Between Declarations and Dreams
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Prologue

In order to speak about the 1970s and the subsequent development of art produced in this region, we begin instead a little earlier – in the 1960s. David Medalla, an England-based Filipino artist, had constructed an unusual piece of auto-kinetic sculpture which he called a bubble machine, for the 1964 exhibition *Structures Vivantes: Mobiles/Images.* This first bubble machine would set in motion the creation of an eventual open-ended iterative series of sculptures (each machine is never the same as the one before) which Medalla would call *Cloud Canyons.* These sculptures were rudimentary devices where liquid soap and water were mixed and pumped through different vertical columns but with the end result being the overflow of bubbles that exceeded containment by the structures (fig. 1). It is this image of the bubbles in spatial flux, forming, deforming and then reforming in their myriad ways, which is of most importance and which trumps the circumscription of the initial form or vessel. Medalla’s *Cloud Canyons* were rather different from the other kinetic sculptural experiments in vogue in Europe at the time, which had looked to harness the different mechanical and magnetic forces to propel motion. The focus of Medalla’s “machines” however lie in the way the works impelled random organic movement, in relation to the dynamics of nature, and avoided the monotonous repetitive gestures of most automated machines. According to Guy Brett, a long-time friend and historian-critic of Medalla’s practice, the kinetic interaction of the bubbles could also be “translated to the sphere of human relations and psychology.”

What then is the relationship of Medalla’s bubble machine to the discussion of art after 1970 in Southeast Asia? What is proposed here is that Medalla’s *Cloud Canyons* (of which version number 24 is in the collection of National Gallery Singapore) be taken as a guiding leitmotif and conceptual lever with which to read and unfold a different sort of thinking about this region’s art of the late 20th century. As such, “Re:Defining Art” – rather than its more prosaic counterpart “Re-defining Art” – has been used as the title. This is to invoke not only the operative uses of the prefix “re-” to signify the gesture of something happening again and again, indicating repetition or that of withdrawal or
backward motion, but also to bring to mind that “Re:”
is also a form of address, which is usually seen in the
subject line of a reply to a previous mail message or
used to introduce the subject of a letter. In placing an
additional colon, the gesture is not just to disrupt but
to syntactically signal that we are about to introduce
further definitional elements or explicate the set of
terms or to segment the different voices in a dialogue.
As such, in yoking “re: defining art” to Medalla’s bub-
ble machine, the stage is set for the further pursuit of
different permutations and the exponential growth of
art and artists.

As a work that is open rather than closed, perpetu-
ating motion rather than stasis, *Cloud Canyons* behoves
the museum visitor to see how the fourth dimension
of time intersects with the spatial and the artefactual.
Process, perception and performance become signifi-
cant modes of thinking about art and its varied lives.
Meaning is no longer just read through iconographical
or representational acts or abandoned for the pristine
formal aesthetics of the organisation the artwork.
Meaning instead *accrues* as the art moves through dif-
ferent and not necessarily linear stages and is variously
experienced by different participants who may or may
not recognise, *prima facie*, the artefacts as art but who
may locate themselves as agents undertaking the inter-
pretation of the different facture and fractures of the
work. Like the soap suds that eventually gather atmos-
pheric dust and other particles, politics, histories and
memories settle upon the works, changing the works
as they change themselves. Despite the contrivance
of certain thematic categories so as to proffer an art
historical chronology, holding the image of the bubble
formation and deformation allows us to not only un-
derstand the actual shifts in artistic and technological
approaches but also the heuristic values that moves us
to see the interpretation of the works as provisional.
Periods and practices overlap, events are out of sync,
and people and situations do not behave as how they
should. Whilst a survey proposition prevails upon us
to understand broad patterns of historical sweep, as if
each artwork in the exhibition is an ineluctable index
of the story, the other stories which must also be told
are those recalcitrant ones, where the original artefacts
and ephemera do not exist (or not wholly) and must
be reconstructed through other interlocutors and in-
termediaries. In the remaking, the work gains other
contemporary dimensions in addition to its historical
ones. The curatorial urge here is not to maintain the
works as fixed iconic markers in the exhibition but to
keep rotating the pieces out, though not merely as a
function of their material fragility but more as a gras-
ping of the opportunities to assemble and reassemble the
stories told through the artworks and their attendant
archival documents.

This approach to curating is especially fitting for the
1970s right up to the early 2000s; significant changes to art-making paradigms were seen in the decades after 1970 in response to the complex political, social and economic issues confronting Southeast Asian countries. These arose as consequences of the militaristic exploits, human and environmental costs of the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge regime and other authoritarian dictatorships in the region as well as uneasy shifts in power allegiances between supposed pro- and anti-Communist, conservative and revolutionary forces, and other global ideological currents, especially with the advent of postcolonial studies, rise of the feminist movement and the end of the Cold War in 1989. Faced with these antagonisms and new models of thought and organisation, art in this post-1970 period could therefore be said to be marked by an anti-formalist, pluralistic tendency that gravitated towards political and cultural awareness. The expanded repertoire of aesthetic approaches (conceptual, process-orientated, performative), genres (installation, film, video, photography, theatre), materials (the everyday, the ephemeral and the body) and critical questions about art, its constituents and reception, became the ways in which artists challenged and unravelled the dogma of rigid academic practice and also oppressive socio-cultural formations in the region.

