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# Difficult Comparisons: *The Curatorial Desire for Southeast Asia*

In the effort to curate Southeast Asia, the curator compares. The curator traces details of affinity and deviance, distance from and intimacy with the subject or the material. In the course of curatorial play, however, the circumstances, as well as the consequences of comparing tend to be overlooked. It might be because the region is reckoned at the outset to be already fully formed as a collective, and as such, the only thing left to be done is to recognise and capture it in a curatorial situation: to finally name it as an exhibition of Southeast Asia.

Here we face the fundamental anxiety of the curatorial and the regional. I argue that both the curatorial and the regional should be simultaneously conceptualised in a common space made possible by the curator and the schema that entitles the curation. I also argue that since the curatorial is a situation, the region should be released from its identity as a fully formed collective; and that, in turn, the curatorial should be plastic enough to be shaped by a formative region, or a region in a condition of forming. It is only within this gamut of reciprocal calibrations that the comparable, or the diverse, becomes comparative or equivalent, and the curatorial and the collective are productively performed as instances of, in the words of social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, “process or precipitate formation”<sup>1</sup> or as the critic Guy Brett would put it, “phases of the kinetic”.<sup>2</sup> Singaporean art historian Kanaga Sabapathy points out, “Comparative seeing is the heartbeat of exhibitions; comparative seeing is vital for thinking on and studying art, historically. Having said this I must add that comparative studies and seeing are not given and easy; they have to be worked for.”<sup>3</sup> Because of such exigency, as Sabapathy has signalled, the comparison is necessarily difficult. It is problematic because of the great risk involved in gathering works from various contexts and making them represent, in one way or another, a singular, monolithic region that is continually dispersed by monsoon and rainforest, spirits, calamities and migrations. The difficulty lies in the double movement of bringing works from discrete, usually nation-bound matrices, to a shared context and claiming them as contemporary and regional from a mess and welter of paradoxically inchoate national forms. Such difficulty is productive, because it moves briskly between incipience and cohering.

Judith Butler in her essay ‘Values of Difficulty’ reasons that to confront difficulty is to deserve the possibility of communication and hence of sociability. Butler asks, “But is it not part of a critical practice, a critical approach to language and, indeed, to rhetoric, to ask what constitutes the norms of communicability, and what challenges them, and how it is that a critical consideration of the norm and its challenges forms part of a comparative approach to literature?”<sup>24</sup> She continues that these norms of communicability are plural and therefore demand a process of translation in the gesture of comparative work, which she considers a “fundamental and irreversible condition of communication itself.”<sup>25</sup> A difficult comparison is made more complex by the desire for a region and the political process of distinction and discrimination, of inclusion or exclusion that is intrinsic in curation. Butler raises the challenge of translatability that either “compels the violence of a certain colonial expansionism” or opens up the “possibility of meeting up with the limits of our own epistemological horizon, a limit that challenges what we know to be knowable, a limit that can always and only function as the radically unfamiliar within the domain of ordinary language, plain speaking, common sense.”<sup>26</sup> To compare and to curate is therefore to translate and portray those that are compared and curated regional and contemporary, within porous and interpenetrating time and space. I am reminded of Michel Foucault’s phrase “sudden vicinity of things” in his preface to *The Order of Things*.<sup>7</sup> According to Foucault: “Moreover, it is not simply the oddity of unusual juxtapositions that we are faced with here. We are all familiar with the disconcerting effect of the proximity of extremes, or, quite simply, with the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other; the mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own.”<sup>8</sup> In the mind of Philippine national hero Jose Rizal, this comparison is akin to a temptation of semblances or an enchantment of affinities.<sup>9</sup> And in Alexander Baumgarten’s seminal treatise on aesthetics, this might pertain to a state of confusion as seen against the achievement of conception, “an organic interpenetration” that leads to “extensive clarity.”<sup>10</sup>

