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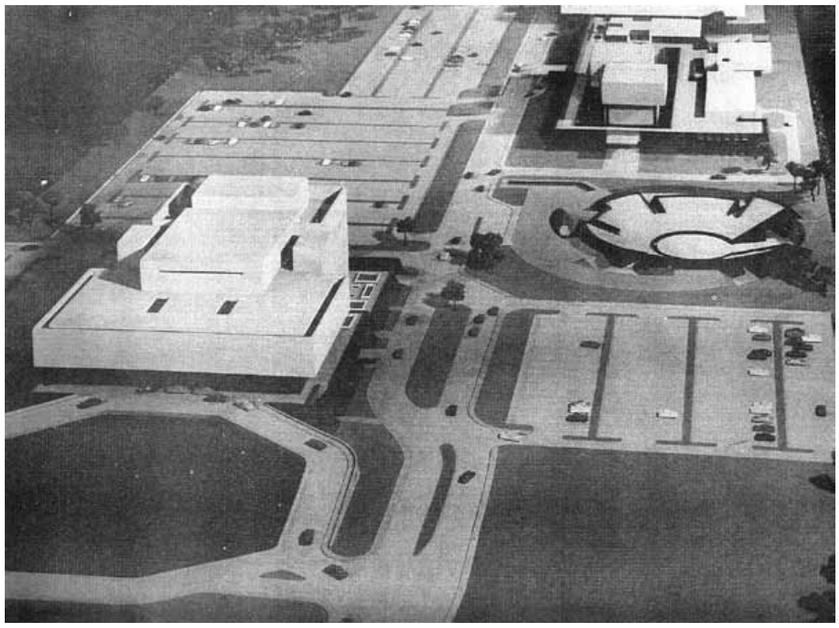
Curatorial Circulations in Southeast Asia

In Bangkok during the nineteenth century, the Thai king of the Chakri dynasty, Chulalongkorn, reserved a place in the royal palace for a museum he called *phrabas phiphitaphan*, or "a tour of various materials."[1] In the early part of the twentieth century, the American anthropologist, census-taker, and museum maker Dean Worcester went around the islands of the Philippines to document ethnicity. These forays share something with the toils of British explorer Sir Stamford Raffles, who, as recounted by an attentive observer, hoarded his people and things: "He kept four persons on wages, each in his peculiar department; one to go to the forests in search of various kinds of flowers, fungi, pulp, and such like products. Another he sent to collect all kinds of flies, grasshoppers, centipedes, bees, scorpions."[2]

The intersection between the amassing of objects and people through the devices of the *wunderkammer* (a collection of objects without defined categories) and anthropometry (the study of human physical measurement in anthropology), well known in the discourse of reconnaissance, leads us to ponder the scale of the colonial in relation to the scale of the modern, the monument of empire and the miniature of periphery. Over time, this act of rendering the world picturesque and therefore collectible may be coincidental with the act of representation of both the self and the state, as can be gleaned in the efforts of the Thai king, the American social scientist, and the British discoverer. The colonized subject who is spoken for in the fullness of time internalizes this longing to not only be represented but also to be part of the representation of the modern beyond the auspices of the colony or the kingdom. The portrait of the nineteenth-century Indonesian painter Raden Saleh, the first Asian to have his work exhibited in a European salon, at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, attests to this aspiration in which the ethnographic and the exotic, inscribed in the image of a Javanese partaking of Europe self-consciously, craft the conditions of appearance and possession: to be enchanted, to transfigure, and finally to be had. The Filipino National Hero Jose Rizal would later call this kind of bedeviling or bewitching, *el demonio de las comparaciones*, the "spell of recollection" or "phantasm of affinities," or, in the translation of historian Benedict Anderson, the "specter of comparisons."[3]

The postwar republics of Southeast Asia, after consolidating their nation-states in the wake of postcolonial revolutions against European powers and in the shadow of the Cold War, invested in nation-building initiatives, alongside industrialization and modernization, in which the production of official culture was central. Exemplary of these exercises



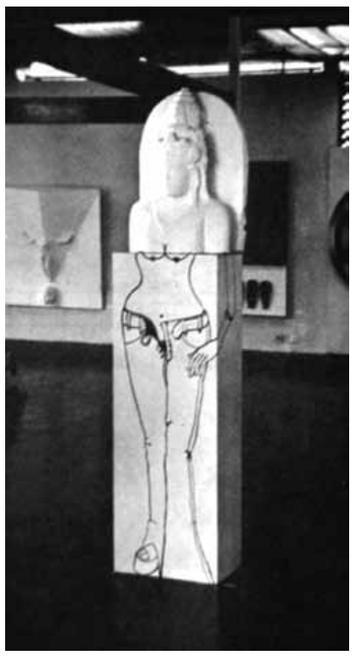
Model of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Courtesy of Arkitektura Filipino Online.

Imelda Marcos in front of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, circa 1960s.

Lobby view of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

were the programs of Suharto, in Indonesia, and Ferdinand Marcos, in the Philippines. The so-called strongman rule in these countries created a coordinated system of cultural infrastructure revolving around nationalism and a national civilization. In Indonesia, the anti-Dutch hero Sukarno began this agenda with commemorative statuary in Jakarta that was continued by his successor Suharto. In Manila, Imelda Marcos undertook an extensive public-works project, reclaiming a large part of Manila Bay, and built a complex of edifices for culture and world-class events like the Miss Universe pageant, in 1974, and the International Monetary Fund-World Bank meetings, in 1976. The iconic monument of this vision is the Cultural Center of the Philippines, which advanced the cultural policy of the government to foster an at once internationalist and nativist aesthetic form. In this elaborate measure, Suharto and Marcos envisioned the multitude of islands and ethnicities as a unity under the paternalist aegis of development. To condense such vastness into an impossible singularity, they built, among other endeavours in the realm of language and culture, miniature archipelagoes in veritable theme parks called Nayong Pilipino (Philippine Village) and Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Beautiful Indonesia Miniature Park).[4]

Jim Supangkat, Indonesian curator.



Jim Supangkat, *Ken Dedes*, 1975, mixed media, 180 x 40 x 30 cm.

This totalizing impulse was resisted, together with the orthodoxy of the art academy—a resistance that is referenced in the manifestos of such artist coteries as the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia, or Indonesian New Art Movement, and the Kaisahan, or Solidarity, in 1975 and 1976, respectively. The nucleus of the formation of such resistance had deep roots in the early part of the twentieth century. The *sanggar* or workshop in Indonesia was a critical community in which artists met and discussed art. The Persagi or Union of Painters led by Sinduotomo Sudjojono in 1938 advocated a nationalist style "for the people" as a critique of what was perceived as the idealization of the locale or what was dismissed as *Mooi Indië*, or the beautiful but corrupted, Indies. This mode of gathering proved to be so potent a force that it would be drawn to ideological allegiance, as in the case of Lekra (Organization of People's Culture), another incarnation of the workshop that was known to have had sympathies with socialism, having been conceived at the behest of the Communist Party in the fifties, during Sukarno's time. This political lineage was to be stigmatized by the Suharto regime, leading to what the art historian Jim Supangkat has called the "depoliticization" of art in the seventies; its "repoliticization"[5] through the Gerakan may have effected a break between the modern and the contemporary and sought, as the manifesto contended, "to ensure the sustainability of culture" in which "it is the artist's calling to offer a spiritual direction based on humanitarian values and oriented toward social, cultural, political and economic realities."[6] An emblematic work from this period is Supangkat's 1975 sculpture of Ken Dedes, revered queen of the royal lineage during the Rajasa dynasty, who ruled Java from the Singhasari to the Majapahit era, roughly from the early thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Cast in chalky plaster, the face of Ken Dedes, who is chronicled to have exuded such stunning beauty and wisdom that men killed for it, is delineated cosmetically, primed with fiery red lipstick. The torso is painted on a pedestal that serves as the surface on which her lower body appears, with uncovered breasts and dressed in tight denim pants, unzipped so that wisps of pubic hair are revealed. The work is fragmented, consisting of a bust that alludes to the stone statuary of a Southeast Asian empire to which the Suharto government pretended for pedigree and a minimal plinth that contains the rest of the stripped corpus, including blue jeans and unshod feet, which may imply urban and contemporary mores. This work sparked outrage in the world's densest Islamic nation.