At the same time, the onslaught of neoliberal consumer capitalism from the West, with its transient flows and exchanges of labour and money and decimation of local cultures and heritage also led artists to return to their bases of traditional iconography, knowledge and craft, as well as the recovery of historical narratives and traumatic memories, seeking them as potential means to negotiate renewed or disruptive understandings of their own identities, whether national, ethnic, spiritual, gendered or sexual. As Southeast Asian artists became more integrated into the global art world in the 1990s and after, the impact of Euro-American art schools, international biennales and art fairs grew more salient and artists were thereby now made to contend with and reflect upon institutional and market structures, and the inner workings of the internationalised art industry. The curatorial clustering that follows can only be simplified, partial solutions to edify distinctive visions of each decade’s logic but within each periodic overture are disruptive specificities which can act as openings and locate other temporalities.

### 1970s

**Question & Concept**

Using Medalla’s unconventional and industrial form of the bubble machine as the fulcrum, the difference in this period is signalled through a distinctive visual shift – the usual terms of painting and sculpture do not anymore fit. Similarly, a number of ground-
breaking avant-garde art experiments took place in the region in the 1970s, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, where certain artists made important contributions as forerunners in transforming the ways in which art was made and received by the public. These three Southeast Asian countries and their respective artists demonstrate the different ways in which art could be reconfigured. In Malaysia, Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa co-created a controversial installation-exhibition titled *Towards a Mystical Reality* with cheap, discarded, everyday items, which attempted to displace the fetishism for art objects with the focus on event and time. Displaying an assortment of quotidian objects and detritus but each indexing an event, such as the drinking of cola from bottles, the cutting of hair and shadows falling upon a canvas, *Towards a Mystical Reality* was unprecedented in its ambition and newness to Malaysian audiences, with its intentions expounded through the 10,000-word manifesto in the exhibition catalogue.

In December 1974, protesting the bureaucratic conservatism of the jury and art establishment at the annual competition of the *Pameran Besar Seni Lukis Indonesia* (Grand Exhibition of Indonesian Painting), a group of young Indonesian artists sent a petition and wreath addressed to the Jakarta Arts Council – it contained the message “Our condolences to the death of painting in Indonesia.” Subsequently, artists from different schools and training in Yogyakarta and Bandung came together to form a new art movement called Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB), or the New Art Movement. Despite recriminations from the establishment, their cause gained traction and sixteen GSRB artists, among them FX Harsono, Jim Supangkat, Siti Adiyati and Priyanto Sunarto, held their landmark 1975 exhibition titled *New Art* at the Taman Ismail Marzuki arts centre in Jakarta. They took visitors and critics alike by surprise with the use of everyday materials to create objects that defied the typical categories of art and sought to reverse the trend of depoliticisation in art and cultural arenas during Suharto’s New Order. The exhibition sparked numerous offshoots and prompted a critical re-evaluation of Indonesian art and vigorous debate amongst art critics. Over several years, following their ground-breaking show, they organised independently exhibitions of their works which showed the jettisoning of sophisticated painting and sculpture for ordinary materials, driven by the need to communicate to their mass public and to overcome taboos over certain topics.

In the Philippines, conceptually oriented artists Roberto Chabet and Raymundo Albano developed an exhibition space and programme at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) that sought to promote a conducive environment to support new artistic approaches in the country, which could be regarded as a form of resistance to the Modernist tenor and
internationalist ambitions (favoured by the Marcos regime) dominating the Philippine art scene during the Martial Law era. This change in direction prompted one patron to exclaim, “But where are the paintings?” after seeing Chabet’s exhibition New Works at the Luz Gallery in 1973. Plywood stretchers were hung up but nary a painted canvas was to be found; instead strips of torn rubber, and even pantyhose were wrapped round them (fig. 2). Chabet also demonstrated an instinctive knack for straddling independent initiatives and national institutions, working collaboratively on projects such as the artist-run space Shop 6, an initiative that first started up at the Sining Kamalig shopping arcade, and the Liwayway Recapping Company with fellow artists Albano and Elpidio “Boy” Perez and organizing the Illumination exhibition (which explored the effects of light, lighted materials, and light moving in time) at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP).

Albano, who was also known as a leading conceptual artist and curator in the country, too challenged established artistic paradigms and in one experimental work took a hundred shots of a subject who did not change pose during the takes, reflecting instead the myriad changes in the background through time. Moving fluidly between their different roles, Chabet and Albano symbolised a new era of Filipino art in the 1970s.

