If war were to mark a turn in the history of art in Southeast Asia, what would it wage? And how might it turn art-historically in a locality of countries that contrives a region? It would perhaps provoke at the outset a confrontation with the oftentimes ruthless, though supposedly civilising, colonial force that had mapped out the territories of nation and culture, and the geographies of art and its histories. These formations were carved out from islands, archipelagoes, trade routes, kingdoms, land masses, and border crossings spanning Taiwan to the Pacific. It would reveal the fragility of this world, torn asunder by the radical evil of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. It would also nearly in the same breath sense the expectations of reconstruction, a reconstitution of the world, and a world order, under the auspices of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Conference—these instruments that conceived of a world after war with sweeping visions of change.

The Philippine painter Hernando R. Ocampo (1911–1978), also a distinguished poet and fictionist, was one artist who was able to scan the shifting landscape of art and society after World War II and through the other wars later. As early as 1940 he did *The Contrast* (fig. 10.1), a scene in which a man on his hunches scoops out what appears to be a measly meal from a nearly empty plate. A kerosene lamp shapes his sunken and rawboned body that is set against the severe silhouette of buildings, high-rise and hard-edged. In 1946, a similar solitary figure reappears, composed as a stark contrast to a looming city in the work *Ang Pulubi* [The Beggar]. In *Calvary (Three Crosses)*, the same dispossessed body surfaces across three crucified figures as if in Christ’s scene of death but are actually amid the smoke stacks of factories. From this phase characterised by historians and critics as “proletarian,” Ocampo would venture into abstraction, the kind that was keen on formal rhythm and the changing constitution of natural and human life. He is believed to have seen *The Beginning or the End* (1947), a “documentary film on the explosion of a hydrogen bomb at the Bikini atoll” and was haunted by its memory:

After the atomic explosion, the fish from the nearby ocean crawled their way on land and climbed trees, and then died due
to asphyxiation. Turtles, instead of going to the ocean, walked toward the desert and also died. The film disturbed me and made me apprehensive about the future. On the other hand, I was convinced that humanity will persist in spite of any number of atomic or hydrogen wars, but perhaps no longer in our present form and lifestyle, but in some other mutant forms.¹

From this experience arose his mutant series (fig. 10.2). This suite of abject figures testifies to the grisly and morbid time of the post-war era that also evoked a heady climate of thrilling mutations.

This essay seeks to explore the period of the 1950s and 1960s in Southeast Asia through three themes: the struggle with successive colonialisms, the coming to terms with independence, and the process of belonging to the international world. These travails, subtended by three wars (the Pacific War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War), will be fleshed out by transformations in the production of art through particular stylistic rubrics that tangentially speak to them: Post-Impressionism to School of Paris, including Art Nouveau and Art Deco, and the various realisms in the 1950s and internationalism in different registers (abstraction, social realism, Pop Art, and an incipient avant-garde) in the 1960s. While these styles may be viewed as derived from the West, their mediation in localities across Southeast Asia gave rise to idiosyncrasies of expression; alternatively, some artists in the region also thought that these so-called Western styles had been shaped by a certain turn towards Eastern philosophy, however this notion of the Eastern was reckoned. To be discussed alongside these themes and styles are encompassing formations that tried to bind the region through the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in 1940; the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955; and the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967.

Broadly, the essay contributes to the conversation on art after war; the investment in the imagination of nation-states through nation-making in the form of revolution or nation-building in the name of modern development; and the mapping of a region, a collective moment in an increasingly international system.

The procedure of this reflection takes the form of an analysis of the practical logic of the artistic proposition. It tries to identify tendencies in how form would congeal through certain modes of depiction and focuses on tropes or ways of imagining reality in the sphere or ecology of art. This relationship between medium and trope may be able to draft the basis of a method of making the modern beyond its protean phases.

