In his 2009 essay for the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) exhibition catalogue *Suddenly Turning Visible: The Collection at the Center*, art historian and curator Patrick D. Flores begins his narrative with the pivotal role played by artist and curator Raymundo Albano (1947–1985) in the productive artistic and collection developments of the CCP.

Albano was the director of museums and non-theatre operations there from 1971 to 1985. My purpose here, however, is not to examine Albano’s achievements; rather, it is to cast a small light on a neglected aspect of discourse and semiotic construction—that of the deployment of the “artist-as-photograph” (and in most cases it is also “artist-in-photograph”)—enlisted into various discursive forms but which often goes unremarked or is complicit with the institutional strictures that try to repress it (as was said of the CCP).

In the margins of Flores’ essay as laid out in the catalogue *Suddenly Turning Visible*, is a half-body portrait shot of the bespectacled Albano (fig. 22.1), his slight figure lying on the floor with his right arm outstretched towards the photographer and his left hand gripping a small Minolta SLR camera that is balanced below his chin and resting on his chest. In a majority of instances, the artist is presented as a headshot, or more often is the case, seen posing with his or her artworks, thereby cementing the intimacy between the artist’s personage with his or her art. Seldom do we ask why some things look the way they do; why do we preface articles on artworks with images of the artist? Is what or how the artist looks like important? My attention is drawn immediately to this selection and placement of a photographic illustration in the catalogue, and to the subtle reflexivity or the “strategically ludic mode” (words used by Flores to describe Albano’s own curatorial disposition) demonstrated on the page with regard to the relationship between the image and the text that lies next to it and follows on from it:
The CCP thought of the period from 1971 to 1975 as the “exposure phase” in which “advanced art—experimental in nature—were deployed in the galleries. The use of sand, junk iron, non-art materials such as raw lumber, rocks … were common materials for the artists’ development strategies. People were shocked, scared, delighted, pleased and satisfied even though their preconceived notions of art did not agree with what they encountered.” This “curatorial stance” was provocative: it may have insinuated a level of democratic habit within a possible Kantian sensus communis, an engagement with strangeness and an encounter with disbelief, into an institution that was complicit in repressing the body politic in no uncertain terms. In all this, Albano was convinced that the atmosphere at the CCP “made one relatively aware of an environment suddenly turning visible.” The Center, hence, was conceiving a world and its spellbound subjects, inventing an indispensable mythology of freedom and prefiguring the unknown in a regime that had claimed unerring destiny: tadhana, a fate written in the stars.2 (emphasis mine)

In this passage by the author, who took pains to vividly evoke the intellectual gambit of Albano, Flores also unexpectedly raised two phrases to the reader’s consciousness, “exposure phase” and “suddenly turning visible.” These are phrases related to the practice of photography and darkroom techniques, both of which worked with and mirrored Albano’s portrait image so as to surface and confirm the message—the importance of exposing or the exposition, the visual and the visible, all concerted tenets and objectives of the CCP in the 1970s. Flores was to again use this image of Albano in his essay “Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator” (2012) and in his presentation for the 2016 symposium How Institutions Think at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. And as an artist deeply committed to play and experimentation with the medium of photography, it is striking that Albano himself chose to be photographed with his camera, and on another occasion with a camera tripod (without the camera). In comparison, Roberto Chabet, the founding museum curator-director at the CCP, was represented in Flores’ catalogue essay with a nondescript headshot, although a more well-known image composition of Chabet would show him in a classroom setting, the preferred mode of reference, as Chabet was a long-serving professor of art studies at the University of the Philippines.

And, indeed, it is about exposing and turning visible some of the conditions and conventions that structure the visual presentation and construction of the artist. In ways these photographs function as if they were the literal non-coded message, or denoted image, whereby the signifier and signified are the same; what you see is what you see. Yet, we should call the bluff of these merely “denotative” images, because as the French semiotician and philosopher Roland Barthes reminds us, the absence of a code only reinforces the myth of photographic “naturalness” (although Barthes rejects the possibility of the purely denoted image) and it only naturalises, supports and contextualises the symbolic, connoted messages held within the overall image structure by making them look innocent. The hyperdistribution of images in the Information Age also means that the appraisal of imaging becomes more challenging as more images circulate but are going away unremarked, and the balance of power between maker, user and receiver is shifting constantly. As Barthes writes, with regard to the advertising photograph as denoted image:

The denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense, especially in advertising. Although
the Panzani poster is full of “symbols,” there nonetheless remains in the photograph, insofar as the literal message is sufficient, a kind of natural being-there of objects: nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented. A pseudo truth is surreptitiously substituted for the simple validity of openly semantic systems; the absence of code disintellectualizes the message because it seems to be found in nature the signs of culture. This is without doubt an important historical paradox: the more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning. (emphasis mine)

In this small excursus of the Philippines, I want to put forward that images of artists, used in their myriad ways, are not merely decorative, illustrative, secondary material. They all come together to concoct the visual field in which we receive the artists and their work. Analyses at present must therefore be diverse, fluid and inventive, taking into account the varying contexts and usages, and critical orthodoxies frequently renewed and reappraised.