Similar to Medalla’s bubble machine, much of the material composition of the works in this section do not conform to the usual standards of object quality, virtuosic skill, and visual aesthetics that one uses in the evaluation of art. Instead, art is pushed towards the limits of dematerialisation, gaining meaning instead from its contingent and contextual surroundings. One might therefore argue that a significant trend in the 1970s is the growing “conceptualisation” of artistic practices in Southeast Asia. But that is not the full arc of the comparison to be drawn out using Medalla’s work. Like the bubble machine, many of the pieces in this section are reconstructions (although one could argue that Medalla’s machine in 2015 is an extension of the series rather than a strict replication of the work from 1963), or in other words, temporal contrivances that attempt to bring back to presence a work that once was. In these reconstructive attempts, the contours of institutional exhibitionary determination or artistic subjectivity reveal themselves. In order to re-stage works which constituent parts have long degraded or been discarded (such as the artefacts in Towards a Mystical Reality and the GSRB exhibition, and the rubber strips on Chabet’s Kite Traps), careful historical fidelity is necessarily exerted though not always consistently. But the key point to note is that no matter the strictness of recuperation, the remade object can only approximate the one before and is itself its own thing once it enters the museum; the remade object gets accorded the aura of the original even though the process of activating
one clearly undermines this. In doing so, the museum initiates the paradox of acknowledging the replica as not the original (conservators will insist on dating it by its remade date) but at the same time treating the replica as if it were, especially if it were to eventually enter the collection (extending to it the same full conservation requirements and documenting the exactness of the reproduction). Therefore, the histories of each re-presented object are truly contingent, and whilst the objects are used to relay the manifest curatorial narrative, the historiography will have to take into consideration the life cycle of each of the artefact and ask how that artefact (which original has been destroyed) gets brought to being at the museum. An intriguing example is that of Supangkat’s now-iconic Ken Dedes (1975), which was re-constructed in 1996 under a Singapore Art Museum commission (fig. 3). This current version demonstrates slight differences from the original which was first displayed at GSRB’s New Art exhibition in Jakarta. The 1975 original showed the figure placing one hand atop her hip and her lips devoid of lipstick. The original plinth of Ken Dedes has also been recycled and is now part of another Supangkat work titled X Box (1979). The significance of change is related to its “artistic measurement,” not content; as the artist explains:

The idea is everything: thoughts and also expressions. Other matters in the art-making are not important [including] details of the works […] Based on this concept, I made changes in the commissioned Ken Dedes since I believe that the idea of the work [remains] the most important matter.14

Whilst this elision of the visual does sound like a classic plea for conceptualist practice, this should not be taken as reason to only treat the idea as primary. In curating a room of remade objects, this exercise should only make us pay greater attention to what is not immediately visible and to register the differences.15

1980s
Traditions / Transitions

In the ensuing decade of the 1980s, right up to the mid-1990s, a counter-current towards the esoteric characteristics of conceptual approaches developed. Whilst many artists continued with or turned to the relatively conventional modes of abstractionist painting and drawing (in Vietnam this was one consequence of Doi Moi, an opening up of the socialist economic system which allowed artists to deviate from Socialist Realism), other artists began to amplify the use of culturally-rooted manifestations of aesthetics in their respective countries, which had already begun in the 1970s, in order to question and move against the Western-
centric orientation of their art making. In searching within indigenous traditions as their resource, aspects such as wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), batik printing, murals, vernacular architecture, folklore and rural rituals, artists were seeking not the simplistic replication of such archetypal forms but to make such traditions respond more incisively to the contemporary issues of the day and become more spiritually satisfying. Artists recognised and acknowledged not the originality of their endeavours but how their exposure to the everyday living heritage of Southeast Asian societies have inflected their own perspectives on the world.

One is reminded here again of the different time velocities at play in different parts of Southeast Asia. Like the movement of Medalla’s bubbles, which react to different shifts in atmospheric climes, art practices could rather take a more détourné or diverted result, rather than proceeding in a linear fashion in pursuit of the new. This pursuit of the new could also sometimes look retrograde, as in the case of Vietnam, due to the particular circumstances of art making in the economic reformist era of the late 1980s. As Nora Taylor has cautioned, seizing upon 1986 (the start of Doi Moi) as a turning-point milestone for art activities is often a misleading gesture. Some artists have regarded 1975 (the end of the war) as more pivotal because artists in the north and south were able to meet for the first time since the colonial era, and other scholars like Boi Tran Huynh saw 1990 as a more significant year because the 1986 reform policy did not engender change until the collapse in 1990 of the subsidised economic system.

While artists and critics in the West were busy proclaiming the ironic postmodern citations in art, their counterparts in Vietnam were delighting in colour and earnestly working out abstract figuration and later neo-expressionist landscapes. To put it bluntly, they were out of fashion. Therefore, even though Nguyen Trung’s abstract painting Untitled (fig. 4) is from 1994, its tenor seems closer to the spirit of 1980s art in Southeast Asia.

Its nostalgic vision for old buildings in Ho Chi Minh City is rendered through a more or less direct evocation of skyscrapers gradually encroaching into the city. This sense of flux is continued even through the artists’ recourse to and deployment of traditional means and icons. Many critics have observed that in the eighties artists have returned in droves to making paintings for the booming demand in the art market (with Saneto Yuliman calling it a “desolate” situation, especially in Java and Bali which saw the rise of commercial art infrastructure without the requisite knowledge) and seemingly turning its back on the experimental practices of the preceding decade. That said, this return to the two-dimensional pictorial surface did not completely diminish the critical, avant-garde edge of a number of artists. Those who have persisted with painterly practices subsequently reinvigorated the painting
surface with deeper considerations of their own cultural traditions which are seen in relation to the aesthetic questions that remain pertinent to the artist. Artists who were inclined towards abstraction were careful not to make glib decorative art but paid attention to formal qualities like scale, shape and tonal contrast, and how they could be used to highlight indigenous features and normative cultural values, without making either the key focus of their composition. Thai-born but Germany-educated artist Somboon Hormtientong’s Das Lied (The Song) are monumental monochromatic gestural drawings in graphite that allude to Thai Buddhist scepticism towards the visible world and the yearning for transcendental Enlightenment but at the same time is openly communicative about the pulsating qualities of densely amased lines and strokes, urging the viewer with its title to also listen to the act of drawing (fig. 5). In comparison Filipino artist Cesare A.X. Syjuco defeats legibility with a visual sleight-of-hand in his work Mythology: Return History’s Whore, His Mother (fig. 6) by inscribing what looks like handwritten lines but which are essentially nonsense texts. The contrived antiquated visage automatically lends an historical air and the grid lines formed by the rope alternately transforms the work into a cipher of the modernist idiom or into a package of archived letters.