#### A TALE OF TWO EXHIBITIONS

The exhibition *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (2017), heralded as the largest exhibition of Southeast Asian contemporary art to be held in Japan, rests on these burdens of representation as well as the fear of repeating the longing to account for an art history, on the one hand, and to intuit the new and the now among eighty-six artists and through fourteen curators, on the other. Part of the burden is the institutional context in which the exhibition takes place, framed by the bureaucracies of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japanese institutions such as The Japan Foundation Asia Center, the National Art Center Tokyo, and the Mori Art Museum. Another is the structure of the curatorium and its preparedness to take on Southeast Asia. Over the years, the density of discourse in Southeast Asia has significantly heightened, and no curatorial effort worth its salt could afford to neglect the criticality of the interlocution. To do so would be to reverse the gains of the field and turn colleagues in the region into yet another coterie of informants rather than annotators of both the region and Japan. To do so would be to reduce a Southeast Asian exhibition to orientalist, exotic, vertiginous traffic.

The exhibition at the outset, therefore, treads on fragile ground, given the cogent counterbalance offered by the region, which is now strongly placed to mediate any representation of it from without. This is further complicated by the commemorative nature of the project, the fifty years of the ASEAN, that the organisers had faceted as the main angle of the event. The interest of Japan in Southeast Asia seems to hover above what is perceived as the region’s economic and cultural dynamism: “Not only in economic terms, Southeast Asia is also now attracting attention throughout the world as a

new hub for cultural exchange in the 21st century.”<sup>11</sup> It is this vitality and energy that is desired by the curatorial enterprise. Such extensity is always tricky, and the exhibition fails to confront the difficulty with earnestness and acuity. Instead, it turns to what it calls a “loosely chronological” approach to the period it defines (1980s to present) and to cover a heterogeneity of art from the art worlds of the ten nation-states in Southeast Asia. A “loosely chronological” framework on a fraught geopolitical worlding of Southeast Asia may initially offer a latitude, but in the course of the curatorial process, may prove to be frustratingly maladroit in decisively delineating conjunctures of social form and sensible life. In the guise of this looseness, the exhibition shirks the responsibility of staking positions on art and history no matter how provisional these might have to be; and so the general feeling is one of randomness as it proceeds across the two buildings of the Mori Art Museum and the National Art Center nearly serially from theme to theme. These themes are verisimilarly weakly inflected; and, sadly, no cogent phenomenological experience comes from this encounter between audience and artistic proposition, and ultimately no discursive speculation is warged. It seems to be all stimuli.

The 2016 *Singapore Biennale* titled *An Atlas of Mirrors*, for its part, is not so constrained by the customs of chronology. It is mainly concerned with the “present” and the location of Singapore within the region as it tries to see the world from where it is perched. It is a rather copious premise, one that may catch all mingled things in this irremediably wired world. That being said, the *Biennale* of around sixty artists and nine curators, endeavors to recollect, to reflect on, and to expand the ambit of Southeast Asia to include South and East Asia. While *Sunshower* appears to aimlessly sprawl like a bazaar-like sensorium in the vein of a faux Roppongi flaneurie, *An Atlas of Mirrors* is more conscious of, or nearly neurotic about, the pedagogy of themes. In many ways, in fact, it tends to overly thematise the ecologies of the art scapes that it fleshes out curatorially. The art is envisaged to speak to the themes within nine conceptual zones. According to its Creative Director, Susie Lingham, the nine zones are fractals, mirror-maps that condense collective nouns in sensations or situations that they hold together. For instance, the “everyday of mirrorings” references “space” and the “somewhere of elsewheres” points to “displacement”.<sup>12</sup>

The problem is that the main theme does not seem to be informed by any specific inquiry emerging from the locality or the region that it considers; neither does it seem to mutate from theoretical conversations in Singapore or elsewhere. In other words, how do atlas and mirror demonstrate themselves as tropes and ideas, and not just themes? How can they be disseminated as elements of local moral worlds? And how do the works of artistic practice further modulate the tone or deepen the texture of the heuristic themes? It would have been interesting had the works been given the chance to excite and unhinge the themes and rearticulate them as tropes and ideas, rooted in the field and exposed to the vicissitudes of the aesthetic. After which, they would be re-conveyed as the ciphers of the exhibition, bearing both tentative thinking and thoughtful sensibility—and no longer just uninstruively molecular themes.

