It may not surprise anyone to know that art history, at least in Singapore, had neither a birth, nor really an afterlife. Its current incarnation has been chastened by easier, more accessible forms of art writing, whether the journalism that passes for art criticism, or the occasional screeds that pop up on social media—catchy, but quickly forgotten.

Art writing in Singapore is often couched in the language of boosterism. One hears talk about the country “developing” in art: having more exhibitions, more spaces to display art, more hot young artists. Cue the next media darling! Dollar figures are trotted out to justify the latest buying spree, as though market valuation were the only determinant of good art. Watch this brushstroke turn into that price point.

Let me be clear that I have little confidence that art history can write against such idle chatter. But in order for the discipline as it exists in Singapore to mean something, to matter, it needs to undergo rigorous self-examination: What are its goals? What are “our” key texts? What constitutes the real work of art history? No doubt securing a work of art’s production and reception, as well as uncovering new objects and material evidence, should still be a fundamental task of art history. But I don’t think this is enough. Most art histories in Singapore tend to what I would call “historicist culturologies”: simple iconographical and sociocultural unravellings of a work of art within a given place and time. Yet these rarely attain what Erwin Panofsky once called “iconology”: a total understanding of a work of art in its context, including an unpacking of the cultural or collective unconscious triggered by the work.
insufficient attention to form; works of art are too quickly explained—or worse, decoded. A familiar assumption is the complete translatability of image to word. Art historians and critics often struggle to catch up to what many artists already know: that investing in form introduces a time depth into the work, and can secure a work’s passage through historical time.

What follows is a selective history of art-historical writing in Singapore—a historiography—via three broad periods. Each poses the enduring question of modernism. If spatially situating modernism in Singapore entails assessing it within its regional context of Southeast Asia (or Asia), equally important is a consideration of temporality: How did modernism emerge out of a long span of historical time? (Modernism is treated here as both an effect of modernity, and a cultural response to it.) The challenge, as I see it, is not so much to move from national to regional-global accounts, but to decentre the national within the regional-global. Taking into account a spatially enclosing “what,” I will simultaneously try to grasp modernism’s time-trickling “when” (my title echoes Geeta Kapur, but also Raymond Williams). The 1300s–1890s, 1920s–1960s and 1970s–2000s were, as we shall see, three moments of modernism in Singapore: three moments in the defeat of labour and the rise of capital.

1) 1300s to 1890s


Wong, ibid., 32.
Enclosure was the removal of land from the commons, the putting of territory into private hands, which took place in Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries. See, for instance, J.M. Neeson, Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure, and Social Change in England, 1700–1820, reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

9

Wong, op. cit., 37.

10

“The 1823 sketch of Singapore from the sea by Jackson [...] obscured the Temenggong’s community in visual space—the impression of a few houses lying close to a beach with nothing beyond the space leading to the slope of the hill is inaccurate. The drawing conceals the fact that a large part of the area between High Street and the coconut palms on the left was occupied by the Temenggong and his followers, a group which comprised more than 600 people living in 79 huts.” Wong, ibid., 41.

11

“It does not appear to me that the influence of the native chiefs has in any respect been necessary or even beneficial in the formation, maintenance, or progress of this settlement, the prosperity of which has rested solely and exclusively on the character and resources of the British government.” Crawfurd to Governor General, 10 January 1824; quoted in Carl A. Trocki, Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore 1784–1885 (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1979), 55.

12

Ibid.

13

For sovereignty, see Lauren Benton, A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

14

Kevin Chua
simply, needs to be performed.\textsuperscript{14} Such an aporia needs to be figured or represented. Intrinsic to the British tabula rasa imagination was the forgetting and erasure of the long history of Malays in the region. Long a powerful self-governed maritime state that was able to control trade in the region, they had only recently been eclipsed by the Bugis, Dutch and British in the 1760s. Such a forgetting also took place against the broader strategic penetration of the British into Southeast Asia—culture was entwined with politics. Acknowledging this longer history decentres the conventional history of the founding of Singapore in 1819, which tends to stress the country’s necessity, rather than contingency, and tends to privilege British agency and autonomy in their ability to turn the island into a successful port and trading centre.\textsuperscript{15}

