kind of elucidation and inquiry.
2. The second recollection may well sound trivial in its telling; still, I relay it without making too much of it for now. It is Raymundo Albano's fondness for the word 'suddenly'; it appeals to him for conveying the unpredictable, for encountering the unexpected, for having to do with immediacy and so on. "Suddenly turning visible" is not the only instance when this word is written. It appears in "Some Notes on Roots, Basics, Beginnings" published in 1977 and which unfolds as a conversation with himself, set out as answers to questions. I read a paragraph in which it is inserted and inserted twice. "Each work can be seen in different ways. It may be that we think of the works as examples of 'Western' art when in fact there is much of the Orient in them. The grid work, the experiments in dye and paper, even blown-up photographs can suddenly be akin to Japanese screens, Chinese scrolls and sari-sari stores. The works are powerful visual statements. Suddenly, such statements can be understood in many ways."⁹

It appears again in "The Philippine Entry to the Festival of Asian Art at the Fukuoka Art Museum: Some Notes", published in 1980. The concluding paragraph reads as follows:

Suddenly things around us look all the more beautiful. If fiestas and festivals were formalized into rules, we Asians may have had new forms of art. But since the structuralization of things is such a western form or order, and it is too late to consider "fiesta" [as] a "happening" or a "performance", we can at least investigate the other elements that make up the framework of our designs.¹⁰

I draw attention to the first line in this extract and to another matter when reading this paragraph. Writers on performance and installation as art in Southeast Asia, writing in the 1990s and early 2000, seek precedents for these practices and representations in rituals, ceremonies, and yes, this includes fiestas and festivals in communities in the region. Albano is rarely, if ever, mentioned in these writings as having thought of these as resources for such practices.

I leave considering Albano's use of and fondness for "suddenly" with these two citations; there may well be other writings punctuated by it, signaling its prevalence as an attribute, as an idiom and as a rhetorical device; as signifying the writer being in and speaking of his time.

II

We loop back to developmentalism, to the three venues and three cities, and enter the second movement of this account. When we regard them collectively as manifesting developmentalism, we feel the pulse of this project. It is at such confluences that the publication really springs to life, forcefully, formatively and promisingly. The transcribed conversations with Leandro Locsin Jr (son of Locsin, the architect of the CCP) and with Mom Luang Tridhosyuth Devakul (popularly known as Mom Tri) in designing and building the CCP and BIMA respectively; the repartees and lengthy reflections by Lim Chong Keat on his life and education, on setting up Alpha Gallery (which was never housed in a designed, purpose-built building, unlike the other two, and had an itinerant existence), his thoughts on architecture/architects, art/artists—all of these individually and taken together are absorbing and revelatory.

There are other voices, companionable and contrary, from the present and the past, supplementing, elaborating, commending and critiquing the three I mention; sites and venues for curating and showing art and the city, claims by powerfully vested authorities/individuals in their respective countries/kingdoms are illustrated and articulated. I commend the curators, who doubled as interlocutors, for their preparedness, discretion and probity when talking with the interviewees. The ensuing transcripts are richly-veined, deep reservoirs for researchers in years to come. I commend them too when excavating archives discriminately, as well as their sensibilities for selecting and republishing past texts and images. As materials and traces of histories, these may well shape writing new histories and spur informed critical accounts of art.

Two interlacing strands are forwarded in this project for dealing with multiple vectors stemming from developmentalism. The first is the near-

contemporaneous emergence of the CCP, Alpha and BIMA, instituted within a span of five years in Manila, Singapore and Bangkok. None is known as directly spurred by the other. Each is formed to meet needs, visions and ambitions, arising from ground up, from terrain particular to three locations. Nonetheless, their respective antecedents regarding design thinking and processes may well be traced to facilities and situations in locations further afield than those in the region of Southeast Asia. Disclosures published here indicate such possibilities.

The CCP and BIMA were designed, built from ground zero and commissioned by powerfully vested authorities/individuals in their respective countries/kingdoms. The CCP and BIMA are hailed as architecturally significant. In these respects, while these two venues/institutions are positioned as signifying Manila and Bangkok as premier metropolises, securing for each of these cities unrivalled emerging pre-eminence, each also aspires to embrace the nation and embody a sense of national identity; the city and nation are interwoven and this needs discussion. Hence the CCP declares, affixes, the nation to its name and designation; it marks the centre, culturally. BIMA is deeply immersed in memorialising a venerated individual, namely, the Italian artist and educator Corrado Feroci, who adopted Silpa Bhirasri as his Thai name/persona and who is esteemed for extolling the modern in the art of Thailand as a teacher, artist and writer, and most notably as the founder of Silpakorn University in Bangkok.

