

## **Cold War Cultural Networks: The Construction of Southeast Asia as a Regional Art Scene**

Convenors: Kathleen Ditzig and Simon Soon, Independent Curators and Researchers

The emergence of Southeast Asia as an art market has been dated to 2009. If we are to believe the source of such a claim, the Deloitte Art Tactic Art and Finance Report of 2014, it would seem that Southeast Asia as a regional art scene is a contemporary construct, defined primarily by the prospecting of an International art market. However, the national art scenes that constitute a regional Southeast Asia have historically been marked by evolving networks of exchange that have allowed for shared discourse and practices to develop. Such networks were particularly pronounced after World War II, during the Cold War, when Southeast Asia as a region was defined as a significant stage for world politics. As Carlos P Romulo, the then Ambassador of the Philippines to the United States described in 1953, Southeast Asia was “the theatre of conflict between the free world and the Soviet world” representing in “large measure the margin between victory and defeat for freedom”<sup>1</sup>. It was in this context of a cultural war for the hearts and minds of the nations of Southeast Asia that the networks of exchange carried travelling exhibitions, art, ideas, enterprise and political discourse across national borders providing the fodder for national cultures of the countries that constitute the region.

This panel brings together a series of papers that explores the lineages and networks of exchange that have shaped the political foundations, discourse and practices of art from Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

### **Panel**

Chair: Kathleen Ditzig, Independent Curator, [kat=ditzig@gmail.com](mailto:kat=ditzig@gmail.com) / Discussant: Ho Tzu Nyen, Artist

- 1. Localising Discourse and the Engineering of the Human Soul in 1950s Singapore and Indonesia**  
Simon Soon, Independent Researcher
- 2. The Demands of Abstraction: Exhibiting the Non-Objective in Manila in 1953,**  
Patrick Flores, Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, Curator of the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum, Manila and Adjunct Curator of the National Art Gallery, Singapore
- 3. Free Enterprise and Modern Art in Southeast Asia**  
Kathleen Ditzig, Independent Curator and Research, Singapore
- 4. Curating a region: Charisma and Leadership in Sihanouk's performances and Shui Tit Sing's art**  
Vera Mey, (SOAS, University of London)
- 5. The British Grand Design: Winning the 'Hearts and Minds' of Malaysians through Art in Post War Malaya**  
Seng Yu Jin, Curator, National Gallery Singapore

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Position of Southeast Asia in the World Community*, a paper Carlos P Romulo presented at the “Southeast Asia in the Coming World”, organised by the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, with the generous cooperation of the Rockefeller Foundation, sponsored in Washington, D.C. Those invited to attend and take part included American university, government and business leaders and educators from Southeast Asia: the President of the University of Indonesia, the Rector of the University of Rangoon, the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University, the Professor of Geography in the University of Malaya, and a Professor of Law from the University of Hanoi. See, “The Position of Southeast Asia in the World Community,” in *Southeast Asia in the Coming World. Edited by Philip W. Thayer, Etc.*, ed. Philip Warren. Thayer, by Carlos P. Romulo (Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1953), pg. 250-251

## Abstracts

### 1. **Localising Discourse and the Engineering of the Human Soul in 1950s Singapore and Indonesia** By Simon Soon, Independent Researcher

In what ways did Mao Zedong's *Yen'An Forum on Art and Literature* speak to artists from the cultural left in the immediate postwar period in Southeast Asia? Within the context of the cold war, the cultural relations between China and Southeast Asia can be understood as paradigmatic of a modern art that proceeds from a different intellectual trajectory. As a cultural orientation, it was different in style, form and politics from the regionalist ambition of *The First Southeast Asian Art Conference and Competition*, held in Manila in 1957.

This paper discusses the development of leftist art discourses in Singapore and Indonesia by examining at a selection of manifestoes and texts alongside artworks. In these examples, I suggest that an emphasis on the creation of a 'national culture' took precedence, inflected by a postwar and anti-colonial engagement with socialism. As a result, references to *Yen'An* became oblique and require close reading to uncover its resonance. The larger polemics of culture was also inflected by a desire to engineer a discourse of 'socialism in one country', thereby producing a localised variant of a global socialist goal that was aimed at cultivating artistic empathy.

Consider the call for artist to 'walk into the crowd of the workers' of Singapore's Equator Art Society, or to '*turun ke bawah* (come down [towards the people])' of Indonesia's LEKRA. The role textual production played in the circulation of cultural discourse demonstrates a politicised practice in search of a new parameter for artistic inquiry. It is premised on a move away from the notion of artistic autonomy, towards a gestural and performative injunction, where an artistic vision could be collectively prospected through a public sphere, and where ethics plays a central role in directing one's modern cultural vision.

### 2. **The Demands of Abstraction: Exhibiting the Non-Objective in Manila in 1953**

By Patrick Flores, Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, Curator of the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum, Manila and Adjunct Curator of the National Art Gallery, Singapore

During the fifties in Manila, the modernity that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century found the opportunity to mediate the requirements of both the national and the international, the local and the global through the language of abstraction. This paper examines 'Abstraction' as an idiom of transnational currency that played out in the climate of post-war reconstruction and the Cold War through the lens of the First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in Tagala in 1953 in Manila. The exhibition would calibrate the idiom of abstraction twice: first through the term non-objective and second through the replacement of the word "Philippines" with "Tagala," a reference to the dominant ethnic society in the country that is appropriated presumably as an alternative to the colonial appellation of the archipelago deriving from King Philip II of Spain. The paper focuses on Aurelio Alvero, the curator of the exhibition who would foreground the non-objective as a kind of linear movement away from realism and a culmination of the struggle for subjectivity (as opposed to objectivity) in relation to how the tern was harnessed by Baroness Hilla Rebay, painter and polemicist who was adviser to Solomon Guggenheim and was instrumental in building up the collection of the Guggenheim Museum. Rebay curated the first exhibition of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, the precursor of the Guggenheim, which was titled *Art of Tomorrow* in 1939. In paralleling how these two figures championed the non-objective artist as both messiah and martyr, the paper highlights discursive shifts in the formation of art worlds outside Europe in light of an "increasingly Americanizing (international) art scene".

