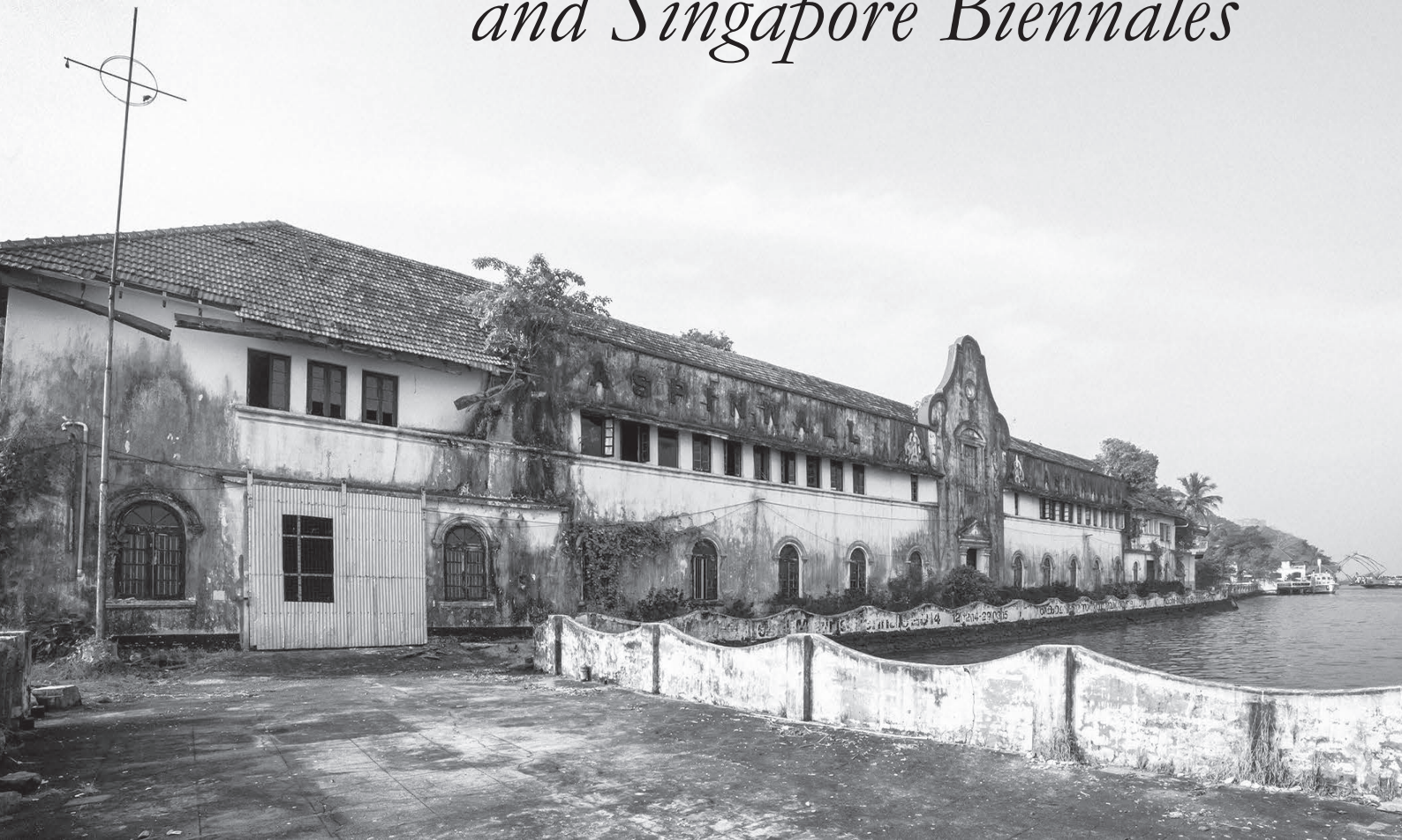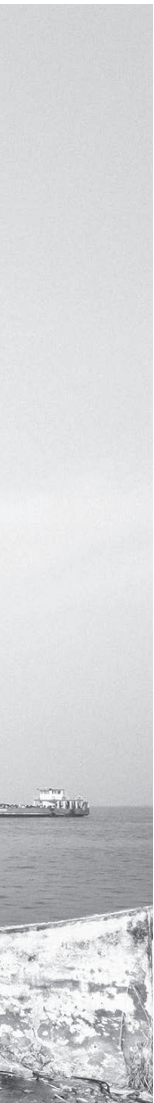MELANIE POCOCK

Possibilities For a Non-Alienated Biennale: *Experiences of Conditions of Production in The Kochi-Muziris and Singapore Biennales*

The title of this essay is both a tribute to and rewording of the theme of the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, *Possibilities for a Non-Alienated life*. In her curatorial note for the exhibition, artistic director Anita Dube identifies "virtual hyper-connectivity" as the primary cause of human beings' current alienation "from the warm solidarities of community."[1] Feeding this alienation, Dube suggests, is a fundamental lack of empathy for people whose socio-economic, material (and invariably virtual) conditions differ from our own. In order to mitigate our increasing estrangement from others, Dube advocates pursuing "a politics of friendship," whose interdependent relationships would make us more aware of the circumstances which shape different communities' lived experience.[2] To quote Dube, "If we desire a better life on this earth… we must in all humility start to reject an existence in the service of capital. Through the potential of social action, coming together, we ask and search for … critical questions, in the hope of dialogue."[3]