Alpha Gallery is not comparable along any of these trajectories. It was initiated by the conviction, vision and enthusiasm of an individual, an architect newly returned from completing his studies in England, driven by newly-formed post-Second World War enlightenment in Europe. (Lim Chong Keat is from Penang but decided to locate his practice in Singapore, gauging it as the major metropolis in Malaysia—when it included Singapore.)

The name eschews affinities with, obligations towards, dependencies on any remembrance. Alpha: the first, the beginning, the source, the origin, striking out newly, unencumbered by a past or by overt national aspirations. As a gallery, it was managed by artists with resources generated within its programmes. It also provided studio or working spaces and enabled public gatherings for conversations/discussions.

I mention these to underline the following: comparative interests do not lead to levelling, neutralizing, overlooking that which is compared into assuming sameness, into forging kinships that remove differences. Comparative schemes illuminate relationships that include dissimilarities, juxtapositions that are interlaced with likenesses and correspondences, complexly. Curators hint at these as prospects in their appraisals of the CCP, Alpha and BIMA. I suggest these hints be raised to prominence so as to yield gritty,

stimulating methods for curating and for discussing art. A project such as this is immeasurably buoyed by the provision of bare-knuckled premises for such representations.

I round off this movement by briefly drawing attention to the status of architecture in this project and even more briefly to interests in Southeast Asia.

Locsin Jr's (popularly known as Andy Locsin) description of the CCP, his knowledge and recollection of his father, his telling of the thinking and designing of the building, his reminder of the weighty demand of Imelda Marcos, his appraisal of Manila as the premier city in the region—all of these are vivaciously relayed in his detailed and valuable narrative. Here are immense potentials for cultivating, fortifying, demonstrating relationships between architects/architecture and artists/art, and for comparatively relating the three cities. There are in his reflections sight- and-thought-lines along which these demonstrations and relationships may be set. They entail the brief for designing the CCP, plans, drawings, details, precedent studies, mock-ups and models! Where are they? Why are they not featured in the publication and the exhibition? Such materials could have been aligned with about 50 artworks contemporary with its design and its making, and with exhibitions housed in this building. If they are not readily available, how might the making of the CCP be reconstituted? After all, there are artworks in this exhibition that are re-made via commissioning and re-configured on an expanded scale.

Mom Luang Tridhosyuth Devakul's disclosures in his published interview may well yield treasure troves of comparable magnitude that could alter the scope of the exhibition as it is presently designed and deepen the tenor of writing as it is featured in this publication.

Unlike Locsin and Mom Tri, Lim Chong Keat did not design a museum or an art institution; this is not to say his shaping-contribution to art within the frame of this project or his stature in the art worlds of the 1970s and 1980s is diminished. Alpha Gallery would not have materialised without his vision, steadfast presence and provision of resources. His convictions in forging sustaining relationships between architecture and art bore fruit in schemes whereby artworks were commissioned, sited prominently and situated sensitively in buildings, thereby enlivening built, designed spaces with aesthetic and symbolic resonance.

These are some ways for vivifying “the close relationship between art and architecture” promised in and by this project—a promise that has not materially and visually materialized. Architecture is sorely missed, especially in the exhibition, where scant photographs and small architectural models

do little to give a sense of the buildings in question, their significance, or their relationship to the exhibited artworks. (We will return to these models shortly.) I am not assuming that relating art and architecture is easily gained. As a proposition and as a prospect leading to representations as exhibitions, such enterprises may well entail leaps into the unfamiliar and the presently unknown, for curators at NGS. But then a brief has been adopted and publicised, and it has to be delivered. A brief that indicates architecture is integrally linked with art in the making of the CCP and BIMA and in the instituting of Alpha, and that the creation of a city is unthinkable without architects and architecture, and in fleshing out developmentalism as a shaping force. Collaboration could provide ways forward (with individuals conversant with making exhibitions of architectural works/designs, and there are outstanding expositors of these genres in our worlds). Such collaborations, stemming from inter-disciplinary curatorial intentions, may yield surprising, illuminating outcomes. The future beckons!

