The Neglected Dimension

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Published by National Gallery Singapore

Rahadiningtyas, Anissa.
The Neglected Dimension.

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It has become almost clichéd to introduce yet another “project space” within the confines of the modern art museum, considering how the model has proliferated globally in the past decade. How did we, in such a short period of time, reach this point of self-referential superabundance? What do these “project spaces” offer? What concerns do they speak to? Several claim to offer insights into lesser studied or suppressed stories within the experience of modern art; or at least begin to acknowledge the silences inhabiting exhibitionary projects due to social prejudice, caused by historical and contemporary biases. Many “project spaces” seek to generate narratives through case studies gathered under a shared curatorial thematic. Some even push the envelope of the modern by resuscitating non-Western cultural objects, which are often bereft of “authorship” (at least in terms of how traditionalist streams of art history register the creator), in innovative ways. Many of these objects had entered museum collections in the former metropoles and colonies via the insults of colonialism. Another approach emphasises engaging contemporary artists who are at the forefront of innovations in their field. These contemporary artists investigate museum collections as a means of bridging the silences of the past with the urgencies of the present. As museums become more willing to interrogate themselves on aesthetic and political grounds, some have even begun to facilitate “takeovers” of their “project spaces” by constituents linked to social justice movements.
No matter the approach, the resulting exhibits are positioned within the modern museum’s ongoing attempts at remaining agile in its programming. They also harness the recent upsurge in decolonising narratives, staking a claim for the legitimacy of subaltern knowledge systems. The impulse appears to be the same across varied contexts: curators and museum professionals around the world are no longer able to shy away from addressing inequalities, including that of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and are beginning to recognise the need to be more open to self-critique. Just as the “white cube” proliferated across the world as a method for display in the modern museum of the 1960s and 1970s, the “project space” now replicates on a planetary level. It is part of our collective moment, wherein artists, curators, publics, and other museum constituents are putting forward a set of shared ethical paradigms for a knowledge base that seeks to guarantee shared access and exposure. The “project space” is a node in this constellation of change.

The aim of Dalam Southeast Asia (the National Gallery Singapore’s “project space” located within its long-term display, *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*) is to contribute to this moment of self-reflexivity from the vantage point of territorial Southeast Asia. By inviting curators at the Gallery to devise questions and then develop strategies to address them, Dalam Southeast Asia argues for lesser-known narratives. By directly questioning the ways in which the modern art of Southeast Asia is displayed and written about, Dalam Southeast Asia aspires to recalibrate what a long-term collections-based display is, and what it may seek to achieve.
“Dalam” is a Malay word meaning “inside.” It is used in everyday parlance to invite someone to enter a place or room. The word also carries esoteric undertones suggesting the “deep,” “within” or “interior,” pointing towards that aspect of the Self which is perceptible but also yet to be revealed. The word has been adopted by several artists. Simryn Gill’s celebrated suite of 260 photographs depicting the interiors of Malaysian homes, titled Dalam (2001), offers insights into the visual phenomenon that is the contemporary living room—a place where one seeks refuge from the vagaries of everyday life, but which is also built up part by part as an expression of one’s relationship with popular culture. Likewise, “Dalam” is the title of a painting from 1975 by S. Mohdir that surveys the depths of the ocean. The work is a description of perception, whether directed outwards or inwards, as it announces the indelible realisation that modern man is merely a speck in the universe. Gill and Mohdir remind us that art is not separate from reflexivity, and reflexivity is not separate from art.

Since its inauguration in 2015, Between Declarations and Dreams has been an attempt at generating an ideal sort of “provincialism” that refuses to submit to the homogenising effects of the Euro-American master narrative of art. The long-term exhibition features almost 400 works of Southeast Asian art ranging from the mid-19th century to the present, and an evolving curatorium has been systematically “rotating” over 100 works every year. In this pursuit, the display has sought to develop its own distinctive capacities (drawing on crucial primary research and fieldwork conducted by the curatorium across Asia, Western...
Europe, the United States, and elsewhere) for shaping what is now a shared story of global modernism. In this way, *Between Declarations and Dreams* lays claim to the Euro-American canon and its futures. Curating from this vantage point allow us to strive for decolonising modernism’s structures; as a result, allowing for multiple anachronistic worlds to thrive.

The idea of a project space at National Gallery Singapore has been with me for some time. It emerged from three key concerns, discerned from years of sustaining a unique long-term display that focuses on the geographical region of Southeast Asia. Although the concerns I outline below are specific to the Gallery, they may apply to any major collecting institution with a focus on the non-West.

Firstly, we have too often relied on art history to establish the legitimacy of narratives before including them in *Between Declarations and Dreams*. Whilst it may be wiser for curators to follow the art historians hypothesising as a prelude to display, Dalam Southeast Asia seeks to present works in a format that is first and foremost “contingent on display,” i.e., presenting bodies of work that have not received sustained art historical attention, so that the exhibition becomes a realm for generating perspectives on artistic processes and their relationship with burgeoning concerns in society. In this way, the modern in Southeast Asia registers its relevance to the present, and our collective efforts to forge a future art history that is diverse. This potential is unlocked by suggesting that the process of display—alongside public dialogues, careful captioning, and copious compilations of curatorial notes—is an extension of the didactic role of the museum. Dalam Southeast Asia is thus a
rehearsal for a forthcoming art history, and those that experience the exhibition are its first readers.

Secondly, we need to begin challenging the very narratives we have set up since 2015 within the galleries that make up the chronological display of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, and actively resist the singularising effects of such a canon-building venture. By exploring dilemmas and silences that have governed the ability of curators to narrate stories within modern museums, Dalam Southeast Asia seeks to contribute to a more inclusive but “uneven” narrative of modern Southeast Asian art, one which remains a work in progress. In this way, Dalam Southeast Asia aspires to enable our publics to recognise that the stories we offer ought to be understood as contingent and open to revision with the passage of time. This process will need to be undertaken with care, because we also do not want to be seen as turning to the margins as a convenient way to access narratives without fully unravelling the problems of the centre. After all, it is the task of each new generation to revise the narratives that have been handed down by actively addressing the exclusionary practices of the past.

Thirdly, it has become increasingly important to stand outside the vending machine of art. This is a demand being made not by curators and museum professionals, but by publics around the world: that museums become responsive to and reflect the concerns of the communities they seek to serve. Increasingly, museums are being challenged to represent diverse voices, reduce carbon footprints, adopt digital interfaces, and claim a place for themselves as providing essential goods for everyday consumption. As a result, it has become imperative to produce an interior space (*dalam*) that talks about how curated
projects can engage with this trajectory. What does “curating” collections-based displays mean today? In this pursuit, Dalam Southeast Asia prototypes the small format exhibition that testbeds speculative approaches to curatorial research and exhibition design. For instance, the curators developing the various exhibitions have not only engaged artists or artist’s estates in conversations but also consulted a range of constituents to fill gaps in the production of cultural meaning. Curators must actively ask how their work in the field should and must have broader implications. With each exhibition, the hope is to devise more responsive approaches for the display of modern art within the museum.

To reiterate: The inauguration of Dalam Southeast Asia marks a significant turning point in the Gallery’s curatorial efforts to display, acquire and stimulate public dialogues around the dilemmas confronting the modern art of Southeast Asia. By locating Dalam Southeast Asia strategically within the framework of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, we seek to balance the familiar vocabularies with the lesser known, generate public and semi-public conversations, and perhaps create new values around the growing awareness that whatever power museums have is granted to them by the constituents they depend on to do their work.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa  
National Gallery Singapore  
15 July 2021
Postscript 1, 15 July 2022—On Curatorial Responsibility

It has been a year since we launched Dalam Southeast Asia. During this time, the project space has enabled the curatorium at the Gallery to engage with the challenges that were identified at the outset, ranging from the ability to develop newer sets of ethical paradigms that enable more inclusive measures for accessing art, to allowing the “curatorial” to act as a space for hypothesising an art history that is yet to come. The inaugural exhibition, *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, which ran from 29 October 2021 to 12 June 2022, generated turns that paid homage to the incredible lives both artists led and the array of materials and objects they left behind. *The Tailors and the Mannequins* re-emphasised the role modern art museums must (and will continue to) play in facilitating the circulation of stories that have yet to receive sustained art historical attention. This was achieved through the tireless work of Roger Nelson—my colleague and curator of the show—in engaging the artists and their estates alongside a series of specialists in a number of wide-ranging conversations that not only enabled gaps to be filled in a meaningful manner but also initiated the public into a vast realm of associated histories that pertain to forced migration and the ability of the Southeast Asian artist to display their art in environments where infrastructure was still in the midst of being formed.

Moreover, the exhibition pointed to the manifold lateral links between Southeast Asia and other regions across the decolonising world (collectively known as the Global South), including in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. As this process unfolded in the lead up to and during the exhibition via a series of public conversations, it became possible to reflect upon the sovereignty that curators (and by extension public art institutions) continue to exercise over the artworks they display, especially when curatorial enchantment actively seeks meaning within the painting’s subject matter but also beyond the boundaries of the artwork, whereby circulation and distribution is seen as an endearing facet of how one may consume the work of art today, in our time. This means that the authorial agendas of the artwork may be sublimated into a demonstration of contemporaneity, whereby the curator acts as an agent who resides within and at the edge of the culture that delivers the subject matter and context for the art. As the different Dalam Southeast Asia projects unfold, it will be pertinent to maintain notes on how this phenomenon unfolds and the techniques each curator develops to enhance accountability for the way artworks, materials, archival traces, and most importantly the stories we are entrusted with are used.