This search for dialogue with communities and contexts surfaced throughout Dube's Biennale, in projects whose materials and logics of assembly drew on Kochi's coastal environment. Nowhere were these materials and logics more apparent than in *Ecoside and the Rise of Free Fall* (2018), an installation by Bangladeshi artist Marzia Farhana, composed of broken household furniture, appliances and objects. Bound with heavy-duty rope and strung across multiple rooms of one of the Biennale's main venues, the refuse had been collected by Farhana from parts of Kerala (the Indian state where Kochi is located) which had been affected by flash floods in August 2018.[4] Through its archive of battered objects, *Ecoside and the Rise of Free Fall* not only reminded viewers of the immense damage caused by the floods (which resulted in the deaths of more than 360 people and the displacement of one million),[5] but the ethical imperative of the Biennale's artists to address them. By using remnants from the floods as her work's content, Farhana also highlighted the very real material conditions which shape artistic production.

Such preponderant, and at times precarious conditions of production have affected the Kochi-Muziris Biennale since its inception. Founded in 2012 by artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu,[6] it has striven to establish optimum conditions for participating artists and audiences, despite operating in a country in which the majority of art institutions are poorly funded and driven by partisan agendas.[7] But if South India's tropical climate and uneven arts infrastructure make staging a large-scale event like a biennale tough, Kerala's unique differences from other Indian states create interesting opportunities to tackle these challenges. With a long history of migration, and more recently communist politics, Kerala is one of the most culturally diverse and literate states in the country: a situation which has nurtured some of India's greatest artists and writers.[8] Thus, while there may be few precedents for contemporary art in Kerala, its vibrant culture and engaged communities provide fertile ground for a biennale to take root.[9]

Kerala's unique heritage and culture can be seen in Kochi's historical buildings, which are used as exhibition venues. The distinctive architecture of these buildings, built in a combination of colonial and vernacular styles, provides artists with indelible sources of inspiration. But for all their charm, these buildings' dilapidated infrastructure also creates significant logistical issues. Their lack of climate-controlled rooms, electricity and water (in earlier editions), for example, have made installing sensitive and technically complex works difficult. Infrastructural issues have also caused delays in the installation of artworks and the exhibition opening. Several critics (myself included) have commented on such delays, highlighting them as intrinsic parts of the "Kochi Biennale experience."[10]

Why critics have felt compelled to comment on such logistical aspects deserves some scrutiny. If such delays appear to contravene the principles of public events (which are usually expected to open as scheduled), they also diverge from the ostensibly seamless organisation of other large-scale biennales, such as Gwangju or Sydney. Famed for their ability to bring together staggeringly large groups of artworks, these biennales look from the outside like neoliberal powerhouses, capable of producing exhibitions of a consistently high (and frequently expensive) standard. Yet underneath this impression often lies a messier reality, in which curators and participants find themselves buckling under the pressure of ambitious scopes and insufficient resources.[11] Considering these models, did my own criticism of Kochi's delays reflect what I perceived to be its organisers' struggle to execute a similar kind of exhibition, under equally pressured conditions?

Living in Singapore—a country which is well-known for its own Biennale—provides an interesting context from which to consider this question. Established in 2006, the Singapore Biennale has earned a reputation as one of the most impressive large-scale biennales in Asia, with a roster of artists that regularly totals more than fifty to ninety participants.[12] Endowed with a generous budget from the cultural ministry, it benefits from the streamlined efficiency of its home country, whose robust transport, economic and arts infrastructure has made staging such a large-scale event both plausible and desirable.[13] For many artists, the Singapore Biennale's generous resources and well-equipped, air-conditioned venues are a dream, because they enable the production of ambitious works largely unconstrained by climatic limitations. The negative side of Singapore's organised infrastructure, however, is its frequent protocols which can limit artists' creative possibilities, especially their use of public sites.[14] Equally limiting can be restrictions on artistic content deemed illicit or taboo by national institutions and the government.[15] In past editions, works such as *Welcome to the Hotel Munbar* (2011) by Simon Fujiwara,[16] and *Unwalked Boundaries* (2016) by S. Chandrasekaran[17] have either had to be reconfigured or closed due to their "sensitive" content.

This essay considers the ways in which conditions of production and presentation have affected artists in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and Singapore Biennale. How have their different visions of affected the artists' scope? What spatial and conceptual constraints do their sites impose? How does financial support for artists differ between them? My motivation to examine these subjects comes from my work as a curator, which often involves negotiating with artists various aspects of artistic production. It is also driven by the current lack of writing on biennales which focuses on the perspectives of artists. While tight budgets and short timeframes are considered key pressures for organisers, they are less recognised as challenges for artists, despite the latter's frequent role as both production coordinators and creative directors.[18] Understanding how such pressures vary between biennales is crucial; a variability which makes comparing Kochi and Singapore an interesting case study. If the latter is seen to represent the high end of Asian biennales, Kochi reflects the artist-driven and self-organised biennale which has become a defining feature of Asia's arts ecology.[19] Having experienced both over the past few years, I have heard first-hand how their different parameters influence artists' processes and the works they produce for them. A number of artists who I have spoken to highlight Kochi's artist-led methodology as one of the most pleasurable aspects of participation, because of the way in which it places artists at the heart of its execution. The fact that the artistic director has always been an artist also invariably reflects the KMB's core aim to embody the conditions of artists.[20]