In the case of the late Malaysian artist Ismail Zain, his painting From There to Now ostensibly expresses Malay design sensibilities as it projected overt symbols of Malaysian life (from the household doilies to the common street-side morning glory flowers) in keeping with the National Culture Policy brief that art should fulfill the objective of fostering strong national identity and social unity, through the focus on indigenous Malay and Islamic cultural ideas and practices (fig. 7). However, on closer scrutiny, the triptych, which is worked out systematically in a contrapuntal composition of symmetry, reveals its modernist constructs that are aligned with Ismail’s own interest on formalist aspects of painting. As fellow artist and critic Redza Piydasa wrote: “The seemingly effortless decorativeness was, as such, highly deceptive, disguising the shrewd cerebrality behind their conception, highly controlled structuring and contemporaneous pertinence.” The lack of figuration is not due to any ideological adherence to Islamic principles but a thinking through of modernist painterly ones. As Ismail Zain has admitted in an interview with journalist Ooi Kok Chuen: “I am excited about working things which at first don’t relate to each other and I try to create a relationship in pattern and surfaces”; he preferred desensitised images that were not overlaid with meaning: “I don’t like motifs loaded with pre-conceived ideas like the bunga raya. I prefer wild flowers like the morning glory.”
late 1970s by Zulkifli Mohd Dahlan, a self-taught artist who died at the age of 25 in 1978. His paintings often show bizarre-looking “nativist” characters, who are all without clothing, in normal everyday situations. They appear to be innocent, guileless and uninhibited but so deformed that they look like mutant creatures from a different world, even perhaps as survivors of a future nuclear holocaust. In Ruang Dapur the caricatured creatures gather around a domestic scene but with the peaceful atmosphere is punctuated by potential violence with the three belligerent figures at the door and the woman in the kitchen raising her cleaver in mid-air ever ready to strike down upon the food on her chopping board (fig. 8). Going “native” in this case takes us instead to a scene of absurd estrangement.

Artists who have incorporated traditional elements more successfully into their work have tended to be those who wished to exploit these aspects to address their respective socio-political issues. Filipino artists Santiago Bose, Imelda Cajipe Endaya and Norberto (Peewee) Roldan have used the tactics of an “assemblagist” to put together their own commentaries on subjects that they care about. In The Matriarch from Negros Roldan embellishes the base fabric of traditional Visayan patadyong (hand-woven cotton wrap or loose skirt) with silk screen prints, embroidery work, flattened soft drink bottle caps, bamboo strips, herb bottles and baby amulet beads as a means to bring the material culture and collective memory of the Visayas region to the fore, displacing the Manila-centric art discourses and production (fig. 9). Bose fashioned a relief that depicted the Igorot warriors of the Cordillera holding up their mountain and guarding it against their enemies in Bury My Soul in Chico River (fig. 10). The work refers to the controversial Chico River Dam Project on Luzon island initiated during the Marcos regime, which threatened to flood out local Kalinga villages. According to Alice Guillermo:

The intensity of the people’s protest against the Chico Dam, matched by the escalating violence on the part of the military resulted in the abandonment of the project by the government. This was a clear case in which the organized masses won their cause. Inspired by this struggle, Santiago did a number of works commemorating it, such as “BURY MY SOUL IN CHICO RIVER”, echoing the rallying cry of the American-Indian minorities. This project is now considered a landmark case study concerning ancestral domain issues in the Philippines. Rural land issues are also a central concern of Cajipe-Endaya’s collage triptych Land In My Altar (fig. 11). The work draws from quotidian but traditional emblems of Filipino life as its material resource, showcasing the unconventional use of materials such split bamboo
matting (sawali sheets) and lace doilies, complemented by Christian imagery, to relay a politically charged and feminist narrative of the rural plight of women affected by land policies, militarisation and hunger in the Philippines, but who remain hopeful and sacrificial. The work also represents a growing consciousness in the 1980s that art needed to go beyond the narrow confines of formalist aesthetics and be attuned to changing social conditions in the country but at the same time convey a sense of authenticity by appealing to local folk culture.

Wayang (or puppetry), in particular, was well used or referenced by artists in the 1980s to service such sentiments. Manusia dan Wayang by artist Ivan Sagito (also known by Sagita), who was then prominently associated with Jogjakarta Surrealism, uses the motif of the puppet to explore the frailty of mankind (personified as female), who is cast away into a barren but dream-like landscape, indistinguishable from the giant puppets who also roam the land. The faces are masked or wrapped up in cloth, exacerbating a bleak horror that any sense of hope for a humane future cannot be glimpsed under the Suharto regime (fig. 12). Far more politically inflammatory was Nirmala Shanmugalingam’s Friends in Need which was removed by officials of the Malaysian-British Association from the Side-by-Side exhibition in Kuala Lumpur in 1986. Nirmala had depicted then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as the demon Raseki from the wayang kulit Purwa repertoire, and also then United States President Ronald Reagan as the monster Rakasas Tjakil (fig. 13). The collaged painting, which showed cut-out news reports such as the cover of Newsweek magazine with its headline “Shooting to Kill,” protests the US bombing of Libya in 1986, an act which was supported by the United Kingdom in the name of fighting terrorism and the socialist leanings of General Gaddafi. Both leaders were also seen as condoning the continuation of apartheid in South Africa by refusing to take stronger action against the Botha government for fear of losing its support in the fight against communism. Both leaders were also seen as condoning the continuation of apartheid in South Africa by refusing to take stronger action against the Botha government for fear of losing its support in the fight against communism. Both leaders were also seen as condoning the continuation of apartheid in South Africa by refusing to take stronger action against the Botha government for fear of losing its support in the fight against communism. Nirmala’s empathy is matched by her meticulous research work, which included a stint from 1984 to 1988 extensively researching Asian arts and crafts, particularly the ikat and pua, and Kelantanese wayang kulit and the Wayang Purwa of Java.