War

In the explication of the lifeworld of war, three tropes are salient: reconstruction, revolution, and independence. These three modes of remaking the country that was a colony also shaped the production of art that responded to the devastation of war in the Pacific, the need to found a nation through a revolution, and the assertion of sovereignty in the form of an independent nation-state. Even if a country had not gone through colonisation in the strict sense, it might have had to mimic colonial devices if it had desired to become postcolonial in relation to other places in the region. War, therefore, was a pervasive presence in this period in art history. In fact, in Vietnam, the arts “during the ten-year period between the two wars (anti-France resistance and anti-US resistance) initially depicted memories of anti-France resistance war, which helped the citizens share their common history […]. At the same time, the town undergoing development was another popular subject. Both subjects reflected the ambience of those days in Vietnam where people strived to build the country by overcoming the damages of war.”²
In this scheme of the war, the “reality” of the social world became a contentious condition. How to embody such a reality that was disfigured by war and was being transformed into a certain level of wholeness through the nation structured an aesthetic problematique. The shifts in the mind of S. Sudjojono (1913–1986), who was a philosopher and polemicist as much as he was a painter, may be a good place to start discussing this energy called the real. Amir Sidharta tracks the changes of the artist’s calibration of the “real” from the Dutch term realiteit, which Sudjojono transposed as realitas, to realism. Sidharta quotes him during his years as part of the Association of Indonesian Drawing Masters (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia, PERSAGI), saying: “This is our life condition and what we want at this present time,” which is by turns ethnographic and programmatic.³ In 1949, however, through the painting Sekko (Perintis Gerilya) in which a guerrilla fighter roams the ruins of a Prambanan village, Sudjojono revealed “a marked difference from his previous works” that aspired to the truth through the depiction of the beautiful. In the said painting, painstaking attention was “given to paint the figure and the surrounding realistically.”⁴ From the quest for truth, it thus became a quest for verisimilitude, conflating realism with naturalism: “Draw a spoon as a spoon, a bamboo bench as a bamboo bench,” Sudjojono would preach. In the course of time, Sidharta interjects, Sudjojono would feel trapped in this kind of realism. Key in this swerve of thought would be the painting Perusing a Poster (fig. 10.3) in 1956 the background of which is left incomplete, even inchoate, marked with “sketches and strokes that indicated his desire to express himself.”⁵ It was the critic Trisno Sumardjo who acutely discerned the tension in Sudjojono’s impasse, and therefore an opportunity to revise in the face of the real; it is worth quoting him copiously as his comments are emblematic of the predicaments of Southeast Asian artists who have had to grapple with the vexed condition of the real:

Sudjojono wants to express a realistic attitude to life (for example, to see and experience the struggle, suffering of the people) with realistic paintings. But it turns out that what is meant is just a method of drawing (a spoon precisely as a spoon) and not an inner sense (for example: colonisation is evil, the fatherland is fertile, I’m sad, the guerrilla is brave), even though these too are realistic sensations […]. Such a method is actually naturalistic; although realism can in fact borrow this method from naturalism, it is not necessary for a realist to have to use that method […]. So what Sudjojono propagandizes as realism is to take motifs from what exists based on the five senses, and to paint them in a naturalistic manner. He forgets that a person can be a realist by painting what is felt by the inner self and with any method at all, as long as its content remains realistic. He is also unaware that in so doing becomes an advocate for people to become slave of the lincak, slaves to the spoon, by thoughtlessly copying whatever nature and circumstances present. He is unaware that this too is contrary to the psychological development of Indonesians today.⁶

While Sumardjo’s critique may be astute, it can also be argued, on the other hand, that Sudjojono’s realism or instinct for the real was ethnically requisite, prompted by what he was witnessing around him and how he thought his people grasped reality. Speaking of his paradigmatic Indonesian: “His reality is the reality of rice. He also perhaps understands when it is a vision, but if his family is hungry, he plunders. Modern theory remains theory, it is rice that’s needed.”⁷

For sure, various means of realism indexed a world after war amid all the rubble. But such a realism was not sufficient. There was the demand to prefigure as well a new world being mustered and swept away by revolutionary passion
and a fulsome commitment to independence. This relay generated an aesthetic that revealed the limits of “realism” as a legacy of the colonial academy and contacts with Western paradigms of art-making and its concomitant pedagogies. With the limit exposed, as it were, the artists strove to transpose it through variations beyond the language of realism. It is at this point that “realism” would be surmounted, sometimes belabouredly so, and was redefined through a problematisation of thought, so transforming inevitably into a problematique. Finally, realism had to shed off its supposedly preordained skin to reveal the layers of “reality” and perhaps the “real.” It was at this punctum that the visual space opened up to other ways of organising space, delineating form, and so on. The dimension of the canvas, therefore, was challenged, its plasticity demystified, and its flatness relieved of its illusions.

The war would be simultaneously remembered in art as an event and a morality tale. The 1950s offered the chance for artists to revisit the consequences of this moment and the lives that it changed in the course of time. Here, realism persisted but only to the degree that it challenged the idealisation of both land and people. A vital part of this critique of the ideal is the representation of people, specifically rendered as characters and even as partisans, coming together to form a common culture or a political consensus. Certain intersections in social life would be marked like the village, for instance, or the street corner as generative of a shared sentiment or a responsibility to act upon the world. The heterogeneity of the social then condenses, incarnated by types and typifications, signified by recognisable codes of ethnicity and gender, and made to comprise a polity or a culture. The realism extracting the “type” or the “typical” is ethnographic in orientation, but its relationship with other types becomes allegorical, transcending the anecdotal and conveying an ethical attitude towards a cause or a predicament in the socius. This condensation of the type finally promises a nexus into the possibility of social comment in which the type could be appropriated to intimate contradiction, conflict, sympathy, solidarity, and the other utterances of (dis)identifications.

