Earth Work 1979
Toh, Charmaine

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In keeping with the intervention that Earth Work represented within the white cube space of the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), this catalogue also features one in the form of an insertion of a conversation between Choy Weng Yang and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa. Choy was the Curator of Art at NMAG when Earth Work was shown there, and himself an artist who studied in London in the 1960s. The interview takes a biographical approach to expand our understanding of the environment in Singapore in the 1970s and 80s and to complicate our consideration of Earth Work during that period. Just as space was made to accommodate Earth Work in the permanent display at NMAG, so too space has been made in this catalogue for a conversation that provides a parallel commentary to the happenings of the time.
We Made Space: 
In conversation with Choy Weng Yang

— Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

I. But I call it Horizontals

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (SHM) What I feel we should try to achieve in this conversation is to track the parallel trajectories that emerge across artistic gesture, curatorial rationale and the making of the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) in 1970s Singapore. I want to ground your thoughts and recollections from the period in the ‘biographical’ or with personal experience as a way to contextualise the interdisciplinary, the modern (not necessarily modernism per se) and the burgeoning discourse of internationalism – three terms that continue to be negotiated until today.

Choy Weng Yang (CWY) My experience is of one thing leading to another. It started when I was awarded a scholarship for my studies in London in 1959, to be trained and to replace the British art lecturers at the Teachers’ Training College. I was not the first of a batch, but I do recall that one colleague went on to become the Head of the Arts and Crafts Department in the Teachers’ Training College. I saw him as a role model; he was hard working and extremely organised. At Hornsey College of Art, I wanted to specialise in graphic design. After two years of intermediate studies, my lecturer Morris Desusmares, a famous art critic in London, asked me, “What do you want to specialise in?” I said graphic design. To this, he responded with typical English thoughtfulness, “My advice for you is to take up painting. However, if you like design, I can arrange for you to do some printmaking.” Looking back, this was a wise choice. After finishing my studies at Hornsey College in 1962, I went to the University of London Institute of Education to do a post graduate course on art education.

SHM What did London feel like in the 1960s?

CWY Many of my peers went to places like Australia for their training. But I consider myself fortunate – in London, the real value was outside the College. The first three months were spent in delight, seeing London Bridge, and so on; then I settled down and felt miserable. I was lonely, but it was good to have happened because it forced me to deal with that loneliness. Later on, when I was more comfortable, things turned the other way around. I tried not to see too many friends, especially Singaporean friends, because that loneliness had become privacy. Having said that, Malaysian artist Jolly Koh was my contemporary; he played classical music – Tchaikovsky and all that. Chia Wai Hon was there too and he went to concerts regularly. I regret not going for concerts. Otherwise, London meant a lot of galleries, exhibitions and films! It was in London that I learnt about Ingmar Bergman, the famous Swedish film director. Although in Swedish with no subtitles, his films were about life. For instance, one film
was about a young man who had just finished school and enlisted in the army. Bergman studied this man’s life – from wearing uniforms to his days offs and how he looked for girls. At the time, the film was way ahead of me. London also meant the television. One programme that I liked very much was called *Face to Face*. The interviewer, John Freeman, asked questions about life. Sometimes artists were interviewed too; it discussed art but also its problems. I also mixed with Lim Yew Kuan when I was lonely. Thomas Yeo was there too, but I only saw him once every six months.

SHM And the art scene...?

CWY I would go to the National Gallery of London and the Tate Gallery regularly on weekends. At the former, they had one recently-renovated small room, which displayed only two paintings. It catered to researchers or people who simply wanted to ponder over the works. I found it meaningful and I kept returning to see the works again and again. One of them was Piero Della Francesca’s *Nativity* (1470-5). It was a scene depicting the nativity, and although I am not a Christian, what drew me in was its intriguing composition. The blue Francesca used, Henri Matisse would have envied! It did not fit into the Renaissance as it was so ahead of its time! Near the National Gallery was Bond Street where there were numerous private galleries; they put up works by Matisse, Pablo Picasso, even Cheong Soo Pieng exhibited there. Once, I saw a colour drawing by Picasso, it was a play of lines, colours, and some patches. I found it delightful, but I could not figure out what made it so delightful or why the gallery put it up. I couldn’t resist seeing it again and again. In the end, my conclusion was: the fact that you go back again and again (about six times) says something, doesn’t it? One day, I was walking through Oxford Street when suddenly I saw a monumental Henry Moore sculpture in a gallery. My god, it was so physically powerful! One work to be thought through in a singular space. But that’s not the point. Moore had solved an impasse by breaking the work down into two entities and yet he managed to integrate it as one work – it was an act of imagination. Moore was, at the time, evolving, and moving towards abstraction – this really got me thinking about the possibilities of the abstract.

