Cultural Wars in Southeast Asia: The Birth of the Critical Exhibition in the 1970s

Seng Yu Jin

What is the art historical significance of exhibitionary histories in Southeast Asia, and how is it meaningful to study this comparatively across this region? To answer these questions, it is critical to acknowledge that Southeast Asia is not a natural region but an artificial notion—a social construct—born from a collective social imagination and geography in terms of territorial proximity, economic exchanges and interterritorial movement of peoples. Southeast Asia was carved out by almost every major colonial power in history, each vying for the region’s rich material resources. This intensity of colonial intervention provides a real collective historical experience in the region. The Portuguese were the first to arrive in the Sultanate of Malacca in 1511, followed by the Spaniards in the Philippines, the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Singapore and Malaya, the Americans in the Philippines and finally the Japanese during World War II. These colonial powers consolidated their political and economic control over their colonies, and constrained existing trade networks that had previously connected places and cities, moved peoples and transferred ideas in this region.¹

Despite the region’s diversity, the concept of “Southeast Asia” has gained traction in academia, state discourses and even in the minds of the peoples who live here. Amitav Archarya draws on Benedict Anderson’s concept of nation-states as “imagined communities” to develop what he terms as “imagining the region” whereby Southeast Asia is an “imagined and socially constructed community.”² Archarya outlines the material comprising territorial proximities, geographical and economic interconnections, and the ideational that thrives on a desire for region-ness and regionalism.³ This sustained desire and search for the concept of regionalism is based on ideas and myths of shared past histories decisively and significantly shaped by local actors. These ideas of region-ness manifest in: oral histories of myths, poems, literature, illustrations, institutions, artworks, material culture and, as this thesis argues, also in exhibitions; in particular, art exhibitions that functioned as vehicles of resistance against colonialism. Such exhibitions generated and disseminated shared ideas of a postcolonial reality and empowered people by creating new subjectivities to challenge existing ones forged by colonialism. Prolif-

¹ For an introduction to the trade networks of Southeast Asia, refer to Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
³ Ibid.
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Intersections between Changing Contexts and Art Worlds of Southeast Asia: Salon, National and Internationalist Exhibitions from 1945 to 1973

Art exhibitions are time-specific events that bring together an ensemble of disciplines, practices and technologies, as a primary site of exchange and construction, to mediate between the art worlds and their contexts. The art worlds in Southeast Asia operate with their own institutional structures and discourses that are in turn engaged with local, regional and global social, political and cultural conditions. This history of exhibitions in the region serves to study the patterns of the changing exhibitionary modes with shifting inclinations, affinities and sympathies to new realities. The art exhibition as a site for exchanges brings together disciplines that have affinities with each other but are separated by boundaries, such as art history, art criticism, curation, postcolonial and Southeast Asian studies, technologies of display and discourse analysis. As a site of construction, the art exhibition is imbued with agency to generate and deconstruct knowledge by mapping and, in the process, making visible its orders, categories and structures. Tracking the exhibition as a pervasive form and format to understand its impact on modern art developments in Southeast Asia requires attending to the ruptures and continuities within changing art worlds that they are an indispensable part of, and the wider social and political contexts that in turn shape these worlds. It is therefore the task of this essay to trace the history of art exhibitions by focusing on their structures and formats—not all are alike. Exhibition types which existed before 1945, such as solo, group, ethnic and Salon-type displays, reveal continuities in format, while new ones, such as medium-based, national and internationalist shows, were invented and mushroomed, post-1945, across the region. By the turn of the 20th century, survey exhibitions (solo and group) became established as the primary way of displaying art.

Scholarship on Southeast Asian art has tended to represent exhibitions as monolithic and static, however its structures, formats and discourses have changed over time in two phases. The first phase (from the turn of the 20th century to 1973) saw the emergence of different exhibitionary formats, the most dominant of which were national, ethnic-based, medium-based and internationalist exhibitions. The second phase started from 1974. It spawned the emergence of a new exhibitionary mode—the critical exhibition—that has produced manifestos, challenged dominant categories of art, envisioned a new role for art in society, and proposed new ways of thinking and making art.

The Rise of the National and the Regional in Salon Art Exhibitions

Exhibitions in Southeast Asia in the 1950s were dominated by Salon-type displays, modelled after the Salon de Paris that was first orga-
ised by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1725 and, from 1881 onwards, the Société des Artistes Français. Salon de Paris exhibitions were held annually or biannually and, from 1748 onwards when they introduced a jury prize, achieved the status of an arbiter, determining taste and quality of art. John Clark in Modern Asian Art identifies art societies that founded art schools and organised exhibitions to support their own schools. For instance, the Indian Society of Oriental Art (founded in 1907) started an art school and organised exhibitions to promote the Bengal School, revealing an incipient network of art academies, art societies and exhibitions.\(^4\) Initially organised by fine art societies, some of the Salon exhibitions subsequently became institutionalised as national art salons, performing “the important function of defining what is national art, categorising works and certifying artists by giving awards and stimulating a national art market to create a standard for adjudicating price.”\(^5\)