An exemplary instance is how the Nanyang artists in Malaya endeavored to construe the mélange of methods as a “sophisticated” and “syncretic” approach to the reality of the place and the culture of the “Southeast” by way of Bali, a trope for both culture and geography, at once orientalist and nativist, describing an ethnographic terrain and staking out a plot of utopian paradise. For the artist–curator–historian Redza Piyadasa, for instance, the 1959 work Tropical Life (fig. 10.4) by Cheong Soo Pieng betrays the layers of this palimpsest: Chinese ink, gouache techniques, rice paper as ground, Cubism as style, hand-scroll orientation, and peripheral vision. Piyadasa finds this admixture “truly innovative,” reflecting “considerations that were peculiar to a group of Chinese artists attempting to arrive at modern art productions that were linked to the place itself.”
This notion of the “place itself” is undoubtedly complicated primarily because it reinserts into the discourse of another form of idealisation that supplants the colonial idealisation. That being said, this new form is at the same time a negation, but one that requires a third moment to fulfill its potential as a critique. The critique, therefore, bears multiple codes of the normative and the alternative. The historian Kevin Chua deepens this dialectic when he raises the issue of the public of the Nanyang artists in relation to their insistence on place. In this equation, the place gains roundure because the agency of a public inhabits it and this agency finally becomes a mode of address: locative and demonstrative. According to Chua, the realism of the Nanyang coterie was critical to the degree that it implicated the people to which they supposedly belonged and for which the pictures were meant either to raise the consciousness of or to affirm their birthright. It was in the same vein critical because it risked its artistic vocation for the “will of the popular.” And finally, it was critical because it dared to insist on a dream of a “better future, with the word ‘Malayan’ written on the sands of a lost island.”

Tracking such a public is tricky because it is in flux and, as a social formation, it is constantly restyled by forces around it; also, it refuses to be monolithic. Rather, it is suffused with disparate subjectivities that relate to each other in a highly volatile, intersubjective space. When contingency demands it, the public becomes a critical mediation of the form. The situation in Vietnam during the war with the United States yields some insights in terms of how both the traditional and the reprographic would reference the folk and the popular through media like lacquer, silk and the print. As theme or subject matter, the public figures prominently as labour force in the trenches of resistance and in work places. As material, the public is interpelled through a technology that reaches its mass. A cogent example would be anti-American posters that were “put up deep behind the frontlines. Flyers were also distributed […]. Those artists engaged in actual guerrilla fighting also drew paintings and sketches when they had time in the battle field.”

In this contemplation of people and the uncertain but also decisive times they find themselves in, the work of Sudibio (1912–1981) and Ricarte Puruganan (1912–1998) prove germane. While the people are evoked quite compellingly, they are also troubled by some kind of phantasm and agitated by an immediate or impending turmoil of sorts; in other words, they are restive. This feeling underlies as well the series of Galo B. Ocampo (1913–1983) on the flagellants, in which hooded figures wander into a wasteland of discrepant detritus. Sudibio, for instance, would integrate characters from Javanese and wayang (shadow puppet theatre) mythology to inflect social commentary in *Kekau Penduduk Jogja* (To You People of Jogja) (1949, fig. 10.5). And in Purugunan’s *Give Us This Day* (c. 1974, fig. 10.6), the class structure of society lays itself bare in the face of imminent catastrophe.

It is in this nerve-wracking context that we can propose a second phase of modernism that was largely wrought by the War and the
world that survived it. This phase moved away from academic realism and the critique of the idyll. The distinction of this critical moment was further honed by the experience with Japanese rule in the region that introduced modern art, orientalism, and nationalism as part of a wider refusal of the “Western,” the “American,” or the “European.” While the latter were not entirely forsaken, they were to be mediated by an Asian moment via the Japanese and its own investments in the modern.

In the Philippines, for instance, there was a marked shift from the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne and Gauguin to the Fauvism of Matisse, Cubism, the experiments of the School of Paris, and Surrealism. These artistic movements are invoked as ciphers and should not be construed as direct sources of the local aesthetic. In the wake of the War and the frenzy of reconstruction, there was a recollection of the past as a dream and a fantasy. The impulse of this form was fragmentation, thus the prevalence of the Cubistic form in Southeast Asia as a vector of the effect of the war on a place and a polity. This fragmentation, however, would not lead to the total disintegration of the figure. Instead, the latter would be dramatically and lyrically enhanced by rhythm so that the fragments would cohere at a certain level through a design that dramatises the ambiguity of the figure and the possibility of its recomposition into a vacillating synthesis akin to a kaleidoscope.