If the camera was the abiding device in the photographic images taken of Albano, the camera also comes front and centre in the surreally funny but conceptually serious paintings of Malaysian artist Kok Yew Puah (also known as George Puah, 1947–1999). Although not photographs, Puah foregrounds the significant use and appreciation of the photographic apparatus in artistic practice and in the conveyance of the artistic self as image. In an attempt to push the boundaries of photography, and to distinguish his practice from journalistic or documentary photography, Filipino conceptual artist Johnny Manahan made the work Self-Portrait with Lens Cap On (1972), which had, however, proceeded to deny the viewer the visual index of the referent and instead presented an endgame scenario. The work comprised an entire film roll of 36 photographic prints of blackness (or blankness) which Manahan later developed after he had taken self-portraits by aiming the camera at himself with the lens cap on. See Clarissa Chikiamco, “Making ‘Marks’ and Leaving ‘Evidences’: The Art of Johnny Manahan 1971–82,” in A Fact Has No Appearance: Art Beyond the Object, exh. cat., eds. Clarissa Chikiamco, Russell Storer & Adele Tan (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 19–20.

Puah’s reference to photography can be situated...

See Puah’s 1995 Camera View of Two Tourists in a Malaysian Town, http://www.theedgegalerie.com/hidden-meanings/ (accessed 25 July 2016). Another painting that utilises the same figural composition is In Front of an Indian Temple (1997) except that in this case the backdrop is that of an Indian temple in Malaysia. Malaysian curator Beverly Yong has written: “In the Camera View paintings exhibited at his last solo in 1997, Kok Yew Puah discovered a brilliant conceptual and formal framing device—the camera viewfinder. He chose favourite familiar places—an Indian temple near his house, the Yacht Club in Klang and nearby Pulau Ketam, for example, and made these the backdrop of various portraits of himself, friends and family. He made these special places iconic, representative of our cultural heritage or our modern aspirations. The scenes are painted in vivid colourful detail, layer upon layer built up lovingly, only to appear flattened ultimately. The figures likewise are brought out in intense detail—the psychological probity of Kok Yew Puah’s portraits undercut the flatness of his painting and the posturing of his subjects. The emotional texture and first impulses of his work can be seen clearly in his drawings and watercolours. See "A Malaysian Version," in Kok Yew Puah: A Tribute, exh. cat. (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2004), 5–6.


Ibid.

his camera towards us, the viewer (although in a preparatory watercolour study of the work, the figure on the right is photographing the figure on the left, who is taking a puff of his cigarette, rather than holding the camera looking out for the next shot). The most intriguing aspect of this 1995 painting is, however, the jumble of street and traffic signage in different languages in the background, a seeming appeal to the viewer to treat the picture (whether painting or photograph) as a complex semiotic and visual composition rather than merely attempt at reading it biographically or geographically. The New Straits Times arts journalist Ooi Kok Chuen, in a presciently titled article “Seeing Beyond His Canvas,” stated that “his portrait works relied heavily on photography. Photography re-affirmed a reality, showing him at a certain place at a certain time [...]. The camera viewfinder device helped him create a sense of detachment between artist/viewer-voyeur and the subject depicted.”

Ooi denied that it was anything to do with “artistic ego when Kok Yew insinuated himself into one of his paintings” but posited that the focus was on the idle boats in the background which indicated “an overwhelming urge to reclaim a fast disappearing past of the Klang that he grew up in.” Yet the artistic ego or artistic subjectivity is precisely something which is aligned with the discourse of photography, not simply because the camera is used to take the myriad shots of the artist-figure, but also that photography is deeply mired in the debates and stakes surrounding subjective positions created by a supposed objective recording device (the denoted image that Barthes speaks about). Malaysian writer Alexandra Tan perhaps comes closest to articulating the investment Puah has as an artist with the act of seeing and visioning. For Tan, Puah is fascinated with the seemingly superficial world of the tourist, a class of individuals who visit a range of places and in the process encounter the foreign and absorb new cultural signifiers along the way, all within this important act of “looking and gazing” as
exemplified by the tourist snapshot. Yet this is again a two-way relationship for Puah—the viewfinder motif reminds us that we, viewers of the painting, are also looking out from the vantage point of the camera lens, collapsing two different moments of voyeurism into a chiastic layer, that which is still an active process, a visual process ironically immortalised as a painting but not yet as celluloid, or until a photographic image is taken of the painting itself. Further, Tan also teases out the relationship between photography and painting, the interdependence these two modes have in the regimes of representation and, more crucially, self-representation of the artist:

What does it mean to render the act of photography in the medium of paint? Any image is supposed to be a durable, permanent thing. Modern photography allows us to capture fleeting moments in a lasting way. Puah immortalises the activity of the scene, as does the painted photographer. The character holding the camera to his face is hypothesised to be Puah himself. If so, he is then being mirrored by Puah the painter. The dialectic of the relationship between artist, painting and viewer is enhanced by Puah looking at himself looking at us looking at him.  