### 3. **Free Enterprise and Modern Art in Southeast Asia**

By Kathleen Ditzig, Independent Curator and Researcher, Singapore

In 1955 the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization funded by the CIA through the USIS, and the Society for the Extension of Democratic Ideals convened the conference "Cultural Freedom in Asia" in Rangoon, Burma. In discussing issues of cultural freedom, the conference addressed the impact of

the West on Eastern aesthetics in art alongside economic development. Economic development, in the form of free enterprise, was seen to allow for cultural freedom, both in terms of social progressiveness but also as a freedom from colonial influence. However, the argument for the adoption of free enterprise was not carried out solely through intellectual gatherings such as the one in Burma in 1955. It was also carried out through cultural exchanges facilitated by American businessmen and the United States Information Services (USIS). In fact, Walter P Reuteher, President of the United Automobile Aircraft and Agricultural implement workers of America would be a key proponent for cultural projects in Asia at the United States National Commission for UNESCO in 1957. Furthermore, the USIS was known to accept corporate patronage to extend the reach of its cultural programme – speaking to the intimate relationship of American business and cultural policy. For example, in 1958, Coca Cola would fund the presentation of the Family of Man in Johannesburg, creating a product pavilion in the middle of the exhibition, much to chagrin of the MoMA International Programme. The relationship between corporate patrons and the USIS when the USIS' exhibitions were hosted in Southeast Asia was equally intimate. Often venues and other costs were often underwritten by businesses both local and affiliated to American corporations. The first exhibition of Southeast Asian Art in Manila in 1957 was hosted in the Northern Motors showroom. This paper will study the travelling exhibition of the MoMA's International programme, facilitated by the USIS in Southeast Asia as vehicles of promoting 'Free Enterprise' and Western liberal economics.

#### **4. Curating a region: Charisma and Leadership in Sihanouk's performances and Shui Tit Sing's art**

By Vera Mey, Phd Candidate, SOAS, UK

Taking a cue from Prince Norodom Sihanouk's, *Charisma and Leadership* (1995; Bernard Krisher, trans.) where the book's author describes an understanding of the volume's eponymous virtues through discussions of various world leaders associated with the problematic ends of social reform to celebrated figures of independence, including Mao, Soekarno and Tito. This research will take its point of departure from Sihanouk's various encounters outlined in *Charisma and Leadership* and some of the cultural pagentry initiated by him and exhibited during Cambodia's independence era. A number of royal dances and parades were commissioned for these visits and Sihanouk himself played a role of artist writing music and is arguably Cambodia's first filmmaker. This research takes the common methodological art history trope of compare and contrast in an atypical manner. The conceptual idea of curating a region will be examined from the state perspective and contrasted with an artists' perspective.

Complementing this symbolic civic engagement with the arts will be an artist focused investigation of the artistic oeuvre of Shui Tit Sing and his activities within the Ten Men art group who were a group of Chinese artists émigrés active from 1961 – the late 1970s adapting their new lives and styles in Southeast Asia towards an aesthetic derived from Western influences and direct interaction with surrounding Southeast Asian aesthetic source material. The Ten Men overlapped as artists, educators and journalists and undertook fieldtrips to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in an attempt to develop a new artistic vision in Singapore during a period of transition. This development of a regional style seems to stand as polar opposites to that of Sihanouk - reasserting nationalism in the wake of regionalism through commissioning cultural initiatives exemplifying the height of Khmer culture to the world. These two perspectives attempt to add insight into how the region did not develop as a cohesive aesthetic whole but how there was a utopian aesthetic belief in it through the notion of fieldwork and stylistic appropriation in the dawn of a new era.

#### **5. The British Grand Design: Winning the 'Hearts and Minds' of Malaysians through Art in Post War Malaya**

By Seng Yu Jin, Curator, National Gallery Singapore

With the return of the British to their colonies in Southeast Asia in September 1945, the need to revive the regional economies through a politically stable and secure environment took priority. In light of the increasing threat of communism and the rise of nationalist movements, the British envisioned, as early as 1945 the Grand Design (or Greater Malaysia) in the form of a long-term political plan for the region, which was to be realised first by the merger of the Federation of Malaya with Singapore, followed by the union of Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo, and finally the amalgamation of the two regional entities

into a supra-national political bloc. This paper will examine the often overlooked cultural aspect of the Grand Design through the Singapore Art Society (SAS), which was established on October 1949 as the first multicultural arts organisation to break out of ethnic and institutional boundaries, seeking to foster a Malayan consciousness and identity by organising exhibitions, and producing cultural discourse through publications. The role of the British in implementing the Grand Design makes visible its cultural objectives to create a unified Malayan culture through the SAS using a system of patronage and its close links to the British Council.