Finally, where and what is Southeast Asia in this project? It is flagged prominently and given attention intermittently in the curators' introduction. We are reminded of historical, geopolitical complexities entailed in its mapping, formations and re-formations. We recall the focus is on cities—three of them—in which are sited three institutions/facilities for representing artists and art in the 1970s and 1980s. How might these cities signify the region?

Wait! Provocatively the curators corral all these, casting them in the following guise. I quote their projection as it is written in the introduction.

The Southeast Asia being offered in this exhibition is a kind of theatre, unfolding through a series of distinct avant-garde experimental practices produced in the cities of Bangkok, Manila and Singapore during the 1970s and 1980s. In this way, this exhibition examines developmentalism as a set of strategies through which artists from non-communist Southeast Asia actively made visible their re-imagination of modernisation's utopian ideals, as well as its promised nationalism and economic development.¹¹

This is a heady mixture. I am fascinated by all that is signaled. It is the stuff of theatre. And it is along these promised or named pathways that I aim to enter the exhibition and behold the unfolding of the region as or like theatre, the exhibition as theatre.

A theatre consisting of three houses—the CCP, Alpha, BIMA—located in three cities, from which issue architects, artists, artists-curators, curators and supporting players. A theatre enlivened by incessant dialogues (including

FIGURE 1: Entry point to the exhibition, *Suddenly Turning Visible* with models and archival materials.

silences and absences) around architecture, art and, let us not forget, the city, intersecting one another. All these intimating visions of Southeast Asia inflamed by developmentalism and a Southeast Asia “suddenly turning visible”, illuminating the modern and possibly the dawning of the contemporary in art. Wow! What a prospect! Here I come.

In beholding this theatre I embark upon the third and final movement.

III

In a vestibule-like enclosure, materials for recalling thoughts, ambitions, intentions, circumstances and outcomes for building or founding these three houses are displayed. At one end on the left, as one enters, are devices embedded into three adjacent walls. These are for listening to recorded conversations with Leandro V. Locsin, Lim Chong Keat and artists relating their associations with BIMA and obliquely with Mom Luang Tridhowsyuth Devakul. Accompanying these voices are published reports of the inaugurations of the CCP, Alpha and the institute, as well as profiles of persons involved in creating them. They furnish lively, illuminating introductions to these houses, enriching materials featured in the publication.

Each house is set apart in the display, regarded independently of one another while remaining within sight of each other. In each of them, the singular, visionary status of the three named individuals is unreservedly acknowledged. There are differences.

The charisma of the CCP's and BIMA's designers, the recognition that these buildings are exemplarily-designed cultural/art sites whose constructions hoist the esteem of Manila and Bangkok respectively onto elevated heights as emerging modern metropolises in the 1970s are buttressed by powerful patrons or benefactors. They are prominently featured in the published reports for funding the two houses and asserting for them national, worldly significance. The centre and the institute would not have materialized without these backers. The Alpha Gallery was initiated, formed and maintained differently.

I have remarked on this earlier, proposing such differences be made to matter when aligning these three houses comparatively and gauging them as equally positioned. Consider the following.

Alpha Gallery was housed in a space located amidst commercial precincts from its inauguration (1971) until its closure (c. 1988). It was not seen, it did not appear as a purposefully-built entity for displaying and appraising art. Alpha Gallery was not distinguished by its architecturally conceived formation. What mattered was its interior, its exhibitions, its provision of critical profiles designed and written by artists, and their commitment to its makeup and programmes. What mattered was its keen advocacy of and hospitality towards a range of especially modern creative practices, those that had been consolidated as well as new, unheralded ones, issuing from various locations in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. And what mattered was its fostering of social connections drawn to and enlivening encounters with art and artists of the 1970s and 1980s.

In these regards it was a magnet lodged in Singapore, akin to the CCP in Manila and BIMA in Bangkok. The timelines inserted at the end of the publication testify to convergences and divergences along the very trajectories I list, thereby interlocking the three houses. The curators underline this in their introduction.

There is one other matter. Unlike the CCP and BIMA, Alpha did not cast itself as an agency with a national mandate; neither was it claimed as meeting with such an aspiration. In this regard, it is well to remember that in 1976 the National Museum Art Gallery was established in Singapore, precisely with such a mission. Alpha did not vanish with the appearance of this institution; it upheld its artistic creed for the duration of its life, 1977–88. In passing we note that 1988 is the year when BIMA was closed! It is abandoned and derelict.