The fantasy of nation was further manifested in the mythology of history and the folklore of nationalism through the mural of filmic aspirations as may be discerned in Carlos “Botong” Francisco’s (1912–1969) efforts to depict the foundations of modernist discourses like history, nation, culture, medicine, and commerce. This imagination that crystallised in the mural and extended to the cinema is best gleaned in his collaboration with the filmmaker Manuel Conde. Among their projects, the film *Genghis Khan* (fig. 10.7) stands out. Done in 1950, it was screened at the Venice Film Festival and the Museum of Modern Art in 1950, annotated by the American playwright-critic James Agee, and translated into around 16 languages. It speaks of a fledgling but resolute Temujin who would transmogrify into Genghis Khan, the overlord whose dominion stretched from the Pacific to the Danube; it mingles the epic, the metrical romance and Russian filmmaking techniques, among others, to limn the saga of a stalwart conqueror, architect of much of the modern world.

Furthermore, the post-war period meant a further engagement with the West, underwritten by the yearning to belong to a more ample ambit of art. Such an aspiration may be characterised as internationalist: to move beyond the nation and to relate with other nations with their own histories of art-making. This meant that artists from the region would partake of the tutelage in Western institutions and seek validation through critique, exhibition, and the acknowledgment of peers. From the purview of the geopolitical, the post-war was the scene of the postcolonial theatre of nation-states in Southeast Asia; they tried to configure themselves into a region in more or less the same season that the “contemporary” in Western art history was cohering as a corpus of practice, a break from the modern and the formalist. The emergence of Southeast Asia geopolitically and of contemporary art historically created a hospitable climate for both the form of creative life and the form of the post-independent nation-state. In this respect, it must be mentioned that the Cold War may have enhanced aspirations to belated modernisms in some parts of the region. For while in the Philippines and Indonesia, for instance, the modernist aesthetic found firm ground beginning in the first half of the 20th century, it was only after the Pacific War that the modern secured a more stable space in places like Cambodia and Burma. What should be of interest in this aspect of the modern in the region was the role of America in fostering the conditions for modernism to thrive. In
Burma, the Burma-American Institute in 1963 underwrote the one-person exhibition of Paw Oo Thet, spurring what may well have been the “modern art movement” in the country. Such an initiative followed through similar efforts as early as 1952 when the United States Information Service (USIS) supported the All Burma Competition, which was won by the painter Aung Khin, regarded as one of the pioneers of modernism in Burma. In Cambodia, the exhibition titled *Scenes de la Vie Cambodgienne* under the auspices of the USIS at the American Library in Phnom Penh around 1960 was pivotal in putting up a platform for Cambodian painters. Another iteration of this mode of exposure came by way of *Peintre Cambodgiens*, described as the third annual exhibition of Khmer Artists presented by the USIS at the American Library around 1962. The artist Nhek Dim was also sent to the United States through USIS and studied cartooning with Walt Disney. In 1965, the Royal University of Fine Arts was established under the patronage of King Norodom Sihanouk (then Head of State) with the architect Vann Molyvann as its founding Rector. The mandate of the institution oscillated between heritage and the contemporary, tradition and renewal. According to Molyvann in an essay in 1965:

> The method adopted is to introduce the student to examples of classic art, and to instruct him in the conventions observed in their production, while opportunities are given him—concurrently—to familiarize himself with modern research methods. Thus the forms evolved by the potter and metal-worker in ancient times are examined by the student with a view to releasing his creative instinct, and enabling him to devise forms of his own invention.12

In Thailand, artists like Fua Haribhitak and Sawasdi Tantisuk “endowed Western methods of painting with local themes to express their impressions of modern Thai life and environment.”13 The Silpakorn school of modernism, in fact, encouraged students to weave strands of the local tradition into the larger fabric of modern art. Its first Thai student to receive an undergraduate degree from the university, Chalood Nimsamer, was sensitive to both “national identity” and the lure of experiment. He later nurtured an oeuvre around environmental art, outdoor sculpture, and installation.

What is overlooked in this phase of contracting Western style and methodology is the contribution of design in the mediation of the contract. An argument can be made that design mediated the dominant Western styles and reinvented their forms for the local contexts. Design was a pliant modality, addressing the broader sphere of popular culture and the industrial complex. On the other hand, it was cognisant of the traditions of ornament in customary forms. Design, therefore, widened the audience of modernism, assimilating it into the schema of objects beyond the privilege of the academy.

The other vital element in the mixture that shaped the mediation of the Western and the international was the urgency of context, regardless of how this context would be interpreted in terms of radical action or the remembrance through art of a symptom of a historical moment. In the context of the recollection of art, or its historicisation, the process of memory would find a cogent expression in the aestheticisation of heroism, the iconography of independence, and the commemoration of what is deemed, cherished, and overinvested as a rupture from a panoply of dominations that had brought forth monuments and its official rituals.