The most well-known artist by far to have embraced the entire practice of wayang kulit is Indonesian artist Heri Dono, who dropped out of art school to study with a famous innovative wayang artist Pak Sigit Sukasman in Jogjakarta. Dono’s seminal Wayang Legenda of 1988 was a performance work which sought to harness the potentially critical voice of the dalang or puppet master against the upper echelons of power but at the same time provide a reinterpretation of the wayang form for contemporary audiences (fig. 14). Dono introduced
figures which were uncommon or previously “unrepre-
sentable” to wayang, such as the lower disenfranchised
classes and the consumerist masses from the urban ar-
eas, made the puppets out of cheap lowly materials such
as cardboard and bamboo, deflected the Java-centricity
of wayang by using a Batak genesis story, the Si Tungkot
Tunggal Panaluan, and also invited young dalangs
from Jogja to perform rather than casting himself as mas-
ter.27 Wayang Legenda is considered important because
Dono had remapped the hitherto fixed social hierar-
chies and normative values which have been previously
perpetuated by wayang stories, doing so by “blurring
the absolute distinction of types and attributes which
one usually witnesses in the eternal and cyclic battle
within the wayang.”28
Like Kamin Lertchaiprasert’s Adam and Eve print
series, which features icons that embody ideas about
evolution, popular culture and religion, Dono also
plays with hybridised characters, merging the superhe-
roes from DC Comics and traditional wayang figures
that look as if they had evolved from the mating of
two different species. Kamin’s sequence begins with
two dressed-up apes carrying tomes on Science and
Religion, followed by a scene of the homo erectus next
to the artist wearing his Superman T-shirt but posing
like the crucified Christ, and ends with Mickey and
Minnie Mouse enacting the classic biblical scene of
the Fall (fig. 15). This print series alludes to the uncer-
tainty of humanity’s future and exemplifies the artist’s
ey and instinctive curiosity about the fundamental
meaning of human existence. But where Kamin’s series
ends on a more muted and pessimistic note, Dono’s
hybridising moves are more transformational in energy
and philosophy. Dono sees wayang and comic cartoon
characters as possessing their own life forces that are
beyond human rational limits. “Dono cites the mor-
phing that happens in cartoons (i.e. chairs come to life;
eyes, limbs and other things spontaneously sprouting
from any part of the body) as examples of a world of
endless possibilities for manipulating the figure to pro-
duce new meaning and relationships.”29

1990s and beyond.
An Expanded Global Face

With the growth of market capitalism and urbanisa-
tion in Southeast Asian cities, and the subsequent
proliferation of available educational and institutional
opportunities, media and technological accessibility,
artists became increasingly more imbricated within a
global network of art, intellectual discourse and infor-
mation, as well as its attendant critiques. This in turn
also led artists to examine more critically the various
bases and politics of their identities or cultural forma-
tions that have been marginalised, as well as their own
personal experiences of inequities and ambivalence in areas such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. To address these complex concerns, some turned to interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating an expanded field of practices such as photography, video, performance and site-specific participatory events so as to explore the social, environmental and commercial pressures pertinent to the region and the necessary re-examination of recent violent political histories which have been suppressed by the authorities. As artists become savvier with international trends and agendas like biennales and art fairs, the messaging within their art also becomes less linear or overt, self-consciously amalgamating historical narratives, popular culture and private confessions with a high degree of polished aestheticisation.

Defeating cultural chauvinism, whether within or without, is much related to the identity and biographical bodily politics played out in artistic practices in the 1990s. Melati Suryodarmo’s Der Sekundentraum, first performed in 1998 in Hannover, is a work inspired by the cultural confrontation she faced when she first entered Germany as a student. Finding herself a foreigner, the work represents her efforts at locating an authentic identity. In the hour-long performance, carried out under the soundtrack of the Andrews Sisters’ popular ditty “Bei Mir Bistu Shein” (which in Yiddish means “to me you are beautiful”), she gradually folds into neat piles the hundreds of clothes which she had collected from flea markets during her first years in Germany (fig. 16). She then messes up the clothes again puts on each piece of clothing, one by one, until she cannot move any more. Her Indonesian background had given her behavioural norms but in moving to another country, she had to give them up and start from the beginning. The multiple layers of clothing thus represent the ambiguity, doubts and replacements she had to face; in putting them on she is also metaphorically accumulating the life stories, experiences and situations of herself and others, in the realisation that we may have to destroy the rules that previously created us, lest they end up stifling us. Vietnamese-American activist-artist Hanh Thi Pham’s Reframing the Family series deals with the transformation of her sexuality and thereby upsetting the norms of gender roles within the family (fig. 17). After escaping from Saigon in 1975 in the wake of the Vietcong’s victory, Pham and her family settled in Southern California. For much of her early life, she played the role of a good and dutiful daughter and wife, staying in a heterosexual marriage for twelve years before identifying as a lesbian.30 Her complex and evocative photos construct queer imagery to explore metamorphic Asian identities but also to rethink concepts of kinship and belonging. Much of this has to do with Pham seeing herself as an outsider, facing “alienation as a living reminder of the Vietnam conflict in her
adopted home." Furthermore, living openly as a lesbian woman at the confluence between two patriarchal cultures, she faced further alienation. In her own words, she “experienced an escalated economic displacement, degradation and devaluation, anti-immigrant hostility, and racial discrimination from the patriarchal dominant structure that validates white Eurocentric morals and compulsive heterosexuality.”