A 19\textsuperscript{th}-century viewer might have considered the observational freshness in Jackson’s sketch and many other picturesque scenes new, which ties into a feeling of the “modern.” But we need to heed O.W. Wolters and Barbara Andaya’s point that Southeast Asia had long been modern, in the sense of people in the region adopting and adapting to new cultural-technological forms and techniques. In many parts of the region, long before the European advance in the 17\textsuperscript{th} through 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, there was an interest in being up to date, with an emphasis on the present, the now.\textsuperscript{16} The forgetting “in” the image, I argue, mobilised by a 19\textsuperscript{th}-century viewer, was tied to the British attempt to claim the centre—of Singapore, in Southeast Asia. Such a centrality did not pre-exist—it needed to be imagined, performed.\textsuperscript{17} And one effect of that performative view was to locate newness and modernity as belonging exclusively to the West. The Jackson sketch may be called “modernist,” if we understand modernism in the early modern period as tied to a disruption of alienating perspectival realism. Jackson may have been replicating a British colonialist gaze, but his drawing unravels the more one looks at it.

Wong persuasively argues that the picturesque became internalised from the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century onward.\textsuperscript{18} But I would argue that this internalisation was not just a change in representational form; it was also an effect of a shift in capital. The opening of the Suez Canal and increased use of steam shipping from the 1860s, and the greater intervention into the Malay states from the 1870s (for the intensi-
fied extraction of primary products like tin) increased the flow of goods and people into the colony, and changed the very nature—the very basis—of representation. Concomitant with this internalisation of the picturesque in the last four decades of the 19th century was, as Wong points out, a greater exclusion of racial others, both in society and in representation (native residences, for instance, were newly described as “slums”). These views, she justifiably says, “precluded any engagement with this population.” Yet, I would argue, there continued to be encounters with the native population in the second half of the 19th century. It is, rather, the nature of the encounter that changed.

Though locals are shown doing manual labour in many of these images, there are also subtler or obscure instances of contact: for example, the print reproduced in the book has one vignette showing a Malay man moving forward hysterically, a kris in each hand (fig. 1.2). The caption for the vignette reads “Running amok.” “Amok” has a complicated history in Southeast Asia; European colonisers misrecognised a condition that was intrinsically religious and could not be tamed by their medical-anthropological categories. Such ineffable phenomena had an ability to unsettle and undermine the colonial artist-viewer. These images may quite possibly be the strongest instances of the refusal of Western epistemology we have. (There is something precarious about the vertically upright man in the image, as though on the verge of falling to the horizontal.)

It comes as no surprise when the one “modernist” writer we do have from the period, Joseph Conrad, centred his Southeast Asian stories on such moments of radical unknowing (suicide, betrayal, trauma). If the word “folly” in the title of Conrad’s first major book, Almayer’s Folly (written between 1889–1894), refers, on one level, to the Dutch trader Almayer’s extravagant house—a playful mistake—the French derivation of the word, “folie,” suggests something deeper—madness, a condition that Almayer sunk into once his daughter, Nina, departed. The 1890s, when Conrad was writing his first stories, was a crucial decade in the history of colonial capitalism. Again, think of capital as conditioning representation. To focus on the post-production afterlife or reception of a picturesque print or painting, as Wong does, does not adequately address the contingencies of history. We should instead ask: why did this particular work appear when it did, and not at another time?