#### HOW TO CURATE THE REGION, HOW TO REGIONALISE THE CURATORIAL

With research as a primary stratum of exhibitions, we can begin to reflect on how exhibitions are produced for and in Southeast Asia. As part of the attempt to acknowledge its presence in a curatorial context, the region is surveyed as a field or a geography of art. It could be a historical survey, a survey of forms, a survey of tendencies. Whichever the inclination is, the initiation seems to represent a place that is cast as a space of art. It is, in many ways, a geopolitical and geopoetic gesture: geopolitical because it makes choices based on a place, made distinct, and therefore political in

curatorial terms because it signifies or materialises the region in a particular way; and geopoetic because art and place are situated in a state of interactive production or mutual making, which means that it is not only place that makes the art, it is also art that makes the place. The projects of large-scale and sustained biennales in Fukuoka, the *Singapore Biennale*, the Singapore Art Museum and the National Gallery Singapore are cornerstones in the edifice of Southeast Asian art. Their formalisation of the regional material has produced canons, but their ventures have also yielded continuing investigations which ensure ever-emerging permutations of insight.

The other mode besides the survey exhibition is the thematic. In this perspective, the region is rendered sensible or made sense of through certain trajectories into how its vast and intricate lifeworld can be explained through art and the curatorial intervention. Such a desire to explain and transpose the region artistically and curatorially may be conditioned by the desire to propose a context through which to understand it. In the survey mode, the technique seems to be art historical in its various declensions; in the thematic mode, the logic seems to be ethnographic. The art historical tends to condense the story of art as a series of the emergence of forms in time and space, while the ethnographic tends to describe the ecology that makes these forms in the thickness and flux of mutating life.

*Sunshower* seems to respond to the necessities and potentials of both the survey and the thematic modality and integrates aspects of both tendencies. For instance, it sets a time frame, which is 1980s to the present, and nominates the production within this temporal parameter as “contemporary art”. In this instance, *Sunshower* first takes a position in relation to the history and theory of art in its use of the word “contemporary”, as it is both a historical and a theoretical category. Secondly, the time frame implies a survey in the way it carves out a span of time from history. Thirdly, it identifies Southeast Asia as a distinct region that can be surveyed through art; and since the context of ASEAN looms large in the imagination of the project, the region can only be surveyed if the exhibition properly represents its constituencies. Finally, *Sunshower*, in the wish to interpret the region in time and space, has to depict whatever it is that makes this contemporary art lively or possessing a high level of life. This liveliness is made to carom across themes which fluctuate from the logic of aesthetic practice to the conditions which make art possible, from general descriptions of the art scape to questions which enable art to be produced in a certain way. These themes, therefore, are sometimes normative like “Diverse Identities” or elusive like “What is Art, Why do It?”<sup>13</sup> This fluctuation may be a symptom of *Sunshower*’s instinct to move away from previous modes of choreographing exhibitions and to avail of a mixed register of phrases to reference that which motivates creative agents to produce. The lead curator Mami Kataoka states that a “panorama” and therefore a “survey” is actually a means to allow several generations of art makers to both “transcend” borders that differentiate and to parlay them into “the cyclical nature of successive periods of time.”<sup>14</sup> But in light of the “region” how can this transcendence be effected? And in light of the contemporary, how can the cyclical be contemplated? Is it not that borders make a region? And is it not that the contemporary is a break from the modern? Unless, of course, *Sunshower* proposes the region that is Southeast Asia to be an illusion, or a failure, or an obstacle that must be surmounted, and that the contemporary to be part of the modernist continuum. Kanaga Sabapathy has spoken about the modern as marking “the new as progressive, as particular and worldly” and “as distinct and of its time in the region’s art, historically.”<sup>15</sup> Does the contemporary then cede the particular to the transcendent and the historical to the cyclical?