NEGOTIATING SITES: HERITAGE BUILDINGS, PUBLIC SPACES AND THE MUSEUM

One of the most interesting conditions attached to artists' participation in both the Kochi and Singapore Biennales has been the creation or adaptation of works for specific sites.[21] Listed heritage buildings—Kochi's historical venues, for example—are considered especially dynamic among artists because of their material vestiges and in-built history. Balancing the character of these sites with the distinctive qualities of one's own work, however, can create tensions. Reflecting on her experience of creating her installation, *The Tuning Fork of the Mind* (2008) for the 2008 Singapore Biennale, Shubigi Rao explains,

> *The experience [was] crazy, frustrating and consequently exhilarating as the work [had] to mutate according to the dictates of the site. I love that random, freakish evolutionary process, where the work is never as important as the venue, or the event, and can consequently slip its moorings of having rigid artistic pretensions, and just be a more gleeful, self-ingesting experience.*[22]

The "self-ingesting experience" of Rao's work came across in its museum-like display of archives, artefacts, machines and videos which sought to demonstrate the unique activity of the brain while looking at art.[23] While the pseudo-scientific premise of the work evoked contemporary societies' frequent need for empirically proven theories of art, it also suggested art's right to ambiguity, and the ways in which such ambiguity can elicit curiosity as much as confusion. Intrinsic to the work in equal measures were its wit and artifice, the latter seemingly veiled by its archival display. At first glance, Rao's work seemed anything *but* site-specific, its self-contained room sealing its contents from the visual regime of the Art Deco building where it was installed. Yet, on closer analysis, it was this very contrast that enhanced the conceptual and physical fabrication of *The Tuning Fork of the Mind*. By effectively creating a shell within a shell, and deliberately tussling with "the dictates of the site," Rao highlighted her work's own manipulative gesture.[24]

The imposing character of pre-existing sites is often felt in artists' works at Kochi and its historical venues. While the interiors of many of these buildings have been renovated into white-cube galleries over editions, their core architecture remains and frequently impacts on artists and their works. The strong aesthetics of Kochi's historical buildings require careful negotiation: while creating a dialogue, artists must also assert the presence of the artworks within them. Artworks which have succeeded in achieving this balance include *Life is a River* (2012) by Ernesto Neto, and *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale* (2018) by South African artist Sue Williamson. Neto's artwork, which was presented in the 2012 edition in the uppermost floor of Moidu's Heritage Plaza, comprised an interconnected series of suspended, cocoon-like drops, which each contained spices signifying Kochi's involvement in the spice trade. Attached to the ceiling like a bodily addendum, the work evoked Neto's characteristic labyrinthine tunnels and bulbous forms, while uniquely responding to its site. In Williamson's work for the 2018 Biennale, onlookers' views of the coastline were partially blocked by a line of shirts and cloth upon which were written deeds of slave sales. These deeds, which Williamson had found in the Cape Town Deeds Office, account the enslavement of Indians who were brought to Africa by the Dutch East India company in the seventeenth century to work in the company's African estates and gardens.[25] Installed on the seafront terrace of Aspinwall House—the former nineteenth-century premises of English trader John Aspinwall—the work situated darker aspects of Kochi's colonial history within a global context, all the while maintaining the poignancy of Williamson's poetic gesture.[26]
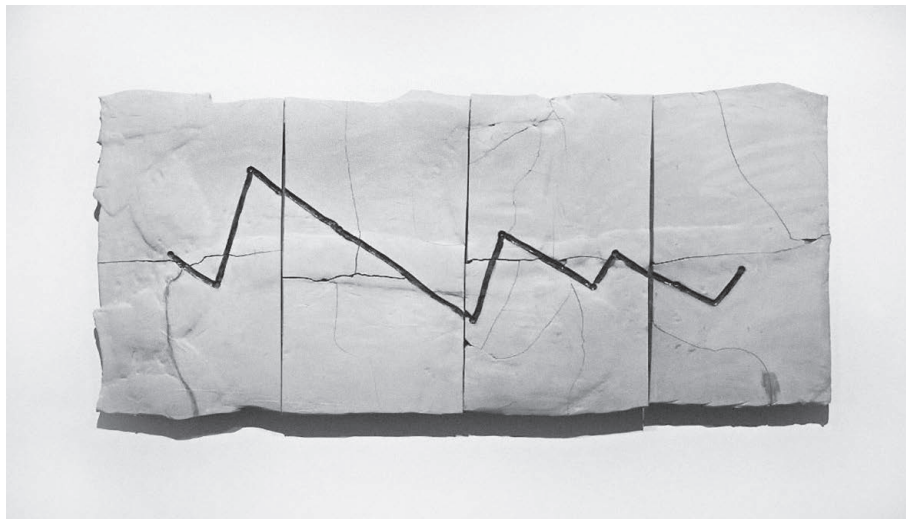
Such strong responses to existing sites have been much less a feature of the Singapore Biennale, where—with the exception of the first three editions—artists have mostly been invited to create works for gallery spaces. Commentators have attributed this shift to the National Arts Council's appointment of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) as the main organiser, which has led its direction since 2011.[27] Since this transition, artists' works have been increasingly shaped by the working processes and spaces of SAM: its emphasis on accessibility, didactic wall labels, and use of its own galleries, for instance. Many critics see this shift as working against the Biennale's original aim to situate contemporary art within the city.[28] Given the dominant role of art biennales globally as activators of local architecture and cultural scenes, one would have expected, and perhaps hoped for the Singapore Biennale to operate in a similar way, by offering artists inroads to spaces to which they would otherwise lack access. The disappointment of artists and critics in the shift towards institutional spaces has no doubt been increased by the critical success of works which were made for public sites in earlier editions, such as Ho Tzu Nyen's farcical operatic court trial, *The Bohemian Rhapsody Project* (2006), and *Everything is Contestable* (2006) by Indian artist Ashok Sukumaran, which enabled members of the public to turn the lights of the Armenian Church (whose patron saint is Gregory the Illuminator) on and off via an outdoor switch.[29]