The conscious scrutiny of the artistic self has continued for Puah beyond the remit of the camera viewfinder and can be gleaned in other paintings such as Colour Guide for Self-Portrait in Four Different Postures (1993) and Colour Guide for Self-Portrait in Three Different Postures (1994), both canvases emblazoned with a horizontal colour bar at the top, as if in anticipation of its turning into a printed published image. But the more peculiar issue that Puah's paintings have raised for me is the analytical invisibility of the artist's pose in art critical discourse in the Southeast Asian region, particularly of those in the panoply of images taken to illustrate exhibition catalogues, magazines or newspaper reports. Looking at Puah's paintings has prompted me to turn my gaze in the direction of Redza Piyadasa (1939–2007), an older peer and friend of Puah and one of Malaysia’s most prominent artists of the second half of the 20th century. Piyadasa himself was a champion of Puah’s work (“a significant Malaysian artist whom I genuinely admired and respected”), and wrote the foreword for Puah’s posthumous exhibition in 2004.  

As T.K. Sabapathy writes: “In Bentuk Malaysia Tulen, Piyadasa presents an image of himself as a site on which authenticity and purity (attributes affiliated with the word tulen) can be negotiated and tested. He simulates a capacity to read and write jawi, hence the inclusion of the script in the upper zone of the composition, written in the formal hieratic style. Will he qualify? Is he a true authentic Malaysian? Can he claim to speak on these matters? Whereas in Self-
Muslim-Singhalese Malaysian. Yet it cannot be denied that he has been prolifically documented in numerous profile shots and many of them with him positioned erect (the photo of him with his painting Entry Points is particularly well circulated) and arms crossed or holding a cigarette in his hand, next to his own work and fully aware of the photograph that he is making with art (like the photograph of him looking through an empty picture frame towards the camera, fig. 22.3). The ineluctable power and presence of Piyadasa in such photographs (although the photographers are usually unnamed) recall American feminist art historian Amelia Jones’ critical dissection of what she calls the “Pollockian performative,” through Hans Namuth’s black-and-white photographs of Jackson Pollock actively working his drip-and-flick painting technique on his large canvases lining the floor of his studio.

Jones is instructive in this regard because she had articulated how the mobilisation of Namuth’s photographs of the artist functioned in the reception and construction of the artist as a subject, and his relationship to his work and his audiences. This was helped by the theatrical character of Namuth’s images (and the physicality of Pollock’s actions) which overwhelmed the article layout, and instead of “appearing as incidental illustrations of the text,” stood out against other conventional imagery of artists sitting with their easels and trade tools. The photographic record of the artist is therefore contingent rather than deterministic, thereby de-privileging original artistic intentionality and opening itself up to the expressed receptivity of its viewers. The formidable appeal of the Namuth photographs held sway in the mythic fabrication of Pollock, such as American critic Harold Rosenberg’s construction of Pollock as a “labouring existentialist hero,” and art historian Barbara Rose’s acknowledgement that “[i]n retrospect, I realize Rosenberg was not talking about painting at all; he was describing Namuth’s photographs of Pollock.” Stories about the profound effects of Namuth’s photos have also themselves perpetuated the art historical narrative that Pollock “became internationally known through photographs published in art and popular magazines by the mid-1950s.”

But where Jones’ exegesis on the “Pollockian Performative” concentrated on the outstanding and therefore exceptional shots of Pollock by Namuth, the photographs that I would like to pay attention to are the conventional and therefore discursively neglected or parried shots of artists posing with their artworks. As a class of image-type, these photographs nonetheless achieve a great degree of

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14 Amelia Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53.

15 Ibid., 55.

16 Ibid.
interpretative currency through their circulation, despite the methodological armoury of the establishment. For those of us interested in the practice of Piyadasa, we cannot ignore occasions where he has depicted himself or gave chance for himself to be depicted as “complex, difficult, arrogant;” the photographs that only demand a cursory glance in newspapers, magazines and books, fashion a distinct atmosphere in which the artist is read, and something which, I argue, can be imbricated with the practice of the artist and at times provide countervailing assessments towards prevailing narratives of the artist and the artworks.  