In this region, the Salon exhibition as an exhibitionary mode stamped its influence on the art worlds by becoming not only an important stable fixture where artworks could be exhibited and artists recognised nationally, but also a guardian of artistic quality that shaped tastes and determined the pecking order of artists. Clark’s study of Salon-type exhibitions in Calcutta and Tokyo can form the basis of comparative studies in the history of exhibitions, understood within the art world, involving its network of the market, exhibition, and discourse; these determine how art is received, legitimised and understood in Southeast Asia. Other Salon-type national art exhibitions discussed by scholars offer different ways in which exhibitions can be appraised. Boitran Huynh-Beattie regarded the 1959–1964 annual Spring Painting Awards organised by the Department of Culture in Vietnam as heralding a “Golden Age” for artists from the Society of Young Saigonese Artists, as its members such as Nguyễn Trung and Đình Cường won awards and gained national fame.\(^6\) The annual Spring Painting Awards, fashioned after the Salon d’Automne exhibitions that coincided with the changing seasons, were consolidated and institutionalised, becoming permanent fixtures of the Vietnamese art world. In Singapore, this was achieved partly through building exclusivity seen in the formation of the Société des Artistes Chinois or the Salon Art Society, subsequently renamed the Society of Chinese Artists (SCA). Registered on 20 January 1936, the SCA quickly established itself as the most prestigious art society in Singapore and, henceforth, was exempted from registration by the British administration. From the SCA’s founding up to 1941, it successfully organised five Society of Chinese Artists Annual Art Exhibitions, only to be disrupted by World War II.\(^7\) Salon-type exhibitions primarily organised by art societies gradually institutionalised and gained a measure of stability after the War, as countries in Southeast Asia stepped into decolonisation fuelled by independence movements.

Stringent entry requirements into the SCA created a perceived exclusivity, further amplified by its accomplished members, such as Tchang Ju Chi, Dai Yinlang, Chen Puzhi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, who were recognised not only as prominent artists but also intellectuals with qualifications conferred by prestigious academies in China. Gaining acceptance into the SCA was immediately recognised as an artistic achievement. The SCA’s penchant for inviting renowned artists like Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu to exhibit, give talks and raise funds for the Sino-Japanese War further raised its profile and status (fig. 16.1).\(^8\) These means, therefore, enabled the SCA to accumulate symbolic capital through its annual Salon-type exhibitions, and secure its position as the most prominent art society in 1930s Singapore.

The concept of a national art exhibition differentiates itself from the Salon-type exhibition in its search for the national; it is, like the


Xu Beihong gave talks on the two occasions he came to Singapore by invitation of the SCA in 1939 and 1941. Liu Haisu gave a talk in 1941 when he came to raise funds for the war in China.


Ibid., 8–9.

concept of citizenship, often tied to a particular country and attempts (either silently or overtly) to construct a national cultural identity through art. It is premised on the notion that art and artists, as a unifying cultural force, can be marshalled to serve a country striving for nationalism and independence. Art was thought to somehow exhibit and manifest the nation and its identity, and national art exhibitions evidenced the “national characteristics” of art.

Apinan Poshyananda in *Modern Art in Thailand* identified this role played by the National Exhibition of Art, organised primarily for art students from Silpakorn University and Po Chang School to showcase their talents by saying that when “placed under the rubric ‘national exhibition,’ it affirmed for the viewers an acceptance of modern Thai art being practised by local artists.”

Silpa Bhirasri, who was instrumental in the founding of Silpakorn University (established on 12 October 1943) and taught at its only faculty then, the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture, represented a prominent voice that championed the need for Thai artists to be free in their creative practice in tandem with how “contemporary art all over the world has freed itself from traditional styles which relied on academism in order to express artistic personality from feeling and technique.”

Tasked to be jointly responsible for organising the inaugural National Exhibition of Art, roles they played until its 14th edition, Silpakorn University and Bhirasri were given the power to shape the direction of the exhibitions in line with the education curriculum of the University. For instance, the exhibition accepted entries in numerous categories of art such as painting, applied arts, children’s art, decorative arts, advertising, graphic arts, drawing, painting and sculpture, which coincided with subjects taught at Silpakorn University, giving artists an additional impetus to work and develop in these areas.

In *A Brief History of Malayan Art*, Marco Hsu identifies Salon-type national art exhibitions, such as the National Art Exhibition held at Kuala Lumpur for artists from the Federated States in 1959 and the 1961 second art exhibition of the Festival of Arts organised by the Ministry of Culture in Singapore, as signs of a maturing art community. Although Boitran, Apinan and Hsu do not analyse such exhibi-
tions (termed “salon national art exhibitions” by Clark) as a mode that has defined, categorised, legitimised and influenced the reception, dissemination and conception of art in the art world, the importance of this type of exhibition is registered in their narratives.

The shift from Salon-type exhibitions to internationalist exhibitions that promoted specific styles, media and ideologies sourced from around the world began in the 1950s and 1960s across Southeast Asia. Social realism and abstraction represented two trajectories of internationalism that marked this shift in the region. The social realist strand of internationalism manifested in the Equator Art Society. In his book *A Brief History of Malayan Art*, Hsu devotes an entire chapter, “Vibrant Young Artists (B),” to the 1956 exhibition organised by the Singapore Chinese High Schools’ Graduates of 1953 Arts Association and the exhibitions by the Equator Art Society. He traces discourses centred around these exhibitions by highlighting specific artworks and essays in their respective catalogues and quoting exhibition texts (such as “Art belongs to society—it is public, and should serve the public”) to mark these exhibitions as ideologically drive, describing them, stylistically, as “mainly realist in nature.”