Perhaps the increasing reluctance of the Singapore Biennale to invite artists to create works for public sites can be understood in light of the processes required to secure them. Proposals for a number of public sites for the 2016 edition, for example, took several months to be processed, only to be rejected six months before the opening.[30] Such experiences have tended to discourage curators and project managers from pursuing these spaces on behalf of artists. If not all artists benefit from their work being presented in public sites, other artists, whose practices hinge upon interaction with public communities, have inevitably felt restricted. Consider Indonesian collective ruangrupa, who, having submitted a proposal to engage residents of Singapore's HDB (high-rise public housing) communities through workshops exploring "vernacular culture", were informed by the Biennale's organisers that using the HDB's void decks (ground level communal areas) for the workshops would be "too difficult". Instead, the collective was encouraged by the project managers to hold the workshops in one of the galleries of the National Museum (where their final work was presented).[31] Given how ruangrupa works—a process which readily involves its members adapting to available resources—it would be unfair to claim that the Biennale's refusal to pursue the collective's original proposal fundamentally restricted the scope of their work. However, it certainly limited the possibilities for them to embed their project within the city and among its inhabitants; gestures that would have made the 2011 Biennale's title-theme of '*Open House*' somewhat more authentic.

If the use of listed buildings and public sites rarely throws up the same constraints in Kochi —indeed, the majority of venues are leased free of charge—it is turning such spaces into structures suitable for museum-standard displays which creates the biggest challenges. In Jitish Kallat's 2014 edition, Ho Tzu Nyen presented *Pythagoras* (2013), a video installation which explores forms of veils and ventriloquism through ghostly and theatrical motifs. Among these motifs are images of retracting curtains and an enigmatic white-haired character, whose "possessed" head surfaces throughout the work's images.[32] Consisting of four videos and eight channels of sound, the complex installation required a special program to synchronise its multiple elements, as well as a sealed black room in order to enhance the luminosity and crisp definition of the videos. These kinds of presentation requirements are profoundly difficult to achieve in Kochi, which lacks capital acquisition of high-level AV equipment, as well as ready-to-use black-box spaces. To overcome these hurdles,

Ho brought his technical team with him from Singapore and installed the work together with the Biennale's technicians. The installation suffered several setbacks: the AV equipment (which Ho had sent by freight from Singapore) was held up by Indian customs and only released two days before the opening. As a result, Ho and his team were forced to squeeze one week's installation into forty-eight hours, and pass the remaining tasks onto the Biennale's team.[33]

CONSIDERING COSTS: FEES AND FLEXIBLE RESOURCES
In light of the issues that Ho Tzu Nyen faced during the installation of *Pythagoras* in Kochi, one wonders why he decided to present the work, especially in a physical environment which was so clearly unsuitable for it. To this question Ho responded, "It was important for me at that time to bring my most technically complex work to a place that one wouldn't really imagine has the infrastructure for it… I think it is crucial to try out complicated works in settings where the infrastructure and financial support are not like Singapore's… for me, it is crucial to try to show them everywhere and to everyone."[34]

Ho's response outlines perhaps one of the most fundamental contrasts between Kochi and Singapore: their vastly different resources. Having received funding from Singapore's National Arts Council for a number of works and exhibitions, Ho is acutely aware of the country's generous resources and privileged access to high-end equipment and expertise. Presenting *Pythagoras* at Kochi thus provided a means for him to redistribute some of these resources, within a context less privileged than his own. That Ho was able to deploy such resources is a testament both to Singapore's relative wealth and his own robust setup as an artist. Indeed, throughout his career, Ho has consistently been able to acquire funding and technical expertise for large-scale productions; a skill which has been as vital to the development of his practice as his research and ideas.[35]

The artist's ability to secure adequate production and presentation resources can determine success or failure of their participation in international biennales. This kind of "requirement" is not only attached to expensive practices (for example, multimedia works), but artists and practices across the board.[36] Such a requirement has been triggered by the increasing pressure on budgets, which are quickly consumed by personnel, freight, installation and marketing costs. Once these cost lines have been accounted for, there is often surprisingly little money left for artists and the production of their works. Relying on artists to support these costs, however, produces a number of logistical and ethical issues. For one, it excludes artists who are unskilled in writing funding applications or securing external support. Secondly, it frequently requires artists to devote as much time and energy to fundraising and logistics as the creative development of their works; a division of attention which can negatively impact on the latter.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the fees offered to artists by the Singapore Biennale are highly valued among its participants. Fees are usually separated into two parts: artists' fees (typically an honorarium or an amount that acknowledges the loan of their work), and a production fee, which finances the development and/or fabrication of new work. There are different fees for commissioned works, which require artists to create a new work from scratch, often in response to the Biennale's theme. Fees for new commissions have consistently been around the S$2,000-mark (which excludes production fees). The lowest fees are for existing works (which are paid on top of artists' loan fees), and are usually S$500.[37] For the development of an existing work (a third category), artists in the 2016 edition received S$1,000. Issues have arisen when boundaries between these categories are not clear-cut, such as extensive development of an existing concept, which, while not commissioned,

inevitably necessitates a tailored approach. However, for most artists I spoke to, budgets for production—whatever the nature or form of their works—were forthcoming and adaptable.[38] In Kochi, the situation is radically different. Historically, it has operated on a slim budget, a situation that requires its organisers and artists to secure significant external funds for artwork production and presentation. In 2013, as part of the fundraising strategy, artistic director Jitish Kallat launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise some of the budget deficit (which was then estimated at Rs50m).[39] If the campaign was driven by financial necessity, it was also designed "to raise the profile of the biennale worldwide" and to "allow people to take ownership of… and feel proud of it."[40] Thus, what began as a fundraising campaign also ended up as one for the Biennale itself, a strategy which, while putting pressure on its production and participants, was savvy. By making the Biennale's situation as a self-financed, ground-up event public, Kallat was able to galvanise local and international support, and disseminate news of the Biennale widely. Over time, such tactics appear to have worked: since the first edition, Kochi has succeeded in attracting a range of public and private sponsors, including the Keralan government, BMW and the South Indian Bank.[41]

However, and despite these initiatives, difficulties in securing financial support for persist. Participating international artists are usually asked to seek funding for their projects by applying for grants available through the arts councils and cultural ministries of their home countries. There is, of course, a strategic dimension to such a request, because it enables the Biennale to draw on resources to which it would not otherwise have access. It is also worth noting that asking artists to seek their own funding for participation has become a common practice in biennales such as Gwangju and Venice.[42] In Kochi, however, this practice has an additional, practical aspect—the Biennale (which operates as a non-profit foundation) is currently unable to receive money directly from international sources.[43] As a result, Indian and local artists are usually paid by the (Kochi Biennale) Foundation, while international artists are compensated through international grants. The problem is that the latter invariably depends on international artists' fundraising skills. So, while for some artists (like Ho Tzu Nyen), these tasks form an essential part of their work, for others, they are less familiar and easy to access.[44]

Most of the artists I spoke with regarding this issue come from Singapore, where public funding for international projects is accessible and often generous. Both Shubigi Rao and Ho Rui An recall their application for funding from Singapore's National Arts Council for their participation in the Kochi Biennale as straightforward.[45] Ho Rui An suspects that the NAC's keenness to support Kochi comes from its status emerging, a quality which, as I mentioned earlier, has also made it attractive to private sponsors. However, the lack of guarantee attached to funding applications has prompted the Biennale to pursue funds that would enable it to offer a standard fee to all artists, regardless of their nationality.[46] Such universal fees are not only viewed by global arts institutions and individuals as professional but ethical, because they mitigate disadvantages and discrimination that artists might suffer at more fundamental levels in relation to their race, gender or educational background.[47]

Currently, international artists seem to regard Kochi's adaptive model with sympathy, recognising its struggle to balance budgets and maintain its global scope. Many artists consider it a unique and exciting creative opportunity which enables them to work in a cultural and economic context that is different to their own. In Singapore, artists find these challenges humbling, and a stark reminder of the privileges that the Singapore Biennale affords them. The resources which Kochi provides in other forms, such as its brigade of enthusiastic volunteers, are also deemed by artists as

invaluable, and on some levels perhaps more important than monetary support. Reflecting on the process of developing her work for Anita Dube's 2018 edition, Shubigi Rao remembers the vital role of a local resident, who, having learned of her research on Keralan libraries, enabled her access to a rare archive. In her work, *The Pelagic Tracts (*2018), the fruits of this access can be seen, its photographs and re-imagined material from the archive forming key "protagonists", its semi-fictional narrative of the history of book smuggling in the region.[48]

LEARNING CURVES
Like many artists, Rao feels that the camaraderie fostered by the Kochi Biennale between artists and local residents is unique, and was one of the most positive aspects of her experience in 2018. It has a high track record of local volunteers who assist artists like Rao in the research and production of their works. While the practice of enlisting volunteers is common to all biennales (Singapore included), it is the sense of ownership which Kochi's volunteers have that is distinctive.[49] Such local engagement has not only been fostered through educational and outreach programs during the Biennale, but also between editions. These programs, coupled with the integration of artworks into public sites, have increased local understanding and awareness of the Biennale and its aims.[50] These practices, as I discussed earlier, are much less evident in the Singapore Biennale, even if it benefits from year-round arts infrastructure and institutional support.[51]

Kochi's sense of a shared endeavour can be hard to cultivate in other biennales and their large numbers of artists. Focused on the production (and later installation) of their works, participants can find it difficult to engage with other artists, the pressures of creating one's best work often limiting their desire for social engagement. The opening reception (and opening programs) are perhaps the best situations for participating artists to meaningfully engage with one another free from the pressures of installation. Opening receptions are frequently constructed events themselves, their setups and seating plans carefully worked out by their organisers and curators. With the Singapore Biennale, the opening reception is usually a very formal affair, and tends to resemble more a diplomatic event than an artistic celebration. Artist and co-curator of the 2016 edition, Michael Lee, observed that the format of the reception and its roots in Western hospitality made many artists from non-Western cultural backgrounds feel uncomfortable.[52] By contrast, the atmosphere in Kochi is more casual, because the installation almost always spills into the opening days. Still embroiled in the process of making the exhibition, artists (and audiences) are obliged to embrace artworks' lack of finishing. One would think that this kind of spillage creates its own stresses for artists. However, the challenging conditions of Kochi tend to create the opposite effect: that is, greater engagement and empathy with the struggles of other participants.