The whole episode became a non-incident, but it presents an interesting study in contrast between Southeast Asia’s two foremost conceptual artists and educators. I clearly remember the disappointment in the Malaysian’s face as he left the wolf’s lair. And it seemed he regarded the event as a potentially significant milestone in Southeast Asian art history while Chabet dismissed the whole affair and forgot about it. If we were to read and deconstruct the “minimalist” encounter between the two, it would speak volumes, and like a Zen parable, would be as enlightening for not having been concluded, the “what might have been” not as interesting or as resonant as what never actually took place.  

Although obviously siding with Chabet, what Achacoso had described was an exquisite collision between two viewpoints: one mined or mourned a lost potential, and the other flatly denying the situation any significance. This misreading or over-reading of what had happened produced a productive tension, a quality that is sought by anyone embarking on the hermeneutics of art. Achacoso’s words also restored to view the necessity of looking into
missed encounters, the parts which were hastily disregarded and deemed to not have taken place (or taken its place), could yet be interesting or resonant.

This is the resonance I am giving to the images of Piyadasa that appear silently in printed materials, their selection and placement seemingly never to have bothered viewers to take a second look. For Barthes, these are the photographs which he deems good enough only as studium but not as punctum, whereby the levels of interpretation and investment would reach those of the cultural, linguistic and political (the “field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste”) but not of the emotional or psychical (“that accident which pricks me [but also bruises me, is poignant to me]”). But what if the named and coded photographs under the regime of the studium are made to be considered differently, to be looked upon as the punctum of the institutional world of artwork images, the “sting, speck, cut, little hole” that is the work of these photographs when reading them (together with the headlines and captions on the page) against the stolid images of pure art? Take for instance the different uses of Piyadasa’s work Two Malay Women in the New Straits Times articles. The 1986 article (fig. 22.4) shows Piyadasa as the gallerist proudly showing off the work in the background and shoring up the defiant headline “There’s Still Business in Malaysian Art Business” and the caption “reputation of a gallery counts a lot.” In the other article in the following year, Two Malay Women is an image apart, with a headshot of Piyadasa overlapping onto it, but signalling a vastly different message and marking the end of his Saujana Fine Art Gallery: “To Seek New Artistic Directions.” The repeat use of the same artwork is intriguing, and seems to suggest the breakdown of optimism, yet it also points to Piyadasa’s method of reusing a certain found image and making numerous variations in treatment of the print (also by way of painting or collaging) for his Malaysian Series, which defined the last phase of his artistic career.

Images from the 1988 article “Piyadasa—The Romantic Artist” by Nora Marzuki (fig. 22.5)—which has an affected title that is incompatible with the cerebral outlook he had fashioned for himself—are more revealing of the artist’s own anxieties and self-regard. This time a pose with yet another work from his Malaysian Series (a composite of the Tun Razak Family which the newspaper mistook for two separate works) and a candid half-body shot of the artist seated in a pseudo-pensive pose and having a smoke, with the words “I’m a painter and a unique one too” running under it. The words sound haughty yet they are also ironic—Piyadasa was not considered a skilful painter and his later forays into mechanical reproduction for the Malaysian Series meant that he was not particularly invested in the unique and original. The intimation of Piyadasa as a family man by Marzuki is taken up again by J. Anu’s 1996 article for The Sunday Star, where Piyadasa’s posed photo with his young children from his second marriage is included in the spread that however says very little of his family life, but works instead to secure Anu’s impression that Piyadasa was “anxious to put you at ease,” his reputation for being blunt, impatient and arrogant notwithstanding. The invocation of the family man in Piyadasa is an odd gesture, clumsily asserted by Marzuki who read the presence of heritage family photos in his works as indicative of him interested in being a family man. By 2001, with his solo retrospective running at the Balai Seni Lukis Negara (presently known as the National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia), the persona of the family man receded and a different picture of Piyadasa emerged, this time of photos of the artist not by himself but with his peers, his artistic and the Malaysian VIP community. The images work with the new rubric, describing an intellectual giant (“Challenging the Concept of Art,” fig. 22.6) and therefore ripe for a
reassessment and critical plaudits (“Remaking Piyadasa,” fig. 22.7).