The strain between the two legacies of pedagogy in Jogjakarta and Bandung heightens a productive difference between subscribing to or resisting the Western, sustained by the festering debates between the Institute of...
People’s Culture (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, LEKRA, 1950) and the Manifes Kebudayaan (Cultural Manifesto, 1963) and, by extension, between abstraction and realism. Tradition would also become a crucial aspect of the facture of the modern by way of the appropriation of batik in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and lacquer and silk in Vietnam. The presence of Fua Haribhitak and Affandi in Santiniketan provides another trajectory or lineage of modernity and tradition quite independent of the Western academic institution or the modern art museum.

As the form moved away from “reality” and to a certain extent freed itself from the overwhelming burden of social context, it was able to articulate something that slipped away from the demands of realism and the figurative. This turn towards the abstract may have been incited by the search for the elusive essence, which may in turn recursively reference the social context that has become so over determining when translated in terms of realism and the figurative. It is at these points of contact that the desire for autonomy touches the unconscious of culture, engendering the thought that Abstract Expressionism, to cite a case, is not alien to the local artist; rather, it is intrinsic. According to Syed Ahmad Jamal: “The main impact of Abstract Expressionism, that of the emotive and mystical qualities of the exteriorisation of the feelings and the senses, as a kind of direct form of mediation which telegraph the intenseness of feeling, of thought and imagination through plastic means.”

This investment in feeling and intensity, as well as in directness and mysticism, would be elaborated on by the New Scene artists in 1969 when they first held their exhibitions. This cohort, which included Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa who later co-organised the Towards a Mystical Reality project in 1974, was “concerned with making original contributions to the existing international movement in art which aims at an intellectual, impersonal, non-symbolic approach.” The motivation to be simultaneously “original” and “international,” whether in the vein of Abstract Expressionism or conceptualism, could only be reinforced by a double movement of being distant and being intensely true to intuition. Jamal continues that the Malaysian artists gravitated around Abstract Expressionism because its “immediacy and mystical quality” suited what he formulated as the “Malaysian temperament, sensitivity and cultural heritage, and with the tradition of calligraphy found the idiom the ideal means of pictorial individuation.” He would mention Kline, Soulages, Hartung, among others, and say that the “gestural quality of their works have obvious affinity with the traditional art of calligraphy, which is a cultural heritage of Malays and Chinese; a visual language immediately felt and perceived by Malaysians.” He considered Abstract Expressionism a “catharsis, a direct form of release” and that it was not a
“borrowed idiom” but rather a “natural means […] a natural development from the loose atmospheric forms of the early water-colours.” Such a back and forth between sympathies, and the internalisation of what previously was seen as extraneous or foreign, may have generated a certain kind of exceptionality, the sense of the native and the natural, as distilled in the wondrous oeuvre and practice of the Burmese Bagyi Aung Soe. Three years after bursting into the scene in Yangon in 1951, the eccentric artist was sent to Sāntiniketan to infuse liveliness into Burmese traditional art. The artist’s commitment to manaw maheikdi dat (painting of the fundamental elements through heightened mental concentration) was thoroughgoing; it was an art achieved in terms of spiritual transformation through mental nurturing.

In this pursuit of the ineffable in the artifice of art, the attraction to the term “non-objective” of Philippine artists may have been instructive. Early abstraction may have cohered around this disposition, spelled out concretely in an exhibition in 1953 titled First Non-Objective Art Exhibition in the Philippines and later annotated in a monograph by Aurelio Alvero titled The First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in Tagala. This sense of the non-objective was a mediation of the abstract, informed by the requirements of plasticity and intuition independent of literature and the reference to reality. What supplements the so-called natural state of the “non-objective” is its cognate condition in the “native” as indexed by the position of Alvero to rename the Philippines to Tagala, perhaps a postcolonial critique of the enduring colonialism embedded in the appellation “Philippines.”