If many artists consider biennales as important vehicles for the production of new work, an equal number also see them as vital opportunities to connect with peers and personal development. There, they have the opportunity to see other artists' works 'in the flesh' and gain insights into their artistic processes. Invited by artistic director Jitish Kallat to develop a work for Kochi's 2014 edition, Ho Rui An learnt considerably by observing the ways in which experienced artists adapted to the challenging conditions.[53] The invitation also enabled Ho to create his first full-length lecture performance, a format which has since become his hallmark form.[54] On the day of his performance, *Solar: A Meltdown* (2014), Ho was forced to move its location to the outdoor green in front of the pavilion where it had been due to take place. The move was necessary because the ongoing construction of the pavilion had overrun its schedule. To replace the projector envisioned for his accompanying video, Ho also had to find a freestanding monitor that would enable his images to be viewed outside in daylight. Yet, despite these shifts, Ho's alternative narrative of colonial enterprise struck a surprising chord with its new site. The view of the construction in the background created an apt parallel with his narrative's alternative account of British imperialism and its roots in the sweat of colonial labourers.[55] In hindsight, Ho also claims it formed "an allegory for the biennale itself," the latter's attempts to emulate an essentially Western exhibition model reflected in the workers' struggle to finish the pavilion.[56]

Whether ephemeral constructions like Kochi's pavilion are worth the time and resources devoted to them is worth considering. The fact that Ho Rui An's performance and other events on Kochi's opening day could not take place inside the pavilion, meant that its production value was not fully recouped. Balancing resources for production against mediation and engagement is integral to the practices of artists like Shooshie Sulaiman, whose works rely upon people's capacity to participate, or create their own meaning from them. For the 2011 Singapore Biennale, *Open House*, Sulaiman was invited to present a version of *Rumah* (2006-11), an installation which comprises personal documents, drawings and collages installed on a selection of wooden walls from her former studio in Kuala Lumpur. The installation was the largest iteration of *Rumah* at the time, a scale which had been actively encouraged by the curators through the work's production budget. However, the final production incurred further costs, which Sulaiman had to supplement with her own funding.

Reflecting on her experience, she felt that the scale of her work's production outweighed the resources channelled into its mediation. After the Biennale's opening she received little critical feedback about the reception or activation of the work through talks and discussions; aspects which she considers fundamental to its operation.[57] Following *Open House* and other large-scale exhibitions in which she has recently participated, Sulaiman has decided to reduce the scale of her works' physical production, and focus more on their immaterial relationships and connections with communities. Without these relationships, she feels, her physical artworks become redundant, and their production value lost.[58]

TOWARDS A NON-ALIENATED (BIENNALE) LIFE

By tracing artists' experiences of the Kochi and Singapore Biennales, it is possible to see two sets of conditions emerge: one aligned with the parameters of the museum (Singapore), the other with the adaptive self-organised capacities of artists (Kochi). In Kochi, questions of resources and process have been as creative as they have been practical, and prompted artists to consider the means and contexts of their own practices. At the heart of these reflections have been the ethics of production processes. While seeking to mirror an international biennale model, Kochi has, at the same time, produced its own, one formed by an active reflection on the conditions of participating artists.

It is undeniable that the robust systems and infrastructure of the Singapore Biennale facilitate artists' production, and provide them with significant financial support. Yet its problem is arguably its very efficiency, which operates on a streamlined, but largely uncritical model. The lack of flexibility surrounding Singapore's infrastructure has also limited artists' abilities to work in ways which do not adhere to its protocols. However, if Kochi's key lesson is the value of giving artists the freedom to respond to a biennale's conditions, it is also important not to romanticise infinite flexibility. Kochi's aim of providing participating artists with a universal fee, for instance, reflects its organisers' recognition of the benefits of certain protocols, particularly when it comes to financial compensation. Underlining this initiative is the danger of forming assumptions about different artists' circumstances, and the importance of not alienating Kochi's conditions from the latter. Perhaps only once such understandings are achieved—to paraphrase Anita Dube—can we imagine possibilities for "non-alienated biennales," where production and "pedagogy [can] sit together and share a drink… and dance and sing and celebrate a [biennale] dream together."[59]

Notes

[1] Anita Dube, 'Curatorial Note', *Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018: Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life*, e-flux, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/211346/kochi-muziris-biennale-2018possibilities-for-a-non-alienated-life/

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

[4] Text by Maddie Klett, with contributions from Anita Dube, Anushka Rajendran, John Xavier and Samira Bose on *Marzia Farhana, Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018: Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life* (exhib. cat.), Kerala: Kochi Biennale Foundation, 2018

[5] Jo Sommerlad, 'Kerala floods: What causes flash flooding and why has it been so severe in India?', *The Independent*, 21 August 2018; https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/kerala-floods-latest-india-cause-flash-flooding-landslides-explained-a8500801.html