Photographs of Piyadasa captured by undergraduate student Peter T. Brown (who majored in photography) in the mid-1970s at the University of Hawaii at Manoa where Piyadasa earned his Master of Fine Arts, however, surfaced a view of the artist as already cognisant of the power of the posed photograph. Similar to Albano before, Piyadasa is pictured in a series of photographs carrying a camera. Yet where Albano was just composing himself as a picture, Piyadasa not only does this but also pursued with his camera the actions of Laura Ruby, a Hawaiian artist and University of Hawaii art department faculty member who made a mock-conceptual work in protest against the conceptual “con-job” art that he was promulgating. Like a double entendre, Piyadasa turns around in one shot and looks smugly into Brown’s lens (fig. 22.8), and then in another, proceeds to track the activity of Ruby with his camera. By posing with Ruby’s work and standing proudly erect and chest puffed, Piyadasa enacts a visual sleight of hand—he made it look as if it were his own artwork (fig. 22.9). We should not be too surprised then that Piyadasa was further captured in a proclamatory gesture, arms outstretched with papers with a flower garland around his neck (instead of a camera), and standing next to a painting emblazoned with the stencilled words “ART IS A LIE.” It was a painting he had acquired from his undergraduate friend Malcolm Wong at the University of Hawaii, who had completed it as a class assignment on Willem de Kooning. Piyadasa proceeded to appropriate Wong’s painting through the reflexive addition of words that remarked upon its own condition and existence.

With these foregoing examples, the Penang collector, gallerist and aspiring art historian Dato’ Dr Tan Chee Khuan was perhaps paradoxically prescient and astute in his assessment of Piyadasa, despite disparaging him as an inveterate “pastiche” artist who being “unduly influenced by another,” makes work lacking individuality and originality—“In conceptual art, the concept is paramount since there is very little aesthetic. Borrowing the concept and adding in local flavour does not exclude it as pastiche.” Tan had also proceeded to illustrate this by way of his own “artwork,” a crude poster titled Pastiche Stinks (fig. 22.10), parodying Piyadasa’s Portrait of the Artist as a Model where the painting is reproduced in miniature on the right and captioned underneath with the words “historical transgression 1977 to 1994.” This is, however, undermined by a caricature of Alfred E. Neuman, the fictitious mascot of Mad magazine, with his fingers stuck up his nostrils and broadcasting his riposte: “The reader may ask, ‘What is a pastiche?’ or ‘Whose pastiches are we talking about?’” Whilst careful not to say that art does not proceed from influence by predecessors, Tan enlisted art critics such as Robert Hughes and Suzi Gablik to his cause to decipher the conditions of pastiche, but in the very same gesture, he brings to the fore considerations of fraudulence, charlatanry, mimicry, imitation, dissimulation, camouflage and counterfeiting, aspects of which are precisely what occurs for Barthes, who wants a “history of looking,” in the act of posing for a photograph.

In Camera Lucida, Barthes examines and philosophises on the centrality of forced and conscious duplicity (“a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture”) of someone posing for the “whole photographic ritual” or “social game” (and even when one is observed without knowing it, one can often know the feeling of being observed by the lens and once knowing, it changes everything, leading to a transformation of the self in advance into an image) and how the posed photograph gets co-opted in the construction of self and identity:

I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in
no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) “self”; but it is the contrary that must be said: “myself” never coincides with my image.\(^25\)

Although there is the professed non-coincidence of the self to the image, there is however an admission that despite the mortification of the body by the photograph, “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” and “represents the very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.”\(^26\) In other words, when constituting oneself in the process of posing, the posed photograph enables the involuntary presentation of a dispersed self, where the subject turning into object permits the inhabitation of contradictory dimensions but turns away from the possibility of ever positing an objective self in a photograph. Paul Jay has argued that:

Barthes’s treatment of posing is really about the impossibility of not posing. It questions the very concept of authenticity and turns it into a kind of simulacrum in which the subject cannot stop “imitating” himself. […] But worse than the specter of inauthenticity is the specter of objectification, the fear that the always-inauthentic image does in fact constitute the objectified self. The problem Barthes’s remarks on posing [reveal] is that the so-called profound or essential self can never be represented as such. Indeed the very nature of this essential self becomes paradoxical: its subjectivity is linked to a notion of authenticity, yet any image of that self is a sign of its objectification, and hence, its inauthenticity. The authentic self, in Barthes’s terms, is finally an impossibility, for it would be a self freed from the process of becoming an object.\(^27\)

In short, there is no running away from the objectification of the self, a self which at the same time requires and acquires its identity and substance from images that objectify or other it. In common parlance, the maxim “fake it till you make (or become) it” applies, as there is no way, to quote W.B. Yeats, to “know the dancer from the dance.”