FIGURE 2a: View of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2017. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 2b: View of BIMA circa 1970s. Courtesy of the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art Foundation.

FIGURE 3: BIMA Abandoned and Derelict after closure in 1988. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

Regrettably these matters are skirted, insufficiently attended to. So much so that the Alpha Gallery is absent in the display in the vestibule-like enclosure; in its stead another entity is included as a building. I draw attention to the following.

On each of three skeletally constructed tables raised to staggered heights, arranged in staggered positions, the entire assembly fenced by black tape affixed to the floor, is a miniaturized model of the centre in Manila, the institution in Bangkok and—no, not Alpha Gallery in Singapore—the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House (SCH), designed by Lim Chong Keat and built in 1965. They are fabricated by the Singapore contemporary artist Michael Lee; it is unclear whether they are presented as artworks, illustrations, or both. Their scale is such that one encounters them as miniaturised, precious objects rather than scaled mock-ups of buildings that stimulate seeing, experiencing individually-designed built forms—virtually in their entirety.

Why is the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House represented? What has it to do with Alpha Gallery? Is it on account of Lim Chong Keat, who is its architect and initiated the founding of the gallery, and who

FIGURE 4: Close up detail of Models from the series *Lines, Planes, Volumes* by Michael Lee. Models left to right are Singapore Conference Hall, CCP and BIMA.

sought to integrate architecture and art in the projects he designed? If so, how might one connect SCH with Alpha Gallery in the first instance, and in the second, with the CCP and BIMA? And in the third instance, how might all of these be hitched to the overarching themes in *Suddenly Turning Visible*?

Or is the SCH featured because as a building, it is appraised as yielding architectural gravitas on a par with the CCP and BIMA, thereby enables gauging Lim Chong Keat as equal to Locsin and Mom Tri? All three are portrayed as individuals intensely attuned to living, thinking, creating in distinctly modern epochs; all three are represented as intensely alive to the particulars of place and location, while encompassing the world boldly, discriminately when developing their practices and positioning themselves as socially, culturally active.

Earlier I remarked that Alpha's significance and impact are measured by what ensues in its interior. This is acknowledged in this project by a rich array of materials in the exhibition. Interestingly and pointedly, Alpha Gallery is illustrated frequently via photographic images of its interior, featuring exhibition layout, viewers, gathering of artists. An image of its interior also appears on the cover of the publication along with interiors of the CCP and BIMA, and in materials presented as 'archival' in the exposition room.

Here is a thought springing from these ruminations. Even as the CCP and BIMA are modelled as buildings designed distinctly as cultural/art spaces, the Alpha could have been modelled as an interior consisting of spaces designed for a distinct habitat: for showing, seeing and communing on art. In doing so its differences from its neighbouring houses are demonstrated while its kinship with them is vividly displayed.

We leave this threshold and move inward, entering a neatly-walled, extensive, evenly-lit container-like space. It is spacious; it is demandingly precise

FIGURE 5: Installation view of the Alpha Gallery. Courtesy of Lim Chong Keat.

FIGURE 6: Cover image of *Suddenly Turning Visible*'s publication. Courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 7: Installation view of the *Suddenly Turning Visible* exhibition in the Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery.

in demarcating a sealed interior. In here, *Suddenly Turning Visible* is shown and seen as an exhibition. And it is visible all at once—clearly, calculatedly and along a measured pace. Nothing is left to chance; virtually every sector in this exhibition arena is visible from any single viewing position. Pictures are hung at even heights, equidistant from one another, spanning the length of walls, from end to end. Occasionally a three-dimensional composition on a pedestal makes a discrete, unobtrusive appearance in space.

Artworks constructed, designed in relief planes such as *Tatlin and Co (Russian Painting 4)* by Roberto Chabet, dated 1984 and remade in 2012, is mounted adhesively to the supporting wall, so much so that we barely discern its spatial claims or demands. *Meta Form* by Teh Tien Chong, dated 1978, consists of planes aligned, angled subtly and joined precisely. We see the ensemble at times receding from view and at times projecting into space, optically and actually. The impact of these oscillating sight-lines are, however, muted and truncated, as its display is spatially constricted and access is hemmed in.