For US-born Thai artist Michael Shaowanasai, cultural identity often has a commercial consumerist side to it. His satirical Exotic 101 is a performative video installation whereby viewers learn “how to be exotic” by following instructions given by the artist and the movements of the male model (fig. 18). On the surface, our “exotic” identity is given a celebratory spin but soon the participants will realise that they are under the mortifying disco lights of a cheap dancehall. According to Victor Segalen, a 19th-century ethnographer, the exotic is not the “kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or of the mediocre spectator, but the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savour.” Audience participation via the a-go-go stage performs the estrangement of not just the self to the other but also the performer to him or herself, because exoticism is not adaptation to or perfect comprehension of something but the “keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility.”

A different demand for such “incomprehensibility” is operative in the global art arena today; artistic exchanges are taking place at lightning speed without heed of deep extended cultural contact and large scale international exhibitions, biennales and art fairs promote new “tropic” encounters whereby artists and artworks are seen side by side, coalescing more under an idea rather than shared historical situations or movements. In addition to the diasporic spread of artists across the world, there is the global circulation of curators, critics, art collectors, art collectives and independent art spaces or initiatives. The seminal itinerant mega-exhibition “Cities on the Move,” co-curated by Hans Ulrich-Obrist and Hou Hanru, which opened its first iteration at the Vienna Secession in November 1997, is a good case in point. Drawing upon works from over 80 Asian artists, the exhibition used as its framing device the hyper-growth of Asian cities, their rapid modernisation and urban development. By creating a special exhibitionary model that moved through seven cities in two years, with each show radically reformed for the specificities of each venue, it relied on activating the potentials in the proposals of artists, theorists and architects; it also relied on the spontaneous interactions between art, artist and audience to provide content to the show. Instead of defining what contemporary Asian art was, the exhibition “like its subject, was represented as a process of insistent change.” In Vienna,
the exhibition tried to break the division between the museum and the street, between inside and out. With “promiscuous” collaborations in mind, the curators had Thai artists Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija work with a team of cinema painters and tuk-tuk (three-wheeled open-air taxi used in Thailand) makers to produce a series of billboards (fig. 19) and tuk-tuks which were displayed in and around the Secession. For the exhibition’s Bangkok version (Cities on the Move 6, Bangkok), the lack of a museum space meant that the exhibition was completed over a number of different informal venues around the city. Part of the sixth iteration, the seven lightboxes which made up Manit Sriwanichpoom’s Shocking Pink Collection were shown at the Central Rama III Shopping Mall in Bangkok, demonstrating the dispersal of art into the everyday fabric of commerce and industrial growth. Manit’s work shows his iconic Pink Man dressed up in several different personas, intimating that there is only surface form but no substance inhering within the subject (fig. 20). Although the work was conceived during the throes of the 1997 Asian financial crisis – which had come about in part due to speculation around the Thai baht – and was meant to critique the dysfunctionalities of wanton consumerism that had swept through the country, Manit’s statement about the Pink Man served also as a gentle rebuke to the global curatorial promiscuity that was manifested through numerous biennales, triennials and art fairs: “Like most tourists today, Pink Man travels not to learn but to consume: to collect exotic destinations, to shop, to show off. He searches but he never learns because he’s insincere.”

Against this seemingly post-historical trend in global exhibition making, however, are countervailing representational acts by artists to recover traumatic memories and suppressed historical events in Southeast Asia, or to put forward trenchant critiques of power and regimes. For the late self-taught Cambodian artist Svay Ken, his sustained painting practice and characteristic vibrant naïve style, with which he documented his impressions and experiences of war and the Khmer Rouge genocide will be his legacy. Through his art, he hopes that:

[The next generation of Cambodians] will recognise the difficulties, the destruction, the casualties and the disabilities that are brought about by wars like this, and understand the reasons why Cambodia was led to war, because of two competing ideologies maintained by the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Blue.

Svay’s Monthly Mandatory Meeting 1975–1979 records the mass meeting sessions in a rural community which was used as an indoctrination vehicle for Khmer Rouge cadres. Ideological conformity was expected and indi-
individual identity was violently suppressed in favour of the collective (fig. 21). Yet, even in seemingly stable democratic societies such as Malaysia, artists have also been sensitive to political abuses of power. Zulkifli Yusoff’s *The Power II* (fig. 22) points to the lively debates in the early 1990s on the powers of the sultans in the country. The altar-like installation, which is adorned with a number of Malay *tengkolok* (ceremonial headdress) makes reference to the lively debates in the early 1990s regarding the (abused) powers of the Sultans in Malaysia and the misplaced adulation the masses give them. Ahmad Fuad Osman’s diptych *The Blurring Echoes* (fig. 23) brings out the contrasting moods of the Malaysian public which is now evaluating the post-Independence progress of the country. On the left panel is an historic image of Tengku Abdul Rahman giving his inaugural Merdeka speech in 1957 as the first Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, addressing a triumphant crowd filled with an optimism for the future of the country as a nation. Members of the public behind him hold up krises, the traditional Malay weapon and also symbol of Malay nationalism. But on the right panel, the figures writhe in agony, with the same krises inverted and jabbed into the ground. Herein lies the anguish of the younger generation (Ahmad was also part a young artist collective called Matahati), pondering the development of the country from the past to the present. 1997 marked the 40th year of Malaysia’s independence but it was also the very same year it was rocked by the Asian economic crisis that swept the region. Artists like Tran Luong from Vietnam took a more community-based approach to examine the results of socialist collectivism. In 2001, Tran invited ten artists to collaborate on the *Mao Khe Coal Mine Project*, which he had organised and subsequently recorded on video, with the aim of engaging with and understanding the predicaments of mining communities. Travelling from Hanoi to the northern coal mining town of Mao Khe, the artists made performances (Tran’s more well-known *Steam Rice Man* was first performed here) and other works, and conducted workshops with the miners and their families (fig. 24). Although overt political judgment was withheld in the video, the visceral quality of the miners’ blackened bodies and their precarious working environments told of the failings of the Socialist dream to uplift the living conditions of all Vietnamese.

To conclude the expansive globalised era but without closing it off, we come to Philippine artist Gerardo Tan’s aptly and humorously titled work *The End* (fig. 25), which features a rope stanchion and a framed painting that depicts the exact same rope stanchion in front of the painting. This endgame results in a looped self-referentiality, one is led to question: which object is the more valuable one – the actual artefact or its representation? Or does the actual rope stanchion gain
in utility for becoming the effective protection of its visual representation? This cyclic riddle is also present in a major installation work of Montien Boonma, *The Pleasure of Being, Crying, Dying and Eating*. Comprising a tower of carefully stacked ceramic bowls imprinted with images of human mandibles, finger bone-shaped brass chopsticks, round feast tables and broken bowl shards, Montien explored his Buddhist worldview and personal grief over his wife’s illness by expressing it through familiar everyday materials (fig. 26). Montien’s practice often championed the centrality of the artistic process rather than final outcomes and here his work alludes to the cyclical but transitory nature of human life: we endure the stages of pleasure (eating) and suffering (crying) from birth (being) to death (dying), and back again in rebirth.

Yet against the cyclical, we should also find the open, the provisional, the serial and the transformational. Krisna Murti’s first video and photo installation *12 Hours in the Life of Agung Rai, the Dancer* recorded the off-stage life and antics of the Balinese *kecak* dancer Agung Rai and was presented as a solo exhibition at StudioR66 in Bandung via wall-mounted photographic strips and TV monitors of various sizes (fig. 27). Degradation of the original V8 tapes and photo negatives meant that the work had to be reconstructed (but only incompletely in 2015) by converting and transferring the remaining source materials into digital files, which are then respectively played on different monitors of varying technological ages and digitally printed out onto new photo paper. Like the bubble machine whose forms were constantly transmuting, Murti could only fleetingly grasp his time-sensitive media by moving it onward to another platform. And in acknowledging his own wish to alter a static exhibition into an event, Murti also had Agung Rai himself present at the opening in 1993 walking amidst the videos and photographs, thereby drawing in the viewers and crossing the boundaries of real world experiences, memories and fiction.

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**Gerardo Tan**  
(b. 1960, Philippines)  
*The End*  
1995  
Brass, velvet and oil on canvas  
Stanchion posts: 100 cm each  
Rope: 231 cm  
Canvas: 37 x 52.5 cm  
Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Manila

**Montien Boonma**  
(b. 1953, Thailand; d. 2000, Thailand)  
*The Pleasure of Being, Crying, Dying and Eating*  
1993, reconstructed 2015  
Ceramic bowls, wooden tables, cloth and brass  
Dimensions variable  
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

**Krisna Murti**  
(b. 1957, Indonesia)  
*12 Hours in the Life of Agung Rai, the Dancer*  
(Archival image)  
1993, reconstructed 2014  
Digital videos, TV monitors, media players, digital prints, tree branches and rice husks  
Dimensions variable
The exhibition in March 1964 was at Redfern Gallery in London and curated by Paul Keeler. At the exhibition was also another sculpture, a smoke machine. The bubble machine was then titled Chaitya, a Pali word for temple, and the smoke machine was titled Vihara, the word for monastic hall, revealing the somewhat spiritual origins of the work.

2 The inspiration for Cloud Canyons is rooted in Medalla’s own concatenation of personal experience and memories: it was the memory of seeing a young Filipino guerrilla shot by a Japanese soldier during WWII and as he laid in Medalla’s garden dying with red blood bubbles foaming at his mouth; it was his deep impression of flying over the Grand Canyon on his first trip to America; it was the visit to a soap factory in Marseilles, and also a visit to a brewery in Edinburgh in Scotland. It was also the memory of his mother cooking Guinataan, a coconut milk and tropical fruit dessert, and the movement of clouds over Manila Bay near his birthplace that inspired him to create a work of art that would express and embody the motion of clouds.