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To access curatorial texts and programmes associated with *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, please visit: [https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins](https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins)
Postscript 2, 15 July 2023—On Curatorial Transmission

The second exhibition at *Dalam Southeast Asia* raised a range of questions on “curatorial transmissions,” especially in relation to the presentation of Southeast Asian modern art. With *Familiar Others: Emiria Sunassa, Eduardo Masferré and Yeh Chi Wei, 1940s–1970s*, curated by my colleague Phoebe Scott, the thorny issue of “Otherness” and who can carry the burden of its representation in light of postcolonial thought came to the fore. As part of the exhibitionary form and narrative, Scott engaged a range of interlocutor-respondents from communities said to be represented in the artworks to respond to the paintings, photographs and archival matter on display. Common practice suggests that these messages—highlighting “potential issues” that have emerged in relation to modes of representation as ethical, philosophical and social conventions have shifted over time—be included in the catalogue, discussed in public programmes, or relegated to the bottom of artwork labels. Instead, *Familiar Others* placed these messages—often critical and working in tandem—front and centre alongside the artworks, suggesting that the didactic and educative function of the art institution be challenged by an overstaging of concerns that can now, potentially, reveal a range of issues related to the messaging of modern Southeast Asian art. I would like to speak to one such pressing matter: the “collectivism” suggested through such an experience of modern art.

From the outset, the curatorial intent of *Dalam Southeast Asia* has been about challenging the prevalent modes of presentation within the art institution. This concern has emerged from a movement taking place across museums as they seek to convert their largely white cube-led narratives (which emphasise the autonomy of the modern artwork) into sites of active public engagement. In this new mode, quiet contemplation is an option but not necessarily the norm—so much so that the beholder is now assumedly a talkative agent, socially engaged and culturally conscious. The underlying curatorial assumption is to generate an exhibitionary mode that offers a critical insight into the historical and present conditions from which pictures emerge. For *Familiar Others*, the artworks are immersed into such a collective ethos of introspection through a range of poetic and essay fragments generated by external agents other than the curators, effectively calling into question any suggestion of the museum as an impartial mediator of perspectives. How such an awareness can be sustained, enhanced, and made productive remains to be seen. For the moment, I offer this observation: We seem to be moving towards a curatorial constructivism whereby the museum’s transcendental promise is being carefully reconstituted by the urge for an inclusive social order promoting collective interaction and a sense of community. This constructivism is premised upon a growing public awareness, at times driven by forces beyond museum workers, that the art institution and its narratives, no matter how naturalistic and certain they appear, are merely historical constructions. It is now, as the saying goes, a matter of time.
Examples of “project spaces” located within major European and American museums includes the following: (i) Stedelijk Turns, which is a room within the Dutch museum’s collections display (commonly known as Stedelijk Base). Stedelijk Turns features “new discoveries, commissions, and acquisitions” that have a direct impact on the museum’s collection. (ii) Salle Focus, which the Musée National d’Art Moderne maintains within the Centre Pompidou’s long-term displays. It is meant to present lesser-studied figures within the story of modernism and host contemporary art interventions. (iii) Minor Histories, an exhibitionary and discursive programme by the Van Abbe Museum, which features “pieces from the collection that have received less attention over the years, as well as recent acquisitions that uniquely represent the times, we live in.”

In Singapore, the NUS Museum hosts preproom | things that may or may not happen, an experimental project platform that features artworks, cultural objects, and archives as they are being accessioned, reworked or revised in relation to the museum’s extensive historical collections of art. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which does not maintain an extensive collection, has hosted MAM Projects, a gallery that attracts similar inquiries. The NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore carved out The Lab, the Centre’s “space for introducing research in process and as an open studio for activation.”

Another recent shift in this genre of space building is the “experimental project lab,” which attempts to bridge visual art with debates in advanced technologies. The LACMA runs The Art + Technology Lab, a joint initiative with Hyundai, YouTube, SNAP Inc and SpaceX for exploring the convergence of art and technology. Similarly, MoMA’s Creativity Lab hosts The People’s Studio, where “visitors can learn about and experiment with artists’ strategies that rely on exchange, shared reflection, and collaboration.”

The inaugural hang in 2015 of Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century was developed by Cheng Jia Yun, Clarissa Chikiamco, Horikawa Lisa, Phoebe Scott, Syed Muhammad Hafiz, and Adele Tan. Since 2016, the curatorium has also included Goh Sze Ying, Qinyi Lim, Shujuan Lim, Anisha Menon, Roger Nelson, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Melinda Susanto, and Charmaine Toh. Alongside extensive efforts at surveying the Southeast Asian collections and developing detailed captions, the curatorium has actively sought key long-term loans from institutional and private lenders to address gaps in the chronological displays. For instance, a highlighted gap has been the mid-19th century displays, which has benefited from generous loans of works by Raden Saleh and Juan Luna from the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Lopez Memorial Museum respectively.