19 Wong’s remark that many of these pictures “left out dissonant elements”—in other words, politics—is, I think, only partly true. Ibid., 50.
20 Wong’s remark that many of these pictures “left out dissonant elements”—in other words, politics—is, I think, only partly true. Ibid., 50.
21 Reproduced in ibid; see fig. 1.2.
23 Similar to the “Running Amok” print in its precarious content is Heinrich Leutemann’s Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore (Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore). Though Wong dates this print to 1835, it was likely made substantially later. Leipzig-born artist and book illustrator Leutemann lived between 1824 and 1905, and it is unlikely that he did the drawing for the print when he was 11 years old. Though Coleman was attacked by a tiger in 1835, the print, I would argue, belongs to the late-19th century—probably after John Cameron’s description of the event in 1865. It is from the 1860s that such a
2) 1920s to 1960s

One seminal piece of art writing produced between the 1920s and 1960s—a period often thought of as the beginning of modern art in Singapore—is Marco Hsu’s *A Brief History of Malayan Art*. Initially published as a series of articles for the *Nanfang Evening Post* between 1961 and 1963, Hsu's writing was compiled into a book in Chinese in 1963, and translated into English in 1999 by architectural historian Lai Chee Kien.


National University of Singapore Museum curator Chang Yueh Siang has pointed out that Hsu seems to have gotten the idea of a “cultural desert” from the generalised public discourse of his time, specifically a series of newspaper articles published in 1949 that questioned the existence of culture in Singapore. Hsu changed his mind between the 1930s and 1960s with regard to the value of art in the Malayan region.

Between Here and Nanyang: Marco Hsu’s Brief History of Malayan Art, an exhibition held at the National University of Singapore Museum, Singapore, 21 August 2013–3 September 2016, curated by Chang Yueh Siang and Lai Chee Kien.

that it did indeed have art, as well as a long cultural tradition, one senses a last-gasp desperation and anxiety. 1963 saw the beginnings of a political merger between Singapore and Malaya (along with Sarawak and North Borneo) which, as it turned out, would only last for two years. The two countries would split in 1965. Of course Hsu, along with so many of his generation, had no idea that that union would not, maybe could not, last, and maybe the trick to reading Hsu’s book is to peer through the art, to detect the burgeoning cracks and fissures in the bedrock of society.

When Was Modernism?
ing, as the term contains a colonialist tabula rasa understanding of history that rhetorically erases the already established culture and history on the island, and compares only by way of further normalising the standard of Western art and culture. The East-West comparison was stacked in the West’s favour to begin with.

This is why the appearance of the word “Malaya” in Hsu’s text is loaded—for it tracks a more contradictory relation to place. If, in his early writing, Hsu had referred to the geographical region as “Nanyang,” by the early 1960s, he began to use the word “Malaya.” This coincided with a broad shift in the orientation of the cultural group that identified with the name “Nanyang”: if the earlier Nanyang was more Chinese-oriented (with most of these immigrant Chinese still yearning for home); by the 1940s, the Nanyang became more multicultural (after 1949, there was a greater sense of being cut off from then-Communist China). By 1955–1956, there was a general use of the word “Malaya” in newspapers, with the word “Malayanisation” even being used as a verb. In the late 1950s, “Malaya” was promoted—one could say co-opted—by the colonial authorities as the cultural corollary of political merger.28

So the stakes of the word are high.

There are moments when the word “Malaya” sits uneasily within Hsu’s text. In chapter ten, for example, he opens an early paragraph with the declarative “Malaya has no painting traditions.”29 Given the sentences that follow, he seems to have meant “Malay races,” but somehow uses the more encompassing geographical term (the Chinese term he uses is for Malaya, and this can clearly be distinguished from the Chinese word for Malay races, which he uses elsewhere in the text). The elision here is telling: the push toward cultural unity literally occludes the Malay races. Think back to the 19th-century British colonial forgetting of the Malay. The contradiction would bedevil both Singapore and Malaysia in the decades to come.30

My 2004–2006 essay “Painting the Nanyang’s Public: Notes toward a Reassessment” was an attempt to resituate Nanyang painting with regard to the problem of “Malaya,” as both cultural idea and political reality.31 The “Malayan” was something that had been mostly forgotten, but I would argue had been repressed, in the decades of economic growth and cultural nationalism in Singapore between the late 1960s and 1990s. It was left implicit.