Aside from the non-objective, the other mode of mediation that had the capacity to address the imperatives of the local and the worldly was the material of concrete. The latter was the main material that built two important Catholic churches in the Philippines: the Chapel of St Joseph the Worker at the Victorias Milling in Negros Occidental in the Visayas in 1950 and the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice at the University of the Philippines in 1955 in Quezon City outside the old city of Manila. In Cambodia, Vann Molyvann relates that he used “cement so that the houses would last longer. When I made molds for the cement columns and posts, I used wooden boards so that the grain of the wood is imprinted in the cement […] I used a wooden mold and poured cement into it. What results is true to the nature of the two materials.” As an architectural critic would put it: “Concrete is a truly international material used worldwide. From another perspective, it is a regional material through the use of locally found aggregate and the techniques and ideals of its builders. Concrete, as a liquid that becomes a
Levels of the Collective
Besides war as a defining condition and contingency of artistic production, the formation of a collective was vital in ensuring that “art” achieved the competence to critique a sense of totality that was dominating the world. In many ways, this form of domination was configured as a result of a history of resistances that ultimately led to wars. An exceptional moment in this regard was the 1955 Asian-African Conference held in Bandung. This conference was organised by Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan, and attended by 29 countries including Afghanistan, China, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Sudan, South Vietnam and Yemen, among others. It brought together figures like Nasser of Egypt, Chou En-Lai of China, Sihamouk of Cambodia, and Nehru of India. It was a seminal moment for what would later be called the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961.

The Conference agreed “first, in declaring that colonialism in all its manifestations is an evil which should be speedily be brought to an end; Second, in affirming that the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental rights.” Sukarno, the President of Indonesia, said in his speech that: “This is the first intercontinental conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind.” He talked of the lifeline of imperialism: “This line runs from the Straits of Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan. For most of that enormous distance, the territories on both sides of this lifeline were colonies, the peoples were unfree, their futures mortgaged to an alien system.”

With this event convened in Southeast Asia, the region found itself at the forefront of a third force beyond the bipolar hegemony of the United States and the Soviet Union. This geopolitical collective would be articulated as a geo-poetic as well through gatherings of artistic agents, for instance, in Manila. Testaments to this were the First Asian Music Conference (or the First Southeast Asian Regional Music Conference) and the First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition in 1956 and 1957 respectively. In these instances, music and visual art across Asia were mapped out and made to cohere at some level of belonging. In 1966, the conference Musics of Asia was organised in Manila, with the Philippine musical artist and scholar Jose Maceda working with the likes of Iannis Xenakis, Ravi Shankar, and Prasidh Silapabanleng, among others. In 1969, a conference on the performing arts in Asia took place in Beirut. According to the organisers, the major question before the Beirut Round Table was “the relationship between the indigenous performing arts and the new mass arts of film, radio and television […] and the response of the artist to the needs of an ever-growing public which is no longer bounded by national cultures or frontiers.”

The more systematic formation of a regional consciousness was undertaken by the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN in 1967. Its precursors included the Southeast Asian League (an informal organisation of Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines) in 1947; the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty (which included the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand) and the Manila Pact in 1954, which was the basis of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1962; and finally the Maphilindo (Malaya, Philippines, Indonesia) in 1963).

The geopolitical impulse of these initiatives was clear. For instance, SEATO’s central purpose was to “to halt China’s long-term as-
pirations for the domination of Asia.” Before China became a threat, the formidable hegem-
on was Japan. Goscha and Ostermann write:

The Japanese overthrow of Western em-
pires across Southeast Asia during World War II meant that the historical process of decolonization started in Asia before spreading across the South along a horizontal axis to Africa. Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno both announced the independ-
ence of their countries in August 1945 as the Japanese empire crumbled but before the French and the Dutch could reassert theirs.

In this climate of cooperation, two figures from the Philippines helped sharpen the focus on Southeast Asia as a regional node that was capable of an extensity: the soldier–diplomat Carlos P. Romulo who was a signatory of the founding documents of the United Nations and the politician Diosdado Macapagal who became President of the Philippines in 1961. Both Romulo and Macapagal were delegates to the Asian-African Conference in 1955. In 1964, Romulo visited Indonesia, Thailand, and India as a university president to pursue “a new concentration on Asia” and “Asian Studies” across the region. In a speech at the University of Indonesia, he quoted the Indonesian President Sukarno: “Our Motherland is a continuity and we are laborers toiling for its greatness. Malaya is a continuity, Indonesia is a continuity, the Philippines is a continuity and we are laboring to make them great.” In 1968, he was a scholar-in-residence at the State University of New York where he presented 11 lectures. In the lecture “Asia in the American Mind,” he spoke of an enigmatic notion of Asia as Time:

Asia is Time. I do not mean clock of cal-
endar time. I mean Time as a kind of passing, a movement as well as a process, a growth that has in it the ingredients of decay. It is likewise a response to seasons of change, at once passive and impassive, the outcome of which is Age […]. How old is the Filipino nation? An impossible age, and certainly unacceptable to our national pride, if the answer goes back only to Magellan […]. Thus the truism that we in Asia live in a number of centuries si-
multaneously […] at the Conservatory of Music of the University of the Philippines, we offer studies in Mozart as well as in the ancient instrument of community and reli-
gious life, the brass gong.

He would then propose: “What the Asian wishes to achieve is a contemporaneity and an urgency of expression preferably in his native tongue.”