SHM I suppose scholars use the term ‘high modernism’ to capture this period of artistic activity. It was a time when artists sought to actively rethink the very categories of painting and sculpture. At times, the word ‘object’ was used to potentiate this sensation. Perhaps, we should leap forward to your experiences at MIT, to your conversations with György Kepes and your encounter with Josef Albers in 1973? I raise this for two reasons. First, to understand the circulation, consumption and reconstitution of modernist approaches during the 1970s globally, tracked through your specific experiences and recollections. Secondly, to consider what this implied for the modes of working in Singapore, amongst artists, designers, architects, but also ‘prototypical artist-curators’ such as yourself.

CWY I was still with the Teachers’ Training College when I went to MIT. I went to the USA on a UNESCO Fellowship for the Creative Arts, which was acquired by the Ministry of Culture and not the Ministry of Education. Christopher Hooi, who I had met in London as a student, and who was also aiming to become the Director of the National Museum after the departure of Dr Carl Gibson-Hill, was instrumental in aiding me towards obtaining the Fellowship.
Hooi was an anthropologist, but he was interested in all kinds of disciplines. He was very dedicated and ambitious, and wanted to build a first-rate museum in Singapore. For the application, I had to write a brief on what I wanted to do. I suggested a survey of contemporary American art along with an opportunity to do research or study under Josef Albers (whose name I learnt in London) and Kepes, who had written *Language of Vision* and ran the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies. The moment I arrived in New York, the agency appointed by UNESCO told me that Albers was the head of the Yale University School of Art and Architecture but had recently retired. They also said it was not possible to get me into MIT. Meanwhile, my referee Liu Thai Ker, who had worked in New York as an architect under IM Pei, suggested that I go to the Cooper Union, and so I spent two months there. It was a good school, and they produced some of the best graphic designers in New York at the time. We had Art Directors from leading magazines like the New Yorker, who gave us talks. The UNESCO-appointed agent also gave me a pass to walk in and out of the New York art museums. I could go in, leave for tea, go back and look at Jackson Pollock again. The wide-ranging survey of American modern art was rewarding because, through the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles Art Foundation and the Philadelphia Art Museum, I came to grasp the character, complexity, directions and quality of the diverse collections. It was ideal for research – I interviewed curators of the various art museums and this gave me an insight into their work.

SHM So how did you end up with Kepes?

CWY I went to MIT on my own with the help of the architect Lim Chong Keat, who was very well-known internationally at the time. (Fig. 1 and 2) I knew him from Singapore, for we liked to get together and talk about art, design, and how different disciplines met and conversed through the visual at the Alpha Gallery (established in 1971). (Fig. 3) Chong Keat gave me a referral letter to hand to Kepes who was his tutor in architecture. Until then, Kepes had not responded to the UNESCO agent’s letters. I walked in and handed the letter to the receptionist. The moment she saw Chong Keat’s name, she said “Don’t go away.” Then she picked up the phone and spoke quite excitedly, “Professor [Kepes], Chong Keat’s friend is here.” Kepes rushed out! He quickly reviewed the letter, “How is Chong Keat? He must be doing well. Are you another architect?” Fortunately, I had prepared some slides with some designs and paintings. I responded, “No, I’m a designer and painter.” He then scrutinised my works, “Where are you now?” and I remember thinking to myself, “Just the right question!” I said I was at the Cooper Union; to this, he commented, “Hey, that’s for kids!” I mustered up some courage and told him, “But I want to come here!” After studying my slides, Kepes invited me to join MIT.

SHM What was the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies like?

CWY There were two or three tables, a chair and not much else; no beautiful furniture, no charts and no pictures. Then he asked the only person who was there, “Is there another artist using this?” He was pointing to one table (I later discovered that person’s father was a famous American sculptor). And this lonely-looking character replied, “He hasn’t been coming for...
months now." Kepes said, "Well, Choy, this is your table." Then he left. The next day, I went to see Kepes who assumed there were some problems. I said, "What do I do? Aren’t you going to give me something to work on?" At first he did not understand what I meant, but then he burst out laughing. He said, "Look here, this is a research centre. You may do what you like and when you don’t feel like it, you don’t have to come in." So I started a series of ‘fountain designs’ based on my own attempts at thinking through sculpture; nowadays, we call them ‘installations’. Conceptually, it was about looking at land and seascapes. My explanation was, "If you see something that looks like a fountain, then it is not my design." I wanted to create a work of art. Professor Kepes, however, reviewed my experiments critically.