Solo exhibitions that propelled “avant-garde” styles like Cubism and abstraction were mounted by individual artists, such as Ta Ty who was described by Boitran as being committed to “Cubism for a brief period of time before venturing into abstract art.” Andrew Ranard recounted Paw Oo Thet’s solo exhibition in Burma, described as groundbreaking for adopting Cubist and semi-abstract styles, “as the spark which ignited the ‘modern art movement’” in 1963. This show was held at the Burma-America Institute, a cultural centre sponsored by the United States Information Service (USIS), and opened on the same day American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas (22 November 1963). It was a great success for Paw Oo Thet. Most of his works were sold even though his paintings drew from the Cubist visual language, a modernist break from “traditional” paintings dominated by realism. In the Philippines, the 1953 exhibition *The First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in Tagala* featured non-representational works that included Cubist, semi-abstract and symbolist paintings, marking the emergence of exhibitions based on propagating styles conceived as “non-objective.” This went against the tide of the dominant Amorsolo school that featured...
realist and idealised landscape and figure-types which embodied the imagined Philippines. 16

From 1957 a new exhibitionary mode emerged—the regional exhibition—with a scope and scale much larger than Salon and national art exhibitionary modes. The First Southeast Asia Art Exhibition: A Southeast Asian Competition and Exhibition organised by the Art Association of the Philippines marked the birth of the regional exhibition. It was soon followed by other regional art competitions like the Philip Morris ASEAN Arts Awards in 1994. Patrick Ng Kah Onn’s painting, titled Batek Malaya, won first prize at the 1957 exhibition, a signal that batik as a textile was imbued with an imagined “region-ness.” Ng’s painting on batik, which evokes the “national” and the “regional,” partly reinvented batik painting as a hybrid genre: a traditional textile craft and an easel format infused with regional pictorial idioms. This is a reflection of why Seah Kim Joo’s batik painting was accepted by the Modern Art Society as the basis of avant-garde artistic practices 15 years later in the 1972 exhibition that also did not show Cheo Chai Hiang’s conceptual 5’ x 5’ (Singapore River). Besides exhibitions, the 1964 Seminar on Fine Arts of Southeast Asia, under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning, nurtured a growing interest in understanding art from a regional perspective.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967. 17 This grouping of countries represented Southeast Asia in fostering regional cooperation based on the principle of equality and respect for the sovereignty of individual nation-states. Regional cooperation was skewed towards forging economic exchanges and interdependence, but the forging of a regional identity received a measure of focus through the ASEAN art exhibitions.

In art historical terms, the birth of ASEAN heralded a new era of cultural cooperation among its members. As art historian and critic T.K. Sabapathy noted, “Art exhibitions are one of several cultural initiatives which are deemed as useful in displaying regional consciousness and diversity.” 18 The first exhibition to mark the establishment of ASEAN was held in Jakarta in 1968. In 1972, the ASEAN Art Exhibition was organised to mark the 5th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore where the five founding members of ASEAN (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines) held an exhibition of paintings and photography. The concept of a roving or mobile exhibition that would travel to the various capitals of the participating countries was mooted and actualised in the 1974 ASEAN Mobile Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur. The ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), which was set up in 1978, inherited the objectives of ASEAN as an institutional endeavour to promote a “sense of regional identity and contribute to the enrichment of the culture of ASEAN.” 19 The Bali Summit in 1976 laid the groundwork for the establishment of COCI as its framework, and included the support of “ASEAN scholars, writers, artistes and mass media representative to enable them to play an active role in fostering a sense of regional identity and fellowship.” 20 Cultural activities, of which the visual arts were a part, were deemed useful for forging a regional identity through ASEAN. The ASEAN exhibitions exemplified how art could be pressed to serve diplomacy, a connection that forms the very basis of COCI’s existence. The significance of “culture and information” was of vital importance to ASEAN, especially during its early years when some member countries were wary of each other’s intentions. It was ASEAN’s programmes on culture and information which served as the spadework that generated the spirit of regionalism during ASEAN’s infant years.

The South East Asia Cultural Festival organised by the then Ministry of Culture in Singapore continued the regional exhibition-
ary mode where “national, regional and global factors intersect in cultural display.” Jennifer Lindsay provides a way of examining a mode of exhibition organised by the state that involves strategic systems of representations by projecting Singapore as “a nation of gathered races performing to and each other, a vision extended to Southeast Asia as a whole”; a multiracial exemplar that embodies the culture and racial strands of this region traced to its Malay, Chinese and Indian sources corresponding to Singapore’s racial make-up. Such state-sponsored and choreographed exhibitionary displays are a mode of exhibition and a site where the networks of the art world and “cultural networks cut across political and ideological ones.”

Lindsay’s focus on the politics of constructing national and regional cultural identities within the context of the Cold War provides another way of studying modes of exhibitions as strategic systems of representation, where national, regional and global forces intersect. This review of current scholarship on exhibitions in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s reveals how exhibitions can be viewed not just as types, such as solo or group exhibitions as in the majority of current literature, but as modes of exhibitions. The approaches employed by scholars like Clark, who looked into national art salons as a mode of exhibition, and Apinan, who looked into the reception of exhibitions, offer different and useful ways to appraise exhibitions, further developed by 1970s scholarship on exhibitions and exhibitionary discourses. These scholars deepened analysis of exhibitionary discourses that deploy strategic systems of representation in the display, reception and discourse of art by understanding the national salon and regional types as exhibitionary modes that were new before the 1970s. Another type of exhibition—the critical exhibition—that emerged only in the 1970s in the region had not yet been conceived and historicised. The rest of this essay will focus on the social, political and cultural conditions that provided the context for the birth of the critical exhibition in the 1970s.