For his part, the Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal coalesced with Prime Min-
ister Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia and President Sukarno of Indonesia to configure Maphilindo (a contraction of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia) in 1963. In Ma-
nila, the three leaders declared: “The Manila Declaration is a declaration of Asian inde-
pendence. It expresses the determination of our three countries to safeguard this area from subversion in any form or manifestation […] in the common struggle against colonialism and imperialism.” Macapagal summoned the spirit of Wenceslao Vinzons’s “Malaysia Irre-
denta” in 1932 and the Bandung Conference in 1955 to carry on with “fraternal cooperation […] to intensify their efforts to help build a peaceful new world dedicated to freedom and justice.” He spoke of a storied past and a radi-
ant future:

The decision to establish Maphilindo looks backward as well as forward. It looks to the past of frustration and shame of the Malay peoples, their fragmented history and incoherent destiny. But it also looks
forward to the reunion of brothers after their prolonged and tragic dispersal […] to the rebirth of a region which an aggressive and adventurous colonialism had long considered as its exclusive preserve.30

He cited as precursors the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in 1947; the Baguio Conference in 1950 attended by representatives from India, Pakistan, then Ceylon, Indonesia, Thailand, and Australia; and the Association of Southeast Asia in 1961.

The other level of the collective pertains to the practice of collecting, or the accumulation of objects thought to be invested with values and the capacity to signify the identity of a historical moment or moment of culture. In other words, they were deemed capable of representing a place and a time, a possibility availed of nation-states or their elite who postured as vanguards of certain totalities, or better still, of their dominions. The process through which in the Philippines Jorge B. Vargas, Fernando Zóbel, Eugenio López, Leandro Locsin, and Arturo Luz, to name only the most assiduous, built up their collections of objects of different kinds (from art to archaeology to books) had been instrumental in shaping the narrative of art history, curatorship, and museology. These collections also ratified the hubris of the elite to ordain the heritage of the Philippine nation, effectively blurring the lines between the patriarchal and the paternalist. It is indispensable for an art history of Southeast Asia to draw up as well a history of collecting, a practice that was central in the reconstruction of the post-colony after the Pacific War. It must be mentioned that Jorge B. Vargas, a political figure who served the American and Japanese colonial governments, imagined his collection of Filipiniana as an allegorical testament to and a recuperation of a shattered Philippine culture: “In the days ahead of the young Republic of the Philippines, there will be undoubtedly a growing desire for emphasis on the appreciation of our cultural heritage.”31 This cultural heritage was in fact asserted in the revolution against Spain beginning in 1896, but then usurped by the Americans. It was the aftermath of war that reignited this passion for culture as an index of wholeness in the wake of war’s fragmentation. The consolidation of the collective in the 1950s generated a sense of adequacy on the part of the post-war, postcolonial nation-state, securing for itself a foundation of the “national” with which to relate to other nations on the same level; thus the quest for the “international” that was feathered in the nest of the 1960s.

Finally, the collective, as intimated by the longing to be part of a more expansive sphere of a history of sensible life, could be referenced through the participation of Southeast Asian artists in art exhibitions with an international or global profile. Affandi, for instance, was at
the Venice Biennale in 1954. In 1964, the Philippines set up its first national pavilion in Venice, represented by Napoleon Abueva and Jose Joya, with the poet-art critic Emmanuel Torres as commissioner. Torres lamented the belatedness of the conservative artistic gesture of the two Philippine abstractionists, “remote from the critical storm centers, the titillating novelties of ‘pop’ […] and the nervy, jumpy excitements of the even bolder works of the ‘kinetic’ artists whose whirling, vibrating, noise-making machines looking like complicated toys.”

This was the year when the American Robert Rauschenberg was conferred the grand prize for painting, an achievement that was styled and staged by American foreign policy and the art market, and marked the American turn in global art. Cities such as Stockholm and Tokyo struggled simultaneously, according to the art historian Hiroko Ikekami, “to articulate […] cultural identity within the increasingly Americanizing art scene” and to “capitalize on the force of American art in order to become an active and unique participant in the world art scene.”

In Thailand, Prawat Laucharoen (b. 1941) widened the repertoire of abstraction by way of reprographic techniques as well as references to Pop Art. Apinan Poshyananda singles out a mixed media series titled Collage No. 3 as “impressive.” It consisted of lettering, raw canvas, oil and sand, among other materials. Prawat engaged in combines and in abstraction that looked to action painting for processes; he also innovated in the field of etching and collage. In New York, he later collaborated with artists like Adolph Gottlieb, Alex Katz, Larry Rivers, Philip Pearlstein and David Hockney.