29 Hsu, op. cit., 63.
30 On the post-1950s differences between Singapore and Malaysia, see Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh’s excellent travel history Floating on a Malayan Breeze: Travels in Malaysia and Singapore (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).
33 Art historians have pointed out that the methodological complexities of that first and second generation of practitioners of form, style, and iconography in Europe and America (which began with Aloïs Riegl and was extended by several Vienna School art historians) did not always extend to their successors. See Whitney Davis, A General Theory of Visual Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
in art historian T.K. Sabapathy’s writing, even though he had lived through the period. Here is Sabapathy, writing in the catalogue for the seminal exhibition *Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang* (1979):

In addition to proposing an attitude towards art activity that readily identified it as being modern, the School of Paris provided for the Nanyang artists a variety of pictorial schemas in which the obligations of traditional iconography were either minimised or neutralised by formal and technical considerations. The absence of such an iconography released the need to root the art object in a clearly defined ideology or value system. Consequently, artists were free to select from the available schemas features which were suitable to their own aspirations, without having to adopt any supporting ideology. *The selection was governed primarily by formal (stylistic) requirements.*

(32) (emphasis mine)

The formalism here may belong less to the painting, than to Sabapathy’s methodology itself, one rooted in an understanding of style and iconography that was being disseminated in Euro-American universities in the 1950s and 1960s.33 Reading Sabapathy’s writing of the 1980s and 1990s, one feels like he was simply taking these Nanyang paintings at face value, or taking these artists—many of whom he had interviewed—at their word.34 Though there was generous praise of their art, there was very little attempt to read the paintings apart from the artists’ own manifest discourse on them. If the Nanyang artists had a “clearly defined ideology” and were in flight from politics, Sabapathy’s methodological formalism did not call them out for it. To me, in 2004, these paintings needed to be wrested from their formalist (pastoral) seclusion—all that nonsense about Bali being a “paradise”—and read in the light of the social throng, the din and buzz of the city.35 Sabapathy’s take on Nanyang painting, to be fair, was perhaps the narrative we needed to believe in the 1980s and 1990s, when Singapore moved into a New International Division of Labour, a global economic and political system that emphasised capital over labour.36

My essay tried to reconnect the painting to its social world via the methodology of dialectical Marxism.37 Instead of stylistic develop-

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35 Such formalism continues, e.g.: “The common thread that runs through all the artworks commonly referred to as ‘Nanyang Style’ is actually the eclectic approach of mixing and matching different techniques, media, compositional formats or modes of representation within a single painting, coupled with the use of local subject matter.” Emelia Ong, “The Nanyang Artists: Eclectic Expressions of the South Seas,” in *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysian Art*, Volume 1, eds. Nur Hanim Khairuddin & Beverly Yong, with T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2012), 64. For me, it is the lack of synthesis, the incompleteness and “unstudiedness” of these paintings that is compelling. There seems, in Ong, an anxiety to define the Nanyang style—as though pinning it down was the problem. A simple notion of pluralism operates here that shuns any kind of definition.


37 I drew from the writings of T.J. Clark, who was a product of the Marxist New Left, formed out of the ruins of the political struggle of 1968 in Europe and America. Instead of orthodox Marxism’s view of culture as secondary to politics and economics—i.e. culture as the superstructure to the base of economics—the New Left thought of culture as primary, and drew from the rich theoretical well of figures such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School.
ment, I was interested in the specific trajectories of art, their rise and fall, and how social contradiction became manifest “in” aesthetic form. Form was tracked alongside certain developments that were taking place in the modern city (the crisis in housing, the building of the first skyscraper, etc.). Modernism, it seemed to me, grew out of modernity, forming some kind of resistance against it. The best paintings of the period—Cheong Soo Pieng’s *Malayan Life* (1957), Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class* (1959), among a few others—were, I felt, in tense contradiction. What continues to be so interesting about *National Language Class*, to me, is the way its tensions and contradictions are left unresolved. In the painting, the cross-race, cross-class political idea—or better, dream—of Malaya was still alive. We can see the dream quite literally in the pastoral painting on the wall in the background—which recalls the more prosaic “dreams” of the Bali group of artists. It is as though the second generation had worked through the alienation of the first, and made the dream more tangible and real—but simultaneously precious and delicate, prone to rupture and collapse. Hence my notion of “failure,” which was both aesthetic and political, and was pitted against a bourgeois understand-

38 My essay was not without mistakes. For instance, the bourgeoisie “[moving] out into the suburbs” was vague (Chua, op. cit., 80.). The squatter problem has since been thoroughly analysed by Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).