Another complication arises when *Sunshower* expresses a retrospective interest in a specific period in Southeast Asian art. Mami Kataoka validates the inclusion of young curators from the region to reflect on this time frame from a generational perspective. Here, the survey modality comes to the fore again: the inclusion of these curators seems to be part of the agenda to represent both the region and the generation of curatorial agents. This could only mean that the region persists and that a disruption between generations is assumed; and we see this not through the themes but through the curatorial structure and its decisions. The themes, however, are made to relocate the discussion from the so-called tradition/modernity tension to what Mami Kataoka terms as “a contemporary understanding of ‘tradition’ that is part of daily life in this day and age.”<sup>16</sup> The preference, therefore, is to ground the contemporary in the Southeast Asian quotidian, and with younger curators reassessing it. Such a grounding, however, diminishes the aspiration of Southeast Asian art to the “universal”. As Kataoka puts it, “it was not possible to include conceptual artists that deal with more universal themes, and who are not circumscribed or limited by regional attributes.”<sup>17</sup> In this formulation, the regional and the contemporary appear to be incompatible, prompting her to doubt the usefulness of the term to characterise Southeast Asian art. And without the contemporary in the equation, only this would remain: Southeast Asian art from the 1980s to the present, unperturbed or unimportuned by the contemporary but also stripped of a skeptical position in relation to the modern, which has conceptualised the region, art, and the contemporary in the first place. (And just a note on this “conceptual art” predicament: While Kataoka denies the acumen of the regional to articulate the conceptual, the exhibition overinvests in and underexplains the presence of the Philippine artist Roberto Chabet, whose inclusion derives from his putative conceptual practice. By valorising Chabet, it is clear that the exhibition chooses artists who conveniently conform to the normative narrative of the international contemporary and mimic the protocols of the metropolitan aesthetic. Why, for instance, not include the work of David Medalla who radically revises the language with a ludic, queer, performative, post-colonial parole? Medalla’s precocious oeuvre does not only demand inclusion in the prevailing narrative, it demands that the narrative of the contemporary begin elsewhere. Corollarily, why not insinuate the Philippine social realist movement that had asserted the socialist dialectic in relation to the conceptualist temptation? By not doing so, *Sunshower* provincialises Southeast Asia twice: first by eliding the post-colonial translation and second by affirming the modernist replication in a regional outpost.)

I am sure that *Sunshower* had built on the work of Southeast Asian curators done over time. But the perspicacity through which it had carried out the task may have been wanting. The textual production of Japanese curators and critics on various projects in Japan, in fact, have formed part of the discourse of art history as seen in the anthology of writing on Southeast Asia collated recently by The Japan Foundation Asia Center titled *Shaping the History of Art in Southeast Asia*.<sup>18</sup> The co-editor Kajiya Kenji has annotated the turns in the exhibitionary perspective in Japan on Asian art: the “pursuit of a unique Asian-ness” in the 1980s to an “emphasis on difference with the West” and “Western modernity”.<sup>19</sup> According to him, “in the second half of the 1990s multiculturalism became the dominant discourse, before it was decried and replaced by heightened interest in artists as individuals or in hybrid culture.”<sup>20</sup> After 2000, Kajiya Kenji perceives a “shift towards peer-to-peer communication to promote exchanges within the Asia region.”<sup>21</sup>

The two modes of the survey and the theme can, however, be destabilised when the concern shifts beyond both art history and the region, thus destabilising as well the notions of the modern and the nation. Such a movement away requires new methods of curating. In this respect, how do we compare, for instance, between the curatorial practice needed for a museum exhibition on a region

## PATRICK FLORES

and for a biennale on and by the region, like those in Indonesia (Jakarta and Jogjakarta) that are more idiosyncratic and less formulaic? Or how do we appraise the new institutions of contemporary art like Miiam Contemporary Art Museum in Chiang Mai and The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara (Museum MACAN) in Jakarta? Is this a matter of choice between the disciplinary system of art history and the speculative discourse of contemporaneity? Or the divide between art history and ethnography? I am wary and worried about the dichotomy driven between these habits of sensing and study, and the distinctions and discriminations they produce for whatever substance in the world that interests them. Art history and ethnography, for instance, suggest degrees of the alienation and autonomy of lifeworlds and their material at the same time that they invite attentiveness to and involvement in the processes of making. Art history and ethnography, therefore, may be able to reconstitute their objects and subjects, the persons and things that they engage.