Critique of the Modern, or the Modernist Critique

The critique of the modern at the end of the 1960s and at the threshold of the 1970s would, at a significant level, overcome the binary of the local and the Western. This required a complicated procedure, prompted by the analysis of contradictions within the discourses and institutions of modernity, foremost of which was the “nation-state” that aspired to an “ethnic totality” across differences in subjectivities shaped by class, race, gender, and so on. This transfigured, for instance, in the evocation of land and the depiction of how it was contested, claimed by discrepant forces and visions of the future. The distance between patrimony and dispossession arising from the said contradictions would be navigated quite markedly in art, with land invested with allegorical potential and even the sublime. On the other hand, an anecdotal delineation of everyday struggle would also be registered, as in the description of scenes in the street like the confrontation of different personae and in riots.
It is this claim to space and its habitation as a historical responsibility, and a critique of other claims to it, that delineated efforts in the 1960s. When Imelda Marcos reclaimed a part of Manila Bay to transform it into land for a complex of buildings dedicated to cultural presentations and conventions, it was a sign that space was being contoured for something modern. This development was also the basis of intense critique. Alongside this depiction of urgency was a more performative rendering of the material condition itself. David Medalla’s (b. 1942) compelling protest on the inaugural night of the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1969 spoke of the instinct of artists to take over space when the situation warranted it (fig. 10.9). Medalla’s practice harnessed this potential. He was an acutely politicised artist; at the same time, he was keenly aware of his environment. He did not only describe this environment; he recreated it as condition in which an alternate life could transpire, evoking the atmosphere of the social in the intuition of the natural. It is in this context that his pioneering work in land, kinetic, and performance art gains exceptional stature of global magnitude.

At the end of the 1960s, art in Southeast Asia was “attuned to the frenzied escalation of events in the world scene.” These were the words of Galo B. Ocampo in his remarks on Philippine art. He continues: “The development of contemporary art in the Philippines has paralleled that same movement in other parts of the world. So continuous is this movement that it would be impossible to define the limits indicating where pure Philippine art begins, as improbable perhaps as to state exactly what is pure Filipino, or pure American.” He would conclude that this idea of Philippine art could never be singular:

Contemporary art is therefore an admixture of developing and shifting cultures. It is no sudden thing that one man conjured in the moment of greatness; it is something borne upon him by social conditions and upon which he, as an individual artist, imposes on his own society. It belongs to a developing scale of social values, values which have been assimilated and summed up in the adult individual—and to which the artist in turn adds his own values to be accepted by others. The history of contemporary Philippine art cannot be disassociated from the contemporary history of the country and its social context.

Still, Ocampo found this toil wanting:

While Philippine arts are able and competent in the craft […] there has been no indication so far […] of the contemporary artists in conceptualizing a new art form that would serve as a model for a convention that could possibly influence the world of art […] no progressive thought in painting has developed which could serve as the springboard for a new cultural invention that would add to the present scale of values. No one has yet in the local field attempted or dared to enter the field of a new form, timidly daring to exploit the only field which has been previously worked over.

In 1969, Oesman Effendi in Indonesia would express his apprehension about the existence of Indonesian painting, or to be more specific, of the Indonesian mark in Indonesian painting. “Therefore, I believe, Indonesian painting is still growing, but does not exist yet, as it is in the process of discovering its unique form.” This sense of incommensuration and indistinction, this political feeling of at once not measuring up and of super-adequating, as expressed by Ocampo and Effendi, is key in thinking through the modern in the region in the 1950s and 1960s, a modern on the cusp of the contemporary that would in the 1970s be addressed with more temerity and resolve.
10.1 Hernando R. Ocampo  
*The Contrast*  
1940  
Oil on canvasboard  
58 x 41.5 cm  
Collection of Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines

10.2 Hernando R. Ocampo  
*Dancing Mutants*  
1965  
Oil on canvas  
101.8 x 76 cm  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

10.3 S. Sudjojono  
*Perusing a Poster*  
1956  
Oil on canvas  
109 x 140 cm  
Collection of OHD Museum
10.4 Cheong Soo Pieng
*Tropical Life*
1959
Chinese ink and gouache on Chinese rice paper
43.6 x 92 cm
Collection of National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia

10.5 Sudibio
*Kekau Penduduk Jogja*  
(To You People of Jogja)
1949
Oil on canvas
200 x 136 cm
Collection of OHD Museum

10.6 Ricarte Puruganan
*Give Us This Day*

C. 1974
Oil on canvas
152 x 211 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
10.7 Manuel Conde as the eponymous overlord in his film, *Genghis Khan* 1950
Image courtesy of Cesar Hernando

10.8 Vann Molyvann, architect
Jean Mohr, photographer
Chatomuk Theatre, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Original photograph c. 1960s, digital reprint 2015
Image courtesy of Vann Molyvann

10.9 David Medalla (second from the right) protesting at the inauguration of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1969