To look at and analyse Piyadasa through his poses in photographs is especially apposite, given his extensive recuperation and use of found heritage photographic material that are largely posed studio shots in his by now

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24 This 1994 poster’s background was subsequently retouched in 2013 and put up for sale by Tan for MYR 2000.
26 Ibid., 12, 14.
Piyadasa’s first forays with photographs in his art-making were with his two versions of Tribute to Usman Awang (1980). Piyadasa was commissioned by the editor of Dewan Sastra to produce an artwork for the journal’s cover to honour the 50th birthday of Usman Awang. Piyadasa was given photographs of Usman which he subsequently replicated as a bromide halftone image of the poet via an electronic copying machine, with the help of photographer Ismail Hashim. The hand-coloured design was based on the idea of a postage stamp, the stencilled letters a carry-over from his conceptual art phase, and the bromide image pasted on rather than silkscreened like his later Malaysian Series images.


Paras-Perez took Piyadasa at his own words: “The more I studied the old photographs, the more I became aware of the documentary power of the photographic medium, namely its ability to freeze and record so vividly aspects of social reality. These were very real people that I was confronting in the photographic images, and I had to consciously retain and project their individual personalities and also the cultural essence and mood of their times. In transferring the images to the silk-screens, I was of course, projecting them twice removed from their original “reality” but their pertinence as persons was not being diminished in any way, in the process.” Quoted in “A Dialogue: T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa,” in Piyadasa: The Malaysian Series (Kuala Lumpur: RA Fine Arts and Asia Contemporary, 2007), 32.


This was Nirmala’s exhibition titled Keadaan Manusia (The Condition of Being). It was held at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur for eight days in January 1981.

It is interesting to note that unlike the photographs of Piyadasa published in the New Straits Times, Nirmala’s feature (as does the female batik artist, Fatimah Chik’s, the first wife of Piyadasa) credits the photographer clearly. See also Alina Ranee, “Fatimah Making Waves Again,” New Straits Times, 1 May 1985, 8.

As such, one should pause to wonder: Could it not be possible too, to entertain ideas about the incorporation of marginal photos into the art historical narration of Malaysian artists?

And although Paras-Perez describes Piyadasa’s use of collage and serigraphy (“photographing a photograph—a process that places the image at a point twice removed from reality”) as non-threatening to “the subject’s unique qualities and the specific referents,” otherwise known as “Malaysian aura,” I would suggest that Piyadasa’s method instead points to a potential change, or even violence, done not to the superficial image codes themselves but to the reception of the actual referent—and for my purpose here Piyadasa is the referent. Opening art historical writing up to embrace this image class of artist poses and noticing their specific deployment on the page provides new interpretative modes that can be held in contention with each other. To this end, T.K. Sabapathy provides a far more accurate reading of the impact and effect of
photography in Piyadasa’s work and on the artist himself:

The portrait photograph is not a neutral value-free entity; on the contrary, the portrait photograph is a fabrication and consolidation of who one is by means of complex codes that are transacted and shared by the subject, the photographer and the community.\(^{31}\)

Sabapathy calls Piyadasa’s method “agglomerative,” where fragments from diverse sources are arranged, shaped and repeated in a pictorial scheme. Yet it is also as a collective arrangement that Sabapathy realises such a schema would already harbour “a hint of a divergence,” with coded images abutting each other, “praising these interests apart.” The inclusion of the posed photos of the artists into the art historical ambit would not be a benign enterprise, for the recursive appearance of artworks, bodily postures and accompanying rhetorical tropes already ensure that dissonances will arise from the non-contiguity between them. If Piyadasa was expecting his use of found old photos of various ethnic families as a means to interrogate the identity politics of the country, he would not be too alarmed by the same manner in which photos of him could be taken as critical resources to appraise his work, attitudes and politics.

An important counterpoint to Piyadasa to raise here (as gender is also a missing operative term when writing about Piyadasa) would be Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam (b. 1941), a pioneering Malaysian female artist of socially conscious or committed art, and a peer and close friend of Piyadasa, who himself had also authored the catalogue essay of her solo exhibition in 1981.\(^{32}\) Nirmala, who has an intense artistic engagement with the plethora of socio-political photographic imagery gleaned from topical news media, often feature in her works photo-silkscreened newspaper images collaged onto canvas which are then painted with bold expressive brushwork or traditional symbolic motifs. Her themes have regularly focused on issues of war, violence, sexual abuse, poverty and environmental degradation in local and international settings from the 1970s right up to the 2000s, frequently foregrounding or addressing women and children as the primary victims. Female subjects and roles have featured significantly too in Piyadasa’s Malaysian Series, particularly the two Malay women, the Malay and Nyonya brides and the Indian mother. However, it is a study in contrast when we compare the photographic “fortunes” of Nirmala and Piyadasa—Nirmala has rarely been the subject of newspaper or journal features, and hence far fewer photographs of Nirmala posing with her work are out in public circulation. One newspaper article that presented such a photograph did so with an image of her placing one hand gingerly on the support on which her works were resting, and not with her arms crossed in a defensive posture. Such tentativeness of pose and posture may strike one as not immediately fitting for an artist who is seen as vociferously opposing the inequities of society (fig. 22.11).\(^{33}\)