Notwithstanding these gripes, I applaud this exhibition as it displays standout creations not seen in a long, long while, and in instances, for showing works for the very first time. I dare say there are viewers who have never encountered any of the productions in this exposition. Art and artists of the 1970s and 1980s, the decades framing *Suddenly Turning Visible*,

FIGURE 8: Roberto Chabet, *Tatlin and Co. (Russian Painting 4)*, 1984, remade 2012, plywood and metal brackets, 121.9 × 243.8 × 30.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

FIGURE 9: Teh Tien Chong, *Meta-Form*, 1978, mixed media, 178.5 × 295 × 127 cm. Gift of the Artist. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

are faintly registered, dimly remembered in the welter of contemporary art worlds. In these respects, this project underlines the importance of art produced during these decades for beholding heightened attainments in spheres of the modern in Southeast Asia, while heralding simultaneously, here and there, abrupt departures from these very moderns and turning towards some other, different destinations.

In these regards, I am reminded of an exhibition titled *Telah Terbit (Out Now)*. *Southeast Asian Art Contemporary Art Practices During the 1960s to 1980s*, which was inserted as a searing interjection into the heart of the Singapore Biennale 2006, to prospectively confront the contemporary with a sense of lineages. Of course *Suddenly Turning Visible* is poised differently as the curators underline, while acknowledging *Telah Terbit*.¹² Even so it emerges simultaneously with the Singapore Biennale 2019, which is avowedly conscious of the contemporary's "roots, basics, beginnings", hence with its histories. The parallelism surfacing between then (2006) and now (2019) is compelling, although the two enterprises are not weighted equally. It is best to defer its discussion to a separate occasion.

We redirect attention to works in the show. I have not seen Teh Tien Chong's orchestrated arrangements of linear, planar forms (*Meta Form*) in more than three decades; it is exhilarating when meeting it newly, beholding formations aspiring to ideal worlds. Hernando Ocampo's *Genesis*, dated 1969, has not been seen here. Painted using oil, it consists of sharply edged formations bearing subtly inflected colours. These formations crackle and flicker energetically, appearing kinetically poised to leap from the canvas and waft into space.

Latiff Mohidin's *Pago Pago II Putih (White Pago Pago II)*, dated 1969, is rarely sighted; I have not seen it in an exhibition here. As the title indicates, it is the second composition in the *Pago Pago* suite that is distinguished by a prominent use of white as a colour (the first was produced in 1967). While this series is renowned, there is little (if any) recognition that it is made up of sub-sets or sub-categories, some of which are set apart by a prevailing colour; hence there are compositions designated as black, blue and red. There are also clusters bearing affiliations with landscape and the figural.

In this picture, interlocking forms are hoisted onto two vertical axes set parallel to one another and located in what appears as a landscape-like setting, an association suggested by the ground-plane. The sources, formation and articulation of individual components, their arrangements as a composition and the picture's impact are matters discussed in extant writings on Latiff's art, on works collectively bearing comparable or kindred traits and appraised as a body. I'll not deal with them here.

FIGURE 10: (Left to Right) Fernando Zobel, *Grabado I*, 1958, oil on canvas, 61 × 91 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore; Jose T. Joya, *Red Sarimanok*, 1964, oil on canvas, 175.5 × 99.6 cm. Collection of the Cultural Center of the Philippines; Hernando R. Ocampo, *Genesis*, 1968, oil on canvas, 60.9 × 121.9 cm. Private Collection; Fernando Zobel, *Lepidoptero: Noche de Verano* (Summer Night), 1969, oil on canvas, 62 × 61.8 cm. Collection of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

FIGURE 11: Latiff Mohidin, *Pago Pago Putih II*, 1969, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm. Collection of Chan Heng Chee.

It is important to acknowledge seeing this painting as consummately consolidating the *Pago Pago* theme in Latiff's practice in the 1960s, at which time pictures bearing this title were produced numerously, thoughtfully and with varying satisfaction, at which time too *Pago Pago* flourished and was developed with sustained confidence and depth, with variety and creative integrity. The mid and latter years of the 1960s are years when this series was fully realized. *White Pago Pago II* emerged from such a milieu. Appraising it along such pathways quickens prospects for seeing *Latiff Mohidin. Pago Pago (1960–1969)*, an exhibition currently showing in the NGS, expansively and sharply.