SHM Have you read Kepes’ Language of Vision?

CWY Yes, Kepes returned to the Bauhaus to say something. And if you are in the Bauhaus, you have to innovate. He was connected to the originator of the Bauhaus tradition, Walter Gropius, since the 1930s. Kepes sought to forge the idea that art can be evolved through technology. My perception of art was completely transformed after meeting artists like Kepes and Albers. Albers was all about colour interaction. For example, if you were to take a particular colour and put red on it, then extend it through a square—imagine what that looks like—and then, take the red away and put a light yellow in it; the entire matrix would be totally different. What Albers was saying was that colours relate to each other differently. At the time, few seemed to catch onto this idea when I attempted to explain it. But I would not have painted my stripe paintings, such as *Horizontals I* (1977), if not for Albers’ theory of colour interaction. (Fig. 4) The moment I reposition or change a colour, the whole work becomes different. No situation is static.

SHM I think Albers called it ‘Interaction of Colour’?

CWY Yes. But I call it horizontals. While I was influenced by Albers on colour interaction, eventually it was always about Paul Klee and his intriguing compositions. It was Klee who made me realise that colour has a life of its own. Albers, who was a lot more theoretical, believed that theory could bring out the relevance of colour to life. For Klee, the relation was more direct – when he adopted a colour, he felt it viscerally.

SHM It is interesting that Kepes’ interdisciplinary approach, his thoughts about the construction of digital imagery and the fusion of design with art, architecture, science and technology are remerging and have critical relevance for contemporary art today. Curators, too, need to and already have begun to respond to such a mode of working.

CWY Kepes was noted for his futuristic insights that art should have a fundamental relationship with technology, and he opened up tremendous possibilities in art for me. Kepes had a theme under which most of the work was done at MIT, but it was always flexible. While, in London, I was thinking about the possibilities of painting and sculpture, it was after my time at MIT that I began to engage with art’s expanded relationship with the environment and communications. I began to think of innovation very solidly and was pushed to re-evaluate my ideas of art. So, I made ‘fountains’ to be sited in the environment. Likewise, my catalogue cover designs were not simply ‘graphic designs’ but are art works in themselves, exploring...
I think we should transition into the second part of our conversation, because it has something to do with creating a certain consciousness of and for art in 1970s Singapore. We should also discuss the internationalist ethos as it played out through your work at NMAG.

I was not aware that the internationalist ethos played out through me. The experience is relative. I first became part of a group of artists that went to the ‘West’ for art training. Teo Eng Seng went to London and Birmingham, some others went to Paris and we all returned in the 1970s. Thomas Yeo very consciously tried to introduce the ‘new’ into his work. We wanted to build up a certain international language of painting. But, having said that, I am also wary of speaking on behalf of the others. In this respect, we did have certain beliefs that Singapore art should be about certain things; but we did not try to solve it as a problem for Singapore. We returned and started to paint in a new way. In terms of the Museum, I joined as a graphic designer and I entered the curatorial world in 1978 after Constance Sheares left for the Netherlands. With my catalogue designs, I simply started introducing new ideas. I tried to be ‘modern’ and maybe even international, using the language of shape, colour, line and all that.

The catalogue for the inauguration of NMAG is a manifestation of these thoughts...?

The cover designs for exhibition catalogues were inspired by the belief that they could enhance the exhibitions with their fresh and intriguing concepts. (Fig. 6 and 7) I conceived them as minor pieces of art, not entirely as works of design. For the inaugural exhibition catalogue, the focus was on originality, to convey a momentous opening. While the galleries were curated by Constance, the catalogue was about Singapore’s four cultures: Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. I was not thinking along political lines but cultural schemas. How do you find four shapes that somehow still say quite a lot? Theoretically, four shapes do not say much. So I decided, purposely, to make them square and yet not square-ish. The square was under interpretation. In other words, I tried to reflect on the ‘work’ that goes into building museums – it was about thinking through aesthetics.

In 1976, then, ‘art’ needed that distinction, not only in terms of how Constance curated the inaugural show, but also how the exhibition circulated in print through your designs.

I never thought of it that way, but maybe it was the outcome of my MIT experience, the Language of Vision, so to speak.
skill for Singapore’s industrial upgrading. It is being used more and more, and it’s so much part and parcel of advertising, sales, newspaper layout and so on.”