The Birth of the Critical Exhibition in Southeast Asia in 1970–1994

The late 1960s and 1970s period was key in the history of exhibitions in Southeast Asia. It was a tumultuous time, characterised by radical student activism; a push for economic development by governments across the region that resulted in an unprecedented expansion of higher education; the spread of authoritarian and military regimes, as in the cases of Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia; and the looming spectre of the Cold War as manifested in the intensification of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) in the early 1970s, resulting in the eventual withdrawal of American forces in 1975. This was a period when ideas and ideologies mattered, marked by a resurgent youth movement that mainly involved students from higher education institutions such as universi-
sities and fine art academies that were either part of these universities or autonomous institutions. Students in this period of social and political upheaval saw themselves as the elite intellectual vanguards of their country, a moral force for social justice, and a bastion against corruption. They could claim to be so by their perceived lack of vested interests to advance their careers within the political system, and did not stand to receive any financial gain. Academics who taught in these tertiary institutions identified with them to a similar but lesser extent. Unlike the academics and lecturers who were clearly professionals, students occupied an in-between status, neither wholly professionals nor marginalised elites whose roles were defined more exclusively in terms of their contributions to nation building and economic development.24 Student activism provides an important context for understanding the emergence of critical exhibitions in the early 1970s because many of them were also artists enrolled in academic art institutions such as the Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia, ASRI) in Yogyakarta and the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts at Silpakorn University. These artist–students were the heartbeat of the new critical exhibition, a mode that was socially engaged, conceptual and, in the display of art, shifted towards public spaces as well as propelled artists to the intellectual forefront of broader movements concerned with poverty, democracy, the social and economic conditions of the people, anti-colonialism and nation building.

1974: The Birth of Critical Exhibitions in Southeast Asia

The late 1960s and 1970s was marked by waves of student movements in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and Singapore. The first wave was a leftist one beginning in the late 1950s through to the early 1970s, in which students fought for a more egalitarian society and were against pro-American policies which they viewed as being neo-imperialist and pro-capitalist. The New Left—which departed from the Marxist focus on the labour movement and class struggle, as well as communism's tendency towards authoritarianism to broaden the range of reforms to include democracy, human rights, gay rights and freedom of speech—could be seen in the Philippines and Thailand. Mao Zedong's ideas on art were particularly influential on the New Left in the Philippines and Thailand, derived from his 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* that called for the arts to serve the people. The second wave that began around the late 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s saw student protestors who were initially sympathetic to the developmentalist goals of regimes turn against these very same regimes. In their eyes, these governments had become too authoritarian and corrupt. These students sought for reformation through institutional critique, counter-hegemonic discourse (in the form of manifestos) and social engagement to restore the meaning and relevance of art to people's lives. Their aim was to restore these regimes to their ideological origins by “returning to the people”; this was most evident in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The emergence of the critical exhibition began in the context of the second wave of student protests, although its roots could be traced to the first wave of student movements in Southeast Asia.

The Rise of Artist–Student Activism and the Emergence of Critical Exhibitions

The Black December Incident in Indonesia

1974 is a historically significant year for student movements across Southeast Asia. Suharto's New Order was established in the wake of a coup that ended the rule of Sukarno and the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komu-
nis Indonesia, PKI) in 1965. The coup which occurred on 1 October resulted in the death of Indonesia's highest-ranking generals, whose bodies were unceremoniously thrown into a well. The PKI was held responsible and banned in 1966. A purge ensued with thousands of communists killed or imprisoned, regardless of whether they were proven or suspected. The military, as led by Suharto, pursued a developmental regime focused on economic growth and destroyed the ability of the working class, farmers and the economically disenfranchised to represent themselves politically. But its overall developmental strategy soon appeared to excessively benefit foreign investors and select elites. The New Order was perceived as having deviated from its original ethos of reforming Indonesia for its people, to become corrupt and authoritarian. This culminated in the Malari affair on 15 January 1974. The “vanguard in vacuum” created by the New Order and its repressive policies allowed students to assume the role as leaders of society, a moral force that would rescue the nation. Widespread rioting and student protests broke out in Jakarta and across campuses in the early 1970s, criticising the government for its corrupt activities as well as and ignoring the plight of the poor.

Connections between the student movements raging in Indonesia and artist–students were clearly made in FX Harsono’s solo exhibition titled FX Harsono: The Life and the Chaos of Objects, Images and Words, organised by the Erasmus Huis, the cultural centre of the Netherlands in Jakarta, in 2015. This solo exhibition followed recent awards: the Prince Claus Awards of the Netherlands (2014) and the Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art in Singapore (2015). Both awards recognised Harsono’s role as a socially engaged artist whose works address the issue of democracy and the need for counter-hegemonic histories that are alternatives to state-controlled narratives and give a voice to the marginalised and disenfranchised. This exhibition featured a timeline that started with the Malari Incident as the catalyst, and context in which one could understand the soon-to-occur Black December Incident.