[6] While Bose Krishnamachari continues to serve as President of the Kochi Biennale Foundation and Director of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Riyas Komu has since stepped down from his management positions; https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/riyas-komu-resigns-from-biennale-trust/articleshow/68505149.cms

7 Veeranganakumari Solanki, 'The Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Interview with Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu', *Culture 360*, Asia-Europe Foundation, 14 January 2013; https://culture360.asef.org/magazine/kochi-muziris-biennale-interview-bose-krishnamachari-and-riyas-komu/

8 Famous Indian writers from Kerala include Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Booker Prize, and Kamala Surayya Das (1934-2009), who is widely known as one of India's most radical feminists

9 My definition of contemporary art here relates to the Western neoliberal model, in which an artwork, by nature of its media (conceptual painting, new media), circulation (in global institutions and centres of contemporary art) and alignment with Western categories of art (post-war, postmodern), inscribes itself into the Western notion of "the contemporary". Such a designation refers less to art made in the present (an expansive definition that would accommodate many forms of art) but to art which bears the visible markers of these media and categories. See Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009

10 Melanie Pocock, 'The Kochi-Muziris Biennale', *Third Text*, 27:2, 2013, p. 291

11 See Kate Brown's recent excellent analysis, 'Biennials are proliferating worldwide. There's just one problem: Nobody wants to pay for them', *Artnet*, 21 March 2019; https://news.artnet.com/market/venice-biennale-hidden-costs-1493455

12 The total numbers of participating artists for *Singapore Biennale*s to date have been: ninety-five in *Belief* (2006), fifty in *Wonder* (2008), sixty-three in *Open House* (2011), eighty-two in *If the World Changed* (2013), sixty-three in *An Atlas of Mirrors* (2016) and seventy in *Every Step in the Right Direction* (2019)

13 Jeannine Tang, 'Spectacle's politics and the Singapore Biennale', *Journal of Visual Culture* 6:3, 2007, p. 365

14 Such protocols, for example, include the use of public sites, which are governed by Singapore's various public authorities. To use these sites, artists and local institutions—even those under the national cluster—are required to submit formal applications. It is difficult to obtain permission to use sites if there are not adequate provisions for public safety, or if the intended use is deemed unsuitable for the purposes of the area. Compounding these issues are differences in working philosophies and cultures between ministries and their statutory boards. Approvals are only granted by directors and senior directors; very few executive decisions are delegated to middle management staff, which causes delays and a tendency to say 'no' instead of pursuing what often become lengthy processes

15 Sensitive subjects include the depiction of homosexual content, nudity and religion (where the latter could be considered "offensive" to the referenced community). See the Media Development Authority's classification guidelines for more information; https://www2.imda.gov.sg/regulations-and-licensing-listing/content-standards-and-classification/standards-and-classification/Arts-Entertainment

16 For a detailed discussion of cases and processes of arts censorship in Singapore (including Simon Fujiwara's work in the 2011 *Biennale*) see Susie Lingham, 'Art and Censorship in Singapore: Catch 22', *ArtAsiaPacific* 76, 2011; http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/76/ArtAndCensorshipInSingaporeCatch22

17 In the case of S. Chandrasekaran, a participant in the 2016 Singapore Biennale, *An Atlas of Mirrors*, the latter's request for him to adapt his initial proposal led to him conducting a public "blood oath ceremony" in which he swore "never to perform in Singapore until [the proposal] was performed." In their explanation as to why his initial proposal—which would have involved a walk-performance commemorating the contribution of nineteenth-century Indian convicts to the development of Singapore—was rejected, organisers Singapore Art Museum stated that the work's "very strong visual bearings or similarities to a sacred and religious ceremony… could be deemed offensive or religiously sensitive for certain segments of the community." See Reena Devi and Shamnuga Retnam, 'Artist cuts himself, takes blood oath, after his performance piece was cut from the Singapore Biennale', *TODAY*, updated 28 October 2016; https://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/artist-cuts-himself-takes-blood-oath-after-his-performance-piece-was-cut

18 To explain this point further, while standard artists' contracts stipulate the institution's and the artist's shared responsibilities for the artist's work, it is the artist who primarily coordinates and oversees the production of their work

19 Jeannine Tang, 'Spectacle's politics and the Singapore Biennale'. See also Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials and documenta*, Chichester: Wiley, Blackwell, 2016, for descriptions of the distinctions between biennials in different socio-economic contexts, and the phenomenon of biennales in Asia

20 Artistic directors of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale to date have been Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu (2012), Jitish Kallat (2014), Sudarshan Shetty (2016) and Anita Dube (2018). Singaporean artist Shubigi Rao has been appointed the artistic director of the fifth edition in 2020

[21] This observation draws on informal conversations I have had with different artists who have participated in these biennales as well as interviews conducted specifically for this text with artists Ho Rui An, Ho Tzu Nyen and Shubigi Rao, and curator Michael Lee

[22] Shubigi Rao, 'Tuning Fork of the Mind', *Universes in Universe*, September 2008; https://universes.art/en/magazine/articles/2008/shubigi-rao

[23] ibid.

[24] Rao recalls that outfitting her allocated room at South Beach was a significant challenge. The heat generated by her installation's black-coloured room and video works led her to spending a portion of her artist's fee on air conditioning. Shubigi Rao, conversation with the author, 16 September 2019

[25] Maddie Klett, op cit.