In 1973, Nirmala made a stunning entrance at the “Man and his World” competition organised by the Balai Seni Lukis Negara with her work Statement 1 (she and Sulaiman Esa were the two major award winners). The form it took—documentary photographs in a grid layout flanked by two boards pasted with newspaper clippings and her extended artist statement on the growing urban pollution of Damansara in Kuala Lumpur, which was installed together with the waste she collected from the area—was so unusual at the time that in the place of medium, the work was just described as a “concept.” Yet despite her photography-based art being the voice of justice for the oppressed and dispossessed, Nirmala was also well aware of the limits of photography. In another work Statement II, she explained: “The camera recorded only a small fraction of what was
seen and experienced by actually being in these areas. No single medium can actually communicate a whole experience.” And despite the innovative treatment of photo imagery by Nirmala, much less attention was paid to her craft than to her sentiments, with critics largely philosophising or pontificating about the state of humanity and the world. One such critic, Zakaria Ali, however, had unwittingly made a useful observation on her method and her scale: Nirmala’s work was “heavy stuff, made even heavier by having these images enlarged. The viewer has no choice but be confronted by the gruesome pictures.” Unlike Piyadasa, who is usually seen posing confidently with his artworks, Nirmala is instead captured rather diminutively seated cross-legged and barefoot on the ground with her work looming behind her; she also does not look squarely at the camera but gazes out into the far corner (fig. 22.12).

Disliking labels but vexed by her own vested interests, Nirmala has declared that she is “an artist first and foremost—not necessarily just a woman artist or feminist artist or political artist” because “once labelled, people feel they can deal with you. It is easier to control and oppress you when you are put into a category. But I have not resolved how to deal with this as I really care a lot about issues that affect women and children.” Her chosen posture in the photograph may have to do with her expressed desire to not be pigeonholed and to let the work and the issues speak for themselves. Despite her divergent emotional responses of anger and compassion when confronted with issues, she lets on that she “had to sit through the pain of the incubation period,” where she “might read a book and try not to think of it” or “do some research or collect things.” This is because “the subconscious cannot be dictated to but rather, it dictates. And it cannot be forced into action or else your work will emerge a shallow mess.” These alternating psychical currents and her willingness to work through her own ambivalence may yet explain why Nirmala the artist has been presented in oddly contradictory ways to her viewers. Her self-portrait from 1999 (fig. 22.13) is a picture of crimson rage where two frontal head shots (one a facsimile of the other) are placed on separate diametrically opposing vectors but close to the points of convergence and the state of metaphorical eruption where she then visually chastises the viewer: “When are you all going to say enough! And stop it!” On the other hand, her profile page on The Edge Galerie’s website is headed by an uncommon pose with the artist’s head turning away from the viewer’s gaze and her eyes downcast, as if rejecting engagement with the prevailing visual order of the world. These are, I would argue, the two poles animating Nirmala’s practice—one being detached and analytic, and the other being highly charged empathy, an interpretation supported too by how she herself is presented and received through the posed photographs that are in circulation. Viewers may not be privy to the intentions of the artist (as the posing subject), the photographer or the news media staff (who textually frames the images); these posed images as artefacts set in motion another form of agency, urging us to pay heed to the ways they interpose on how we read the artists, their art and their unexpected lifeworlds.

To end, I am reminded of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari had argued in the name of “minor literature”: “Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor.” Instead of having an “official, referential genre” and the proper assignation of names and sense, we ought to have “a sequence of intensive states, a ladder or a circuit for intensities that one can race around in one sense or another, from high to low, or from low to high.” Any word, name or image need no longer refer to only one thing but to other things or conditions—“the becoming-dog of the man and the becoming-man of the dog.” Turning our attention towards photographs of artists with their artworks that might otherwise be gleaned only as supplemental and marginal
to an essay is one way of “becoming minor.” For Deleuze, to invoke the minor is to jettison the established model for a process, a becoming that will lead into unknown paths, which does not in itself jeopardise its ability to acquire a major model should we wish it to.42 The acquisition of a “major model” was also at the forefront of the minds of the convenors of the landmark exhibition *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art* at the Balai Seni Lukis Negara in 1994. It was a desire for a master narrative guided by a sense of history and continuity. Yet as the esteemed Malaysian dramatist and critic Krishen Jit rightly cautions in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, “historical meaning changes over time in perceptions of art and social contexts” and these are seldom tackled by art historians in Malaysia. Jit proposed instead to bounce off art and social contexts against each other, so that “we could enjoy the benefit of being both inside and outside the drama of modern Malaysian art”:

> On the one hand, our insideness would be ensured by our entanglement with the narrative of the relationship between art and society. On the other hand, the very act of bouncing off these forces and actions would release us, even if temporarily, from the dangers of an incestuous and claustrophobic involvement, and thereby help us to construct a critical distance from the evolving narrative.43

I would hazard that Jit did not go far enough. If we are truly concerned with the social nature of art, we should attend to the visual universe that the works of art reside in, and that one way to construct that “critical distance” and evolve the narrative would perhaps be to first expand and include the visual field of what can be considered *with and next to* artists and art-making—the minor streams of photographic material which circumscribe our daily visioning of art, that is.44
22.1 Photograph of Raymundo Albano.

22.2 Kok Yew Puah  
*Camera View of the Artist*  
1993  
Acrylic on canvas  
163 × 163 cm  
Private collection, Singapore  
© Family of the late artist

22.3 Redza Piyadasa holding an empty frame.  
Image from *The Star*, Malaysia

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Rhetorical Postures and the Photographic Condition

Nora Marzuki

Rodda, a full-time artist Rodda was a lecturer for 10 years. He was attached to UAC and University Malaysia, where he also taught part-time in the Fine Arts Department. During this period, he managed to write several books.

Family man

"I enjoyed teaching and had a good rapport with my students. I tried to give each of them the best advice possible. A student who's dishonest in life will never be successful. What I educate them about is not just theoretical but practical too. Good artists are not born; they are made through hard work and dedication."

Rodda's last exhibition was held at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

Good topic

Rodda believes that creativity comes from an intensity of living — and does not mean an absence of life. "I am highly charged, I have an acuteness to mental and intellectual energy. Thus I need an emotional anchor — a woman!"

Rodda is a unique one too. He says: "I am not saying that I am the best, but I think I am well-equipped to do it."

Rodda with two of his works — of Tun Razak's family.

Remaking Piyadadasa

Art historian T.K. Sabapathy is of the view that Redza Piyadadasa's diverse works not only represent the debates in Malaysian art but also show his creative dimension. OOI KOK CHUEN reports in this second of a two-part series.

In the 1980s, the focus of Malaysian art was on the development of an identity for the multicultural nation. A generation of artists emerged to search for a new identity and a national story to be told. Their works were characterized by a high level of intellectual and critical depth, often revealing their sharp insights, original ideas, and complex, challenging curatorial skills and methodologies. Sabapathy, as next in line, is a rare brilliant mind who has done so much to shape and reshape art thinking with contemporary concepts, its history and defining personalities.

Piyadadasa, who taught at Universiti Sains Malaysia’s then Batang Pisa Art Department in the late 1970s, is now a senior fellow in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore, where he teaches the history of art and architecture. He is also director of the Contemporary Arts Centre of Louisiana-SEA, College of the Arts in Singapore.

The Piyadadasa Overview, which could well be re-titled ReLooking (Re-Making) British Piyadadasa: Musings and Ideas, Sabapathy says:

"What I try to do is to talk about Malaysian art history through Piyadadasa. I talk about his critical debates at that time, facets which have never been known, never been seen before.

"Piyadadasa has as much as Piya to offer in terms of an artist, but the directions he took to develop his practice after leaving college are very distinct and very different from others, especially in the way that he interpreted and read the state of art in Malaysia in 1980s and beyond — with his encounter with Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. "In as much as Piya tried to counter that, there were also encounters with it elsewhere. So he developed that kind of historical intervention. "That sense of criticality has been integrated into his practice, so his works, especially culminating with the conceptual period — To be Continued (his 1979 pairing) marks the terminus of that — represent the critical dimensions in his practice. "It is most vividly demonstrated by the juxtaposition of text and image. Until very recently, the word and the image have always been seen as occupying totally antithetical dimensions, hence, the reunification that went through so many cultures. "But here it is very much a Conceptual strategy. Piya didn’t invent it. One aspect of Conceptualism was the inclusion of text and the use of words as the carriers of concepts and meaning, denying the importance of the visual and the optical dimensions. "But what Piya did was to juxtapose the two and in some instances, the text works in harmony with the image. At other times, the text is at tensional relationship with the image. In any event — it undercuts the image. You
22.8 Piyadasa photographing Laura Ruby unveiling her work. Image courtesy of Malcom Wong © Estate of Peter T. Brown

22.9 Piyadasa posing with Laura Ruby’s work. Image courtesy of Malcom Wong © Estate of Peter T. Brown

22.10 Tan Chee Khuan
Pastiche Stinks
1994–2013
Mixed media on paper
37 × 27 cm
Collection of the artist

Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam
Self-Portrait
1999
Acrylic and collage on canvas
101.5 × 91.5 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore