Charting Thoughts

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Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia.
Could we return to a fictional scene? A few years back, writing about “global art history,” I evoked a hypothetical elderly couple. Both are retired professors; the man studied literature and the woman, film. One day she had a dream which recalled a moment from when they started dating. Back then, she was doing her PhD at the university where he taught, and, once in a while, she would go to his lectures. In her dream, the man, in his mid-30s, is waving his arms, pontificating in front of a class of sophomores. “The purpose, the true purpose of literature, of reading novels when you are young, is this: so that they can provide certain images of the world, of life, that will come back and haunt you, if you are so lucky to grow old.”

As I imagine them, the elderly couple still live in a university town in the Northeastern United States, and her dream harks back to the late 1970s. The where and when of that scene are very different from those of this essay. Here, I am concerned with contemporary art from Southeast Asia or, more specifically, the regional assumptions underlying its curation. But perhaps the whys and hows are not unrelated. If not “the true purpose,” then is it not at least one of art’s many functions to suggest images, visual or conceptual, that will trouble and delight us for years to come? Although maybe the more pertinent comparison is this: with the storyteller, the poet, they address the world as something daunting—it is difficult to live in and make sense of; it is too big, too complicated, too messy. I do not believe good novelists ever presume to fully apprehend the worlds they create; their reach always exceeds their grasp, and their perspectives are admittedly partial and personal. It is in this context...
that they struggle to find something to say. Is it not the same with artists? And what about for those who write about art?

Years ago, I initiated a web anthology project called *Comparative Contemporaries*. The project aimed to bring together art writing from across Asia and began with five editors, each of whom selected what they believed were key texts of writing *from* or *for* Southeast Asia. Over time, the plan was for new editors and their “proto-anthologies” to be added to the website. Far from attempting to establish a canon of authors, the intent was to generate a community of researchers and readers engaged in discussion. The project alluded to the discipline of comparative literature, which considers not only different national traditions but also different historical periods, often with the aim of questioning the very concepts of “literature,” “tradition,” “canon,” “nation” and “history.”

Likewise, *Comparative Contemporaries* called for an investigation of the art of different societies and traditions, and, at the same time, a questioning of those categories usually employed in constructing anthologies. In what ways is art across Asian countries “contemporary” with each other, or contemporary with art from anywhere else on the planet? How does one compare these varied practices and places?

While *Comparative Contemporaries* focused on art writing, it had implications for curating the region. The project eschewed the goal of a survey or mapping; instead, its aims were deliberately provisional, reflecting both its exploratory attitude and the fact that “we” in Asia (at the time the project was initiated) were then at the early stages of forming discourses about “our” contemporary art. Aristotle once proclaimed the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *Comparative Contemporaries* argued for the inverse: that it is better to understand “Asia” not as some unified entity, but as a loose and messy assembly of parts comprised of lateral and contingent associations. *Comparative Contemporaries* was not interested in the view from above or any totalising theme. Rather, it argued for perspectives articulated from the ground, always in process, always in negotiation.

The question of who are our contemporaries is not just about geographical and temporal adjacencies. Proximity is formed in the imagination. We construct constellations of contemporar- ies, not unlike how we order groups of stars in the night sky. The celestial bodies that comprise Orion are not actually next to each other in the galaxy; only as a consequence of our vantage point on earth can we draw them into an outline of the mythic hunter. Another thing about the contemporary: as an art critic, I may write about recent work, but I am less interested in the “new” than the “now.” Consider these two approaches to teaching history: in one, the lecturer prepares the students to go on a trip to the past, as if it were a foreign country; in the other, she guides the students through the present, showing them signs of how history is still everywhere. I am less interested in artworks that are new for the sake of being new, and prefer art that has a deeper sense of time. Thinking about the contemporary involves a detour into the historical fullness of our “now.” The proper tense of history is not the “past” but the “present.”

By evoking the constellation, I have used a spatial metaphor for time. It is good to be vigilant about one’s use of metaphors. In my own case, I wonder if I tend to privilege “space” over “time,” seeing the latter through the lens of the former. Some other spatial metaphors I have enlisted here are the two geographic terms “islands” and “continents.” So is it a continental or an island/archipelagic perspective that shapes my own thinking of Southeast Asia? Should we insist upon and prioritise the discontiguity of disparate parts? Is the island the right metonym for this part of the world? Or
is there something that a continental Southeast Asia implies—that there is indeed, throughout the area, a collective desire for a larger, interconnected identity?