Harsono was one of the leading proponents of the Black December Incident in 1974. This has been cited by art historians as the precursor to the emergence of the New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, GSRB) in 1975. Prior to the Black December Incident, groups of young artist–students in Yogyakarta and Bandung had begun to experiment with new art forms that challenged the aesthetic and theoretical conventions of modern art, which were largely defined by painting and sculpture as taught in the art academies. These artist–students critiqued their academic art curriculum as being too conservative and restrictive for limiting fine art to disciplines defined as painting, sculpture, printmaking and graphic arts. They advocated alternative art forms that offered new ways of using non-art materials such as found objects and organic materials from everyday life that the rakyat or people could easily relate to. One such group was based in Yogyakarta and formed the Group of Five (Kelompok 5), which comprised Hardi, FX Harsono, B. Munny Ardhi, Nanik Mirna and Siti Adiati, all students from ASRI. The Group of Five proceeded to organise exhibitions in many cities such as Surabaya and Solo, questioning the institutional structures of ASRI that were shaped by the practices of painting and sculpture. The mass media covered their activities with great interest.

In 1974, members of the Group of Five were involved in a dispute between the students and the ASRI administration, culminating in the Black December Incident. At the 1974 Grand Exhibition of Indonesian Painting, the jury’s decision favoured works by more established artists such as Widayat, Abas Abassyah and A.D. Pirous. The Black December Manifesto was issued in reaction, proclaiming the following:
1. Diversity is undeniable in Indonesian art, even if diversity does not by itself signify a desirable development.

2. For the sake of a development that ensures the sustainability of our culture, it is the artist’s calling to offer a spiritual direction based on humanitarian values and oriented towards social, cultural and economic realities.

3. Artists should pursue various creative ways in which to arrive at new perspectives in Indonesian painting.

4. Thereby, Indonesian art may achieve a positive identity.

5. Obstacles in the development of Indonesian art come from outdated concepts retained by the Establishment by art business agents as well as established artists. To save our art, it is now time for us to pay tribute to the established by giving them the title of “cultural veterans.”

14 artists, including FX Harsono, signed the document. The protesting artists sent a wreath on the day the five winners were announced. The wreath read: “Our condolences upon the death of the art of painting.” The five winners were Widayat, Irsam, Aming Prayitno, Abad Alibasyah and A.D. Pirous. This protest by these 14 artist–students can be seen in context of the broader student movement of 1974 that peaked with the Malari Incident. Like the larger student movement, the 14 artists who issued the Black December Manifesto were seeking to reform ASRI and its perceived conservatism. The Manifesto was welcomed in Jakarta and Bandung, with the exception of ASRI which suspended those students who signed it.

Just eight months after the Black December Incident, the Group of Five and other artists from Bandung, together with noted art critic and lecturer Sanento Yuliman, established the GSRB and organised an exhibition in August 1975 at the Jakarta Arts Centre (Taman Ismail Marzuki, TIM). Works presented in this exhibition were socially engaged, raising issues concerning injustices beyond the field of art to include socioeconomic and political issues aligned with the Black December Manifesto’s call for artists to develop socially engaged artistic practices. Works shown by the GSRB artists included a wide range of art forms (such as installation art) that questioned the definition of art circumscribed by the aesthetic conventions and practices of painting. The use of everyday materials in art expanded what were traditionally considered as art materials, such as oil and watercolour paints, to include found objects that embodied local cultural and political meanings.
The Artists’ Front of Thailand

The Artists’ Front of Thailand (AFT) was formed the year after the military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn, Praphat Charusatien and Narong Kittikachorn was toppled by a student movement in October 1973. The AFT opposed art that was produced by those in power and big businesses for capitalism, and called for art to be relevant to the common Thai worker and farmer, and bring culture to every Thai. Like the artist-students who initiated the Black December Incident that led to the formation of the GSRB, the AFT grew out of a larger student movement, in this case one that successfully demonstrated against and brought about a change of government in Thailand. The establishment of Thammasat University, a product of the 1932 revolution led by the People’s Party, resulted in an open admission policy that gave all Thais, regardless of their economic background, the opportunity to receive a university education. This was unlike Chualalongkorn University, which catered largely to the elite. Post-war Thammasat University became a hotbed for student activism, with students from different economic classes, including the working class, spearheading anti-imperialist protests against Japan as led by Pridi Banomyong from the Free Thai Movement. Unlike other universities in Thailand that shifted their emphasis to hard sciences as dictated by the military regime, Thammasat University focused on expanding its departments of humanities and social sciences, whence many of the student protestors came. Both student movements in Thailand and Indonesia believed that they were a moral force above the corruption of which their governments were guilty; this gave them a sense of being privileged. They sailed on the powerful potential of youth, shaped by the ideas of the New Left, transforming society by challenging the institutions that propped up authoritarian capitalist and developmental regimes.

On 14 October 1973, around half a million people, a large proportion of whom were students, gathered to protest. A violent massacre then broke out between the student and civilian demonstrators, and the military and police, which left many dead. While the protest resulted in the collapse of the military dictatorship, the ensuing act of suppression also ended the country’s attempt at a democratic transition in leadership. The military replaced elected interim prime minister Sanya Thammasak with a civilian dictatorship led by Thanin Kraivixien. Just after the massacre, the Dharma Group that artist Pratuang Emjaroen had founded in 1971,
organised its third exhibition. Dissenting artists who were horrified by the violent clashes that had just taken place gathered around Pratuang and joined the Dharma Group. The work Pratuang exhibited was a massive oil-on-canvas painting that stretched to almost six metres, titled *The Days of Disaster* (1973–1974). It employs potent symbols drawn from the very notion of “Thai-ness” as steeped in Buddhism. Buddhist iconography was reinvented by Pratuang to include a flag riddled with bullet holes, dismembered limbs with blood pouring out, and the face of Buddha covered in bullet holes, melting under the streaks of intense light penetrating it. Seen together, these powerful symbols make a political statement about this protest and its aftermath. Another painting, made a few years later, *Red Morning Glory and Rotten Gun* (1976, fig. 16.3) reinforces Pratuang’s revulsion towards violence and killing by hybridising realist and Surrealist visual languages. To decry the actions of the military and its betrayal of Buddhism, he uses a rotting gun and the back of a decapitated Buddha statue as symbols.