CWY Yes. Many of the participants were from Baharuddin Vocational Institute (established in 1965), a very interesting bunch. At the forum, there was a lecturer from the Textiles Department of Baharuddin and even a distinguished alumni, who had won numerous awards for his logo designs as a student. The forum focused on the balance between aesthetics and function.

SHM Within the Museum, was there a certain amount of tension in pushing a ‘newer’ discourse that was internationalist in its outlook? Perhaps, we can discuss one 1983 exhibition in particular that you presented at NMAG, that is, on Paul Klee. (Fig. 8)

CWY It was not easy, put simply. To tell you about Klee, I have to talk about another show that presented a similar challenge. In the early 1980s, NMAG was lucky to have, in the French Embassy, a first-rate cultural attaché by the name of Mr Ariola. We went to his house, together with other artists, and saw many beautiful abstract paintings in his collection and talked at length about culture. One day he invited Hooi, Chen Wen Hsi, Yeo Hoe Koon and I to dinner. We were seated in relatively dim light on a long table in the veranda. Chen Wen Hsi brought roast duck and carrot cake. Then Mr Ariola suddenly remarked, “The Chinese actually have many internationally recognised figures like IM Pei.” He continued, “Mr Hooi, if we can bring a Zao Wou-Ki solo exhibition, would you want it?” My director, who was an anthropologist, did not recognise the name and remained silent. I could not resist and had to say something, “Mr Ariola, I hope it is not a reproduction exhibition, because we were recently given a reproduction exhibition from Brussels on Peter Paul Rubens and we didn’t take it.” By now we were conscious of NMAG’s status as a museum and reproductions were just not appropriate. Mr Ariola replied, “No, no, the original works!” Then Hooi stepped in, “Well, I will accept the exhibition, but not just because the artist is Chinese.” In another meeting with the Goethe-Institut about the Klee exhibition, I used the “not a reproductions show…” line again to alert Hooi that this was an exhibition worth having in Singapore. The Germans were well organised and they conducted a survey of our facilities, and this is the reason why the exhibition only travelled to three places in Asia. The other two sites were the Metropolitan Museum of Manila and Hong Kong Arts Centre. (Fig. 9)

SHM Both were very serious exhibitions...

CWY Yes. Although we did not talk about it much, we were very conscious about constantly moving NMAG up the scale so that it can attract first-rate international exhibitions.

SHM In retrospect, what was the impact of the Zao Wou-Ki and the Paul Klee exhibitions?

CWY Strangely enough, one thing had led to another, and NMAG developed at a pace totally unexpected. By 1985, barely a full decade after its opening, it had already organised volumes of Singapore art exhibitions such as the...
The Pioneer Artists exhibition series which included Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi. This was followed by a series of ASEAN travelling exhibitions culminating to a roster of international exhibitions of Zao Wou-Ki, Paul Klee, Zhang Daqian, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alvar Aalto and modern German sculpture. (Fig. 10) The succession of international art exhibitions was quite extraordinary. These were not planned per se, it happened. Initially, when we were offered the Cartier-Bresson exhibition by the International Centre of Photography in New York, it was rejected because we could not meet the expenses. Later, the exhibition was funded by American Express. In fact, a lady from American Express came to Singapore to explain how important Cartier-Bresson was. I said, “We know the importance, but we don’t have the money.”

SHM What was the budget like at NMAG?

CWY We ran on a shoestring budget. But we did do a lot of Singapore shows all the same, many of which tended to be collective or group shows. Beyond the presentation of exhibitions, the other achievements that were important were the discovery of fresh talents and forging a dynamic momentum in Singapore art. The curatorial concept was this: modern painting was ‘core’ and, thereafter, branches outwards into installation, and so on. Even today, with National Gallery Singapore, this ‘core’ is still relevant. Don’t you think so?

SHM I have always maintained that the ‘contemporary’ is the progressive character of the ‘modern’. We cannot understand the ‘contemporary’ without looking at the ‘modern’ and vice versa. This is one significant proposition of the National Gallery’s permanent galleries.

III. Look, it’s the painting that’s important

SHM At NMAG, whilst exhibition making continued, there were also networks that were developing. I am especially keen on the Southeast Asian ones. In The Straits Times, there is one report dated to 1981, which declares, “Art is alive and well”, say six Asean scholars.” The six scholars were Choy Weng Yang from NMAG, Syed Ahmad Jamal from University of Malaya, Panom Suwannath from Silpakorn University, Napoleon Abueva who was the Dean of College of Arts at University of the Philippines and Ahmad Sadali from Bandung Institute of Technology. Ng Eng Teng was on the panel too as he had just received the year’s Cultural Medallion.

CWY Syed Ahmad Jamal was already a friend, we knew each other as artists. These networks were initiated through the ASEAN cultural projects. What happened was that the Japanese government donated a sum of money to the ASEAN countries with the condition that it should be spent only on ‘cultural activities’. So a series of projects were planned. I believe these sort of projects still continue. I suppose, each name was proposed through each country’s Ministry of Culture. It was not an independent initiative. This was also how projects like the ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Painting and Photography began in 1981. It made numerous stops, first in Thailand, later in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and finally in Singapore.
SHM Were there any common concerns that emerged during these meetings?

CWY I remember that we all joined feeling quite optimistic. I do not know about common concerns, but for us [i.e. Singapore] things got a little demanding when we met the ‘big civilisations’, so to speak! When we all went to Fukuoka in the early 1980s, the Indian representative delivered his speech. He was from the Ministry of Culture or its equivalent and was not an artist. I remember that he started by saying something like “500 years ago...” I thought to myself, “How are we to compete? 500 years!” Then later, I spent time with our Indonesian neighbours and talked about their history. They would say too, “300 years ago, this picture was 300 years ago...” Ang Kiukok, for instance, became a good friend. I was once in Manila, and mentioned to the symposium organiser that I wanted to meet Ang Kiukok. He said, “They are very difficult to meet. They are the giants here.” So my concern was always, “How is Singapore going to match them? How might Singapore proceed in such a way that we don’t look too terribly out of place?” Later on, I realised that the problem was not that acute despite our neighbours having older traditions.

SHM During the 1960s, the very notion and function of painting was also being rethought. There was a consciousness that art is something in and by itself, self-contained and quite individualistic. I find this important in tracking the so-called ‘conceptual turn’ in Singapore and Southeast Asia, this assertion that the artwork is neither painting nor sculpture, but an object.

CWY When I was in America in 1973, I began to experience this shift; maybe not entirely consciously, but I did begin to see art more and more as an object. If you follow this line of thought, then you tend to think about the work of art as a whole – this is the American contribution to global modernism. But when you go back to the French artists, they often value the nuances and subtlety. The Americans, intentionally or not, probably pride themselves that they could throw out the particular vocabularies of art and think of it as object – you conceive art, you conceive of an idea. With the French Impressionists, Van Gogh or Matisse, you would never hear them talking about ‘conceiving an idea’. They just sense and paint a picture. What made them paint a picture was based on what they painted before. In other words, the word ‘conception’ is tied up with the idea of art as object.

SHM In relation to exhibition making and the treatment of space at NMAG, the white cube did sustain the primacy of painting and sculpture during the 1970s – albeit as ‘object’. But NMAG also accommodated and maybe even encouraged experimentation. I am interested in hearing what you think is the moment of confluence between the rethinking of painting and sculpture as objects and the installative, for instance?

CWY In retrospect, it is quite clear that until Tang Da Wu returned from London in the late 1970s, there was hardly any installation work being done. As you seem to suggest, the conceptual had already been ‘brewing’ for a while, happening subtly, and Da Wu’s Earth Work enhanced the scene in a significant manner. For instance, my colour stripes, or what I call ‘horizontals’, could have been easily turned into installations. I was also aware of the 1968 Earth Works exhibition held in New York. This was the same for many other artists – Teo Eng Seng’s incorporation of non-conventional materials like plastics are interesting prototypes to consider.
from the period too. I would contend that there was an undercurrent already operating by the early 1970s that suggested the rise of the ‘installative’, to use your expression.

SHM The Earth Work exhibition by Da Wu at NMAG, then, was a progression but also a break?

CWY Let us leave that to the current exhibition at National Gallery Singapore to debate over. In 1979, at NMAG, we made space for Da Wu. I recall that NMAG opened up a whole stretch of the permanent exhibition space for the installation; that in itself meant something. (Fig. 11) There were many, especially amongst artist circles, who wondered what this new form of art was all about. Even The Straits Times wrote about the project on numerous occasions. I also recall a very dramatic moment in the life of the exhibition when Da Wu was digging a hole and extracting the earth in front of the Stamford Road building; when Hooi came out of the office, he got a shock!

SHM The 1970s is then a time of encounters, especially in terms of the ‘modern’ and how it negotiated with newer modes of working that actively contested the physical and architectural space of NMAG but also its assumed authority. Whilst I agree with you that we should allow the exhibition and the other writings in this exhibition catalogue to expand on the impact of Earth Work, your expression “we made space” leads me to recall Constance’s recent evocation of that period. She said, “The Seventies was a time of Singapore developing its museum knowhow. At NMAG, I tried to create a big white-shed. I came to this realisation after a study trip in USA with over twenty curators, with US State Department funding – what Singapore wanted was white walls with [lighting] tracks and power points on the floor for vitrines.”

CWY Constance has an amazing sense of space – one day, as NMAG’s construction was still going on in 1975, Hooi suggested the three of us walk around. The architect responsible for the renovations was from Hong Kong, and he showed us some wall colours that he was considering for the galleries—they were deep tones—and I immediately mentioned that the proposed colors would not work. I said, “No matter which colour you choose, the whole gallery will be ruined. With carpets, you are competing with the painting!” Later on, fortunately, there were some budgetary issues; we did not have enough money, so they kept the exposed wooden floors! Constance and I decided on white. Another shock I received was the floor. The architect had already chosen his favourite carpet colour – light pink or something like that. Having gone through the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I said, “No matter which colour you choose, the whole gallery will be ruined. With carpets, you are competing with the painting!” Later on, fortunately, there were some budgetary issues; we did not have enough money, so they kept the exposed wooden floors! Constance and I went around and I said, “What’s wrong with this?” There were a few cracks on the floor. I recall that she responded, “This effect is quite good, let’s just fill the cracks.” Although the architect already had some designs. The theatrette seats, for instance, were in primary colors. One other significant aspect to me was the ceiling height in the galleries. Hooi called the architect and inquired why the ceiling was so low. The architect’s response was “Well, I’m designing your gallery to make it cosy and comfortable – like a coffee house.” My reply was, “Look, that’s precisely my point, this is not a coffee house.” I asked him for higher ceilings and said, “Well, if you came back from New York, would you want to see Jackson Pollock paintings? Have you heard of him? Pollock’s paintings are eight feet high.” Many liked the space and its simplicity.
It had to be done.

I particularly like that you use the term ‘negotiate’ to describe the labour of presenting the modern, because it was a gradual process at NMAG. In 1976, Constance had returned from a study trip to the USA and I from MIT – it was not only good timing but a great partnership. I recall that when NMAG was being conceptualised, Hooi studied different UNESCO position papers and even proposed that the most sustainable model (considering our limited resources) would be to operate as an ‘art centre’ or kunsthalle – NMAG would not maintain a collection or acquire art. Eventually, we decided to stick with the museological model, although it was through the exhibitions that we began to track various streams operating within the Singapore art scene. The National Museum Art Gallery Open Exhibition in 1976 was one such platform. It was an opportunity for artists to exhibit and for new talent to be discovered. Likewise, the ASEAN projects started too. For instance, in 1985, we organised and hosted the travelling Third ASEAN Exhibition of Paintings and Photography.

Artists networks proliferated and early comparative frameworks began to take shape…?

Ng Eng Teng became quite well-known with Damrong Wong-Uparaj, who arranged a show for him in Thailand. By the 1980s, NMAG was gaining credibility amongst the ASEAN countries. This was also the time when NMAG became involved in the 1981 ASEAN Sculpture Symposium. I often had to manage expectations, "Look, we are only starting, we are barely even a museum." More than one top Filipino artist wrote to me to have a retrospective at NMAG. Alas, we could not afford the space. Singapore was, somehow, international.

This is an edited and abridged version of a combination of three different conversations that took place at National Gallery Singapore in November 2015. Choy Weng Yang and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa thank Joleen Loh for the original transcriptions and tireless editorial work.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa is Senior Curator at National Gallery Singapore, where he researches art from Southeast Asia. He was formerly Curator (South-Southeast Asia) at the NUS Museum, where his approach centred on deploying archival texts as ploys in engaging different modes of thinking and writing. Most recently, he was curator of the Singapore Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, which presented SEA STATE by Charles Lim Yi Yong.

Choy Weng Yang is a Singaporean artist, curator and arts writer. Choy graduated with a National Diploma of Art from Hornsey College of Art in 1962 and received the Art Teachers’ Certificate from the University of London Institute of Education in 1963. In 1972, he was awarded the UNESCO Fellowship in Creative Arts and conducted research at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies. From 1978 to 1985, Choy was Curator of Art at the National Museum Art Gallery in Singapore.
End Notes


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