4 T.K. Sabapathy, Piyadasa: An Overview 1962–2000 (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2001), 52. Malaysian artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa met as art students in 1963 at the Hornsey College of Art in London. Whilst there, they were exposed to a paradigm shift in art education whereby art was a means of critical enquiry. They bonded over theoretical discussions about the definitions of art which would subsequently inform their enquiries and creations, whereby the art object was secondary when compared to the ideas and experiences provoked by it. Towards a Mystical Reality, held at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature) in Kuala Lumpur from 2 to 7 August 1974, attracted strong responses from the art establishment, the most vehement coming from the poet Salleh Ben Joned who on opening day urinated publicly on the exhibition catalogue.

5 Ibid, 30. The manifesto represented a culmination of the ceaseless search for an authentic approach to artistic practice that can be traced to the New Scene exhibition in 1969. Piyadasa penned the New Scene exhibition catalogue as well, declaring that their concerns lay with “making original contributions to the existing international movement in art which aims at an intellectual, impersonal, non-symbolic approach” and that “for the Malaysian viewer, the show would mean a redirection of aims, a shift in emphasis and taste, and the formation of an alternative aesthetic and of new habits of seeing.”


7 GSRB is the product of the meeting of young student minds from ITB (Institut Teknologi Bandung) in Bandung, and ASRI (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia) in Jogjakarta, who joined forces to present solidarity against the prevailing conventions of artistic production. Embodying the wilful charting of a different course for Indonesian art, they drew up a manifesto outlining five decisive strategies for their new movement, exhorting for art to critically look at new possibilities and move away from its elitist bases. See Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia: Kumpulan Karangan (Indonesian New Art Movement: A Reader), ed. Jim Supangkat (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1979).

8 The 1975 exhibition was followed by another show, GSRB II in 1977, which featured a larger roster of artists adopting non-traditional approaches to making art. Although GSRB disbanded after their final exhibition in 1979, which had attracted new members such asSemseta Siahaan and Dede Eri Supria, they came together once more in 1987 to create their first true collaborative work at the Pasar Raya Dunia Fantasi [Supermarket Fantasy World], which critiqued the commercialisation that was permeating the Indonesian art scene of the 1980s.

9 Patrick Flores, “The Turns of a Term in the Philippines,” Afterall, http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.34/social-realism-the-turns-of-a-term-in-the-philippines (accessed 25 September 2015). Architecturally trained and with an active practice since the sixties, Chabet was hailed as a precocious talent and subsequently made his name as a conceptual artist, curator and educator who invited his students and audiences to explore and experiment with vernacular form, readymade material, process and expression.
During his short tenure with the CCP, Chabet took over the reins of museum director at the CCP in 1979. At the CCP in 1975, and the 1979 survey show titled “Recentness and a turning away from the past.” Today, the award remains one of the highest honours bestowed upon young artists in the Philippines. Albano took over the reins of museum director at the CCP in 1979. At the CCP in 1975, and the 1979 survey show titled “Recentness and a turning away from the past.” Today, the award remains one of the highest honours bestowed upon young artists in the Philippines.

The exhibition featured a number of novel reflective items and lighting equipment such as projectors, spot lights, black lights, acetates, paper, mirrors, aluminum foil, painted tire interiors, fluorescent-painted objects, rubber, and even a tape-recording system playing music from The Rolling Stones, Santana, Yes, Xenakis, Minaroglu, John Cage, and Varese, with added soundtrack of water leaks and flashbowls. See “Illumination: Exhibition Notes,” Asia Art Archive, http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/7800 (accessed 25 September 2015).

During his short tenure with the CCP, where he was appointed Founding Museum Director, Chabet inaugurated the “Thirteen Artists Award,” which sought to recognise young artists who demonstrated “recentness and a turning away from the past.” Today, the award remains one of the highest honours bestowed upon young artists in the Philippines. Albano took over the reins of museum director at the CCP in 1979. At many points he and Chabet continued to cross paths, evinced by shows such as the Shop 6 group exhibition at the CCP in 1975, and the 1979 survey show titled A Decade of Developmental Art which showcased the conceptualist approaches of the time.

As Alexander Alberro states: “In its broadest possible definition, then, the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution.” See Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art,” in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, eds. Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), xvii.


Reconstructions of artworks are also present in the succeeding decades of this section although they were done so for other reasons, eg. technological degradation of source video, filling in the gaps of incomplete acquisitions and accidental loss of material in the collection, etc.


Boi Tran Huynh, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 onwards,” (PhD. Diss., University of Sydney, 2002), 312.


25 Ooi Kok Chuen, “Brush with Harsh Realities of Life,” *New Sunday Times*, 3 May 1992, 12–3. An exhibition of paintings by 12 young British artists were shown alongside Malaysian artists who had received part of their formal art education in Britain. The exhibition also featured prints by 12 other more established artists; it later travelled to Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore.

26 Ibid.

27 The Sumatran Batak narrative – *Tungkot Panaluan* (or *Tunggal Panaluan*) is a priest’s ritual staff traditionally made from wood carved with human figures and festooned with horsehair and cooked human viscera from sacrificial victims – is a cautionary one against incest or giving in erroneously to one’s desires, which in Dono’s version can be translated also into the selling out of one’s heritage due to consumer avarice.


29 Ibid., 51.


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.


34 Ibid.


37 *Cambodian Artists Speak Out, the Art of Survival*, eds. Nico Mesterharm et al. (Phnom Penh: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2008), 14

38 The consequences of coercive and destructive authoritarian governments are also depicted in the paintings of Myanmar artist M.P.P. Yei Myint’s *National Registration Card* (1992) and the Laotian artist Khamsouk Keomingmuang’s *Who Makes War* (2002).
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