There are other works with compelling histories, for example, works by Sharifa Fatima Zubir, Eng Tow, Lin Hsin Hsin, David Madella, which herald new, startlingly different (i.e. Madella) practices of art. There are remakes of productions that no longer survive materially, such as Roberto Chabet's *Tatlin and Co (Russian Painting No 4)* mentioned earlier. Apinan Poshyananda's multimedia performance titled *How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock* (an undisguised appropriation of Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Art to a Dead Hare*), inaugurated in 1985 and presented at BIMA, marked a watershed moment in contemporary in art in Thailand; it is remade for this exposition and acquired by NGS for its collection.

At this juncture I enter a lament.

It is unlikely that we will see works assembled in this exhibition again, any time soon. An exposition staunchly affirming the 1970s and 1980s as decades in which certain kinds of art were produced, propelled by developmentalism, as the curators assert or as Raymundo Albano sees it, kinds recognizable as "developmental art", is unlikely to be reconstituted.

Each work bears traces signifying particulars of its making, its entry into and placement in the worlds of art, and its subsequent representations. When these traces and their import are comparatively apprehended (that is to say when a work is seen along these pathways and seen in relation to another), they are expected to yield ways of seeing art produced in locations in the region during these two decades, exhibited in the CCP, Alpha and BIMA, as art in Southeast Asia. These are among aims declared in this enterprise; we presume works on display are curatorially adjudged as substantiating them.

These are weighty matters needing attention. Here is a suggestion for doing so. It would be immensely useful to issue a publication featuring the exhibition component of *Suddenly Turning Visible*, in which artworks, supporting materials on display are illustrated, catalogued and discussed. A publication dealing with the exposition and its making as subjects for explication along a number of fronts.

FIGURE 12: (Left to Right) Renato Habulan, *Kagampian (Fullness of Time)*, 1982, oil on canvas laid on board, 213.4 × 152.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery Singapore; Apinan Poshyananda, *How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock*, 1985, painted crates and LCD monitors, Video, 5 channels each 4:3 format, colour and sound (mono), varying duration. Collection of the artist.

The following spring to mind, inserted as questions. When were works, displayed here, shown in the respective houses? How were they presented, publicised and received? Were there indications of possible links between artworks and architecture in exhibitions in these venues? Did the CCP, Alpha and BIMA exhibit only art exemplifying developmentalism or accountable as developmental art? If so, were they the only agencies to do so in Manila, Singapore and Bangkok? Were there crossovers of artists and art between and connecting the three houses? And so on.

As questions, they are not extraneous. They arise from seeing artworks and supporting materials constituting this exhibition. I pose them in part after reading thoughts, recollections, aspirations, outcomes by diverse persons, the curators' introduction in the publication reviewed earlier. In part they are posed from realizing that such a publication, which is markedly conventional and very different from what has been issued, is still the only means for recording an exhibition, for conserving it and for enabling its study. Without it, I fear the exhibition will vanish, be forgotten, or recalled haphazardly. Without it, knowledge of a recent past, a past that is vital for knowing art's modernist histories is impoverished.

I round off this review by returning to one of the foundational aims for developing *Suddenly Turning Visible* as a project in the NGS, i.e. appraising the CCP, Alpha and BIMA comparatively as formative agencies for advancing the new in art of the 1970s and 1980s via the exhibition, and seeing the display as artistically manifesting the region. We remember the curators saying that they intend showing Southeast Asia (in this instance artists and art emerging in these two decades in locations in it, represented in these three houses) unfolding as or like theatre. The aim is sound, the intention realizable, and the prospects promising.

I ended the second movement on this note, in high anticipation, expecting to behold a stage that is dynamic, variedly accented, even surprising in the sense of encountering the unexpected. And to be immersed in a charged milieu!

A stage consisting of, perhaps, clustered spaces of varying dimensions and design for fostering, on the one hand, conversations, and on the another, soliloquies, and occasionally for dealing with situations arising from silences or absences. A stage in which the three houses are shown at times interlocking, at other times skirting or bypassing the others glancingly, and in some other instances positioned as standing alone even. The artworks and supporting materials assembled are more than adequate for fuelling such anticipations; the exhibition room is spatially extant for yielding transformations I envisage, creating an enlivening arena for meeting these expectations. And I do not doubt the curators are able imaginatively to direct or offer an exhibition as or like theatre.

We leave the vestibule-like enclosure buoyed by scenarios such as the ones I envisage thrown into relief. On entering the exhibition room, scanning the display, we see *Suddenly Turning Visible* as a timid, constrained presentation; we enter a stage where the players are stilled and regimented.