In all these undertakings, what is important is the approach or the theoretical attitude of the curator that also shapes the mode of writing, the configuration of the archive, research and scholarship. We can scan several tendencies in this regard. First is the international in which the context for the national and for its relations beyond it is primed and pursued. Second is the postcolonial in which the nation does not exist in a political vacuum but is rather charged as part of the process of struggle for independence and emancipation. Third is the global contemporary in which levels of locality including the nation or the region are constellated within a wider latitude of spaces and interactions, from the distribution of capital to the migration of people. Fourth is the curatorial in which the practice of gathering or convening art in itself forms the discourse that is not tied to the aforementioned categories and can in fact be critical of them. Whatever the research attitude or the procedure of knowing and presenting artistic practice may be, the field work of the curatorial must always be alert to immediacy and process, to what suddenly turns visible, to paraphrase the exceptional artist-curator-poet Raymundo Albano, and to what has taken time and what takes time to transpire. The curatorial present, therefore, in the regional contemporary must be attentive to both *longue durée* and emergency.

### PROSPECTS AT THE THRESHOLD

Both *Sunbower* and *Atlas of Mirrors* betray predilections underlying the curation of Southeast Asia. The impulse of *Sunbower* is to introduce Southeast Asia to a Japanese audience in spite of the many years of introductions from The Japan Foundation and the experiments in Fukuoka since the 1980s. This never-ending introduction tends to infantilise both the material that is Southeast Asia and the Japanese art public, resulting in an exhibition that lies between stasis and bedlam. *Atlas of Mirrors* is an elaboration of a reconnaissance project from an ascendant regional economy such as Singapore, a search for the unheralded or the affirmation of achievers. It is largely a barometric exercise that while productive does not always ensure analysis nor guarantee position. It is most successful when it catches artists at a watershed of maturity, as exemplified by Ade Darmawan, Bui Cong Khanh, or Niranjan Rajah or even Han Sai Poor. For its part, *Sunbower* is most interesting when it is sympathetic to facture (as gleaned in the work of Dusadee Huttrakul, Maung Day and Than Sok) and not to the fiction of its Southeast Asian fantasies.

The said fiction could have been made more lush had the Japanese curators only marked out for the Southeast Asian curators, supposedly co-operators in this conspiracy, the intellectual scope to surface their aspirations more fully. The catalogue, for instance, does not even spare space for their thoughts; they are egregiously absent and so are not contemporaneous—or contemporary. It finally becomes a dominantly Japanese affair in the end, which raises specters of national and curatorial imperialism even as it tries to dissipate its being hegemonically, singularly, metaphysically Japanese in operations that make them more susceptible to difference, plurality and intersubjectivity. And to some extent, such inability to open up the erstwhile post-war “greater co-prosperity sphere” amid the opportunities of sprightly interrogations leads us to ask how tenuous curatorial postures like these are as we become more assiduous in asking questions like: What really happened in the exercise of restraint over the work of Tiffany Chung at the behest of the Vietnamese diplomatic officials? How does the political economy of trade and financial interests of Japan and to some extent of the Mori Art Museum shape curatorial investments in Southeast Asia? The Director of Mori Art Museum, Fumio Nanjo was also the founding Artistic Director of the *Singapore Biennale* in 2006 and again Artistic Director in 2008. How do Tokyo and Singapore skew the infrastructure, human resources, artistic options, curatorial talent and intellectual capital of the region?