40 Despite some solid new research on the 1950s exhibitions of the Equator Art Society group, Seng Yu Jin’s exhibition *From Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency* (Singapore Art Museum, 2007) tended to paint the artworks on display with a broad political brush. The problem of aesthetic form dropped out of the picture.

41 Patrick D. Flores, in his *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008), made the valuable point that sometimes exhibitions do contribute to art history. I would say that the *Between Here and Nanyang* exhibition at the NUS Museum was one such art-historically important exhibition. My discussion of the works in this exhibition draws from Chang and Lai’s research.
the exhibition in 2015 was especially laudable, because it gave the paintings room to breathe.) One excellent comparison had Lai Kui Fang’s *War and Peace* (1959, fig. 1.3) hung across from another very similar still life by him, *Still Life* (1959), on an opposite wall. At first, the former painting, hung next to Nanyang paintings of Bali, came across as “apolitical,” while the latter, hung alongside other Equator Art Society works, looked “political.” But, more than simply showcasing the diversity of work by Equator Art Society members, the comparison problematised the politics of interpreting painting of this period as such. One could certainly read *War and Peace* in a political light: the date “1 January 1959,” on the depicted calendar, may have referred to a new, perhaps more hopeful, year in the Malayan “Emergency” (for the Malayan Communist Party, a war of liberation). Or one could read it apolitically or formally, as a mere painting exercise: Lai remarked how the props used for this work were circulated in a number of other paintings. No doubt such a polyvalent work would have been attractive for members of the Society, many of whom were under governmental surveillance in the 1950s. Were these paintings aimed at the general public, or at those who were on the “right” side of history? The Tolstoy reference may have resonated with the vernacular cosmopolitanism prevalent in Singapore and Malaya after the Asian-African conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. Chinese high school students were avidly reading works of Russian literature.42 Reading Lai’s painting in this light decentres the conventional, national interpretation, towards a consideration of the work within a broader relational field of political actors in Southeast Asia.43 The strength of the exhibition lay in the way the viewer was allowed to test these interpretations, as a means of accessing—or better, inhabiting—history. I would say that contesting the interpretation of these paintings keeps the question of the politics of Nanyang and Equator art alive. Let “modernism” remain as a barely uttered, fugitive demand.

3) 1970s to 2000s

Art history in Singapore, as it turns out, may have been built on a tangle of myth. One instance is the reception of Cheo Chai-Hiang’s 5’ x 5’ *Singapore River* (1972). Since 2005, if not slightly earlier, the work has been held up as the origin of contemporary art in Singapore.44

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Yet recent research by curator Seng Yu Jin has shown how the reception of that artwork—Cheo famously submitted the work, from England, as an entry into an exhibition organised by the Modern Art Society in Singapore, and was rejected—was in fact more complicated. In fact, Cheo’s submission was never really rejected; Seng thinks it was ultimately an administrative error. But a lingering question is why we needed that myth of rejection in the first place. For several years, Cheo became our Duchamp (recall the brouhaha surrounding his *Fountain* [1917]). It is as though, to get its art history going, Singapore needed to call up these mirrors of Western modern and contemporary art.

One recent essay that mentions 5’ x 5’ is Sabapathy’s catalogue essay for the exhibition *Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, held at the School of Art, Design and Media Gallery at the Nanyang Technological University in 2012. Sabapathy’s argument, at least for the section on Cheo, is that “the modern, the contemporary, and the seventies may be nudged into forming historically inflected intersections.” An incontrovertible statement, as it is. But when, taking up Cheo’s call to artists and the public to actively deal with and give shape to their times, he writes that the artworks that were to be produced “may no longer be embalmed by purely aesthetic values but had to resonate with living experience,” we get a sense of the limitations of his approach.