The display begins with paintings associated with the CCP, one set beside the other. These are followed by pictures shown at the Alpha also hung next to one another, followed by works linked with the BIMA. Occasionally the sequence is interrupted with the three houses arranged next to the other. The sequence is then reset. By and large the houses are segregated. The display is steadfastly held along a continuous linear trajectory, sticking leech-like to the walls, from end to end in the exhibition room. Platforms are erected in clear space for displaying published materials of events represented at the CCP, Alpha and BIMA; they are effectively isolated, removed and set at a distance from the artworks that are the very subjects of these publications. These materials could have been interspersed with the paintings, sculptures and mixed-media productions, provoking stimulating interlocutions. And so on.

FIGURE 13: Installation view of archival materials on a display platform in the *Suddenly Turning Visible* exhibition in the Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery.

FIGURE 14: Installation view of *Suddenly Turning Visible* exhibition in the Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery.

I need hardly go any further in this vein. The layout is neat, precise and clinical. As attributes for viewing, they are impressed at a cost, especially when set against intentions, aims for this project. Hence, the suddenness promised by Raymundo Albano, flagged formatively and avidly by the curators for encountering art in the 1970s and 1980s, is absent. Prospects for displaying art produced during these decades unfolding like theatre is unrealized.

I leave wondering why, oh why have we missed an occasion for creating an out-of-the-way public representation of art produced at crucial junctures in the formation of its history? Where we see the familiar unfamiliarly, the unseen unpredictably! Where we leave such a theatre intensely energised, and continuously communing—amongst and within ourselves.

I exit, slouched and somewhat deflated.

Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989) is an exhibition at the National Art Gallery Singapore (NGS). Its curators invited me to review it. This review essay consists of an appraisal of the publication issued for it, and a review of the exhibition. I have organised my thoughts, observations, analysis and opinions in three movements. Two had been written and presented to the curators in February 2020. The third is concluded at the end of April. I appreciate the generosity extended by the NGS.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- ¹ Cheng Jia Yun, Joleen Loh, Seng Yu Jin and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, "Introduction", in *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1980)*, ed. Seng Yu Jin and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019), p. 6.
- ² Eugene Tan, "Foreword", in *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1980)*, p. 5.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
- ⁵ Raymundo Albano, "Developmental Art in the Philippines", *Philippine Art Supplement* 2, 4 (July–August 1981): 15–6. Republished in *Raymundo Albano Texts*, ed. Patrick D. Flores (Manila: Vargas Museum, 2017), p. 46.
- ⁶ For discussions of *kagunan*, see the following: Jim Supangkat, "The Emergence of Indonesian Modern Art", in *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, ed. Masahiro Ushiroshoji and Toshito Rawanchaikul (Fukuoka City: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1991), especially p. 228; Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral. Curation in Southeast Asia* (NUS Museum, National University of Singapore, 2008), pp. 14, 43, 45; Ahmad Mashadi, *Jim Supangkat on Contemporary Art: Notes and Reflections*, unpublished, Singapore 2010. *Kagunan* has been employed by writers other than Jim Supangkat; see, for instance, Sudjoko discussing Kartini with reference to this term in Sudjoko, "'Kagunan' bagi Kartini", *Kompas*, 22 April 1983.
- ⁷ Roger Nelson, *Modern Art of Southeast Asia: Introductions from A-Z* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019), p. 15.
- ⁸ Patrick D. Flores, "The Only Thing Left to Do", *Every Step in the Right Direction, Singapore Biennale 2019*, ed. Patrick Flores and Joyce Toh (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2019), p. 15.
- ⁹ Raymundo Albano, "Some Notes on Roots, Basics, Beginnings" (Manila: Cultural Centre of the Philippines, 1977); republished in *Raymundo Albano Texts*, pp. 31–2, p. 32.
- ¹⁰ Republished in *Raymundo Albano Texts*, pp. 41–2, 42.
- ¹¹ "Introduction", in *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1980)*, p. 7.
- ¹² *Telah Terbit (Out Now). Southeast Asian Contemporary Art Practices During the 1960s to 1980s* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Biennale 2006, 2007). Curiously (mistakenly?), curators of *Suddenly Turning Visible* refer to the 2006 exposition as *Telah Terbit (Out Now) Southeast Asian Art Practices during the 1970s*. See "Introduction", in *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1980)*, p. 6.