That being posited, let us walk through some of the predicaments that trouble the curatorial desire across current initiations. At this point, we hold out a foil. In light of the voicelessness of Southeast Asian curators in *Sunbower*, it is salient to hear their voices here, to feel the pressure and the promise of their arguments, and so are quoted at length. First the temptation to thematise is difficult to resist. The themes typically emerge from what is perceived as a context without discussing fully how this context is conceptualised. This context is then made to explain why certain forms materialise. What we do not see or feel is the strain between this so-called context and the form that is exhibited. What is the relationship between the two? Is it entirely a relationship based on causality? This is the impression I get from the curatorial notes of *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History* organised by Asia Society in 2017. This penchant to preserve the binary is apparent in the question it asks: “At a time of social and political tension, how should art and artists respond to the challenges of the moment? Does art have the power to change the world or does the world shape the evolution of art?”<sup>22</sup> And the exhibition answers the question by relating the creative form to a political event. For instance, it supposes, “Indonesian artists FX Harsono and Tintin Wulia have each created powerful work following the turmoil and intermittent violence that erupted in Indonesia during the 1998 *Reformasi* period, the country’s politically motivated transition to a democratic government. Their practices before and after this period illustrate the complex ways in which artists participated in this transition and were also changed by it.”<sup>23</sup> This tendency extends to artists from Vietnam and Myanmar:

*While Harsono and Wulia drew power from their position as insiders, the artists from Vietnam featured in the exhibition may be seen as part of the legacy of the American-Vietnam War. Dinh Q. Lê and Tuan Andrew Nguyen of The Propeller Group collective came to the United States as refugees in their youth and returned to Vietnam in recent years, not only to focus on their own practices but also to rediscover their cultural roots. In the process, they have played pivotal roles in helping to rebuild the cultural infrastructure of Vietnam. From Myanmar, Htein Lin and Nge Lay’s intense and personal work reflects not only their responses to the dramatic transformation within the country as it undergoes reform and political transition but also their powerful attachment to and regard for their society and kin.*<sup>24</sup>



On the other hand, the exhibition curated by the scholar and curator Roger Nelson titled *People, Money, Ghosts (Movement as Metaphor)* in 2017 takes us to a different direction curatorially and in terms of the art world ecology, exploring;

*...how the travel and migration of populations and industries, ideas and spiritual beliefs, aesthetics and technologies, and artists themselves are continually remaking our world—within and beyond the region we call Southeast Asia—and how this is manifested in the practices of the exhibiting artists. That is, the exhibition is about the process of movement itself as the hinge on which the works turn, rather than about questions that can be said to inhere in any single location. All of the exhibited works were created not in the artists' 'home' cities, but rather in distant sites charged with locally-specific meanings, both historical and contemporary.*<sup>25</sup>

In this initiation, it is no longer the geographical or geopolitical context that is central, but the geopoetic through the dynamic and the logic of movement. According to Nelson, the works of artists Khvay Samnang, Amy Lien, Enzo Camacho and Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai;

*...consider movement both as an experience, and as an object of artistic research. Each of the artists have chosen questions and concerns relating to the displacement of people, the shifts in foreign capital, and their haunting after-effects as historical traces in contemporary locations. These sites of interest mirror the artists' own experiences of movement and processes of working. In recent years, the exhibiting artists—like many others—have embraced travel as a necessary condition for practice. This increased mobility becomes a methodology of research and experimentation; that is, movement figures both an experience and a subject for artistic research. This is also related to infrastructural shifts within the transnational system of contemporary art, including the rise of artists' residencies as important sources of financial support and creative enrichment. No longer primarily just about experiencing a new location or detouring from routine, residencies are now opportunities for interactions that complement and reinforce diversely layered networks. The artist's residency is a format rendered especially important in contexts with limited state support for contemporary art, and in globalising neoliberal economies, which drive artists (like others) to seek opportunities in diverse locations from largely non-state sources. Unlike large-scale exhibitionary formats such as biennales, the ascending phenomenon of the artist's residency has been subject to relatively scant scrutiny in scholarly, curatorial, artistic and other settings. These artists offer a way of seeing this region as a dynamic network of inter-relationships that are constantly being reconfigured, and that hungrily hop across national borders within Southeast Asia, and across the imaginary boundaries of the region itself.*<sup>26</sup>