Cheo’s proposal was laudable for wanting to break free from the conservatism of so much of modern art then being produced in Singapore, but when the art historian simply repeats the artist’s statement, it becomes a token heteronomy. Heteronomy refers to the blurring of art and life—a move made by many contemporary artists after what was perceived as the dead end of modernism. But heteronomy is never total; art never fully blurs with life. The blurring of art and life has become an empty utopianism of contemporary art. Cheo’s artwork, read via his manifesto-like statements, should be treated as aiming for, but not necessarily reaching, heteronomy (as Adorno knew, there is a necessary opacity at the heart of society). How do we write of an artwork’s unpredictable contact with its public, instead of assuming an easy relation between artistic intention and reception? Heteronomy more properly grasps an artwork’s non-relation with the social world; it is the obverse of autonomy. Another way of putting this is that Sabapathy’s writing stays within the acceptable boundaries of the art world, within art discourse. So even as the essay claims some larger social and political purpose for the art that he discusses, methodologically, this art historian’s approach ironically closes itself off from the world.

An instructive counter to Sabapathy’s essay is Lee Weng Choy’s “Coincidence and Relation: Art Criticism and Heartbreak” (2006). Normally Lee’s writing gets slotted under “art criticism” rather than “art history”—which is unfortunate. Art criticism and art history are necessary siblings; one cannot exist without the other. “Good” art history always has a component of art criticism, and the most compelling art criticism gains historical value and specificity from careful attention to visual particulars. In Lee’s case, specificity comes through the regard, the gaze, the address to, not about, a work of art. He begins with an analogy between art criticism and falling in love, but instead of the expected idea of “falling in love with a work of art”—mere subjective taste, one could say—Lee does something altogether more interesting, that hinges on unpredictability and contingency: “A declaration is made in the absence of a relation. The actual relationship is entirely a matter of coincidence—or, some might say, of chance, of luck.” Similarly, the judgment of a work of art is based on risk. What follows is a meandering, one might say digressive, discussion of Richard Linklater’s film *Before Sunset* (2004), and the third part of Ho Tzu Nyen’s *4 x 4 Episodes of Singapore Art* (broadcast on the
television channel, Arts Central, in Singapore in 2005). And yet the essay’s very digressiveness is, paradoxically, its strength. Of course the heart of Ho’s film, Tang Da Wu’s (non-)contact with the President of Singapore at an art opening, bears on this point, of Lee’s Lacanian call to “not give up on one’s desires.” “Episode three,” Lee concludes, “while ostensibly a documentary on art, is less about an artwork than a performance of regard, a speaking to art, both in the singular (Tang’s work) and in the universal, to Art with the capital A. […] What Ho teaches me is how the tension, the seductive interplay between irony and sincerity is central to the declaration of love […]. One cannot say everything, one cannot be entirely sincere and sometimes the best use of irony is, paradoxically, not as a means of protecting oneself, of distancing, of undermining the full presence of an encounter, but of maintaining and making possible a greater intimacy.”

For my purposes, Lee’s essay discloses—eloquently and precisely—the non-relation at the heart of the social world.

Art history is conventionally understood to document. It tells a story, and fixes an object in time. But the strongest forms of art history do much more: in looking deeply into a work of art, a viewer-writer is given an opportunity to grasp a historical moment, in all its stunning complexity. When we as writers do that, the yawning chasm of the past opens up before us, leaving traces, in turn, for the future.

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1.1 Philip Jackson
_A View of Singapore from the Sea_
1823
Graphite on paper
28 x 43.6 cm
Collection of the British Library
© The British Library Board WD 2971
1.2  *Skizzen aus Singapore*
[Sketches of Singapore], after original drawings by A. Wanjura
1880s
35.1 x 26.5 cm
Collection of National Museum of Singapore
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

1.3  Lai Kui Fang
*War and Peace*
1959
Oil on canvas
48 x 59 cm
Collection of the artist