In October 1974, the AFT organised a large display of more than a thousand paintings and posters on Rajadamnern Avenue to commemorate the student victory which occurred exactly one year ago. This critical exhibition challenged the gallery exhibition format by displaying artworks in public spaces, involving artists and the public, especially students, as a form of social engagement, and rethinking art as a form of performative action—a gesture of anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian protest—against a military regime. Works by both artists and students were shown in this outdoor exhibition, demonstrating the close relationship between the AFT and student activists. Further evidence that the AFT was part of a broader student activism can be seen from the strong support that it drew from students in vocational institutes and the Po Chang School of Arts and Crafts. Kamchorn Soonponsiri was the chairman of the AFT. His thinking on art had been shaped by earlier Thai socialist discourse that had been recycled and become popular with both the AFT artists and student activists, the most influential of which was Chit Phumisak’s *Art for Life and Art for the People*, first published in 1957 and widely circulated.

The AFT was not alone in deploying critical exhibitions for political agitation. In October 1975, the Coalition of Thai Artists organised street exhibitions of “people’s art” along Rajadamnern Avenue as a symbolic gesture of democracy, displaying agitational banners against American military bases making air strikes in Vietnam. These critical exhibitions formed part of a larger ground-up initiative calling for “art for the people,” “art for life” and “songs for the people” (which effectively replaced foreign-language songs with Thai lyrics) and “theatre for the people.” Other forms of cultural resistance against the military regime by student activists “responded with conceptualism, surrealism, and other forms of experimentation—including the transformation of traditional forms that were rejuvenated as well.”

Art historian Clare Veal locates these art groups like the AFT and the Coalition of Thai Artists as “modernists” as they had “definite memberships; worked under the auspices of manifestos; and stylistically their works were within the parameters of Surrealist and Expressionist discourses, already largely accepted by the establishment art system. This meant that, despite their political radicalism, members of these artists’ groups were easily reabsorbed into official arts systems in the 1980s.” While some of the leading artists from the AFT and Dharma Group (for example, Pratuang) became established and recognised as artists later in Thailand, the moment of artistic resistance against the military regime in the 1970s deployed the critical exhibition as a new exhibitionary mode that abandoned the gallery for public spaces, using a range of artistic strategies that included social engagement and the conceptual.
Veal locates the manifesto as a product of modern art within the Western context pronounced by artist groups such as the Futurists and Surrealists. The art manifesto in Southeast Asia takes on a different meaning in the postcolonial context as artists deployed it in the 1970s as counter-hegemonic discourse, a form of cultural resistance against imperialism during the Cold War, most keenly felt in America’s military intervention in the Vietnam War. The critical exhibition became the vessel in which the art manifesto corralled its ideological force into action through its artworks and discourse. Art historians have, such as Patrick D. Flores in his study of exhibitions, focused on art manifestos by tracing its proliferation across the region as a “proxy for the work of art itself,” a “document of alterity” and a “dissemination of text as collective undertaking and the polemical fire it sparks.” Flores examines the manifesto as “a vehicle of agency,” driven by the “desire to re-think the world” in its rebellion against authority strategies of institutional critique. He is not alone in identifying the manifesto as a potent instrument wielded by artists in the 1970s. Sabapathy located moments of “contemporary turns” in Southeast Asian art in his exhibition Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art (2014) within the ambit of exhibitions and the manifesto as a form of exhibitionary discourse. Both Flores and Sabapathy cite manifestos, some of which were directly produced from exhibitions such as Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa (1974), and GSRB (1975), and yet other manifestos or treatises were issued and disseminated publicly by artist collectives and artists like the Kaisahan, AFT and Cheo Chai Hiang in the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore respectively. Both Flores and Sabapathy refer to the primacy of exhibitions as sites hospitable to the production of such exhibitionary discourses.

The Rise of the Left in the Philippines

July 1974 was a turning point in the Philippines. The United Progressive Artists and Architects (Nagkakaisang Progresibong Artists at Arkitekto, NPAA) and other mass organisations in the urban areas were dissolved as part of the NPAA’s broader strategy to deploy their forces to the countryside. Peasants were new recruits and became the lifeblood of the organisation, a move aligned with the New People’s Army’s strategy to create a rural power base. The NPAA had been formed in 1971 as part of a struggle in the Philippines that rose up against American imperialism, in tandem with student movements all over the globe, such as in France, America and Japan, that likewise arose in response to American imperialism. Its influence on students was exercised through educational institutions such as the University of the Philippines, University of Santo Tomas and St Mary’s College. The NPAA was a collective of artists and a cultural organisation that produced revolutionary propaganda in the form of portable murals, banners, illustrations, posters, comics, photography and paintings as anti-bourgeois art that depict the real social conditions of the proletariat. The transference of the NPAA artists from the urban centre to the countryside created a vacuum for another artist collective—the Kaisahan group—to establish itself in 1976 in metropolitan Manila and create artworks based on political and social themes. The Kaisahan comprised artists across different socioeconomic classes, some of whom included Renato Habulan, Edgar Fernandez, Al Manrique, Jose Tence Ruiz and Pablo Baen Santos. Besides exhibitions, they organised workshops, lectures and exhibitions on sociopolitical issues concerning the Philippines.