[26] The entire process of *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale* (2018) involved the (originally) muddied garments first being displayed in Cape Town in September 2018. The garments were transported to India, where they were washed in a public laundry in Fort Kochi and rehung at the Biennale

[27] Khim Ong, 'If Only the Singapore Biennale Didn't Change: Tracing the Four Editions of SB', *Article: The Singapore Biennale Review*, Singapore: The International Association of Art Critics, 2013, p. 8. The mixture of public sites and gallery spaces in *Open House* (2011) could be seen as another result of the National Arts Council's handover of the Biennale to Singapore Art Museum (which occurred mid-way through that edition's development)

[28] ibid.

[29] Lee Weng Choy, 'Singapore Biennale 2006: Belief', *caa reviews: A Publication of the College Art Association*, 12 April 2007; www.ccareviews.org/reviews/964#.XS7fPZMzai4

[30] Michael Lee, conversation with the author, 21 August 2019

[31] ruangrupa, conversation with the author, 12 August 2019

[32] Press release, *Ho Tzu Nyen: Pythagoras*, Michael Janssen Gallery; https://www.galeriemichaeljanssen.de/ho-tzu-nyen-pythagoras/

[33] Ho Tzu Nyen, email to the author, 23 September 2019

[34] ibid.

[35] Ho's epic, hour-long multi-disciplinary performance, *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014), for example, was co-commissioned by Wiener Festwochen (Vienna Festival), Carriageworks, Sydney and the Asian Culture Complex-Asian Arts Theater in South Korea, and involved a travelling, configurable set, cast and technical crew

[36] Kate Brown, 'Biennials Are Proliferating Worldwide. There's Just One Problem: Nobody Wants to Pay for Them', op cit.

[37] These figures have been confirmed by Michael Lee (co-curator of the 2016 Singapore Biennale) and Shubigi Rao (participant in the 2008 Singapore Biennale). Conversations with the author, 19 August and 16 September 2019 respectively

[38] Budgets attributed for production can cover both physical fabrication, artists' expenses, and contracted staff and assistants required to produce the project. Michael Lee, conversation with the author, 21 August 2019

[39] 'Rosalyn D'Mello on How The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is Remaking India's links to the global artworld', *ArtReview Asia*, Spring 2015; artreview.com/opinion/ara_spring_2015_opinion_rosalyn_dmello

[40] Statement by Kochi Biennale co-founder, Riyas Komu, quoted in ibid.

[41] Kochi Biennale Foundation, Annual Report: 2016-17, p. 73; http://www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Annual-Report-2016-17.pdf

[42] Ho Rui An, who has participated in both *Kochi Biennale* and the Gwangju Biennale, describes needing to apply for National Arts Council funding in order to underwrite costs associated with travel, research and production. Ho Rui An, conversation with the author, 18 September 2019

[43] The reason for this is because the Kochi Biennale Foundation does not yet have a permit from the Indian Government to receive foreign funds. The FCRA (Foreign Contributions Regulation Act) regulates individuals and associations' receipt of foreign funds. The aim of the act is to prevent individuals' and organisations' acceptance of foreign funds for activities that would be detrimental to the national interest. Kochi Biennale Foundation, email to Melanie Pocock, 29 October 2019

[44] Artists who are not represented by commercial galleries, or whose work does not circulate in the art market often find it difficult to secure support, for instance. See also Kate Brown, 'Biennials Are Proliferating Worldwide…', op cit.

[45] Shubigi Rao and Ho Rui An, conversations with the author, 16 and 18 September 2018 respectively

[46] Kochi Biennale Foundation, email to the author, 29 October 2019

[47] This could mean artists discriminated against as a result of their race, gender, political beliefs or socio-economic background. These factors, whether at an application or canvassing stage, or earlier in life, can limit artists' possibilities to galvanise financial support for their work

[48] Shubigi Rao, conversation with the author, 16 September 2019

[49] ibid. Among locals, the Biennale is also widely known as "The People's Biennale". See Balamohan Shingade, 'Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018: Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life', *Art-Agenda*, 18 January 2019; https://www.art-agenda.com/features/250382/kochi-muziris-biennale-2018-possibilities-for-a-non-alienated-life

[50] Outreach programs conducted by the Kochi Biennale include the Students' Biennale, an exhibitionary platform which encourages art students from art colleges across South Asia to reflect on their practice and exhibit on an international stage, and 'Let's talk', a public conversation forum that explores topics related to cultural practice, and which runs throughout the year; https://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/

[51] To expand this point further, many artists and arts professionals feel that Singapore is currently suffering from a glut of arts institutions and activity: from the enormous site and programming of the National Gallery Singapore to the city-state's various country-themed and national arts festivals, which include the Singapore International Festival of the Arts, da:ns (the dance festival programmed by The Esplanade), and the Singapore International Film Festival. The dominant perception, however, is that all this activity is achieving (proportionately) little in terms of increasing locals' engagement with contemporary art

[52] Michael Lee, conversation with the author, 21 August 2019

[53] Ho Rui An, conversation with the author, 18 September 2019

[54] Ho Rui An's subsequent lecture performances include *Screen Green* (2015-16), *DASH* (2016) and *Asia the Unmiraculous* (2018–)
See https://horuian.com/

[55] Ho Rui An, conversation with the author, 18 September 2019

[56] ibid.

[57] Shooshie Sulaiman, conversation with the author, 20 September 2019

[58] ibid.

[59] Anita Dube, 'Curatorial Note', op cit.