The second tendency in recent curatorial practice is to reconsider modern art history as a way to understand that account or the discourse of the contemporary from the 1970s to the present. In this respect, *Concept Context Contestation*—curated by Iola Lenzi, Agung Hujatnikajennong and Vipash Purichanont in 2014—makes an attempt. According to the curators, the exhibition,

*...instigates cross-national and cross-generational expressive dialogues to reveal the region's deployment of conceptual approaches in the making of art with social purpose. Including media and artistic genres of all types, the exhibition further uncovers the cross-disciplinary nature of regional contemporary art. Finally, exposing artists' predilection for interactive strategies that stimulate public engagement with real issues, Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia illustrates the way in which Southeast Asian contemporary art meshes with life.*<sup>27</sup>

The exhibition tries to achieve its ambitions by identifying the “conceptual” or the “conceptual strategy” as a framework for the contemporary as well as the engagement with everyday life. What might be the basic problem here is that the “conceptual” is foregrounded at the outset as a cross-cultural, trans-art historical category without investigating how the local ecology had conversed with or mediated the concerns of the conceptual, which had been wrought elsewhere and by other social contexts. One of the curators, Iola Lenzi argues that “conceptual approaches constitute a key attribute of the contemporary even as many artists slip seamlessly back and forth between modernist and contemporary languages.”<sup>28</sup> The question is why privilege the conceptual to define the contemporary when there is already a recognition of the back-and-forth movement between the modern and the contemporary? Another exhibition that exemplifies the effort to revisit art history is *Misfits: Pages from a Loose-Leaf Modernity*, organised by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin in 2017. Its main argument is this:

*How can outsider figures in modern art question the framing narratives of art history—the bounds of national narratives as much as those that organise global contemporary art? How is visibility generated and art validated? The three artists Tang Chang, Rox Lee and Bagyi Aung Soe defy clear classification, developing their work outside of art’s institutions. Their consciously marginal positions suggest alternative criteria for canonisation: refusing patterns of identification, developing a critical transnational consciousness, and understanding modernity and the present as a precarious, contested state. With concrete poetry and abstract expressionism, experiments in performance, comics, animated film, and above all, drawing, Misfits showcases work from personal archives that haven’t previously been accessible to a wider public.<sup>29</sup>*

What we see in this exhibition is the risk of rewriting Southeast Asian art history through the eccentric work of artists, as well as that of art historians and curators. *Misfits* was curated by David Teh in collaboration with Yin Ker, Merv Espina and Mary Pansanga.

The last example, the Guggenheim Museum’s *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* curated by June Yap in 2013, is a rather institutional one. A prominent museum in New York positions itself as a global museum and therefore extends its collection policy through an exhibition program that allegedly accounts for underrepresented regions, which include Southeast Asia (curiously lumped with South Asia). Surely, the geographic and the geopolitical cast an overwhelming shadow on this project but which are repressed by the curatorial premise. According to curator June Yap, “*No Country* is not framed as a descriptive or prescriptive representation of the region’s aesthetic expressions and developments. Rather, its title subverts the logic of the nation-state as the unit of representation in order to create latitude for dialogue about it.”<sup>30</sup> To accomplish this, “*No Country* offers a selection of artworks that possess dialectical character, in that while endeavoring to forge community in the region, they also engage with the complications of the identity and representation of those entities that go by the name of nation.”<sup>31</sup> While this may be an attractive scheme, it is hard to imagine a dialectic when the curator also conjures Southeast Asia as a “continuous horizon”; and if she does succeed to imagine it, she does not probe why the Guggenheim is interested in the regional and the global. That part of the dialectic should really be telling.

The projects of *Sunshower* and *Atlas of Mirrors* are complex. Their curatorial premises do not encompass the indeterminate creative life that happens in the spaces of their appearance. The exhibitions, the art in them, and the ecology that is created within and beyond, are so much more than the curatorial urges that liberate them. They offer lessons about curating Southeast Asia and should give us the chance to critically gauge not only the art that is curated but the curatorial impulse

## PATRICK FLORES

in relation to a more complex understanding of the region and what it means to summon the nation, the region and the world in our time and against it. It is interesting that *Sunshower* merges the words “contemporary” and “now” in its title. The two terms may actually not be reconcilable and that tension inheres between them. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is of the mind that the term “contemporary” belongs to art history and instead selects the term “art today” to speak of art in the present that might resist the capture of both the discourse of art and history. Nancy elucidates that “art today” is a sign and a gesture that implies something other than signification. In his *imaginarium*, art today is a making of the world, “a form of possible circulation of sense.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, it is, as Judith Butler mentions in the beginning of this text, a proliferation of translation, like the scattering of light from place to place, from sun to shower. And here *Sunshower* might have been able to draw inspiration from Nancy’s words, if it only worked hard enough and was sufficiently sensitive to the toil of others in the field:

*When you make light play... you are precisely in the process of giving a form to the world, to the material world, to the world of light, to the world of the sun, or to the world of candles, of all the other lights. You are in the process of giving a form which is nothing other than a new play of light, or nothing other than making light shine, but one can also say that “nothing other than making light shine” means in Latin going from lumen, the light that has settled on things, to lux, which is the original light, the light that illumines, not the one that is settled on things... hence it goes back to the creation of the world.*<sup>33</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, ‘Grassroots Globalisation and the Research Imagination’, *Public Culture* 12, No. 1, 2000

<sup>2</sup> See Guy Brett, *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, London: Hayward Gallery, 2000

<sup>3</sup> T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Thinking on the Contemporary in Southeast Asian Art (Exhibitions), Historically’, (keynote presentation), *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, The National Art Center, Tokyo, 8 July, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Values of Difficulty,’ in *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, Jonathan D. Culler and Kevin Lamb eds, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 199

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Butler, ‘Values of Difficulty’, p. 206

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2002, p. xvii

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See the novel *Noli Me Tangere*, Berlin: Berliner Buchdruckerei-Actiengesellschaft, 1887

<sup>10</sup> See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954

<sup>11</sup> *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Susie Lingham, ‘Our Fractal Realities’, *Singapore Biennale 2016: An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2016, p. 15

<sup>13</sup> See *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*

<sup>14</sup> Mami Kataoka, ‘Sunshowers in Southeast Asia: A Premise for an Exhibition’, *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, p. 276

<sup>15</sup> Sabapathy, ‘Thinking on the Contemporary in Southeast Asian Art (Exhibitions), Historically’, p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Kataoka, ‘Sunshowers in Southeast Asia’, p. 286

Difficult Comparisons: *The Curatorial Desire for Southeast Asia*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 287

<sup>18</sup> See *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies, Volume 3: Shaping the History of Art in Southeast Asia*, Patrick Flores and Kenji Kajiya eds, Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Kajiya Kenji, 'Asian Contemporary Art in Japan and the Ghost of Modernity', *Count 10 Before You Say Asia: Asian Art after Postmodernism*, Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 2009, p. 220

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History*, <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/exhibitions/after-darkness-southeast-asian-art-wake-history>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *People, Money, Ghosts (Movement as Metaphor)*, <http://www.jimthompsonartcenter.org/exhibition/222-people-money-ghosts-movement-as-metaphor>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Iola Lenzi (ed.), *Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Center, 2014

<sup>28</sup> Iola Lenzi, 'Conceptual Strategies in Southeast Asian Art: A Local Narrative', *Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*, *ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>29</sup> 'Misfits': Pages from a loose-leaf modernity, [https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/misfits/misfits\\_start.php](https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/misfits/misfits_start.php)

<sup>30</sup> June Yap, 'No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia', <https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/guggenheim-ubs-map-No-Country-Contemporary-June-Yap-curator-essay.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Art Today', trans. Charlotte Mandell, *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 1, 2010, p. 98

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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