Like the AFT, the Kaisahan produced a manifesto to state its ideology on the purpose of art—that it should be people-oriented and shape a national identity. The Kaisahan’s manifesto differed from the AFT’s in its desire
to open the aesthetics of political art to allow more room for creativity, whereas the latter focused on using art as a tool to instil what they considered to be Thai art, and to resist the power of the “big people” (such as those with economic and political authority) in favour of the “small people” (the working classes). In this aspect, the Kaisahan and GSRB shared the desire to expand the thinking and making of art by being socially engaged without necessarily reducing art to mere propaganda. Mao’s 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* influenced both the Kaisahan and AFT to deploy art more democratically for the masses rather than for a small urban elite class, and, as mentioned, Mao’s ideas provided a powerful postcolonial attack on imperialism and authoritarian regimes in Thailand and the Philippines. In 1977, an exhibition titled *Notes on the Hayuma Exhibit* was held. It can be considered a critical exhibition for bringing together paintings from the Kaisahan artists and poetry from the Galian sa Arte at Tula (GAT) poets in an interdisciplinary collaboration to make art that was “relevant to the people and their lives.” This exhibition conceived of art as a vehicle for social change, an alternative to the art from the academies and salons, and intimated that art went beyond the gallery space to public spaces the way the AFT went into schools, streets and plazas. The GSRB, AFT and Kaisahan were aligned in their emphasis on the “concrete and the everywhere,” an aesthetic based on the real conditions of the urban poor, for instance the pollution, struggles and desires of the common people as seen in Pablo Baens Santos’ *Bagong Kristo* (New Christ) (fig. 16.4). Their common aspirations for “the concrete” and “the real” were drawn from a confluence of ideas around socialism, informed by Mao’s Yan’an Forum, local socialist intellectuals, the energy of student movements, anti-imperialism against the Vietnam War, as well as the corruption and authoritarianism of developmental regimes.

### The Mystical Meets Nature: Conceptual Shifts in Malaysia

Malaysia in the early 1970s experienced a mixture of three waves: nationalism, the rise of the Left and Islamisation. Meredith Weiss, a scholar on Southeast Asian political science, situates the rise of post-war Malayan nationalism in the formation of the University of Malaya (UM) in Singapore on 8 October 1949. The UM was eventually split into two autonomous campuses, the University of Singapore and the University of Malaya in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur respectively. The UM proved to be an im-
important institution for fostering a Malayan national consciousness and produced left-leaning journals like *Fajar*, published by the University Socialist Club. The leftist wave in the early 1970s was led by student activism propelled by international concerns engendered by the Vietnam War and conflicts in the Middle East, such as the 1973 Arab–Israeli War. The student movement centred in universities was joined by other leftist forces, such as students and trade unions, which had convergent political interests. These left-leaning trade unions protested against imperialism, unfair state economic policies biased towards development and social injustice. The Malay Muslim Student’s Society and the UM Student Union actively organised protests for social justice and pro-poor policies, which the government tried to rein in by passing the Schools Societies Regulations in 1960 to little effect. Race riots in 1969 led to the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1971, meant to reduce poverty, curtail the domination of certain occupations by specific races and improve Malays’ access to higher education through quotas. The religious wave or Dakwah activism first began in 1965, led by the Pertubuhan Al Rahmaniah at the UM, which identified Islam as a religion that could deal with social issues such as corruption and poverty. By the 1970s, Dakwah activism quickly became synonymous with Islamisation of the state due to its broad spectrum of religious activities, from personal religious study groups to moderately violent protests against perceived decadent Western cultural influences like pop culture.

1974 also saw the formation of the Children of Nature (Anak Alam, AA) and heralded *Towards a Mystical Reality*, a critical exhibition organised by Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa. Several names were initially suggested for the group, including Angatan Pelukis Contemporary (Assembly of Contemporary Painters), Avant Garde Group and Angkatan Kreatif (Creative Assembly). However, Anak Alam, a name proposed by artist and poet Latiff Mohidin, was subsequently chosen. “Anak Alam is a process, therefore it is full of possibility” was Ismail Abdullah’s assessment of this loose collective of artists, painters and theatre practitioners in his essay in *Dewan Budaya*, a magazine that featured critical writings on contemporary art. 

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and culture, published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). Formed on 1 May, the AA occupied a mansion named Taman Budaya located at 905 Periaran Tun Ismail in Kuala Lumpur. It focused on interdisciplinary practices and the process of art-making, evident in its first exhibition in 1974, *Nature Day*, a two-day-and-night event with “spontaneous and creative activities by and for the whole family; events day and night, including enviro-sculpture, drama, pantomime, play reading, and mini-*kata*; poetry readings, bamboo gamelan, and much more.” The AA became a place for artists such as Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Osman, Zulkifli Dahalan, Mustpha Ibrahim, Siti Zainon Ismail, Tajuddin Ismail, Ali Rahamad and others to exchange ideas, exhibit and make art across disciplines. Street and experimental theatre, led by Omar Abdullah, Muhammad Abdullah and Khalid Salleh, among others, became an important part of the AA and were part of the student activist movement spearheaded by the UM’s Experimental Theatre and other campuses protesting against American imperialism, government corruption and circumstances that made it difficult for university graduates to secure reasonably paid jobs.