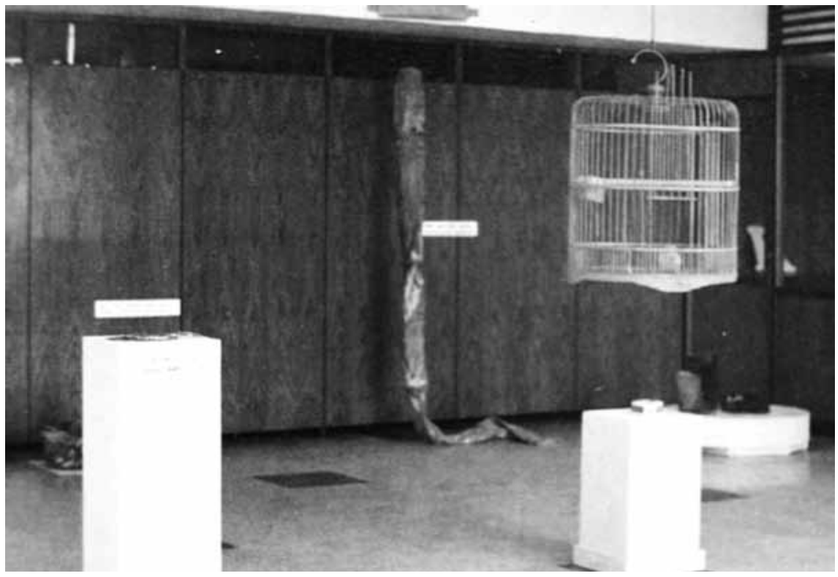
In the Philippines, the social realist movement had links to the ideology of the armed revolution, which had appropriated a Maoist pedagogy

in its strategy and tactics. In the field of art, it looked to Mao Zedong's doctrine on culture, specifically his description of the people's new culture as national, scientific, and mass, in a 1940 article titled "The Culture of New Democracy." The New People's Army, the armed organization of the socialist movement, soldiers on to this day, making it one of the few remaining actual revolutions in the world. Perhaps it is in this context that the contingency of the national allegory becomes salient. The manifesto of the Filipino artists leaning toward its ideology declared in the seventies: "We believe that national identity is not to be found in a nostalgic love of the past or an idealized view of our traditions and history. It cannot be achieved by using the common symbols of our national experience without understanding the reality that lies within them."[7] An early 1971 work by the United Progressive Artists and Architects consisted of a reinterpretation of Juan Luna's nineteenth-century painting *Spoliarium*, which was conferred a gold prize at the Madrid Exposition in 1884, depicting a spoliarium, the cellar of the Roman coliseum where gladiators were despoiled and burned in the furnace. The Filipino revolutionaries at that time read into it an allegory of the colonial condition under Spain, an interpretation pursued by the latter-day social realists to portray the trifecta of inequity: American imperialism, bureaucrat capitalism, and feudalism.

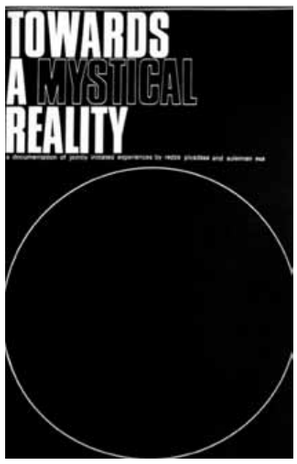
These aforementioned instances carve the political in sharp relief, animating the production of art and its complicity with the people and social transformation. Surely, such an engagement with the political would render art prone to the instrumentalization of ideology, something that a cognitive mapping of a totality of radical change requires in tension with the equally radical particularities of the subjective and the aesthetic.

The idea of a coherent tradition and its vitiation by singular power and sometimes coextensively with the "West" was a notion at play in this political struggle. Collectives like the Dharma Group, in 1971, and The Artists Front of Thailand, in 1974, came to the fore in the context of the bloody struggle between civil society and the military government of the period in Thailand. Pratuang Emjaroen's *Dharma and Adharma* (1973–74) distills the ferment of the time by intuiting the 1973 turbulence (reprised in 1976 and 1992) in Bangkok by way of Buddhism: *dharma* (truth, righteousness, justice) and *adharma* (evil, wrong, injustice, immorality). As the artist himself stated: "I wanted to capture the feeling of confusion, shock, and horror . . . The face of Buddha is symbolic of Thai people who have been hurt; his eyes are closed, tears are streaming, bullet holes are shot across his face."[8]

It is important to note that this surrealistic inclination was part of the more fulsome syntax of the neo-traditional aesthetic of Thai mural painting, as social transformation may have also meant a return to traditional values of Thai folk culture and Buddhism, supposedly untainted by the perversion of the modern or the metropolitan. The neo-traditional in Thailand dwelled on the notion of Thainess in a political register; this identity as an essence or life-force was decisively politicized because it dared to interrogate the basis of and longing for art itself. The fine arts school Silpakorn, founded by the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci, set up the Department of Thai Art in 1977, in the midst of the internecine upheavals.



Installation view of Towards a Mystic Reality, 1974, Dewan Bahasa dan Pusaka, Kuala Lumpur, curated by Rezda Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa.



Poster for Towards a Mystic Reality, 1974, Dewan Bahasa dan Pusaka, Kuala Lumpur, curated by Rezda Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa.

Still, in the same season, in 1974, Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, styling themselves as "mystical conceptualists," curated an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur of "jointly initiated experiences" they called Towards a Mystical Reality, with a manifesto that elaborated on a different mode of perceiving reality beyond the pale of the West. According to them: "It is our contention that there are alternate ways of approaching reality and the Western empirical and humanistic viewpoints are not the only valid ones there are."[9] Piyadasa was likewise staunchly opposed to the reduction of Malaysian subjectivity to a pan-Islamic ecumene, actively engaged in the critique of the conflation of ethnicity with faith. One of his works titled *May 13, 1969* (1970) comments on the ethnic riots between the Malays and the Chinese in 1969, and other works reconceptualize art through pieces bearing texts like: "Why did the Chinese artist refuse to halt reality in a single instance of time?" and "Artworks do not exist in time, they have entry points."

The episode of modernity in Southeast Asia is, therefore, rooted in such a sequence of incidents. The promise of postcolonial critique within a broader dialectic of liberation was conceived in democratic movements, activism, and community. This collective ethic may be key in our understanding of the interdisciplinary, collaborative, and cooperative social engagement in contemporary art in Southeast Asia that challenges the authority of collections in the form of the history of art and the history of nation. This "collectivity" and inevitably the impulse for a "collection" may have condensed in the curator. My broad survey of the history and the current situation of curators in Southeast Asia reveals the following types of curators. It is with caution, however, that I use the word curator, with keen attention to the nuanced declensions of the term in an art ecology that is in many ways improvised, confounded by the social movements surrounding it, importuned by the need to be specialized in keeping with international standards, and idiosyncratic in its tessellation of tactics.

First is the artist-curator, who in Southeast Asia in the seventies and eighties was seen as an "avant-garde" figure seeking to question the idea and material condition of art by proposing a different form of practice. There is in this modality a kind of institutional critique on the part of the artist who later engages in curatorial practice because of the competence to critically reflect on what it is that is happening, to gather a coterie of likeminded artists to sustain it, to historicize it and represent it beyond national boundaries through discourse and theory. Here, the artist-curator is a provocateur, a ludic figure, a public intellectual, an innovator, and a crisis maker within modernity.

Second is the art historian, trained in the discipline and working within the institution of the museum. The practice of the art historian who becomes a curator creates a body of initiations that builds up an art historical discourse that reconsiders the ramifications of modernity in Southeast Asia and its relationship with contemporary art. The art historian-curator, who is engaged to the museum institution with a markedly fraught colonial history, abides by the efficacy of art history as a method or procedure in figuring the extent of a modernist premise. All this is situated within the latitude of the contemporary and converses with Eurocentric art history through a critical narrative and an equivalent modernity that is reflexively normative.

Third is the peer, more often than not belonging to the same generation of artists, who eventually takes on the tasks of a curator, organizing peers in exhibitions, thus defining a peer-to-peer relationship within the curatorial scheme. Along this grid, the curator gains social capital from contemporaries and explores access to them almost as a matter of course. This curatorial personality is rather interesting because while it is very prone to market co-optation because of its proximity to the production of art, it is also similarly closest to artist-run spaces and the other improvised scenarios of contemporary art. This gives rise to an embedded curator, a conspirator in the adventure, and in the experimental, tactical time of contemporary artists.

Fourth is the networker-curator, who attempts to develop practice outside institutions but nevertheless generates an alternative structure, one that is more rhizomic, emerging from multiple circuits of various interests. The high level of relationality in this arrangement enables this type of curator to venture into intersecting terrains of practice, forms, and areas not necessarily national, as well as into such processes as workshops, dialogues, residencies, events like performance art and film festivals, and gatherings of community in general. It is this curator, a strategist in many ways, who is most predisposed to collaborate with international non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations and assimilate their advocacies, together with their funding streams, under such broad rubrics as the "creative industry" (including heritage) and "culture and development," into contemporary art. It could also be that this curator is not from the locality and may be seen as an expatriate whose tenure in regional practice is variable.

Fifth is the professional independent curator, raised in a curatorial program overseas within what usually is a practice-led institution. This curator is relatively relieved of the burden of art history and its dialectical critique and more liberal in citing conceptual assumptions from varied traditions

of inquiry. The curatorial knowledge deployed here is decisively oriented toward the contemporary as well as the infrastructure of the contemporary to which the professional independent curator is drawn. The layers of this system—from teachers to peers to curators to gallerists to critics to editors and commentators—surround the practice and guarantee entry-level position in the worldwide curatorium. It is this sort of curator who is keen on the biennial paradigm and its mutations and is astute in seeking resources across the milieu. A class analysis may also be considered in probing the practice of this curator, who studies and lives abroad and imbibes the customs of a confident, well-connected curatorial and artistic sector and promotes certain tastes and standards in the locality upon return.

Finally there is the gallery personnel, who assume the role of curator through the art-market network laid out across the region by galleries that have set up different collaborations beyond their original site of operation. It is through this art-market agent who gathers symbolic capital through training and travel that contemporary art is parlayed into the market with both financial and curatorial value. This curator is an entrepreneur who coordinates interlocking markets through relationships with nation-state instrumentalities like government, the local elite, museums, galleries, collectors, and auction houses, and takes all this to a transnational level.

The other prospect of this essay is to offer possible ways of explaining the consequences of these modalities of curatorial practice in Southeast Asia.

First is the shift from institutional critique to some kind of parallel institutionality. Whether this institutionality is to be regarded as critical is arguable. But what is apparent is that power accrues to this institutionality through curatorial work. And what is also clear is that this institutionality is a modified one that redistributes power formerly concentrated in, let us say, the state or the market, without necessarily negating the sources of such power, which may actually turn out to be the state or the market.

Second is the movement beyond national representation, with curatorial practice making certain that the contemporary art of a locality achieves a transnational circulation and reception, with the curator acting as agent of the mobility, facilitating that art as a level of locality that survives the translation of the global (that it is comparable) or enhancing this locality so that it survives the globality of translation (that it is comparative). This transnational movement may explain how forms coming out of fragile modernities could leapfrog into the public sphere of contemporary art.

Third is the possibility of the reconfiguration of curatorial power from a vertical one that was largely conceptualized within institutions to a horizontal platform in which more lateral, reciprocal, interactive relationships could take place and prosper among the various agents of contemporary art.

Fourth is the insertion of local curators into the global curatorium through the rites of passage secured in foreign educational systems, internships, residencies, and so on. This development effectively eludes the national institutions of validation for curators and introduces a somewhat highly

specialized neoliberal approach to contemporary culture that is no longer beholden to the particularity of discipline and the universality of the humanistic perspective.

Last is the ascendancy of the primary and secondary markets, the boundaries of which in Southeast Asia are blurred, which has transmitted contemporary art more quickly and with more versatility partly through the quick-change personas of the curator, whose ties with the market are deep and lasting and whose aspirations to the capital of a critical contemporary art are equally unwavering.

All told, the curator, in his or her circulation in these channels in Southeast Asia and beyond, is informed by a history of a turbulent political life in the seventies, the economic developments and their decline in the nineties, the surge in the art market in the last decade, and the integration of commodity systems of art in the current time in which the biennial and the art fair are the platforms par excellence. Along with the verticality of the integration of the art system is the lateral consolidation of strategies through artist-led or self-organized projects, the effort to constitute a region of art called "Asia-Pacific" with its own processes of making and intuiting art, and the formation of a discursive community that rethinks the circumstances of contemporaneity in this part of the world. The curator is an agency in this assemblage, one among many whose name is legion.

This paper is partly derived from two presentations: "Collection/Collective: Tracing the Southeast Asian Contemporary," for the Annual CIMAM Conference held in Shanghai, China, in 2010, and "Curatorial Circulations in Southeast Asia," for the symposium Curating in Asia, organized by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2011, as part of exhibition The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989.

Notes

1 Cary Caverlee, "In the image of the king: Two photographs from nineteenth-century Siam," *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*, ed. Nora A.Taylor (New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2000), 132.

2 Gretchen Liu, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum* (Singapore: National Museum, 1987), 15.

3 Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Ma. Soledad Lacson-Locsin (Manila: Bookmark, 1996), 67.

4 Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture and Political Culture in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth and Marcos State Architecture* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2000).

5 Jim Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond* (Jakarta: Indonesian Fine Arts Foundation, 1997).

6 Sumartono, "The Role of Power in Contemporary Yogyakartan Art," *Outlet: Yogyakarta Within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene* (Jogjakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 2001), 23.

7 Alice Guillermo, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990* (Manila: University of the Philippines, 2001), 243.

8 See Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 162. See also John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998).

9 Redza Piyadasa, *Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1974), 21.