In January 2015, in advance of its opening in November that year, National Gallery Singapore held its first forum, “Is Singapore the Place for Southeast Asia?”5 (I want to highlight a sampling of forums, symposia and the like organised by museums and other art institutions in Asia to acknowledge their role in developing art discourses in this part of the world; these gatherings are arguably more accessible to curators, artists and art audiences than academic conferences in the region. My itinerary includes events involving the Gallery; the Institute of Technology, Bandung (Institut Teknologi Bandung); the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong and the Asia Culture Centre (ACC) in Gwangju. The AAA has been a vital resource centre for practitioners as well as scholars, and the ACC, much like the Gallery, is a major new Asian museum complex that aims to position itself also as a research centre.)

One of the speakers at the Gallery forum was Nora Taylor, who teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Taylor spoke about the evolution of Southeast Asian art history, and the role that curating has played in the writing of these histories. When she started in the field, Area Studies was the predominant frame for understanding the region, and few in Europe and North America studied its modern art in art history departments. Over 25 years later, the situation has naturally changed but even so, it was not long ago when research focused on individual countries and considerations of the region as a whole were rare. The discourse has shifted from criticising hegemonic notions of modernity and recognising “other modernities” to going beyond East versus West dichotomies and establishing interregional conversations. Taylor emphasised how the curation of exhibitions and festivals, as well as the networking among artists and organisations have often provided the creative conditions where research has flourished in the region.6 A good example of interregionality, art history and exhibition-making coming together is Patrick D. Flores’s book Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia, which the author developed in parallel with his curatorial contribution for the 2008 Gwangju Biennale (helmed by artistic director Okwui Enwezor). For Gwangju, Flores looked at the practices of four seminal artist-curators: Raymundo Albalno from the Philippines, Redza Piyadasa from Malaysia, Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand and Jim Supangkat from Indonesia.7

At the forum, Taylor also made the provocation that in Singapore, while the art museum may have had power, it lacked intellectual authority. When it launched in 1996, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) boasted the largest collection of modern and contemporary art works from Southeast Asia in a Southeast Asian museum, and was also the richest of the region’s national museums (the collection, which has since grown, is now shared with National Gallery Singapore). In my own review of the inaugural exhibition Modernity and Beyond (1996), I argued a similar point. Modernity was a demonstration of SAM’s aspirations, from the start, to become a leading museum for Southeast Asia. It had two components: Themes in Southeast Asian Art focused on the region with the exclusion of the host nation, and A Century of Art in Singapore was hitherto the most ambitious survey of the country’s art. A notable theme in Century was the journey; for example, the 1952 field trip to Bali by the pioneer Nanyang-style artists. Artists may go overseas, they may even study abroad, but as far as Century was concerned, the most important part of their itinerary is the return. To travel may be to detour, but to return is to belong. The themes in Century were assimilated into a national-
The full title of the Gallery forum included the subtitle, “Art, Agencies, Agendas.” The speakers were: Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore; Nora A. Taylor, Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art History, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Joselina Cruz, Director and Curator for Museum of Contemporary Art and Design of De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, Manila; Farish A. Noor, Associate Professor and Head of Doctoral Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; and Pauline J. Yao, Curator, Visual Arts, M+, Hong Kong.

See Nora A. Taylor, “Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and their Communities in the Face of Geography,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 2, Summer (2011): 6–23. Some of the points made in her presentation at the Gallery forum are elaborated in that essay. Although I cannot recall if Taylor mentioned Flores in her presentation at the Gallery forum, she would certainly concur with me that his work is a good example of the research she was referring to; Flores is Professor of Art Studies at the Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines and was also an Adjunct Curator at National Gallery Singapore. See Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008).

As with the inauguration of SAM, National Gallery Singapore launched with two major shows, one on Southeast Asia and another on Singapore, but these are permanent exhibitions, and instead of cleaving the host country from its regional context as in *Modernity and Beyond*, these two overlap. While my purpose here is not to review the newer shows in comparison with the older ones, let me say this: I met with curators at the Gallery before the opening as they were preparing the Singapore exhibition, and found a marked difference in their approach from the presumptions of chronology and nationalism in SAM’s *Century*. From what I gathered, their aim was for their show to be assembled with multiple narrative points of entry and departure; it was meant to be a testing ground for ideas, rather than, by virtue of the museum’s name and status, the definitive story of the nation’s art. Of course, curatorial intentions are no guarantee of what a hang finally produces. And it will be interesting to see how this “permanent” exhibition evolves over time.

If I dwell on how the art museum in the island city-state of Singapore has dealt with nationalism, it is also because it can serve as a test case. Moreover, expressions of Southeast Asian regionalism have often been extensions of nationalism writ large onto the region. Approaches to curating Southeast Asia range from those that are self-reflexive about the difficult and complicated process of making sense of a certain area, to those that are emphatic in packaging it as a singular identity—whether in terms of the aforementioned regional nationalism, or in order to market the area for global consumption. Let me elaborate by referring to the symposium, *Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia*, organised by the AAA in Hong Kong in October 2013.
Kevin Chua, who teaches art history at Texas Tech University, spoke about the concept of the “curatorial” in relation to two exhibitions of modern art in Southeast Asia: *Realism in Asian Art* (2010) and *Strategies towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Contemporary Indonesian Art* (2008).9 Chua cited Maria Lind, who explains that the “curatorial” is, in her view, an approach towards exhibition-making that produces “not a survey but a situation,” and “involves not just representing but presenting and testing; it performs something here and now instead of merely mapping something from there and then.”10 For Chua, *Strategies* was an example of the “curatorial” at work: “Instead of an exhibition space that served as a container for objects, one had the sense that *Strategies* was structured like a loose network of object-idea constellations, and that each constellation was structured by a non-linear sense of time.”11

While *Realism* was a rare occasion to view a breadth of paintings from the region, as well as to think about “an important artistic movement in the light of social history,” Chua found some curatorial decisions to be “puzzling,” notably, the “exhibition cleaved form from content.”12 *Realism* seemed to assume that modernism—and realism as one of its formal tropes—was imported from the West, even as the exhibition argued that Asian artists made realism their own. For Chua, downplaying the relationship between form and content was a way to address the anxiety of Asia being derivative of the West by wishing it away, but it kept coming back, like the repressed. Even as “the exhibition tried not to be linear and fall into traps of teleology and progress, it fell into another one—that of a barely disguised essentialism.”13 *Realism* pivoted on the question of what is distinctively “Asian” about Asian realism, yet it failed to give an answer. Chua argued that, alternatively, the curators could have more rigorously tested the relations between form and content: “How do we understand the gap or distance in realism—between artifice and truthfulness, calculation and contingency—as it occurred in Asia?” Encounters with European modernism took place in Asia at different moments and speeds. So perhaps rather than trying to identify what looks Asian, Chua suggests that it might have been more productive to ask when did “Asia” in Asian art happen, “when did certain cultural configurations and formations come into being?”14

Also speaking at the AAA was Pamela Corey, who teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She analysed how metaphor has been used in curating mainland Southeast Asia to both draw and
maintain geographic boundaries. Her aim was to “expand on the question of how—and for whom—a geographical metaphor endures.”\textsuperscript{15} Metaphors are effective as they can elide what is messy and incoherent, and represent complexity with a single compelling image. Corey recounted some of the criticisms of The Mekong platform at the 6\textsuperscript{th} Asia Pacific Triennial (2009) and the Long March Project: Ho Chi Minh Trail was presented in 2010, organised by the Long March Project, Beijing.\textsuperscript{16} For instance, with the Ho Chi Minh Trail project, it seemed as if the Chinese Long March artists, in the name of networking and cultural exchange, were on “a mission of knowledge-gathering rather than sharing.” Corey ended her presentation on a note of how metaphor can indeed be provocative and productive, when she spoke of the naming of the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh: \textit{reyum} translates as “cicada crying.”\textsuperscript{5}

From a forum in Singapore and a symposium in Hong Kong, let us now turn to a workshop in Bandung, Indonesia. “Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art” is a research programme that aims to bring together early career scholars and foster their work on the art histories of Southeast Asia from after World War II to the 1990s.\textsuperscript{17} Its first meeting was at the University of Sydney in March 2015, its second gathering was at the Institute of Technology, Bandung in August, and the third and final meeting was at National Gallery Singapore in January 2016. During one of the Bandung sessions, eminent Singapore art historian T.K. Sabapathy led a seminar titled “Yielding a Region. Writing Art in Southeast Asia.” For my purposes here, I am interested in how Sabapathy created a subtext for his interventions by handing out a set of readings. Among them was “Southeast Asia: Comparatist Errors and the Construction of a Region” by Ananda Rajah.\textsuperscript{18} The “errors” of the title have to do with how “comparative methods imply systems of classification”—to think of Southeast Asia as a region is necessarily to think of other regions with which to compare it.\textsuperscript{19} But for Rajah, writing in 1999, the problem is “not whether we can or cannot identify Southeast Asia as a region”; the problem is that “we lack a conceptual framework, if not a theory, of regions as human constructs.”\textsuperscript{20} We are misled if we focus on the question of a Southeast Asian regional identity in comparison with other identities. Rather, we should be looking at interactions of “inter-subjectivity over geographical space and time,” and, as Rajah reminds us, such interactions were not and are not self-contained—regions are “interpenetrated systems.”\textsuperscript{21}
The name of the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* pivots precisely on this shift: the founding editors, Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat and Taiwan cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan-Hsing, deliberately used the term “inter-Asia” rather than “intra-Asian.” The latter might require articulating what an Asian regional identity might be, whereas “inter-Asia” directs our attentions to the interactions of an interpenetrated system. Which brings me to our final stop on our tour of talking about art: Gwangju, Korea, where the ACC held its “Vision Forum” in April 2015, the new centre’s first public event in advance of its opening in the autumn that year. The forum included such speakers as University of Sydney gender and cultural studies scholar Meaghan Morris. Morris referred to both *Inter-Asia* founding editors in her presentation “Liminality and Everyday Life in Hong Kong.” She discussed Chen’s book *Asia as Method* (2010), which takes its title from a 1960 lecture by Japanese sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi; she also cited a separate essay by Chen that examined the Takeuchi lecture. Morris’ presentation about Hong Kong involved thinking through Chen thinking through Takeuchi, who, on his part, was thinking through American philosopher John Dewey, performing the very intertextuality and interregionality at the crux of Chen’s arguments.

Takeuchi’s “Asia as Method” takes up the proposition that the West cannot be the model for the intellectual and cultural development of Asia. The problem, for Takeuchi, is less the West itself than the binary and hierarchical structure of the idealisation. The solution is to seek multiple and lateral frames of references instead. He argued that for Japan to advance, rather than emulate a West deemed as superior it should look to China, India and other Asian countries, which should be viewed as equals, not inferiors. Yet as Chen observes, 50 years later, “[e]ven until today, comparative studies of China, India and Japan (with reference to each other) still do not really exist in the Chinese speaking world or in Japan, not to mention mobilising other regions in Asia or other parts of the third world.”

Chen’s project is part of a larger interdisciplinary discursive turn towards rethinking notions of the world. Examples in art history include the recent collection edited by Marie Antoinette and Caroline Turner, *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, while in comparative literature, there is Pheng Cheah’s new book, *What is a World?: On Post-Colonial Literature as World Literature*.

Today, it might seem the simplest thing for a Southeast Asian curator to declare that “we” should keep the focus within the region to make sense of “our own” place in the wider world. However, the increasing visibility of art
from Asia in international exhibitions like biennales hardly evinces a widespread practice of “Asia-as-Method.” Instead, what one finds are lapses into comparatist errors, essentialism, or even orientalism. Chua mentioned the second issue in his analysis of the Realism in Asian Art exhibition. And while I did not use those terms in discussing SAM’s A Century of Singapore Art, nor did I speak about Corey’s considerations of the Asia Pacific Triennial and the Long March Project with such language, it is arguable that those problems do appear, in some combination and to some degree. It would not be difficult to cite more exhibitions that critics have faulted along these lines, but with this essay I want to reflect on broader conceptual concerns. As I see it, structural problems underpin many assertions of Asia for Asia or, the corollary, Southeast Asia by Southeast Asia.

“Ethno-geography” is a neologism I have employed a few times, for instance, in the essay, “On Being Curated.”27 There, I reiterated that the geography of ethnicity has been privileged in many biennales and international exhibitions, so much so that one could describe a predominant mode of knowledge produced by those projects as “ethno-geographic.” Consider a hypothetical biennale, where a Cape Town-born artist based in Mumbai is displayed next to a Beijing-born artist based in Paris (I leave out whether the artists are male, female, transgender, black, Chinese, or mixed, but one could readily fill in those blanks). In these situations, a good part of what it means “to be curated” is to be surveyed and mapped. As if a juxtaposition or a set of coordinates were sufficient to accomplish a translation, enabling distinct perspectives to speak to each other. The ethno-geographic impulse, one could say, is symptomatic of curating in the age of globalisation (surely a phrase that has found its way into a title of an art essay or two). It belies “covert meta positions that are uncommitted rehearsals to totality,” because it presumes the “global” without adequate reflection.28 This graphing of art and artists is over-determined by many underlying assumptions, but central among them is a privileged “global” view from above, which wields a panoptic power that renders distance and difference abstract, and which contains and controls culture into categories. At the same time, the distances that curators and the curated travel, as well as the distances between the places of art-making and the spaces of exhibitions, are often elided in biennales—and sometimes less as a deliberate strategy than an unconscious reflex. Globalisation’s appetite for consuming cultural difference is not only a desire for the other, but a desire for the other as readily available, a desire to compress the separations of distant places and cultures, even as categories and sub-categories of identity proliferate and get rearticulated.29

Sanjay Krishnan observes in his book, Reading the Global, that globalisation is typi-
cally discussed in terms of the increasing integration of international markets, financial systems and economies, the intensification of digital media dissemination, or the alarming destruction of the environment; however, he contends that it would be more productive to analyse it as an “instituted perspective, not an empirical process.”

For Krishnan, “the term ‘global’ describes a way of bringing into view the world as a single, unified entity, articulated in space and developing over (common) time”; it is a constructed viewpoint, which invents and legitimises itself, as it “defines the terms in which historical narrative and political agency are shaped.” In the age of globalisation, what a curator might do, rather than presume the global, is follow Krishnan’s suggestion to “cultivate critical reflexes that actively interrupt the global perspective. Such ‘resistance’ aims to enrich the global through the repeated interruption of its frame. […] Far from being a rejection of the global, this approach must be thought of as its interruptive embrace.”

To return to islands and continents: of the world’s regions, Southeast Asia is perhaps the most evenly divided in terms of archipelagic and continental land areas. It thus offers two contrasting geographic tropes to think about regionality and how the regional relates to the global. Discourses on regions can provide not so much a “counter narrative” to the prevailing discourses of the global, but a way of thinking through Krishnan’s “interruptive embrace.” Islands have famously functioned as metaphors for isolation as well as individuality but, of course, in real life, they are also always part of some larger ecosystem. Continents too, due to their breadth, can impart a sense of an entirety unto itself. Notions of self-containment are something that can apply to both, albeit coming from different directions. If we could play with figurative speech here, let us characterise the pedestrian view from the ground as an anecdotal one, and the airborne view from above as thematic; let us further suppose that an island perspective is akin to an anecdotal one, while the continental’s is thematic. When you are on an island, you need only walk around to be reminded that you are indeed on one—signs of the sea are never far from sight—but for a proper sense of a continent, you have to imagine looking from up high to appreciate its extent. What obtains in one island may not apply to the next nearest one: an anecdote does not offer enough evidence for a general tendency; on the contrary, sometimes what it does is make a claim for an exceptional specificity. But when you consistently see a pattern across a continent, then you may have a persuasive argument for a theme.

Anecdote and theme can be important devices for the writer. But care must be taken when using an anecdote to make a point. A highly selective example may be recruited merely to illustrate an already constructed argument. And when an anecdotal outlook expands into the role of a larger theme, this can produce problems such as essentialism, like when a set
of observations on Southeast Asian art becomes overgeneralised and a certain feature is then asserted as the defining characteristic of practices in the region. An exhibition is comparable to an essay in that individual artworks can function like anecdotes and a larger theme can be assembled through a series of them. Although in composing an essay or curating an exhibition, each and every anecdote need not always add up, there can be those examples which trouble rather than reinforce the overarching theme. I would hope that my own penchant for anecdotes is not for drawing conclusions; a more productive use for them is to interrupt the tendency to generalise through a close reading of specific cases—to prompt debate and discussion by challenging assumptions, rather than prop- ping up stock positions.

When I write about art I would hope to engage the works, not to illustrate my arguments but to test them against the art, and likewise test the art against the arguments. Surely this is an attitude that some curators share when it comes to exhibition-making. Though to be honest, it is an aspiration I cannot say I have always lived up to, and I think my curator friends would admit the same. How many times have you seen a show where the artworks were used mainly to demonstrate the curatorial theme? In such cases, the theme speaks at the art. But the job of the critic and the curator is to speak not at but to art. The preposition matters: the “to” invites a conversation, as opposed to the one-sided broadcast the “at” insinuates. What makes a conversation is not the talking; what is most important is the listening. Crucially, this “speaking to” should not assume that we all speak the same art world language. Concepts like modernism, realism or conceptualism become even more contentious when applied across cultures and geographies. When unpacking the assumptions of a common language, one should think about commensurability as well as translation. In the latter, you must have at least two, and typically many more units, that are measurable by the same standard. If we apply this to islands and continents, we can imagine an archipelago where every island has its own vernacular and the inhabitants of each have learnt to translate their neighbours—one vernacular into another. Compare this with a continent where there are several provinces with their distinguishable dialects but there is also a lingua franca. Here, translation is from each provincial dialect into the common language, not one dialect into another. But does the establishment of a standard across the continent really make all languages and dialects commensurable?

There is a possible metonymic slippage here that is problematic, where commensurability stands in for totality, and becomes either the global view from above or that single thread that connects together all the anecdotes. There are other ways to understand how separate stories relate thematically to each other. For example, story A may be related to B, and B to C, but the relationship between A and C could be tenuous at best. What we have in this case is a “family of resemblances” amongst A, B and C, even if we do not have a single idea that explains or contains them all. This is a crucial point of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language: we do not have, let alone need, definitive definitions for our words in order for us to use them and know what they mean. Language is possible only because of its looseness; we can understand each other because we can also misunderstand each other. If an island/ anecdotal view might be too limiting because it is too particular, then a thematic/continental perspective can offer a bigger picture that allows us to create associations between different parts. But this “bigger” does not mean complete, and anecdote can be very helpful at pointing out the elisions that an overall frame overlooks. Thematic associativity may give us a glimpse of a horizon of commensurability, however, it does not deliver the global view.
My thoughts here have the purpose, as it were, of finally putting the reader in front of a work of art. Let me bring these reflections to a close. I want to culminate with a mention of a project by Navin Rawanchaikul, not to illustrate or test any arguments (contrary to what I just said), but to invite the reader to look and listen to this artwork, as well as to think further on one theme in particular: transportation. My suggestion is that “transportation” can offer an alternative approach to the surveying and mapping of the ethno-geographic impulse. Curators go far and wide to meet artists. It is not always easy to translate these encounters into forms of display, and sometimes exhibitions neglect to engage their viewers with the journeys that curators and the curated make. Yet, every so often, curators and artists present audiences with the experience of how art traverses distance. We are taken from the place of art to the space of exhibition, and we become transported. Or as Maria Lind would say: the curatorial gives us a situation, not a survey; it does not map a “there and then,” but performs a “here and now.”

Navin was born in 1971 in Chiang Mai, a child of the South Asian diaspora. His Hindu-Punjabi ancestors were from Gujranwala, now part of Pakistan. His father descended from the first wave of Indian merchants who settled in northern Thailand while his mother, when she was about seven, migrated there with her family because of Partition. In 1993, Navin graduated from Chiang Mai University with a BFA and in 1994 founded Navin Production Co. Ltd in his hometown. Much of his multi-disciplinary work which features sculpture, installation, performance, painting, photography, film, comics and other media is produced through this company, which also functions as a diverse collective of artists and cultural workers.

*Cities on the Move, Bangkok* (1999, fig. 25.1) by Navin and Rirkrit Tiravanija is part of National Gallery Singapore’s permanent exhibition of Southeast Asian art. The work is named after the well-known touring exhibition co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Subtitled *Contemporary Asian Art on the Turn of the 21st Century, Cities on the Move* first opened at the Secession in Vienna in 1997, and subsequent editions included shows at the Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen, the Hayward Gallery in London and multiple venues in Bangkok. But I wish the Gallery would display another Navin piece from their collection, *Fly with Me to Another World* (2008). It is this project that I would like to touch upon.

Navin has often used vehicles in his art, from taxis to tuk-tuks, bicycles and scooters. These have served as mobile galleries, interventions into everyday situations, or imagery for his paintings. In 1999 he started the *Fly with Me to Another World* project, which in Thai, *Sud Khob Faa*, translates as “magnificent horizon.” Versions have been presented in Italy, France, Belgium, Japan and elsewhere. The inspiration for *Fly with Me* is the life and work of pioneer Thai artist, Inson Wongsam, who was born in 1934 in Pasang, a small town in the northern province of Lamphun. Inson’s is an archetypal story of the artist as a young man trying to find a way of being in the world, but also finding his way back home. In 1961, he received a scholarship after completing a course in printmaking and sculpture at Silpakorn University in Bangkok; however, instead of continuing with school, he used it to explore Thailand for a year. Inson, moreover, wanted to travel the world, especially to Italy, the native country of his mentor and professor Silpa Bhirasri (also known as Corrado Feroci), the eponymous founder of the first art university in the country. Inson raised funds through an auction of his works; he also received in-kind sponsorships, notably an Italian Lambretta scooter. In May 1962, he left Thailand with the scooter and, riding through India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Greece, finally arrived in Italy in August 1963. He continued

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to travel (albeit without the scooter as it had broken down), first across Europe, settling and studying in Paris for a while, before moving on to New York in 1966. In 1974, Inson returned home to Lamphun and built a studio in the forest. He was honoured as a National Artist of Thailand in 1999, and today still lives in Lamphun and works in his forest studio. Navin, after a few years of his own travelling art project, brought *Fly with Me* back to Lamphun in 2004 for a year-long series of activities: these experiments with alternative public spaces for art involved collaborations with partners that ranged from government offices to NGOs to temples, from Thai and international artists, curators, writers and activists to inter-generational members of the local community. Navin concluded the Lamphun project with the symposium, “Public Art In(ter)vention” in 2005, which in turn generated material for a book of the same name that was published the following year.  

Navin has produced many works with the name *Fly with Me to Another World*. What the Gallery has in its collection are three items: two sculptural pieces, each with a Lambretta scooter: one, replete with travel bags, has a fibreglass figure of a young Inson riding it (fig. 25.2); the other, painted all over with a montage of Inson’s adventures, has Navin himself as the rider (fig. 25.3). And then there is the painting: Navin has done several such canvases in a style that is an amalgam of the outdoor movie posters found in India and Thailand. Here, the subject of the supposed film is the life of Inson Wongsam (fig. 25.4). While Navin’s mimicry of the poster form is adept, after having seen a few of these paintings, I feel that what is at stake is not so much the appropriation of popular culture, or nostalgia. I would contend that Navin does not survey Inson’s journeys; instead, he gives us a situational view of them. How might I support this impression? On the cover of *Public Art In(ter)vention* is an old photo of Inson and his scooter in India in 1962, while on the back is a picture of him in 2005 with a similar vehicle in Lamphun (fig. 25.5). For me, his painting shows how much Navin has inhabited, not literally but empathetically, the space and time of these and other photographs like them, which were likely the source material for the artwork. Navin reveals to us the presentness of the past conjoined with the distant as contemporaneous—the “here and then” and the “there and now.”

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25.1 Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija
*Cities on the Move 6, Bangkok*
1999
Acrylic on canvas
170 x 120 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
© Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija
25.2 Navin Rawanchaikul
*Fly with Me to Another World*
2000, edition 5
Painted fibreglass scooter, bag and found objects
215 x 78 x 176 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

25.3 Navin Rawanchaikul
*Fly with Me to Another World (to be continued…)*
2008, edition 3
Painted fibreglass, scooter and found objects
210 x 84 x 170 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
25.4 Navin Rawanchaikul
*Fly with Me to Another World*
2008
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 229 cm
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

25.5 Front and back covers of Thanom Chapakdee et al., *Public Art In(ter)vention: Fly with Me to Another World Project*, ed. Navin Rawanchaikul (Chiangmai: Fly with Me to Another World Project, 2006).
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