Teater Kecil was the brainchild of Omar and Muhammad who produced impromptu theatre in street spaces, bringing plays from the stage to the street and thus directly to the public, much akin to the broader leftist wave in Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The AA expressly shunned state bureaucracy, but ironically were supported by influential cultural figures and patrons like Usman Awang, a poet who also worked as the senior research fellow at the DPB, and Ismail Zain who served as Director of the Balai Seni Lukis Negara, now known as the National Visual Arts Gallery, Malaysia, and Director-General of Culture at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

Like the other artist collectives across the region who produced critical exhibitions, the AA was firmly rooted in a student movement that was locked in a struggle to produce socially engaged art for the common people, address the issues of corruption and resist the forces of imperialism. “The Anak Alam of that era was full of the words of ‘protest’” was how Raja Zahabuddin described them. The manifesto was also a potent vehicle for action and change deployed by the AA in their declaration to produce art that is not based on ethnicity:

- with no divisions of ancestry,
- of skin colour,
- of beliefs,
- of age,
- of gender and length of hair
- in this generation of nature’s children.

This desire for art to be ethnically inclusive and constrained only by the artist’s ability to imagine was a response to the 1969 race riots and the 1971 First National Cultural Congress held to construct a Malaysian national culture and identity through art based on elements drawn from relevant cultures and Islam.

*Towards a Mystical Reality* was organised by Esa and Piyadasa who both taught fine art at the Mara Institute of Technology (now known as Universiti Teknologi Mara) in Kuala Lumpur. The exhibition shared the anti-imperialist tenor of the other critical exhibitions organised by artist collectives in Southeast Asia, and produced a manifesto calling for Asian artists to “emphasise the ‘spiritual essence’ rather than the outward form” as an alternative way to think about and make art, based on a different concept of reality that is not scientific but meditative and experiential, to break away from the hegemony of Western art and its art history. Although both Piyadasa and Esa were lecturers and not students, they were nonetheless part of the broader student movement and political environment that shifted towards art-making as a socially engaged and intellectually rigorous activity, a powerful political and cultural actor that contributed to the process of decolonisation.
Conclusion

This essay has traced the emergence of the critical exhibition within the changing and overlapping contexts of student movements, the rise of the New Left, decolonisation, emergent nationalisms, anti-imperialism, as well as cultural resistance against authoritarian and developmental regimes from the 1950s to the 1970s in Southeast Asia. The historical development of the salon, national, regional and internationalist-type exhibitions as earlier forms of modernist exhibitions that dominated the art worlds of the various countries in Southeast Asia continue to exist to this day, even if they have been eclipsed by the critical exhibition.

In particular, the emergence of the internationalist exhibition format in the 1950s and 1960s was an important precursor to the critical exhibition in the 1970s. The internationalist exhibition imagined itself as part of two main trajectories in the form of social realism and abstraction that encouraged deepening knowledge about art theory and art history, even as these knowledges were Western-centric. Continuities between the internationalist and critical exhibitions could be seen in the production of art manifestos. The difference between these two modes of exhibitions was in how critical exhibitions deployed art manifestos not as a way to connect with broader art movements in the West but to engage with their existing social, cultural and political contexts. The postcolonial condition, driven by student movements across the region against imperialism and most concretely manifested in the Vietnam War, was supported by most authoritarian developmental regimes. Critical exhibitions embodied a powerful force that repudiated the slavish deference to Western ways of thinking about and making art, and explored new ways and approaches to conceptualise art that were different from the West, most boldly declared as its objective by the critical exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality*. Other critical exhibitions rode on the tide of student movements as many of these artists who produced critical exhibitions were artist–students themselves, or lecturers in tertiary-education institutions. The influence of socialism and the New Left in student movements proved to be a popular alternative to the Western model of capitalism, and the pursuit of economic development for its own sake without addressing the issue of poverty, resulting in the call for critical exhibitions that were socially engaged. This reframed exhibitions so that they were not only a way of displaying art but also vehicles of resistance and change for the common people. However, there was an internal contradiction. These student movements that resisted Western capitalism and its modes of art-making continued to refer to “Western” ideas of socialism and the New Left. “Art for art’s sake” was now reconfigured as “art for life” or “art for the people.” The emergence of critical exhibitions marked a shift away from earlier exhibitionary modes that were produced from colonial contexts, to the reality of actual social, political and cultural conditions of countries in Southeast Asia in a period of decolonisation and nationalist movements.
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**Total Number of Talks**
Singapore: 23
Malaya (Kuala Lumpur and Penang): 6
16.1  Talks Given by Visiting Artists from China Held in Singapore, Penang and Kuala Lumpur (1938–1941)

16.2  FX Harsono

*Bunga Plastik*

1975

Mixed media

Dimensions variable
16.3  Pratuang Emjaroen
Red Morning Glory and Rotten Gun
1976
Oil on canvas
133 x 174 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

16.4  Pablo Baens Santos
Bagong Kristo (New Christ)
1980
Oil on canvas
122.4 x 86.6 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore